

FANTASY OF FLIGHT

THE TAINTED ACCORDS



Kelly St.Clare

Fantasy of Flight

Book Two of the Tainted Accords

Kelly St. Clare

To my younger sister, so she doesn't feel left out - even though she won't be able to read these for another seven or eight years.

To my father, because he probably doesn't want to be mentioned.

And to the Shetland Islands (particularly Whalsay), where the second draft of this book was written, the first title released, and for being awesome in general.

When Kelly St Clare is not reading or writing, she is lost in her latest reverie. She can, quite literally, drift past a car accident while in the midst of her day dreams, despite the various police sirens and chaos.

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. As it turns out, this failed miserably. Do you know what it is like to read something you've written? Not to mention, the ending is ruined before you've begun. Never-the-less, Kelly loves it and wishes she had more time to squeeze it in between her day job as a physiotherapist.

Fantasy of Frost, the first title in The Tainted Accords, is her debut novel. Its sequel, Fantasy of Flight, is to be released on May 24th, 2015.

A New Zealander in origin and in heart, Kelly currently resides in Australia with her soon-to-be husband, a great group of friends, and some huntsman spiders who love to come inside when it rains. Their love is not returned.

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This book is very international. Part of it was written in Australia, some in Londonderry Ireland, a lot in Whalsay, Shetland Islands, and then some in Scotland, England and Europe. The point of telling you all that is to thank my fiancé Scott for being so patient with my antisocial travelling behaviour. Actually, as I am typing this he is trying to point some kind of mountain thing out the window. Thank you.

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And as always, the final thanks goes to my readers. As long as you keep reading, I'll keep writing.

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Chapter One

“Lock it up, boys!” a voice shouts from the end of the hall. The noise interrupts the steady snores from the room next to mine.

There *is* a wall there, but you’d never know. The culprit resumes their rhythmic wheezing. It will continue through the night – my constant companion for the last month. The strumming of a guitar echoes from a room further away. One of the fighters plays, I haven’t figured out which one yet. But the songs always end up sounding more haunting than beautiful by the time they reach me.

My room at the compound is small. I can only reach the far shelves from the narrow space next to the bed. It makes the tower room, where I was locked away for most of my childhood, seem like a palace.

I’ve been here since the night I ran from the assembly to the Outer Rings. I’d taken my chance during their migration to the First Sector castle. Lost, and in great danger, I followed Alzona, the owner of this fighting compound, across the crumbling rooftops and into her fortress concealed at the bottom of a deep alleyway. It was dark at the time, but I still remember the moonlight catching at the spikes embedded on the outside walls and the series of locked doors we passed through.

I haven’t fought in the rings yet. Competitors are not to fight when injured. It’s one of Alzona’s many rules. And I was riddled with half-healed, stiff wounds when I arrived - the consequence of a severe beating and a journey through the Oscala, the pathway between our two worlds. This rule would have worked in my favor, except no combat means no payment. Payment for me is a cut of the money earned from a successful match. More importantly, if I compete, I get half a day off to locate the source of Seedyr wood arrows. The arrow which killed Kedrick. This is my highest priority. My second priority is finding a new veil. I can’t regain my position as the Tatuma of Osolis without it because of my blue eyes. Even if I get into the castle, King Jovan, Kedrick’s older brother, will kill me if he finds my veil off. He promised as much last sector.

“Alright, Newbie, you can stop,” Alzona calls from her position close by. Giving her my real name, Olina, hadn’t been an option, so I had been issued the name “Newbie”. My real name is too easy to for King Jovan’s Watch to track. But the ‘O’ at the start of my true name is also typical in

Solati culture, meaning I'm still unmarried. The name is unusual on Glacium and will raise suspicion.

"We done?" I gasp for air, wrinkling my nose against the smell of old sweat. We were in a smaller room scattered with mats and weights. She's been training me separately from the other fighters.

"You're ready," she says, already walking away.

Alzona is normal height for a Bruma, which puts her at the same height as most of the men here. Her features are as sharp as her tongue. She isn't beautiful as such, but so striking it takes a while to realize you're merely looking at confidence on an ordinary face.

When I trailed after Alzona over the rooftops, I assumed she was a fighter herself. I realized about five minutes into my first training session she had never fought a day in her life. I'd watched her shout useless training orders for a week in the gym and then started to make suggestions. She took my advice, though she was more snappy than usual for a few days after. I would like to ask why she's keeping me separated. But this would breach another rule - No questions.

The only time I see the other competitors is during meals. There are five of them, all male, and they still haven't spoken a word to me. Their names are too ridiculous to be real, but I don't dare ask. Blizzard, Ice and Flurry often swap stories of the pit where the matches take place. I know it's to scare me off. Why else would they discuss the fact there are no other female participants, so often. The other two, Shard and Avalanche, usually eat in silence.

"Fuck, Avalanche, you wanna try and chew a little?" Blizzard says to the huge man as we enter into the mess room. I hold back a smile. His words are rude, but his observation echoes my own frequent thoughts. Avalanche has his own plate they call the "dog bowl". It is easily four times the size of my own. But then he is nearly four times my size. He's bigger than King Jovan *and* Rhone - the biggest people I know. An Avalanche must be a fearsome thing. I'll have to ask the delegates what it is when I get back to the castle.

The huge man lifts his head from his plate and stares Blizzard down.

"Just joking, big guy, ease up. That kind of anger can't be good in a man your size." The others snigger at his reply. Avalanche just goes back to his food.

Alzona stands up at the far end of the table where she eats with young

Crystal. The men eventually stop talking and pay attention. Shard elbows Avalanche, who is still shoveling food into his mouth. He shovels in one last mouthful, the size of half my entire meal, and turns as well.

“Tomorrow morning, Newbie will be joining the rest of you in the main gym. She’ll be fighting in the rings this week,” she announces. Her words are barely out before a chorus of complaints starts.

“You can’t throw a woman in the ring. It ain’t right.”

“I ain’t fighting her.”

“This is a whole new level of low for you,” Blizzard says. Alzona snaps her head toward him. He stands up and glares at her.

Her reply is soft at first. “Last time I checked, these were my barracks. That means my food, my beds and my rules.” She checks off her fingers as she speaks. Her voice gets louder until she’s shouting. “So if I say you’re training with her, you will fucking train with her!”

My heart thuds as I look between the pair. Blizzard struggles with himself for a few moments and then kicks his chair back. It falls over beside the tub holding our supply of water. He storms out with a backward glance. Ice and Flurry share a look before following him.

“She’ll kick your arse, too,” she yells after them, sitting down with a huff. “Men are idiots.”

The next morning the others eat in sullen silence. After breakfast, Crystal directs me through a set of worn double doors I’ve yet to go through. I’m eager to see what is behind them. It’s where the other fighters disappear to each day.

I tail Crystal down the short hallway.

We enter a gymnasium twice the size of the room I’ve been training in. One area of the room is littered with various weights, bars and pulley systems. Mats cover a corner space. The remaining half is largely open and uncluttered, but there is a built-up stone ring to one side. It’s of a similar size to the meeting circle in the King’s castle which seats twenty five men, but instead of seating, there are walls about double my height enclosing the circle.

Shard and Avalanche immediately head for the opposite end of the gym, as far away from me as possible. I get the message.

We begin our separate warm ups. Shard and Avalanche jog back and forth in the clear space. I go through a sequence of Aquin’s on the mats, moving faster and faster, twirling and kicking. I stop when sweat is rolling

down my face. Normally, my veil is soaked by now and sticking to parts of my face. It's one tiny perk of my decision to take it off and pretend to be a native of Glacium. Of course, I'd always planned to have my veil secure for when I returned to the castle after a few short days in the Outer Rings. But it had been ruined beyond repair in my fight with the whorehounds.

"Where are those three morons?" Alzona snaps at Crystal. If I were her, I'd be running to Sector Four. Having the owner's attention is a little terrifying.

Crystal gives her a look and ignores the request, instead going over to her seat to trawl through a stack of papers. Crystal is a puzzle I can't figure out. The strawberry blonde looked to be around fifteen. This is how old the others think I am, too. I don't correct them. She is pretty, and the shortest Bruma woman I've ever seen. She seems to help with the general running of the place. I don't think she fights.

Surprisingly, Alzona only smiles at the young girl's retreat before scowling at the rest of us.

"You lot can start. We'll do the ring first. Newbie, watch and learn." I approach the outside of the "ring". Little squares in the otherwise solid walls allow me to see inside. The only way of getting in or out is a heavy door to one side.

Shard and Avalanche move into the ring.

"Crystal, do the bell and then *please* go tell the others if they aren't here in two minutes they can pack their bags and get the fuck out," Alzona says from behind me. I'm not really listening anymore. I'm focused on what's about to happen.

Avalanche closes the door behind him with a loud grating noise and faces Shard across the circle.

The bell tolls.

I don't even have time to blink before the two launch themselves at each other.

"When do they stop?" I finally ask without taking my eyes from the pair. Alzona just laughs.

Their bout goes on for ten minutes. I take careful note of their styles and ability. The brutality of their fight is alarming. Ironic, considering I've killed without thought. But I think there's a difference between fighting to save your life and fighting just for the sake of it.

"Okay, you can stop now. Stop!" she shouts to get their attention.

Shard dances away from Avalanche. "I don't want you to finish each other off. You'll both be practicing on Newbie." My stomach leaps at her words. I'm a good fighter, but due to the need for utmost secrecy, I've only ever sparred with three people, my brother, Kedrick and Aquin. And during my training on Osolis, we usually used some kind of padding, or blunted weapons. This bare-fisted fighting was not softened. It was raw and, unfortunately for me, it was also skilled.

Footsteps sound from the entrance of the gym. "You can't be serious." I recognize Blizzard's voice and glance over my shoulder. Ice and Flurry stand on either side of him, their arms crossed.

Alzona ignores them. "Which one you wanna beat up first?" she asks me.

I look at the two men standing inside the ring. Avalanche is huge, but in this case, it doesn't mean he's the better fighter.

"Him." I point to Avalanche. I need to work up to Shard. I slip off my boots and walk around to the door.

Shard leaves the enclosure. Blood pumping, I step over the stone framing the bottom of the entrance, pushing the door closed behind me. I look back at the others through the small openings. Blizzard is shaking his head while Ice, in the square next to him, looks amused. Alzona grins manically.

The bell tolls.

I refocus on the man in front of me and barely have time to spin sideways as he bowls through the space where I stood seconds before. My strategy is to use my speed against his strength. Avalanche is slow and overcommits on his punches. I approach him, keeping slightly out of reach. He takes the bait and lunges forward. I step out of his range. He puts too much weight behind his swing and doesn't have time to recover his footing. I move back onto my left foot and unleash a high kick. He staggers away as the kick connects.

