

FANTASY OF FROST

THE TAINTED ACCORDS



Kelly St.Clare

Fantasy of Frost

Book One of the Tainted Accords

KELLY ST CLARE

To my elder sister - who said I had to dedicate this to her or she wouldn't read the book.

To my mother - to reassure her she is very un-tatum-like.

When Kelly St Clare is not reading or writing, she's dreaming up a story in her head; the cause of many headaches for her friends and family, who have struggled to encourage her participation in normal activities – such as everyday life.

Books have always been magical and mysterious to her. One day she decided to start unravelling this mystery and began writing. Her aim: To write stories she would want to read.

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First Published: 14th January 2015

Publisher: Kelly St Clare

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All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Acknowledgements

Most writers would agree their books would never have reached publication without the support of those around them.

Firstly, to my fiancé Scott. Others may have read it and critiqued it, but you lived through the experience with me, encouraged me and all that emotional stuff. Thanks man!

Secondly, to my beta readers. I appreciate the time you put in to critiquing my work, helping me to identify issues I was blind to and making me laugh the whole time (instead of crying in the foetal position). This book would not be in its current form without your efforts and I am grateful from my head to my toes. These people are: Jill Meroiti, Chelsey Meroiti, Frances Lindsay, Kelly Lindsay, Seamus Maher, Seamus Woods, Lauren Mills, Jacquie Clements, Laura Gingell, Henry Carthew, Philippa Cox and Jessica Collier.

Thirdly, thanks to my Editor Christine Winsor and to my Cover designer Akira who made this book all shiny and good looking.

Finally, a massive thanks to my readers. Without you, there would be no reason to put this story on cyber paper.

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PART ONE

Chapter One

Kedrick's back. He arrived back yesterday and, before leaving the middle ring tonight, I had given him our secret gesture. I hoped it hadn't been too subtle for him. Sometimes I forgot he was unused to the discreet ways of my world.

I weave my way around the layers of semi-circle tables where the court members sit and ignore their whispers as I pass. I am used to their gossiping. It's the consequence of having worn a veil since birth.

I twist through the dark passageways of the palace and climb wooden steps until I reach my room about half way up the farthest tower. I change out of my brown robes and into my black set. The light material slithers down to cover me until only my hands and sandalled feet are exposed. The only time black robes are worn is during grieving, but my brother Olandon and I often wore them to sneak around.

I settle into my spot in the opening and will time to move faster. "Come on," I mutter.

The sky darkens according to its own schedule. Smoke gathers and unfurls, stretching out high above the palace and pitching Osolis into darkness.

At night, I'm blind. The material of my veil is too thick. In the firelight, during the day, I am able to make out the shape of objects from across the room. Not that there is much to look at in here. A bed, a basin, a chest and two fans. I could have been crippled by my impaired sight in our culture. Facial expressions were a blur to me unless I was right in front of the person. But in the last few revolutions, I had become adept at listening for clues like breathing and tone of voice. Posture also gave me a lot of information.

I lean out of the opening. Once the deep voices of two sentry guards fade around a corner, I throw my legs over the side and slide my way down the wall. My robes blend into the dark Kaur wood. After twenty holds, I

drop the rest of the way to the ground, landing on soft toes and wait in a crouch at the bottom for any sounds of discovery. When I was twelve I miscounted the amount of holds to the bottom and had to drag myself all the way to Olandon's room for help.

Low to the ground and close to the shadows, I make my way out of the palace confines to the meeting point in the meadow. I operate by memory, having had nearly six revolutions to learn where to put my feet. I cannot remember the last time I stumbled. The long, drying grass here is the perfect place to see each other. It is so tall it reaches my shoulder. Kedrick has to stoop over to stay hidden, though.

He's not there when I arrive, but I'm usually first. The meadow is closer to the tower which Kedrick and the other eleven delegates from Glacium share, but I know the layout of the palace much better and he has to sneak away from his guards.

I sit down and close my eyes, stretching my senses as a distraction from the sudden insecurity he may no longer feel the same way about me. He'd been away for three months, things may have changed. The futility of our relationship hadn't seemed to bother him before, but maybe he had decided the dead end of being with me was no longer worth it. A Bruma and a Solati together? The idea would be disgusting to both of our people. Which was why it was paramount to keep it hidden.

There is a slight rustle as a gentle breeze sweeps across the meadow. Apart from this, it is beautifully silent. Footsteps interrupt the tranquillity. For a graceful looking male, Kedrick has a heavy step. Aquin would have a spasm if I ever took the Prince to see him.

"Olina," he says. His voice warms me.

Any doubts of his feelings disappear as he crouches next to me, pulling me into his arms. My face warms underneath my veil. I wonder if he can feel it through the material of his thin blue robes. Unfortunately, the peace delegates from Glacium only have blue robes to wear during their stay. They don't blend in very well. I pull away after a few moments. We had held hands once before he left on tour, but this was our first embrace. It made me a little uncomfortable. I knew this was normal where he came

from, but on Osolis, we didn't show intimacy outside of our sleeping quarters.

"Kedrick," I greet with a smile in my voice.

"Kedrick," he copies in a playful tone. "That's all I get after three months?" I hear the teasing in his tone and then the increasing heat from his body as he leans close. I move my head back and he laughs.

"Not even a kiss to say hello?" he asks. I shake my head, eyes wide, but a small thrill goes through me. He throws himself down in the grass and heaves a dramatic sigh, I laugh under my breath at his display.

"Did you even miss me?" he asks.

"Yes." My breath catches at my accidental admission. Kedrick has been wearing off on me. Solati never talk without thinking. I quickly pluck one of the wilting wildflowers from the ground and focus my attention on it, twirling it around in my fingers.

He sits bolt upright. "Did you just admit to missing me?"

I ignore him and keep toying with the flower, a small smile playing on my lips. "I leave you alone for three months and you become a Bruma," he continues. My smile turns into a grin.

"I hope the tour went well," I say, changing the subject. Kedrick shuffles over and grabs both of my hands. His hands are warm and calloused from combat training. I hope he can't feel the roughness of mine. I take great care to keep them soft so no one finds out my other secret.

He brings his mouth to my ear, I can feel the tickle of his breath. "I will tell you of the tour, but I want you to tell me you missed me first."

For once, I'm glad my face is covered. My face is about to catch on fire, but I'm also burning with curiosity. I've never been out of the royal rotations, except for the migration every eighteen months, and this was done in a covered wagon. Now that I think about it, it is quite ironic Kedrick has seen more of my own world than me, yet I am to rule Osolis once my mother's reign ends.

"I missed you," I say quickly. He releases my hands and I drop the pieces of the shredded wildflower to the ground.

We talk of his tour. I laugh at his descriptions of the other delegates. On Glacium, where they are from, it is very cold. Many of his men still struggled with our crushing heat and they had already been here for nine months out of their twelve month stay. I doubted these men would adapt if they had not by now, though we were nearly in the third. The hottest position.

“There were no problems,” I say, a question in my voice. Our two worlds had been in a tentative peace for over thirty-three revolutions, but occasionally a villager in the fifth or sixth would cause a disturbance. Many of them remembered their relatives who had been killed or lost in the wars. We were still far from true peace.

“Do you want to try that again?” Kedrick asks, nudging my shoulder with his. I look up and laugh at him.

“Did the villagers cause any problems?” I ask. During his year here we’d been helping each other to understand the others culture. He could now conceal a question within a statement and I could ask a question without apologising afterwards. We laugh at this for a while, it feels great. There are not many people I can be free with like this. Two, to be exact.

He puts a finger under my veiled chin. The touch zaps through me. He turns my face so it’s directly to him. I hold my breath, waiting for whatever happens next. The joking of the moment before is long gone.

“I missed you every day,” he says in the open manner I am so fond of. His face nears mine. I know what he is going to do, but curious, I don’t pull away. He kisses me through the cloth of my veil. I gasp at the intimacy of his mouth touching mine. His warm breath reaches me through the cloth.

He leans away and my skin chills, the grass whispers as he rolls down to lay on his back again, humming quietly to himself.

A smile features permanently on my face the next day. I’m lucky no one is able to see it. They also cannot see the puffiness underneath my eyes, which I know is there. Kedrick and I had stayed in the meadow until the Kaur trees had begun to draw the smoke from the sky in the early hours of the morning. Kedrick, of course, turns up to the morning meal looking as though he’s gotten a refreshing night’s sleep. He told me he was used to

nights with little sleep. The celebrations on Glacium often went through to the following day. Such a long celebration was unfathomable to me. It sounded nearly as bad as sitting through one of the tragic plays my mother loved.

The Prince was in negotiations for the day. He detested these because nothing was ever decided. It was the only time I ever heard him complain. I could understand his frustration, he had so many ideas to improve the relationship between our worlds, but mother was blocking him at every turn. I would have loved to be at the negotiations. I *should* have been in the room, but this would mean mother would have to suffer my presence, and she would rather walk into the fires of the fourth than do that.

After my education with the royal tutors finished at fifteen, I had waited to be given the duties expected of me as Tatum, the next in line. But there were no invitations, and when months passed and nothing had eventuated, I had decided to pick up my feet and fill my time in other ways. It was not what I wanted to be doing, but it kept me sane.

I climb up the stairs. On my way to the nursery to see the twins.

Olandon, my younger by a year, was already being trained to take over as Head of the Guard. He had been furious on my behalf and ready to refuse when mother had offered this to him, but I'd swallowed my envy and made him accept. She had only done it to try and cause a rift between us and I wouldn't rise to the bait. The Tatum loved my brother, or some emotion close to it and she hated how close we were, almost as much as she hated me.

The two nannies in the nursery curtsy and continue their tidying.

"Ochave, get out of the opening," I say in a firm voice. Ochave throws an innocent expression over his shoulder, but drops it once he sees me and clambers down off the sill.

"Lina's here!" he shouts. Oberon pokes his head out of a chest at the end of his bed.

"Lina's here!" he echoes and they both rush to greet me, jumping over various strewn obstacles. The twins still have the chubbiness of youth and, unfortunately, the wildness of children without a firm presence in their

lives. Their father had died four years ago, when they were still babies. I tried to make up for this loss as much as I could.

I exclaim over their artwork and discoveries of the morning, but my mind is drawn to my thoughts of before.

There's nothing I wanted more than to start learning how to rule. There were so many things I wanted to change. I wanted to start now. It was so hard to bide my time. And the way I was treated, I couldn't be sure I would survive long enough to become Tatum.

"Oberon," I warn. He giggles and takes a wooden toy off the seat a second before one of the nannies sits down. "Come on. We will all go outside," I say, choking back a laugh at the instant relief on the women's faces.

Today I tell the twins they are to be guards. One of the orphanage matrons had let me in on this invaluable trick a year ago. I knew the matron well, as I was often down at the orphanage. Sometimes it was to help, but most of the time I used it as a cover for my training sessions with Aquin. He lived deep in the Kaur forest behind their building. In return for the matron's silence, I organised for carts of apples to be delivered there. The matron's sister was the head cook in the palace kitchens. They would not talk unless forced.

The twins sandwich me, their prisoner, as we walk down to the middle gardens, keeping an eye out for imaginary foe and signs of ambush. I sit on a low seat. Oberon, my thinker, soon tires of their play and sits down next to me. Ochave continues stabbing his enemy with a broken branch of a Kaur which is too heavy for him. I settle in for the stream of questions I know is coming.

"Lina?" Oberon asks.

"Yes Oberon," I say, smiling down into his rich brown eyes.

"Nanny was talking about a first and second yesterday," he says.

I sigh. Of all the questions children ask me, explaining the rotations is the worst. Calling Ochave, I lead them to the kitchen and pick up two pies. The explanation always works better with pies.

"Can I have some?" Ochave asks, not able to bear the wait.

“Hold on,” I say. I lead them up to the top of the steps overlooking the training yard. Watching the guards is their reward for good behaviour. They wave to Olandon. He has a sword, they love him. I bring their attention back to the pies.

“Osolis and Glacium are like two pies split into six pieces.” I cut up both pies into six pieces and push them close together.

“Osolis is hot, full of fire, and Glacium is cold. We share some of our hot with Glacium and they share some of their cold with us.” I pause to answer Oberon when he asks what cold is.

“Our worlds both spin, but Glacium goes this way and we go the other.” I demonstrate, twisting Glacium to the left and Osolis to the right.

I push Ochave’s reaching hand away.

“The piece of the pie closest to the other world is called the first. The next piece is the second.” I continue numbering the pieces of the Osolis pie clockwise until I get to number six. “Right now we are here, in the second.” I point at the second piece again and give them a spoonful each from it.

“As our world turns, we move to the next number.” I twist the pie around again and point to the piece with two bites out of it which is now further around. “Soon we will be here. What number is this?”

“Free,” Oberon replies.

“Yes, three. Remember Glacium is cold and Osolis is hot. When we move away from their cold, our own world gets hotter.” I move the pie into the next position and look at Oberon.

“Four,” he says.

I nod. “When we get to number four, we are so far from Glacium and it is so hot, the land is ravaged by fire and we cannot live there.”

“Then where do we live?” Ochave asks, worry in his voice. The twins had done the migration from the third to the first before, but they would have been too young to remember it.

“We travel back up to the first, where we have another palace. There are two royal rotations on Osolis. So when one is in the fourth, we can live in the other.” I give them a spoonful each from the piece now closest to the Glacium pie.

“Why do we not fall over as the pie spins?” Oberon asks.

I hold back my giggle. “It takes a long time, six months, to move from one number to the next and three years for the world to move all the way around.” I turn the pie in a full circle. “It is too slow to fall over.” Ochave turns to watch the guards, losing interest in learning. “What about these pieces?” Oberon asks.

“This is the fifth,” I answer, pointing to the piece. “Only a few people stay here to put out the fires and rebuild homes. It is hard to live here after the damage from the fourth. We mostly leave it alone so the plants can recover. The sixth is last and this is where we plant our food as every rotation moves through to keep everyone fed.”

Oberon nods with a hand on his chin. I tuck away the sight of him mulling information over so seriously.

“We don’t go to four, five or six,” he clarifies. I nod, more than a little proud of his intelligence. “Yes, it is safer in the first, second and third.

For half an hour we watch the guards go through their defence manoeuvres. Soon one of the twins is wilting mentally and the other physically. I drop them back at the nursery, already making a list of the errors I had seen during the guard’s sword sparring today. I would discuss them with Olandon, he was always eager for my input.

Chapter Two

I'll have to warn Kedrick he's being obvious. He is looking at me too much during the noon meal. Anyone paying attention will see it and I know the court pay particular attention to the middle ring. What else would they talk about all day?

"We're not in meetings this afternoon, Tatum Avanna," Kedrick says to my mother. Loudly. I nearly laugh at his crude way of telling me he's free this afternoon. I'm close enough to see mother's eyebrows lift before she smooths her expression. It always puts me on edge when she talks to him.

"As discussed earlier, Prince Kedrick," she says. Her voice could freeze the fourth. There are a few titters from the ring closest to our table. I grit my teeth. She has insulted him many times before. And he is always oblivious to her slights, much to the amusement of the court. I wish I was brave enough to risk her wrath and defend him.

The court breaks out in whispers and I have no doubt of the subject. They remind me of Tellio lizards which eat the fallen Kaur branches. The venom in their mouth is the only substance known to break down the impenetrable wood. The blithering, stupid people around me care more about gossip and their hair than they do about each other. They are corrosive.

We meet outside of the palace walls and I decide to take him to the old lake. I was expected at the orphanage this afternoon, but the matron would manage fine without me. Kedrick has run away from Malir and Rhone, the massive delegates who usually follow him everywhere and I have made sure I am not followed. I'll have him to myself all afternoon.

As we skirt around the village and leave it behind us, I become increasingly aware of how close he is. The small hairs on my arms raise every time he brushes my robe with his hand. It happens so often I start to wonder if he's doing it on purpose.

He passes the time by telling me stories of his family. I already know he has a younger brother, Ashawn, and, of course, his older brother is the King of Glacium. He makes me laugh with tales of Ashawn's antics. Kedrick is very fond of his older brother, though the stories he tells make me wonder why. He seems to be a ruthless, inflexible kind of man.

Kedrick grabs my hand. I look up, hearing his laughter and realise he has asked me a question.

"Sorry," I mumble, pulling my hand away.

"Where were you just then?" he asks. This is one of his traits I cannot get used to. I do not like to share my thoughts.

"How old is your brother?" I ask.

"My brother is twenty-two, nearly twenty-three," Kedrick answers, breaking off the top of some yellowed grass. It must nearly be time for it to be harvested for housing. "That must seem old to your seventeen years."

"It does not," I say with a bite. He chuckles and too late, I realise he was teasing. It is another trait of his I was still getting used to.

He laughs and nudges my shoulder with his elbow. "I know, I know. You are nearly eighteen," he says and abruptly loses his smile. "I wish I was here for your birthday." He chucks the bit of grass away. "It will be shortly after I leave."

A small breeze stirs my veil along my collarbone concealed by my grey robes. I reach up a hand to hold it in place. Why he would need to be here for my birthday? It was just a day like any other.

"It will be two years from now," he says, changing the subject with a shake of his head.

I understand what he means. "Only if I am selected for the delegation to your world," I say. Our two worlds alternated every revolution in sending twelve delegates to the other world. The chance of me being chosen was slim, since I wasn't even allowed to see the village rotations and had not received any duties.

"I worry that you will marry while I am gone."

I burst out laughing, thinking of the fat, balding man who stained his cheeks with berry juice, paying me far too many compliments at one of mother's tragic plays the other day. If he could marry my position without me attached, he would. "Not likely," I say, but inside I am thinking his worry is well founded. We will both have to marry others of our own race at some stage.

"Where exactly is this Old Lake? It is either very small or very far away," he says.

It takes a moment to understand what he means. I laugh. "The old lake is not really a lake. It used to be, but was-" My eyes widen as I realise where this conversation is going to lead. "Uh...filled in," I finish. I hurry to think of something to change the subject. Unfortunately, Kedrick is used to saying whatever is on his mind.

"Why would it be filled in? Surely it would be kept in case of fire. I've seen every damn river linked to the Lake Aveni in the last three months," he says.

Veni, I curse, searching for an answer to give him which is not an outright lie.

"The Tatum ordered it." I keep my answer brief and turn my head away.

"It doesn't make sense," he continues, oblivious to my attempts to deter him. "It took your ancestors so many years to dig the channels between each rotation to contain the fourth fires. Why would you go to the trouble of filling in a natural break?"

I recheck my veil, a nervous gesture I have had since childhood. I can feel Kedrick's eyes on me, awaiting my answer. I look up at him, and then away. The subject of my veil had only come up once before, during Kedrick's third week here. I had run away from him when he asked about it, mortified, and had ignored him for two weeks afterwards. He had not asked since then and he was not asking now. But things between us had changed, barriers had been broken. I could choose to tell him now, if I wished. I could share some of the burden I had been carrying for so long.

"It was filled in at my birth," I say with my eyes squeezed shut.

I crack them open as the silence gets unbearable.

I look up from his chest to his face. He is stunned, his eyebrows are pulled together above his clear blue eyes. He and the other delegates usually keep their hair short, to help with the heat. But he has not cut it since getting back. A couple of light brown strands fall over his forehead. My eyes run over his handsome features. I get the pleasure of seeing his face daily. Against all odds, he likes me despite never seeing my face. He deserves to know why he will never be able to do so.

I stop the question on his lips with a raised hand and take a deep breath. “It was filled in so I could not look at myself. The lake in the other royal rotation has also been filled,” I say.

He still has not spoken. The silence filling the space between us is so thick I feel like it is creeping into my throat and choking me. “I don’t know why,” I add.

“”You can’t be saying that you’ve never seen your own face,” he says. My silence is confirmation enough. “Fuck, that’s...why would she do that?” he asks, talking more to himself than me. He takes a step away from me. “Do you choose to wear that veil?” he asks, turning back to me.

I shake my head and suddenly Kedrick is boiling mad. “Your mother is one sick, twisted bitch.”

I have no idea what fuck and bitch are, but they don’t sound like nice words.

“And you’ve honestly never seen your own face? A mirror? The springs?” he asks

“Never. The springs are too dark and mirrors aren’t allowed in the royal rotations. I’ve felt my face before, but that’s all.”

He brings his chin to his chest in thought, nodding. “It’s true, I haven’t seen mirrors here. But you could have seen it in other ways. Water in a basin? I don’t know,” he says, jerking a hand in the air.

I tilt my head back and lean on a Kaur tree behind me. How to get him to understand? I sigh. He’ll have to be told everything.

“Until I was ten, I was largely confined to the tower above the room I now have. I was let out occasionally, but there was always someone with me, watching.” I shift on the tree, remembering. “I hated every day of it. I just wanted to be free. I had no friends except Olandon and later there was Aquin.” I pause to collect myself, clearing my throat to get rid of the lump which has risen there.

Kedrick makes a gesture towards me, but I hold up a hand.

“When I was nine, mother came to my room and said I could go outside. She said I could never show anyone my face. I couldn’t believe my luck. My freedom for not showing my face? Nothing would be easier. I ran through the meadows and climbed the trees and smelt the flowers. I went to the village and explored.” I close my eyes as I recite the next part.

“There was a girl under a tree playing a game with some round stones. She asked me if I would like to play, too.” I had only ever told this story to Olandon.

“I went back there every day for a week and every time she asked to see my face I said no.” I blink back tears. “But I had never had a friend before,” I whisper. “So, at the end of the week, I said yes and I showed her my face.”

“What happened?” The question barely disturbs the air, it is so quiet.

“I was being followed everywhere. They were on her before I could do anything. They slit her throat and made me watch her die.” I hear Kedrick breathe in sharply.

“After this, I was locked away again until I was ten. Then mother came to me again as before, except this time she told me if I ever looked at my face or showed another, she would kill Olandon, lock me in the tower and throw away the key. This time I believed her, I was still having nightmares from the year before.”

Kedrick sits on the ground, shaking his head. “That’s the most disturbing thing I’ve ever heard in my life. How could a mother do that to her own child? And why go to such dire lengths to keep a veil on you?” he muses. We sit in silence.

“She has to be afraid. Fear creates the strongest reactions,” he says.

“What?” I say.

“She must be afraid.”

I shrug. “I think she just hates me.”

He shakes his head and stands again. “Maybe.”

“The funny thing is, I no longer think she would kill Olandon. She loves him. But I dread being locked in the tower again. I don’t think I could bear it.” Climbing down the wall from my room was one thing. The tower room was much higher.

We arrive at the Old Lake. But the view is tarnished after the gloomy story of my life.

“I apologise, I did not mean to ruin-” My words cut off as I am pulled into a ferocious hug.

“Never apologise, Lina. It is your mother who should be sorry,” he says and pulls back so I can see his face. I’ve never seen him so furious. I nod, breath held.

We start back. Kedrick keeps opening his mouth to talk. I can hear the breath catching as he does so.

“Has Olandon ever offered to describe your face to you?” he finally asks.

I continue walking, my hands clasped behind my back. “Yes,” I say. “I told him what I just told you and then told him not to ask again.”

“Are you still followed?” He asks.

“Sometimes. But it has lessened a lot with the arrival of your delegation, mother is probably too busy having you followed,” I say.

“I know. Malir and Rhone have a lot of fun leading them astray,” he says. I laugh as I try to picture this.

“Would you ever let me see your face?” he asks, but I am already shaking my head.

“No Kedrick...I can’t. I’m sorry. Please understand.” The thought of taking off my veil fills me with a crippling terror. There is too much at risk if I am caught or someone tells my mother.

He doesn't speak for a long time and I walk by his side in a worried mess.

“Kedrick. You must promise me this knowledge will not get back to anyone else. Not even your brother, King Jovan.” I did not want my story to become common knowledge or affect Glacium's dealings with my mother.

He kisses the back of my hand. “You have my word.” He does not release my hand until we reach the outskirts of the village.

Chapter Three

Over the next couple of weeks I feel lighter than I can ever remember being. I do the same things; see the twins, train with Aquin, visit the orphanage and spend time with Kedrick and my brother. But I'm happier. Telling Kedrick had been the right choice, though Olandon tells me it was a mistake.

The day is so hot, the air warps my view of the landscape in front of me. On days like today, designated groups of villagers comb the rotation for spot fires which start up for no other reason than it being too hot. They also work to clear leafy debris from the forest floors closest to the village and the palace before we reach the third.

I sit on the stairs in the shade of the Kaur wall with the twins, looking over the training yard. The other delegates are joining in the training today. They are stripped down to just their trousers in the heat. Our guards keep on their full attire, consisting of long-sleeved loose tunics and full-length trousers tucked into knee-high laced boots. Straps cross over their backs and underneath their arms to hold a chest plate tightly in place. Wide belts circle their hips with spaces for daggers and swords. They look very smart, but I wonder at the practicality of all of it in this heat.

There's more than just friendly competition going on from what I can see. The delegates are pouring with sweat, I feel a little sorry for them. Malir and Rhone, the huge, muscled men who usually tail Kedrick are impressive fighters. If I had fought Malir, who was one of the older delegates, before now I would have seriously underestimated him. It had taken me a little while to understand Rhone and Malir were following Kedrick to guard him. Even my mother only took her Elite when going out to the village. Otherwise, our guards were for discipline and also acted as a safeguard against invasion.

"Lina." Oberon's voice breaks my daydream of joining in the fighting below me.

“Yes.”

“Our names all sound the same,” he says.

“Our names start with the letter ‘O’, it looks like this.” I draw an ‘O’ in the air. Ochave comes to sit on my lap, but his attention does not waver from the guards, who are practising archery today.

“Why?” Oberon asks.

“Well,” I say, “on Osolis, anyone who is unmarried has an ‘O’ at the start of their name. Do you remember what being married means?” Oberon nods. This had been one of Oberon’s questions from last week.

“When you get married you lose the ‘O’ at the front of your name,” I say. “So when I marry. My name will go from Olina, to Lina.” I try to imagine getting married and Kedrick pops into my mind. I push the image away. That will never happen.

Oberon creases his eyebrows as he ponders this. “But we call you Lina now,” he says.

They had actually called me ‘Eena’ for years.

“Family can call you by your name without the ‘O’ if the person says it is okay. It is a sign they love you very much.

“I love you, Lina,” Ochave says, turning in my lap. He has been listening after all. My heart melts a little at the innocent words coming from his young face framed by the curly mop of chestnut hair they both have. The colour is inherited from my mother. If they grow to Olandon’s height, they will be very sought after when they are older.

“I love you too, Ochave,” I say with a small smile.

“You gotta call me Chave now.” He stands up to his full height, which is level with the height of my eyes in sitting.

“Thank you, Chave, I am honoured,” I say with a dip of my head. My boys do not understand this yet, but it is considered one of the biggest compliments to allow someone to use your shortened name. Oberon is quick to echo Chave’s offer to call him Beron, and I repeat my thanks to him.

I walk to dinner with Olandon later. There is the usual murmur throughout the dinning ring that night. A few heads are held close together, whispering. Others talk in larger groups.

As I pass the table of blue-robed delegates, Malir hits a red-haired Bruma over the head.

“Fuck that hurt!” The younger delegate shouts, rubbing his head. A general hiss of disapproval sounds from the Solati court. It is echoed by my brother beside me.

The other Bruma delegates either think his words or our reaction is amusing. I smile as they roar with laughter. One of them is hitting their plate on the table. Mother will be having a seizure.

“Disgusting,” Olandon says. I frown and then tread on his foot as he waves at some young women. He elbows me in return and I laugh as his face heats.

Kedrick is already at the middle ring talking to Adnan, another of the Bruma. Adnan is much more reserved than the redhead who had shouted out. I enjoy hearing of his inventions back on Glacium and of the ideas he has had since being on our world. If mother and Uncle Cassius were not present, I would be interrogating him about ideas he may have had to improve Osolis. But I wish to live until I am at least twenty, and that won't be achieved by revealing my large obsession with becoming Tatum.

I finish eating my regular green apple and dip my fingers in the small dish of water, using the napkin to dry my hands. As I prepare to leave, the Prince speaks.

“Tatum Avanna, I wondered if you could spare Lina tomorrow. I would like to see the Kaur forest here before we return.” I half turn to hear her answer, but freeze, a bit confused as gasps fill the room.

My mother looks between Kedrick and I with wide eyes. She never shows any expression on her barely wrinkled face, so I know something has shocked her deeply. I repeat his words over in my mind and inhale in horror, realising what he has said.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears, the sound is so loud it must be pulsating through the entire circular room. He has used my shortened name. Calling me Olina would be bad enough. But it was nearly unheard of for an

unattached woman to let a male use her shortened name. And certainly not by a Bruma. By calling me Lina, he has implied we are lovers.

A hand grips my leg under the table. Mother is only a little taller than me and slim, but she is strong. Her nails dig in and I do my best to keep still, thinking fast.

I laugh. The nervous sound rings through the dining ring. "I am not married yet Prince Kedrick. That means I still have an 'O' at the start of my name. I know this is very different to Glacium. You also may not know when you are widowed, you have an 'A' at the front of your name." I babble a bit as the deadly silence gets to me. I snap my mouth shut.

A hum of whispering starts. The nails dig in a bit more, I bite down on a whimper.

Kedrick's eyebrows raise high on his forehead. "Oh, I beg your forgiveness, Tatuma. I fear the heat must be getting to me." Some of the court laugh at this.

I take in a shallow breath. "We cannot expect you to come to a foreign world and know everything there is to know."

I almost cry out as she removes her nails. The feeling is like removing five splinters at once. It is impossible to stop my shoulders from hunching slightly. I bite down on my lip to stop any sound from escaping.

Kedrick frowns, I don't know if he realises what she was doing. "You are most understanding, I am sorry for the mistake." Kedrick nods deeply at me and then at mother. I wince as he gets this the wrong way around.

Whispers and hushed talk start up again. Olandon lets out a breath beside me and grips my shaking hand underneath the table. I peek sideways at my mother without moving my head. She is leaning forward talking to an advisor, blissfully forgetting me for the time being. Unfortunately, this means Uncle Cassius is in my line of sight. He watches me with an eerie smile, as though someone else is holding strings and is pulling up the corners of his mouth. He only smiles for one reason. I will be getting a visit later on.

Rising, I walk out of the ring with measured steps, keeping my head high. Usually the court just whispers as I pass, but tonight they fully turn in

their seats to watch the Solati who would let a Bruma use her shortened name go by.

It would be talked about for the rest of my life.

Chapter Four

Blood drips from my nose onto the rug. The rug looks new. I grin around a split lip, hoping it is. I wonder how many blood stains it covers. This room, like the rest of the palace is made of black Kaur, the only wood able to withstand the fires of the fourth. In my childhood, I had named this the torture tower. The circular room had no openings to the outside, probably so nobody could hear the screams.

Mother and Uncle Cassius sit on the viewing balcony, have watched my punishment. Cassius' laughter is still ringing in my ears. I am glad he has not joined in the beating, he likes to hit the same spot over and over.

"Thank you, Rian. You will do well here," Mother calls down. The guard still standing behind me steps back into place around the rounded walls of the room.

My confusion at the lightness of my beating clears. Rian was probably rather shocked at having to beat the Tatum on his first day in the Elite.

I place my hands on my knees, pushing into standing. I always do this because I am convinced it angers mother. Like the blood on the rug, it is a small act of defiance. The only size manageable under her rule. I tilt my head back as my Uncle walks to the front of the balcony, willing him to fall over the side and land on his head. Imagining his demise is one of my favourite pastimes.

Cassius is tall, taller than my mother. They have both aged well, though I know it's not all real. Olandon told me mother colours her chestnut hair with berries. Still, both of their faces are sculptured and they each have deep brown eyes. They would have been stunning in their youth.

"Be grateful for the Tatum's continued mercy," Uncle Cassius booms. I roll my eyes, but bow to my mother seated on the Throne behind him. I turn on my heel and stride out of the opened door with my head high and only slightly limping. There are several things I'd like to say, but having learnt this was a good way to get beaten again, I keep my lips pressed together. A

tapping sounds at the door not long after I've reached my room. I toss the coarse material of my veil deftly over my head, already knowing who it will be. I grab the wooden band next to the washing bowl and push it down over my head. Feeling for the ends of the veil to check it is in place.

Olandon stands outside, his dark robes blending into the shadows.

When I crack the door open to admit him, his gaze moves immediately to the bloody water on the stand. My room is so bare it is impossible to miss.

He stands in front of the opening. I watch the light between his fingers disappear as he clenches his hands.

"I am fine Landon," I reassure.

"I am sure you are," he says, jerking his hand in the direction of the bloody mess. I glare at the damning bowl. I hated worrying my brother, but this wasn't my only concern. The older Olandon got, the harder it was to convince him not to stand between mother and I. So far he had respected my wishes. I had no wish for the wrath of my mother to be turned on him.

I shrug. "The guard who beat me was new, his heart was not in it," I say and move forward to sit on the chest.

I watch him run his hands through his hair. I cannot see it, but I know it is black. The same colour as mine, though his is short and mine falls to my waist when undone. After washing it in the springs, I confine it in a braided bun at the base of my neck. The similarities ended there. I was a year older, but my brother already towered over me. This height difference between male and female was normal on our world.

"Fight back," he says. I sigh at the old argument, but I think of how I'd feel if I were in his position. "We could do it together."

"Tell me what would happen if I fought back. If we fought back," I say.

He falls silent, we both know what would happen. Exile or death.

Before I can stop him, Olandon stands and punches the wall. He draws back his fist again and I rush in to grab it on the backswing. I turn the rest of his body towards me and rub a hand over his grazed knuckles.

“One bruised person is enough,” I say, mostly to myself. I walk to the opening to spare him any embarrassment, hearing his breath is catching a little.

I lean my head on the side of the opening and look out at the Kaur forest. I take as deep a breath as my bruised ribs will allow and renew my silent vow to be impenetrable like them. Mother will not destroy me, or her insane brother. I will survive this and when I rule, it will all be worth it.

“I hate seeing them do this to you. How much can you bear before you break?” He must be truly upset to have asked me outright.

I place a hand on his arm. “I am strong. They have not succeeded yet.”

The stiffening of his shoulders tells me what he thinks of this reply. I know what he needs.

“Thank you for being here brother,” I say and put my arms around him. He sighs after a minute and hugs me gently. “Always Lina.”

Once he is gone, I walk over to the fan and pull one of the weighted cords to start its motion. The bouncing weights create their familiar rhythmic thudding sound in time with the throbbing in my jaw. There is not really enough smoke yet to warrant the fans use, but I find the regular thudding soothing.

When I finally fall into an exhausted sleep, I have wonderful dreams of a life without my mother.

Chapter Five

I lay on my stomach, my body aching, waiting for the bell signalling the morning meal.

My eyes keep closing.

I get up, moving in careful increments, and start stretching my body, knowing the next few days will be easier for it.

I take up my favourite position by the arched opening of my room. The wood on the side I sit is more polished than the rest of the opening. I love Osolis during the day, when the smoke is gone and the world is cast in the soft orange glow of the firelight. I watch the activity of the milling people below me. Lattices of cracks are already visible in the bone-dry brown ground. These will only grow bigger as we rotate further away from the cold of Glacium.

The bell rings, reverberating through the wood of the palace. I make my way down to the dining ring to sit with my tormentors.

I crunch at my apple painfully, ignoring Kedrick's gestures. I am not meeting with Kedrick. It would be disastrous if we were caught and I'm not eager for another beating. I'll go to the orphanage today since I cannot train.

Two girls around my age walk in front of me as I head out to the front of the palace.

"She was wearing yellow! I felt sure it would be green." One of them whispers. I roll my eyes, my mother was dressed in yellow robes today.

The other girl is dressed in yellow robes herself. "Yes, it was a lucky guess. But your hair is almost the same style she's wearing," she says. They catch sight of me behind them and hurry away with deep nods.

The court's bright colours and quiet ways could be mistaken for tranquil and elegant. But it is so contrived and ostentatious it makes me grind my teeth.

Villagers skitter away and bow as I pass. I know it's my mother's title and her reputed hate of me which keeps them away. And they still remember the girl I once played with. Sometimes I see them running a finger across their throats to each other. They probably tell the story to their children late at night, to scare them. No one wants to be associated with me, unless they are desperate or too young to know.

I reach the orphanage and sit with a young girl who stares up at me with huge grey eyes and her thumb in her mouth. Most of the children in the orphanage have lost their parents to fire or smoke inhalation. The dangers of Osolis are great and every time I visit these children, I'm reminded of just how dangerous fire is. Nothing is more feared on Osolis.

"You're hungry," I say. She nods. Picking up an apple out of a large crate, I begin slicing it into chunks, trying not to laugh at her unwavering attention. She accepts the pieces I hold out after a cautious moment. I watch her crunch away. Apples always remind me of this place, it is why I love to eat them.

"Why you wearing that?" The small girl points to my head. I am so used to this question from the orphans by now, it hardly bothers me. Though the first time I was asked I'd nearly run out of the place.

"I don't know," I reply. She nods at this and resumes her apple. I work the rest of the day, staying longer than I usually do for reasons I don't want to examine. I clean and play with the children, keeping my guard up for hands trying to grab at my veil. If mother knew what happened here I would be locked away forever. She thought I read stories to them. The matron knew what to say if she was ever asked.

I stand and move through the small orphanage and call goodbye to the Matron.

"Thank you Tatuma," she says, but does not curtsy. She has only just stopped after three years of me requesting it. She still refuses to stop thanking me, which has always felt backwards to me. I always feel I should be the one thanking her.

The top of my head just clears the door of the orphanage. This building, and other houses in this area, are made from the dried grass

harvested from the second. Every revolution these homes burn down and are then rebuilt in the fifth. I cannot imagine always having to do this and think it is a waste of their time, but I understand there must be a certain number of Kaur trees left standing to be able to clear the smoke. There had been incidences in our history where this balance had been upset and resulted in great loss of life.

The village has always had the effect of putting my life in perspective. The thin, weathered people around me wear loose trousers and tunics, dirty with the soot of smoke and ash. They are happy though. Children run between carts and wagons in bare feet, hair unbound, squealing when they are caught. One boy trips and falls in front of me. I crouch down. He must be about a revolution old. I'm reaching to put him back on his feet when he snatches a hand out and grips the bottom of my veil. I whip my hand forward and grip the veil in front of his hand and then pry his fingers off with the other.

I look up.

The village has lost its bustle, every person is watching us in horrified silence. A woman and male sprint out from a thatch building to my side. I let go of the boy's hand and the woman grabs for him while trying to keep as far away from me as possible.

The man sinks down onto his knees in front of me.

"Mercy Tatuma, please don't harm my family. I will take any punishment on their behalf," he pleads with me. He has the accent of the villagers, rolling the 'r' in his words. The private tutors hammered this out of me, and I know the court was taught the same in the palace classrooms.

The pair are lean, obviously hard workers from the tired hang of their shoulders. It's the first time this has ever happened to me. There are so many people watching.

The man is still on his knees. His wife huddles over the boy weeping. If I ever needed reminding of the fear my mother instilled, this was it. The Tatum's word was absolute and I was the next in line.

I place a hand on the man's shoulder. He is at least three revolutions older than myself, or appears it anyway. "He is a young boy and did not

know any better. I am not going to harm your family,” I say. “What is your name?”

“Turin. It’s Turin,” he stutters.

“Well Mister Turin, return to your wife and your son. There has been no harm done,” I say.

It takes a while to leave. I eventually get away, a bit sickened after they pledge everlasting gratitude and wish me all kinds of good health and longevity. A young girl, maybe another of their children had approached with a small cake which I had politely refused. One of my worst beatings came after mother caught me eating village food.

The houses change as I near the palace, becoming increasingly made of Kaur - the sign of wealth and status on Osolis. Directly outside the palace border, the houses are Kaur with only the roofs being made of thatch. These abodes belong to the wealthiest villagers, such as the Satums and their assistants, who oversee the running of food, resources and regeneration throughout the rotations.

Olandon waits for me in the outer gardens as I pass through the unguarded wall into the palace grounds.

“You have been in the village,” he says.

“I have,” I say with a smile. It was rare that I didn’t spend at least part of a day there. “You should come, too.”

Olandon shudders. Apart from my brother’s ability to genuinely like the court, this was the only issue we really disagreed on. He couldn’t understand how the village held such allure to me. He had come once or twice at my insistence, but I knew he did so reluctantly and with a bit of disgust. He also hates how I’m ridiculed for my village visits by the court. Their laughter has never bothered me though because their ridicule is the only reason my mother allows me to go into the village. She enjoys it immensely. But as I also enjoy my training and going there, I don’t lose any sleep over it.

“Tatuma Olina, well met,” a voice says. I roll my eyes, but stop when I turn and see who the voice belongs to. A genuine smile lights my face.

“Satum Jerin, you are returned from the sixth,” I say, pleasure flooding my voice at seeing him after such a long time. He bows to myself and Olandon.

“Yes, we have just finished removing the Kaur cases from the next rotation of fruit trees there and planting seeds for harvest in the first,” he says with a smile, the wrinkles around his eyes creasing. Jerin is one of the rare court members I will be keeping.

“It is a big job you do for us,” I say, nodding my head. Mother never appreciates him enough, so I always try to praise him. Of the three Satums, he is the only one I like.

He beams at the compliment. “We only lost ten trees this year. The twenty new trees we planted in the sixth rotation last revolution survived the fires.” I smile at the passion in his voice. “With the Tatum’s careful management, we have nearly a whole revolution of food stored,” he continues.

“As long as there are apples, you know I am satisfied.”

He gives me a small bow. “You can be assured they have survived. I always make sure to lock those cases extra tight before the fourth.” I give him greetings to pass on to his wife and children.

Olandon and I discuss the guard’s training on our way to dinner. I tell him of the issues I’ve spotted recently.

Uncle Cassius was technically the head of the guard, but from the odd occasion when I had seen him at training, I knew he was an average fighter at best, certainly not good enough to be Head of the Guard. One of my mother’s Elite unofficially held the position until my brother turned eighteen. I listen to my brother’s stories and force away the threads of jealousy as he talks.

As we approach the dining ring, I see Kedrick standing to the side with the delegates. He turns my way. Several of the court are watching though. I glide past without acknowledging him, my heart sinking.

Chapter Six

Despite a previous promise not to do so, I avoid Kedrick for the second time and once I've recovered, I spend all of my free time training with Aquin. Working myself into exhaustion helps me to deal with the revolted looks from the court.

It's not hard to avoid him, mother has had Kedrick in negotiations since his slip in the dining ring. I'm oddly thankful, though I realise how twisted that is. I run down the empty pathway to the village on my way to Aquin's. The meadow had now been harvested and is empty. My robes and veil flatten against my front as I run. I imagine material billowing out behind me. In my mind, my veil becomes my hair and instead of the brush of material, I feel the heat of the firelight directly on my skin.

Occupied by this, I barely have time to react to a cracking sound to my right. Large hands grab at me. I lash out with my right leg, hearing a loud grunt in response. I twist under the tall person's arm, take hold of their wrist and use their flailing momentum to throw them over my hip and into a Kaur tree.

I whirl around and sink into a fighting pose as I hear several heavy steps approaching. I straighten at the sight of Malir and Rhone walking into the clearing. The two men were the least friendly of the delegates, but rather than dislike them for this, I found I enjoyed it. When people were forced by custom to talk to me, they were always polite, whether they wanted to be or not. My mother hated me, but wouldn't tolerate open disrespect of me.

Anything discreet was fine.

Both are looking with confusion at the person behind me. My brain slowly turns over, until I realise who I've just thrown into the tree.

I whip around to where Prince Kedrick lays at the base of the tree groaning. Malir rushes forward.

"Veni!" I say, also rushing forward. "Kedrick, you snuck up on me."

He sits up, wincing a little with the movement. “That is the worst apology I’ve ever heard. How the hell did you throw me like that? You’re so small.” He rubs his back where he hit the tree.

I walk to inspect the tree. There is not any sign it has been hit.

“Is the tree alright, Olina?” he says sarcastically, standing on unsteady legs. Rhone snorts and I look at him in surprise. Rhone made a sound, he can talk.

In light of previous comments Kedrick has made about Bruma women being mainly decorative, I suspect his pride has suffered the biggest injury from my throw.

“Thank you, it is okay,” I reply in the same tone, receiving a glare from him and another snort from Rhone. His use of my name has reminded me I am angry at him.

“If that is all, I will be on my way.”

“To the orphanage? I hoped you could be persuaded to take a walk with me,” he says to my back.

“Another time, Prince Kedrick, I’m quite busy today.” I keep walking, even though my stomach is sinking.

“Shit!” I hear him say. I hear some murmuring behind me, which fades as I round a bend. Footsteps sound behind me. Kedrick runs to my side, grabbing my hand. I look back and see Malir and Rhone walking off to the meadow in the opposite direction.

“Lina, wait. I need to talk to you,” he says. I wrench my hand from his grasp.

“Don’t call me that,” I hiss. “That’s what put us in this mess.”

“You got in trouble?” he asks, face paling. I roll my eyes, how has he somehow missed the tension of the last days?

“Yes, of course.” I push at his shoulder roughly and he takes a step back. “How could you call me Lina in front of the court? In front of my *mother*?” I ask.

“I’m sorry,” he says, reaching to grab me. I push his hands away.

“Sorry is not enough. I need you to understand the importance of what you have done. The only people to call me Lina are my family and one very

old man who has known me since birth. The whole court thinks we are... lovers," I say.

"What? Is that why it got so weird?" He throws his hands up. "Shit." He can understand how this would garner a strong reaction. "You have been Lina in my mind for months now. It slipped out. Please, tell me what I can do to make this right."

I hear footsteps approaching from ahead of us. I drag him off the path, into the trees until we are out of sight.

"Nothing can be done, except what I am already doing. We cannot be seen together," I say.

Kedrick looks at me for a long moment. "I've ruined everything haven't I? How bad will this be for you?"

"I am used to it." I shrug. "I accept your apology," I continue, to change the subject.

"Will you also accept my solemn promise not to do it again?" he asks. I nod. He steps forward to grab one of my hands. "I am not sure I could so easily forgive my stupidity, but I thank you. I hope I have not lost your trust." He hints at a question, and I know he has purposely poised it this way, so I can choose not to answer him. I also know discretion is not one of his strengths, but he has proved himself in other ways.

I recollect my intent to see Aquin and a grin spreads on my face as a plan forms in my mind.

Brushing aside thoughts of what Olandon will say when he finds out, I step up to the Prince.

"There is something I've never told you." I walk a little from him. "Something very important to me, but something which will also endanger another's life if anyone else were to ever find out about it."

A crack resounds through the forest to our left, I drop low, and feel Kedrick do the same. I peer through the trees and wait, holding my breath. We both wait several minutes, but there is no further sound. It was probably just a fallen branch. I back away and pull close to Kedrick, whispering to him while keeping one eye on the forest in front of me just in case.

“We must leave Malir and Rhone behind, unless you trust them not to tell King Jovan.”

He nods. “Let’s go,” he says, his warm breath tickling my ear.

We keep out of sight, going around the outside of the village before ducking between buildings and slipping into the orphanage through an opening. I wave out to the matron and greet children as we go, weaving my way to the back of the building. This should keep anyone following off our track.

I crack open the back door and look out to the Kaur forest. There’s no one in sight.

I turn to the Prince. He opens his mouth, but I put a finger to his lips. He grips my hand and kisses my finger, before turning my palm over and placing another on the back of my hand. The hot shivers I’m starting to like, run down my body.

Pulling free, I duck out the door and run to the forest, Kedrick trails closely behind. After ten minutes, I stop and wait for Kedrick to catch up. I can hear him crashing closer after a minute.

“Why all the running and orphanage stuff?” He gasps. His limbs are long, but I know he’s not as graceful as he first appears, and he is unused to jumping over the vines which are yet to drop off the Kaur trees.

“The orphanage is a cover for what I really am doing,” I explain.

“And the running?” He has his hands on top of his head, drawing in huge breaths.

I laugh, not out of breath at all.

“Because I am able to get to Aquin faster.” I take off at another run, ignoring a weird growling sound from him. He stays closer this time.

I don’t stop until I break into a clearing. The clearing holds several large Kaur buildings.

My trainer was revered as the best of the Elite guards in his time. Olandon and I had heard the guards talking of him once. I think of him as my father, my advisor and a great friend. I used to pretend he and his wife were my grandparents. It was easy because they had no children of their own.

I slow to a walk so Kedrick can catch up. He is dripping with sweat when he does. I forget he is not as accustomed to this heat, and feel some small guilt at making him run all the way here. He does not talk, just looks around while he catches his breath.

“This Aquin is rich,” he gasps, as though he is disgusted by the fact, a bit hypocritical considering he is a Prince himself.

We round a corner and I spot Aquin sitting on his favourite bench in the shade. Both of his hands rest on top of his cane and his head is bowed. I stop in front of him. Kedrick looks at me with a raised eyebrow. I smile. He probably thinks Aquin is asleep

“You have brought company with you Lina,” Aquin says, astonishment colours his words. His voice would have been called deep ten revolutions ago, but time had since taken some of its resonance. “There is a first time for everything,” he says, opening his eyes and looking at me.

I see the Prince making the connection as to who this person is. A sudden grin shines on his face.

I shake my head at his mood swings.

“I’ve brought the Prince Kedrick to watch our session,” I say.

“A Bruma Prince of Glacium, none the less. You trust this boy?” Aquin keeps his eyes on me not acknowledging the Prince at all. I smile as Kedrick bristles beside me.

“Yes, I do.” I look at the prince and his eyes hold mine as he looks back.

“I see,” Aquin says, standing with a swiftness belonging to a much younger man. Kedrick jerks beside me, taking a half step backwards.

“Get changed and meet me for warm up,” Aquin says over his shoulder as he moves to the largest Kaur building.

I direct a confused Kedrick to follow him, while I head to another smaller building to change.

I take my robe off and throw it over the screen, careful not to dislodge my veil. The small set of training clothes lay over a bench in the corner, I pull these on. They’re my favourite clothes to wear, even better than the toga dress. We’ve had to adapt the top which was too tight in the wrong

places and too easy to grab onto around the waist. The result is a light sleeveless top, which stops just above the top of my matching black trousers.

There's so much more freedom in them than what my robes afford. They are much more like what the villagers wear. And every time I put them on my uncertainty and my fears fade. I become more like the person I want to be.

On my way out I grab a leather helmet which ties under my chin. It is the only way my veil will stay on during our sessions.

Entering the largest building, I see the Prince leaning on a wall, looking around with unstopped fascination at the array of weaponry. This is where Aquin's true genius is displayed. His mind was why he was considered such a formidable fighter.

The room is filled from floor to roof with different apparatus. All over the room there are panels, all of which open to release a form of weapon or trap. Between these are other obstacles such as swinging logs, bags of dirt, nets and jagged surfaces. A series of ropes hang from the ceiling. All of this he somehow controls from levers around the room. I used to think it was magic when I was younger, and even now I cannot begin to understand it. Aquin was very guarded about how they worked.

Aquin is dragging equipment into place for our session. Kedrick watches him. No doubt he offered to help, but was cuttingly refused by the older man. The Prince glances at me as I walk towards him then turns his head back to Aquin, only to whip his head straight back towards me. His mouth drops open and his eyes move down and back up. His gaze lingers on my chest for several moments before returning to my face as I stand in front of him.

I watch with interest as his face reddens. I haven't seen this on him before. I tilt my head to the side and place my hands on my hips.

"Are you ready to see my secret?" I turn from him and walk to the middle of the clearing, looking back over my shoulder when he does not answer. His throat works as he swallows.

Aquin starts me on a light series to warm my body. Any difficulty blocking out the distraction of Kedrick fades as Aquin speeds up the routine

and begins to shout out complex kicks and spins. Soon I have a sheen over my body.

At the blocking post, I jump back into stable footing and stop a wooden shaft with my forearm. Aquin wheels the twisting post faster and faster until my hands are blurring and the whistle of the approaching shafts blend together, making it impossible for me to anticipate where to place my hands. I glare up at him as a shaft whacks me in the side of the head.

We move onto weapons; throwing and sparring until I am pouring sweat. I can stick a dagger hilt deep into the training dummies around the room. My downfall is that without sound, I have no accuracy. I am just as likely to hit the wall as the dummy. When I'm sparring with my brother, I fight using touch, heat, the sounds of his breathing, the shuffling of his feet and, of course, my memory of his weaknesses and strengths in combat. When we fight with swords, I listen for the whistling of the swing and I am passable with swordplay, but Aquin still insists on blunting the sword's edge. Bow and arrow is similar to throwing a dagger, I can deliver a forceful strike with no accuracy. It is frustrating I have no other sparring partner. Since Olandon has been training with the guards he has started to beat me. He has learnt to creep silently across the training surface and he breathes soundlessly so I'm blind to his position and next attack.

I really can't complain at the handicap my veil presents. Without it, my reaction times would be much slower. I've learnt to react instantly, without thought. Aquin also thinks my other senses have grown much stronger due to one being impaired.

Next is my favourite part of the session, because I never know what Aquin will unleash. This part had not been dangerous when Olandon and I were children, but as our skill grew, the padding had been taken off most of the blunted weapons.

We start. I have no idea how long I've been evading, blocking and dodging when Aquin does something completely new. He releases a gigantic log suspended between three ropes from the ceiling. My mind registers the beginning of its slow arc. At the same time I hear a whir behind me which I've learnt over the years means arrows are being released.

I drop down to dodge the first arrow. It punctures the air where my head was half a moment before. Gathering strength in my legs, I jump and tuck my legs to my chest as the log careens underneath me. I throw my legs out and arch backwards as the second arrow, which would have hit my side, flies underneath me. Landing from my backflip, I close my eyes to shut out the distraction of the shifting veil. Twisting, jumping and side-stepping, I dodge seven more arrows. I miss the last arrow's whir as it leaves the wall. Aquin must have released two at once. It hits me on the bone of my left hip. Hissing with pain, I bend forward. Momentarily forgetting the giant log which is swinging back towards me. The cloud of pain clears just in time for the creaking groan of strained ropes to register. I burst upwards and fling myself horizontal. The log passes underneath, tearing at the skin of my stomach as it does. I stumble on the other side of the log, landing on one knee and quickly roll upright and jog out of the log's swinging pathway. It will take a while for it to come to a stop.

"Nine out of ten arrows dodged. Not bad. What happened with the last?" Aquin asks, tapping his cane on the side of my arm.

"I missed its noise as it left the wall," I say, moving to the area designated for cooling down. As though you can cool down in this heat.

The old man stops in front of me and stares at me, waiting.

I sigh in aggravation. "Yes, the sound of two leaving at once was louder."

"I would imagine it was twice as loud." He snorts. "Therefore you should have registered it. Dropping to the ground would have been the better option. Though you have the arrows' routes memorised and possibly could have positioned yourself to miss both."

I close my eyes and go through the scene in my mind. "Yes. I know the sound now. You will not catch me again with it." I challenge him.

Aquin chuckles as he moves to collect the arrows. "Once is enough on a battlefield. There is no chance to memorise everything there."

"I will just have to make sure my enemies all wear veils then," I joke.

He looks back at me. I cannot quite understand his expression, but it dries up my laughter. His gaze flicks from Kedrick to me. He arches an eyebrow and resumes his tidying.

What was that about? I shake my head as I hear Kedrick approaching.

The Bruma prince stops a few strides from me and does not say a word. I slide through my series of stretches. A few minutes pass before I open my eyes and finally acknowledge him. He is frowning at my stomach. I look down and see my top has been torn and there is a large graze where the log passed beneath me.

“It got me.” I chuckle, then wince as I feel the already forming bruise on my left hip. “Aquin, that log was new. I loved it.” Aquin grunts and Kedrick chokes.

I turn to him, ripping the ruined bottom half of my top off. His eyes fix on my bare stomach. I ignore his look, bending down to stretch the backs of my thighs.

He finally breaks his silence. “What...was that?” I smile under my veil.

“What do you mean?” I say.

A derisive noise comes from him. “You know what I mean. I’ve never seen anything like it. My heart stopped two dozen times during it. How do you see anything?” Words tumble from his mouth. “Shit. It’s no wonder you keep it a secret.” He shakes his head and paces a few times, pulling a little at his hair.

I try very hard to suppress my amusement at his reaction.

“You’re surprised.” I let humour fill my voice.

“That’s one word for it.” His eyes flick briefly to my chest again. “Here I thought if there was ever any danger, I would be the one protecting you.” He shakes his head, a baffled expression on his face.

“Do you fight?” I ask.

“Of course. Every Bruma male fights.”

He seems a bit insulted. “Will you spar with me while you are here? The only person I get to practice with is Olandon. I’d appreciate fighting someone with different techniques. He has been beating me lately.”

Kedrick swallows audibly. “Uh...sure.” He moves to find a comfortable spot. “How do you see out there? I wouldn’t have thought you could see anything under your veil.”

“I don’t see as such,” I say. “I listen, feel and much of it is memorised.”

We walk to the edge of the training building and I slide the heavy door open. We pick a seat on the edge of the forest clearing under a tree while Aquin continues to clear up. I've learnt not to offer him help, he always tells me to go away. We sit in comfortable silence, listening to the sounds of the forest. The dampness in my veil dries as we sit. My nose wrinkles at the smell so close to my face. It is the only bad thing about training.

"I've seen only a few who could rival the speed you just displayed. Perhaps only my brother Jovan, if I really think about it. You're very fast," he says. His admiring tone encourages me to open up. He listens intently as I give him an account of how I started training with Aquin long ago.

Kedrick laughs, breaking the silence we have fallen into.

"You let me go on and on about the females of our world. I'm remembering some of the things I said, and I can't imagine how you were able to listen to them with a straight face."

"What was I supposed to say? I could not tell you my secret yet. I did not trust you then," I say.

He glares at me.

I roll my eyes and shrug a shoulder. "I trust you now. Showing you my training should have told you that much. You are my friend now."

He flings the handful of dried dust and grass away. "Bloody friends," he mutters.

I whip my head around to him in some disbelief at what I just heard. What does he mean? It sounds as though he is not happy with being friends. Has he felt that way the whole time? The thought tears a little at my heart. I stand to get away, but Kedrick stands also, grabbing my elbow.

"I would be more than your friend." He steps up to me and grabs my other elbow, bringing me to face him. I place both hands on his chest to steady myself, speechless. He tilts my chin upwards, leans his head down and kisses me through the veil. The heat of his skin reaches mine. The veil moulds to my lips and I taste the salt of my sweat. The friction causes tingles to spread through my body all the way to my toes. "I love you," he says, laying several kisses down the side of my neck before breathing deeply and stepping back.

“I would also love to continue, but until you put your robes back on we’ll need to stop there. If I didn’t think Aquin would put a dagger in my back...” He trails off, eyes fixed on me, as though he could stare at me for days. My skin starts to warm under his intent gaze.

I assess my cropped training top and linen trousers. I am sweaty and definitely not smelling like a wild flower. I cannot see the allure.

“I could tell you were petite in your robes, but bloody hell,” he groans. “Let’s talk of something else.”

My cheeks heat at his almost pained words. I’ve never had someone look at me the way he is right now. Maybe it is a Glacium custom. It hadn’t occurred to me to worry about what he may think. Mumbling a vague something, I leave him to get changed, thinking about our kiss the whole time.

Chapter Seven

Olandon tells me there have been whispers about the length of the Bruma delegation's stay. Delegate parties often return home soon after their three month tour of the other world has been completed and final negotiations have been reached. I know the court whispers I am the reason. Kedrick and I continue to avoid each other in public and keep any talking at meals to a minimum. This does nothing to abate the whispers and I've wondered if our behaviour is actually having the opposite effect.

I continue my training with Aquin, wishing Kedrick could join me again, but we cannot both be missing at once. It would be too obvious. Frustrated thoughts of how it could have been, hover over me like the ever present smoke. If only he hadn't said those words.

One day after a visit to the twins, Olandon requests my presence in his room.

His room is very different from my own. Bright rugs and sculptures are draped and dotted around, taking away the bare feeling. He is always asking me why I do not decorate my room. I would always reply the emptiness was my preference. I did not tell him the room was just a room to me, it was not *my* room, just as this was not my home. The village was more of a home than the palace would ever be during mother's rule. When I was younger, I spent years dreaming I lived at the orphanage instead of here.

"You are not yourself," Olandon starts to say as he places the objects he carries onto a desk.

I don't answer. It is the beautiful thing about the Solati avoidance of asking straight questions; it is easy to ignore them. He frowns and turns to me.

"It's the Prince," he says.

I shrug. I do not want to talk about Kedrick to my younger brother.

“You are jeopardizing your credibility as the future Tatum for a man who will be gone in another few weeks.”

I feel my eyes narrowing at his words. I cross my arms to hold my anger inside. But he doesn't stop.

“What has happened? Where is your focus? This Bruma has removed all your ambition. Osolis does not need half of you; it needs you as you were before. I have waited for you to come to your senses, but enough is enough.”

Olandon has had enough. And so have I.

My voice could nearly cut through the Kaur walls. “Do not suppose you know what goes on in my mind,” I say. “I've lost my focus?” I walk until I am nearly nose to nose with him. “I am always focused.” His eyes are wide, he has never seen me like this. “My plans are always in the front of my mind. All day. Repeating over and over like a chant, just so I can stay sane in this poisonous Tellio nest.” My veil is puffing outwards with my harsh breaths.

“Lina,” Olandon starts. I cut him off before he can start. He knows nothing about what I am feeling.

“When Kedrick arrived, I felt something so foreign to me, it took months to recognize it,” I say before turning my back and striding to the door. Most of me is furious with him. Furious because he knows me better than anyone, but in this moment does not seem to know me at all.

The other part of me wishes he could see what I see; how twisted the court and my mother are, how the Bruma are not inferior - just different. “You may keep your judgments of my behaviour, brother. I will have these memories of what it feels like to be happy and to be loved by someone to carry me through my life.”

I slam the door as I leave, angry at Olandon and angry at myself for already feeling guilty over my very rare loss of temper. My robes flick out from my legs, twisting between my ankles with my angry stride. I'm not being discreet enough, several of the court watch, their posture stilling as I pass.

The form of Uncle Cassius taints the view of my windowsill when I reach my room. The timing could not be worse.

“What do you want?” I say, teeth gritted.

It is the first question I have ever dared to ask him. He stands and strides over to me, slapping me hard across the face.

Red colours my vision, and it all becomes too much.

My fist cuts under his chin and his head snaps back. I follow this with several jabs into his nose. He grabs his face and tries to turn away from me, his movements slow and lumbering. I aim blows to the areas I know will hurt the most; the kidneys, the face, the ribs and knees. Years of resentment and remembered pain are being channelled and unleashed through my fists. By the time I’m finished he is sobbing on the ground, pleading with me to stop.

I lower myself, still fuelled with fury, and put my mouth close to his ear. “Every time you feel the pain of your beating today, I hope you are reminded of your transgressions. You can only blame yourself, and must remember that today the Tatum has shown mercy,” I hiss the last word and straighten.

“Get out,” I say and watch him scramble for the door, stooping with pain.

I sit on the windowsill and take time to commit every detail of what just happened to memory. A wide, savage grin on my face, I relish the triumph of making Cassius a whimpering mess. I feel pride in my victory. I do these things now, because I know I’ll be in bed recovering for a month once my mother gets word of what just happened. This is by far the worst thing I’ve ever done.

And it felt amazing.

The firelight dies as smoke fills the sky, and I think of Kedrick and of Olandon, and the twins. I shouldn’t have been so harsh with my brother. It was too easy to fall into resentment because he was raised so differently than myself. I hoped he would forgive me for my harsh words. Though they had been honest, they had been stoked by my bitterness and disappointment of the distance between Kedrick and myself.

I hear the rhythmic sound of marching footsteps down the hall. Standing up, I lock down my victory in the back of my mind.

The Elite escort me down to the far tower where the Torture room lies. The whispers of the court follow me down the hall. I pass Blaine, the complaining sneering delegate and see that he watches the show with interest.

None of the court ask what is happening because they all know. I am not fool enough to think my beatings are a secret. The escort to my mother's secluded torture room, followed by weeks without my presence in the dining ring or a limping walk for several days. Every person here knows what their ruler does to her child and not one of them has ever lifted a finger. Oddly, it's the one thing I cannot blame them for. Society on Osolis is governed so completely by the Tatum and always has been. To question the person who holds this title is more than treason, its shame and dishonour on you and your family. The kind of which is never forgotten. I can't be sure I would risk this if I was in their position.

Dread fills the area under my ribs. One of the Elite shoves me forward. I stumble to a stop below the viewing balcony where mother is seated. Cassius is not present.

"I have seen Cassius," she starts, in a voice bereft of all warmth and humanity. I've never heard her use this particular tone before. It is so void of emotion, I almost step back. I cannot imagine what her expression would be, but her voice is pure evil.

She examines her outstretched hand. "You can be assured I will be looking into how you were able to beat an experienced man of twice your size."

Fear shoots through me. I've put Aquin and Olandon at great risk. I hadn't even thought of this. My mind darts around for some reasonable explanation, but nothing sounds convincing. I listen with half a mind as she continues her threats. I can't let her hurt them.

"I was quite happy to let you ruin your reputation by continuing your relationship with the Bruma savage. But beating my beloved brother. Your own Uncle. You are disgusting, less than an animal. Nearly less than a

Bruma,” she pauses, drumming her fingers on her throne. The room is so quiet. Normally there is a shuffling from the Elite, a sword changing hands, a snigger. But everyone is still with the tension spreading from the Tatum.

“Soon, I will let my guards beat you within an inch of your life. After this, you will be taken to the fifth, where you shall live for the remainder of your ungrateful life. You have lost the title of Tatum. This will pass to Olandon. At least I know he will not make a mockery of the mantle. He *can* be trained.”

My heart begins to thud in my ears as I process what she’s saying.

I will never see Olandon, Aquin or the twins again. I will not be able to warn my brother of the danger to Aquin. What will happen to the matron or my orphans? How will they get enough food? My dreams - gone. I will never see Kedrick again.

Mother’s hand is lifting to signal the guards. I can hear the creak of leather behind me as the Elite prepare to take a step forward.

I’m desperate. I grasp at the only idea I have. Words blurt out from my mouth “Are there mirrors in the fifth?”

I don’t need to see her face to know her answer. Her hands still, her whole body stiffens. I’ve struck a nerve.

“What did you say?” she asks.

“I asked if there were mirrors in the fifth,” I repeat. “I wanted to know because as soon as I get there I will be taking my veil off. Maybe even before.” The fact she has not realised how she currently looks with her hand hanging in the air shows how shocked she is. She is all about appearances.

I keep pushing, I am grasping at straws. “What is to stop me lifting my veil and showing every person I meet there?” I say in a stronger voice, walking closer to the balcony, tilting my head back further so I can still monitor her reactions.

She laughs. The sound is too high-pitched. Her face has not changed, but her nervous laugh has given her away. “It is your choice if you want to show your hideous face to everyone,” she says.

“My choice? Why did you not tell me so? Here I have been thinking you had told me specifically that I had no choice. But if this is so, you will not mind if I...” I move my hand towards the end of the veil, which hangs down at the tip of each shoulder and across my collar bone at the front.

She leaps up from her throne and rests on the balcony, her arms out to each side of her. “All mirrors in the fifth will be removed,” she hisses at me and lifts a hand again. I am dancing inside. She has confirmed her fear. If she had just sat still she would have won, there was no way I would have taken the veil off.

Kedrick was right. The Tatum is more terrified of me removing my veil than I am of taking it off.

“You could do that later, perhaps. It would not stop the damage I could do now. I have decided I am eager to have it off, especially in this heat.” I grip the coarse material, take a breath and lift it slightly.

“Stop!” She shouts the word and then claps a hand over her mouth.

I stand taller, as though I’m in my training clothes, and gather my thoughts. It’s not hard because I’ve dreamt of my victory over my mother so many times in the past.

“It seems to me you don’t want me to remove my veil, Tatum. And though I would dearly love to do it anyway. I am willing to negotiate because you are my mother and I care deeply for you.” I grin as she narrows her eyes.

“Let me tell you what is going to happen,” I say, pacing slowly in front of her.

“I will not be beaten today or ever again. I will not be confined to the fifth and your control over me vanishes from this moment forth. I will remain the Tatum. It is not within your power to take this away from me, anyway. I will not be locked away in the tower.” I pause and see her posture has stiffened, but she has resumed her clutching of the balcony edge. Still terrified. Furious, but terrified.

“If you do not comply with these...let us call them, requests, I will reveal my face in front of the court, or the villagers, or to whomever I am with at the time.” My voice does not waver.

“I only care because I do not want you to know how disgusting your truly are,” she says in a sad voice. “It would not affect me in the slightest, apart from a mother feeling the hurt and embarrassment of one of her children.

“You really should not tell such horrible lies, mother.” I reach up to the material once more, and this time I move it up, exposing my throat, my chin. My mouth dries, but I push my own fear to the side. I lift it up and expose my bottom lip and then begin to twist on the spot towards the Elite.

“Okay!” The word is screamed. It echoes around the circular room. She is shaking so much, I can see it from here. Her hands are balled into fists. She is so rattled, she has not thought to use the guards to subdue me. Yet.

I drop the veil and it swings into its usual place. I bow to her with flare and stride to the doorway. The guard who last beat me, Rian, is there and he moves to the side to let me out. I let go of my breath and thank him silently. I am an excellent fighter, but taking on all of the Elite guards would be impossible.

Chapter Eight

It felt like I was constantly holding my breath over the next week. I awaited my mother's next move. I knew she would try to regain control in some way. Her revenge was merely delayed. But as long as I protected Aquin, Olandon and Kedrick, she could not hurt me.

If you hadn't been in the Torture room, nothing would have appeared any different. I'm careful with the food, only eating apples and checking them for any sign they have been tampered with. There have been instances where the members of the court have been poisoned with Tellio venom.

I don't worry about her poisoning Kedrick. If he died here, it would mean war.

Aquin and Olandon both knew to be on their guard, I'd told them about Cassius and my ultimatum with mother. Olandon had been joyous at the news. Aquin's reaction had been more like my own - wary and expectant. What had happened between my brother and I was forgotten. He was too excited at my stand to be angry with me. He had commented it was time things changed. When I had prompted him to explain the comment he had closed the conversation and told me we would talk of it once the delegates were gone. Maybe he did not trust me to keep it from Kedrick.

I was more cautious than ever when going to my training sessions. Guilt at having potentially put Aquin in danger, hung heavy in my stomach. But when I had suggested we stop the trainings, he'd told me to shut up and get on with it. He later explained he was too old to care, he'd always known it was a risk.

I'd just begun training for the day. I look up after a series of kicks to see Kedrick leaning against the door frame. I fumble my footing at the sight of him, but catch myself in time. What is he doing here? Aquin does not let him talk. He puts us through a gruelling series of exercises and my arms and stomach are burning by the end of it. My veil is soaked. I hate this time of revolution.

Afterwards, Kedrick and I lay out under a Kaur tree on the dry and cracked ground. His training tunic is off and I'm distracted beyond reason at the sight of his chest. Is this the kind of fascination he has with my body? I had given Kedrick a highly edited version of what happened with my mother. I didn't want to pit him against her more than I already had. It would affect the relations between our worlds.

"I can feel you watching me," he murmurs. He lifts his arm up and looks at me. Horror at being caught floods through me. I whip my head towards the Kaur forest. He chuckles.

"I was beginning to wonder if you found me attractive at all. It's so hard to tell what you're thinking," he says as he reaches up to tug on my veil.

I pull away and do not answer, looking around for something to distract me, but the wildflowers are all gone, dried by the crushing heat. I always worry about Aquin out here in the middle of the forest with all the fires. Every year and a half when I expressed these concerns he would proceed to have Olandon and myself clear debris a hundred metres into the forest in a full circle around the grounds. This always made me feel better and I had no qualms bringing it up every time we neared the third, much to Olandon's disgust.

"You do find me attractive don't you?" He stands in front of me, flexing his ridged stomach, a grin on his face. A small smile plays on my mouth, but I keep my head turned. I can't resist sneaking another look and have one second to see his posture tense before he launches at me. I'm pushed back, and he has my arms pinned above my head before I can think. I am about to kick my legs out to break the hold when a sensation combining pleasure and torture starts over my skin.

Kedrick tickles my stomach and legs. I scream, pleading him to stop.

"I want to hear you say you find me attractive. No! I want you to say I am sexy."

"What is sexy?" I gasp, writhing side to side between laughter.

"It means you would like to have children with me." I gasp, what an outrageous thing to say. His words cause warmth to spread down my body,

as it has before. But this time it's more intense. I cannot take the torture anymore.

"You're sexy," I wheeze. He stops tickling and brings his face close to mine, his legs are on top of mine and his body hovers over me, his weight is propped up on his elbows.

"Who is?" he says, his eyes piercing through my veil.

"You are! Kedrick, you are sexy," I say, my heart beating in my chest. His weight is suddenly gone and I am being hauled up into standing. A furious Olandon grips my arm and stares daggers at the Prince.

"Why are you on top of her Bruma?" he spits out. He has asked a question to insult Kedrick. I don't bother trying to tell him Kedrick prefers this way of talking. "Just because I brought you here does not mean you may take liberties," he continues.

"You brought him here?" I ask in surprise. Olandon flicks a small glance at me and nods. Tears almost well up. He has thought on my words of the other day. He is trying to help me spend time with Kedrick.

"I was tickling her, not hurting her," he explains.

"You were touching her," Olandon snarls, stepping closer to him with his fists clenched.

Kedrick's face goes blank for a moment, and then he grins in a challenging kind of way. I am not sure he understands how furious my brother is.

"It did not hurt, Landon," I reassure, trying to step in front. Olandon pushes me roughly behind him.

Kedrick's eyebrows slam together and his next words are clipped. "I don't think he is objecting to the lack of hurting...Lina."

"Veni," I cry as Olandon lunges forward and tackles the prince. They roll and punch at each other. They would be evenly matched, but Olandon's fury gives him an edge. I move forward to intervene, but my hand is grabbed.

"Come with me. Best leave the boys to it," Aquin says. He walks me to a seat in the shade around the corner. I crane my head to look back.

“Why are they fighting?” I fidget with my veil. I wish they would stop. They look like they are going to kill each other.

Aquin turns amused eyes to me. “Your brother does not approve of the prince’s attentions to you. Men do not touch a woman’s body for no reason, though...I would not consider the Prince a man just yet.” He looks out at the fighting pair. I frown at Aquin’s judgement of Kedrick.

“You mean having children with him.” My eyes widen, I wince at what I’ve just said.

He chuckles, “Yes, that is a part of it. But there is much more also.”

“What do you mean?” I ask a bit bewildered. I have not heard of this before.

Aquin smiles a little and does not answer, though I have asked directly. Stubborn old man.

We sit comfortably in each other’s company, as I listen to the yells and thuds from around the veil. Should I go break it up?

“Lina...” Aquin starts. I sit up straight at his serious tone and peer at him. I’m close enough to see his face.

“You’re not ill,” I say, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He sighs and the sound is bone-weary, like he is holding the weight of two worlds in his hands.

“You must promise me...that you will be careful,” he says. “Extremely careful.”

“Of course,” I say with a shrug. He knows I always am.

“No,” he says. “You do not understand. There are people-” he starts and snaps his mouth shut. “There are things happening which you are not aware of.”

My eyes are wide. Aquin has never warned me like this before, he is truly afraid for my life. “Tell me,” I whisper.

Aquin holds his head up. I follow his gaze. The yells and thuds have stopped. The laughter of my brother and Kedrick approaches us. The old man looks back at me and pulls me into a strong embrace.

“Be safe, my girl. Forgive me.”

“How will I protect myself if you do not tell me?” I ask. He pulls away and looks at me with tear-filled eyes before standing and moving slowly away. Kedrick and Olandon stand beside me, but I cannot tear my eyes from the old man now leaning on his cane as though he has aged another revolution during our conversation.

I stamp back through the forest with my brother and Kedrick, refusing to talk to either of them. The Prince and my brother decide this is very amusing. Now that they have beaten each other up, they appear to be best friends. I don't know how they will explain their cuts and red grazes at dinner. The walk is easy now that the vines have dried and dropped from the trees. It's good because I'm reeling from the conversation with Aquin. He had asked me to forgive him. Was he apologising because he was unable to stop it? And what else was going on in the palace? Aquin and I had already discussed how my mother might retaliate. Was Cassius planning something? Maybe I had enemies I was not aware of. I stumble over an exposed root. Olandon catches my arm and squeezes my hand before resuming a joking discussion with Kedrick. Aquin had nearly been crying. And he had hugged me. That had never happened before.

I go down to the underground springs, my habit after every training to remove the stale sweat. The springs are an enormous lake underneath the surface, spreading throughout the rotations. The water is always warm due to the boiling water underneath the fourth. The heat from the boiling water permeates outwards, all the way to the first. The water is only bearable for short amounts of time now. In another few weeks, once we enter the third, the water will be too hot to wash in.

Torches line the walls down into the darkness. It is the only place where open flame is permitted on Osolis. Arson holds the harshest penalties on our world. It means death for you and your entire family. It has not happened in my lifetime. I hope it never happens during my rule.

As I soak, I force Aquin's alarming comments out of my mind. All I can do is be as careful as possible, as he advised. My stress begins to drain out of me. As it does, I remember Kedrick's body. The way the sheen of sweat had reflected the firelight and made him glisten. A warm feeling pools deep in my stomach. I usually spend this time feeling my face, but today I feel

my body instead. I run my hands over the smooth, olive skin of my legs. I've seen most of my body, but I wonder what Kedrick sees when he looks at me. Sometimes his eyes watch me with the heat I feel right now.

I remember to place the water pitcher in front of the door before I climb into bed to alert me to any unwelcome guests during the night. I start the two fans to beat away tendrils of smoke which might gather during the night.

Aquin's comments come back to me. I cannot decipher their meaning at all. One thing is certain. His hug had been his way of saying goodbye.

Chapter Nine

There's a crash in the darkness. My body fumbles awake and I roll out of bed onto the ground beside it. The pitcher has been knocked over. I strain my ears. Someone is there, I know it. The silence is unnatural. My door closes and then there is the sound of quiet steps moving quickly down the passageway away from my room. Did the noise scare them off?

I wait for a long time. But there's no further sound. Drawn as tight as a bowstring, I move to the door and replace the pitcher. The person is gone. The silence is normal again. Was it one of mother's Elite? Was this what Aquin was warning me about?

I sit on the edge of my bed and place a hand over the wooden band circling my forehead. Sleeping again will not be possible. This room is too open, too easy to attack. The wall could be scaled and the door couldn't be locked. It was the same for every room in the palace. I would need to find somewhere safer to sleep. I roll my neck around with a sigh and move to the opening to watch for more visitors. A couple more hours of sleep would be very welcome right now.

I decide not to tell anyone about the attack except Olandon and I only tell him because I have to sleep in his room. Aquin was still being distant and I was uncertain if I should put more pressure on him. Kedrick would just get angry and perhaps do something to upset the peace.

Mother had made other, more subtle, attempts to test me which I kept to myself entirely. One night in the ring, she had whispered abuse in my ear. Calling her bluff, I had begun standing on my chair intending to remove my veil, which had grabbed the full attention of the court. To cover it, she had grabbed my hand and praised a decision I made in meetings that day with the Satums. The court had murmured amongst themselves after, but for once it hadn't been about me, it had been about my mother. It was another triumph, we both knew I had not attended any meetings. She hadn't attempted this again.

Cassius finally leaves his room where he's been hiding since the night I injured him. The dining ring is the loudest I can ever remember it being as the court speculates over his bruised face. Olandon doesn't bother to hide his grin, though I kick and elbow him under the table. Kedrick, at least, remembers who and where he is and only permits himself to share one smirk with my brother before clearing his expression. I'm glad the two are getting on now. Some of the distance I've felt growing between my brother and I over the last few months has disappeared with it.

It has been on the tip of my tongue several times to tell Kedrick we cannot meet anymore. Olandon has continued to bring him up to Aquin's under the guise that he and the prince are now friends. Every time I remember he is leaving in a handful of days, I shove any unease to the back of my mind and plan the next meeting. And I've been very uneasy, disquiet is a constant presence in my mind. My shoulders feel like they have been tense for weeks and I'm exhausted from lack of sleep.

I sit with Kedrick in Aquin's training shed while he cleans up. Olandon is still stretching. It's not really any cooler in the shade as the air itself is hot, but we trick ourselves into thinking it is. Aquin has avoided being alone with me with a vengeance. Whatever is going on so clearly bothers him, I have stopped trying to corner him.

"Lina," Kedrick says. I'm alerted by his forced casualness. I turn to him. "I'm leaving in only a handful of days."

Hearing him say it fills me with heartbreak. I'd been in strong denial as to how much his departure would affect me. He leans his elbows forward onto his knees.

"When I first came here I was determined to find a way to open up travel, or communication, between our worlds, for the good of both Osolis and Glacium. We each have resources the other could use." He looks at me, and then back to the ground between his knees. "My reasons for why might have changed, but it is of no consequence. Your mother will have nothing to do with the idea," he says the last part as though he has eaten something sour.

I don't interrupt him, rarely having heard him so serious before. "I can't think of any way we'll be able to meet before this revolution is

completed, two years from now.”

He sounds so forlorn, I do something I have never done before. I lean over and place a kiss on his soft lips, not caring that Aquin and Olandon can see. It is similar to our first kiss, but this time it spreads down my neck, tingling across my collarbone.

“If you kiss me like that again, I won’t be able to leave you,” he whispers. I sit back.

“I would like you to do something for me. Something I believe will mean a lot to both of us.”

My brows furrow as I try to guess what he means. “What?” I ask. I hope I’ll be able to give him this thing he wishes for. I would give him nearly anything, especially when he is this sombre. “I would consider it a great honour,” he says, and then swallows. “I’d consider it a great honour if you showed me your face.” My breath stops, and when he reaches a hand up I flinch, thinking he is going to remove my veil then and there.

“Shh, Lina. It’s okay.” He pats his hands in front of him. He must sense my panic because he hurries on with a look at Olandon who is turned and looking at us.

“I can give you freedom from your fear.” Kedrick looks down at me like I would look at a friend who was dying. “I just want you to think on it. If you say no, I’ll respect your wish and it won’t change how I feel about you.” A small thrill pushes through my panic.

“Give me the gift of seeing your face,” he whispers. “Then I will know however many times I’ve missed a first in your life while we are apart, I was the first to see you.” I feel a lump rise in my throat at his words. If I was unsure before, I know I love him now. I sniffle.

“It is not that I don’t trust you. I would be afraid for your safety if you saw. And my brothers’,” I lower my voice.

“Lina, we both know the threats your bitch of a mother made up, are stories designed to scare a child. She has ingrained this fear in you. And...I think you sometimes use it as an excuse.”

I try to summon anger, but cannot. My heart recognises the truth of his ruthlessly honest words.

“Besides.” He shuffles into a better position on the ground. “I can think of worse ways to die than looking at a pretty woman’s face.”

My brows crease at his rash comment and I wonder how he knows I will be pretty. I sit, running my fingers between the cracks on the ground, thinking over what he’s said. I watch Olandon offer to help Aquin with the equipment and smile as Aquin shakes his head.

“What is a bitch?” I ask some moments later.

Kedrick roars with laughter. It’s a while before he regains enough control to answer. “It’s slang for someone who is vicious. It is not a nice word. I shouldn’t have said it.” I nod, my assumption of its meaning confirmed.

“And what is shit, bloody hell and a fuck?” I ask.

This time he shakes with laughter and does not stop for a long time, going silent in places while his whole body twists side to side. He sits up, while he attempts to control the last aftershocks of laughter.

“I never thought I’d hear those words coming out of your prim mouth,” he gasps, wiping tears from his eyes.

My mouth drops open in outrage. “I’m not prim.” I cross my arms in front of my chest.

He pats my back, annoying me further. “I’m comparing you to the women on Glacium,” Kedrick says. “It’s not a bad thing, in fact, I prefer to know if we could ever become a normal couple, I will have been the only one to touch you.” His gaze moves down my body and the heat blooms on my skin under the trail of his gaze. I shiver.

“Where were we?” He puts his hands behind his head and lies back on the grass. “Ah, yes. Fuck, shit, and bloody hell.” He laughs again, shaking his head. “Well, ‘shit’ is a swear word to use when something doesn’t go as you would like. I’ve heard you use the word ‘Veni’ before and I think this means a similar thing. I will not tell you the real meaning of shit. It’s too rude for your ears.”

I huff and he sniggers.

“Hell or bloody hell,” he continues, “is used in the context I hear you use the word ‘Solis’ for. Hell describes a place full of flame and despair. A

lot of people on Glacium actually call your world hell,” he says, looking like he regrets the comment. I’m sheepish myself because he has caught me cursing so much.

“Well it is certainly full of flame,” I say. “And fuck?”

He shifts a little. “Fuck is generally considered the worst of all the swear words. It conveys ultimate frustration and anger. But it means other things, too.”