"Finish him!" Alzona says. I frown at her. What does she mean? I'm not going to kill him.

I wait for him to regain his bearings.

"You need to knock him out." She calls again. Avalanche charges. I dodge and this time I follow close behind him. When he turns, I spring up and deliver a stinging upper cut. He falls to his knees. I dance back.

"If you don't finish him right now, I will drop you outside the nearest

whorehouse.” Alzona bellows. I don’t doubt her, but I still hold her gaze for a brief moment to show her I’m not intimidated.

He’s standing again. I don’t give him time to collect himself. I run up and launch backward, kicking him with straight legs, one after the other. I help him to the ground with a right cross to the jaw. He doesn’t get up. I resist the urge to check him.

Alzona moves around to the door and opens it. “And *that* is how you get out of the ring,” she says. Her laughing is borderline cackle. Scary.

“Blizzard. Ice. Drag him out.”

The reactions from the others extend from curiosity to open-mouthed shock. Crystal is smiling behind them, the only other person to have seen me train so far. She gives me a quick wink before returning to her papers.

“Shard, Ice. You’re up. Show me you haven’t been up to jackshit while I’ve been with Newbie.” She slaps me firmly on the back as I pass. The Alzona stamp of approval.

Dinner is silent. Alzona eats with a grin featured on her face. Crystal also seems to be humored by something. All the men, except Shard, are sulking.

Shard shoots me an amused glance. He is the only one I couldn’t beat. Alzona stopped him before he could end the fight. Blizzard and I were an even match, but I eventually took him down, too. Alzona wanted me to get used to the finish, so I knocked out four of the five fighters today. Not a good way to make friends, but maybe it would earn their respect.

I lie in my lumpy bed starring up at the crumbling ceiling. A room like this should have driven me crazy by now. Confined spaces tended to overwhelm me. But then, I can leave at any time if I need to. I have no idea where I’d go. At least the option is there, keeping me sane. I draw Kedrick’s arrow from beneath the mattress and twirl it in a slow circle.

If someone had told me a year ago what was in store for me, I would have thought they were insane. I’d endured Kedrick’s death, a kidnapping, and a journey through the Oscala. Not to mention surviving a whole sector in a foreign court. I was so close to finding the killer, I could feel it lurking just beyond my grasp. Finding the answer has become an obsession. Kedrick was the first person I loved, and so much more. A lone friend amongst all of my enemies, a kindred spirit. His life had ended just as he was realizing his potential.

Prince Kedrick had been one of the peace delegates from Glacium,

our neighboring world, with whom we held a tenuous peace. Every three years, or revolution, our worlds would alternate in sending twelve delegates to the other world to refresh and renegotiate the treaty. It's the only contact between our worlds and despite the passing of nearly thirty-three revolutions, since the war, this limited communication is barely tolerated by either side. Our people are too different, according to popular belief. The Bruma are too crude, the Solati are too conservative. I have my own, less popular views on the subject, which Kedrick had shared. Even my brother, Olandon, would be beyond shocked to hear the extent of my plans for when I became Tatum. If that future was still an option for me. I didn't know anymore.

I have a strong pang in my heart, hoping Olandon is safe. I have an occasional fear my mother may have turned her ire on him in my absence. I don't think it's probable. The Tatum has always nursed a particular hatred towards me. By which I mean, she loathed me, beat me, and ridiculed me from birth. Her abuse only stopped when I was taken hostage by the eleven remaining Bruma after Kedrick's murder. Even now the after effects of my mistreatment haven't fully disappeared. I'm not sure I even know the extent to which I'm affected, or if I'll ever truly be free of her.

I discovered the reason for her abhorrence when I summoned enough courage to overcome my phobia and remove the dark veil for the first time in my life.

I have blue eyes. A typical trademark of the inhabitants of Glacium and a color no Solati should possess, especially not the Tatum - the next in line. My eyes are proof mother did something she shouldn't have. She must have slept with one of the peace delegates during treaty negotiations. It was the only explanation for my eyes and her hatred for me.

I've counted the delegation years over and over again, but my age simply doesn't work out. I am now over six revolutions old, or eighteen and a half. Meaning I was conceived between delegation visits. I must be younger or older than I've been told. Or maybe mother somehow met with the Bruma delegate between revolutions. This seems unlikely. Though no less unlikely than my mother sleeping with a savage in the first place - savage is her favorite term for the people of Glacium.

Trying to work it out makes my head spin and I wish Olandon was here to figure it out. He's better with numbers. This will mean I actually have to tell him my secret first. Only King Jovan, the Tatum and myself, know. Suffice to say, if word gets out, it will throw Osolis into anarchy. The Solati

will not yield to a ruler who has interbred, or a ruler who looks like a Bruma.

Eventually, I'll need to figure out who the delegation members were on either side of my birth. If King Jovan doesn't lock me up when I return, I'll ask for access to their archives. This is a big "if". The King left for a month-long tour before I ran away. Even if he wasn't tracked down when I first escaped, he definitely knows of my disappearance by now. The thought of his fury when I inevitably return, keeps me awake some nights. Most days I expect him to break down the compound doors and drag me back. In some ways the Glacium ruler is exactly what I envisioned before arriving on this cold world. He was intimidating, strong and fierce, though, over time I discovered an entirely different, almost protective side to him. I doubt this protective side will save me when we meet again.

I listen to the lingering sound of strumming over Flurry's snores. I will find the murderer and then go back to my responsibilities and position. Jovan can't be too angry when he sees what I've found. After all, Kedrick was his brother.

I'll be back at the castle soon.

I just have to win a few fights first.

Chapter Two

Fighters are not to train the day before entering the rings. Another rule, but one I agree with. I doubt our health is Alzona's motivation behind it, more likely the risk of losing her money if we're in bad shape. She is a business woman through and through. I suppose she did warn me the first night.

Ice is talking to Crystal, who looks uncomfortable with the attention. The barracks talk amongst each other while they eat, ignoring me. If I thought I might be accepted after training with the men, I was mistaken.

"Shard, I need you to take me to Tricks'." Alzona doesn't look up from her papers as she makes the request. "You can have the afternoon off instead."

Shard nods as if this is no new occurrence. The others don't seem interested in their exchange. The others must be leaving the compound and going somewhere in the Outer Rings. This would be the safest opportunity to get my bearings for when I begin my search. It was a maze when I ran through it the first night. I had assumed the poorest area would be similar to the villages on Osolis, where the spaces were open, children ran around laughing and you could stroll through unmolested. To say I miscalculated the perils on the Outer Rings is an understatement, but I expect they will make more sense in daylight.

I clear my throat. No one looks up except Crystal, who scans the table, waiting for the others to respond. She grins at me when they don't.

"May I also accompany you outside?" I ask, trying to keep my expression and voice neutral.

"What does accompany mean?" Flurry whispers to Ice.

I don't try to alter what I've said, though I feel my warm cheeks betraying me. I don't want to draw more attention to the slip. Alzona looks down at me from her position at the head of the table. Her head tilts to the side, dark hair flowing free, as she assesses me.

She grins. It's not a nice smile, like Crystal's had been a moment before. "Why not," she says.

I rifle through my pack back in my closet room. My hands pause. The others will be staying here while I leave the compound. I look down at the incriminating contents of the pack. One ruined veil, one broken arrow and

clothing of the highest quality. Much better quality than the grey tunic and trousers issued to me, like the others wore. Even the clothes I've seen the men wear on their days off are threadbare. What if someone looks in my room while I'm out? Namely, Ice. I hesitate, examining the room for hiding places.

I take out the tattered black material and briefly study the large tears in it, remembering the night it happened. The gang of men who attacked me planned to sell me into the sex trade. Now all of them were dead and their gold was mine. I rip a sizeable hole in the mattress corner, shoving the veil's remains inside. I pull on my most worn set of trousers and leave my training tunic on, forgoing the shining fur coat. The chill of the First is nothing like the bone-freezing temperature in the Third. I'm sure I can handle a few hours. I shove the rest of my belongings – clothing I will not need today – beneath the mattress. The arrow, my most incriminating possession, goes down into the side of my polished boots.

The others are waiting at the entrance to the compound. No, not a compound. The others call it the barracks. I should start doing the same.

“Finally,” Alzona says. She turns to unlock the first of the gates. Crystal follows her outside

Shard gives my trousers a cursory glance and follows the two women out the door. I release my held breath and hurry to catch up. My clothing passed inspection.

The echoing confines of the barracks seem almost home-like compared to the dark alley leading to the main walkway. The high walls block any thin light which might otherwise have reached the Outer Rings. It takes several minutes to get to the uneven cobbled pathways. The narrow lane is crammed full of the poor and the sick. People litter the street and it takes all my willpower not to cover my nose against the smell. Shops selling who knows what have been set up in the empty ruins running down each side of the street. Curious, I peer down every alleyway we pass, eager to get a mental map of the area. I glance down another and see someone sleeping there. But there is something odd about how he is lying. I look again at the crumpled man and see blood stains. I gasp and stagger back into someone.

“Watch et, girly.” I back away from the towering man, stammering an apology. In doing so, I step on a booted foot and receive another angry threat. Shard drags me away from the mess I've created.

There are starving, homeless people on the side of the street. But this

mass of Bruma are shoving and elbowing each other. Why are they behaving this way? A man with black ink all over his face kicks a child asking for coin. I am sickened to my bones.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Shard whispers in my ear.

“Why do they do this?” I ask.

He appears perplexed for a moment, confused about my comment. Then he seems to recall something, as though dredging up a memory from long ago.

“Because each of them is on the brink of survival,” he says and looks sideways at me. “You still look shocked.”

I erase my expression, aiming for boredom instead. Shard gives my face another glance and shakes his head.

The constricted lane explodes into a bigger area, a kind of courtyard. The main feature is a tall building. It wouldn’t stand out at all, except for the barely clothed women draped along the balconies, windows and doorways. The women’s expressions – and some girl’s too – are broken. They are past despair. I bump into Crystal and tear my eyes away. I know what the place is. It’s where I would have ended up if the whorehounds had captured me.

For the first time since meeting Alzona, I realize how grateful I should be. I wonder if this is why she let me come today – if this was an attempt to keep her investment from running away. I wasn’t stupid. My month of isolated training, while supposedly allowing me to heal, was also a design to keep an eye on me. She knew I was a flight risk. Well, she made her point today; if I left the barracks without a veil, I would become one of the nameless dead in a dark corner, or a vacant-eyed woman groped by every passing man.