“Like what? Fuck,” I say, trying the word out. I think it is my favourite one so far. It’s satisfying.

Kedrick shifts a little and grins. “It also means, uh...making children.”

“Oh.” My face is hot from training, but it gets hotter still. “You have a lot of words for making children on your world.”

Kedrick grins and closes his eyes. “It’s because we spend a lot of time trying to make them. I would give two or three fingers to see your face when you see our world.” He chuckles and closes his eyes. He seems very confident I will go to Glacium.

Not even a day later, I know my answer to Kedrick’s request. He’s right. My own fear is holding me back. To my surprise, the thought of him seeing my face is not as terrifying as it once was. Perhaps it’s because I know how much he loves me. Another part of my mind reasons I won’t have to live with his reaction if he doesn’t like my face because he leaves in two days. A bigger part says this is also a good thing because mother will not be able to kill him if she finds out I have shown him.

I hope he likes my face. It is a childish, vain concern. Kedrick fell in love with me without seeing my face. I must trust he will love me still once I’m unveiled.

Chapter Ten

Despite my fervent wishes for time to slow down, Osolis and Glacium keep on turning. Malir tells me the delegates are already packed and eager to return to their families. A thought had occurred to me the day before and I had nearly burst with excitement, kicking myself for not thinking of it earlier. What was to stop us from meeting up on Oscala, the great shelf pathway between our two worlds? I could make a copy of his map. But Kedrick's reaction, when I spoke to him of it, had crushed my fresh hopes. He had made me promise to never traverse it, saying it was like a floating maze where one could spend months drifting while slowly starving. The small dots of rock did not look bad from here, but I had shrugged and agreed not to do it, trying to hide my disappointment.

Tonight was the night I would show Kedrick my face.

The Prince had leaving ceremonies to do and travel arrangements to make, which occupied him for most of the day. I had only seen him at meals, going early to lengthen our time together. I anticipated tonight with impatience and a fair amount of nausea.

I spend the day with Olandon and the twins, taking them to the village. The twins had never been there before and I'm happy to see them enjoying themselves. The villagers give us an extra wide berth. I wonder if the twin's reputation has preceded them or maybe it is Olandon's scowl.

I sit in my room once the dinner feast is over. This afternoon, I had skipped training and working at the orphanage to visit the springs in an attempt to make myself more attractive. Never having had to worry about this before, I had no idea how to really go about it. Suddenly the elaborate hair styles, jewels and beaded robes of the court did not seem so stupid. I had even thought about rubbing some berry juice into my lips as the other Solati women my age did. Instead, I had washed my hair as I normally did and scrubbed my face a bit harder.

These last moments drag on longer than the whole week put together. Inevitably though, the smoke creeps over the sky. I climb out of the window

and down the Kaur walls of the palace to meet Kedrick, feeling excited and a bit broken at the same time. Kedrick had suggested we just take off my veil at Aquin's after a training session. But I had not wanted anyone else to be there when my veil was removed, not even Aquin. Especially as he had been so weird lately. The darkness had also appealed to me, maybe he would not be able to see my imperfections in the poor light. My sense of unease had not abated either, so I had instructed him to meet me at the Kaur tree I had thrown him into a few weeks before.

I creep along the palace wall until I reach the tree line and hug this until I can no longer see the large shadow of the palace. I wait at the Kaur tree and soon I hear the crackle of leaves as Kedrick approaches. His lightness of step has only improved slightly with Aquin's training. It was a great source of frustration to them both.

My eyes have become accustomed to the darkness now and I make out Kedrick's outline moving into the clearing. He pulls me into his arms and we just hold each other for several moments.

"Today was horrible," he says, in a hushed voice. Maybe, like me, he is reluctant to disrupt the night.

"All I wanted to do was spend time with you. But ended up talking to your bloody mother." He rubs his cheek over the side of my head, before resting his chin atop it. I breathe in his scent, he smells like soap. My palms get clammy as I remember why we're here.

"Adnan wanted to talk of inventions he has seen here which he wants to try back on Glacium. And I ended up snapping at Sanjay because he was being too loud or happy. I don't know." He sighs. I giggle nervously at his babbling. With sudden clarity, I realise things between us will be changed forever after this moment. I try to prolong it by asking him a stream of questions about his day.

Eventually he brings a finger to my face, searching for my lips before placing the finger across them. I do not need to see his face to feel the love in the gesture.

"You sound like Oberon. It's okay." I giggle again. The sound is high pitched. My breath becomes shallow and short. The clamminess of my hands has spread all over my shaking body. I turn away and brace my

trembling hands between two Kaur trees, trying to deepen and slow the air into my lungs and control my sudden nausea. The air comes out of me in a shuddering wheeze. Hands wrap around my waist, and I'm turned around. My body is nearly jumping with the terrified rattles which have taken over me. Still gasping for breath, I scrunch my eyes closed.

A warm hand rests under my chin and a kiss reaches me through the veil, warming me. An errant thought crossing my mind. Tonight we will be able to kiss without the barrier between us.

His fingers move to the outside of the veil, and I dig my fingernails into my palms to stop myself from grabbing his wrist. The veil slides up over my chin, then up over my nose and the raises of my cheek bones. No longer breathing, I feel the material brush over my eyelashes, and then I'm unveiled. It is off. And I'm not in the dark springs or in my room. The warm air is on my face!

I hear the Prince gasp. I cannot bear to see his expression and continue to keep my eyes closed. He rests his hands on top of my shoulders.

"Lina, my love," he says. His hands start to move from my shoulders, but then he tightens both hands into a painful grip. I open my mouth and tell him to loosen his hold, but do not get a response.

The hairs on the back of my neck raise. I open my eyes and look up at Kedrick. He is peering into the darkness over my head, his face clear to me without the veil. I see terror flash across his face one second before he throws me to the side with astounding strength. I hear a sickening squelch behind me just before I slam into a tree. The air is crushed from my lungs. I crumple to the ground.

There are footsteps crashing away through the forest. I roll to the side as the noise fades. In a painful daze, I rise to my knees and look back to see where Kedrick is. My heart stutters and then stops. He is still standing in the same place. But an arrow protrudes from the middle of his chest. I watch, in horrified disbelief, as he falls to his knees.

I recover my legs and stumble to him, helping him to the ground. What do I do? I don't know what to do! I look around desperately for something, or someone who can help him.

I open my mouth to scream for help, but snap it shut as he groans. The sound gives me some hope.

“Kedrick. Kedrick!” I plead, touching his arms, his stomach, everywhere but the terrible, wound in his chest.

“Tell me what to do,” I say. My eyes dart around the forest again.

He coughs and rolls onto his back. My eyes widen at the blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth. The little hope I had vanishes.

“Lina,” he chokes, reaching for me. I grab his hand and hold it in both of mine, bringing my face over his. My black hair surrounds us in a cocoon, my tears fall unchecked onto his face.

“Do n-not cry,” he gasps as he forces a grimacing smile through his pain.

His hands reach to my chin and he traces my wet lips with his thumb, his eyes following its trail. He looks so peaceful.

“Don’t give up, Kedrick! I will go for help. Please!” I say. I want him to say something. I want him to tell me it will be okay. I sob underneath his touch, my body knowing what my mind will not admit. His lips are turning blue.

There is a look of complete awe on his face. I help him as he traces his hand up over my cheek bone, underneath my eyes. I watch, my mind and body numb, as his look of peace turns to utter shock when his eyes meet my own. He opens his mouth, but no words come out, just bubbles of blood. His desperate eyes meet mine once more.

I sit staring at his face, waiting for him to come back. I shake him a little. He will come back.

His hand is limp in my grasp. It gets colder and colder.

There is some kind of disturbance, a noise. It rouses me from my vacant stare. My gaze falls on my veil in Kedrick’s other hand. I pull it from his grip and put it on and then look back down at him.

The arrow is sticking out of his chest, disrespecting him.

Moving in a stupor, I stand and use all my weight to pull the arrow out. I snap off the end. I lean over and wipe the blood from his mouth and pull

up my veil to kiss his blue lips. We were going to kiss without the veil between us.

The feel of his cold skin shatters the deepest part of me, but my tears have run out.

The disturbance grows louder, closer. I realise in a distant part of my mind that Malir is shaking me and yelling, but the words are muted. Rhone is at Kedrick's head. He is shaking his head sadly. They talk over my head.

Everything is too much. There is a flash as something hits the back of my head.

I surrender to darkness.

Part Two

Chapter Eleven

I wake with a gasp and struggle to sit. My body is moving reluctantly as though I have lain in bed for too long. I close my eyes and place a steadying hand on the rocky ground beside me, groaning as dizziness grabs me. I check my veil and then gently explore a massive lump on the back of my head.

“Well, at least you didn’t kill her,” a voice speaks. I jerk at the sound.

Once the dizziness ebbs, I crack open my eyes. It takes a moment for my surroundings to stay still. When they do, I’m startled to see that I’m surrounded by a semi-circle of delegates.

I stare in confusion, my mind scrambled. Their postures range from wary to aggressive. I look to Malir and Rhone who, rather ironically, appear the least hostile right now.

“Where is Kedrick?” I ask and wince because I have forgotten his title. I was just telling him off for the same thing a few weeks ago. Luck is with me though, as no Solati are around to pick up on my mistake.

Malir and Rhone turn their heads to each other.

What is going on?

I roll over to stand, but feel something lodged underneath my right foot, my old hiding spot. I haven’t hidden anything there from mother since I was a child.

My hand is reaching to dislodge the object when I remember; Kedrick’s injury, the blood, his empty eyes. I remember everything, including placing the fletching from the arrow between my shoe and foot.

I gasp as memories of last night rip through my mind, tearing it apart. I put one hand over my mouth. A terrible wailing sound fills the air, and I wonder where it comes from. When I take a breath, the sound halts and I realise the haunting sound is coming from me.

I hear Malir’s answer as if my head is under water.

“He’s dead,” he says.

I don’t hear anything else, I just watch as his mouth continues to shape words. Instead, I’m rubbing the tips of my fingers together, remembering Kedrick’s hand in mine as it had slowly gotten colder. I choke and struggle to my feet, turning my back on the delegates. Kedrick is not gone. He cannot be, because I was just with him. It is too much. I feel like my mind is going to shatter. But then, blissfully, I start to numb again, as I had when he had died. I stare without blinking and although the memories of last night batter at my mind, my newfound numbness allows them to slide off and drift away.

None of it is real.

Time passes while I stand and stare, I do know how long it has been.

“Step away from the edge, Tatuma. It is not safe,” somebody says. Another person approaches me with a wet cloth. When they go to tie it underneath my veil, my hand moves to take it from them and I complete the task myself. The motion rouses me slightly, enough that when food is offered to me, I respond and shake my head. A hand grips my arm and pulls me to my feet. When did I sit down? A hand pushes me along for a few steps until my body takes over and begins to place one foot in front of the other.

I walk. I do not care where to, as long as Kedrick is there.

The smoke is getting thicker. I look up from my feet and can barely make out the person in front of me. Drawing a breath through the wet cloth over my mouth, I stumble through the growing darkness. The black chasm we are in, is familiar to me somehow. Maybe because it is how I feel inside now.

I bump into the person in front of me and someone stands close behind me, steadying me. We move into more blackness.

A rhythmic thudding sound starts up, my eyebrows crease as I struggle to place the familiar noise. Several more of the same rhythmic thuds begin. The dense smoke begins to clear, someone cheers. I stand stationary until I’m pushed over to a rock. I take some offered food, but my stomach tells me I will not eat it. I set the food on the ground. The others around me go

about their business, hardly talking. They roll out blankets on the ground. They look at me and share glances, but I don't care if they think me crazy. I cannot imagine ever caring again.

Chapter Twelve

Images of Kedrick's lifeless face pass before my eyes, jolting me awake. I sit up and see the delegates are still asleep. Malir's huge frame keeps watch by the fans which were the cause of the rhythmic thudding last night. He looks over at me, then glances away.

I untie the now dry mouth covering which is still in place and drop it by my side. For the first time, I realise I have no idea where I am. I try to summon some kind of emotion over this, some shred of self-preservation.

The light starts to shine through a large swath of material covering the mouth of this cave. Malir stands, stopping a bit to clear the roof of the cave, and moves with confident steps between the sleeping delegates to draw the curtains back. Orange light pours into the cave, bouncing off the sharp, uneven walls of the cave. I look out and some small shock finds me.

I'm on Oscala. I stand and hobble towards the entrance.

The Oscala were something every child dreamed of exploring. The floating shelves numbered in the thousands. No one I had ever spoken to knew how many. While some could take half a day to walk around, others were only stepping stone size. The shelves were dotted throughout the divide between Glacium and Osolis. The only means of communication and passage between the two worlds. They were the essence of many stories told by villagers. Aquin had told me many of them as he had once been part of a delegation to Glacium. It was the place I had promised Kedrick I would never go.

I stand on one, lone shelf, in the middle of countless others. There are only shelves and no way of knowing which direction to go. It is tempting to just start drifting as Kedrick had once told me could happen here, to get lost in the barren space. But Malir watches me with steady eyes, perhaps following the direction of my mind.

I take in the burnt glow of Osolis, wondering how I got from the Kaur forest to Oscala without remembering any of it. I imagine it had something

to do with the bump on the back of my head. It must have taken several days to travel to the first and then some more time to get to our current position. I don't know enough about the Oscala to know how long it would take to get to this stage.

"It takes your breath away, doesn't it?" Malir says. The sound of his voice startles me out of these thoughts. I shrug, not replying.

Soon the others are rising. They haven't bothered to put on their mouth coverings this morning. The Kaur trees have already been hard at work and have cleared the air in the divide. As we start the day's trek, I soon begin to wonder how I didn't die yesterday. I hug the walls closely as we climb the jagged steps cut into the sides of the cliff.

The shelf we are currently on is huge. The steps are narrow and on the other side is a drop into nothingness, if you do not hit the rocky obstacles on the way down. When the leaders of the two worlds first sent out parties to explore the opposing world, a sort of pathway was formed. On some of the bigger shelves, steps had been chipped into the sides to make a more direct route. They had placed ropes on the steep and dangerous shelves to help scale up the sides. I look around me at the floating rocks and wonder how many people died trying to discover this still treacherous pathway.

It takes at least an hour to get off this shelf and we come to a long, thin shelf next. A heavy rope dangles down one side. Malir grabs a length of rope from his pack and signals to me to stand next to him. I look at the rope. It seems only slightly longer than the one in Aquin's training room. Malir goes to grab me, I push his hand away, irrational anger surging up. I grab the rope and prepare to make my way up. A heavy hand lands on my shoulder.

"Get your hand off of me," I say, my voice low and dark. The hand slips off.

I start up the rope before I change my mind and decide to push the delegate attached to the offending hand off the shelf. I take pleasure in the physical exercise, in the familiar burn through my arms as I haul my body weight up. I don't look down, I just pretend I'm with Aquin.

Slightly out of breath, I reach the top and wait for the others. I take satisfaction in the shocked looks directed my way as each delegate climbs over the cliff edge. The yellow head of Rhone comes into sight as he reaches the top, a ghost of a smile lingers on his sharply featured face as he looks at me. I suppose the hand on my shoulder belonged to him. Lucky I did not attempt to throw him over the side. I would have lost.

We move onwards to the next rock, and the next, only stopping to wet the covering and tie them over our mouths again as the smoke from the fourth saturates Oscala. The temperature has cooled slightly during the day's climb, but the air is still warm, just cooler than the first. A gentle breeze teases the edges of my veil as I walk. The colour here is different from anything I have ever seen. It is a kind of brown. The light is fading as we move away from the orange glow.

We reach the second cave. Adnan starts up the fans once again so the thickening smoke does not choke us in the night. Images of Kedrick drowning in his own blood pushes forward, I scrunch my eyes shut until they pass.

We're all sitting when a nasally voice breaks the silence. I look up at Blaine.

"Tatuma, we demand to know what ha-" he starts. A bag flies through the air, hitting Blaine in the chest and cutting off his words. He starts to stand, but quickly sits back down when he sees it is Rhone who has thrown the bag.

It takes me a moment to understand what the sneering, greasy man was about to ask. Of course. The delegates would have no idea of what happened in the forest the night Kedrick died. Even Malir and Rhone would only have the barest knowledge of his death. I scrunch my eyes closed and roll away from them to face the cave wall, tuning out the whispered argument which erupts behind me. I'm not ready to talk of it yet. I am exhausted, tired of being in my mind.

When I wake from a nightmare sometime during the night, a single vivid memory stands out. My hand covers the middle of my chest. The arrow had hit Kedrick right here.

He was so much taller than me, it was the level where my head usually rested. The arrow had hit him exactly where my head had been at the time. If he had not thrown me out of the way, I would be dead. My hands cover my mouth, horrified as this discovery leads to an even worse realisation.

I had been the target. It had been my mother. One of her Elite had tried to kill me. This was what Aquin had been warning me about. Guilt and anger streak through my stomach, scraping it raw. His murder was my fault. I had angered my mother and she had intended for me to pay the ultimate price. It had worked regardless, I would rather be dead than have his death on my hands. I deserve to feel this way for what I have done to him. Tears well in my eyes.

As the fire light shines through the cave's entrance the next morning, I think of Kedrick's expression before he died. His look of awe and how it had turned to fear as he suffocated. The threatening tears burn away and I feel a surge of white hot fury within me. Anger takes over, some of it directed at Kedrick for leaving me here by myself.

On my side, I feel for the arrow in my pocket where I transferred it yesterday morning. I draw it out with slow movements so I do not draw the attention of the rousing delegates.

I look at the weapon which ended Kedrick's life. My breath catches and for a moment, I don't understand what I'm seeing. The wood of the fletching is not Kaur.

My mind struggles to grasp what this arrow is telling me. I slow my breathing.

Kaur wood is the only type of wood on Osolis. There are the fruit trees, but these are never harvested for wood. They are too precious and are strictly accounted for. This fletching is not from a Solati arrow.

My hand holding the shaft end trembles. I look at it and my eyesight becomes tinged with red. I put the arrow back in my pocket and stare a hole into the wall I'm facing. I had assumed my mother had tried to kill me, but this arrow proved otherwise. There was only one other possibility. The only other place where this wood could have come from was Glacium, and all of the Bruma who could have shot the arrow were currently in this cave. There

were only two maps. My mother had one, the delegates had the other. No one else could have traversed the Oscala. The killer was in this cave with me.

My vow is furious and heartfelt. I will find out who killed Kedrick and rip the life out of them.

Over the next day the remaining smoke disappears.

“Thank fuck for that!” A delegate yells behind me. I start at his language, but the others just laugh. They have begun talking again today, their grieved silence over Kedrick’s murder broken.

The same man continues speaking, “I’m bloody glad to be out of that smoke.” In truth, I don’t remember all of the delegate’s names. I only dealt with Malir, Rhone and Adnan, though I remember Kedrick mentioning Sanjay a few times. I remembered Blaine, too, because I had disliked the way he constantly complained.

“I’m bloody glad to be off that hell they call a world,” Blaine says. I narrow my eyes at the back of his head, eyeing his slick black hair with disgust. Anger has been my companion since realising one of the delegates is the murderer. I would only need the smallest hint of confirmation before I attack.

“I’m bloody glad to be heading home to Fiona,” Sanjay says.

My eyebrows raise at they continue to comment. Adnan, the quiet unassuming man who likes to make things, shoots a look at me. I shrug at him and one corner of his mouth tilts up. My lips don’t move at all in response. I think they have forgotten how to smile.

The delegates have been acting differently today. Malir’s posture is tense and several of the men are sneaking covert looks at me, the slight turn of their head giving them away. Their whispered fight from last night is unresolved, and clearly, I’m the root of the disagreement.

I nibble on an apple at dinner. I look at it as I chew, remembering Kedrick’s smile when I told him of my apple rebellion. I walk to the edge of the shelf and throw the apple away with all my strength. In an attempt to control my temper I move towards the wall, ignoring wide-eyed looks

pointed my way. I sit down, my back on the smoothest part of rock I can find. It is still too jagged, I lean forward, elbows on my knees.

Malir clears his throat. The other delegates look to him in expectation. “Tatuma...” he starts.

Blaine cuts Malir off. “Why were you found over the dead body of our Prince?” About half of the delegates become rigid, whether at his rudeness or in anticipation I do not know. The other half nod in agreement.

I would’ve considered answering Malir’s question, but my recently tamped down fury surges to the fore at Blaine’s insinuation. My fists clench, and thoughts of how good it felt to punch Uncle Cassius flash across my mind. But then the lingering taste of apples stops these thoughts. I remember Kedrick. I must find his killer. If I lose my temper, the murderer may be alerted to my suspicions. If they are, I may never find them. I swallow my rage and shrug, turning my head away, looking further into the dark cave.

Blaine turns to the other delegates with his arms spread wide in a dramatic gesture.

“A shrug is all we get,” he says, copying my shrug. “Our Prince has been killed while on a peace mission, and the Tatuma of Osolis just shrugs.” He turns back to me.

“I told you she wasn’t really grieving. Hell, maybe it was her that killed him.” My head whips towards him. I know I will not be able to control this surge of fury.

Malir saves Blaine’s life with his next words.

“And then she stayed and held his hand?” he says with a shake of his serious face. “Don’t be a fool.”

Blaine glares at Malir, then smooths his expression as he looks back to me. “It is of no matter. She will be passed over to King Jovan in a few weeks anyway.”

It takes a long moment for his comment to penetrate the cloud of anger around me. Then it hits me. My mind had been such a blur, I had been so absorbed in my grief and anger, I had not even given this a thought. I had been a puppet they have been leading around. Of course I had realised we

were going to Glacium. I just had not cared enough to ask why. Now I knew it was as a hostage.

I don't give Blaine the satisfaction of rising to the bait and asking more about my fate. But he must sense my shock or perhaps he cannot pass up the opportunity to boast.

"You can imagine what message the assassination of our Prince sends to Glacium. You are now a Glacium prisoner, whether to be used for leverage or for justice is not for me to decide, though I know which I'd pick," he says, watching me closely. A few of the delegates murmur their agreement.

His manner reminds me of my mother. There's no doubt Blaine will be voting for my head on a platter. His answer does not upset me, it just confirms what I already knew. I no longer care. I did not care about Osolis, I did not care about becoming Tatum and I certainly did not care about what Kedrick's brother would do to me. Without Kedrick it was all pointless.

I shrug again because I know it will annoy Blaine. "Alright then." I turn away and lie on my side to face another cave wall, feeling savage pleasure in the swear words he looses at my back, his composure cracked. Osolis or Glacium, I will feel empty wherever I am.

That night I lay awake and go through every variable which could have saved Kedrick's life. What if I had just shown him my face at Aquin's? What if I had refused to unveil my face in the first place? Every what if adds to my fury. Why had one of the few things which made me happy, been ripped away so cruelly?

The pattern is the same for the next fourteen days. Wake, climb, eat, climb and sleep. Where I used to liken myself to the Kaur tree, I now see more of myself in the Oscala. The air grows darker. The orange glow from my world is gone, I have no way of knowing which way I would turn to go to Glacium or Osolis. Rocks surround us on all sides, I only know up and down. The air has gotten steadily colder. A few mornings ago my breath had formed into a cloud in front of my face. I always looked forward to the physical exercise of the day to exhaust me, but now I also depended on it to keep me warm. This provided a new obstacle to sleeping, though it was

already restless due to my constant nightmares. I knew I was keeping the other delegates awake.

I also had a chance to study the delegates. The only anger remaining in me now after two weeks or more on Oscala, was the slow burn of revenge. I had begun obsessing over which delegate shot the arrow. I had spent hours studying each of them. Blaine would have been the obvious choice, but this was what made me disregard him. The real killer would surely not be *acting* like a killer, though there did not seem to be any suspicion or talk as to a killer being in their midst. It had been dark and the arrow head had been gone, likely they had not spotted the Bruma wood of the arrow.

Blaine's main supporter, Sole, was my next choice. But on closer inspection, I decided he lacked the necessary backbone. He couldn't stand up to Blaine's continual insults and orders, let alone find the guts to kill someone.

I walk between Malir and Rhone at the front of the line and accept a water skin from Adnan.

There were three groups. One I liked, who followed Malir. One led by Blaine, and another group who seem to change their minds constantly between Malir and Blaine. I wondered if this had always been so, or if it was because of Kedrick's death. Being Prince, he would have been the assumed leader.

None of the delegates carried weapons apart from one knife each. This was a condition of the treaty though, which I remembered from my lessons. However, each man also carried a large pack on their backs. It would not be hard to conceal weapons in this and then leave the murder weapon on Osolis.

I should have asked Kedrick more about the delegates during his stay. I didn't know their roles on Glacium, and could not guess at what motives they might have. Did Blaine want to war with Osolis? Assassinating me would definitely help to start one. I run my hand over crumbling rock, and duck underneath an overhang.

Kedrick's death could very well start a war. With his death and my capture, we would already be tittering on the brink of a war. The thought of

having to redo all the hard peace work of the previous royals over the last one hundred years is a sobering thought. Briefly, I remember Kedrick's and my own passion on this subject before shaking the thought away.

I walk across a rope bridge, which sways side to side dangerously, making my stomach lurch. I keep my eyes straight ahead.

War or not, I would not be returning to Osolis until the Bruma who killed Kedrick was destroyed. I owed him this much, and so much more for his sacrifice.

Chapter Thirteen

I have taken to sifting through my memories of Kedrick to distract me from the monotony of our journey. Today I'm trying to remember his face. I imagine his half smile and his vibrant blue eyes and put him in my favourite place. We are in the meadow and it's the middle of the day. The grass is still long and making its quiet rustle. We don't have to hide. A lump rises in my throat.

"Malir, may I ask you something?" My voice crackles from disuse. The heads closest to me jerk at the sound, obviously curious as to what I want to know. I have not spoken more than a couple of sentences the whole journey.

Malir nods his head, not taking his eyes off the rope hanging between this shelf and the next. He tugs it firmly to check it is still strong enough to hold our weight.

"What happened to Kedrick's body?" I have no idea what happened after I blacked out. This had not bothered me to start with, but I found myself more and more bothered by what had happened afterwards. I wanted to know all of the facts. Maybe I could glean something from their recount to help me narrow down my list of delegates.

"We moved him into the forest and covered him with branches," Malir says, turning from the rope to look at me. His voice is direct as always, but perhaps a little regretful.

I nod my thanks to him. He didn't need to answer my question. I still had not answered any of their questions about Kedrick at all.

If Kedrick's body was on the way to Aquin's, maybe Olandon or Aquin would come across it and give him a decent burial. I shove thoughts of animals eating him and of his body decaying in the woods from my mind and focus on swinging one arm in front of the other along the rope to cross between the shelves.

My breath clouds in front of my face the whole night. I'm the coldest I have ever been in my life, my thin robes are not meant for this temperature.

I shiver and wish for another blanket. The men's snores and breathing go on as usual, comfortable as ever.

It is a long night.

Adnan approaches me the next morning as I sit rolling up the blanket which did nothing at all for me last night. He holds out a pack to me. Confused and a bit curious, I take it from him. Seeing my darker skin next to his white skin reminds me of how Kedrick's hand and mine used to look when next to each other. Forcing this aside, I look inside the pack and find clothing.

"It was Kedrick's bag," he says. "They will be big on you, but they'll be warmer than what you have on." He gives a small smile and returns to the other men.

I'm so exhausted, I almost cry in gratitude. I unpack Kedrick's clothes and pull them on under my robes, rolling the legs and sleeves of the garments several times over. I pull the edge of his tunic to my face, disappointed when his smoky scent is not on it. The boots are too large for me to wear, but I cannot bring myself to leave them behind, so I put them back into the pack with my robe and the arrow end. My sleeping gear is stuffed on top. Rhone has been carrying my blankets until now. I stand up, shouldering the pack.

Another day passes and I'm grateful for the clothing as my nose and ears begin to ache with the cold. The temperature drops even further towards the end of the day and I find the rocks are becoming slippery and treacherous. My sandals don't provide enough grip on the surface. Rhone catches me for the fourth time, and Malir shakes his head at my shoes. I glare at him under my veil. They should have thought about boots when they took me hostage. My mood worsens over the remainder of the day. By the time we reach the next cave I decide I have never looked forward to bed more.

I'm sitting on my sleeping gear when the young orange-haired delegate called Sanjay walks over to my spot. He pulls a knife from his boot and I tense. He notices this and chuckles.

"There are a lot of cleaner ways to get rid of you out here."

I stare at him. Did he really just say that? He gestures at my shoes. “I have come to have a look at those sandals of yours. They aren’t any help in the ice and you’ll be taking a flying lesson if we do not change them.”

Despite my uncertainty at his odd comment, I shove my shoes into his hands, saying, “I had thought to wrap some material from my Solati clothing around them and perhaps tie them to my legs.”

He taps his chin. “That may work, but the spare material from your trousers will work better still. And maybe we can use some of the boot that you have in your bag also.” He calls Adnan over who takes both shoes eagerly, discussing ideas with Sanjay, who nods occasionally.

I hesitate, brooding over his intent to ruin Kedrick’s belongings. I pick at a loose thread on the borrowed trousers I wear.

“Sanjay,” I begin. He turns to me with raised brows, surprised I know his name perhaps.

“These are not my belongings and I do not wish to tear them up without permission,” I say.

“But they were Kedrick’s clothes. How is he going to give you permission?”

I swallow hard and do not answer. Adnan elbows him in the ribs.

“Tatuma, it is a sad truth, but a truth nonetheless. Kedrick doesn’t need these clothes where he is.”

I gasp at his callousness. “You are very....straight forward,” I say.

He rubs his head. “Yes. It was hard for me on Osolis. Though my wife will rejoice at my new restraint.”

My eyebrows raise. If this is him showing restraint, I’m glad I did not know him before. I pass him Kedrick’s boots with a heavy heart.

I watch him work, surprised at how deft he is with his hands. After a while I tell him so.

“My wife would agree with you,” he says, sniggering a little. He cuts this off at a growl from Malir.

Sanjay turns to me. “I work with Adnan on Glacium. Adnan thinks up the ideas, but lacks the masculinity to actually make them.” Rhone snorts over his food. We all turn to look at Adnan who is eating across the cave. He looks up, suspicious at our sudden attention.

Sanjay continues, “It’s exciting to work with something again. Even if it is Kedrick’s smelly boots.” I giggle against my will. His sense of humour is terrible.

“That is the first I’ve heard you laugh on this holiday.”

The giggle sounds again. “A holiday! You’re jesting.”

“Yes, well, maybe a forced holiday for you.” He chuckles as he holds up the boots in front of him. He has somehow combined my sandals and Kendrick’s boots and he did not need the extra material from my Kendrick’s clothing either.

“I don’t know how you made this with only your hands and that knife, but I thank you,” I say, nodding at him.

“No problem.” He scratches his ear as his face turns red. I grin at his awkwardness. He is similar to Aquin in this way.

I wake up to Adnan shaking my shoulder. My hands fumble to make sure my veil is on and I sit upright. I didn’t have any nightmares last night. Seeing everyone is nearly ready, I throw my belongings in my pack. Rhone passes me some food and I munch on it as we leave the cave. It is getting windy now and I tuck my veil beneath the high neckline of Kendrick’s tunic.

I look around with awe, taking in the layer of white sticking to the shelves. Adnan tells me it is frost. We begin our climb once more and I quickly ascertain my new makeshift boots are far superior to my sandals in this slippery terrain. I listen, smiling on occasion as Sanjay teases Adnan about this or the other. Adnan puts up with his comments with suffering patience, never rising to his baiting. They are obviously close.

Soon after our lunch, the line comes to a stop and a cheer goes up from the front of our group. I nudge Sanjay aside and get my closest ever look at Glacium. It is so bright, I squint my eyes a little. It almost looks like there is a ring of light around it because the glare is so strong. I stare until my eyes water, but I cannot see beyond the blinding light at this distance.

My heart lifts at the sight of something other than the Oscala, which is odd considering I'm a prisoner. The sameness of the shelves had been starting to make me see things. One day I thought I had seen a Tellio, and had looked back to find it was a crack in the rock. Another day I had seen a flash of red, blinked my eyes and been met by the same dark sky I had been looking at for weeks.

Blaine brushes past me, forcing me off balance. I stumble, but regain my footing and look up seeing the line has started moving again.

"Watch out, Solati," he hisses. I glare at his back. Sole shuffles past me, not meeting my eyes. Three men behind him pass me, ignoring me completely, which I don't mind. The two men at the back, Roman, and another whose name I do not recall, gesture for me to walk in front of them. They have been sitting with Malir lately.

Though Glacium has been sighted, the weaving pathway through the shelves triples the distance. We continue our careful journey over the icy islands, crawling over unstable bridges and, my least favourite, jumping between the shelves. We slow as we near a large vertical rock face.

Foot holds have been cut into the rock face and a large rope spans the length of the wall, coiling in a pool at the bottom. Malir goes first, leaning back into the rope and propping his feet onto the rock. He walks his feet up the wall using the foot holds.

Men slowly trickle up. I stand by the coil of the rope, well out of the way of the five hostile men who are still at the bottom with me. I do not feel entirely safe now most of my allies are at the top of the cliff. Dropping my pack, I pick up the end of the rope lying in the coiled heap and loop it a couple of times around my left wrist while keeping a covert eye on the group of men. I will use the rope as a weapon if I have to.

Sole starts up the cliff face. Two of the men who ignore me, fill their skins with water from the melting frost which drips off the rock face. I debate whether I should drop the rope and fill up my own skin, when a scream of absolute terror sounds from above me.

I whip my head up to see Sole is falling backwards, his grip on the rope lost. My mind traces the path he will take, realising he will overshoot the

ledge we stand on. As it has in the past, my body is reacting before I can process what is happening. Rope in hand, I launch myself off of Oscala's ledge into nothingness. For a moment I just float.

My mind catches up with my body as I crash into Sole, wrapping my legs around his waist. Flying fists smack me in the face.

"Hold tight to me, Sole," I scream, desperate to reach him through his terror. Sole's arms tighten around me, forcing my breath out.

I have a stricken instance where I remember the rope is coiled around my left wrist. I grip the rope above it with my other hand a moment before the rope jerks to its end.

There is a loud snap.

Agony rips up my arm. I scream, fighting to stay conscious through the pain. Remember Sole is here, don't faint. I try to shift my arm, but it has lost its power. The only thing holding us up is my right arm and the coils gripping my arm. Bile rises at the back of my throat.

I swallow hard and look side to side.

We won't be able to swing to another shelf. I know I won't be able to pull us up. I tilt my still swimming head back. The rest of the group is not visible past a rock jutting outwards from the underside of the rocky surface. We dangle in space, neither of us talking. My legs start to shake with the effort of holding onto Sole.

I nearly lose my stomach when the rope jerks suddenly, but I realise in the next moment that we are moving upwards. The other delegates are pulling us up. I hold in screams from the pulling on my wrist, but am unable to stop a groan escaping. I try and pull upwards with my right side, to take some weight off the left arm, but I'm not strong enough with the weight of Sole's heavy frame combined with mine. Black dots fill my vision every time the rope is heaved.

We move up past the jutting rock. I hear a cheer as the delegates see us. Chin to my chest, my only focus is on not losing consciousness before we reach the top. I open my eyes and see Sole has his head back and is watching me with a look of complete terror.

We have only ten more metres.” His voice shakes. I don’t know if he is trying to encourage me or if he is pleading with me to hang on.

“What is a metre?” I gasp.

“A metre is what you call a stride or pace,” he says.

“Why are we talking about this?” I mutter, mainly to myself.

He laughs a bit hysterically. “I don’t know.” He laughs some more. His hysteria sets off my own and I giggle a little, which sets him off again. We both laugh with our heads thrown back.

We are still this way as we are pulled over the edge by a group of frantic delegates.

“Watch...her shoulder...and wrist.” Sole gasps between aftershocks of laughter.

Ignoring our lunacy, they pull me onto my back and Sole is hauled over my head. Rhone picks me up and moves me away from the ledge. My laughter dries as I look at my left wrist. I begin to feel my shoulder also, now that the pulling on my wrist has stopped. My wrist looks and feels exactly like a hand would if you attempted to pull it from the rest of the arm. The black spots begin again now that Sole’s hysterical laughter is not distracting me.

Rhone moves to grab my arm and I shake my head, taking a deep breath through my nose.

I slowly uncoil the rope, doubling over a little in pain as blood circulates down to my wrist. A small whimper escapes me. The arm appears burnt from the elbow down where the rope has rubbed off the skin. My wrist lies at a weird angle to the rest of my arm. My shoulder is not where it should be. Nausea bubbles in my stomach at the sight. My right arm seems alright, apart from a similar raw, burnt look on my palm from the rope being pulled through too quickly.

“Rhone, have you ever put an arm back in before?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

I giggle and clamp down on it before it gets out of hand again. I think back to the bones Aquin has put back in for Olandon.

“I think you pull the shoulder, and then twist it back into place. It has to be done before it swells. At least that’s what happened with my brother’s shoulder this one time,” I babble. Malir puts a hand on my shoulder and pushes me into a lying position.

“Just keep on going if I faint. I’ll see you later.”

Rhone and Malir share a look. What am I saying? The pressure Malir has on my shoulders increases. Rhone looks at me, no apology in his eyes, and grabs my arm. The black spots join together and I welcome them with open arms.

Chapter Fourteen

My mother's and Kedrick's face swirl together as I fight to the surface. I open my eyes to complete blackness and a throbbing pain in my wrist. I'm in a cave. Someone must have carried me for the rest of the journey. I feel my wrist in the dark. Someone has fashioned a splint for it and my arm is in some kind of a sling. The shoulder is stiff, but not too painful now back in its rightful place. Or maybe the wrist is so bad I cannot feel it. Sleep is over for me.

I take a breath of frigid air and my chest expands. My chest expanded? It is so shocking I forget my wrist for the moment. It feels like the first full breath I have taken since Kedrick's death. Some of the weight crushing my chest is gone. But why? I take another lungful of cold air. It only takes me a moment to find why I have awoken this way. The whole time while on Oscala I had not really cared if I lived or died, if I fell or got lost. But some part of me had realised I wanted to survive while dangling at the end of a rope with Sole. I shift uncomfortably as I'm swamped with guilt. Am I allowed to feel this way? What would Kedrick think of me if he knew?

The night drags on into morning and I sit in a stupor of pain. I'm so deeply engrossed in my trance, I do not notice as light starts to fill the cave until Malir comes in from outside. Seeing I am awake, he makes his way over, touching the other men on the shoulder to wake them.

"How are you feeling?" he asks in his deep, steady voice.

There are no Solati words for how I currently feel. I turn to my Bruma vocabulary.

"I feel like fucking shit," I say.

There is a moment where Malir seems shocked, then he throws his head back and roars with laughter. Everyone in the cave is jolted awake at the sound. I jump a little myself, and hiss at the jolt through my wrist. Malir continues laughing, he even adds a slap to the knee.

"What the hell started that?" I hear Sanjay ask. I shrug.

Regaining some control, Malir repeats my answer to the others. The cave explodes into noise as everyone joins in the laughter.

I do not understand what is so funny, but the noise is hurting my head. I feel my way out of the cave, hearing Adnan try to hush them behind me as I do.

I shiver a little in the fresh air and occupy myself by playing with my breath cloud. I touch the cold rocks to moisten my fingers and scrub at my face under my grimy veil.

Feeling present for the first time this morning had prompted a discovery. I felt and probably smelt revolting. There were layers of smoke, sweat and dirt all over me. I wish I could soak in the springs. I put my hands underneath the back of the veil and untangle my hair as best as I can before braiding it again.

They are still chuckling in the aftershocks of their laughter when I re-enter the cave.

“What is so funny?” I demand.

Roman is wiping tears from his eyes. “It is just funny to hear that language from you.”

Sanjay adds, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say anything even slightly impolite before.” He erupts back into howls of laughter.

I huff. “Kedrick taught them to me and I have been listening to what all of you say. If you don’t want me to say those words, you should not say them yourself.”

“I hope you never stop!” Sanjay bursts out. They all howl again, obviously starved for some hilarity.

I take some food from one of the supply packs and head outside again with a roll of my eyes. I lean back on the cold rock face, taking in the glaring white around me. We are so close to Glacium now. It is nice to see something other than darkness, but I’m lucky the veil protects my eyes. I have seen some of the delegates use the cloth we had for our mouth coverings to cover their own. I don’t know how the others stand it all day, though a part of me wishes I could see the Oscala with my veil off.

The delegates have finally stopped laughing behind me. As an experiment, I try to imagine the words 'I feel like fucking shit' coming out of Olandon's mouth. A surprised laugh bursts from my lips.

Adnan looks over with a smile. Maybe it was a little funny.

My fate on Glacium is now in the forefront of my mind. I cannot guess how King Jovan will react. A Bruma had tried to assassinate me, but had shot their own prince instead. Even if they had not been attempting to start a war by killing me, they had guaranteed one by killing Kedrick on Osolis and had then sealed the two world's fate by taking me prisoner. I wonder who made the decision to take me captive. I think it had been Malir who had hit me over the head. Was it Malir who killed Kedrick? He would be hard to kill, maybe impossible with my veil on. There is also a twinge of reluctance at the thought of doing it. I realise the King will assume a Solati had done it. The only way to avoid war would be for the Bruma assassin to confess, or for the King to somehow forgive me. Even then, mother might fake offence and start a war anyway.

I return to the cave and find Sole over at my sleeping spot, packing my gear. It is nice of him, I would have struggled to do it.

"I will not forget what you have done," he whispers to the uneven ground.

Why is he saying it to the floor? He looks back over his shoulder, I follow his gaze to see Blaine watching us. Interesting. Sole quickly secures my pack on top of his own and moves away from me.

We start climbing again. "I can't believe you jumped off," Sanjay says, shaking his head and swallowing audibly. "You're insane." I nod at him, distracted by my thoughts. Someone hits him.

I try to look at Kedrick's death from an outside perspective. If I were the King and Olandon had been killed, would I let the only witness live? I let out a slow breath. My odds of survival were very low. The People of Glacium will want retribution and I will serve as convenient justice.

Stopping the disastrous downwards spiral of our worlds seems like an impossible task.

My best strategy lay in presenting my worth to the King, in becoming a bargaining tool to use against my mother. Hopefully the delegates were not aware of just how much my mother loathed me. She had probably been smiling since my disappearance. She would already be training Olandon. I smile as I imagine my brother's reaction. The smile falters. I hope my brothers and Aquin somehow know I'm alive.