I have rarely seen such horrors in my life and usually they’re happening to me, not others. By the time I see a similar, studded building up ahead, I’m struggling to keep my reaction at bay. Tears balance at the edges of my eyes. I stride ahead of Shard so he doesn’t see and place my hand on the crumbling wall of the ruin next to me. I focus on the coarse texture under my fingertips until the tears retreat. It is a useful trick Aquin showed me when I was a child, before I learned crying doesn’t get you anywhere in life.

I open my eyes.

The others wait ahead of me, watching. Alzona has her arms folded across her chest and looks at me with a knowing expression.

“What?” I snap.

She arches her brow. “Handled it better than most.” She turns around and bangs on a massive door. The first of many, if it is anything like our barracks.

The door swings open after a long delay. A frowning man fills the frame, but his expression changes the instant he sees Alzona. “I knew it would be you, crazy lady. How you keeping, Zona? Ready to marry me yet?” he asks. It’s the worst proposal I could imagine. Is he serious?

Alzona laughs. “No, Tricks, not yet. I wanted to talk about the fights tomorrow.”

The smile drops from his face. In a second he goes from pleasure to business. He launches into a discussion with Alzona while waving the four of us inside with a dramatic gesture. His eyes move over me, evaluating my value, before snapping back to focus on their conversation.

I listen with half an ear, but most of my attention is on my surroundings. This man’s place is much bigger than ours. It looks much more comfortable. His fighters must do well.

He leads us through to the back of the building.

“Wait here.” He opens the door and shuts it behind him.

“Stop what you’re doing, boys. We’ve got company!” His yell is heard clearly through the wall. He opens the door again and waves us inside once more.

“What’s wrong, Tricks? You afraid of us?” Alzona asks, smiling widely at him. I can’t tell if she’s being genuine or not. Is this man important enough for her to put on a smile? Or does she genuinely like him? Crystal and Shard seem relaxed enough. I guess he’s a friend.

“Can’t have you knowing all my secrets, m’love. It would ruin my mysterious reputation.” He adds a wink to the flirtatious words. I share a quick smile with Crystal.

Their gymnasium is in keeping with the quality of the rest of the barracks. The equipment is vastly better. There is double the amount of fighters and every one of them is sweating. Something I’ve only seen Shard and myself do in Alzona’s barracks so far.

“Who’s the fresh meat, Shard?” someone calls out.

I look in the direction of the voice and am rewarded with a glimpse of the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. He looks me up and down slowly, gives me an unhurried smile. I turn my head away to hide my face.

“Our newest fighter,” Shard says.

This causes a commotion. I can tell most of the fighters think the idea is ridiculous. Tricks gives them a sharp look which shuts them up instantly. Afterward, the owner evaluates me a second time.

Another man whistles. "Hey, does she have a nice little snow name like the rest of you?" His tone is still teasing, but has an edge to it which the first mans didn't have.

"Yes," Shard says. Alzona looks at him, eyebrows raised. I do the same.

He looks at me and smiles. But there's a challenge in his eyes. "Her name is Frost."

I know my eyes reflect sleepless night as I sit down at the table the next morning. At least some of the others have the same signs. I'm more nervous about the fight today than I expected. My spirits lift a little when I see nerves haven't affected Avalanche's appetite in the slightest. It's nice to know someone isn't worried. Or perhaps he just doesn't want to die hungry.

After breakfast, I follow Crystal to the room off the gym where she does her work. She hears me approaching and lets out a long sigh when she sees it's me.

"Why do I always get cornered?" she asks the room.

"Because Alzona is terrifying," I say. Crystal chuckles, not disagreeing.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything," I say. She looks up at the ceiling to collect her thoughts. And I catch myself wondering how a beautiful girl like herself ended up in the barracks. Her friendship with Alzona led me to believe she'd been here a long time. Why did Alzona take her in when Crystal was unable to fight? I entertain the thought Alzona could have a heart. The thought is fleeting. It's more likely they were friends before coming to the Outer Rings.

"You'll be put into the pit with competitors from different barracks around the Outer Ring. They come from all sectors," she begins. "This time, the pit is in our sector. The location changes so it's harder for the Watchmen to catch us."

I look at her sharply. "Watchmen?"

"From the castle," she clarifies slowly. "They flush out the arena and capture as many of the fighters they can."

I wish I could ask more, but I catch her bemused expression. This is something a Bruma would know. Alzona, Crystal and the men probably think

I come from one of the other, more prosperous parts of Glacium - the Middle or Inner circles. I don't care where on Glacium they assume I'm from, as long as they don't discover I'm Solati. As long as I keep slip-ups like this to a minimum, my eye color will protect me. Ironical, considering it has been the basis for nearly all the pain in my life so far.

"Oh...yeah," I say lamely. "Bad sleep, sorry."

She gives me a sympathetic look. "Alzona organizes matches with the other owners. You'll be up against someone of...your own level. Fights are always arranged, except for the big tournaments between all ten barracks. Then a draw is made up. But that's not for another few months."

It was the first I'd heard of the tournament. "Where do we usually place in this?" I ask. Crystal doesn't say anything, but her blush gives me the answer.

"Oh," I say. Obviously, last. The news is not surprising, but it does make me anxious about fighting today. I was fairly confident after beating most of the men here. But it sounds as though the other barracks are better.

"You can see why she's so hard on you all," she says, referring to Alzona.

I shrug. I see the workouts the men do. The majority stand around for most of the session, talking. Only Shard and Blizzard seem half serious about training. Really, Alzona is not as strict as she should be — if you ask me.

"Do all the fights end with a knockout?" I ask. Many of Blizzards favorite stories ended with a person dying.

Crystal gives the door a hasty glance. "Was that Zona calling me?"

I didn't hear a sound. I narrow my eyes at her. "Crystal," I say in a warning tone.

She sits back down and puffs her cheeks out. "Fine! I don't know why they haven't told you yet anyway." She pulls her hair back and ties it in a tight bun with a bit of fabric. It's a dark, stretchy material. Not the kind I need for my veil, unless I want to walk into every building between here and the castle.

"Most of the time the fighting is only until a knockout. But sometimes a punch or a kick ends up deadly, or the opposition falls at a funny angle to the ground." She shrugs. "Sometimes the fighters do it on purpose, if it gets personal."

I blink. Why had no one told me this? "Does it happen often?"

She shrugs her dainty shoulders again. "Once or twice a revolution."

I let out a slow breath. Odds are this won't affect me before I leave.

As our group leaves for the pit, Alzona brings me what she calls my "uniform". I almost refuse when I see it, despite the hard glint in her eyes. Several thoughts stop me. One is the knowledge even the Bruma are comfortable with nudity, so technically I should be, too. Only a Solati would be uncomfortable with revealing so much skin, as we tended to wear long robes. Plus, the leather garment looks like it will cover most of the important parts.

I tug the top on as we walk. It dips down in a V over my chest and stops above my navel. I make sure to fasten the laces extra tight. My trousers are nearly the same as the men's. Their leather is stitched, though, while mine laces up the sides, a strip of skin showing all the way down. It seems a bit unfair. Their tunics are leather, too, and sleeveless, but they're full length. I'm not sure why my stomach has to be bare when theirs is covered. But at least the black material is supple and moves easily with my body.

We take a different route than yesterday, winding further into the depths of the ring until I give up trying to memorize our route.

We eventually stop outside an inconspicuous building. If it can be called that. Crystal grins at my doubtful expression. There's no way all of the competitors are inside this space. And I thought there was some kind of audience, too. Do we go in one at a time? Or maybe we're stopping for supplies.

"Just wait," Crystal says.

Blizzard shoots me a glance and mutters under his breath, turning to glower at Alzona. He's still against my fighting, though I've proven my ability several times. I'm not quite sure what the source of his anger is.

Alzona knocks five times and the door to the rundown structure cracks open. She stoops to talk in a low tone to the person on the other side.

The door swings open. "Late agen. We was this close to startin' without yous." The toothless man holds his thumb and what remains of his forefinger together in an indication of just how close we had been to missing out.

"Just think of it as building anticipation," Alzona says, brushing his complaints aside.

We cram into a tight space and the hobbling man elbows through our muscled huddle after shutting the door. He slides against me as he does, eyeing the deep crease in the middle of my chest. A horrible stench reaches

my nostrils and I know the revulsion shows on my face.

Blizzard's hand clamps down on the vile man's shoulder. "Keep walking, friend." His tone is almost conversational. The man shoots the heavily muscled fighter a nervous, gummy smile and hurries onward to the far wall. Why is Blizzard suddenly protecting me?

I watch to see what the gnarled doorman does next, but he hides the movement of his hands. Then, with a groan, a section of the heavy stone wall slides forward. The man heaves it open and as he does, a distant cheering fills the small room.

"Quickly in, quickly!" The man frets, waving an impatient hand at us. We file in. Blizzard takes his time. We trail down the stained and stinking steps in silence. Water drips from the ceiling, making the way slippery. The roaring of the crowds grows steadily louder and I strain my ears to hear what they are saying. I'm just about to ask when we'll get there, when the stairway opens and I get my first glimpse at the pit. Shard nudges me. I look at him and he glances down at my mouth. I snap it shut with a sheepish look.

I take care my mouth doesn't drop open again as I look around me. It sure wants to. We've been walking down the stairs for so long I was sure we'd be at the bottom somehow. Actually, I'm not really sure what I expected, but it wasn't this. We're now at the top of an enormous circular arena. And from the sound echoing off the torch-lit, curved interior, I know it must go deeper still. A thick crowd leans against a low barrier which travels the circumference of the landing we are on, keeping them from falling over the edge. People push to the front, while those already against the balustrade crane their necks to look over the side. Avalanche rips three men back from the barrier and throws them on the ground so we can get a view. The men scurry off when they see him.

I move up to the edge making sure to keep my hands off the slimy looking support which the Bruma around me seem so eager to brush up against. I look over the side with a gasp. I'd known from the echoes the space went deeper, but not that deep.

There are levels upon levels here. I count six of them.

"How is this possible?" I say to no one in particular.

Shard answers anyway. "There were natural caves here once. The rest was made around fifty years ago."

This must have taken a lifetime to create. I peek over the side again. At the bottom I can see the pit. It's tiny from up here. Two men are inside.

Each stripped down to their trousers. One is covered with blood. I can see their movements, but cannot tell much more from here.

I look around the landing I'm on, and my immediate curiosity is assuaged. Many of the women are bare-chested. Are they whores, or is this normal? I don't dare stare into the shadows of the columns. I learned that lesson yesterday. The men up here are dressed like the hobbling man we met at the door. Some have a few teeth, most are unwashed and wearing tattered rags, and they all seem to have a drink in their hand. Two men move closer to me. I look around for the others and find them halfway down to the next section. Avalanche is looking over his shoulder and beckoning me. I hurry to catch up.

We wind downward. I've counted right. There are six levels. The people on the fifth landing, below where we just stood, are notably wealthier than those above them. It continues in this trend. On the second level, the most prosperous looking Bruma pass coin between one another from their bright cushioned seating. Two men close to the stairs smash their goblets together, spilling the contents all over a scantily clad girl. They laugh uproariously, earning a glare from Ice as he pushes past.

The bottom level is a different story. I already know what it's called because it featured in many of Blizzard's stories. It's called The Cells.

The Cells are filled with leather-clad men. Some are warming up. Others are wrapping their hands. One man lies bloodied on the floor while another mops his face. I realize there are separate groups, small spaces between each of them. Each barrack must have its own area. Alzona heads toward the last empty bench. Overall, it's not so bad.

"I thought the whore had finally given up," a loud voice says behind us. Perhaps I spoke too soon.

This can't be the first time Alzona's heard this type of remark because her reaction is instant.

"And I thought the fuckwit had gotten some new insults. What a pity." She turns around to face a seedy-looking man, who observes our group with a mocking expression on his face. His eyes glitter at Alzona's words, but he doesn't respond. His gaze comes to rest on me, moving down my body. My stomach lurches as I notice his leering eyes. I wouldn't meet this man in a dark alley for anything. Even a new veil.

"And who've we got here? Save another whore?" He flicks his eyes to Crystal who blushes the same color as the strawberry undertones of her

hair. But it's more than that. She looks utterly terrified. Alzona steps forward, but Crystal whips out a hand and grabs her wrist.

Shard doesn't look up from where he sits, untying his boots. "She's our newest fighter, Hale," he says.

"Your newest...?" The cruel man named Hale stares, apparently struck speechless. Then he throws back his head and roars with laughter. He turns to his comrades.

"You'll be fighting a bitch today, boys," he yells. Those who can hear him share looks of disbelief, others burst into outright laughter.

"The slut is trying to make a joke of us all!" he says. The groups around us start to pass word around the Cells. Laughter spreads throughout the entire place. I can see some of the fighters from Tricks' compound shaking their heads, but they don't laugh. My face flames, and I hold my head high, staring straight at the thin man. I ignore the jeering stares of the fighting males who are coming around to gawk at me.

"Look at those tits!"

"I'll tell you what darlin', give me a romp and I'll let you win!"

"Look at that face boys cause it won't be long til she's missin' some of 'er teeth!" People in the levels above are craning their heads to see what all the laughter is about.

I want to sink into the floor and somehow arrive at the castle, in my bed, covered with furs.

Alzona steps up to the skinny man. "Well, if she's such a puny female, you'll have no problem putting her up against Crush."

Some of the fighters hush. Most laugh even louder at her words. Crystal gulps audibly.

"She serious?" one of the men close to Hale asks.

Hale looks at her with narrowed eyes. Then at me for a long moment. My eyes start to burn with my mortified tears. His frame blurs.

He smirks at me and spits on his hand, holding it out to Alzona. Without hesitation, she spits on her own hand and grips his. It's gross enough to shock me through my embarrassment.

"You gotta deal. There's a slot in three fights," he says.

Chapter Three

I warm up behind our bench. Avalanche and Blizzard stand on the edges of the area. I realize they're trying to shield me from view. Surprise is a strong advantage for my first fight, so I'm thankful for their help. I move until my muscles begin to burn and then sink into my stretches. Flexibility is crucial. My humiliation has turned to anger. The feeling is familiar. The more I think about it, the more I see the parallels between my mother's torture room and the pit I'm about to enter. Instead of her and Cassius watching from the viewing balcony, there are hundreds of people. I'm still surrounded by those who assume I'll fail. And instead of her Elite beating me, there's just one fighter - called Crush. I don't want to think about how he got that name. My little snow name, as one of Tricks' men called it, doesn't seem so tough anymore.

I roll my head, shrugging my shoulders. I block out movement around me, focusing my thoughts. Unfortunately, in doing so, I hear Shard and Alzona's whispered conversation.

"Did you have to put her against Crush first?"

"If she beats him, then they'll never say another word against her," she whispers back.

"Sometimes I think Blizzard is right about you." He moves around Avalanche, heading toward me. I smooth my expression from my eavesdropping.

"You've got it, kid," he says, crouching beside me.

"I'm not a kid. I'm nearly nineteen," I reply. I don't know why I tell him. Perhaps I just want someone to know *something* about me before I'm pummeled to a pulp.

Shard twirls a dagger in his hands. I wonder if he's even aware he is doing it. "Right, well. Crush. You can probably guess a bit about him from his name."

I nod.

"Like most large, strong men, he's a bit slower. In brains *and* brawn in this instance." Avalanche grunts and Shard throws a grin in his direction before continuing. "Don't let him get a hold of you and you'll be fine. I've fought him, he leaves himself open on the left when he jabs." I nod again, not trusting myself to talk because I've just heard the bell signaling the end of the

second match. An unconscious, bloody man is dragged from the ring.

The last of the fighters before my slot enter the ring. I look over at Hale's bench and see most of them are smirking at me.

Shard follows my gaze to their bench. "Don't mind them; they're trying to get in your head."

"Maybe I can frost him to death," I muse.

He gives a tight smile. I appreciate him making an effort at my terrible joke. "You know why I called you Frost?" he asks.

I shake my head, still darting looks at the Hale's group.

Shard shoves his dagger back into its holster. "Because frost has a way of taking you by surprise."

Blizzard snorts over his shoulder. "Frost was the only snow name you could think of."

Shard silences him with a glare and turns back to me. "Ignore the crowds. Do what you did in training all week. Oh, and don't try to escape the ring, or your life is forfeit."

Solis, no one told me that! His talk helps, though. My breath deepens and my shoulders relax. My nerves settle somewhat. "Thanks," I say. He claps my shoulder and steps away.

I keep moving to stay warm. It helps to distract me from panicked thoughts. The result is something close to constructive tension, I hope. I wince as a person in the ring is choked until he blacks out. The bell sounds, the winner struts to Hale's bench amid loud cheering. I try to still my shaking hands. Shard and Blizzard wave Alzona away as she moves toward me. I'm glad. My heads in the right place at the moment and I don't need her business bullshit.

I've picked up a new word.

The warning bell sounds again. Copying what I've seen others do, I walk to the wooden door on the other side of the Cells. Men of all shapes and states of dress shout out lewd comments.

Tricks gives me a wink as I pass, and the beautiful man from his gym shouts, "Go get em, Princess!"

I look back at him with wide eyes, a completely different panic rising. But he's already turning from me. I force my feet to begin walking forward again. It was a random remark. He can't know who I really am. My heartbeat sounds in my ears and I grasp for my former determination. It returns as I reach the pit's entrance. The door is open and I can see Crush is already in

the ring. He's laughing with the crowd, pointing at me and jeering as they turn my way.

There are five large steps into the ring. I count every jarring one of them.

A heavy thud resounds as the wooden door crashes shut behind me. I'm in the pit.

For a moment everyone stops drinking, brawling and fondling, to stare at the female child in the ring. The fighters watch the crowd's reaction from the Cells. I hear gasps of shock. Peals of laughter spread in a wave through the levels above me, as it had in the Cells. The noise grows until it's deafening. I prefer it. It's all one big mass of sound, easier to tune out than a single voice. If anything, the other fighter is having a harder time focusing than I am. He runs around the pit, hyping the audience, shouting and encouraging their cruel laughter. I don't think he's particularly worried about me.

A small smile curves my lips. His mistake.

I watch the way he moves. He's heavy footed. Shard was right. He will be slow. It'll be like taking down Avalanche, but this time I won't hesitate.

The bell tolls.

The man doesn't deign to turn and face me. I can see the crowd behind him, they laugh at his antics. Apparently, I'm not worth fighting. His belittling behavior reminds me of Uncle Cassius. Any lingering fear is burned away.

I move forward. When I get within a couple of paces, Crush turns to face me, expression bored.

I keep my muscles tensed, not fooled. He'll want to end this quickly, to send a message to the crowd.

Sure enough he lashes out with his fist. I duck under and dance away. I need to get him away from the wall so I can't be trapped against it. His eyebrows furrow and he follows me to the center. There's the lack of brains Shard was talking about. I smile at him, taunting him. He charges. I feint to the left and then reverse-roll to the right. I trail close behind him as I did with Avalanche, and when he turns, I'm there.

I cross my left leg behind my right to gain power and kick high. It connects underneath his chin. I dart away in case he has a harder head than I've assumed. He doesn't. He staggers back to lean against the wall.

This time, I don't wait to press my advantage. I move to his weaker side. He stumbles forward looking for me. I let him see me, waiting for his left jab. It comes, uncontrolled and slow as Shard had advised.

I dodge and jab him in the throat, not enough to bring him to his knees, but enough to distract him.

I sprint for the wall behind him.

He turns slowly, gasping for air. And the timing is perfect.

I jump high and kick off the wall with both legs. Spinning back to him, I let my left leg go wide. It connects with his still turning face. He makes a complete circle and lands face down on the floor. I land softly on my toes and stroll a short distance away, hands on my hips.

The crowd is silent. There's no laughter.

I have to give it to Crush. He still gets up. Probably helped by the thing he has too much of. Arrogance.

I circle him and let him get to his knees. Purely because it's easier for me. As soon as he lifts his head, I strike. He tries to bring his arms together, but I force them wide with my own so he can't trap me and I snap my head forward into his nose. Blood spurts everywhere.

I tuck some of my hair behind my ear and step back. He sways a bit, but does not topple. Really? This is one of the few times I wish I were stronger. I snap another kick at his head.

This time he stays down.

There is a long, drawn out stillness. Even the bell takes a while to sound.

The door swings open.

As I reach the door, the crowd gets over their shock. The arena erupts. I can't understand much, but one word is said by enough Bruma that I can hear it.

"Frost! Frost! Frost!" The chant booms through the underground space. It's fair to say the reaction when I leave the ring is different than when I entered.

Two men squeeze past to drag Crush out, looking at me like I've grown two heads. I ignore them. Some in the Cells stare in shock. Others avert their gaze. There are open mouths, but there is no jeering.

"Showed them, sweetheart!" Tricks calls, cackling with glee. I grin at him.