The whole morning I try to glean information from the delegates. All I'm told is that King Jovan will decide. Most of them seem surprised at my questions, probably because I have shown no interest in my fate until now. Maybe they honestly don't know, but I am guessing they are reluctant to tell me I'm walking to my death.

The day will never end.

My arm throbs with every step and I know I'm not paying enough attention to where I'm placing my feet. I am exhausted and frustrated to be slowing down the group. The men do not complain. Instead they take turns to call breaks we would not usually have. Even the three men who usually ignore me call breaks and ask how I am. Something has changed between us with my jump to save Sole. I remember Kedrick saying worth on Glacium was determined by your actions.

We get to the next cave after darkness has fallen.

Sole lays out my sleeping gear, it must be his way of thanking me for saving his life, but it makes me a little uncomfortable.

"Go to your spot, I will bring you food," Roman says.

I awaken halfway through the night again. I fell asleep before eating. Rhone eventually comes in from watch. He brings me some food. I try to refuse, my stomach does not feel very steady.

"You need it. Eat now," he says.

I snatch the food with my good hand. He snorts. My annoyance amuses him.

The others awaken and come to check on me. I suspect Blaine starts to regret he did not, with how the others treat him afterwards. Even Sole does not scramble after him as he tends to do.

“You know, we could’ve lost our hostage yesterday,” Sanjay says with a grin. Rhone cuffs him over the head. But I laugh quietly, now more used to his black humour.

“It would’ve been nice to have more food between us,” Roman says, making me smile again.

We are so close to Glacium now. There is new energy in their movements and loud talk of home. Roman, the eldest and thinnest of the delegates, says he expects to arrive there in another two days.

By mid-day, I’m swaying with exhaustion and fall asleep on Malir’s shoulder during lunch. I wake as he is picking me up to carry me while I sleep. He puts me down at my demand and I continue to walk. It is dangerous enough on Oscala without the added hazard of carrying someone. Being forced to rely on Malir and Rhone to carry me across the obstacles is bad enough.

The next day is no better, I watch the ground in front of me, putting one foot in front of the other. The rocks are so slippery and I’m so focused on my feet, I walk right into Adnan who is stopped in front of me.

“Veni,” I swear, hunching over my wrist and trying to breathe through the pain.

“Sorry, sorry!” he says, fluttering his hands around my wrist uselessly.

Tomi punches him in the shoulder. The Bruma hit each other a lot.

“It is not your fault, I did not see you stop. I was watching my feet,” I say and turn to Malir as he speaks.

“We’re stopping here for the night,” he says. The announcement is met with a loud groan.

“We will reach Glacium by mid-day tomorrow,” he continues.

Where there used to be three defined groups within the delegates, now there are only two. Everyone follows Malir now, except Blaine and Sole, and I have begun to suspect Sole would quickly change sides if he were able.

I apologise to the delegates, knowing we could have reached Glacium today without my injury. Rhone snorts. My nose wrinkles at the disgusting

sound. Sanjay tells me to shut up. The others mumble dishonest reassurances about how they do not mind the delay.

I walk over to examine a bunch of pointed ice daggers hanging underneath a protruding ledge at the edge clearing. I touch one and it snaps off and shatters by my foot. I don't set up my blankets there.

Sole spreads out my sleeping gear and I lay down straight away as has been my habit since breaking my wrist. My hopes of a good sleep are destroyed. I have never been so cold. I almost laugh as I recollect the cold the week before. I am sure it would seem almost warm now. I toss and turn for hours, shivering and teeth chattering, unable to warm myself. I'm in a fitful trance nowhere near sleep, when a body lies down on one side of me. Desperate for warmth, I shuffle towards the heat. Another body moves to my other side. Wedged between the warm bodies, I fall asleep at last.

I reach up to scratch a fluttering disturbance on my veil and encounter something cold and wet. I can hear the delegates are up and eating the morning meal. I sit and feel my mouth drop open at the white flecks falling over the clearing. I reach up my good hand to catch one of the flecks and bring it to my face. It is like a lace flower, but made of ice.

I laugh in delight and stand up to catch more. I push my feet into my boots and experiment, scrunching the white stuff on the ground, taking delight in the sound. I gather up a large handful of it and hold it out to the delegates.

"What is this stuff?" I laugh, watching as flecks gather on top of their shoulders. There are a few chuckles at my reaction.

"It is the frozen tears of sad children," Sanjay says, turning his head away.

Horrified, I stop, my hands falling to my sides, the substance tumbling from my loosened grip.

The delegates laugh. A grinning Adnan launches at him, pushing him to the ground to stuff some of the white matter into his face. Malir shakes his head at the pair, a smile on his face.

"It's snow, Tatuma. It falls when the temperature gets very cold," Roman explains.

I glare at Sanjay, my good hand on my hip. I should have known better than to take his word for it I suppose, after hearing the tales he makes up when talking to Adnan each day.

He raises his hands in surrender, snow all through his bright red hair which stands out like fire on white ash. It is one thing I like about how Bruma look. Solati tend to have brown and black hair, though our eyes are all different colours. Some of the delegates here have yellow hair and some have deep red or a light brown and I find myself wondering what other colours they have.

There are many things Kedrick told me of which I would like to see. If I live long enough to do so.

Chapter Fifteen

There is a tension in the air as we walk that day. Everyone walks a little bit faster. There is more swearing, too, though the delegates do not seem angry or upset. My cheeks heat over and over, as Sanjay describes what he is going to do to his wife when he sees her. The other men roar with laughter at his crass comments and add their own. Rhone and Malir are the only delegates who seem to remember I'm there. Neither of them join in, to my heartfelt relief.

By late morning we have finally made it to the last shelf. A rope about ten strides long swings down to the ground below. A group of Guards stand at the bottom waving up to us. A few of the delegates cheer back down at them, but a heavy mood settles over the rest of us as Tomi starts down the rope.

"I forget they don't know yet," Adnan says, "that Kedrick is dead." His thoughts describe my feeling exactly.

The people below us are too happy. How can they not feel Kedrick is gone?

Although it has become slightly easier, after realising Kedrick would want me to be happy, I still feel the wound of Kedrick's death as though I was the one hit with the arrow. But oblivious to this, Glacium has kept turning. Dread pits in the base of my stomach. How will this world change once they know?

It would be so easy to close my eyes and imagine that two years have passed and I'm part of the peace delegation to Glacium, my companions not Bruma, but Solati. Kedrick waits at the bottom for me.

Rhone approaches with the rope I have become accustomed to since breaking my wrist. Trusting another person with my life is something I instinctively shy away from, but I allow him to hook the rope around my hips, tying me to him.

"Last piggy back, Tatuma," Sanjay says.

“What an odd term,” I say. “I’m not going to ask you what it means.”

“Well, I know how you Solati hate to ask questions, so I will offer the answer anyway. It’s when someone carries you on their back,” he explains, purposely misunderstanding my comment. I hadn’t believed a word from his mouth since his lie about the snow.

“I’m sure. If so, what is a piggy?” I ask.

I have to hand it to Sanjay, his lie about a pink, four-legged creature is convincing. He even adds a strange sound the animal would make. Rhone snorts as I thank Sanjay for the fantastic story.

I hold onto Rhone as he lowers us down the rope, bringing one massive hand down after the other in a slow rhythm. When we reach the bottom, the new men look at me with curiosity. I look between them and my companions. The guards are well fed. All of the delegates have lost weight on the journey. I have no doubt my state is similar.

The ground is icy here, like the shelves on Oscala have been for the last few days. There are a few trees around. Their leaves are green, not the red-black colour I’m used to, and the bark is brown.

I feel for the arrow end in my pocket, but it’s still in my robes in the pack. The wood here *must* match the end of the shaft. It is a dark brown also. I was right! It was from a Bruma’s arrow.

I look around me in amazement as we walk, ducking as some kind of winged animal flies over my head. The men chuckle at my reaction.

We do not walk around the outside of the world as you would on Osolis. When I ask Roman, he tells me going around the outside would be too dangerous, instead we will walk straight down the middle of the first sector to the centre, and from there we will walk around to the third sector where the King currently resides. The villagers here are not as peaceful.

There must not be any Dromeda to ride. Their ministers must waste a lot of time travelling between sectors. But then I remember Kedrick telling Olandon that the ministers only reported to the King while their area was in the fourth sector.

“Why is Glacium split into six parts?” I ask when we stop for a break. “The weather in your fourth sector cannot spread like our fire does and I

have not seen any landmark which splits the sectors into parts like our rivers do,” I explain. There were many snow-covered mountains and icy formations around, but it seemed like they were randomly placed.

A few of the delegates seem confused. Roman answers. “Glacium was not always split into six. It used to be split into four and instead of sectors, we had seasons. My grandmother used to speak of it.”

“Why was it split into four?” I ask, huddling in my coat to stay warm. It’s harder when we stop walking.

“It was based on the weather. Summer was the warmest season, then autumn signalled the cold change. Winter was the coldest season and then spring signalled the coming of the warmth again.”

“Why was it changed?”

Roman shrugs. Tomi answers instead. “The seasons became too large for the four ministers at the time to manage. Crime had escalated and the poor were suffering. So we split up the four sections into six.”

“Why six. Why not eight or ten?”

“We copied your world, I believe. It had been shown to work on Osolis and it split the revolution into six month slots to easily mark the passing of time,” he finishes.

Much to my delight, a layer of white powdery snow covers the ground as we move closer to the middle. I laugh as Adnan works some into a ball and throws it at Rhone, pointing at Sanjay when Rhone turns around glaring. It is nice to see him beat Sanjay at his own game.

Some of the objects we pass I’m able to identify from Kedrick’s descriptions. Though I struggle to understand the layout of their houses. They don’t have dotted villages as we do, the stone houses seem to be arranged in layers, much like our dining ring on Osolis. Large muddy lanes run between the buildings and layers. The housing gets much better as we move towards the centre.

Though I would think it impossible, the cold grows even worse as we draw closer to the third. The wind picks up, stabbing its icy chill through

my clothing. I try to hold my veil down with one hand, but it is difficult while slipping and sliding over snowy heaps and icy rivets.

In the next layer of housing we pass, Malir signals for us to wait while he ducks into a building on the lane side. He comes out with a coat made of a soft, hairy material which he throws over my frame.

“Thank you,” I say, snuggling into the warm coat. I tuck my veil under it to free my one hand. It is hard to balance in the snow.

Malir nods. “I remember how hard it was to acclimatize to your world.” He returns to the front of our progression.

“He got you a child’s coat,” Roman says, scratching his long, thin face. “I suppose you’d be too small for female clothing here.”

“I can’t wait to see one of your females. You have all made them sound like giants. I think it cannot be true,” I say.

Adnan laughs from his place in the back of the line. “You can tell us yourself. You’ve passed many of them already.”

I turn my head to him in surprise. I had noticed the children, but everyone else had been the same size. I had assumed the females were inside in this weather.

Adnan laughs. “You know sometimes, although you wear that veil, I could swear I know exactly what your expression is.”

I shrug, turning away at the mention of my veil. It was the first time it had been mentioned since leaving Osolis. Now that I thought of it, it was odd they hadn’t tried to remove it. My eyebrows draw together as we continue our trudging walk. Maybe they would have tried if Blaine had been in charge. I guess they were just used to me with it on after their time in the Solati court. They wouldn’t want to be disrespectful in case the King let me live.

Making a point to survey the passing Bruma more closely, I try to make out the females, but it is hard with the shapelessness of the thick coats and furry head covers everyone wears. I decide the slimmer Bruma must be the females. Kedrick had been serious. My mouth drops open. These woman could be fierce opponents if they wished to be, though I knew the females here did not fight.

Soon, instead of patches here and there, the whole ground is white. We round a large, snow-covered mound and a strange coughing sound startles me. I peer around Rhone's side at the clearing ahead.

"What on Sol-" I start to say.

There are furry things ahead of us. A massive group of them. I quickly count and there are at least thirty. The coughing sound is coming from them. Rhone heads to the front furry thing and kneels down beside it.

"Quit your barking, Leo," he demands. The thing sits back and stops coughing. Rhone looks over to the people waiting by a type of wagon with no wheels and they walk up to him with large grins.

"What are they?" I say, awe colouring my voice.

"Dogs," Roman answers.

A long strap runs from the front of the wagon through the middle of two rows of the dogs. Each dog is then attached to this strap. Malir crunches towards the group.

"The King sent dogs. He must be eager for our arrival," he says, approaching the three men. I swallow hard at the reminder of my impeding judgement.

The other delegates move forward to the wagon, and after a moment of hesitation, I follow them, keeping one eye on the dogs. Rhone splits us between the three wagons, Malir defers to his judgment. I huddle in the corner of one wagon, holding onto the side with my good arm, my other arm warm in the sling underneath my coat. Adnan, Tomi and Roman join me, cramming into the small space.

I hope this isn't going to do what I think it is. Rhone steps onto the back of the wagon and it sinks down under his weight.

"Hike!" he yells and I gasp as the dogs lurch and pull. My heart leaps into my mouth as the wagon moves forward. Solis help me.

My hand tightens in a death grip on the side.

"What is this thing?" I shout at Adnan.

"A dog sled," he shouts back over the coughing dogs.

It takes several moments to convince me I'm not in direct danger. I loosen my grip, and stare around me at the skimming landscape. Soon I'm laughing. This is much better than riding. Snow flies around us and the wind is nearly unbearable, but my excitement overrides the discomfort, I never want it to end. Especially because when it does, it will mean I've reached my probable death.

We near the end as the sky begins to darken. The palace of Glacium looms over us as we approach. It is nothing like the palace back home. There are no towers or rounded walls. It is grim and unmoveable. No effort has been made to dress it up.

A trellis grate blocking the entrance is lifted as we approach. Do they expect an attack? A group of four guards wave us through, saluting Malir as we pass. I look back the way we came between Rhone's legs and hear the thud of the gate as it is lowered again. My mouth dries. Maybe it's not to keep others out, but to keep prisoners in.

My eyes flick up to the walls and surrounding courtyard. There is no escape from here for someone with only one arm in use. The time to escape had been many weeks ago when I had unfortunately been dumb with grief.

"Whoa!" Rhone calls. It is one of many unusual sounds he has made during our journey.

We slide to a halt at the bottom of several great stone steps. I topple, momentum carrying my stiff body forward. Adnan grabs at me at the last moment to stop my face plant into the wagon. I clamber out with his help, stretching out the stiffness from the long ride. I climb up the steps which have seemingly been made for giants. Sanjay and Roman are at the top heaving on the formidable palace doors.

I step backwards into Sole, as a wave of noise bursts from the building. There is shouting and laughter, accompanied by banging, barking and the smashing of glass. Do they have dogs in there?

We sweep down a massive hallway lit with flaming torches. I startle at the open flame before I recollect where I am. I cannot imagine snow catching on fire. There is the occasional guard and some heavy armour as we move further down the hall, but the rest of it is all grey stone.

Malir stops just before a large archway. It is so big he would be able to walk through it with his hands stretched above his head and still not touch the top. The noise is at a maximum here. The King and his court must be on the other side. Any laughter and fun I had on the sled seems a week ago. Any joy from throwing snow or reaching the end of Oscala is forgotten, as each person in our group is met with the realisation of the news we must now bring to the King.

I feel the weight of their gazes on me. I know they wonder what will happen to me once the King is told. I look up and see worry in Adnan and Sanjay's frames. I see my mother's cruel smile reflected on Blaine's face. But what worries me most and makes my hands shake is the look of regret I see in Malir's eyes as he stands in front of me.

He takes a deep breath which I echo, and gives a nod to the others.

The men form a group around me. We turn and walk through the archway.

Chapter Sixteen

All sound is sucked out of the room. There are a few shouted greetings and cheers, but these fade out as the crowd senses something is amiss. Perhaps tragedy is written on the delegate's faces.

Being in the middle of the group, I'm unable to see past the delegates large frames, especially as they are made bulkier by the cold weather clothing they all wear. Our footsteps echo as we approach the far end of the room.

The group comes to a halt.

I peek between the delegates, but can only make out the bottom of a throne.

Rhone shifts slightly, clearing my line of sight. My mouth drops at what I can see of the King.

He sits leaning to one side with his left leg sprawled out. I cannot see anything above his hips. But I can already tell that where Kedrick had been tall and graceful, his brother was taller still and built entirely of muscle.

There is a moment where we wait uncertainly, then Malir moves forward with a small step. He does not get a chance to speak. The King's voice stops him partway through a gesture.

"My brother is dead," the chilling voice says. I shiver at the menace in it. This man is dangerous. How did he know that? I realise the Prince would have greeted him first if he were here.

My growing friendship with the delegates had fooled me into thinking my reception would be easier. The threat in the King's voice dispels these hopes instantly.

"Yes, my King," Malir says, his head bowing so his greying hair falls over his face.

His words are met with a wave of gasps and whispers from the court. Despite the King being the judge of whether I live or die, my heart fills with

sadness for him. To have his brother's death so publically revealed, and be forced to put on such a collected front before being able to grieve, would be horrible. I could not imagine it. The sadness turns inwards. If things had gone differently, Kedrick could have been introducing me to the King and the court as a friend. I swallow this wishful thinking down before it overwhelms me.

"How?" the voice continues. I cannot gauge anything from his tone. "Falling off Oscala?" he asks.

I can hear the deep breath Malir takes before answering.

"An arrow to the chest." The people closest to the King gasp. It is obvious they hadn't expected anything more than an accident.

"Who?" The King's voice surrounds us somehow. I feel like I'm being hunted. My blood beats in my ears as my judgement looms.

The future of our worlds is hanging in the balance. If he kills me it will mean war, unavoidable war. I know if I can determine who the assassin is, then I can make all of this go away. I can prove Osolis was innocent of any wrong doing. But I need to be alive to do it. If the King values peace in any measure, he will have to let me live. I will explain my suspicions and show him the arrow if I need to, though I prefer to keep this knowledge hidden for now. I knew that by showing the arrow I could clear Osolis straight away, but avenging Kedrick was more important right now. I would only show him if I absolutely had to.

"We don't know who the assassin was," Malir replies. "When Rhone and I found them, whoever killed the Prince had been gone many hours." I see the King's leg shift as he sits up from his sprawl.

"You said them. Who else was with him?" he asks, demanding an answer.

Malir looks back at me with an apology in his eyes. The King leans forward, dangling massive forearms over his knees. His arms and hands are bare of jewellery.

"The Tatuma Olina, the...Princess of Osolis, was with him."

The King stands. I feel Roman jerk behind me, startled by the abrupt movement. I can only see his massive boots as he stalks up to the group

before coming to a stop in front of Malir.

“And why were you and Rhone not with my brother?” His tone is casual, but my heartbeat triples at the threat I hear in his words. It was not Malir and Rhone’s fault. Should I say something in their defence? I await Malir’s answer with clenched hands.

“We were on watch outside Prince Kedrick’s quarters. When we entered the room early the next morning to awaken him, he was not there. We began tracking him immediately.” The undertones of fear in Malir’s voice make me quake. If Malir is scared of the King, I know I should be terrified.

“He...snuck out. To see a girl. Why?” Bafflement forces its way out of the King’s mouth. It is the first emotion I have heard from him. Maybe he is human after all.

There is no sound in the room.

Malir speaks quietly, but I doubt his words are missed by anyone. “Because he loved her.” The room gasps collectively and sounds of disgust and surprise swell in the hall. There is a sharp intake of breath from the King. The room hushes suddenly, I look around in confusion.

“He fell in love with a Solati?” the King says more than asks, spitting the words out as though they taste sour. “He snuck out to see her like a young boy?” he continues, his astonishment evident. I grit my teeth.

No one dares to speak.

I marvel at the openness of his ruling. There is no scenario I can imagine where my mother would have this conversation in front of her court.

The King walks slowly back to his throne and lowers himself down in weary comparison to his energy filled movements of a moment before. It has been silent for so long, I jump when Malir resumes talking.

“Once we discovered Kedrick’s body, it was unclear as to whether the rest of the delegates were at risk.”

Finally, I’m going to hear what happened in the days after his death.

“Rhone returned to gather the others and steal some of the fast beasts Solati ride between the rotations. It was easy enough as we were already packed in readiness to depart,” Malir continues. “I buried Kedrick as best I could and stayed with the unconscious Princess. It was decided between us to flee Osolis so news of his death would reach you. We got a good head start. A large group of villagers tried to attack us when they saw we carried their Tatuma, but we were able to escape. We had to...incapacitate the guards at the entrance to the great stairway. They were not killed. We destroyed the rope ladder to the first stair so we could not be followed. We have been travelling since the night of his death.” Whispers start up behind us.

I am disappointed with his brief explanation, most of this I had already guessed myself.

The King absorbs this before he speaks, a striking difference to what Kedrick would have done. His thoughts would have already been blurted out. I blink back a stinging in my eyes, surprised. I have not cried at all since the night he died. What a time for them to want to start. I dig my dirty nails into my grimy palm.

“You questioned the Tatuma before you left?” he asks, though he says it more like a statement than a question. There is a ripple through the delegates around me. Some make sounds of disapproval and a few hang their heads, but almost as one they look at Blaine.

The King must direct his attention to Blaine also because his face blanches. I almost feel sorry for him, knowing I will soon be receiving the same attention.

“The Tatuma was unconscious for several days after Prince Kedrick’s death. Malir hit her too hard over the head,” Blaine says in a shaking voice, throwing a glare at the others.

“Why did you hit her?” the King asks.

“The Tatuma was...upset. The noise would have attracted unwanted attention,” Malir says.

“She was wailing like a child,” Blaine puts in. I raise my eyebrows at his comment. I don’t remember doing this. But it explains why Malir used

force.

Blaine continues. “We tried to question her on our way up, but she refused to answer,” he says in a shaking voice, throwing a glare at the others.

I’m almost thankful to Blaine for telling me what I have wanted to know. At least I had been unconscious the whole time. I had worried I had gone temporarily insane in those few days, especially with how I had been upon waking.

“She was grieving, you idiot! Anyone could see she wasn’t ready to talk of it,” Sanjay bursts out. I have never seen Sanjay so angry, or angry at all really. The back of his neck is so red, it almost matches his red hair.

The King stands so fast, I take a step back, standing on Roman’s foot.

“Sorry,” I whisper. Roman squeezes my right arm in reassurance or in farewell, I don’t know which.

“You brought her here?” the King breathes. “Where is she?”

Whispers start up, growing louder until people are yelling and shouting to be heard.

The delegates sigh, and exchange glances with the others around them. I’m gratified they don’t appear to want to throw me to the fires anymore. Not that it helps me in the least.

Malir and Rhone move to the side, followed by Sanjay and Adnan who stand directly in front of me. The other delegates step away from my sides and I feel Roman distance himself from my back.

I take my good hand out of the coat pocket and straighten my shoulders before looking at Kedrick’s brother.

My head tilts back, and then back some more. Solis, he is tall. If he stood still I could believe he was a tree.

I do not breathe as he takes me in.

I take the chance to do the same.

His blue eyes are exactly like Kedrick’s were. But where I had always felt as though Kedrick could feel my gaze through my veil, I get the chilling

sensation the King can see through my veil. That he can see inside me.

His penetrating eyes make me want to hide.

His hair is darker than Kedrick's was, and where Kedrick's hair had been cut short, the King's was almost to his shoulders. Aside from these features I cannot see any other resemblance. Kedrick was strong, but he did not exude pure power as this man does.

"This...is the Princess?" the King asks, looking up at the delegates with raised eyebrows. "My brother loved a child?"

My eyes narrow. I was short by the standards of their females and in oversized clothes, but I was taller than a child. I keep quiet, aware he is lashing out, testing me.

"Does it talk?" he says to the room, there are a few laughs from the court. Blaine joins in and loathing fills me at the sound. Adnan and Sanjay throw him a filthy look.

The King stalks down the platform towards me.

In every action he makes, there is the suggestion of a threat. I have never felt more like running in my life. His expression is blank, but I have no doubt he is taking in everything; my veil, the empty sleeve of my coat, the reactions of the men around me who stand tense and shift closer to me as the King draws near.

I take a breath and speak.

"It does. I was not aware you had asked a question of me, King Jovan." His eyes narrow at my slight reprimand. Rudeness was probably not my best choice, but if I was allowed to live I couldn't show weakness. Aquin is in my ear; start how you mean to go on. I also hear him saying; pick your battles, but as far as I was concerned, I had picked my battle by not trying to fight eleven delegates on Oscala.

"Take off your veil, I want to see your face," he says, waving a hand at my head.

"No," I say straight away. There are loud gasps from both the delegates and the court at my refusal.

Adnan steps in. “Uh, King Jovan. The Tatum never takes off her veil. Kedrick said we must never ask her of it.” I turn my head to Adnan, my heart breaking a little at hearing this unknown fact about Kedrick. This explains why they had never tried to remove my veil while on Oscala, they were respecting Kedrick’s wishes. The King gives a low hum at Adnan’s information.

“Are you crippled?” He gestures to my arm, his eyes still on Adnan whose breathing had become shallow.

My mouth drops open behind my veil. Solis, even Sanjay does not compare to this boldness. I wonder if the King is trying to unbalance me.

“No, I hurt my wrist in a fall while climbing Oscala,” I say. The King raises an eyebrow for translation, still staring at Adnan who blurts out in a higher voice than normal. “The great stairway.”

Kedrick’s brother snorts, breaking his gaze and striding a few steps away as though this confirms his judgement of me. “The great stairway is not for the weak.”

I say nothing, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. But I do roll my eyes under the safety of my veil.

Sole takes a tiny step forward. “She broke her wrist while saving my life on the stairway. She did it at great risk to herself,” his voice squeaks and he steps back the instant it is said, taking a much bigger step backwards than he took forward to begin with. My eyes shift to Blaine to catch his reaction. I’m not disappointed.

The King turns, but does not say anything, just strokes his face. I can hear a bristling sound as he does, a light stubble covers his jaw.

“Without the Tatum, we would have lost Sole,” Malir says.

“Yet it is because of her my brother is dead.” The King’s tone is raw and harsh. He turns his head to the side for a few moments. I’m in awe he is still able to be so composed with the news his brother has been murdered. The lack of emotion he displays has me most scared out of anything he has done so far.

He turns a blank face towards us.

“I must think on what we will do with the girl,” he says. I grit my teeth again, a retort on the tip of my tongue, but I draw back, knowing the King’s grief is fresh. It was only a month ago when I felt my heart was cut out from me, and this man had known Kedrick for much longer than I.

He gestures at some guards behind him and speaks a quiet command to them. They approach and I feel the group around me hesitate.

Disobedience from his men will surely rile the King’s temper and his threat of Malir and Rhone still weighs on my mind. I step forward and squeeze Malir’s hand, then Adnan’s.

“Thank you.” I nod at the others who then surprise me by bowing down one by one.

Except of course for Blaine. I stop in front of him

“Did that go how you expected?” I ask, he takes a step towards me, fury contorting his face.

I laugh quietly and do not resist as the guards push me out of the room.

The King’s voice sounds behind me. “Roscoe. Find Ashawn and send him to my quarters.”

I’m led through the palace.

The layout is straightforward, unlike the twisting halls of the two palaces I grew up in. I’m prodded up some more large steps to a small wooden door. It opens into a massive, very cold room.

My teeth chatter in the frigid air. It is obvious no one has been in here for a long time. I can smell the air is stale even with my cold nose. If this is their dungeon though, it’s not so bad.

I wrap my arms around myself and shiver. If being cold means my life, I will gladly take it. The guards surprise me though when one stoops to light a fire in an area built into the wall. Once this is lit they leave the room, closing and locking the door behind them. I listen for their fading steps, but they stay outside the door.

It looks as though I am to be watched.

I approach the fire with my hands outstretched. I move my head closer in confusion. Where is the wood? Instead of wood there is a heap of small,

round beads somehow keeping the fire alight. Kedrick had never mentioned these. I go down onto my knees, getting as close as possible.

I stay by the fascinating fire until I'm warm and my eyes are heavy. I look towards the bed which must easily be double the size of my bed on Osolis. The surrounding drapes are pulled back and tied to four large stone columns at each corner of the bed. A heaped mass of furry blankets, similar to my coat, are piled on the bed.

I think longingly of a bath as I walk with bone-weary steps to the bed and wrap myself in a fur. However, I think the guards will more likely laugh at this request than allow it. I lay down in the soft bed, remembering I have not slept in a bed for many weeks.

I expect to spend the night tense and waiting for attack, but my exhaustion has other plans. I'm out once my head touches the pillow.

Chapter Seventeen

My eyelids crack open for at least the tenth time the next day. This time I'm able to keep them from closing. I sit up, trying to shake off the remnants of my deep sleep. There had been no nightmares of Kedrick's murder. It may have been the best sleep I'd ever had.

I look around the room with blurry eyes and blink at the sight of a small pile of clothing on the long seat at the end of the bed.

"Oops," I say into the empty room. Aquin would make me train all day if he knew someone had crept up on me.

The fire still burns and the room is a comfortable temperature, though the stone is still cold under my bare feet. Wrapped in the fur, I walk over to the window to gauge the time. A wall of swirling white snow is the answer to my inquiry. I cannot see anything.

Returning to the bed, I pick up the clothing and measure it against my chest. It must be children's clothing because it is a close fit. There are also trousers and boots.

On the table next to the door is a bowl of water and a cloth, much like what we use on Osolis. It looks like my longing for a bath will go unsatisfied today, but clean clothes were more than I expected. I wonder how often Bruma wash. If I believed the court rumours back on Osolis, I would think never. The delegates had certainly not seemed bothered by their lack of cleanliness during our ascent. Though, in their defence, there had not been anything to wash with. We had all been covered in grime. The basin wash does not give anywhere near the clean feeling which submerging myself in water would do. However, I am able to get a layer or two of grime off and wash my broken wrist. I will have to ask someone to put the splint back on for me. The water is black when I'm done.

Afterwards I'm more optimistic about my situation, but this slowly fades when no one comes to collect me all day. Later attempts at opening the door are unsuccessful. Occasionally, the guards murmur and someone

pushes food under the door twice. They wouldn't lock me in here forever would they?

To take up time, I look around the room for ways to get out. I can think of only two ways to escape. Neither effective with my injuries. I run through various scenarios of what the King may ask and what I would like to say. Then, in danger of going out of my mind, I rifle through my pack. I shake my head at my useless robes, I might need them though if I'm able to escape after killing Kedrick's assassin. I take the fletching out of the pocket of my robes, looking at it, remembering why I'm here. I push it down the side of my new boots. Despite being in Kedrick's home, I have never felt more distant from his memory.

The bolt of the door slides back with a clang. I jump, whipping my hand up as I straighten. A guard stands in the doorway. He has a sword sheathed at his side and holds a spear in his right hand.

"The King wants you in the meeting chamber," he says.

I'm almost excited as I leave the room.

Torches have been lit since last night and I see there are no other rooms up this stairway. The guards direct me down the staircase and back into the main hallway. I get my first real look at the palace and its occupants.

Bruma line the walls, staring at me with undisguised hostility. They don't seem to be doing anything in particular in the hall, except waiting for me to pass so they can show how much they dislike the child-like Solati in their midst. I wonder if it was like this for the delegates when they first arrived on Osolis. It is a strange feeling to know you are disliked just for being born on another world.

One of the Bruma goes as far to spit at my boots. My nose scrunches in revulsion, but I make no outward acknowledgement of his action.

The Bruma are tall. I am able to tell the females and males apart here. The females all wear their hair loose down their backs. There are no fancy hair styles at all. The trousers and tunics the men and women wear are of better quality than the villagers we passed on our way in, which is to be expected of the people closest to the King. There is fur, leather and the same fur-lined cloth I am wearing, which I don't know the name of.

The woman's clothing is tighter than the males and the necklines of their tunics are lower. Some extremely so. One woman has trousers which lace up the side, but she has let skin show down each side. They all have one thing in common, though. The glares on their faces. I do not feel welcome for one moment, but I remember my vow not to appear weak and keep my head high. A guard swings a door open before me and I walk into the meeting chamber.

I look across the room and stumble in shock.

Kedrick is in the room.

A prod in the back pushes me forward. My heart drops as I see this version of Kedrick is too young. I shake my head. It must be Ashawn. He looks nearly identical to him. He has the same lighter brown hair and blue eyes, the same intelligent face and, if the situation were different, I imagine his smile would be the same.

I look at Kedrick's younger brother, my heart breaking. He stares at me also, but with a different expression. I recognise his rage. It is like the fury simmering deep within my body. He makes to move over to me, but the King grabs his arm and talks quietly to him. The younger brother responds, gesturing wildly, before standing at Jovan's reply and storming out of the room.

No one comments on his departure. King Jovan's face does not change.

The air in here is colder than my room. The Bruma in attendance seem comfortable, most of them in short-sleeved tunics. I shiver and curse at forgetting my coat.

The room is stone, in keeping with the rest of the Glacium palace. A large table also made of stone, circles most of the room.

A single chair sits vacant in the middle of this stone ring.

I look around at the Bruma sitting around the outside of the table. My delegates are already here. They all look exhausted. I wonder if they had been in meetings ever since our arrival. I note, with envy, their hair is washed and their faces are free of grime.

The guard at my back pushes me into the middle, towards the vacant seat. I fix my jaw at his manhandling and decide to be defiant, stopping as

we reach the area where most of the delegates sit.

“I hope the reunions with your families went well,” I say. The guard prods me in the back again.

Most of them just smile and nod back at me, darting looks at the King. Sanjay, of course, goes the extra step.

“I had several reunions with Fiona,” he says with a grin, resting back in his chair and putting his hands behind his head. Rhone snorts and several of the other delegates muffle their laughter. The guard pushes more forcefully. I turn to look at him. He glares back. The delegates continue to joke behind me.

“It would’ve taken more than one reunion to make it worth her while, after a year of being without a woman,” Roman says from the other side of the ring.

“I take it poor Jacqueline was not satisfied the first time,” Sanjay returns. Several Bruma laugh. I wonder at how appropriate this subject is given the situation, but no one seems bothered.

The guard pushes me roughly. I stumble forward and grab my still unsplinted wrist. An angry murmur starts behind me and I hear a couple of the delegates push their chairs back. But I have reached the end of my patience. I spin around and point a finger in the guard’s face.

“Push me one more time, and you and I are going to have a problem,” I say in a dark voice. My threat is not satisfying in the slightest, but during my morning in isolation I had decided it best to continue keeping my ability to fight to myself. It would hardly count in my favour if I displayed the skill which would have been necessary to kill Kedrick. Ironically though, shooting arrows was the one thing I was unable to do with my veil on. But they didn’t need to know how impaired my sight was, either.

Most of the room snorts, laughing at my words and the sight of a ‘child’ standing up to a big guard. The guard himself laughs until Malir barks an order at him. He falls back, his laughter dying, leaving me to stroll to the judgement chair unmolested.

I ignore the still laughing men around the room. My gaze lifts to meet the King’s. My temper had just gotten the better of me. I hope its loss was

seen as strength, not an angry disposition. His gaze is furious, though surprisingly, it's not directed at me and instead is on the guard behind me. I hear the guard fidgeting under his attention. The King shifts his gaze to me and the guard lets out a small squeaking sound.

“This meeting has been called to collect the Tatura's account of what befell Prince Kedrick and then to decide her fate accordingly,” the King states, not raising his voice at all, though the room is large.

“I have spoken in length to all of the delegates and their accounts have been...interesting.”

I realise then the King Jovan I saw last night was uncontrolled. The distant interest he gives off now is terrifying and I have not missed the thinly veiled threat in his words just now. He would not hesitate to kill me if I am uncooperative.

“Why was my brother with you that night?” he starts, his eyes on my hands in my lap. He cannot see my face so he is watching for other signs.

I swallow and shift my eyes to look behind him, his eyes are too intense.

Should I tell the truth? I have a feeling lies are going to end with more of my bones broken. Kedrick had always spoken highly of his brother. I think he would want me to tell him, to reassure him in his grief. I could see this now, though I could not have a week prior. And who knew what information I could glean from this meeting by giving up some of my own.

A few people shift as I take my time answering.

I decide on the truth. “Kedrick and I met several times at night during his time on Osolis. This particular time was because he was due to leave the day after. We wished to be alone together,” I say.

Many of the gathered Bruma mutter, some shy back in disgust.

There is a moment where I wonder what was wrong with what I said, my brow clears as I remember. I keep forgetting how relationships between our races are viewed. Any qualms I had initially had about this myself, had disappeared almost a year ago.

The King looks a little amazed by my answer, though he was informed of our relationship last night. “There was nothing different about this night from the others?” he asks, leaning slightly forward for my answer, one large finger across his lips.

There is no way I’m going to tell him we had planned to remove my veil.

“We met in the forest instead of the meadow.”

“Why?” a blonde-haired man asks from my left. I do not like his watery blue eyes.

“We did not want to be caught. The forest is more private than the meadow.” A few men snort at this. I look down, realising what they thought Kedrick and I had been doing. One of my hand fists. There is a growling behind me from the delegates and the others shut up.

“What next?” the King asks, his hand moves in a jerky gesture. Kedrick used to do the same thing.

I have replayed what happened next over in my mind so many hundreds of times I do not need to think before I answer. “I was facing Kedrick.” I swallow as everyone leans closer. “He was looking at me, but must have seen or heard something in the forest behind me because he peered over my head. I saw his face change at the moment he must have realised there was an archer there.”

I swallow hard, taking a few moments to collect myself. I focus on the pain in my wrist. On the arrow in my boot. I had debated, while locked in in my room, over whether I should share the next information with the King. But not acknowledging Kedrick’s selfless action is too cowardly. I take a deep breath.

“The archer was behind me. Kedrick threw me aside. When I looked up the arrow had struck him here.” I bring a trembling hand to the area where he had been hit. “It is where my head had been. If he had not thrown me aside, the arrow would have gone through my head,” I say in a wooden tone.

The King makes as though he is going to stand, but stops himself.

A couple of the others in the room gasp at my words. The rest do not understand the implication of what I have just said.

“I believe I was the intended target,” I say, guilt drips off every word. Now everyone in the room knows it was my fault. Not for the first time, I wish the arrow had reached its intended destination.

My words leave the room empty. No one speaks, no one moves. Everyone takes a moment to digest what I have said. My chest starts to feel tight at being surrounded in the ring. I take rapid breaths.

“After he got hit?” the King asks, his voice angry.

This is the part I have dreaded retelling. I squeeze my eyes shut and talk quickly. “I helped him to the ground. I could hear footsteps crashing away. It must have been the assassin, but I did not think to give chase. And I don’t know why they ran. I was so focused on Kedrick, not thinking clearly. I only remembered the footsteps afterwards.”

I take a shuddering breath which catches on the rising lump on my throat. When my voice sounds, it is hoarse. “I did not know what to do to help him, we were so far from the palace. I don’t think he could have been-” my voice catches on the word ‘saved’.

I clear my throat and try again.

“I held his hand as-” I can’t bear it. I stand up and pace in jerky patterns, focusing on the feel of my boot striking the stone, the throbbing in my wrist. I grasp at the fury I know lies in wait. It rises up at my call and burns back the tears threatening to fall. I resume my seat, reverting back to my wooden voice. “It was many hours later before Malir and Rhone found us.”

There is silence again. For a long time. The King finally breaks it.

“Did he say anything? Before he died?” His voice is rough.

A single tear escapes my fury and trails down the side of my nose. I nod, but cannot talk.

“What?” he says, leaning forward once again.

“He said,” I try, but the words do not sound. I try once more. “He said, don’t cry.”

Tears pour down my face, I turn my face to the side, unable to respect Kedrick's last wish. They drip underneath my veil into the front of my tunic. The King waves to the person next to him, an older, intelligent looking man.

"Had there been any prior indication you were in danger?" the man asks in a deep voice I instantly like.

I start to say no, but stop as a hidden memory surfaces. Frowning through my tears, I answer, "There had been a crack in the woods behind us in the days earlier. I had dismissed this as a fallen branch."

I try to remember the positions we had been in that day. The memory has faded too much for me to be sure. I shake my head. "I do not know if this was the archer or not."

The grey haired man nods. "Are there any on Osolis whom, you believe, may have been behind the attempt to kill you?" I do not answer, the time for the truth is over. Now I have to save my own skin.

I'm saved from lying and damned at the same time by Blaine.

"Her mother. You know I'm particularly good at perceiving relationships, King Jovan. The Tatum hates her," he says in his nasal voice.

My teeth and fists clench at Blaine's words. There goes my shot at convincing them to let me live so they can eventually ransom me back to Osolis.

All eyes are on me, waiting for a denial.

"Amongst others, yes," I say in an even tone.

"You believe your mother would kill you?" the King finally speaks. He looks at me like a tree has sprouted from my face. Probably wondering what is so wrong with me my own mother would hate me.

"The Tatum's a fucking bitch," Sanjay says. I gasp at his language.

"Sanjay," I admonish, twisting around to look at him.

"You know it is true," he defends.

"Well..." I bite back a sudden bubble of laughter. "You still should not say so." He just raises an eyebrow in response.

“How old are you child?” the older man speaks again. I turn back around to the front.

“I’m not a child. I am five revolutions and five rotations old. No, make that six revolutions now.” My birthday had occurred somewhere on the Oscala.

“Eighteen,” Malir translates.

“Yes,” I say. My shoulders hunch forward. It feels like we have been in here for hours. This talk of Kedrick is emotionally exhausting and I want it to be over. I don’t see what my age has to do with deciding if I should live or die.

The King is quiet, surveying the room, uninterested with our current topic. I wonder what he is thinking.

“I would like an explanation from the delegates as to why the Tatum was taken hostage,” he says. I see Blaine stiffen to my left and I smile an evil smile, knowing better than to feel sorry for him by now.

“I thought the Prince had been t-targeted, my King,” Blaine stutters. I roll my eyes. “I thought it best for Glacium to have some leverage against Osolis in the case of war.”

I could not fault his reasoning. I may have done the same if in the same position.

“Did you not think by taking her, you would assure a reaction from Osolis? Considering you were sent on a peace mission, I would hope this thought had crossed your mind,” the King says in the dangerous soft voice I had heard him use last night. Hope flares within me.

“Yes, my King, it had. But because her mother hates her, I thought it unlikely to eventuate into anything more,” Blaine answers. Ouch.

“Even if the Tatum hates her, I’m sure there are others who would push for her return. Other family perhaps.”

Malir interjects. “Her brother Olandon will. And she is much loved by the people of Osolis.” I twirl to look at him. I am?

“To anger the people is worse than to anger the ruler,” the King says. Again, I hear the threat masked in his musing tone. I can tell Blaine does,

too, by how he pales and begins to babble.

“I thought she could be used as ransom.”