Alzona and Crystal cheer wildly as I reach my bench. Another grin

spreads across my face. Shard and Blizzard give me quick smiles, each focused on their own warm up. I forgot they were up afterward. I'd been so focused on my own fight. Avalanche surprises me by picking me up in a big hug before dropping me back down. I look into his massacred face, startled, and give him a tentative smile, which he doesn't return.

"You did it!" Alzona approaches. I'm glad my success helped her to show up Hale after his demeaning comments.

I shrug. "You wouldn't have put me in there if I couldn't, right?" I already know the answer.

She doesn't even bat an eyelid. "Of course not." Avalanche makes a sound of disbelief. Even Crystal raises her eyebrows. I give Alzona a wry look and turn to watch the next fight, noticing the menacing glares from Hale's barracks as I do. I tune them out. If I can ignore the stares of the castle assembly and the palace court, I can ignore the angry looks from a bunch of men.

Blizzard and Ice beat their opponents. Shard and Flurry do not.

We walk back to the barracks. It's evening now, but there's light enough to see where we're going. The streets have filled once more. I like it better than when the streets are empty. The paths seem more dangerous when there's no one around. Alzona chatters the whole way back, ecstatic over winning three fights. I gather this isn't usual. Shard weaves as he walks. Both of his eyes are swollen shut. I pull him gently back into the middle of the path before he hits a wagon.

"Maybe I shouldn't have pitted you against Slay, but we were on such a roll," Alzona continues to babble. I've never seen her so talkative.

"Maybe?" Blizzard explodes. "Slay is the best fighter in the comp. What did you think was going to happen?"

Shard scowls at Blizzard. At least, I think he's scowling. Blizzard doesn't notice. "It was a stupid bet. You lost coin because you got cocky. Again."

Ice pipes up. "Yeah, and Hale would have told Slay to do a number on our barracks because Frost kicked Crush's butt."

She glowers at them all for a moment, but she's too happy with the overall result to snap at them as she usually would. I'm glad someone's pleased. I'm exhausted. The fight was exhilarating. It was a rush, a shock, an overload of my senses. It was survival. It was seeing your life as a tiny speck in the palm of a giant. All of that could make a woman tired. I don't know

how the others live like this. Week to week. It's one thing to fight a few times, another entirely to do it for life. And I get the feeling the others have been in this game for a long time, never knowing if they would make it out of the ring each time they walked down those five steps.

I'm...happy to see the barracks. I never thought I would say it. All I want to do is wash the thick layer of sweaty grime from my body. Even using the tiny tub in the washroom doesn't discourage me. And bed! That sounds perfect. I start down the hall, but pull up short as an arm shoots across the doorway to the mess room.

"Where you think you're going, girly?" I look up into the angular face of Ice and then over my shoulder at the rest of the men, who are all just as serious. Alzona and Crystal ignore them, plonking down onto seats around the table.

"To my room?" I ask, stomach sinking.

Ice clicks his tongue and remains in my way. "You think because you kicked ass in the rings today, you're part of the crew?"

I shrug. The thought hadn't crossed my mind. Well, maybe a little.

"Let me tell you something, girly. You'll never be one of us." He says, watching for my reaction. I scowl up at him, ignoring the stab of hurt.

"That is," he pauses and looks down his nose at me for a long moment. "Until you drink with us!" He shouts and erupts into laughter. The men echo the sounds of his amusement behind me.

"You shoulda seen your face!" He cackles. He turns around, arms spread wide in a dramatic gesture. "Seriously, I thought she was gonna kill me."

"You're such a dick, Ice," Alzona calls out, not taking her eyes off the papers in front of her. It looks like she's counting.

Ice drags me to the table and the men surround me. Shard reaches beneath the station where Crystal prepares our meals and pulls out several bottles. I swallow my rising apprehension. I have an idea what this is.

Blizzard takes one and pulls off the stopper with his teeth. "Now, when we thought you were twelve, this didn't cross our minds. But Shard has informed us you're nineteen." He mumbles around the stopper with some difficulty. I raise an eyebrow at Shard, who shrugs and grins.

"You're nineteen?" Crystal interrupts.

I nod.

"Shh, girly. Fighters only," Ice says. I've only ever heard people from

the Outer Rings use the term girly. Ice must be from around here. From Blizzard's and Shard's speech, I guess they are more educated. If Glacium is like Osolis, the poor will not receive schooling.

Crystal rolls her eyes and turns away.

"I don't see how you can be nineteen," Blizzard continues. "But it doesn't matter. What does matter is your initiation into our..."

"Snow pack?" Flurry offers.

"No, that's stupid," Blizzard says.

"What about the cold crew?" Ice asks.

Shard clears his throat. "I think we're getting off topic. How about we just use the pack?" Murmurs of agreement meet his words.

I feel my heart begin to thud. I'm more afraid now than when I stepped into the pit today. I look across the table at Flurry for some hint; his face is usually the most expressive. He blushes and looks away. He's started doing this in the last few days.

Shard fills six small glasses. Everyone grabs one and with no small amount of dread, I do the same. The men raise their drinks. I know what this is! It's a toast. Adnan, one of the delegates, slurred his way through one at my belated birthday party.

There's no speech this time.

"Tits and ass!" Ice shouts. As I watch in confusion, they turn to each other and clink their glasses twice. I turn to Blizzard, who laughs at me.

"You clink your glass at the top and then the bottom. Tits and ass. See?" He explains as the others grimace from the taste of the drink. What a vile thing to say. However, I've come this far. I clink my glass with Blizzard's, dutifully murmuring "tits and ass" to the hilarity of all, and swallow the liquid.

My eyes water as the liquid burns its way down. This alcohol is about ten times worse than the stuff I drank at the castle. I cough a few times and thump my chest, holding up the empty glass. The room cheers. Maybe now I can go. I move to stand. Avalanche's hand pushes me back down.

I watch in horror as Flurry refills the glasses.

Shard leans toward me. I realize his eyes are sparkling - even with the swelling. He is not masking them, for once, and intelligence burns out of them. In fact, for a person I'd initially dismissed, he's turned out to be the most dangerous here.

"Wishing you were back in the pits?" he asks.

Chapter Four

I crack open an eyelid and the room is spinning around me. Bad. I feel bad. What happened last night? I rub a hand over my face and sit up, clutching my head so it doesn't explode.

So much drink. Too much. There was the second glass and then a few more. The alcohol had started to taste alright. My stomach lurches as I recall its smell. How did I get back to my room? Why is my memory gone? This can't be normal. I groan and lower myself back onto the bed. Veni, what if I said something? Or revealed I was Solati? After a few more spins, I decide I'd have been thrown to the Watch by now if the others knew my secret. How did the night get so out of control? Not that I was given much of a choice and I had to admit the fighter's acceptance felt good. Still, I could've said no.

My assembly friends at the castle call this a hangover. Whatever it is, it's not worth it.

I'm never drinking again.

I enter the mess room and find Crystal and Alzona with their heads together at the table. They look up and snigger at my appearance. I reach a hand up and realize my hair is a disaster.

"First to bed and first to wake," Alzona sings.

"So," I say, breathing through the rising nausea. "What happened last night?" I reach up and braid my hair over one shoulder.

"What didn't happen?" Crystal laughs. "I hope to never hear you sing again in my life. I would drink some water if I were you."

I groan and rest my head on the table. It's easier than holding it up. Maybe I'll sleep here. I hear footsteps coming closer. The others have awoken.

"I hope you're not falling asleep," Alzona says. "You're still expected to train."

"What?" I hear Flurry ask. "Why?"

"Because you've been slacking and it's going to change. You get one day off per week. That's it. And you had yours, two days ago. Get boozed before your day off if you can't handle the hangover," she snaps.

"I only get half a day off." I lift my head to give her an accusing stare. Alzona looks at me and shrugs. "Should've bargained better."

“You told me it’s all the fighters got!”

She ignores me and turns to the men, who are cramming meat and bread into their mouths. I shudder, how are they eating?

Alzona shoos them into the gym. “Go on. You’ve already started late.” She looks back at me and smiles. One of those smiles I don’t like. “You, too.”

“I didn’t get a half day off this week because I helped escort you to Tricks.” This is a stretch of what happened, but I feel so ill I don’t care. “I fought well yesterday and I’d like my half day tomorrow.”

She narrows her eyes and then surprises me by nodding - after a nudge from Crystal. The tiny victory gives me the colossal strength required to stand and walk into the gym.

I proceed to have the worst day of my life. I do something I regularly disapprove of - I don’t work hard enough to break a sweat. The only good part is the men are also hungover and can’t summon the effort to tease me about last night. They *do* have enough energy to reenact my singing. I renew my vow never to drink again every time they do. The only thing which gets me through is the reminder of searching for the arrow tomorrow.

I awoke the next morning, relieved to find the hangover gone. “Where are you going today?” Shard asks at breakfast.

I shrug. “Just around.” My words are honest, not a deferral. I have no idea where I’ll go.

“I’m taking my half day off this morning, as well. Do you want company on the walk in so you don’t get lost? We could meet up later, too.” He must originally be from the Middle or Inner rings, he’s too well-spoken.

I can’t keep the relief off my face. “That would be great. Thank you.”

Shard walks me into town and points to a...building? “I’ll be in The Slime. Come find me if you have any trouble.” Part of the roof has collapsed and someone has scratched the words “Ronah’s Slime” into the half-rotten wood above the door. My nose crinkles. Why would Shard willingly go in there? Surely any place with the word “slime” in its description should be avoided. He laughs at my expression and begins jostling away through the thick horde.

I’m alone in the Outer Rings for the second time.

I can’t help but remember what happened the first time. At least

there's daylight and I have some idea of how to get back to the barracks. Whispers trail after me as I wander. Ronah's Slime starts to seem like an appealing place to be, but then I see people are stepping away, giving me a wide berth. Why would they be doing that? I straighten when I realize. They've heard about my fight in the pits.

I have a reputation. It's better than worrying about plots to kill or sell me and I'll take anything which makes it easier to get through the mob.

Somehow, I drift to the opening where the naked ladies dance in the windows. Five different paths converge to this one point. It's as good a place as any to ask my questions.

"Excuse me," I say to an old lady with a large hump on her back. Old ladies are nice.

"Get off ya," she snarls. I jerk away from her rancid breathe. Solis, what was her problem?

I try again with the next person who looks my way, a young man. "Can you tell me—"

"Not int'rested love. Jus had a tumble," he says. He pushes me roughly, staggering past. I close my mouth after a few moments, rubbing my chest where he elbowed me.

It's the same over the next several hours. Obviously my reputation isn't enough for the Bruma to listen to my questions, let alone answer them. These people are horrible. And I'm reluctant to threaten anyone for answers. I don't know who these people are or what connections they might have. It'd be my luck to threaten the leader of some gang.

I sit on a discolored step and try not to think about what might be getting on my trousers. I watch whores wave and dance in the tall building opposite me. Most of them seem like they're just going through the motions, like puppets, their eyes empty. Pity washes through me as I watch their sad routine. What a way to live. There are some, though, who appear to genuinely enjoy what they're doing. One beautiful woman dances in the top triangle window. She draws the desiring eye of nearly every man passing through - and the jealous eye of nearly every woman. She disappears periodically, probably to do things I'd rather not think about.

Realizing my life could be a lot worse, I shove my way back to The Slime.

I wrench open the broken door. It bangs on the wall and bounces back. A bald giant glowers at me from where he's pouring alcohol. I peer

through the dusty clutter. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle as I feel the stares of people lurking in the building's shadows. I spot Shard's dark blond head and hurry to his table.

"Had a look around?" he asks as I sit opposite him.

I nod. I'm pleased to feel like a friendship is beginning between us, too. I doubt I can have too many of those out here. Perhaps he sees my morning has not gone as planned, because he gives me an amused look and gulps another mouthful. I don't know how he can drink after yesterday.

I hesitate and decide to tell him part of what I've been doing. "People aren't in the...answering mood today."

Shard smiles as he swirls his drink. "You know the best thing about the Outer Rings?"

I shake my head as he tosses back the drink and slams the simple looking goblet on the table.

"People are usually in the 'getting richer' mood."

I follow him to the compound. I've taken this path several times now. I'm fairly confident I'll be able to find my way back to the whore's courtyard by myself. Shard's hint was loud and clear. I think of all the coin I stole from those men. Next time I'll bring money with me. I'm smiling by the time we get back, determination renewed.

I've settled into an uneasy routine. Uneasy because I don't get anywhere with my questioning. Shard was right about using the coin. It makes them listen, but it's like there's some kind of code against answering. Or maybe they can smell when someone isn't from here. I can certainly smell when they *are*. I'm starting to get sick of everyone assuming I'm around "for a tumble", as they so eloquently put it. I judge I have about half a day left until my moral code breaks and I begin using my fists to get results. I'm not on Osolis and I'm not in the castle. There's a whole different set of rules in the Outer Rings and I'm going to start playing by them.

Then there's the veil, though I'm not so worried about this. On Osolis, there are fabric shops in the villages. But there was a royal seamstress who made all of my robes. I'm sure she always hated me because of the dull colors I wore to blend in. Here, I haven't seen anything to help me. No fabric, no clothing shops. Nothing. Maybe I'll have to search the Middle Rings. The material had to be just right; thick enough to hide my features, but thin enough to allow some visibility in daylight. Malir once brought me a fur coat

from a shop so I knew they existed.

Shard interrupts my thoughts.

“Wrath had you pinned last time and I know you got out in the end, but there’s an easier way.” He grunts as he goes through a defensive sequence I’ve just shown him. The last fight against one of Tricks’ men, Wrath, was the hardest I’d had. He wasn’t nasty and snide like the other fighters I usually faced. Afterward, he came to shake hands, much to the amusement of Hale’s bench. I actually enjoyed the round.

“You going to share your wisdom, or is it a secret?” I ask, pushing weights above my head. Training is becoming more intense as our success continues. Alzona can see the coin and is determined to get it. I suppose the boost in morale has made everyone automatically work a little harder. Except for Ice, who still doesn’t break a sweat. How he’s survived this long in the pits, I don’t know.

Shard chuckles. “Guess I’ll show you. I pity you because you were so easy to beat last time.”

“Whatever. You barely won.” I say.

He stops his sequence and shrugs. “One thing always lets you down,” he says and waves at Blizzard and Flurry to come over.

“What? What is it?” I can’t think of anything obvious. I’ve entered the pit five more times in various sectors since my first fight, winning every match – though with my advantage of surprise gone, it wasn’t as easy as the round with Crush.

Shard taps his longer than average nose. His eyes twinkle as he looks down at me. It strikes me the expression in his eyes is too old for his age. I’ve assumed he’s in his late twenties. It’s obvious the twenty or so years haven’t been easy.

“Can’t tell you that. Then you might win.”

Shard shows me how to escape the hold. I practice on Blizzard first. Then Shard motions for Flurry to pin me so I can try it on a different body type. I look up at Flurry who has his forearm across my chest. Jovan pinned me like this twice. The first time to rip off my veil, the second while overreacting to my decision to learn the dog sleds.

Flurry’s cheeks are flushed and though we’re only a couple of finger widths from each other, he somehow avoids my gaze. He’s always hesitant around me, yet I’ve seen him act perfectly normal with the men, and other women. Maybe he’s just shy.

As soon as I get out of the hold, he jumps away and returns to the weights section. Blizzard laughs at his retreating back.

“What’s up with him?” I ask. Shard and Blizzard share a look and snigger. They turn away, ignoring my question and I remember Shard’s earlier comment.

“Wait, you didn’t tell me what I’m doing wrong,” I call out.

The fight next week is in Sector Six. I keep careful track of the lanes and occasional landmarks as we go. Once we escape the packed mass of low overhanging roofs, I’m startled to see how close we are to the Oscala. I never realized my position. The Bruma call it the Great Stairway. The floating rocky islands are the only means of access and communication between our two worlds.

We crunch and slip through settled snow in the shadows of tall brown and green trees until we come to the twisting lanes of the Sixth. Travelling by foot doubled the journey from one area to the next. It was much quicker to travel through the larger streets between each sector, or by a sled and team, but Shard says we travel this way to avoid alerting the Watch. I’m impressed by Outer Rings tactics. The people here are technically the least influential on Glacium, but they have numbers. If they want something badly enough they have the power to take it. Turns out the pits qualify as a good enough reason.

Like my world, Glacium is split into six sectors. Where Osolis is unimaginably hot and in constant danger of fire, Glacium is the extreme opposite - deathly cold. Both of our worlds depend on the other for a livable climate - ironic considering our mutual hate. The point where the worlds are closest, the First Sectors, have the mildest temperature. The Fourth Sectors - the furthest from the other world - are unlivable. This wouldn’t be so bad if the Fourth in each world could be avoided. But the two planets rotate, meaning every part of each world moves through the Fourth position. It’s impossible to stay in one spot for the entire three years it takes to complete a revolution. Instead, the Solati and Bruma migrate every one and a half years to avoid the fire and smoke, or blistering freeze. This necessitates there be two castles on Glacium, and two palaces on Osolis. And so, like the rest, Alzona has two barracks. A spare to use when the other was in the Fourth Sector. She doesn’t own a compound in the Sixth, so we’re staying with Tricks’ group. Tricks owns a compound in every sector. We stayed with him in Sector Two, as well. In the six weeks I’ve been here, his fighters have

done almost as well as Hale's group. I don't know why he's taken Alzona under his wing when her barracks are so far below his own. He seems genuinely nice, maybe this is reason enough.

Darkness is falling by the time we finally reach our destination. Our group sits at one table in the far corner of Tricks' fancy mess hall. The other four tables are full of their fighters. If you closed your eyes you'd never know what these men did for a living. There is laughing and joking between the two groups. It's a roomful of happy people. Of course, the illusion is dispelled after opening your eyes and seeing the corded muscles, ropey scars and broken teeth.

The steady volume around our table grinds to a halt as Alzona draws a strappy bit of leather out of her pack and holds it up. Everyone at our table peers at it. By the silence behind us, I guess some of the other tables are doing the same thing.

"What is it? A harness?" I ask, thinking of dog sleds.

Alzona laughs and chucks it at me. I catch it, moving my head back to avoid the flailing straps.

"No, it's for you." She bends over her food, apparently dismissing the subject.

I look at it, pulling bits of it up. "What for? Is it a weapon?" I press. Flurry chokes on a bit of food. Avalanche thrashes him on the back, throwing him into his plate.

Alzona doesn't look up. "I suppose you could look at it that way. But it's supposed to be worn."

My eyes widen. "Worn?" I hold the straps up, but can't see how they would form anything wearable.

"Where is the rest of it? Or does it go over something else?" I say. I look over to Tricks' table. They are definitely listening.

"Oh, wait." She holds up a finger. I sigh in relief, there's more.

"Use this to lace up the sides." My mouth drops open as she chucks me two thin lengths of leather and bows her head over her paperwork again.

I shake my head. "I'm not wearing this." I toss it on the table.

Alzona lifts her head and gives me a hard stare across the table and I have a second to remember why I don't argue with her.

"That will help you win," she spits. "And it's not up for discussion."

I pick up the leather again and shake it at her. "This. Is not clothing! I might as well not wear anything!" There is only so much I will do to fit in.

This goes far beyond that point.

“If you do wear it, I’ll fight you first!” the beautiful man called Sin shouts out. I ignore him, locked in a battle of wills with Alzona.

“Listen, you little bitch. You know the deal. You do what I say, when I say it, or you’re out on your pretty little arse. Or more likely on your back, because that is the only future for you outside my barracks,” Alzona says, her voice rising. Usually, I can understand her motives. She’s a woman in a world dominated by males, and in the most dangerous area I know. But now? Her words make me furious.

I keep my expression blank, mimicking King Jovan. “You’ll be making me into one anyway, if you force me to wear this.” I hold her gaze. I know my worth. She can’t afford to lose me.

She snorts. “You ain’t seen the half of it, girly,” she says in a hard voice, adopting Ice’s phrase. “You put that on, or you can get out.”

I stand and place the “garment” down on the table. It’s a shame it’s come to this. I truly don’t know where I’ll go. At least I have some street smarts now.

“I’m sorry you’ve wasted your coin on these, Alzona. I would also thank you for taking me in, though as you once said, you didn’t do it out of the kindness of your heart.” I look around at the others. “It was lovely to have met and to have fought with you all.”

“Where will you go?” Shard asks, brows furrowed.

I wink at him. “Best you don’t know. You can’t follow me there anyway.”

Shard raises an eyebrow. He probably knows this means I don’t know. Avalanche rests a heavy hand on my shoulder. I turn and hug him. I nod at Blizzard, punch Ice on the shoulder and smile inwardly as I give Flurry a quick kiss on the cheek. His face flames red. I finally figure out what his issue is.

“Do I get one of those?” I hear Sin call out. I pick up my pack, turn and stride out.

“Is she fucking serious?” I hear behind me.

“Yep, you screwed up big time, Alzona. You just lost your best fighter,” Shard says.