The King stands, fists on the table. “Would a mother that hates her be likely to pay for her return?”

“We could torture her for information on their armies and supplies,” Blaine blurts.

There is a roar of outrage from my companions and some of the King’s party also. The King holds up a hand. Everyone quiets as he speaks.

“The purpose of the treaty delegation is to maintain a peace with Osolis and to forge a stronger relationship between our worlds. It is something my brother strongly believed in.” He stands. “During your training for Osolis you were all present and would often hear his passion on this subject, would you not?”

I applaud Blaine’s survival instincts when he does not answer. The King starts a slow stroll around the outside of the table towards him.

“It is why I’m amazed you happened to forget this in the wake of his death,” he says casually as he strolls. “Not only have you jeopardised the tenuous peace between our worlds, you have disrespected my brother’s memories with your rash decision.”

The King has almost completed the circle. He stops behind Blaine who is visibly shaking.

“On top of that, you further appear to have disrespected him by convincing the others to capture someone, who, by all accounts, he seemed to be...fond of. With your gift for noting relationships, as you mentioned earlier, I would think it an unlikely oversight to have missed his growing relationship with the Tatuma.” The King stands directly behind Blaine now. Blaine’s quivering has turned to full shaking.

“You are suddenly quiet,” the King says. Blaine squeaks in reply.

“I didn’t think so.” He picks Blaine up by the neck and throws him towards the closed door. Blaine crashes into the wood, bouncing off onto the ground. I gasp at the King’s strength. He had thrown him as I would throw an apple.

“You will spend a year in the sixth sector. I do not want to hear of you, or see you until the assembly is in the second. Your family will remain here.” The King walks back around the circle and settles into his seat. Blaine scrambles up to his feet and wrenches the door open. His last look is for me and I quake a little at the hatred I see there. Another enemy. The door slams shut.

“As for the rest of the delegates, I’m disgusted you were so easily persuaded. It seems most of you realised your error on the journey, however, and for that I will be merciful. Leave us now,” the King says.

I half rise with them, uncertain if his order included me.

“Sit down,” he says. I narrow my eyes at the order, but do so. Slowly.

He does not speak again until the shame-faced delegates have left.

I fix on the King’s face. His lips are pursed in some small amusement. “You have commandeered most of those men.” The amusement is gone the next moment. He sits forward.

“I don’t want you to think I want you here, when your world was the death of my brother. If I could swap your life for his, I would do it tenfold.”

I nod. I would do the same.

“I also don’t think you have told us the whole truth.” I keep still, thinking about the shaft in my boot.

“As I have just demonstrated with Blaine, I will not disrespect the honour and bravery of my brother’s sacrifice by killing you. If it as you and the others say, Kedrick was fond of you. You can be assured I will not torture or kill you unless it is necessary.” He sits back, sprawling out his left leg. “If I find you have been dishonest in any way or are here for reasons other than what they appear to be, I will kill you myself.” I crack my eyes open in disbelief. He is going to let me go?

He surveys me with his hand splayed over his bottom lip.

“That blasted veil is a pain in the arse,” he says. My heartbeat picks up, but my panic is quenched as he continues talking. “You will stay here as a guest, until I decide what I will do with you. Do you understand?” he asks.

I narrow my eyes at him, he is talking to me as though I’m stupid.

His lips purse in amusement again, as if he knows what I am thinking.

The meeting has worked perfectly. I will stay, giving me time to find Kedrick's killer. And I will live. I give a short nod.

The same guard escorts me out, minus the poking in the shoulder. The door is nearly closed, but I hear the King's words clearly.

“Send two messengers to Osolis to convey news of the Tatuma's safety. Tell the messengers to set the hawks up at the midway cave.”

The hawks! They were only brought out during war negotiations.

I struggle to recall my lessons on them, but can remember nothing except they save time by taking messages to the edge of the smoky barrier on Oscala. Instead of waiting two months to receive a reply to your message, you would get a reply in a month.

Was King Jovan trying to maintain peace? Or declaring war?

Chapter Eighteen

Over the next month I learn the term 'guest' differs in meaning on Glacium. The Bruma do not spit on me anymore, but I feel their hostility constantly. After an attack from a Bruma man as I walked to my room one evening, I was given a second guard. Life here is a far cry from my life before, where I never had any guards at all. Only people spying on me.

One of my delegates would always collect me for meals. The members of court were less likely to try and trip and push me when they were by me. I try to remind myself of the attitudes of Solati towards Bruma when my patience levels are low, and I want to punch the Bruma right between their eyes.

My arm is now yellow and much less swollen and it is confined by a new splint Adnan fashioned for me. I had been happy to get rid of the sling a week ago.

The Bruma were not all this way. I had met the wives of some of the delegates now. Fiona, Sanjay's wife, was kind. She had been the one to leave fresh clothes in my room and Sadra, Malir's wife, reminded me of the matron from the orphanage.

The food hall was also the perfect place to spy on the King. So far he had received one message by hawk, though I had no idea of the contents. The hawk had been beautiful; snow white with the biggest wings I had ever seen. When it had taken off, I had felt the power of them from my seat. I suppose it would need powerful wings to fly through all this snow and rain. Adnan explains they have some extra eyelid which protects their eyes, but still allows them to see. The hawk had risen to the ceiling and disappeared through some exit not visible from our table.

The King's posture had become rigid as he read the message, which I didn't take as a good sign. I was relieved, though, when I did not receive word I was to return home. So far I had not had any luck with finding the assassin. I needed more time.

I open the heavy door at the front of the castle. I had pretty much been allowed free reign of the castle, though I was told I was not allowed out of the gates.

I make my way down the massive steps into the courtyard, huddling to keep warm, but making sure to keep one hand on the wall as Malir told me to do so I don't get lost in the blizzard. The white powder of the disturbed snow flies around us, penetrating even the thick fur of my coat. I will never get used to the cold here. Most of the time I feel like my bones themselves are frozen. I only come outside for one thing. To see Rhone's dogs.

When Rhone is not away doing business for the King on the sleds, the dogs are kept here or in the kennels. There is a whining noise as I approach. I bend down to Leo, giggling as he raises one ear and tilts his head to the side. I reach out my good hand towards him. He sniffs at my hand and then licks it. I scratch him behind the ears where Rhone has taught me to, laughing as he moves his head side to side when he gets enough in the first spot.

I start as Rhone crouches down beside me, I had not heard his approach over the howling wind. He scratches Leo's chest, not speaking.

"Are you taking the sled anywhere today?" I ask in a loud voice over the howling wind.

"No, too dangerous," he says. "Not much to do until the King's tour."

I have learnt the dogs are one of the only topics Rhone will offer more than one syllable answers on. He spends much of his time on the sled transferring important people and various communication. I think it must be quite a lonely job.

Rhone was different than the others.

I had always noted it, but it had been even more noticeable since we had arrived on Glacium. Where the Castle Bruma would only slightly ease their bullying when I walked with the other delegates, no one even attempted to touch me when I was with Rhone. I wondered what he had done to earn this fearful respect.

I follow him back to the castle, keeping my hand on the wall again. Rhone walks with me to the huge hall where the Bruma eat. As usual,

everyone turns to look and glare upon my arrival, but as expected no one dares to touch me when he is looming by my side.

I have found the assembly here to be different and similar at the same time. As on Osolis, the people who eat here are those who are connected to, or who are a person in a high position; ministers, advisors, important merchants. Unlike Osolis though, these people did not live in the castle and the only Bruma who seemed to stay here were high-ranking travellers, some of the King's advisors, Rhone, and guards down in the barracks. The only mystery remaining, were the large number of females who seemed to stay somewhere in the castle, though they were always changing. Sometimes I would see a similar face, only to see a different face leaving the same room the next day.

Rhone continues walking and we stop at a table close to the throne platform where Malir, Sanjay and Adnan sit. The King is listening to someone talk on his left side. His eyes flick to me briefly. I have not had any more interaction with the King since the meeting room. I hope this continues.

“Morning,” Malir greets, shifting to the side so I can sit next to him.

“Good morning everyone,” I say and talk briefly to Fiona before approaching the table of food.

The food table stretches all the way down one wall and is piled with all kinds of strange edibles. It is another difference to the Osolis court. Here, there is communal food, you are not served. I still didn't know what most of the food was. Roman had pointed me in the direction of a fruit he called a pear, saying it would be most similar to an apple. I had not known my eating habits were so noticed.

I have just grasped my pear from the groaning table when I'm shoved to the side by a huge body. Losing my feet and the pear, I protect my left arm, rolling over so the back of my shoulder hits the ground instead. I continue rolling to my feet, sinking into a defensive posture. Keeping a low profile is warranted, but I will protect myself.

I look back at the large man and scrunch my nose as his smell reaches me. Mostly, I have found Bruma stereotypes to be unfounded, but this man

fits them perfectly.

“Move it Solati whore,” he snarls.

I don't even have time to respond before a massive hand grips him around the throat.

“Gabel,” the King says in a casual tone. “Why are you harassing my guest?”

Unfortunately for Gabel, he mistakes this for a genuine inquiry.

“She killed Prince Kedrick,” Gabel chokes as the King squeezes a bit more.

He turns to face the assembly who are watching. Gabel follows him around, balancing on his tip toes. “I have seen the way you have all been treating our guest,” he says. “Might I remind you the Princess is a woman and half your size?” Gabel's face is turning red. I do not dare look at the assembly for their reactions.

“Let me set you straight on the matter of my brother's death,” he says, continuing to squeeze.

“Contrary to what you all apparently think, my brother sacrificed himself to save the Tatuma.” The room hushes.

He continues, “Do not make a mockery of his bravery, or of his sacrifice.” The King turns to me, I force myself to stay still.

“I apologise on their behalf. If I had been myself in recent weeks, the matter would have been cleared up before now.” I nod, distracted by the man still in his grasp.

Gabel's face is now purple, his lips turning a blue tinge.

The King drops him to the floor and returns to his throne without a backwards look. Gabel curls into a ball on the ground, drawing air weakly into his lungs. I stare for a few seconds, then step over him to get another pear.

From that day on the tripping and shoving stop.

I'm in a deep sleep, as I always seem to be in this bed. I struggle to the surface as a loud crash sounds outside my door.

I listen intently as there is sudden silence. My door crashes open. I jump, trying to extract myself from the fur I am tangled up in. A huge shadow fills the doorway and I see the outline of my guards laying in a heap behind them. The shadow enters the room and slams the door closed.

I frantically pull out of the fur, putting a hand up to my veil. I hesitate when I notice my predicament. I have taken to sleeping without clothing on due to only having one set of clothing. I like to stay as clean as possible, which is made hard without the help of regular baths.

I compromise by wrapping the fur around me as I stand. I will fight naked if I have to.

“What do you want? Why are you in this room?” I ask, my voice direct.

The person swears, surprised. “Shit, you’re awake.” The voice is slurring, but I recognise it nonetheless.

“What are you doing in here, King Jovan?” I ask. He is acting strangely. His movements are clumsy. He takes several steps backwards during his walk towards the bed. I watch, my fear turning into confusion. He finally makes it to the seat at the end of the bed and collapses.

“Your room is huge,” he complains, huffing as though he has run uphill.

“You just beat up your own guards,” I say. This is beyond strange. I don’t know what to think, or if I should get him help.

He closes his eyes, a grin across his face. “Yep.” He sways on the seat while I hover next to the bed in the fur, uncertain.

“You’re ill. Do you need help?” I ask.

“Do I need help?” he repeats quietly. “I think I do.” I wonder if he knows he is talking aloud. I say nothing, my eyes still accustoming to the dark.

“Tell me of you and Kedrick,” he demands in a surprised voice like he has just remembered something important. I blink at his request. Is that why he’s here?

It had been weeks now and the King had shown no outward sign of grieving for Kedrick, apart from his comment in the food hall earlier. Considering his control when he first heard the news, though, I wouldn't have imagined him as the sort to break down as I had.

I walk around to him and tilt my head to the side. I think King Jovan has finally lost control.

I look longingly towards the bed and sigh. This was not going to be a short visit.

The King watches, turning his head with my movement as I step around him to put beads on the fire. Once the fire is lit I prop myself up in the chair next to it and carefully tuck the fur under my legs. Where do I start?

“We were friends to begin with. It was my job to show him around the palace. We spent much time together, more than was required of us. We grew closer.” I shrug.

“Doing what?” King Jovan shouts.

“You don't need to yell,” I reprimand.

“I wasn't shouting,” he sulks, his head lolls back and thuds against the stone pillar behind him.

Rolling my eyes, I humour him. “To start, we would go on walks. Sometimes to the village or to the old lake, but often we would just walk through the outer meadow surrounding the palace. He would talk of Glacium; the people, the animals, the cold. And I helped him to understand Osolis.”

The King is completely still, rapt on every word. I realise he really just wants to hear about his brother and what he did in the time before his death.

“Things are very discreet on Osolis. Kedrick was like...a breath of fresh air after inhaling smoke. I quickly learnt of his honesty and good heart.” I smile. “It took me a little while to get used to his bold questions, but they became one of my favourite things about him.” I giggle at a memory and decide to share it with the King.

“Although, he occasionally got me in trouble for it. One time we were in the dining hall and he accidentally called me Lina. I thought for sure I would be -” My eyes widen at the words I almost let slip. I must still be half asleep. I hurry on. “It was very scandalous. I’m sure the court will gossip about it for years.” I shrug my right shoulder awkwardly and pull the fur up when it slips down.

Smiling, I remember how furious I had been at Kedrick. It seemed so trivial now.

“I was so mad at him at the time. But being mad at Kedrick for blurting out whatever is on his mind is like being angry at snow for being cold.” I laugh softly and hear it echoed by the King.

“He spoke often of you and Ashawn,” I say and poke at the fire a bit, though it does not need the attention.

“What did he say of me?” the King asks, leaving the seat and stumbling towards me, only to drop down heavily and sprawl in front of the fire. I wonder if he’s like this often and if the assembly is aware of his malady.

I smile, happy to relay what Kedrick had said of him. “He said you were his best friend, his advisor. That you had become his father, too, in recent years,” I say, turning my head away to give him some privacy as the King stills with my words.

The fire pops and crackles.

“They told me my brother loved you. Did you love him?” he asks softly.

“Yes,” I say, my heart giving a painful squeeze. It is something which has tortured me since Kedrick’s death. “I never told him,” I admit.

I wave my hand around the room. “Solati are much more conservative than your race. I was embarrassed to say it to him.” I clench both of my fists, the left hand does not close fully yet. “I regret it most bitterly. I hope he knew I loved him. That I love him still.”

“My brother was always confident with women. It would not occur to him that you would feel differently,” the King says. I crease my brow at his comment wondering what he meant. Kedrick had never seemed this way to me. He had been confident, but I had never found him arrogant.

“He loved you regardless.” The King stands up on unsteady feet. “What a fool! To fall in love with the Princess. Don’t know what he was thinking.”

He lurches to the bed and swings a fist at one of the stone columns surrounding it. My eyes widen at his sudden rage. I stand, gripping the fur.

“Could you be pregnant?” he asks, spinning back around. I gasp at his rudeness.

“That is none of your business!” I say.

The King steps towards me. I hesitate, unsure of what to do.

“Don’t be embarrassed. My brother was never shy of showing his affection to the fairer sex.”

I gasp again. Why is he saying these things?

I had not thought of Kedrick being with other women before me. But he is right, I have seen enough of the open groping in the food hall to know Glacium is very different in this regard. My heart sinks. The love I felt for Kedrick feels tarnished somehow.

I look up at the King who hesitates a bit before resuming his slow stalk towards me.

“Why is it he warned the others not to speak of your veil?” he muses. His voice is a bit steadier now, he’s not slurring his words as much.

I don’t answer. It is too personal to talk of.

I look towards the door, debating whether I should leave now. I look back and the King is suddenly right in front of me. I jump back in fright.

“Did he see your face?” he asks. His breath is sweet, potently sweet.

“No,” I lie, trying to calm him. I look down at one of his hands. Both of them combined could nearly enclose my head. At best, I would only be able to evade him while he is this ill. He had still been able to take care of my two guards and I had no real chance against him with a mostly healed wrist and stiff shoulder.

I look around for a way to get out. “You are trapped, little girl,” the King purrs as he steps closer. “And you’re lying to me. I do not like liars.”

“Do not call me-”He lunges forward halfway through my retort and grabs my shoulders. My breathing is shallow and rapid.

“I want to see what he saw,” the King growls.

My heart hammers in my chest as I realise his intent. He drags me to the wall next to the fire and pins my shoulders to the wall with his forearm across my chest before I can blink. My eyes are wide. I am defenceless. I grip his forearm with both hands, trying to tear it off, scratching him. This does not bother him. My legs kick at him, but he presses his body against mine to pin my legs down. I throw my head back and catch him under the chin.

He grunts, but does not loosen his hold. Instead, using his other hand he rips off my veil. I barely have my eyes squeezed shut. It is off, my veil is off.

The King says nothing, he makes no sound. The only movement is that of my chest underneath his forearm and the sounds of my gasping attempts to breathe through my fear.

I do not dare open my eyes.

It is utterly silent apart from the occasional popping from the fire. I flinch, turning my head as he begins touching my face. He traces across my cheek bones and chin, across my forehead down my jaw, ignoring my efforts to throw him off by shaking my head side to side.

“Open your eyes,” he says in a hoarse voice.

I am not going anywhere until he lets me go. I open my eyes and look up at him. He reels from me so quickly I nearly fall over.

I scramble to collect the fur from the floor as it drops to the ground without his forearm to hold it in place. I stand up, unable to meet his eyes after his view of my nakedness. He is completely silent. I finally look up and am surprised by his look of absolute shock. His eyes only leave mine to look at the veil in his hands. His mouth hangs open.

I don't know how long we stand there, but my hands start shaking from the tension. King Jovan swallows hard, I notice he is no longer swaying. My face has shocked him out of whatever ailed him.

“You must wear your veil,” he says.

I nod, my eyebrows furrow in confusion, which turns swiftly to anger. Why do people keep saying that to me, or dying?

He rushes me again, slamming me against the wall and gripping my throat. His eyes are wild and unrestrained like an animal.

“Do not test me. Your life is forfeit if I so much as detect you have twitched your veil without my permission,” he spits.

There is a second where I think he must truly be able to read my mind, then I see his eyes flicking across my face and realise I have forgotten to filter the expression on my face. I’m so used to the veil concealing it. He must have seen my anger.

His threat bounces off me. I have no doubt he will do exactly as he says, but my mother has used these words so often they have lost their effectiveness.

“Do you understand?” He shakes me, yelling in my face. My eyes flash up to his. Without my veil I am able to see his face clearly in the light of the fire. With him this close I can see the individual lashes around his eyes which remind me so much of Kedrick.

I sigh. “I had not been planning to take it off anyway, King Jovan, but you have made yourself clear.” I look directly into his eyes as I say this.

His gaze flickers down and then back up to my eyes again. He releases his grip and pushes the veil into my hand. He does not wait to see if I put it back on. With one last murderous look he stalks out of the room and is gone with the same slamming of the door he came in with.

I replace my veil in a daze, trying to absorb what just happened. I locate the wooden band across the room and push it over my head. As I do, my anger fails me and utter devastation fills me. Three people have seen my face, one is dead and the others both threatened to kill me. King Jovan is more similar to my mother than I had thought.

All my loneliness and heartache, and all my worries and sorrows rain down on me when I attempt to sleep once more. I have not cried more than a few tears since Kedrick’s death, but now, in the lonely dark, I sob until falling into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

I'm unable to lift my spirits. I recognise my dejection, but am at a loss of what to do about it. Between the happenings with my mother a few months ago and Kedrick's death, I wonder if King Jovan's words were my breaking point.

My friends know something is wrong. I respond quietly to their inquiries about my mood and health, but I wish they'd stop asking. Rhone offers to take me on a sled ride, I decline.

I jump when Sanjay slams his fists down on the table. "Tell us what's wrong," he demands. The others look at me, body language expectant.

"Nothing Sanjay, I am f-" I start.

"Don't tell us you are fucking fine again," he says, red creeping up his neck in the tell-tale sign he is angry. "You're not."

Unable to summon enough energy to argue with him, I get up from the table and leave the hall. I just need a day to crawl into a hole and recover.

My new guards follow me. I wonder how severely the other guards were hurt.

I spend several days in my room, only going out for meals, and even then I don't eat, I just watch for the hawk to reappear. Enough time has passed now for a second reply to have arrived. But there have been no more messages since the last, unless they are being received somewhere else. Not knowing what is happening between our worlds is worrying me to the point of it being overwhelming.

I sit on the long seat in my room where the King had sat not long ago himself. I stare at the arrow tail, hoping an answer will suddenly jump out at me. Every passing day makes me feel like the trail is growing colder, slipping out of my grasp. Apart from narrowing it down to the delegates and staying alive, I have not made any headway with finding Kedrick's killer. What if the next message asks for my return to Osolis and the King

grants it? I feel I'm failing Kedrick, disrespecting his memory, but I honestly don't know how to go about tracking the assassin down. And how would I get away even if I did kill them? The weather was getting more and more violent as we moved further through the third sector. The howling wind was a constant background noise. Like Osolis, the fourth sector here was unliveable, though I wondered how it could possibly get any colder than it was now. I wouldn't be able to take two steps in this weather without getting lost.

A pounding on the door startles me from my gloomy thoughts.

I tense, thinking it might be King Jovan, but the door does not crash open so I rise and look out through a crack. Fiona and Sanjay stand outside.

"You *are* alive." Sanjay throws his hands in the air, his voice echoes down the hallway.

"As you see," I respond with narrowed eyes.

Fiona elbows Sanjay and he mutters, "Ouch", before he continues. "You are summoned to the meeting room," he says.

I swallow. King Jovan has decided I cannot be trusted to keep my veil on. Is he going to kill me after all? I can think of no other reason he would want to see me. I nod, my eyes wide.

I return to the bed for my coat.

Sanjay and Fiona lead me to the meeting room. Sanjay slaps her bottom as she moves in front of him down the stairs. She giggles in response, throwing a grin over her shoulder.

This is nothing compared to what I have seen in the food hall. Sometimes people are all but making children on the table tops. But in these situations there are always other people around. It is very awkward being the only other person here while they do this.

We continue on in this uncomfortable way until Sanjay looks over his shoulder at me and bursts out laughing.

"My love, the Tatuma is not used to such affection. We must save it for tonight," Fiona hushes him. I clear my throat and do not say anything.

Sanjay is still laughing at me as we reach the room.

“Stop it,” I snap over my shoulder as we enter the room. “I do not care that you touched your wife’s bottom.” I turn to look at the room.

“Surprise!” A room full of people yell at me. My hands fly up to protect my face as I jump back from the onslaught of noise.

Sanjay howls with laughter behind me.

I look around the room in utter shock.

All of the delegates are here with their wives and children. They’re all laughing at my fright like it’s a joke. My eyes move over the rest of the room. The stone table of the meeting ring is laden with food and bright material has been thrown over the chairs.

“Why did you do that to me? What is this?” I ask, stepping further into the room, my heart still galloping in my chest.

“It is a surprise birthday party,” Malir says.

I frown. “It is not my birthday today. It is not until the end of the first.”

“We know,” Adnan says with crossed arms. “You neglected to mention it on the stairway.” I’m baffled by the set of his shoulders.

I struggle to understand. “You are...annoyed I didn’t tell you?” I ask. I glance at the other delegate’s, finding they all echo Adnan’s disapproval, some of their wives are shaking their heads.

I pull back as I contemplate their reactions. What had Kedrick said about birthdays? I can only remember him commenting on them once, when he had noted he would be missing my birthday and how unreasonably sad he had been about it.

“Birthdays are big here,” Sole says, even his voice is slightly lowered in disapproval.

Hilarity bubbles up within me at his words. I have grown to like Sole a lot more now that Blaine is not around. He is more upright and confident. I bite the inside of my cheek to stop my laughter from escaping. I don’t want to offend them, but this situation is utterly bizarre. “I beg your forgiveness for this gross oversight. I hope because I was a prisoner and had nearly snapped my wrist off, you might see past this grievous error.”

The wives nod their heads and murmur their forgiveness, quite solemnly, while the delegates who have spent time on Osolis do not stir from their disapproval. They know I'm laughing at them. What Solati would not? The big, raw Bruma love a good birthday celebration? I would have found it easier to imagine Olandon working in the orphanage.

I look at the men, their faces are averted. Adnan gives me a small smile which does not reach his eyes. My shoulders shake a little with suppressed laughter. They will only get angrier if I laugh at them. I put a hand to my chest.

"I'm sorry. Truly," I choke out in strangled voice. Though still suspicious, this seems to mollify them a little. I attempt to compose myself as Jacqueline, Roman's wife, steps forward.

"Stop sulking you lot. She has apologised and I am sure she won't do it again." To me she says, "There is not much to do here in the cold. Birthdays are treasured, as well as other occasions."

"A birthday would have broken up the monotony of the stairway nicely," Roman mutters, then winces as Jacqueline hits him in the back of the head.

"So. You scare people on their birthdays?" I ask. This is a completely foreign notion to me, ridiculous even, but I reserve judgement for the moment. I can certainly see why they would want a break from the monotony of the weather.

"It is more considered a thrill," she says. "I take it Solati do not celebrate birthdays?"

I shake my head. "Only the eighteenth birthday or on your revolution day family and friends will acknowledge the passing." Jacqueline nods, but I think I have lost her. She looks like Ochave when I was explaining how Osolis rotated. Fiona has joined us and overheard the last part. Her eyes are wide in disbelief.

"Thank you for this." I wave around the room and force down another giggle. "You did not need to go to this trouble. My birthday was long ago."

"The other women and I have been busy all morning," Fiona says as she steps into the middle of the stone ring table. She gestures to a group of

women who stand in the room and they all busy themselves.

I move around the room as introductions are made, not knowing what to do to help the other women. Tomi's small son particularly likes me and follows me around the room, sitting on my lap when I stop to rest.

"Time for presents, Tatuma," Sanjay says, his voice high pitched in excitement. I laugh and think of how fond I have grown of these people. I haven't thought of them as my kidnappers since we first stepped foot on Glacium. Somehow, despite me never being able to make friends before, they have become just that. It seems silly that they are still addressing me so formally.

"You must stop calling me Tatuma," I blurt out, wincing a little as the delegates hush and turn to me. The wives and children look at them with confusion, not understanding the importance of this.

"You may call me Olina now." I nod to them and one by one they bow to me as is Solati custom.

"We are honoured, Olina. Thank you." Malir quickly explains the importance to the others.

Sole and Tomi come forward with a pile of bright parcels.

"What are these?" I ask.

"Presents!" Cameron, Tomi's boy squeals from my side.

"Gifts," Rhone grunts.

I gasp. "Presents. Kedrick talked of these. They are all for me?" I ask looking around the room. Smiles and laughter are the response.

"You take off the paper," Adnan prompts. Sanjay sniggers.

I roll my eyes. "Yes, I know that."

I pull the bright material off the first parcel, inside is a new set of clothing. It is woman's clothing made in a child's size. The neckline is low, I worry a bit about how much of my chest will show, but I admire the quality and feel of them. They are soft and lined with fur, I know they will be warm.

"They are beautiful, who made these?" I ask.

Fiona blushes. “I did. It’s why your party is later than we would have liked, I had to finish making these.”

“It astonishes me that you can do this with your hands.” I marvel.

“She can do a lot more than that with her hands!” Sanjay says. The others in the room laugh as Fiona cuffs him around the ears. I’m a bit wiser now and my cheeks heat, having an idea what he means.

I go through gift after gift. The delegates have been thoughtful and given me presents I need to help with the cold. Boots, a coat, a furry thing which apparently goes on my head to keep it warm. Sleeping clothes, which I clutch in relief. No more naked midnight visits, thank Solis. They give me a game called cards, and Malir’s wife, Sadra, offers to show me some games. I had always loved the games back at the palace. Olandon and I had played them often. It would be nice to take back some new games to show my brothers. I offer to show Sadra some of the games we play on Osolis in return. Several of the women murmur their interest at this.

After the presents are done, I am directed to the food. I move towards my usual pear.

“You can’t eat a pear *again*,” Sanjay scoffs. “No wonder you don’t grow. This is a birthday party, you’re meant to stuff your face.”

“I don’t know what the other food is,” I say honestly, though I’m sure I would still eat the pear anyway. We do not eat a lot of meat on Osolis and I have found the majority of the Bruma diet is made up of it.

Sanjay looks up at Roman, his mouth a grim line. “Roman?”

Roman takes over. Having wondered about his role on Osolis, I am soon told he is in charge of food resources on Glacium. Though he is not a minister. Maybe he works for the food minister. I tuck this confusing thought away for later.

He prepares a plate with a selection of food arranged in bite size. I try them one at a time, people laughing when I do not enjoy the food and cheering when I do. My cheeks hurt from the laughing after a while.

“No more,” I say. “I swear I cannot eat another bite.”

“I’ve been impressed you’ve eaten half of what you have. I don’t know where it has all gone.” Roman laughs and takes a large sip from his goblet. I have noticed most of the adults here are drinking the same substance. Their cheeks have been growing steadily redder and their movements have grown more erratic, similar to King Jovan’s a few nights before. The voices in the room are loud and shouting now. I even saw Malir’s hand disappear up Sadra’s skirt before, and he has never shown any affection in the food hall before. There must be something in the goblets.

Fiona and Jacqueline sit next to me singing a bawdy song.

Adnan stands on a chair, wobbling slightly. I worry he will fall, but the others do not appear concerned, so I shrug it off.

“To the Tatum!” He shouts. I laugh at the loud sound coming from Adnan, who I have always found quiet.

“She said to call her Olina now, fool,” someone shouts from the back.

Adnan pats the air several times. “That’s what I meant. I want to wish a happy belated birthday to Olina! Raise your drink.” I look around me as everyone holds their goblet in the air.

“I don’t have one,” I yell over the noise.

“Get the woman a drink!” Malir roars to the laughter of the others, even Rhone cracks a small smile. A large glass of the drink is shoved into my hand by Roman. Some splashes onto my boots.

“Where was I?” Adnan squints, swaying on the chair.

“Bloody hell, get it done before dinner, man,” Jacqueline shouts. I giggle at Adnan’s consternation. His brow clears as he remembers.

“A toast! To Olina. On her birthday!” There is a cheer at his words and everyone tips back their glass. Some only take a gulp, others like Sanjay and Roman, drink the whole cup. I bring the cup under my veil and swallow a large gulp. My eyes widen as the liquid burns its way down my throat. I manage to keep from spitting it out, barely. I cough and gasp for air. The Bruma find this hilarious. The room is filled with their laughter and the sound of a door crashing open.

Fiona takes the cup from me and rubs my back. I'm bent over, my hands on my knees.

"Veni. What is that stuff?" I sputter to the floor.

I push up from my bent position and turn towards the others, still coughing a little. The room has hushed. Fiona giggles nervously behind me.

I follow their attention and stiffen at the sight of the King and his advisors in the doorway. The grey-haired man, who I have since found out is Adnan's father, looks very amused. Most are smiling while others, like the watery eyed blonde man, look at us as though we have rolled in mud and are dripping on a new rug.

The King looms at the front of his advisors with one eyebrow raised.

Malir clears his throat. "We did not think this room was being used today, my King. We did check with the clerks. We'll leave immediately."

"It is no bother," the King says slowly, his eyes on my still spluttering form. "What is going on?" he asks.

"We are celebrating Olina's birthday," Adnan slurs. His father looks like he will explode with laughter, a strangled sound escapes him. I suppose Adnan does not usually drink from the goblets.

The King's other eyebrow raises.

Whatever was in the drink is starting to warm my insides. I'm warmer than I have been in months. This must be why they drink it.

"Carry on," the King says with an imperious gesture.

"There is only one more thing, we won't be long," Malir says with a nod at Rhone who stalks out of the room.

I wait curiously. Some people are murmuring in interest, but most seem to be in on it. They are nudging each other and sharing smiles. I sit down, then stand up. Fiona chuckles at me and I grin. I love birthday parties!

"Do you know you bounce on your toes when you're excited?" Malir asks, laughing. "I haven't seen you do that since Ked-" he cuts off his words as Sadra elbows him in the side.

There is no time for the room to become awkward at Malir's words. Rhone re-enters carrying a large box in his arms. As he places it on the table in front of me, I forget about the King and his advisors. I climb onto the chair I have just vacated and glimpse down into the box.

My heart melts. Instantly.

"It's a little dog," I say in a whisper, not moving my eyes from the small, furry object in the box. It is unbearably cute. A few people laugh.

"A puppy," Rhone corrects.

"He's for me?" My voice quavers a little on the last word.

"It's a girl, but yes, she's yours," he says.

I swallow the lump in my throat and stare at the beautiful animal.

"Thank you," I whisper. "I love her." I jump off the chair to hug Rhone and then give Malir a hug also. He pats me awkwardly.

"You've been so interested in Rhone's dogs we thought you might like her," Malir says, his voice gruff. "You can train her."

I race back to climb the chair and look down into the box again. Her light blue eyes look up at me, her head is tilted to the side.

I pick her up and hug her closely. She wiggles in my arms and licks my hands and arms. I giggle at the slobbery feel of her small tongue.

"What should I call you?" I kiss her forehead. "I cannot believe you got me a little dog," I say.

"It's a puppy," Rhone says again. His voice is lost amongst the others in the room, who are all shouting out names. The puppy starts barking.

"I am going to train you and you are going to be even better than Leo," I say to the puppy as she tilts her head to the side.

"Of course she'll be better than Leo, females are much smarter than males," Jacqueline says, matter of fact. The other woman in the room shout their agreement.

"Olina's a female and she's talking to a dog," Sanjay says in response, pointing a finger at me.

“It’s a *puppy*, Sanjay,” I say, not taking my eyes off the squirming animal.

“I told you their stupid,” Jacqueline says to me in a loud confiding whisper.

The room fills with laughter. I look around. Even the King has a smile on his cruel face.

I turn away, placing the puppy back in her box. She whines once out of my arms, like a baby wanting to be held. The sound tears at me a little and I hesitate, wanting to pick her back up again.

“It is easier to teach good habits, than undo bad ones,” Malir says.

I sigh and step back from the box.

I say thank you to the people around me, a lump swelling up in my throat several times. I wonder what’s in those goblets. It has some unusual side effects. I ask Rhone to bring the box with my puppy up to my room. I can’t wait to hold her again. How long do dogs live? How long do Rhone and Malir expect me to be here for? Do they know something I don’t?

I see the King heading my way as people begin filtering out of the room. I leave the middle of the stone ring, striding away from the King to move around the other side of the stone ring table where I then follow the ring back towards the door. Hopefully, he is now in the middle of the ring, far away from me. My height gives me the advantage of making me hard to spot. I duck out of the door with the remaining crowd. Glancing back over my shoulder, I glimpse the King watching, posture tense, as I leave the meeting room. I laugh under my breath.

I am liking birthday parties more and more.

“You’re so lucky you live in the castle,” Fiona says with a shy smile as we walk down the main hall.

“You don’t live here?” I ask, though I already know.

“No we all live just outside the walls. Though some of the delegates have rooms here.”

My interest perks up. “Which delegates?”

She looks down at me and I rush to make my interest more natural. “It is just, I have never seen any of them except Rhone coming down from the higher floors to breakfast.”

She nods. “Malir and Roman have them, but rarely use them. I think Tomi, Leroy and Merkus, too. Rhone stays here often because he has no other family in...our circles. And Blaine always stayed here, too, but you wouldn’t have seen him because he’s still in the sixth.”

“Is the sixth bad?” I ask.

“Never been there. It must be bad though, to be a punishment.”

“The King said Blaine’s family was to stay here. Are they still in the castle?” I ask.

“Oh yes. Blaine’s wife is named Macy. She sits in the front table. She has blonde hair the same as mine and jumps at every noise.” She looks at me in question. Fiona has blonde eyelashes, it had taken me a while to get used to them.

I nod, but cannot recollect who she means. I will have to look for her at the next meal.

“She’s Sole’s younger sister,” she adds.

“Really?” I say. Blaine is married to Sole’s sister. Is this what makes Sole so subservient?

I walk with the others to the door. Blaine had lived in the castle and he wasn’t here.

I was going to search his room.

Chapter Twenty

The party has snapped me out of my low mood. I have purpose again. I name my puppy Kaura. I groom and feed her and she follows me everywhere, stumbling over her puppy feet and falling asleep in the oddest places when she is exhausted.

I realise, as I look into the white nothingness from a hall window, I have been here for over three months. It will not be long until we must move up to the first again, or the first sector, I correct myself. So much has changed. Kedrick's death and what could have been still weighs down on me some days, but I count myself lucky to have had the experience of this world when few from Osolis ever would. The hawk has still not come again and I wonder if I've missed it somehow. The attitude of the Bruma has not turned nasty though, as I imagine it would if war had been declared. And the number of guards around the castle has remained constant. I have been slowly working up my resolve to ask the King if he has heard from my mother.

When I think of Osolis, the only source of sadness I have is in missing my brothers, Aquin and some other smaller things like the springs or how I used to run my hands through the long grass. I am standing in an alcove by a window where a thin patch of light is streaming through, my eyes are closed remembering this sensation.

"What are you doing?" a small voice asks.

I realise my hands are actually waving by my sides in my pretend grass. I giggle and turn to look at the voice and discover Cameron, the young boy from the party looking at me with open wariness.

"I was remembering how it was to run my fingers through long grass. I did not know I was moving my hands, too," I say.

"Oh, that's all. I thought you might've gone nuts like my Aunt Beatrice," he says. Laughter chokes in my throat. I have always loved children's tendency to blurt out their every thought.

“I heard someone say you are an alien from hell the other day,” he confides.

I burst out laughing. “Do you think I’m an alien?” I ask, ignoring the other part of his comment.

“I can’t see your face, so how would I know for sure?” he says.

“I suppose you wouldn’t,” I agree.

“You’re from the fire world,” he states, his dark blue eyes wide. My heart pangs. He is about the twins’ age.

“The fire world,” I confirm with a nod, my voice solemn.

“Do they all cover their faces there? Is it to protect you from the flames?”

“No, I’m the only one I know of to cover my face, but it was clever of you to think of that reason,” I say.

“Why do you wear it then?” He climbs up on the seat next to me, staring at my hand, comparing it to his own.

“I don’t know why, my mother has always made me wear it, from the time I was a baby,” I say. It is just like being in the orphanage.

“Sometimes my mum makes me do things, too,” he muses.

I smile a little. A throat clears and we both jump half a metre up off the window seat.

“Cameron, why are you out of the nursery?”

Cameron scabbles down off the seat, his expression filled with guilt. I recognise the voice and turn with a bit of dread to face King Jovan, cursing my luck at him finding us. I wonder how much he overheard.

“This is the last time I want to see you out of the nursery if you have not been given permission,” he says in a stern voice, but his eyes stay on me. It’s a mistake. Children can always sense when you are not whole-hearted in your reprimands.

Cameron nods and starts off in the direction the nursery must be located. I know from Jacqueline that the assembly wives often leave their

children in the castle while they run their errands and socialise. Cameron turns back when he is a few metres down the hall.

“You can call me Cam if you like,” he says. His voice is overly formal and I’m confused about why before remembering he was at the party yesterday and witnessed me giving permission to the delegates to call me Olina.

I nod to him deeply. “Thank you, Cam. My friends call me Olina. You may call me by this name,” I say.

He bows. I struggle not to giggle.

“I don’t think you’re an alien from hell, either.” A small giggle escapes me as he patters off down the hallway.

“You are good with children,” the King notes.

“Yes,” I reply, losing my smile as I turn to look out of the window again. I had not been comfortable with the King from the start, and my discomfort had only grown since his intrusion into my room. I was still furious at him. My shoulders tense as he moves up behind me.

“You worked at an orphanage on Osolis,” he says. I shift to the side slightly, keeping him in sight, my body prepared for any sudden movements.

I look at him surprised, but do not answer.

“I interrogated the delegation in depth,” he says, answering my unspoken question.

I nod to show I have heard his comment and then return my gaze outside, ignoring him. He hovers for a few moments. An awkward tension fills the air.

“I have business I must attend to,” he says, turning to make his way back down the hall.

“Have you heard from the Tatum?” I blurt out.

He pauses and turns back to me. He knows what I want to know. What else would I be asking about?

“We are currently in negotiations with Osolis,” he says. “We received another message a couple of weeks ago.”

“I did not see its arrival.”

“You wouldn’t have. The hawks cannot fly this far into the third sector,” he explains.

“She is angry, I gather.”

“Yes.”

If she was angry, it was either artifice over my kidnapping or for another reason entirely. Maybe at something the King had said. “Will there be war?” I ask, softly.

He looks down at me. I know he is weighing how much he should tell me. “Not if I can help it.” His tone raises the hairs on my neck.

I look out the window again to collect myself. He is holding back information. If I were in his position, I would do the same. After all, if I was returned, I could use what he has said against his people.

“Why have you not asked to be released?” he asks.

I glance over my shoulder, he is watching me. Telling him I’m going to kill one of his delegates might not be well received. I go on the offensive.

“Would you have said yes?” I ask.

“No.”

“Well then.” I see a large grin over his face. For some reason it makes me want to smile, too. “You said you had business to attend to.” I remind him.

His grin fades at my dismissal, he arches an eyebrow. “Yes, I do. I will leave you to your grass petting.” I glare at his back as he walks away. He displays a grace which is rare in people of his height. I would have expected heavy, booming steps from him, but his is light, not like Kedrick’s. Not for the first time I daydream about fighting him. With my small stature I had the advantage of speed normally, but I knew from experience he was fast. I would have to rely on stamina and perhaps come at him from above and behind where his arms were less likely to wrap around and crush me.

For the rest of the day it is just me. It must be very boring being my guards. This pair are not as professional as the last. I often caught them whispering, and once I had tripped on a step and one had sniggered. I am still glad I have them for protection.

Malir's wife, Sadra, had been showing me how to move my wrist to get rid of the lingering stiffness. I could now close my fist completely, however the strength in my arm had completely wasted. Another few weeks, though, and I would be able to protect myself.

Adnan is the only one of the delegates at the table this evening. We eat quietly and Adnan fills up the time with talk of his work. It's harder to ignore the glaring when there are not many of my friends here, though I feel the attitude towards me has softened a little. Perhaps the assembly has grown accustomed to my presence.

It's the looks from some of the males which make me most uncomfortable. They seem more inclined to look at my chest than anywhere else. I wonder if they do it on purpose, to make me uncomfortable - it is no secret Solati are a conservative race. I resist the urge to cover my chest as Gabel's slimy eyes run over me. A couple of months ago he had wanted to kill me, now he obviously thought otherwise. Not for the first time I wish Fiona had made my clothing with a higher neck line.