“No I haven’t. You’re my best fighter.”

“Maybe for another week. She’s gonna overtake me soon.”

“Why won’t she just bloody wear it?”

“Doesn’t matter, does it? She’s gone now,” he says. And I nearly am. I even reach the outside gate.

“Wait!” a voice hollers behind me.

I turn, arms crossed against the chill of the Sixth. A strong wind picks up my braid and whips it around. I’m lucky we’re only on the edge of this sector or I wouldn’t have been able to leave at night. I would have survived the pits only to die of the cold.

“What?” I make my voice angrier than I am. I already know I’ve won. I don’t brag about it. It’s probably hard enough for her to chase after me. She won’t take attitude from me on top of our argument.

“You don’t have to wear the bloody clothes. But you’re making a mistake. You get the crowd on your side and you can win any fight. People cheer for Slay, because they hate him. They cheer for Shard because he’s honorable. And they love Sin because they lust after him. You should use your sex appeal.”

“You’ll never try to make me wear it again?” I ignore her continued attempts to convince me.

I can see her jaw clenching and her reply is grating. “No. But don’t think it means you can just do what you like. Nothing else is up for negotiation. You pull any more shit and I swear I’ll leave you at the closest whorehouse.”

“I love you too, Alzona,” I say and push past her.

Chapter Five

I wait to find out who I'll be facing today.

The roaring of the crowd is familiar now. I push their noise to the back of my mind and look absently around. My eyes fall on Sin, he's talking to the man beside him. He catches me watching and winks, flexing a muscle.

I roll my eyes. I certainly don't flatter myself by thinking I'm the only one receiving his attentions, but secretly, I find his antics hilarious. While we've been in Tricks' barracks there have been no less than five females leaving his room. This wasn't unusual in itself. The men at our own barracks had regular female company. But we've only been in Sector Six for three days. I wonder if he's been through all the women on Glacium.

I don't find the tension in the Cells threatening anymore, though I'll never be comfortable with Hale and his men. My eyes search for the long black fur coat he always wears. The vile man faces me, talking to a man who seems familiar in some way. I can't put my finger on it. I study the person's greasy black hair. My heart jumps into my mouth as the man turns and recognition slams into me.

Blaine.

I'm half standing when I remember he can't possibly recognize me. He's only seen me with a veil on. I forgot he was exiled to the Sixth Sector for a year. What's he doing here? I frown. Should a member of the assembly be on speaking terms with someone like Hale? Jovan can't be aware of the relationship, though I don't really know what Blaine's role is in the castle. I never found out. The two men seem like they're friends. They're grinning. At ease with each other.

I've been staring for too long. Slay has noticed and his face is twisted into a snarl. I force my tense shoulders to relax and turn the other way to find Alzona coming back from the other side with Crystal. She looks up and freezes. I've never seen someone go white so quickly. She scurries back, dragging Crystal with her.

Confused, I whip my head around to see what terrified her. Everything seems normal to me. Then my eyes alight on Blaine. She knows him. Alzona's afraid of him! I move around the curved wall of the pit towards where she whispers frantically to Crystal. As I approach, her gaze

flicks to me and over my shoulder. Her face blanches all over again. She throws herself behind Tricks' bench.

A sneering voice sounds behind me. "Where is this woman Alzona, then?" I turn and Blaine stops in front of me, glancing down his oily nose. Hale is no longer with him. I scan the area surrounding me. I'm surrounded by Tricks' men.

I cock out my left hip, crossing my arms. "I'm her. Who's asking?" Crystal fidgets next to me.

Blaine lifts his eyebrows and gives me another once over. "You're her?" His tone is patronizing. Doubtful.

"You gotta problem with that, old man?" I snarl, moving closer.

His eyes narrow. "Do you know who you're talking to?"

I do, that's what makes my next comment so much fun. "A greasy bastard with a stick up his arse?" I ask. Thank you, Alzona, for swearing so graphically.

"I'll have you know I'm one of the King's advisors."

I snort. Bloody liar. "Are you just? And why's the King's advisor in the Sixth Sector? Seems to me the King don't want you no more." Tricks' men watch the exchange, glancing at Alzona, who is hiding, and then at me pretending to be her. They don't say anything.

At the edges of my vision, I can see her feet sticking out from the end of the bench. The temptation to look is overwhelming.

"I am conducting a tour," he says, sniffing. His features settle into hard lines.

I clap him on the shoulder, giving him a knowing wink. "Sure you are, old man, sure you are." I move past him. "Crystal!" I snap, clicking my fingers. She scampers up behind me. We return to our bench and Blaine sweeps past after a few tense moments. I ignore his furious look aimed my way.

"Ice," I whisper. "Follow him. Make sure he's leaving." He looks at me strangely, but slides off the bench to do as I've asked.

Alzona stumbles back to our bench, still pale. Crystal squeezes her hand. The usually bossy barrack owner looks down at me, her expression impossible to read. I don't ask any questions, she'll tell me if she wants to. I seriously doubt she'll want to. It doesn't mean I won't be trying to figure it out myself.

Ice slips back in. "He didn't leave. He's sitting three levels up." I

glance up, but he's not in sight. I wonder who's with him.

I wait for Alzona's decision, until I see she's still in shock.

"Do you need to get out of here?" I ask. She nods. I quickly gather my thoughts. Alzona just organized my fight so I can't leave. If Blaine stays to watch my fight, he'll know I'm not Alzona.

"Shard, Avalanche, Blizzard, Flurry. Get in." The other men have been watching during their warm up. I meet Shard's gaze and then look up at Avalanche. "Alzona's heading out," I say. "Shard, I think it's best if you take over organizing the rest of the fights." Shard nods.

"Ice, take Alzona and Crystal back to Tricks'. Don't let that man see them on the way out." Ice jumps up and down, eyes gleaming. It's the most energetic I've ever seen him.

"That alright?" I shoot Alzona a hasty look. She just nods again. Her meek attitude concerns me. She's usually so strong. What has Blaine done to make her so afraid?

"The rest of us will fight and aim to appear as normal as possible. If anyone asks, Alzona was sick." If we're lucky, Blaine will leave before realizing the truth.

Alzona, Crystal and Ice leave and the rest of us try to settle back into our routine.

"Finally!" Blizzard says. "We can pick our own matches."

Shard gives him a wry glance. "Wrong. *I* can pick them."

I leave them to their work, starting my own warm up. Alzona's absence doesn't go unnoticed. There are a few speculative glances from Tricks' bench as Shard begins to negotiate our fights.

Shard approaches after talking with Tricks. "I don't think you'll be happy, but I want you to know in advance that Alzona did it and this opponent is close to your level. If you're focused, you'll win."

I narrow my eyes at him and wait for it.

"Sin."

"No!" I gasp, swinging a punch at him even though it wasn't his doing. He darts away.

"You're on in two."

I continue my stretches, huffing. There's an actual twinge of worry in my gut. Sin is constantly joking, but I've seen him in the pit. He's a deadly competitor. And I'm not entirely comfortable in close proximity to him. It's one thing to laugh at his jokes and flirtations from another bench. It's another

to have our skin touching.

The next fight goes on. I run over my starting strategy, knowing I'll likely have to adapt it during the fight. I can be sure he'll do the same.

"It's your face," a soft voice blurts behind me. I turn toward Flurry, who is stretching.

"What?" I ask and watch as he blushes. It's been worse since I kissed him on the cheek.

"Your face is your tell," he says. "You show what you're gonna do. It's what Shard was talking about the other day. He uses it to guess your move. Rest of us aren't quick enough for it to matter. But Sin is. And I bet he knows you do it."

I go back to stretching, thinking on his words. Why didn't I think of that? It makes complete sense. I've never fought with my veil off, so filtering my expression was never an issue.

My heart pounds as the warning bell tolls. As usual, I walk around the Cells to the door, passing Tricks' bench. His men shout out at me. Not in a demeaning way - friendly. Sin stands in front of them. He bows and gestures me to enter in front of him.

"After you, Princess."

"I can't wait to see this!" I shake my head at Tricks, who cackles with glee.

We enter the pit side by side. The last few fights the crowd has been chanting my name, but today Sin's name is the loudest by far.

"You're fighting with fame here," he drawls, dragging a finger down the middle of his chest.

"Is that the reason all the females go to your room?" I ask.

"No, *that's* because I'm the most beautiful specimen you'll ever see. And the most skilled." He waggles his eyebrows at me. I shake my head, trying not to smile.

I grasp at focus and it comes quickly. The bell tolls. This fight is different from the others. We circle each other. His eyes move down my body. He's trying to put me off. The crowd laughs with him.

I distance myself from my emotions. I leave them behind.

He inches closer. I smile at him and lunge forward, aiming a fake punch at his head. He moves to block. I anticipate this and my true blow flies toward his crotch. He just catches my foot before it connects.

I need to get out of this hold. I push off with my free foot and knee

him in the face, then push off his chest to flip backward. He staggers, blood trickling from his nose. He drops his hand and to my surprise, he smiles. I see the first genuine emotion ripple across his face. Intrigue, anticipation. Again, I don't flatter myself, thinking his interest is in me personally. I know because his expression mirrors my own.

We grin at each other.

He flies at me and we collide. I block his thrust and punches, taking the blows on my forearms. They'll be black and blue later. Right now, I can't feel them at all. One of his punches glances off my jaw. I hook a foot behind his leg, but he steps out before I finish the form. I land an uppercut instead.

We break apart and continue circling. I'm about to change direction when he does the same. Then I remember Flurry's words. I'm letting my gaze fall where I intend to move, before I *make* the move. Sin is anticipating my movements.

I check to see if I'm right by flicking my eyes to the left. He moves to the right to counter my supposed movement. I keep my expression smooth, but inside I'm laughing. Got you.

I lose my focus for a split second while celebrating. It's enough for him to rush me. I don't have time to think. My body responds instinctively. I duck away from his long reach and swing up onto his shoulders, wrapping my legs around his neck. I throw my weight and he crashes to the ground. I roll, intending to scramble away, but he grabs my foot and in a flash, I'm pinned. He grins down at me as I try to bend my body out of the hold.

"I've got you right where I want you now, little Frosty," he says.

I stop struggling. "Do you?" His hold is unbreakable for someone of my stature, but I'm not losing this fight. I give him a look I saw a whore use and raise my head to kiss him. My lips touch his. I don't really have time to analyze it, but at some level I know it doesn't feel the way Kedrick's use to. It's nice, but there's nothing in the kiss apart from attraction.