I nod vacantly at Adnan's description of his latest invention. I had kept up initially, but it had become too complicated.

"Because, you see, when the metal is heated," he says. I nod again, searching the table closest to the throne table. This is a table who seem determined to hate me. It is mainly filled with women. There is one very beautiful blonde-haired woman who sits there. Her glare is particularly nasty. Maybe she had a family member who was killed in the war or just hated me because I'm Solati.

I locate Blaine's wife, Macy. Fiona is right, she flinches every time someone talks to her. I wonder if she is timid or if something has happened to her. My eyes move behind her. I'm surprised to see Ashawn sitting to the left of his brother. He has been absent many weeks now, since the afternoon

he stormed out of the meeting room. I see his hatred of me has not dimmed in the slightest during this time.

“And then we put in an insulation layer,” Adnan continues.

“I see,” I mumble. I’m ashamed to say I feel relief when Fiona and Jacqueline join us at the end of our meal. I look between the two women as they sit either side of me. I don’t feel as though I could confide in these two women yet, but I am fond of them. I hope one day, if matters between our races improve, I could share my thoughts with them. They are my first female friends, apart from the matron at the orphanage who had been three times my age.

“You must stay after dinner tonight, Olina,” Jacqueline says. “You always disappear to your room.”

I dip my head. “I apologise Jacqueline, I didn’t realise people were supposed to stay here afterwards.”

Fiona giggles. “She was only joking. You should stay though and show us some of the games you spoke of.”

I stay after dinner as they have requested, showing Fiona and Jacqueline a popular word game Olandon and I are fond of. Several of the other women in the hall become curious and join us after a time. Many of them hold a goblet of the potent drink I had at my birthday party.

I shake my head when the drink is offered to me. I have noticed when people consume it they loosen their tongues and their wits numb. I remember the effect it had on me from one small sip. Jacqueline soon changes the rules of the game to incorporate a penalty for losing. The Bruma around me start to drink every time they make a mistake in the game. As with my birthday party, the noise gets louder and people begin to act strangely. But unlike that happy occasion, I do not feel comfortable in the slightest now, with people I don’t know.

I evade another man who is brushing too close to my body, shuddering. I push away a goblet someone tries to push into my hands. Another body slides up and down my own. My shoulders are so tense I feel they are up around my ears. My eyes are getting wider and wider as men and women wrap around each other. Shouting and loud singing ring from one wall to

the next. Fights break out amongst the males over trivial matters, or females.

I back away from the game, retreating in the direction of the archway, and trying not to be obvious about it. I don't want to offend my new friends or get laughed at for being scared. Eventually, I thud onto the stone wall behind me, my eyes are fixed on the carnage in front of me. The archway is to my right. I turn towards it, but find myself staring at a large arm. A man's other hand reaches to the wall on my other side, caging me in. I tilt my head up to meet an ice blue gaze, not one I recognise. At least it is not Gabel. The Bruma's breath is sweet and potent like the King's had been.

"Where do you think you're going little Solati?" He dips his head down and nuzzles the side of my face.

I quickly duck down and escape under his arm, walking quickly to the archway, nearly running. I'm nearly there when a large hand yanks at my left wrist. I cry out at the sharp pain.

Then the pressure is gone.

I bend in half over my wrist, cradling it to my body. My eyes flick upwards to see Rhone deliver a blow to the man's jaw. The man crumples to the ground in a heap. There is a roar of approval from the wild crowd who then return to their partners and games as though nothing ever happened.

"Is your wrist alright?" Rhone asks as he approaches. I flex my fingers.

"I think its okay. It is not like the pain I had when it was broken. The movement was just too sudden," I say.

Rhone leads me over to a large bowl. He scoops ice out into a cloth napkin and applies it to my wrist.

"You've done this a few times," I say.

He nods. "For the dogs."

"Of course." I snort and then gasp in disbelief. "I just snorted!" I tilt my head up to glare at Rhone. "That's your fault."

Rhone snorts in response. I giggle and we both laugh.

It is the first time I have seen Rhone laugh. He looks much younger when he does. I had placed Rhone in his late twenties, but when he laughs, I

wonder if he may not be a few years younger. He walks me to my room at my request. I don't want another run in with the male. Apparently unions between Bruma and Solati are not thought disgusting by everyone.

Did that happen after dinner every night? I was not sure I was brave enough to stay tomorrow night and find out. I hoped the man who grabbed me awoke with a headache from Rhone's fist.

I burrow into the furs on my bed with a sigh. Tomorrow I would follow Macy back to her quarters and figure out the best way to search her rooms.

Chapter Twenty-One

The temperature is indescribably cold as we near the edges of the fourth and hardest sector. I feel I'm never out of my coat for long and spend most of my time in the dining hall where fireplaces line the walls. I am finally able to take my wrist out of the splint. There is still some swelling around the joint, but all of the bruising is gone and I can move my fingers and elbow easily, even though the wrist is still stiff. It's a great day. The second best since I have been on Glacium. My birthday held first place.

Sitting by one of the fires, I wait for Macy to finish her breakfast. Seeing she is done I make my move. I have about five minutes. She usually talks to the others a little before leaving.

I lead my guards on a quick dance around the lower floors and sprint to the second floor and hide inside a smaller hall which branches off the main passage on this level. She comes up the stairs slowly, she must have trouble with one of her joints. She looks around thirty-five or so, but it is hard to tell. She looks like she's had a hard life.

It is a simple matter to follow her to the room she usually shares with Blaine. She doesn't leave again. I retreat to my room, letting my guards find me. The next step will be much harder.

With my wrist out of the splint, I use the rest of the morning to train in my room, jumping on and off the seat at the end of my bed and practicing maneuverers from the top of the stone columns around the bed. I would love to train with the guards here, but mentioning my skill is an impossibility, especially when I'm just starting to feel more accepted. Besides, the idea of a female fighting would be appalling. Kaura always gets excited by my training and I've had to train her to stay away from where I workout after I nearly landed on her head.

When I had first found the training yard here, a large group of females had been watching. I had joined them for a few days, thinking they were interested in the actual training. But when the King had joined the training

one afternoon and the number of females doubled, followed by one of the younger ladies fainting when he removed his tunic, I realised this was not the case.

After lunch, Fiona mentions that she wants to go out to the training yard or the barracks, as they call them, to watch Sanjay train. Every male in the castle must do a mandatory amount of practice with the full-time watchmen every week. A group of us trail down to the barracks and I nearly fall over when I realise what they are doing.

They are practising archery.

I push past Jacqueline to get a closer look, but cannot see the arrows from here. There is only the thud as the arrows hit the targets - not that many of them are. I scrunch my eyes closed, remembering the squelching sound as the arrow had parted the skin and muscle of Kedrick's chest.

I need to get closer to them.

The women are looking down from the stone walkway which sits on top of the walls enclosing the training yard. They stand above and behind the men shooting the arrows, so they don't get hit. Like our own training yard on Osolis, there are large stairways down each side of a massive cleared space for the watchmen to spar in or go through drills.

The targets are down the far end of the yard.

Malir shouts and the shooting halts while a small figure runs up the far steps to the walkway above the targets. He comes back down the stairs into the yard with an armful of arrows which have completely missed the targets. I hear the clatter as he unloads them behind the archers.

"Does Jovan ever miss?" A younger girl sighs as the watchmen resume their practice. I roll my eyes and shift onto the balls of my feet.

When the next shout goes up, I'm ready. I sprint down the walkway.

"Olina, what are you doing?" Jacqueline shouts behind me. There is no way to be subtle, I'm going for speed. I fly over the stone walkway towards the fallen arrows, my veil flattens to my face. I need to see those arrows.

I skid around the wet stone corner and hurry forward looking for an arrow.

I see the glint of an arrow head and reach out for it, bringing it close to my face. The wood is a light colour and it does not bend at all, unlike the arrow in my boot.

I feel like someone has punched me in the stomach. It is not the same.

But it has to be. I grab another arrow and test it only to get the same result. I let the arrow fall out of my hand and roll back to the ground as footsteps sound to my left.

“What are you doing up here?”

I look up at King Jovan. I am so disappointed by my discovery, I can't speak. Shaking my head, I sit down with my back to the side of the walkway.

“You were looking at our arrows. Why?” he asks, walking closer.

I shrug. “Just interested.”

“I'm sure. Tell me,” he says, and his voice is less harsh. I tilt my head to look at him. I'm sure he has already guessed what I was doing.

“I was seeing if it was the same as the arrow...that killed Kedrick,” I say and hold my breath.

“You have been withholding information, I see. And you think a Bruma did it,” he says, his voice heavy with doubt.

“The arrow was not a Solati arrow,” I say. “Our arrows are always made of Kaur, the wood is black. The wood on the arrow was not black, but it is not like this light, strong wood either,” I say.

“Spruce,” the King offers distractedly. It must be the name of the wood. He crouches forward and sits down beside me. “If it was not a Solati...then who?” I do not think he is talking to me. I stay silent.

“Do you have the arrow?” he asks, looking down at me.

“No,” I lie straight away. He nods and looks forward again.

“What do you think of the men's shooting?” he asks, interrupting my disappointed thoughts.

“Terrible,” I say.

The King startles me by laughing. "It's true. We don't usually use arrows here, the wind is too strong. But we need to learn in case..." He shrugs and gets to his feet.

"In case you need to shoot my family and friends?" I say. He doesn't need to know I only have two friends.

He doesn't answer.

"Would you like to come down and shoot?" he asks. I look up at him as I get to my feet and brush off my trousers. Why is he asking me to go down there?

"I cannot shoot," I say.

"Why?"

I grip the edge of the veil and wave it slightly. "I would need to be able to see to do so."

"Huh." He moves to the other wall of the walkway and looks down over the training yard. "How far can you see?" My stomach twists in warning. But I ignore it.

"I can see most of you from here. I can see the shape of the castle and the shape of the women over there. The light is good," I reply.

"That's all?" He seems stunned. "What about the weaponry over there?"

"No."

"That arrow on the ground to your left?"

I glance to my left. "No."

The King holds up a hand to Malir's enquiring shout. "How do you do anything? Especially in the dark. How do you even know our shooting is terrible?" he asks.

I move up next to him. "I get by," I say with a bite. He grins. "And I know because I can hear the sound of the bowstrings as they loose an arrow and then the thud of the arrow hitting the target. There are many more sounds of bowstrings being releasing than there are of the arrows hitting the target."

I pause. "I can also tell you are worried about something. You are angling your body, so I cannot see much of the yard." I hesitate. "Be assured, nothing I see here will get back to my mother."

"You read minds now?" I almost laugh as he vocalises the thought I have had several times about him.

He continues. "I have no qualms of you watching. If you were male I might have some objection." Angry heat floods my cheeks at his comment. What an ignorant thing to say.

"If you didn't take the arrow, then how did you see it that night?" he asks, watching for my reaction.

Oops, that's what the warning twinge in my stomach had been about. "My veil was not on the whole time," I say in a curt voice.

He stares at me for a few moments and then turns towards the stairs leading back to the yard. "I will make some enquiries about the arrow," he says over his shoulder.

My run down the walkway is all the women can talk of for the rest of the day. The story has changed in the re-telling. Now, I supposedly ran behind the targets while the arrows were still being loosed. I fob off their inquiries by saying I thought Kaura had been down there. Jacky doesn't buy it for a second. I'm eager to escape her accusing eyes and get to my room. I don't know how Roman does it.

I'm drifting in a dreamless sleep when I become aware of a hush outside of my bedroom door. I roll over and listen. If Jovan were beating his guards again it would be much louder. I start fading back into sleep. I love this bed.

The door crashes open and rebounds off the stone wall behind it.

I jump and clamber to my feet, trying to get my balance in the middle of the soft-heaped bed. I can't see anything, but my ears pick up footsteps, three sets of them. I need time for my eyes to adjust enough to see their outlines.

"Who are you?" I say.

“None of your fucking business,” a deep voice answers from in front of me. The voice belongs to a large man, the sound coming level at me across the bed. There is a quiet laugh in response to the thug’s comment further to my left. The sound comes from lower down, but I cannot guess anything else from this second man, except that his breathing is heavy. He is unlikely to be fast.

Light footsteps patter back to the door, it is shut and a chair dragged over to it, I assume to keep out unwanted interruptions. These footsteps belong to a smaller man or a very good fighter.

I can see the silhouettes of the two men closest to me now. I strike while the three are separated. Running over furs, I jump.

My foot connects with the tallest man’s nose. I hear a satisfying crunch.

The rug under my feet absorbs my landing, taking all sound from it.

The heavy breather swings at me and I push the blow over my head with both arms, whipping my left fist back to then jab him in the throat. My wrist complains at the impact.

I return to the first while the heavy breather now adds a noisy wheezing sound to his inhalation.

The third man has returned from the door, but he lingers at the front of the bed. He is small. Maybe a boy.

Kaura barks and growls from her box. I’m glad she can’t get out.

I use my left knee to land a blow between the tall man’s legs and deliver a sharp uppercut which snaps his head back. Loud wheezing sounds behind me, I twist back, kicking my right heel into his fleshy stomach, smiling as he crashes into the wall, gagging now.

Two down. I start towards the skinny man and stop, my heart in my mouth.

He holds a whining, squirming body in his hands.

“One more step Solati whore, and the dog gets a slit throat,” a cruel voice rings out. It is a man after all, not a boy.

“It would be a shame if you killed your puppy by being difficult,” he continues. I can almost imagine a twisted sneer on his face from the tone of

his voice.

There is a dull thudding in my ears, I sense the other two retrieving themselves from the ground behind me. I watch Kaura struggle and know what I will do. She has brought me so much happiness. I could not bear it if she died this way.

My hands drop to my sides in defeat and I nod. I am powerless.

I release my breath when the small man places Kaura back in her box. He remains close to her though, probably expecting me to attack and rightly so. This man is obviously the only one of the three who has some intelligence. He nods behind me and with no warning there is a crashing blow to the side of my head. Black patches spot my vision.

Staggering to the side, I struggle to regain my balance. Blinking in slow motion. Before I can fully stand, there is a crushing sensation in my ribs. I hit the ground, the breath knocked from me, fire in my side. They kick my lower back and I arch backwards, unable to decide between protecting my back or my ribs.

“That’s where a good slut should be. On her back.” The men laugh together over my head.

I try to lessen their blows. I hold the cloth of my veil between my teeth, to keep it down. They don’t seem to care what my face looks like, they just seem intent on getting the job done. In fact, I wonder if they prefer my veil on. Maybe it is easier to beat someone to death when their face is covered.

My eyes dart to their faces when they get close to me, I do not recognise them from the castle, but I commit their features to memory. If they do not kill me, I will be hunting them down.

My vision starts to cloud when a kick cracks my head to the side, only slightly dampened as I move in the direction with the blow. I know I will lose consciousness soon. My attempts to block and divert the worst blows become weaker. My hands drop uselessly to cover my head. I hear dull smacking thuds as they connect blows with my body. I no longer feel them though. It is like I am a spectator watching my death.

“Enough,” the skinny man says from far away

There is another dull thud, my body is rolled by another kick to my side.

“Enough, you fucking idiot. He said to beat her nearly to death, not to kill her.” The man’s voice is at the other end of a long tunnel.

I fade in.

“She isn’t so bad looking. Even with the blood.”

“For fuck’s sake Nam, put it away. We don’t have time for you to get your dick wet.”

I fade out.

Chapter Twenty-two

There is an annoying sound in my head. Something wet is dragging over my skin. I cannot open my eyes. What happened? My head throbs and bile rises, burning my throat and the back of my nose. The noise is making the nausea worse. I try to swallow.

Flashes of the night before start trickling back to me. I was beaten. And by the excruciating pain radiating through my body, I am alive.

I try to open my eyes again and the left one moves very slightly.

“Kaura,” I try. I lick my lips, my tongue running over several painful splits.

“Kaura.” This time a rasp comes out. “Kaura, shush,” I say. The annoying sound stops as she quits barking to nuzzle the side of my jaw, which also hurts.

“I’m okay,” I rasp out. I think. I start an inventory. My fingers, wrists, elbows and shoulders all move. All are painful and take a bit of coaxing to respond, but they feel nothing like my broken wrist did a few months ago. My head throbs, taking over my vision. I swallow yet another lot of bile. My legs are in a similar state to my arms. I’m going to have a very bad limp for a while.

The real issue is discovered as I try to sit up. Hot searing pain lances across my ribs and lower back, taking my breath away and forcing me back to the floor.

“Veni!” I hiss. I lay until the pain dissipates to a lower level. Bracing myself, I roll onto my tummy, propping my upper body onto my elbows. Once I am safe from losing my stomach on the floor and the flare of pain has lessened, I move to my hands and knees. The black spots I am learning to hate flood in, I spend a lot of time begging them to stay away. Sweat drips down my neck. My veil is stuck to the blood underneath my nose.

Eventually, I manage to crawl to the seat at the base of the bed and prop my arms on it, resting my head on top of them. Kaura is whining again. In my life I had probably had three beatings which were worse than this, but only because bones had been broken and required longer to heal. I do not think I have ever been kicked in the back before. I hope the guards are not dead. They must be if they have not checked up on me yet.

“Hush, Kaura. I’m okay,” I say again. “You were a brave girl last night. And you got out of your box, too.” She looks at me like I am crazy.

I pull myself into a sitting position on the long seat and rest my pulsating head against the stone column to my left. What happened last night? Why had those men attacked me? The men had been thugs. The comment by the small man at the end about their orders swims around in my head. They were hired. Who hates me that much? A few come to mind. Then another thought comes to me. What if it is the same Bruma who tried to kill me on Osolis? It’s hopeless. I’m a Solati in a castle of Bruma who all have the resources to hire these kinds of people. Finding the culprit would be an impossible task. I can’t even find Kedrick’s killer in a small group of eleven.

Anger floods through me as it often does after a beating. I hold onto it and it burns away the blurry edges of my vision. Violence had been expected in the first weeks after I arrived, but it had been a month or more since I had begun to feel more settled and less like the foreigner. I look out the window. I judge it to be early morning, though I cannot be sure.

I refused to appear weak. I will go about my normal day. A grimace of a smile spreads on my face as I imagine the look on the face of the Bruma who hired the thugs when I turn up at breakfast.

Using the column, I push into standing and spend a minute there before moving to the pitcher of water across the room. I pour a small amount into my mouth and swirl it around before spitting it out. A darkened red colours the basin. I swallow the next mouthful and taste the rustiness of blood as I do. I pull the veil carefully from the blood under my nose and then with shaking hands, I trace over my face. Two bruised eyes, one swollen and bloody nose, thankfully not broken. And one very painful jaw. Talking and eating is going to be difficult.

Slowly, painfully, I wash the blood from my body and my veil, wishing the whole while Olandon was here. He always helped me after my beatings. The skin is split on my shoulder and legs where their boots have cut through. The rest is just bruised. I wash the cuts out as best I can with the limited water. I feel across my chest and the skin feels bruised. I pull on the children's tunic I initially wore which has a high neckline, hopefully it will cover the bruises there. A thick coat goes on top of it.

A wave of nausea too strong to ignore comes over me. Ripping my veil off, I rush to the bowl and stoop down to vomit up the water I just drank. The veil goes back on. I am lucky it is black or it would be unfit to wear with all the stains it has collected.

After struggling through changing my trousers and boots with the pain in my back, I'm ready for breakfast and already regretting my decision to leave my room today. My blurry mind reminds me why I am doing it. Maybe I'll just head down, say a few hellos and then come back up to my room.

I leave the room expecting to see dead guards, but no one is there. They must have disposed of the bodies. I do not know how I will bring up their disappearance without giving away I am injured. Should I tell Malir, or Kedrick's brother?

I move slowly at first, my pain easing slightly as my body warms. Enough that I can walk with some semblance of normalcy if I'm careful. By the time I reach the bottom of the stairs, I am swallowing constantly to keep my stomach inside of me. I see the archway. The throbbing in my head intensifies and the black patches renew their assault.

I need a moment before I enter.

I leave the main hallway, moving into a smaller hall. A blurry glance tells me it is empty. I lean on the wall gasping, trying to stay upright on my shaking legs. The torches down the hall make the dizziness worse. I close my eyes, breathing deeply. My right hand applying pressure to my painful ribs to help with each inhalation.

"Tatuma?"

My feeble effort to keep the black patches at bay prevents panic.

“What’s wrong with you? You’re hurt.” The commanding voice moves closer.

Veni! Anyone but him. I crack the left eye open to find the King bending down beside me.

I shake my head. “No, I am fine.” I curse inwardly at my answer.

“I’m sure. What have you done?” he asks, moving around me. I try to straighten, but my ribs catch as I do. A hiss of pain escapes me.

“I fell down the stairs to my room and hurt my ribs.” I gasp, latching onto his belief I have somehow created my current pain.

“Let me tell you if they are broken or bruised. I’ve had many myself.” A massive hand moves to the front of my coat. He continues, “Though I am surprised you fell down them to begin with. Your balance looks to be quite good.”

I shrug off his hands. “Don’t worry. I’ll have a look once I’m back in my quarters.”

He frowns down at me and steps back, looking up and down the hallway.

“Where are your guards?” I look up at him through my left eye and lift one shoulder in a shrug.

The King’s eyes narrow and his voice softens into a dangerous tone. “Tatuma. You would not, by some foolish decision, be lying to me, would you?”

I swallow back more bile and put a hand to my head as I see two King Jovans. I shake my head both in denial to his question and to clear my head. The King steps into me, grabbing at my coat and rips it open against my weak protests.

He bites off a sound as he looks down. I follow his gaze and see blood has soaked through in several places. He looks at my chest also. Despite the high neckline there must be a bruise showing there. He grabs my right shoulder.

“What the fuck happened to you? Who has beaten you? Was it your guards?” he says as he bends down in front of my face. If the stone wall

was not already at my back I would be trying to move away from him, as it is I push myself into the wall hoping to melt into it.

I start to repeat my previous answer, but he shakes my shoulder.

“Do not,” he says right in my face, “lie to me.”

I do not answer. The black spots have returned with a vengeance. I put my hand on the wall again and breathe deeply.

“Put this back on.” He shoves my jacket at me.

“No,” I moan and push weakly at his hands.

“Olina, I need to have you tended to, but I cannot do it in the hallway. Put on your coat so no one sees and I will help you to somewhere more private,” he says in a rough voice which would be as close to gentle as I think he gets.

I put on the coat and stumble beside the King, back the way I came. Luck is with me, we don't pass anyone. I get to the stairs before my legs give out and I start sinking to the ground.

He picks me up and I groan as his hand wraps around my right ribs. He readjusts his grip. I am carried the rest of the way and deposited on the bed seat. I should have just stayed here. Groaning, I lean forward to hold my head in my hands. Kaura bounds over and goes up onto her hind legs to lick my hands.

“Hey little girl. I forgot to get you food, I'm sorry. I'll go and get you some later,” I mumble. Her head tilts to one side. I don't blame her, I barely understood the slurring words myself.

“You're not going anywhere,” the King says. I wince at the sound, digging my fingers into my temples.

“Who did this to you?” he demands, pacing in front of me.

“Lower your voice,” I whisper.

“I will know who did this. You will tell me,” he says, not changing his volume in the slightest.

My battle with the black patches finally fails. They connect together and I'm gone once again.

I come to lying down. The King hovers over me, his expression of concern turning to anger as he sees I'm regaining my senses.

I groan. "How long was I out?"

"A couple of minutes. You're lucky I caught you. What if you had been alone?" I don't mention I had been alone since it happened. He obviously thought this happened downstairs.

"I will not allow the beating of women in my castle. Where are your bloody guards? If they are smart, they will not come back." I note he is speaking in a softer voice now.

"I think they may be dead," I whisper with a hand to my head.

"What?" the King says loudly, I wince at the noise as I sort through my options. The situation has gotten out of hand. There is no excuse I can think of to explain the guards death and my injuries without saying I did it myself. If anyone is to know, at least it is the King. He has kept the secret of my face so far, though I doubt this is out of respect for me. If I give him a good enough reason, I trust he will remain silent on the matter.

"Three men came in here last night. I think they must have killed the guards, though..." I pause and struggle to remember through the throbbing in my head, "I did not hear any fighting outside the door like I did when you fought my last guards." The King's face becomes grim at my words.

"The men were hired." I shift to sit up, but quickly lie flat again when the room swims. The King's hand pins my shoulder to keep me from moving.

"How do you know this?" he asks.

"At the end they were talking about their orders."

The King's face is expressionless. "Which were?"

I shrug the shoulder under his hand. "I cannot remember the exact words, but they weren't to completely kill me."

His gaze moves over my covered face, then he reaches a hand out and pulls my veil up. I hear his sharp intake of breath.

"That bad?" I look at him through my half a left eye and watch his features smooth again.

“Did they see your face?” he asks.

I roll my eye, of course he is worried about that. “No,” I say, but then a flicker of a memory hits me. I shake it away.

The King is already standing. “You are badly injured. You need to be seen to. I will send the doctors up to you.”

“No.” I grasp his arm. “I don’t want anyone to know of this.”

“You nearly just killed yourself by going down to the food hall, and now you don’t want treatment.” A torrent within him breaks and hot fury fills his face as he looks down at me.

“Do you realise how near to death you probably got? I have personal experience with how dangerous your kind of injuries can be, your head, your ribs. I think you are many things, but I had not thought you foolish until now.” His hands move in jerky movements, he confines them behind his back and glares at me, his jaw set.

Tears burn at the corners of my eyes. “I do not want to appear...I did not want them to think they won,” I whisper and turn my head away, completely spent; physically and emotionally. I do not want a lecture, I just want to be left alone.

There is a pause. “Would you let me do it?”

“No,” I say, weary of this argument now.

“You will not see a doctor, you do not wish for me to do it. Should I just leave you here to die perhaps?” he asks. I’m now accustomed enough to Bruma speech to pick up the sarcasm layering his words.

“You can go get me things to care for myself and I will do it,” I say, my patience snapping.

He stops and looks at me, his huge arms crossed over the expanse of his chest. “I have already seen you naked, I do not see why it is a problem. You were my brother’s. If not as a child, I would see you in the light of a... younger sister.”

My cheeks heat furiously with embarrassment and a bit of anger. I wish the veil was down.

“You are referring to the night when you broke down my door and assaulted me. I am not seeing how you are different from the thugs of last night.” I know the comment is unfair, but there is no way he will see me naked for a second time.

He appears taken aback by my words. “I’m not like those men. That night was a ...rare loss of control. Now I’m here to help you. You could not walk up the stairs by yourself, and you lost consciousness only moments before. You truly think you can care for yourself?”

“Perhaps not, but I will also not have to listen to your lectures.” I am seconds away from forcing my battered body to try and attack him. He is infuriating. A smile jerks at his lips. I want to scream.

He walks away and I celebrate, thinking he is leaving.

“I can see you have already tried to care for yourself.” He walks back. “Where else are you injured apart from your ribs and face?”

“My lower back. Everywhere hurts, but that and the ribs are the worst.”

Weariness is creeping over me. I close my left eye.

“I will be back in a moment.”

“I can’t wait.” I breathe.

Chapter Twenty-three

“Don’t sleep,” a voice booms, rousing me. I groan and mumble in response, then shriek as something cold is placed on my face. I crack my left eye open and I glare up at the King. His expression is blank. Suspiciously so. The cold seeps into the right side of my face and this time my groan is one of relief.

“What is it?” I ask, rolling slowly towards him.

“Snow pack,” he says. Before I can object he reaches under the front of my tunic and places another pack of snow over my ribs and then another beneath me before he rolls me back onto it. The snow numbs the pain over my body. A sigh leaves me as the throbbing heat dissipates for now.

Jovan pushes the sleeve of my tunic up my arm and begins washing out the wounds, not making a sound. My body is so bereft of energy, I don’t think I could move even if the thugs rushed in the door again. He rubs a strong smelling salve over the injured skin and wraps each wound. He moves to the other arm and then rolls my trouser legs high, to my embarrassment, and repeats the same process. By the time he is finished with the first leg, I have forgotten my embarrassment. His touch is impersonal and efficient. It reminds me of how I would clean the children in the orphanage. The thought is vaguely insulting. He looks relaxed as he works.

“I will need to get to your shoulders, stomach and back,” he says.

My vows are long forgotten. I pull the bottom of my tunic upwards, so the bottom part of my ribs are exposed. The King sucks in another breath. I’m too tired to speak, but I make a questioning sound. He looks at me, his face closed down.

He removes the snow pack again and warns me before he gently prods at my ribs. I clamp my mouth shut to keep the screams inside. “Our father died from a rib penetrating his lung.” After an eternity, he stops. “I have no training in this. I only know from my own injuries and...my father’s. I think

most are just bruised, although these two in the middle seem worse than the others, they are maybe cracked. You're alive after many hours though, I assume you will live," he says

"Oh, good," I say, my voice dry and rasping. Amusement flashes in his eyes.

He rubs a different salve over my ribs. "I need to do your back."

"Please turn around," I say, struggling to keep my eye open. He hesitates a moment before he does as I ask. Someone doesn't like being told what to do.

I sit up like I'm thirty revolutions old and pull my tunic off. I shift in several increments onto my stomach and murmur when I am ready. He works on my back and even the pain as he moves over bruises cannot dim the relief of the salves he is applying.

"You are better than Rhone," I say, half asleep. Rhone had only given me ice. I would have to tell him about this salve.

Jovan's hands stop, though they still rest on my skin. I complain when he stops for too long and he resumes rubbing the salve over me.

"It was a low blow to kick you here," he says, clearing his throat.

I mumble my agreement. "How did your father's ribs break?" I ask.

The King draws a fur up over my back. The mattress dips as he sits back on the edge. I wonder if he heard my question.

"Overturned sled," he mutters. There is clunking and sloshing as he collects up the various bits he has just used.

"I cannot keep my eyes open any longer." I sigh in apology.

"Sleep now. I will come back to check on you when I can."

"Thank you, Kedrick," I say and fall into blessed sleep at once.

True to his word, the King comes to wake me several times during the day. Each time he brings snow packs and rubs more salve on my ribs and lower back. I push aside thoughts of how odd this situation is to think about later. My head feels much better the next day, though my ribs and lower back are just as bad. Every time I think of my actions the morning before,

shame burns through me. What was I thinking, going to the food hall in that state? I wince at some of the things I said to King Jovan and decide to blame my head injury.

I'm still reeling a little at his patience and tending of the day before. It was a side to him I had not seen before. Threatening to kill me one moment and then nursing me back to health the next. Furious beyond reason, then smiling when I become angry. My headache starts up again. I quickly stop trying to figure out the mystery of Kedrick's brother.

I get up, wash, and then dress in my last set of clean clothing. I add Pyope beads to the fire and then remember Kaura with a start. A quick search tells me her box is gone. I am seconds from a panic attack when I realise the King must have taken her.

I shake my head in bafflement. "Who has taken over King Jovan?"

The door crashes open as the person creating my bafflement strides in and slams the door shut behind him.

Anger surges. "What if I were dressing or washing?" I ask, glaring up at him. There is a screen blocking off the chamber pot and basin, but it is still horribly rude.

"You're not though," he states. I turn my head away with a shake and roll of my eyes.

"You roll your eyes a lot."

How did he? I start, and reach a hand up to check my veil only to find it is not there.

I look over to the bed in shock and then back to him. He watches me, head tilted to the side.

"Your veil is over there, I can see it," he says.

My head must be worse than I had anticipated. I struggle to gather my thoughts. "Thank you for yesterday," I say. "I was not very well and would have been worse off if not for your assistance. I don't know why I went downstairs. I was not thinking straight."

He snorts. "I think the words you're looking for are foolish and idiotic." I frown at his poor manners. "But don't worry. We all do stupid

things when we are concussed. I once had double vision and tried to punch the person's image instead of them."

I smile a little, but my eyes keep darting back to my veil.

"Do you want me to get it for you?" he asks. I wrench my eyes away from the veil to his face. I don't like the way his eyes are taking in my thoughts. I hesitate and shake my head.

"No." I look at the fire. "It's just unsettling, I have never had it off for longer than a few moments and now I have had it off for a whole night and part of a day." I poke at the beads.

"The Tatum has always made you wear the veil," he says.

"Yes. I'm sure you heard me telling Cam that I don't know why I wear it."

And there it is. The closest I will come to asking him why he ordered me to keep the veil on. I look up at him and see an infinitesimal widening of his eyes before he shuts the expression off. His hand jerks. "I gather then that you have never seen your own face." He fixes his attention on my face.

Should I try and bluff the answer from him. It would not work.

"No," I say and sit forward. He knows what I want.

He sits back on the seat along the bed and stares through me. My heart pounds. Is this it?

He stands suddenly, cleaning his throat. "I have sent the members of the delegate on various errands over the next week. I expect you to stay in here for this time. I have placed four of my own guards on your door in the event the mercenaries should revisit. You can be assured that they're well trained."

"I feel much better today. I should be fine to leave my quarters by tomorrow," I say, my voice wavers once. It is the only hint of my devastation at his decision to stay silent.

"Do you ever do as you are told?" he asks. I ignore his question as he has ignored mine.

"Where is Kaura?" I ask.

“I have been looking after the dog. I will bring her down tonight.” He starts towards the door. “You know, you are spoiling her by letting her stay in here.”

I just glare in response. He grins and leaves the room, making me jump again as he slams the door shut.

I sleep all day and rub more salve on my back and ribs when I awaken to the dark room. I would kill for a snow pack or three. I smile and feel one of the splits on my lip reopen.

The door crashes open and I jump, clutching at my ribs.

“Veni! Can you stop doing that?” I shout.

The King looks amused. “No.”

I forget my anger when I see he holds some snow packs underneath Kaura’s box. I hold out my hands for them. He raises an eyebrow and passes them to me. I put one to my lower back and one to my ribs and lean my head back with a groan, placing the last on the side of my face, over the jaw.

When I tilt my head to look at the King, I find him watching me with dark eyes.

“You are looking much better. Your eyes are better and the swelling on your face is much... better,” he says. My veil is still off. It hurts too much with it on.

I snigger. “I thought you despised lying. I know I look awful, King Jovan. You don’t need to be nice, it is not your forte.”

He looks offended for a few seconds before he chuckles, running a hand through his short light brown hair. “I thought I would give it a try.”

Kaura pops her head up at the sounds of our voices. She whines and the King picks her up by the scruff of the neck and drops her on the bed. She inches closer to me as though sensing I am hurt.

“I’m alright. Come and see.” She comes closer and trips over her feet. I giggle and look at the King.

“Sometimes she trips over her puppy feet,” I say.

The King's laughter echoes through the room. It is a surprised sound, as though it has been dragged out of him. I had not intended for my comment to be funny at all, but the deep sound of his laughter is contagious and makes me smile, too.

"I think the word you want is paws. Puppies have paws," he says.

"What do dogs have then?" I ask, scratching her belly causing her to kick one leg ferociously in appreciation.

"They also have paws."

"Huh, okay," I say, watching as she wiggles around on the bed. I giggle at her play. It's like she is telling me the story of the last couple of days.

"Thank you for looking after her," I say, looking up. He is watching me again, but shifts his gaze from mine quickly, expression blank.

You're welcome," he says stiffly, taking a step back. "I will get the guards to collect you snow packs over the next couple of days." He scratches Kaura behind the ears, nods once to me and then leaves the room, slamming the door behind him. I shake my head at his odd behaviour.

I last for two days before I feel myself starting to go crazy. Being locked in reminds me of being in the tower. There are only so many times you can count the stone blocks on the ceiling. The only thing I have achieved during the last two days is a plan to ask Adnan about the wood of the arrow. I have even broken off a bit of the arrow and put it in my pocket. Searching Blaine's room will have to wait until I'm better.

I put on my veil and pick up Kaura, deciding to take her outside for a while. The guards have been doing this for me.

I open the door.

"Does she need to be taken outside again, Tatuma?" one asks. These guards have been the most polite so far. The King must have instilled a healthy amount of fear in them.

"No, I am going to take her out," I say.

The four guards share uneasy looks. "We were told that you were going to stay in your room all week," the same guard spoke after a few moments.

I laugh. "I had been planning to, but just changed my mind. I'm going down with Kaura for a little while."

I can tell they're not fooled.

"Tatuma, it is just...the King himself had said you were going to stay in there," the same one says, adding a small bow this time.

I begin walking down the hallway. "I am certain there has been some confusion, but perhaps while I'm out you could send someone to clarify your orders," I say over my shoulder.

I go outside and stay out in the cold for a couple of hours, which I have not done once since arriving on Glacium. The snow packs have won me over and I find myself preferring the cold with all of my injuries.

Three guards watch me. Unfortunately they called my bluff and sent the fourth guard to the King. I feel a slight twinge at disobeying Jovan when he has helped me so much. But it is so slight, the next wall of sleet blows it away.

I'm just heading back in when I spot Adnan's father standing with all four of my guards.

"Tatuma," he greets. "I have come on behalf of the King to inquire why you are outside against his orders." His voice is stern, but his eyes are amused. His back is to the guards, I gather the tone of his voice is more for their benefit than mine.

"Orders? I had thought it was more of a suggestion. There has been a misunderstanding it seems." I nod to the fourth guard. "Thank you for clarifying his orders at my request." He nods back. His face is pale. I wonder what the King did to him.

Adnan's father chuckles at my manoeuvre.

I continue, "We have not been formally introduced, though Adnan has told me you are his father."

"Yes, I own the title of Adnan's father. You may call me Roscoe. It is a pleasure to meet you, Tatuma Olina." He bows slightly. "You were on your way back inside. Might I join you?" He is very polite for a Bruma. I nod

and we walk through the small side door, turning through several smaller halls which feed into the main hallway.

“You seem to get along with my son very well,” he says. There is a slight question in his voice. The subtle nuances he is using remind me of Osolis.

“Yes, he is a good friend,” I say with a wave of my hand. “Your way of talking is similar to my own. Or how it was.”

Roscoe releases a held breath. “I am glad to have retained the skill. It is many years since I was on Osolis.”

“You went on a treaty delegation,” I say, enjoying this chance to speak as I am used to.

“I was lucky enough to, yes. All of the King’s advisors have been to Osolis. It is very different to Glacium. More refined perhaps, but still as deadly overall. Just more discreet about it.

I laugh, nodding in agreement. “That is what I think. I have to say, though, the manner of Bruma speech is a refreshing contrast to the Solati way,” I say.

Roscoe looks down at me with a smile. “Forgive me for saying this so bluntly, I hope this will be the refreshing kind of speech you just mentioned. You seem very open-minded. The other Solati I have met were not always so.”

I shrug one shoulder up. “I have always been this way. It is unusual, I know,” I reply. Memories of Olandon’s face after being in the village move to the front of my mind. I smile. “Even my brother is much more... conservative than I.”

Roscoe chuckles and I pause to enjoy the sound.

“You must be a lovely singer,” I say. He stiffens and I wonder what I have said wrong.

He nods slightly, acknowledging my comment, but changes the subject again. “I would consider open-mindedness a trait associated with how one is brought up. For your brother to be conservative and you to be open-minded is...interesting,” he says.

The smile slips from my face. I attempt to speak in a pleasant tone. “That is easy enough to answer. Olandon and I were raised very differently.” I shrug and turn my face away. “You might be right, this could be the reason.”

“Perhaps so,” he says after a long moment.

He leaves me at my quarters with a farewell and a deep bow. “I am glad we have now met.”

“As am I,” I say. And I am.

Chapter Twenty-four

The next day I leave the room again. Protesting this time that I was sure the King had only meant yesterday. The guard who went to clarify with the King yesterday shakes his head in refusal to go when the oldest guard looks at him. A different guard leaves with a sigh.

I giggle under my breath as I walk off.

It is obvious they have orders not to touch me or they would have thrown me back in the room. This time I know I will not get long, so I race around the castle, changing locations every so often, hoping to get at least an hour with Kaura before being caught. I hate being locked up.

I'm in some empty courtyard I have never been in before, admiring the snowflakes which are landing softly on the ground and bare trees. The wind is howling, but the courtyard is protected and there is only a slight breeze around me. The contrast between the chaos outside and the tranquillity inside the courtyard is peaceful.

Kaura jumps around trying to eat the snowflakes. I have been teaching her to jump on command all morning. Training her requires much patience, but Malir says this is because she is still so young.

The cold seeps inside my boots, but once again I find it helps to distract me from the pain. I am comfortable out here. My veil is tucked inside my coat which buttons just underneath my chin to stop it from blowing off and revealing my face. I close my eyes, lost in the gentle brush of the snowflakes landing on my veil when I hear shouting voices. One of the guards standing behind me shouts back. I glare at him. Traitor.

King Jovan stalks through the archway to my right, ducking his head to clear it. His shoulders take up most of the opening. Roscoe and a harassed looking guard follow closely behind him.

“Where have you been?” the King roars. Two months ago I probably would have run for cover.

I stand up, brushing the snow from my trousers. “I have been chasing Kaura around all morning, you have no idea how infuriating it has been.”

The King’s face changes from its usual fair colour to red and I hear Roscoe choke.

“Are you alright, Roscoe?” I ask, and see his stifled grin before the King’s glare dictates its hasty removal.

Jovan moves swiftly towards me. It is like a team of dogs is bearing down on me, but I stand my ground. He pulls up in front of me and moves to grab me.

He stops suddenly, looking down and yells in surprise. I follow his gaze and see Kaura has sunken her teeth into his leg. He kicks her off and she yelps.

“Don’t do that!” I glare up at his towering frame. I reach down and pick Kaura up, cradling her in my arms. “Are you alright, Kaura? You are such a good girl.” Roscoe chokes again.

“Good?” the King shouts in disbelief. “She just bit me.”

“You deserved it,” I return and hear muffled laughter. The King aims another glare over his shoulder. I have never seen the King this flustered. I barely restrain my laughter.

The King’s eyes narrow and his mouth grows grim. I tense as he ducks low and lifts me onto his right shoulder, holding me in place with an arm across my upper thighs. I squeal in protest and a little pain, my ribs taking my breath, although I note he is taking care to carry me so most of the pressure is on the left side of my body.

I struggle to hold onto Kaura. It is a big drop from up here. I’m lucky my veil is tucked in. Kicking out, I land a knee to his stomach, causing a satisfying ‘oof’ of air which he then retaliates, to my shock, by smacking my bottom with his hand.

“Put me down,” I snap. “And stop wiggling, Kaura. I don’t want to drop you.”

“If you will not obey my orders, you will be treated like a child,” he snaps, not breaking stride.

“Why don’t you just drop me at the nursery with Cameron then?” I shout.

“Don’t tempt me.”

I feel like banging my head against something solid. “Stone-headed bloody Bruma,” I shoot in his direction. This time I hear full laughter from Roscoe who must be trailing us.

The King smacks my bottom again.

“Stop that,” I say, kicking my legs.

He snorts and flings the door to my room open. I tense my body thinking he is going to throw me, but he surprises me by bending in half so I roll gently down onto the ground. I let Kaura go and look up at the King who is opening his mouth.

“Are you going to lecture me?” I say. I know I am pushing my luck. His mouth snaps shut. His glare is withering as he turns on his heel and storms out, slamming the door. I hear him shouting at the guards.

“I will have your fucking heads if you let her out again.” Followed by, “You were no fucking help.” And then the sound of Roscoe’s deep laughter.

I clutch my ribs as I laugh more than I have in a long time. The sound is carefree. Another weight I did not know I had been carrying is lifted.

I spend the fifth day in my room. I stretch and do lighter exercises for my arms and legs, stopping when any of them cause my ribs to complain. I wake the next day and know I must get out of this room. I crack open the door and the two guards who have gone to the King before shake their heads. The eldest guard looks at the fourth one who slumps his shoulders forward. I giggle at the display.

“There is no need to be worried. I think I should not go out without the King’s permission. He seemed a little put out the other day. Could one of you take a message to him?” I ask.

The nominated guard nods his head, though his eyes are wary. I clear my throat.

“Could you please tell him I’m starting to feel like Cameron’s Auntie Beatrice and would like to leave my room, if he would be so kind as to allow this?” The older guard coughs hard. I look at him. Maybe I should not be keeping them out in the cold. The third guard walks down the hallway, dragging his spear behind him. I close the door and practice Kaura’s new trick with her.

A knock sounds on the door a while later. I open it to a red-faced guard.

“King Jovan has said he will allow you to leave your room today as a reward for your good behaviour yesterday.”

My eyes narrow at the King’s response, purposely worded to infuriate me, I’m sure. But my happiness at being able to leave the room overrides my annoyance.

I pick Kaura up and nearly run down the stairs, which many parts of my body do not appreciate. I spend the day outside again, only returning to the castle when my fingers are blue. Guilt swamps me when I see the guards are freezing.

“You are all frozen. You should have said something. I apologise,” I say to them. They seem surprised and mumble a polite response. I take them to the food hall and make them stand by the fire to warm up.

The next morning I open the door. “My week is up,” I say. Two of them snigger, the guard who conveyed my message to the King yesterday still looks traumatised and the older, serious guard just nods at me.

I smile and bound down the hall, Kaura at my heels.

I go straight to the food hall hoping to find one of my friends and peek a look up at the King, who is his normal expressionless self. Next to him I see Roscoe looking at me with a large grin on his face. I look further down the table and see Ashawn looking my way. For the first time he is not glaring at me and I wish he was. He is smiling at me, but it is not like Roscoe’s at all. The menace in his expression sends shivers down my spine.

In that moment, for no other reason than my instincts are screaming at me, I know Ashawn was the person who hired the three thugs. My step falters, before I remember to keep moving my legs. It looks like this culprit

was much easier to find. Sadness overrides the twinges of anger and frustration I feel at this discovery. Sadness because Kedrick had always said Ashawn and I would get on so well, sadness because Kedrick's death had affected Ashawn so devastatingly, and more sadness because there was an ugly part of me, left over from my mother's treatment, which told me I deserved the beating.

I sit down at the empty table. There is no way I can retaliate or tell the King. The Bruma already think I killed one prince. Being responsible for another Prince's death is impossible. I had hoped the beating and Kedrick's death had been linked and by tracking down the thugs, it may have led me to Kedrick's killer. I swallow my disappointment. Ashawn had certainly not killed his brother. You only had to witness his behaviour afterwards to know this.

I sit down and eat my pear dejectedly, feeding Kaura some food. And what if I discovered it was Malir or Sanjay or one of my other friends who killed Kedrick? The thought of killing one of the delegates to fulfil my vow was...abhorrent.

Rhone sits down, throwing snow everywhere and interrupting my guilty tirade. He must have just returned.

"Good morning, Rhone," I say.

He nods. "Tatuma."

I frown at him. He was the only delegate yet to call me Olina.

"How was your trip?"

"Unnecessary," he says.

With my background knowledge on why he was sent away, I can imagine it probably was.

"That's a shame," I say lightly. He looks at me with narrowed eyes. Of all of my new friends, Rhone is the most astute. I commend King Jovan's decision to send him as part of the treaty delegation. He would actually make a good Solati.

Malir sits down with a weary greeting and I wonder what he had been doing for the week. I know he is the head watchmen. Had his task had

something to do with Osolis? Dread fills me and I stow the thought away. The King stands just as people are finishing their meals. It is such a rare occurrence the entire hall hushes immediately, though his presence always demands their attention.

“We are well into the final month of the third sector.” A small cheer meets his words. He waits for the noise to subside, tilting his chin and surveying the assembly. “As is our custom, we will celebrate the coming snowfast. If you have any questions about this, please see Arla.” He gestures to a beautiful blonde. “Who is in charge of its organisation.” Arla beams a smile and waves her hand at the assembly. Some of the males let out appreciative calls. I imagine many of the females will be rolling their eyes. The King resumes his seat and excited talk fills the hall. War could not be on the horizon if they were planning a celebration. His announcement quells some of my worry.

Fiona and Jacqueline approach the table as I am standing to leave. They ask me if I am well. They, of course, would have noticed my absence from the hall. I reply that I have been out with Kaura and in my room trying to adjust to the cold, but I keep it as vague as possible, too aware of Rhone’s suspicious look. Hoping to divert their attention, I ask about their plans for the day. Disappointment twinges when they tell me a group of woman are heading into the middle rings to shop as the weather is the best it has been in weeks.

“That sounds like fun,” I say, not able to keep the yearning from my voice. I don’t really know what shopping entails. All I know is that it’s different from what we’ve been doing and this is enough to tantalise me.

Fiona looks at me with sympathy. Jacqueline however leans in, saying, “You should come with us. You have not seen the city yet.”

“I do not think I would be allowed-” I start, but she is already standing up.

“Roman!” Fiona and I jump when Jacqueline yells out. Every head in the hall turns our way. Roman comes promptly. I giggle, pressing a hand over my mouth beneath the veil. He responds like Kaura when I call her to heel.

Conversation resumes around us. “We need you to ask the King if we can take Olina with us into the city,” Jacqueline says to him.

Roman pales and tugs at his collar. “My love, I do not think...” he starts.

“You don’t have to think. You just need to do,” she says with fake sweetness. I feel a little sorry for Roman. His wife is one of the tallest women I have met and full of fierceness, and her blue eyes are currently pinning her husband down, challenging him to say no. She is a woman who could make an army cower if she got riled up.

Fiona is looking my way with a wide smile, I bite my cheek so I don’t laugh. Roman drops his head and turns towards the throne table.

We watch as Roman walks towards the King with dragging steps. Fiona giggles and claps a hand over her mouth. Not being able to hear anything, I can only guess what is being said. Roman talks, still tugging at his collar. The King immediately shakes his head. Roscoe talks to the King for a moment. Roman nods eagerly as the King talks to him again. I hold my breath as the King looks in our direction. He summons us with an imperious gesture.

“Uh-oh,” I mutter under my breath. The others laugh under theirs. We approach the King and the two woman on either side of me curtsy. I nod a little.

“You have sent Roman to ask whether the Tatum may enter the city with you. I must deny this request.” My face falls and my jaw clenches, but I remember where I am.

I turn to the others. “It’s okay, I did not think I would be able to. You will have to tell me of it when you return.”

“However,” the King says in a loud voice. I turn narrowed eyes back to him. “Roscoe has suggested a visit to one of your homes may be a safer alternative. I am willing to allow this,” he finishes. The other ladies are more than agreeable.

“Thank you, Roscoe!” I say, then turn to Roman. “Thank you, too.”

I look back in the direction of the throne and catch Roscoe tilting his head to the King in a not so subtle hint.

“And...thank you, King Jovan,” I say in a less grateful voice.

The King’s eyes narrow. Roscoe hides a smile behind his hand, Fiona titters next to me. The two women curtsy again and we turn to leave.

As we step down from the platform someone bowls into my right side, I gasp at the pain in my ribs, unable to stop myself clutching them. I look up and see the beautiful blonde woman, Arla.

“Oh, I am so sorry, Solati.” She giggles. I hate the sound immediately. “I’m not used to looking down at my feet to see where you are running about.”

Jacqueline looks like she is about to attack Arla any second. Fiona just watches with wide eyes. I put a hand in front of Jacqueline. There is no sound from the table behind us.

“That’s all right.” I mimic her giggle and add a toss of my veil for good measure. “Even if you looked down you wouldn’t be able to see past your nose anyway.” I hear a few gasps from the tables around us, but I also hear a few snickers. “And its Tatum, to you,” I say in a casual voice. I drop my hand from my ribs to my side and walk off with the two ladies in tow, wishing I had said something a bit meaner and wittier. It was probably not wise to overly anger her. Arla sat close to the throne table which meant she, or her family, held power on Glacium.

Jacqueline leans down to my ear as we near the archway. “She’s touching her nose.” I burst out laughing, the carefree sound echoing off the walls.

I had expected the two ladies to go on their trip to the city and take me to their homes another day, but they both hush my protests and say it will be much more fun to show me around. We decide to go to Fiona’s home as it is the closest. They explain the set out of houses as we go. Kedrick has explained much of what they are saying, but it is easier to understand as I see it for myself.

There is a path out of the castle gates, which we follow, their guards lead the way and mine keep close behind us. The snow has been pushed into large piles on either side of the pathway. We huddle together for warmth and hurry down the path to the house. It is so windy my veil keeps

untucking from my coat. I use one hand to keep my veil from blowing up as we stand in front of Fiona's house.

"Oh, you have the loveliest shade of hair," Jacqueline says, making my heart stop. The veil must have blown up at the back.

"I have always wondered what colour her hair is," blonde-haired Fiona replies.

"It's black I think, but it seemed almost blue for a moment there. Who do you get the shade off?" she asks.

I keep my tone casual. "My father. He had dark hair. My mother's hair is a chestnut colour."

"Oh...I apologise," Jacqueline starts, but I hold up a hand to wave off her apologies.

"My father died shortly after my younger brother's birth. Talking about him does not bother me. I did not really know him at all." I had often wondered if my father's death made our mother the way she was. If she had been twisted by grief. Thinking of how my life could have been different if my father had lived had occupied much of my childhood in the tower. And when the Tatum had married the twin's father, Arlo, I had hoped he would protect me from my mother. It had not taken long for this hope to be crushed.

We enter Fiona's home. It is much cosier than the castle. Rugs and cushions brighten the rooms and coloured furniture splashes life into what would otherwise be a grey stone home. The whole house is warm and I wonder how as I don't see a fire anywhere. It is bliss after our cold walk here. When I remark on the liveliness of her home Fiona explains most of the wealthier homes are like this.

"The castle used to be much brighter when the King's mother lived there," Jacqueline adds.

"She's no longer alive?" I ask. I know this already from Kedrick.

The two women shake their heads sadly. "She died not long after King Borin's tragic accident. She was heartbroken."

“She died from losing him?” I ask with a furrowed brow. They nod and I see Fiona dab at her eyes with a piece of material. Remembering my grief after Kedrick’s death, I could imagine how this could happen, especially if you had spent your whole life with a person.

“The three Princes lost both their parents within a short time. It hit them all hard. But if anyone had been uncertain whether Jovan was ready to rule, they were quickly reassured. He rules so ferociously it is easy to forget how young he is,” Fiona says.

Jacqueline nods. “The death of his parents has changed him. He was always the more serious of the Princes, as you would expect of the eldest son, but he lost his heart the day his mother died and with Kedrick’s death, we all fear he will not find it again.” The women tense at the mention of Kedrick and swiftly change the subject without giving me time to reassure them I’m okay with talking about him.

As they chatter, I reflect on what I have just heard. My heart squeezes in sympathy for the King, who has lost so many of his loved ones.

“That whore Arla was so rude to you today, I was this close to acquainting her with the rug on the ground,” Jacqueline says, holding up two fingers. I nod in agreement, smiling at her passion. Having friends here has given me a new perspective of the court back home. It’s fun to gossip - when it is not about you.

“I have heard this word whore before. What does it mean?” I ask.

Fiona giggles. “It’s a woman who men pay to do the dirty with them.”

My eyes widen. “Oh,” I choke out. Wide grins cover their faces at my reaction. I do not know the term ‘do the dirty’, but I have discovered most of the time when I do not understand a phrase or a word it usually ends up being another way of saying sex.

Luckily, the servants pick this moment to bring in hot drinks and the sweet food they call biscuits, giving me a chance to recover.

“I cannot believe what you said to her,” Jacqueline continues. It takes a moment to remember we were talking of Arla. She and Fiona laugh for a long while over re-enactments of the run in.

“I have been wanting someone to put that bitch in her place for years. She will hate you for the rest of your life, but there are many women in that hall who will be kissing your feet for what you said,” she continues.

“Who is she?” I ask.

“Her father is one of the King’s advisors.” I think of the row of men who sit at the throne table. I remember the one with blonde hair and watery blue eyes from the meeting room I had instinctively disliked.

“Does he sit fourth from the King’s right?” I ask.

“That’s him.” Fiona nods.

“What has she done to earn the dislike of so many of the women?” I prod. It is a bold question, but I am comfortable the pair will not consider this rude.

“She’s a nasty social climber. She’s slept with everyone,” Fiona says, which I find a tad hypocritical. “She has been after Jovan for years. Before King Borin died there was talk she and Jovan were together.” The venom dripping from Fiona’s words is startling, she is usually so passive.

“They still are together, if you ask me,” Jacqueline adds. “Why else would she be organising the ball?”

“Jovan is going to marry her?” I ask. They both stop talking to stare at me and then laugh for so long I get irritated.

“I forget how innocent you are,” Jacqueline gasps. I frown, remembering when Kedrick called me prim.

“Sleeping with someone here does not mean you want or need to marry them. I bet that is exactly what Arla wants, though. But it is quite common to have several partners before you marry or sometimes even have multiple lovers at once. Everyone does it, it’s considered quite normal,” Fiona says.

I gasp as one of the castle’s mysteries pops into my mind. “Is that why there are always different females around the castle in the mornings?” They barely nod before launching into another bout of laughter. My mouth drops open with my shock of what has been happening in the castle under my very nose.

“It is very different on Osolis,” I say in a weak voice. They both laugh again before Jacqueline erupts into a narrative of her past lovers.

Chapter Twenty-five

The two women don't want to miss dinner because they expect Sanjay and Roman will be back. I'm not sure I will ever be able to look Roman in the face again after Jacqueline's stories.

Both are there upon our arrival at the hall, as well as Adnan, Rhone and Malir. I discuss my wrist with Malir. Much of the stiffness has gone now. The strength is much slower to come back, but I have seen some small progress.

Towards the end of the meal we all sit talking, having much to catch up on after our week of separation. I take the chance to corner Rhone about learning to drive the sleds.

"No," he says.

"Why not?" I ask, with my hands on my hips at his flat refusal. "I have watched you working several times with your team. I know Leon and he responds to my instructions. And my wrist is fully healed," I add as an afterthought. I try not to think about my other new injuries, he doesn't need to know about those.

"She has you there, Rhone," Sanjay says. His mouth snaps shut at Rhone's look.

Rhone looks back at me. "It's not that simple. It can be dangerous. You're only just healed, you don't want another broken wrist."

I nod. "I would be safe in your wise hands." I bite my cheek once I've said it.

He snorts, not falling for my flattery.

I do not push him any further tonight. This Kaur tree will take some work to knock down. Malir looks at me with a wink.

Roman moves to talk with me and though I answer his questions, I do so without fully facing him, mumbling one word replies. When he finally asks me what the problem is, Fiona understands the situation immediately

and bursts out laughing, telling the whole table about Jacqueline's reminiscing of prior bed partners that day.

My face is on fire as the table teases me.

"She can't look at him without being reminded of Jacky's description of what's between his legs," Sanjay yells out. Mortification floods through me at the many heads turning our way. Roman laughs with the rest of them and waggles his eyebrows at Jacqueline who shakes her breasts back at him. It is too much and I excuse myself to retire to my room.

"Look we've scared her off," Sanjay calls to my back. I turn around and lift my middle finger into the position Sanjay himself had taught me last month. I leave the room to their booming laughter and the sound of their fists hitting the table.

A smile tugs at my mouth as I rush up the stairs to see Kaura, who has been alone all day. My smile falters when she does not come to greet me. I look through the furs on my bed and under the table and chair anyway, but she is nowhere to be found. I rush out the door, startling my guards.

"Kaura is not in my room," I say to the guards in a panic. I rush back down to the food hall, half running to the table of my friends, ignoring the stabbing in my side. The clanging of my guard sounds close behind me.

"Kaura is gone," I whisper as their concerned faces turn to me. "I left her in my room this morning and she's not there now." The table hushes.

Adnan, who is standing at the end of the table next to me, puts an arm across my shoulders. "It's okay, Olina, we'll find her. You're sure she wasn't in your room?" I nod, dread heavy in my stomach.

Malir stands up. "Rhone and Sole, check outside. Sanjay and Fiona, check the upper floor. Jacqueline and Roman, you're on the lower floors. Sadra and I will check the guard's quarters. He turns to my guards. "You four take Olina to check the kennels, smithy and kitchens."

My group has no luck finding Kaura, I return to the hall nearly in tears. I glance up at Ashawn who is looking at me curiously and without any trace of guilt on his face. It was not him this time. I hope Arla did not take her to get back at me. I debate telling my guards to go and search her room, but decide to wait until the others return. I don't even know if she has a room

here, though if she and Jovan are together I would think it likely. Searching her room would be overstepping my position and would turn her into a real enemy.

Sanjay, Fiona, Jacqueline and Roman come back half an hour later with no Kaura. Several women have approached me during this time to ask what the problem is. It is nice of them to ask, but their sympathy is making my tears well up.

Malir and Sadra return empty handed. I stand up, trying to control the urge to pace.

“Rhone and Sole may have her yet, Olina. Don’t worry. We will find her,” Sadra says, rubbing my back. “If not, I will make Malir order all the guards out to find her.” I force a chuckle past the nervous jumping of my stomach.

I stand up when I spot Rhone and Sole. My heart sinks as they shake their heads at me. I sit down and cry under the barrier of my veil. It is not as silent as I would like and the delegates hover uncertainly, never seeing me like this before. Malir gestures to the guard and starts reeling off orders to him. It looks like Sadra was serious. Others approach from around the food hall to ask if they can be of any help. I take a shuddering breath in, remembering the thug threatening to slit her throat.

A bark sounds from the front of the hall and I nearly fall out of my seat trying to get to it.

I push through the people surrounding our table and see King Jovan standing in the archway with Kaura in his arms and a shame-faced Cameron by his side. I twist my head to look up at the throne table. He must have been gone this whole time and I had not noticed.

The King pushes Cameron forward when he sees me moving towards them. I slow down as the boy reaches me. He promptly burst into tears.

“Lina, I took your d-dog,” he sobs around tears. “I was hiding from Nanny and it must have been your room ‘cause I saw the puppy and thought I would just p-play with her and put her back ‘fore anyone knew.” He wipes his nose on his sleeve before continuing. “I didn’t know she was your dog,

Lina. I didn't mean to make you upset. I'm s-sorry." He bursts into fresh tears. "I'll never do it again!"

I pick Cameron up and carry him to a table where I wipe his face with a cloth. I hold him as I say, "Thank you for your apology, Cam, it is hard to admit when you do something wrong, you're brave to do so." I wipe fresh tears from his face. "You're right. I was very worried when I thought Kaura was missing, but I'm relieved to know she was with a friend." I tap him under the chin and lean down to whisper in his ear. "The King would not have been happy to find you out of the nursery. Nod your head if he was angry."

Cameron makes a noise half way between a giggle and a sob and nods his head.

I smile, staying close to his ear. "I will sometimes need a Nanny for Kaura when I am away. Nod your head if you will help me." He nearly hits me in the head with the vigorous nodding of his head.

"I'll look after her whenever you want me to!" He yells. I thank him and place him on the ground as his father, Tomi, takes him away with an apologetic look directed at me.

I walk eagerly towards the King, who stands watching and holding the wriggling Kaura.

"Thank you, Jovan," I whisper to him and fresh tears of relief trickle down my face, dripping underneath my veil to the floor. His eyes flick to the falling tears, but he does not mention them.

He just taps under my chin with a finger like I did to Cameron. Like I am a child. And then chuckles when I lightly punch him in the arm. I grab Kaura off him and hug her to my chest, relief making me light.

"You are too attached to that dog," the King says as he walks with me back to my table of friends.

"I am not," I say with some heat in my voice. He chuckles, I have reacted as he wanted me to. I roll my eyes, still too upset to engage in bickering with him.

"Did you enjoy your day out of the castle?" he asks. I remember I was at Fiona's earlier. It seems so long ago after the stress of the evening.

I shrug my shoulders. “Most of it was nice,” I hedge.

The King laughs. “Ah, yes. I overheard a few of Sanjay’s comments.”

I turn my head up to the side and respond with silence, halting as we reach the table. The King looks down at me out of the side of his face, grinning. This time he struggles to control his expression.

I smile behind my veil. Like Rhone, he seems years younger when he smiles. I have not seen him this carefree in my entire time here.

The King returns to his seat after receiving congratulations for finding her. Everyone fusses over Kaura, who looks a bit confused at the attention. I have no doubt she spent a day being stuffed with food. I will have to talk to Cameron about this before he cares for her.

Back in my room with Kaura asleep on top of my chest, I think of how the attitudes of the assembly have changed towards me in the course of a few months. But then, I can feel how I am changing the more time I spend here; adopting their phrases, asking more questions, joking with people and letting too many people call me Olina. All of these changes might have made me feel as though I was losing myself, when in fact the opposite was true. I was beginning to feel the dangers of becoming too comfortable on Glacium.

Chapter Twenty-six

All the women can talk about is the upcoming celebration they refer to as the snowfast ball. I do not care for the idea, I imagine it will be like my mother's plays. So beyond latching onto it as a reason there cannot be a war going on, I ignore its approach. Instead, I chip away at Rhone about learning to use the sleds.

One day during lunch he explodes upwards from the bench.

"Okay," he roars. "I'll do it. You could fucking convince a stone to give you water. But I'm not teaching you until we leave for the first sector." He storms out of the room and I do an excited dance. The others chuckle at my reaction. I have never heard Rhone swear, but I do not care because I'm getting what I want. Feeling some emotion will be good for him.

I finish my drink and take Kaura to the nursery for Cameron to look after. She has grown in the last month and she is to my knee now. As Malir predicted, she has become more responsive to my training and she can do many tricks, obeying me to a fault. I do not think this is because I am a good trainer. More because she is loyal to me and I am persistent from having too much time on my hands. I make my way back down to the food hall to meet my friends.

Footsteps echo down the hall.

I look up to see the King striding my way. He doesn't look happy. I contemplate ducking into another hallway, but he raises an eyebrow as though he knows what I'm planning to do. My hopes he is not angry with me for some reason, disappear when he grabs my arm and drags me into the closest chamber. It is a smaller room with beautiful rugs strung up around the walls.

"What are you doing?" I ask. My immediate thought is he has somehow found out about Jacqueline seeing my hair. My muscles tense with his man-handling, though I do not feel too afraid he will hurt me.

“That is my question for you,” he says, leaning down so his mouth is directly in front of my own. Still gripping my arm, he whips his hand up, causing me to flinch and rips off my veil. The wooden band clangs onto the floor. I glare up at him as my hair loosens from its coil at the back. The braid falls down over one shoulder

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You want to learn to handle the sleds. Your ribs are not fully healed.” One of his fists clenches in anger. “Do you ever think?”

I’m baffled by his fury. “I do not know why you are so angry. He will just be showing me the basics.”

“I am angry because you obviously expect everyone else to constantly pick you up when you’re injured.”

“I do not-” I begin to respond, pushing him away.

He continues. “Rhone has had a fair few overturns.”

“He has?” I ask, distracted. I cannot imagine it.

“Yes, of course,” he says. “I have come to say you won’t be doing it. I have already told Rhone.” My eyes widen even further.

“What did you say?” I ask in disbelief. Did he really just say that? “It is not your choice as to whether I learn or not!” His jaw clenches and my stomach does the same, instantly knowing this was not the right way to negotiate. He stalks towards me and I step backwards until my back thuds on the wall behind me. I shiver from the cold of the stone which permeates through the thick tapestry hanging over it.

The King brings his hands up to my shoulders. I brush them off with an angry push. He grabs my wrists instead, pushing my hands down by my sides before lifting his hands up to my elbows and lifting me up on the wall.

He brings his face very close to mine, his eyes not leaving my own startled gaze. “Everything you do or don’t do is my decision,” he breathes. “Everything anyone does or does not do, on this world.” His gaze moves down over my face then back up to my eyes before he continues. “Is up to me.” He moves closer still. Our noses are nearly touching.

My own breath catches in my throat as I start to feel closed in, locked away.

“I won’t do it until my ribs are healed,” I say, snapping my mouth shut at his growl. I’m too vulnerable like this. My panic escalates as he continues.

“If I tell someone not to eat for two weeks, then they don’t,” his voice grows louder. “If I want everyone to go without boots for a day, they will do it.” I struggle against his hold. “And if I don’t want Rhone to teach you to drive a sled, he sure as fuck won’t be teaching you to drive a sled.”

His chest is pushing against my own. His hips push into my upper thighs, pinning me to the wall.

“You will not be doing it,” he says in my ear. I close my eyes as I feel tears start to build. I turn my head from him, but a few tears trickle down each side of my face.

“Please let me go,” I whisper.

I hear a sharp intake of breath. He loosens his hold on my wrists. My legs buckle as I drop down. I lift my hands up to cross my chest as he takes a small step back. I straighten and brush past him and pick up the pieces of my veil. My legs feel like they will collapse any moment.

Turning my back to him, I replace the material and band with trembling hands.

I leave the room without another word.

It is easy to hide my disquiet while I’m with the other women. A large group has gathered at Jacqueline’s today and they all discuss tomorrow night’s ball with excitement. Her home is similar to Fiona’s. The colours are more subdued however and everything is more rigidly placed.

“You need a dress to wear!” Fiona says to me. She starts talking of taking in one of her own for me. I describe the Toga dresses we wear back home and Jacqueline laughs at my description, leaving the room to go get her own dress. While she is gone the women gossip about the ball.

Talk turns to the opening dance.

“The dance is supposed to be opened with the King dancing with the queen, but because Jovan is not married yet, he must dance with the highest ranking female, which is Arla the skank-monster,” Greta, one of the young unattached Bruma says.

Sullen comments fill the room. “No!” Fiona gasps. “She’s not anymore.” She points straight at me. “Olina is a princess. Her rank is higher.” The women in the room squeal and scream. Two of them hold hands and spin in circles. All I feel is horror at having to dance with the King after this morning.

Jacqueline returns and, after jumping up and down at Arla’s supposed downfall, she holds out some strips of material to me.

“Are you part way through making the dress?” I ask Jacky.

Fiona bursts out laughing. “That *is* her dress. All of our dresses are similar to this.”

My mouth drops open, I grab the dress out of Jacky’s hands and hold it up. The scraps of fabric will cover the main parts, but not much else. I gasp and shove it back at Jacky, who is laughing so hard tears are streaming down her face.

Fiona begins to talk of taking up her dress for me again. I wait for an opening.

“Please don’t worry yourself about it. I don’t think I will go to the ball. It is not for me. But I hope you all enjoy yourselves.”

This is met by firm denial. Jacky will not hear of it, but I’m adamant in my refusal.

“I have a more concealing dress from when I was younger. My father would not let me out of the house in those kinds of dresses until I was twenty.” Greta points at Jacky’s dress.

Though my true reason for not going is to avoid dancing with Jovan, wearing the revealing dress also has me a little worried. I latch onto this excuse. “Thank you, but I would feel vulnerable.”

“You have great boobs and a nice figure. You have nothing to worry about,” Jacky bursts out. I can tell she is becoming a little angry, but I will

not be swayed or pressured. I force myself not to cover my chest as everyone stares at it. I mumble an excuse to go to the bathroom to escape.

The servant shows me to the bathroom, and I take my time in there, having no need for the amenities other than using them as an excuse. I sit on the edge of a tub, there are pyope beads underneath it in a stone circle for heating. One of Adnan's inventions. My gaze travels around the room. There is seat behind a screen over a chamber pot. It is much nicer than the one I use in the castle.

I frown at a twinkling light in the far corner of the room, my heart stops when I realise what it is.

There, over a large shallow washing bowl is a mirror. I know it is a mirror, though I have never seen one in my life. A shiny kind of glass fills the frame and I can see the small window at the far side of the room reflected on its surface. I tremble as my mind grasps the opportunity being handed to me. After a second of hesitation, I stand and step towards it.

My hands drifts to linger at the base of my veil. I toy with the fabric and my stare becomes vacant as I listen to fear battle for control. My hands shake. The fear wins. I lower my hands to my sides and turn my head away. I cannot do it.

A knock sounds on the door.

"Olina. Are you alright?" I hear Fiona's muffled voice come from the other side.

"Yes. Just fixing my veil," I say, moving to the door, relying on her avoidance of this topic to save me from too many questions. I open the door and walk out.

"Oh." Her cheeks are red. "I thought you might have been trying to escape from our attempts to persuade you to go tomorrow night."

I laugh convincingly. "Maybe that, too."

The ladies continue to chat into the afternoon. There is no further mention of my attending the ball. I join in occasionally, but cannot stop thinking about the mirror. Each time I do, angry tears threaten. What a coward! No matter how far I get from my mother, she is still able to control

me. My fists clench as I imagine her laughing down at me from her viewing balcony in the torture room.

I'm as far from her as I will ever be in my life, but I am still in her prison.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The women from yesterday are flustered at breakfast. I don't know why they are even here. They don't seem to be eating anything. Maybe it is a custom. I'm not going to the ball so I select my usual pear and sit down to observe their odd behaviour.

Gentle Fiona snaps at Sanjay when he teases her about not eating and starts going on about all the errands she must do before the ball starts. I think they will get hungry, but I do not dare say anything. The ball starts in the early afternoon and breakfast is the only meal being served beforehand. I grin at the wide-eyed looks the men are sharing. The women all stand at once. They must have some way of telling time which I'm unaware of.

I linger with the delegates, listening with amusement to them talk of their wives.

"I'm telling you now, Adnan. Don't get married," Roman says with a groan. I snicker openly at his despair and Sanjay turns to me with a glare.

"And why are you not off getting your nails done and hair bounced up or whatever they do?" he says. I shrug one shoulder, not wanting to get into it. I'm surprised they did not already know.

Sanjay hums darkly. "As though we care about that shit. As long as Fiona is in a dress where I can see almost everything, I'm happy."

I smile, Sanjay will be a happy man tonight indeed.

"But don't forget you have to mention all of those things they've done or else they get angry and it's no point being able to see almost everything because they won't let you unwrap the rest," Roman says. I giggle as the other men hum and nod their sombre agreement.

I move around the table and sit next to Adnan.

"Adnan," I say. He looks up from the objects he is tinkering with. "Can you tell me what kind of wood this is?" I reach into my pocket and draw the small broken piece of wood out.

He takes it from me and shakes his head. “Sorry, I don’t often work with wood.” My heart sinks at yet another dead end.

“Tomi!” Adnan calls behind us. I look up as Tomi approaches from the table where the delegates I’m not as familiar with sit.

“What’s this wood?” Adnan asks him and then says to me, “Tomi is the man to ask about plant stuff.”

Tomi examines it. “It’s been stained this colour. Straight grain. Doesn’t seem very durable, but it’s light.”

I hope the King isn’t looking our way.

“Do you know what it is?” I say, silently urging him to hurry.

“Hmm, I’m not sure.” He brings the wood forward to his nose. “Oh. It’s Seedyr wood. Has a distinctive aroma. But where did you find this? It only grows in the warmer sectors,” he says.

“I found it outside,” I lie. “Why does it only grow in the warm sectors?”

He holds a hand to his hip. “Well, it only grows about this high, not strong enough to withstand the winds. We don’t use it here because it’s not durable enough, we tend to use spruce. I only know it because I’ve seen it used in the outer rings for hunting weapons.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. Someone is looking at me. I take the wood back. “Thank you for your time. I find all these new animals and plant life very interesting.”

He smiles and offers to show me more sometime before returning to his table.

I have barely put the wood back in my pocket when Roscoe sits down next to me. “You are the only female left in the room, Tatuma Olina. I hope we can expect your company this evening.”

I hesitate, but don’t want to appear rude. “I’m not going,” I say as softly as I can, hoping the others will not hear.

“What! You have to come.”

I groan as Sanjay's yell alerts the whole room. Roman and Malir join in his denials, demanding I go.

I meet Roscoe's amused eyes, he has surely guessed I did not want anyone else to hear.

Adnan reaches across the table and taps on the back of my hand. "Come on. Why are you not going?"

I turn my head away. "There is no particular reason."

"I have never known you to do anything without reason," Malir says. I shrug and start to stand.

Sanjay leaps around the table and pushes me back down. "No you don't. You aren't leaving until you tell us why."

"Sanjay. Get your hands off of her," Roscoe bites out. Sanjay stands back immediately. "If she does not want to go tonight, her reasons are none of our concern," Roscoe finishes.

Sanjay returns to his seat with a sulking expression. I stand again and whisper my thanks in Roscoe's ear as I leave the hall. I feel the King's gaze on me as I leave, knowing he must have heard at least part of the conversation. I do not turn my head towards him.

I grab Kaura and head up to the nursery to hide from anyone who may choose to crash through my bedroom door to demand an explanation for my non-attendance. I can only hide there so long before I start getting odd looks from the woman watching them. I leave and use the back way through the meeting room to sneak down to the kennels and look at the dogs.

Large cages line the walls of the kennel. Each row has a lever at the end so a whole team of dogs can be let out easily. Rhone had let me do it once.

I say hello to Leo, introducing him to Kaura, who does not seem impressed. I eat a pear out on the steps in the freezing cold and then, running out of things to do, I return to my room. The edge of the rug closest to the door is doubled back on itself. Someone has been in my room. I'm glad I have managed to avoid them. It was probably the King, or worse, it could have been Sanjay. I correct the rug and proceed to work out for the

next two hours. I don't stop until I am pouring with sweat and all my muscles are aching enough that I feel calm. Physical exhaustion always does this to me. It is one reason I always loved going to Aquin's.

Though it is only the afternoon, I am exhausted after washing in the basin. I change into my nightgown, wishing again I could submerge myself in water. Adnan had told me he had a team hard at work in the first sector inserting his latest invention into the castle. A bath big enough to hold fifty people at a time, heated with great piles of Pyope beads from underneath. He said the underground springs had given him the idea and he had tested the idea on smaller baths in the homes of the assembly. This is where he had been the week I stayed in my room after the beating and where he often disappear to. I couldn't wait to try it, though the thought of being in a bath with that many Bruma was unthinkable. They were inappropriate enough with clothing on, let alone off and I bet there would be other things going on in there I wouldn't want to know about.

I'm disorientated when I awaken and unsure of why I have woken. A strange sound travels through my door. I roll out of bed and sit on the side, breath held, waiting to hear it again. The sound starts once more. What is it?

I quickly dress and check my veil, then swing open the door to my room. The noise grows louder. I ignore the questioning looks from my guards and run down the stairs, following the trail of sound which tugs at me somehow. I hear my guards jogging behind me. I slow as I reach the archway to the food hall turned ballroom. Of course it is in there. I try and peer down the side through the archway, but the wall of the archway is too thick to see the whole room. The object or person must be in the corner by the throne platform.

"What is making that beautiful sound?" I ask the older guard.

"It is a violin, Tatuma. There are musicians here for the ball."

"I have never heard anything so lovely," I say. The desire to see these musicians is too strong.

"I just want to watch for a few moments. Do you think you could wait here, so I do not draw attention to myself?" I sense the guard's hesitation. "I

will go just inside the door and you can check on me every ten seconds,” I say. The older guard nods, looking as if he already regrets it.

I take in the transformed room. How did they do all this between breakfast and now? I don't like Arla, but I'm impressed with what she has pulled off. Snowflakes hang from the ceiling. They must be made of material. Ice sculptures and glass decorations cover the walls and floor. The rugs and tables have been removed and huge white and blue cushions are organised at one end of the hall. Couples and groups of friends are gathered on them. My eyes nearly pop out at the sight of so many scantily clad women. There is a lot of skin. Too much skin. Some of them only have small strips of cloth covering their front. The men have special tunics on and leather trousers. It seems a bit unfair the women have to go to so much effort. They must be freezing, too.

Fiona spots me from across the room and nudges Sanjay at her side. I pretend I have not seen them and keep moving towards the sound.

I leave one hand on the wall, approaching with slow steps until I'm ten strides away. I am unsure of how close I should get. A tall man plays a small wooden object I assume is the violin. There are two others with him, who sit immobile next to other objects. I wonder if they make the same sound.

To my surprise, I have to blink back tears as the musician continues to play. Thoughts I usually only have in the privacy of my room are dredged to the surface. My heart thinks of Olandon and how much I have to tell him, of the twins; Oberon's questions and Ochave's loveable nature. I think of Aquin and hope he lives until I get to see him again. I think of what I have lost in the last year. I think of Kedrick. Of his fierce loyalty and his laughter, his honest blue eyes.

I turn and look around the room to see if anyone is approaching and catch the snide gaze of Arla as she looks down at my clothing and whispers to one of her friends behind a hand. I roll my eyes and turn back to the music. Just one more song.

I nearly jump out of my boots as a large wooden bench crashes down behind me. I glare at the culprit, Kedrick's bloody brother. I should know. Where there is crashing, there is King Jovan.

“I thought you might like to sit down while you listened,” he says. His voice is its usual confident self, but I detect an uncertainty in the slight hunching of his shoulders. All he would need to do is put his hands in his pockets and kick at the ground to look like the eight year old Olandon when I had found him throwing stones at a herd of Dromeda.

“Thank you,” I say and sit on the offered bench, directing my attention forward again. As much of it as I can with Jovan behind me anyway. He moves to sit beside me.

The bench is much too low for him. His forearms drape over his knees and I’m reminded of when I was first brought before him. “You don’t have music on Osolis,” he says. “Roscoe was just explaining your interest to me.”

I tilt my head up to him. “We have some singing, but nothing as beautiful as this.” I wave at the musicians. “Solati lean towards plays and tragic theatre.”

“You don’t like these much,” he chuckles.

I shudder. “I thank my good fortune daily that you do not have them here.”

We fall silent, listening to another more upbeat song. Laughter and yelling sound from the crowd who have moved in behind us, eager to be close to their King. I hope the ladies from Jacqueline’s are having fun.

The bench shifts as the King looks behind him. “The two guards outside your door that night were found,” he says, lowering his voice.

“They are alive?” I ask, hopeful. Their deaths had been hanging on my conscience.

“They were alive. That problem has since been rectified.”

I look up at him in alarm. “What do you mean?”

He looks at me, an eyebrow raised. “Did you not find it strange that you heard no sounds of fighting outside your room? The guards were paid off, well paid off from what I could discover. They escorted the thugs in and then left you. They tried to hide in the middle rings, but were picked up by my men. The price for desertion and their other actions is death.”

“That is disgusting.” The King growls at my response. “No. Not their penalty. Their greed. How could a person be so...” I struggle to find the right word.

“Immoral?” Jovan supplies. I nod and continue. “I am glad they are gone now. Did they say who paid them?” Surely he would not be so calm if he knew Ashawn had done this.

“Unfortunately, early in their stay, before we were able to work on them, the watchman guarding the dungeons was overthrown. The next morning it was discovered the two men’s tongues had been cut out.”

I swallow firmly at that horrifying thought. “Oh.”

Where were the dungeons located? I had not noticed any of this happening. They must be by the barracks. That was the only part I had not had an opportunity to explore.

“We will find the person sooner or later. I won’t have that sort of person in the assembly. I do not think we will ever find the mercenaries, however.”

A large part of me hopes the King never finds out it was Ashawn. And I was still certain it had been Ashawn. For only sixteen years of age, he knew some very shady people. He was a boy playing with sharp swords and Jovan needed to take him in hand before he got in too deep.

“Olina...” The King interrupts my thoughts. “I must apologise for frightening you yesterday morning. My anger got away from me.”

I change my position on the bench, stretching one leg out and placing both of my hands on either side of me to grip the bench. My mouth opens and then shuts as I think about which answer to give. I decide on honesty. He had told me before he despised a liar, so I assume he valued the opposite.

“It only occurred to me afterwards,” I say, “that you have not had good...dealings with sleds in your family. I can forgive your worry, if that is what it was.” I keep my face forward. “It was your intimidation I objected to.”

He is silent for a long time. My heartbeat increases as I try to guess his reaction.

“You are right. I do not do well with sleds anymore,” he says, as though the words are being dragged from his mouth. I grin under my veil.

He continues, “I admit I was surprised by your reaction, though. You have not responded in this way before. Even when I was in your room when you first came and had you against the wall.”

Somebody gasps behind us. Jovan turns and glares, scaring them away. He turns back with a frown.

It is my turn to be silent as I decide how to answer. It had cost him to admit he had overreacted. I feel I owe him for some reason. Maybe for letting me live or maybe because he knows my biggest secret and has proven to be discreet.

“I did not have an easy time on Osolis,” I say and his eyes shift to my veil and flick down, perhaps taking in my posture as I do to others. “You will remember Blaine saying the Tatum hates me?” I ask. He nods. I turn forward.

“That was putting it lightly. As a result of the...as a result of *this*, I don’t like feeling intimidated. In fact, I do everything I can to avoid feeling vulnerable,” I finish, regretting having told him more than I had intended to, more than I had told Kedrick.

My eyes look to his hands, which are still draped over his knees, but now balled into huge fists. His tone when he speaks is the soft voice I have learnt means I should run as fast as I can away from him.

“Then I’m doubly sorry. The reports of the Tatum have certainly not been favourable. To what extent were you mistreated?” he asks. I shift on the seat.

“I do not think you need to know the details,” I say, hoping to dissuade him from the subject.

“I don’t need to know, but I would like to know. If you will tell me,” he says in his rough approximation of a gentle voice I have only heard once before.

I shrug my shoulder and look behind me. The crowd is several strides back. “Similar to how I was beaten here, some worse, some not as bad.” I keep my voice emotionless.

“You were physically beaten?” His tone is horrified. I tilt my head to the side. What did he think I had meant?

The King stands up as though he needs to punch the stone columns surrounding my bed again. He sits back down after a few moments. “*Fuck,*” he says in a voice I have not heard from him before.

“Did Kedrick know?” he demands.

“I think he suspected, but I never told him. I did not want him to try and intervene and get hurt or create a problem between our worlds because of me.” I look around for inspiration to change the subject.

“What is that thing on the end called?” I ask.

I know he wants to hear more about my mistreatment. “A drum,” he answers finally. I let out a breath.

The King stands making the bench wobble. “Come, I will take you to meet the musicians.” He holds out his hand.

“I do not want to put them off,” I say looking at his hand.

He rolls his eyes. “Come with me, bloody stubborn woman.” I huff and place my hand in his. His hand encompasses my own. My hands must feel like blocks of ice to him. His skin is so warm. I see him glance down at my hand with a small frown. He leads me to the musicians and holds up his hand, stopping them mid-song.

The man who sits playing the third and unknown object looks up and shares a nervous look with the others.

“You don’t like this song, my King?” he asks.

“Your music is good as always, Tonio.” He pulls me forward. “This is the Princess of Osolis. They don’t have music there and she is curious about your instruments.” The three musicians turn their attention to me. I step forward, hands clasped in front of me.

“I cannot find words for how beautiful your music is,” I say. This seems to relax them. “I heard the violin from my room and had to see where the sound came from. We only have singers on Osolis.”

They thank me and offer to show me how their instruments work.

The drum player holds out one of his sticks which I take with some trepidation.

“Like this.” He grunts and hits the barrel which has a tight skin of some sort stretched over it. I tap the stick on it gently and a soft noise come out. Jovan snorts. I glare at him and see one of his eyebrows raised in challenge. I bring the stick down hard, jumping at the noisy sound and then laughing at my fright. I bang away on this for a few moments and then another man moves behind me and tucks his violin under my chin.

A horrible screeching sounds fills the hall when I attempt it. I shake my head to get rid of the sound as I would a bitter taste. Laughter sounds through the hall, I look up to see there is a massive audience watching. I hand the instrument back.

The last man gestures to his seat and places the guitar in my arms. “This guitar is much too big for you. I would make a smaller one for you if you were going to learn.” I look up at him in disbelief.

“I could not learn the guitar,” I say laughing and shaking my head. The man shrugs.

“Put your fingers here, on the second fret.” He puts my middle three fingers on the instrument.

“Second fret,” I repeat, feeling stupid. I hear a snort from Jovan and try to kick him in the shin.

I strum the strings awkwardly with my thumb, wincing as a strange muted noise comes from the strings.

“Press with your fingertips.” Tonio moves the position of my hand and the other musicians give me words of advice. I try again and get a fuzzy sound from them. I rearrange my hand again and this time all of the strings produce a mellow sound. I look up, sure I am glowing through my veil at my success.

“Very good, Princess. We will make a musician of you yet,” he says, taking his guitar back.

I look up at the watching crowd and feel guilty for stopping their dancing.

They start back up with gusto, making the crowd cheer and scramble to find partners.

I rub the tips together feeling the tenderness there. My fingers have shallow indents in them from the strings. I wonder how Tonio is able to play all night, I think my fingers would bleed.

I join Jovan and Roscoe who has walked over.

“You have taken a liking to the guitar, Tatuma?” Roscoe asks.

“Yes I have and you may call me Olina,” I say.

“I’m honoured, thank you,” he says with a deep bow. I nod back.

“What do you mean you’re honoured?” the King asks with furrowed brows.

“Being given permission to drop the Tatuma’s title is considered a privilege on Osolis.”

Jovan looks down at me and I laugh at his expression. He has called me Olina for many weeks now.

“I know it is not as formal here. Many of the Bruma here call me Olina,” I assure him.

“I heard little Cameron call you by your shortened name the other day,” Roscoe says.

“Yes, but he is too young to know otherwise. I cannot get angry at him for it.”

“I know many Solati who would become angry anyway.”

I shrug in response, but he is right.

“What is your shortened name?” Jovan interrupts.

I fidget a little. Roscoe frowns at the King, who ignores him. “Lina,” I say, keeping my tone short and uninviting.

He is not deterred. He and Kedrick share the same perseverance. “What does it mean when people use your shortened name?” Somehow he makes his question sound like a demand.

I sigh and share a glance with Roscoe. “Only people you love deeply are allowed to call you by your shortened name before you are married.

Family, friends and lovers.” I smile when I say the last word without fumbling.

“Kedrick called you this?”

I look at him, surprised with the reference to his brother, who he always seemed to avoid talking about. “He did,” I say.

I look past the pair to a group of females standing across the room from us. If their eyes were daggers I would be dead many times over.

“I think I will return upstairs now,” I say with a nod in the direction of the women. “There are many people who want some of your attention.”

Jovan looks over his shoulder and turns back with a sigh. The females preen under his momentary attention. I see Greta pushing at her hair and smiling.

“It could be worse. You could be watching a play,” I say. He snorts and walks towards the females with his hands clasped behind his back. I turn to Roscoe who is smiling and watching the King leave. He turns to me with an air of speculation I do not understand.

“He does not laugh much anymore. It is nice to see him do so,” he says.

Confused as to why he is saying this to me, I say goodbye and walk towards my guards.

A hand grabs my wrist, nails dig in. I whirl around, breaking their hold.

Arla looks down at me, eyes wide. I let out a shaky breath. For one moment, I had thought my mother was here.

“Chill, Solati. I’m not attacking you,” she says, crossing her arms and stepping further away. She keeps a beaming smile on her face for the benefit of the people watching. I doubt it is for me.

“Yes?” I ask.

“I wanted to have a girl chat. We haven’t really talked yet,” she says.

I narrow my eyes. “You do?”

“Yes, plus we are all wondering how you thought Kedrick was in the sack.”

“In the sack,” I repeat.

“I thought he was pretty good myself, he did this thing with his tongue. You know what I’m talking about?” She nudges me and I realise what she’s talking about. Gross.

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” I say, turning to walk away.

“Why not? All of us swap stories. And Kedrick has had sex with pretty much all of us.”

Her barb stings. I remind myself I shouldn’t believe a word out of her mouth. I know she is trying to hurt me on purpose as revenge for the nose comment.

“Arla, what you doing here? Shouldn’t you be on your back in a dark corner by now?” a voice says.

I tilt my head back and see Greta approaching.

“We were just talking of Kedrick and his...skill,” Arla says. “You know what I mean, you and he were together at some stage if I remember correctly.”

I gasp, I can’t help the sound. Arla’s lips curl up at the sound.

Greta’s freckled face turns pink. “Well, yes we were. But it didn’t mean anything. That’s how it is here.” She ducks her head.

Greta’s words hurt more than she will ever know. I would have discounted anything Arla said as nastiness, but Greta wouldn’t lie. It was true. How many of these women had Kedrick been with? I couldn’t believe it. Tears well in my eyes.

“Oh, I know dear,” Arla says to Greta. “Don’t be embarrassed. Olina knows we can’t keep it in our pants.” I turn and quickly leave the hall before my tears fall to the ground.

Chapter Twenty-eight

I'm surprised to find the food hall is full the next morning. On closer inspection, though, it becomes apparent the Bruma just haven't been to bed yet. Most of the men are half naked, the ladies now wearing their tunics. I sit at my usual table and look around the sorry looking group. I'm still feeling sorry for myself. But I cannot help a grin at their misery.

"Get rid of her, she's laughing at us. I can feel it," Jacqueline says to Roman, stabbing a finger into his eye.

"Yes, m'love," he slurs, resting his head on top of hers, appearing to fall asleep instantly. I giggle and go to retrieve my morning pear. Rhone approaches as I am contemplating whether to add a biscuit to my meal.

"You look like you feel better than the rest," I say.

He nods. "Couldn't drink too much last night. We're leaving soon."

"Who? Me?" I ask, turning to face him.

Rhone snorts. "No. Me and the King. I'm taking him on his tour of the sectors. Won't be back for a month." I blink twice at the length of Rhone's speech.

"A whole month," I say, and get a more typical grunt from him in reply. "Is that wise, considering what is happening with my world?"

Rhone looks at me, weighing what to say. "Negotiations are ongoing, they take a long time. Perhaps the King wants to keep up appearances."

I nod. The last war between our worlds had taken six years to be declared and it had only been six months so far. Still, I don't know if the King's decision to go is particularly wise.

Rhone looks sideways at me as I reach for a biscuit. "The King has just sent another response. He will be back from his tour before the reply from Osolis arrives," he says softly.

Without turning to him, I nod and speak just as quietly. "Thank you."

I'm intercepted by Fiona on my way back to the table. She looks like she has been dragged under a sled backwards. She leans her head on my shoulder and the smell of sweat and the sweet aroma of the goblet drink floods my senses.

"I heard what happened with Arla," she mumbles and straightens to look at me through blood-shot eyes. I stiffen.

"Yes, Arla was being a ...bitch," I say.

"Not hard f'her," she mumbles. "Listen. When we sleep with other people here, it doesn't mean anything. It feels good sometimes, and it's fun, but it doesn't mean anything. Marrying someone and telling them you love them. That's what counts."

"Kedrick said he loved me," I say, hope tinges my words. I desperately want her to say he never said it to anyone else.

She nods, then winces as though the movement hurts her head and stops. "He never said that to any of the woman here, I can assure you. Ignore Arla. Everyone else does."

I am so happy with her answer, I hug her. What Kedrick and I had was real. I'd known it deep down, I had just needed the reassurance.

"Oh, and Greta said to tell you sorry," she adds.

"If you see her before I do, please tell her she has no need to apologise."

I help Fiona back to the table and eat my meal, laughing at the still-intoxicated Bruma around me. There is a flash of a shining sword and the swirl of a fur cape as the King moves past the archway. Standing from the table, I hurry after him, hoping I can catch up.

I reach him as he is swinging one of the massive entrance doors open with one hand. It takes me two hands and all my strength to do the same. Rhone stands waiting outside, covered from head to toe in overlapping fur garments.

"King Jovan," I say, raising my voice over the howl of the wind as the door opens.

He looks over his shoulder. “Yes, Tatuma,” he says, voice brusque. Maybe he is eager to be on his way. I shiver as the chill reaches me.

“Have you heard anything more from Osolis?” I ask.

He opens his mouth and closes it again. There is a pause of a few seconds.

“No, there has been no further reply.” He nods to me and stalks past Rhone. Rhone waits for the King to pass before sharing a look with me and turning to follow him.

We both know he was lying, unless Rhone had been misinformed and he was not the kind of person to talk without being certain. Why was the King lying? If war had been declared, he surely would not be leaving the castle for a month. He had seemed uncomfortable, like he had wanted to avoid the answer. Did the news involve me?

It takes two days for the castle to recover its normal bustle. Everybody is readying themselves for the shift to the first sector. Not having much to pack, I spend the time with the children who are the only Bruma who look half alive. I’m delivering my usual reply to a young girl’s inquiry about my veil, when Cameron looks up at me.

“Is your mum still on the fire world?” he asks. I nod.

“Then why do you still need to wear your veil? She won’t know. We won’t tell her.”

The other children erupt into a chorus of promises.

For the rest of the visit and, indeed over the next two days, I think on his innocent and quite profound words. The deep parts of my mind have been whispering the same words to me since the confrontation with the mirror. What was to stop me looking at my reflection, apart from my own fear? No one had to know. The King appeared to have defrosted towards me, but this would disappear fast if I were to cross him on the matter of showing my face.

With Cameron’s innocent words came a swift resolve. This small defiance had, I believe, always been present in the back of my mind. My fear had shrivelled it into dormancy. With the opportunity now presented to

me with the mirror and the awakening question from Cameron, this resolve was now the only thought in my mind.

With nothing else to do, I had time to think of what I have overcome in the past year. Kedrick's death, climbing the Oscala, the hostility of the Bruma, my various broken bones. The thought of taking it off would have never entered my mind a year ago. In fact, I would have done anything to prevent its removal. Having someone else see my face had been terrifying to the point of crippling fear. But to see my own face. To never be able to go back to what I knew before. That fear was indescribable. Unspeakable. I think of one of the court members on Osolis who has a fear of water. He will not wash in the springs at all, and once I saw him scream in terror when someone spilt water on the table in front of him. That is how I felt when I thought about removing my veil.

But whether by choice or not, the veil had been removed several times now and with every removal the terror had lessened. Maybe it would be the same if I practised looking at my face.

On the third morning after the King's departure, I wake knowing it's time to be rid of my mother's oppression. I drag myself down to the food hall ignoring my mind's attempt to convince me to abandon this plan. I grab a pear and approach my friends.

"Fiona, what are you doing today?" I ask. I cannot be sure she has a mirror in her bathroom, but I was unable to think of a good excuse to go to Jacqueline's. There isn't one in my room, I assume it's because it could be used as a weapon. They would have been worried about this in the beginning.

"I haven't got any plans. Did you have something in mind?" she asks. This needs to be done today, I do not know when I will find my resolve again.

"I was wondering if you could start teaching me how to sew," I say. My stomach lurches at her reply.

"Sure, it will be fun. You will have to excuse the mess, though," she says. All the assembly households are being packed for the shift to the first

sector in two days' time. Sanjay looks at her fondly. I nod at her, unable to speak. It's going to happen. This is it.

I am filled with nervous tension on our walk to Fiona's. Sadra and Jacky are joining us, too. I try to act normal, but I know the three ladies notice. My senses are in overdrive. My body tingles as it does when I'm in the middle of fighting Olandon. I hope they put it down to excitement over Fiona teaching me to sew.

Fiona lays out material over the parlour floor. She takes me through the measuring, cutting and threading process. Jacky and Sadra are not at all interested and play cards, sitting on top of wooden chests because the chairs and other furniture have been covered and put away now. They chat amongst themselves about the shift to the first sector. The journey will take three days. Most of it is done on the sleds and then the last day is done by wagon or on foot. They make it sound like all they do is drink for three days. Sadra is complaining about riding in a sled with a hangover.

Fiona looks over my shoulder at intervals and, during her next assessment, exclaims over my erratic stitching. She grabs it to unpick my poor work. The thudding in my stomach comes back, this is my moment. I have been procrastinating all morning. If I wait any longer I will talk myself out of it.

I excuse myself from the room and make my way to the bathroom. The hallway seems to narrow as I get there. The walls throb in time with the heartbeat lodged in my throat.

I hurry into the bathroom and press the door closed, sinking to the ground. I lower my head between my knees in an attempt to regulate my breathing and clear my head, knowing if I take too long the others will come to check on me.

Pushing back against the wall, I stand and start towards the mirror.

My movements are heavy, weary, and memories peck at my mind making each step feel like a hundred. Cassius hacking off my hair, mother laughing as guards whip me, her screams as she hits my head against the ground, a five-year-old Olandon crying as they break my leg.

Bile surfaces. I hold a shaking hand over my mouth and swallow several times before turning to face the mirror.

I take in the small covered girl before me. She looks afraid and helpless. A sudden conviction that I won't be able to remove the veil, settles over me. I don't have the strength. I'm too weak - not good enough.

I'm the girl who lies on the floor and gets beaten.

Tears sting my eyes. I lean forward onto the table beneath the mirror. I know what I have to do, why can't I just do it? Mother is right, I will never be strong enough to rule.

A thought steals through my churning panic. I lift my head to look at the girl again. Maybe I can pretend Kedrick is taking it off, like he did in the forest. My sweating hand barely twitches at my side. My head falls back down.

Then I think of Jovan and the night he burst into my room demanding to hear about his brother. My back had been to the wall and he had snatched off my veil as you would rip off a bandage stuck to the skin.

Quickly, boldly, without thought.

I straighten, and look at the heavy black veil over my face once more. Underneath this pathetic bit of material is a face I have both longed and dreaded to know. This cloth is just like the tower I was locked away in for ten years of my life.

It's time to be free.

Lifting a shaking hand, I grasp the edge of the coarse fabric and with a deep breath, I rip the veil off.

The world is timeless as I take in the impossible sight before me.

My eyes are blue.

My sluggish mind is trying to understand what they mean. Kedrick had blue eyes, so does Jovan, Fiona, Jacky, all the delegates. All of the assembly have them.

On Glacium everyone has blue eyes, but Solati... they have brown eyes, green eyes, grey eyes. Never blue. My mother's eyes were brown, and

my father's eyes were brown too.

I stare at them and will them to change, to turn brown like my brothers. They stay the same. A vivid, devastating, damning blue.

The sluggish part of my mind catches up and in an instant everything I have known, the truths of my life - that I have brothers, that I am Solati - evaporate like a drop of water on the hot ground.

My eyes belong to a Bruma.

I am Bruma.

Chapter Twenty-nine

So many thoughts are hurtling through my head. I cannot be a Bruma, I was born on Osolis.

This is why I have been veiled my whole life. It has to be. There is nothing else obviously wrong with my face - but this. Anyone who saw me on Osolis would know. I scrunch my eyes closed, relieved when the offensive blue eyes are gone from my sight. Really I don't know anything of the time surrounding my birth, only what I have been told. Obviously lies.

Either my mother was not my mother or my father was not my father. Or could this be some bizarre birth defect? The thought of the Tatum taking in a child who was not hers, was as ridiculous as the thought of her having sex with a Bruma. The possibilities tumult over each other in my mind, piling up and crushing me underneath them. Moments from losing control, I place my hands on the wall and focus on the stone texture underneath them.

Were Olandon and the twins even my brothers? Did I have anyone in this world? No wonder the King had reacted with such horror. My mother was tricking two worlds by keeping such a secret. The people would not stand for it.

I open my eyes again and my breath becomes short. I cannot look at the heart-shattering sight anymore. I pull my veil back down and stumble backwards. The lip of the tub digs into my knees and I throw myself forward to avoid falling. Flinging my hands outwards, I crash into the mirror and the loud shattering noise pierces through the bathroom like a knife.

I'm on my hands and knees when the door bursts open. My group of watchmen barge through the door and drop to my side.

Fiona pushes through them.

My tongue is heavy and numb. "I'm sorry," I say in a thick voice.

Fiona hushes me and makes me stand to check over my arms and legs. I have cuts all over my forearms where I tried to protect my face. The ladies exclaim over them and tell the guards to bring me down to the parlour where they can get the glass out. The problem being my legs are shaking too much to walk.

The older guard who never loses his professionalism picks me up and takes me downstairs. The ladies cluck over me, I stare and do not speak while they clean my arms. They try several times to engage me in conversation and I know from their voices and shared glances my reaction is worrying them.

I summon the effort to reassure them so they do not look more into the accident than I wish them to. I don't want them alerting their husbands and for the incident to somehow get back to the King. He will guess that I have looked at my face. Speaking for the first time, I tell them a lie of how my brother cut his face on glass and how traumatising the episode had been to me. I apologise for being absent. The smashing glass had taken me back. It had caught me unawares.

I ask to return to the castle to rest. When Fiona starts apologising for my injuries, I cut her off with a hug. I hug Jacky and Sadra too, surprising them. I need some comfort because a startling thought has occurred to me while Fiona had been cleaning my wound.

We start back up to the castle, wedged between our guards, and I am lost in my own thoughts.

I had assumed my mother had been the one antagonising Glacium, but I wondered now if Jovan did not have his own agenda. I generally thought well of him. He could be arrogant, but I knew this was due to his position, his need to prove his worth despite his age and perhaps due to more than his fair share of grief. When I was around him, I did not think he was inherently evil like my mother. In fact, I had started looking forward to our conversations. But what if he had been using me? I knew I *was* to be used eventually in one way or the other. Whether for information or as a hostage. Though, the likelihood of this happening had been getting lesser every day. Why would he bother getting to know someone he was going to torture? I had expected to be used in this way, but now he held an ace in his hand

which was much more effective. Blackmail, anarchy or ridicule. The possibilities were endless. Who would follow a Tatum with a Bruma child? I remember him lying to me the other day about not receiving a reply from my mother. If you had asked me if he was capable of using me in this way before then, I would have said no. Now, I was not so sure. If he was hiding that, what else would he hide?

We enter the castle, only to be intercepted by my favourite person.

“Excuse me, Tatum. May I have a word with you?” Arla asks.

“No,” I say and continue walking.

“Please.” Her tone is desperate. Most of it put on, but part of it is real.

I sigh and wave Jacky, Sadra and Fiona onwards. They leave after some persuasion. I instruct the guards to wait at the bottom of the stairs and follow Arla as she leads me into a room on the upper level. She walks, hips swaying, over to a table lined with coloured bottles and brushes.

“We have a problem, Solati.” Her desperate tone is gone.

I feel my eyebrows lift at her address. “I believe I have told you to call me by my title once before.”

She sneers as she sprays some strong smelling concoction around her head and looks in the mirror above the table. She looks at me in the reflection, applying something to her lips now. “I’m not sure if you know, but Jovan and I sleep together. A lot. His room is just down the hall.”

Hah! Jacky was right. “I would have thought he had better taste,” I say. She opens her mouth to snap back, but I cut her off before she can speak. I’m past caring what toes I step on today. “Get to the point.”

“Here is my point. You may mistakenly think my Jovan has been showing interest in you. I called you up here to warn you - one female to another - what you’re seeing isn’t interest. It’s pity.” She follows her words with what I think is supposed to be a sympathetic look. It falls more into the category of a patronising grimace. But the desperation in her voice is back. She is truly worried that Jovan is interested in me.

I take my time picking my response, opting for the speediest way of getting out of the room. I sigh loudly. “I knew he wasn’t interested in me.

He only ever talks of you when we are together.” Her eyes light up, only dimming slightly when I mention Jovan and I being together.

“What does he say?” She walks forward and stands in front of me, failing to conceal a beaming smile.

“Oh, this and that. How beautiful you are and how well you organised the snowfast ball. Nearly better than his mother, he said,” I say. A childish part of me hopes that if Jovan is using me, he ends up with this nasty woman.

“Really?” she says, dancing around the room.

I make a grunt of agreement. “If that is all...” I make a move to the door.

“Yes, yes, yes. Go.” She shoos me to the door, but grabs my forearm as I swing it open. I wince as she squeezes one of the cuts.

“You know what? We should be friends. You can sit with me at the front table every so often. It will give you a break from those stupid men you sit with. In return, you could tell me what Jovan says about me when he lets you near him.”

If I were not so distracted by my recent discovery, I would have collapsed to the floor with laughter. “I would be honoured. You’d really do that for me?” I ask. She nods back and winks.

“Thanks, Arla.” I shut the door behind me and take a moment to gather myself after the baffling encounter.

A body brushes past me as I start towards the stairs again. Macy darts a timid look at me before shuffling down the stairs.

Macy is out of her room and my guards are downstairs. The chance is too good to pass up.

I walk to her door, scanning the hall and listening for breathing or footsteps. I let myself into the room with a small creak. Time is short, I hold my veil up with one hand. The room is filled with expensive belongings. Things are glinting and shining all over the room. Instead of brightening the room, it gives it an eerie feel. The rest of the décor is dark, and everything is meticulously placed. A table sits in the corner. I move swiftly to it, heart

hammering. There is nothing of interest there. He is too smart to leave something in plain sight. I scan the room again and freeze at the sound of voices outside the door. I dash behind the screen blocking the chamber pot from view and crouch in the corner. I let my veil down as the door swings open.

“No, go ahead. I just want to grab something,” someone says. It’s Macy.

“I’ll save a spot for you.” Arla is there. If she’s going downstairs, my guards will see her and soon be up.

The door closes. “I’ll save a spot for you,” Macy mimics Arla in a high voice. If I was not terrified of being caught, I would laugh and congratulate her for seeing through Arla’s pretences.

She is not in the room long and luckily she does not need to relieve herself. There is a clanging as a lid is removed and then replaced. It’s coming from the far side of the room.

The door bangs a little as she leaves the room. Flicking my veil back, I peek to make sure she is actually gone. I don’t have much time. There is a silver urn across from me with a lid. I skim across to it and lift the lid quietly.

There are papers in there. Stacks of them. I grab one and read its contents. There are more papers in here than I have time to go through. I open my coat and tuck my tunic into my trousers and then stuff all the papers down. I run to the table and grab half of the papers off, fold them in half, and put them in the urn.

One of my guards is still at the bottom of the stairs, the others are most likely trying to find me. The guard gives out an audible sigh, but does not say anything. I make a quick trip to my room to deposit the papers. By the time I come out, two more of the guards have found us. I go briefly to the dining hall, using the mirror incident as an excuse to leave soon after eating. I grab much more food than I usually do.

“I see you’re finally making an effort to grow,” Sanjay says.

“It’s for Kaura,” I say and force a laugh out.

Back in my quarters, Kaura bounds up to me. I lower to my knees, and collect her to me, trying to steal some comfort and ground myself. She senses my mood and begins to whine and lick my face.

I sit holding her for a long time. Finally, my head quiets enough that I make another discovery so crushing I'm not sure I want to think about it. With blue eyes, all my grand dreams for Osolis were forfeit. I would never be Tatum. Solati would not accept a woman who had conceived a child with a Bruma and they definitely would not accept a ruler who *was* half-Bruma. When mother had told me I would be the ruin of our world, she had been telling the truth.

The only way I could rule would be to keep my veil on and go back to my lonely life. And even then I would have to trust King Jovan not to use it against me for the duration of my life. And then there were my children who would have my Bruma heritage. Glacium would always have a hold over us if I became ruler.

“What am I going to do?” I ask Kaura in a whisper. Did I give up my identity for my dreams, or did I give up my dreams for my identity and the future safety of Osolis? Hot tears spill over my cheeks as I sob and hold her to my chest. I look into her blue eyes and think of my own. What a mess. The crunching of paper underneath my tunic reminds me I have something else to do.

I scan through all the documents, throwing the last paper away from me. There is plenty in there to incriminate Blaine, but nothing about plans to kill me. Yet another dead end. I wonder why he has kept all these documents. I would have burnt them as soon as I had read them, if they were mine. The information was useless in helping to find the killer, but it was information I would keep. I spend the next couple of hours hiding the papers and then fling myself onto the bed, completely exhausted.

My mind won't rest. I turn my thoughts to Kedrick's assassin to distract myself. There is only one other lead I have left.

Tomi had said the Seedyr wood was harvested in the first sector. The assembly would leave for the first sector in two days. The timing was perfect. I could travel with them most of the way. This way I didn't have to escape the castle and I wouldn't get lost. The King was also away and he

was the only other person who knew what I looked like, which would make it easy to escape. I would be back before him. His anger would be placated with the information I uncovered about the arrow. I had to go. I had promised Kedrick I would avenge him, but I also needed time to myself. I needed to gather myself and formulate some plan for my own future. I was done relinquishing control to my mother and Jovan.

Everything I would need to survive the cold, I had gotten from my birthday party all those months ago. The weather would be a great deal warmer in the first sector, too. Food was the only item I did not have. I would stockpile it over the next two days.

And I do exactly that. I'm glad Rhone is not here, he would have noticed straight away. I pack all my belongings into Kedrick's bag, which I still have from our Oscala journey. It seems like an eternity ago. The assembly is meeting in the courtyard. I stuff the remaining part of the arrow shaft and fletching into my boot, then shoulder my bag and whistle to Kaura.

Only half of the assembly is present.

"Where is everyone?" I ask Roman.

He jumps down from helping to pack the sled. "Only half of the assembly goes at a time. There aren't enough sleds. The people closest to the King's table go first. The others are collected in a week." He helps another man to load a large chest.

It would have been easier to disappear with more people.

We start out soon after. I get in the sled with Adnan, Roscoe and two other advisors I don't know, hoping for quiet. I'm wedged between Roscoe and Adnan, their body heat and my fur clothing keeps me toasty warm.

A shout stirs me from a deep sleep. I open my eyes and shift a little, before realising I have fallen asleep on Adnan's shoulder.

"Sorry," I mumble, still half asleep. I hadn't gotten much sleep since seeing myself in the mirror. I kept having a nightmare where I was standing in front of a whole bunch of people without my veil on.

“No problem,” Adnan says. Even if it had been a problem, he would not have told me. He was too nice.

“You slept nearly the whole way. We will be stopping soon,” Roscoe says from my other side. I nod and straighten my veil, pushing the band down.

We stop at a place called an Inn. As foretold, the assembly proceeds to get roaring drunk. I sip away at a goblet, pouring the drink out when no one is looking. I’m still not comfortable with the drink. Malir comes over and sits with me. He is not drinking tonight.

“You know. If you get caught tipping that out, there are harsh penalties,” he says.

“Penalties? Like what?” I ask. I had not thought this would be considered a crime.

“See that large urn over there?” he asks. I nod. “You have to drink all of that as fast as you can. Believe me, you don’t want to do that.” He shudders.

“Thank you for warning me.”

He chuckles, I am close enough to see the laugh lines around his eyes as they crinkle. I can’t believe how different my view of him is now. I used to be slightly afraid of him. I still wouldn’t want to get on his bad side.

“Adnan waters down his brew. He thinks we don’t know, but we do. You might want to do this instead. There are no rules against it. Yet,” he adds and gets up as Sadra yells at him from across the room.

I take his advice and fill my goblet with water. It’s much more manageable. I almost enjoy it.

The next day passes quietly because everyone is hung over. I ride with the same group who don’t seem too worse for wear. I think Fiona and Jacky may be a bit hurt I’m not riding with them, so I try to make up for it by spending the next evening with them. We are now on the edge of the first sector in the middle ring. This is my chance to run. The inn is surrounded by buildings. It will be an easy matter to lose anyone on my trail. I keep Kaura close the whole evening. I will have to leave her behind. It feels like

I'm betraying her, but she is too young and I don't wish for her to get injured. They will find her tomorrow and I'm sure one of my friends will look after her for a few days. I hug Jacky and Fiona again that night. They are too drunk to wonder why and I listen to their conversation for awhile. They are discussing the King's tour. He is supposed to be in the fifth sector right now. Perfect.

Malir is not on duty tonight, he's drinking with the others. Guards have been placed around the Inn. My guard has decreased with the watchmen needing to divide between the two groups of assembly members during the migration. I still have two personal guards, thankfully not the older guard who is more experienced than the others.

I sit in my room as the night goes on and silence falls, signalling the end of the festivities for another night. When the dark sky becomes darker still, I stand and stoop down to pick up Kaura.

"I love you, girl," I say and kiss her on the nose. She whines in response. Still in my nightgown, I move to the door and swing it open.

"Sorry, I think she needs to go out. Do one of you mind?" I ask. The younger guard takes a whining Kaura from me and walks away. The other guard and I watch him go down the hall. I wait until the door swings shut behind the guard before hitting the remaining guard in the side of the neck and helping him to the ground. I heave him inside the room and close the door.

I dress in record time, pulling on the heavy coat and gloves. I rip off the veil and stuff it deep into the bag, then pull the fur hat on.

I deal with one more guard before reaching the outside gate to the Inn.

"Halt," a voice says. There are three sets of footsteps.

Veni. I turn around to face the watchmen. "Yes?" I ask.

"What are doing here?" the tallest one asks.

I gesture at the building I have just left. "I was looking for a room at the Inn, but it's bloody full," I say.

The man glares at me. It is amazing what I can see without my veil on. "You shouldn't be wandering around by yourself."

“You my father now?” I ask, giving him a narrow look.

The watchman isn't happy with that. He waves me on. I turn and walk away keeping my steps relaxed, just like I used to in the dining ring.

“Isaac, go and see where the fuck Rik is. The Commander will have his head if he finds out someone got in.” That's my cue to get out of there.

I have no choice but to stick to the pathway as I leave. It is the most obvious route, but speed is my strategy for the moment. I start running once I hit the cobblestones and then begin zig-zagging between parallel lanes at random. The cold air stings my eyes. They water from the sensation. I can feel the air on my skin. I keep to the shadows, knowing nothing except the further I get from the Inn and the closer I get to the outer rings, the lesser my chance of being caught before I get my information.

Hours pass. The houses get smaller and closer together. The large lanes running between the blocks of homes turn into narrow pathways until eventually I'm creeping down an uneven cobbled space only wide enough for two people. Low ceilings jut out a couple of metres above my head. Jovan would have to stoop to walk down here. Half of the houses, if they can be called that, are in ruins; roofs caved in and gutted. Dark alleyways branch off at intervals. This must be the outer rings. Finding somewhere to stay until morning is my next priority. I have never been anywhere new by myself. How do I go about this? Do they have Inns here? Uneasiness twinges under my ribs.

My instincts have me stopping regularly to listen for noise. The hairs on the back of my neck start prickling. Someone is watching me.

There is a whistle to the side of me. Several other whistles break the silence of the night air. The whistles surround me in a circle. I can guess what that means. I take off at a sprint, winding through the narrow spaces.

I come to a fork in the path and dodge to the left. Hope flares as the path opens into a larger space. I slide around a collapsed building and slow, my hope replaced by dread at the large wall in front of me.

Chapter Thirty

Laughter fills the alleyway behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I see five shapes of varying heights. I need to scale the wall. I turn back, but pull short as I find there are now two shadows sitting on top of it.

I take off my pack and hold it in my hand.

“Look, the child’s gonna fight us.” A small man smiles, he grins at me and my eyesight is so clear now, I can see he is missing most of his teeth.

“Do y’think they’ll take ‘er?” one asks. “She’s small.” I shudder in revulsion, whoever they plan on selling me to, it can’t be good.

He mistakes my shudder for fear.

Aquin is always telling me to use my height to my advantage. I slump my shoulders forward. “W-what are you g-going to do to me?” I ask, keeping my voice shaky and high as a child’s voice would be.

“Have you run away from home, little love?” the tallest man in the middle speaks. “We have found many like you. Young ones, lost and afraid. We’ll show you somewhere warm to sleep. We’ll give you food to fill your belly.”

This man is the creepiest by far, I sense danger emanating from him and wonder if anyone, even a child, could fall for his words.

“Somewhere w-warm?” I ask in a small voice.

“Sure, sweetie,” Creepy says.

“You’ll keep someone warm, anyways,” another mutters. They all snigger and start to move closer. I let them surround me. The space is too wide to force them into single file. The pathway I left might have been a better fitting space. At least here I don’t have to worry about attacks from above. It might be the only place with high roofs I had passed out here so far.

The two up on the wall do not move. All they see is a little girl, they don’t think they are needed to help capture this one. I throw my bag half

heartedly at one of them. He catches it with a laugh and starts rifling through it with the man next to him. Two distracted.

The first move comes, very predictably, from behind me. I cross one leg over the other for momentum and lean to the side kicking my foot high, the kick is full force and straight to the middle of his face. There is a crunch as his cheek bones and nose are broken. It had been six months since I had trained and the movement was not as precise as my kicks usually were, still, it had still done the job.

There is a moment where the remaining four are frozen with shock. The two men drop my pack, spilling the contents onto the ground.

I take advantage of their shock and run to the man on my right. I grab the hand he punches towards me and roll my back to his body, I use his momentum and crush my elbow into his throat. I hear the snap of the small bones through his throat and know he will die soon. I spin behind him as I hear the ting of a dagger being released. The dagger thuds into his chest. I rip it out with a squelching sound, throwing it into the forehead of the man who I threw my pack to. Three down. The two men from the walls are on their feet about to jump down the wall. They have realised this isn't going as planned.

I run at the next man to my right. The dagger thrower. He launches another and I spin above it, catching him just as he is retrieving a third. I land and jump high to level a punch straight to his eye. His head hits the wall behind him and he bounces back towards me, I kick high under his chin. He crumples to the ground. I hear a whistle of a weapon behind me and roll sideways. Someone grabs at my legs as I do, but I kick them away and roll my legs back over my head, then jump to my feet. The two men from the wall have landed now. Three to go.

The remaining three stand in a line and look at each other.

They rush me at the same time. I run to the side and take a few quick steps up the alley wall and flip over their heads. A knife scrapes my back as I do so. I land behind them, sweeping the legs of the creepy man from under him. I round house one of the wall men in the face and slit his throat with his knife and then throw the same knife into the skull of the other wall man,

who is trying to run away. I don't hesitate. They won't have a chance to bring more friends.

The leader finds his feet. "Wh-who are you?" he says. It's his turn to stutter. I know his is real.

I shrug. "It doesn't matter. It does not change anything." He tries to run, I knew he would. I launch up and land on his back, then twist his neck and feel him go limp. I drop his head and it lands with a thud on the ground.

I rest my hands on my knees. My punches had been slow and my muscles were burning. The last six months had taken a lot of my endurance. But there was no time to rest. If more came, I might not be able to fight them off.

There are seven bodies around me. I check the first and confirm it is dead. I go to the fourth one who threw the daggers at me and push a dagger under his ribs when I feel his heart is still going.

A part of me is surprised at my ruthlessness, considering I have never killed anyone before. But the actions are almost automatic. It was them or me, and I chose me.

I have probably prevented them from selling children to become whores or slaves in the meantime.

"Thank you, Aquin," I mutter. I pillage the bodies, collecting several daggers which look to be of decent quality and taking any coin they have on them. Which is a lot. I find it sewn into their clothing and hidden in their boots.

I leave them with their clothing on, which is more than they would have left me with. I go back to my bag and quickly repack it. I grab the wooden band from my veil and feel around for my veil. Where is it?

I walk back and forward along the alleyway. The veil is my ticket back into the castle. I will not be able to return without it. My fingers sweep across some cloth in the far corner of the alley. I sigh in relief, but it is short-lived. The veil has been torn in half. It is ruined beyond repair. I stare at the pieces in horror.

"So where to now?" a voice calls.

I whirl, a dagger drawn in front of me. A tall figure stands on top of the wall. I scan behind me and along the roof tops to make sure there is no one else. I stand up once confirming it is just one person. Though, I remind myself, I was only one person and look what carnage I had just created.

“None of your fucking business,” I say. I knew when I left the assembly I would have to be a bit rude. A lot more, if I took those men as an example.

“Well I would advise that you may want to make it your *fucking* business,” the voice retorts. The voice is feminine, which surprises me. It doesn’t make me trust her for one second. Again, I’m female and look at what I had just created. Plus, the pure fact she is brave or stupid enough to be out alone in the outer rings tells me a great deal.

I take the bait. What have I got to lose? I can’t return until I get another veil.

“And why is that?” I put a few layers of sarcasm into my voice.

“Because you have now alerted most of the outer ring you are here. There are eyes everywhere. Actually, there are eyes watching and listening to this very conversation.” I peer side to side. I cannot sense anyone. Is she bluffing?

“What is it to you if everyone knows?” I say aggressively, trying to mimic Jovan’s voice when he had erupted about the sleds.

“It means a lot less to me than it should to you,” she responds cryptically, tossing her head. “What you just faced were the whore-hounds. An unskilled group. They’re the poorest of thugs. The men who are coming next, however, they’re the real deal. We are talking about men who have trained and who have spent their lives fighting. There are many among these who could easily rival what you just displayed.”

This catches my attention out of everything she has said. Suddenly my plan of run until morning, find out who makes Seedyr weapons, find a new veil somehow and make my way to the castle in the first sector seems impossible. I had thought the outer rings would be similar to the villages back on Osolis. It wasn’t. Veni! I had bitten off more than I could chew.

And I had not counted on there being fighters better than the level of the thugs who had beaten me in the castle.

I say nothing. It is encouragement enough for her.

“Do you have anywhere to go?” she presses.

I still don’t answer. I’m wary of the ears and eyes she mentioned before and I do not want them to know that I am not familiar with the area.

“I have a place you can stay,” she says.

I scoff aloud. “And you would just offer this out of the kindness of your heart?”

She snorts. “Don’t be fucking hilarious. I’m a business woman. Before, I mentioned I don’t have as much interest in your safety, but I do have some.”

“I’m not a whore, you bitch. So don’t even try that shit.” I smile at using so many bad words, though the moment is tense.

“As you look to be a child, I sincerely hope you are not a whore.” She spits this out and I know the concept is disgusting to her. Or she’s a good actress.

“I’m a business woman,” she repeats as she walks along the wall. “I make my money by placing the fighters I own into competition fights held throughout the outer rings.” She lets this soak in. “If you come with me I will provide you with food, shelter, relative safety and clothing. In return you will train daily and, when I deem you ready, you will enter the pits and win my coin.”

I can hear shouting in the distance. The woman looks nervously towards the sound. If this woman, who lives here and owns a fighting business is scared, I definitely should be. Her offer doesn’t sound too bad.

“How do I know you are telling the truth?” It is the only thing holding me back. I would imagine being a paid fighter is probably the most respectable trade I can get into out here and, if she is sincere in what she has offered, I would see it as an opportunity to survive until completing my quest and getting some material.

She laughs and shrugs. “You don’t.”

We stare at each other and I can hear the shouting grow closer. With a deep breath I nod my head.

“I will fight for you in return for the things you offered. I would also like a cut of the coin won. And half of everyday as my own time,” I say.

She snorts. “You have death at your back and you’re negotiating. You got balls.” I think of the ball at the castle with the dancing and music. It doesn’t seem to fit the context of her comment.

“I will give you a small cut of the coin. And *if* you prove to be a decent fighter, I will increase the percentage. And you’ll get half a day off a week, just like everyone else,” she says. Her jaw is set, she will not be swayed from this.

It is my turn to snort. “I’m a good fighter.” Half a day a week is not ideal, but this is my safest option at the moment.

“We’ll see,” she says with an arched brow, turning away.

I scale the wall at a run and pull myself onto the top.

“One more thing,” I say. She looks over her shoulder with a frown.

“If you try to take advantage of me, I’ll rip your head off,” I say and then wonder belatedly if I should have put a bad word in there, too.

She smiles, but it does not reach her icy blue eyes. “Right back at ya kiddo.” She pulls herself onto the roof of a building and then turns back towards me.

“You coming?” She glances to the shadows moving at the end of the alley. I swallow hard knowing this is a pivotal moment in my likely short existence. The shadows creep closer, making my decision for me.

I follow the woman up onto the rooftop, in the midst of Glacium’s lethal outer ring.

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Wolf Moon: A Grazi Kelly Novel

Book 1

By C.D. Gorri

"Hi. My name is Grazi Kelly. There are things I know are true and things that I never would have guessed. First, demons and witches exist and they are evil. Second, the world is up for grabs and the witches are getting their minions ready. Third, I'm a werewolf and it's my job to stop them."

High school sophomore Grazi Kelly leads an ordinary life in the suburbs of New Jersey helping her grandmother with chores and attending Catholic school. Things are pretty good except for her bullying cousin and the rest of

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