He blinks and loosens his hold. I imagine no one has ever tried this on him in the pits before. The crowd is screaming. I thrust a palm up under his nose, hearing a satisfying crunch. As he moves to dodge towards empty space, my knee connects with the sensitive areas between his legs.

He falls to the ground and the men in the stands groan in empathy. I wait for him to stand up. He's not grinning when he does.

I am.

I dart a look at his left leg, then I rush him, purposely glancing to the

left again. Sure enough, he turns so his left side is away from me in the last second before I strike.

I kick out his right leg and he falls to the ground, legs splayed. I give him a right cross while he sits there, following the blow through with my full body weight, twisting my back leg to maximize the force of the hit.

Wrath grins at me as I saunter past. I imagine he's happy to no longer be the only male beaten by a woman in Tricks' barracks anymore. The others are a bit shocked, I think. In truth, I am too. The match was close. He wouldn't fall for my deception twice. Still, I wink at the men as I go past. Let them think I'm the more skilled.

Shard claps me on the back as I throw myself down on the bench. The others cheer and whistle loudly. Avalanche brings over some clean rags and water. Apparently my face is bleeding. I don't remember that hit.

"You just beat one of the best fighters in the comp!" Blizzard sings, bending down to grin right in my face. He literally sings it. It makes him look ridiculous. Completely ruins his image. His grin only grows when I tell him this.

Alzona will be ecstatic. We won all our matches. Blizzard went in the pit twice because he took down his first opponent in record time. He complained about the extra work, but I agree with Shard. If we aren't exhausted from the first round, it makes sense to push on. But I worry what Alzona will do if she finds out he competed twice. I wouldn't put it past her to start putting us in twice every week, regardless of the difficulty of the first fight.

Shard is a natural at organizing our matches, as I knew he would be. His personal experience in the pit gives him an edge Alzona can never achieve. Flurry said all the other barrack owners are ex-pit. If Alzona utilized Shard more often, our winning figures would soar.

We begin our journey back to the First with Tricks and his group. We pass many travelers heading back. It seems no one cares what the Watchmen see once the fun is over. I think it might be a way to let them know the pits still operate, despite their efforts to stop it. A quiet rebellion.

Sin has recovered from our fight and keeps touching the array of bruises marring his face, sighing. He tells everyone he's in love. Our bout has

been turned in his favor. The men think he's great for securing a kiss in the pits. Like it was *his* idea. Secretly, I'm glad Sin made a joke of the whole situation. I think we could be friends once he realizes I won't make children with him.

"There's a sled. Look! It's coming this way!" Ice calls from the front of the line.

I peer around Avalanche, my eyes straining. I've discovered wearing a veil my whole life has affected my vision. The others seem to be able to see much farther. I spot the sled, however, which is changing course toward our group. I squint and make out two figures on the sled. My heart quickens when I see their size. I don't know many people this big. Only three really. One of them, Avalanche, is standing directly in front of me.

It can't be. How common are dog sleds?

When I make out Rhone standing on the back of the sled a squeak leaves my mouth. Avalanche turns to me. I shake my head and glance over my shoulder.

We're between two snow-covered rises. The rounded corner of one is only a few meters behind me. The other is massive, with no cover on its steep incline.

I slow so the men behind me pass. Everyone's attention is on the approaching sled. I duck around the other side of a mound and push through knee deep snow, which hasn't been packed down like the muddy snow on the path. The width of the mound is much deeper than I initially thought. I continue all the way around its massive girth, my breath puffing out as my feet slip.

I still as the sound of Jovan's voice reaches me. The demand in his tone is unforgettable. There are mountains in the distance, but no other cover in the space between. None that I can see. If he comes around here, I'll be caught.

"A child ran around the back of the knoll. Why?" Jovan commands. I creep around the side, sticking my head out. I can't see them.

"He's pissing, m'King." I hear Alzona slur. "Should I gets Bobby f'ya? He'd make a bang up servant. Has most of his teeth, too."

"Not necessary," he says in his authoritative tone. "Carry on."

Rhone shouts his command, "Hike!" and the dogs bark as they pull forward - hopefully far away from me.

I wait until the sled is on my other side before rejoining the group

with my hood pulled up over my hair. I move next to Shard. He doesn't say anything, but I see a speculative gleam in his eyes.

"Why did you run off round there, girly?" Ice blurts out. Blizzard smacks him over the head.

"No questions, dumbarse, you know Alzona's stupid rules." He shoots a quick look at Alzona. Everyone forces a laugh, but I can feel tentative eyes on me. I wish Tricks' group hadn't seen that, though they are the most trustworthy of the other barracks I've met.

I'm in a bit of a daze after the near miss.

But why do I consider it a near miss in the first place? Jovan would have recognized me and taken me back to the castle. He wouldn't have given me away. His blank features could fool the best card player. Rhone may have figured it out, but I doubt anyone else would have. So why did I run? Was I afraid of his anger? Jovan would be furious, but the thought of his reaction doesn't bother me as much as it used to. My memories of him almost seem reasonable after dealing with the Bruma in the whore's courtyard. It takes me a few seconds to come up with a reason. But I remember now. I can't leave until I find out more about the arrows. That's right. I knew there had been an explanation.

The others are staring. I realize they are waiting for an answer to Ice's illegal question.

"I don't like dogs," I say lamely. Avalanche snorts and thumps me on the back, pushing me face first into the snow. I sit up sputtering, snow through my hair and eyelashes. That is when I learn what a real snow fight is.

Sixteen pit competitors use complex wrestling moves to stuff snow down other's trousers and shirts. They burst snow balls with punches and high kicks. And five men hold Avalanche down so I can push snow into his ears.

It is the most fun I've had in my life.

It's only after, when my guard is down, that I can admit the truth. I didn't hide because my business with the arrow was unfinished. I hid because this place and these people are starting to feel like home.

Chapter Six

I feel free as I sit on my step watching the people in the whore's courtyard. People shy away from me because they know of my skill, not because I wear a mask. Fear of my mother doesn't keep them away. It's fear of what I can do. A respect I've earned. My whole life I've known who I was going to be, what the plan was. I would suffer my mother's abuse until she died and then I would rule. But now I'm a nameless Bruma and there are so many choices I can make. There is no pressure to act a certain way or be diplomatic. Beyond training to the best of my ability and continuing to track down the Seedyr wood, I have no worries. It's addictive. Going back to my responsibilities as Tatuma becomes less appealing with every passing moment. Anyway, my people want the brown-eyed Olina, not the blue-eyed one.

I could be happy here with my new friends. And do I really need to know who my father is?

"Not having any luck with those questions, are ya?"

I swing around and see a beautiful woman in front of me, the one all the men stop to gawk at. Why is she talking to me?

I shrug, regaining control over my shock.

"You've been trying so hard, it's caught my interest," she says in a throaty voice, swaying her hips as she moves closer. Every time I come out to this spot, she's dressed in something different - though equally revealing. I should really ask her about material for a veil, I suppose. It might be good to keep my options open, regardless of what I desire.

"Your clothes are nice," I say, hinting at a question. It's the first time I've used the Solati questioning-style in months and I don't quite know why I'm doing it now.

She doesn't respond straightaway. She circles me, tracing a finger over my back. I shiver and step aside, earning an amused sound from her. But it's not a snide laugh. It doesn't fill me with misgivings like Hale's does.

"Yes, they are. I spend most of my coin on new clothing."

"You get coin then? For what you do?"

"For having glorious sex?" she asks.

I nod, keeping the grimace from my face.

"Of course. If you bring in enough customers, the mistress gives you

a cut. Just like your own profession, I imagine.” She arches an eyebrow and I understand her second meaning.

“We both perform for a price,” I say. She laughs.

“I like you.” She decides. “Tell you what. I’m always after some coin. You give me eight goldies and I’ll get you the answer to your question.”

“Don’t you want to know what my question is first?”

She waves a hand in the air. “I already know.”

I contemplate her offer. I have twenty-five gold coins and they need to last. “I only have six gold pieces, but I’m willing to part with them. You will receive three now and three when I get my information. To be clear, I want to know the places where I can find Seedyr wood arrows,” I say and see her eyes light up before she masks the expression. Damn, I should’ve offered her four.

She nods and I slip three pieces into her hand. It disappears into her fist. “Come back same time next week. I’ll have your answer.”

When she said a week, it didn’t long compared to how long I’ve already waited, but time drags. I’m one step closer to finding which of the delegates is guilty. But what if it’s Rhone? And what about Sanjay or Malir or Adnan?

But if it were Blaine...

I found his presence and his contacts in the Outer Rings very condemning. I’d always dismissed Blaine as being the murderer because he was the obvious choice. The exiled man was slippery, cunning. If he were going to kill someone, it would be done in a way which removed him from all suspicion. It was one of the few occasions where I wanted to be wrong.

I need to know who did it. The arrow has been my sole objective for too long now. I can’t stop. I’ll deal with the consequences once I have closure. When I feel I can finally move on with life, at last.

“Pig-shit-for-brains,” Alzona yells. I flatten against the side as she storms past me.

I sit next to Flurry. “What’s wrong with Zona?” I ask. He smiles to himself.

“She does it every revolution,” he says. “Tournament’s coming up.” I wonder if she is still reeling after Blaine’s appearance.

“I’m saving the kick you taught me for the big comp,” I say, stealing some of his food.

“I bet you’ll use it against Slay in the final,” Flurry predicts.

“I doubt it. I don’t even know the first thing about the tournament.”

Ice joins our discussion as he scoops eggs onto his plate. “Not much to know. Each barrack can enter how many people they want. Most put all of their guys in. And there are three prizes. Top Solo, Top Group Fight, and Overall Barrack.”

Shard appears with several bottles as I question the others in more depth. He drags one out and fills up a wooden mug for each of us. Crystal hesitates before accepting hers. I share a sympathetic look with her, while feeling sorry for myself at the same time. She grins, mouthing “uh-oh” at me.

“A toast!” Blizzard says. Whenever I hear those words it makes me miss my delegate friends.

Not for the first time, I long to see them. Did Malir get in trouble for letting me escape? How are Rhone and his team of dogs? Are Fiona and Jacqueline worried about what to wear to the next ball? Do Roman and Sanjay still swap disgusting jokes? And are Adnan, Sadra and Greta all okay? What about little Cameron? And, Kaura, my puppy. She won’t be a puppy anymore. I never intended to leave her, or any of my other friends, for so long. One taste of freedom and I’m willing to give them up entirely. What kind of person does this make me? What if I was born into a normal life, one without a tortured childhood and without the weight of so many responsibilities and burdens?

I hold up my cup alongside everyone else’s. I’ve gone through the motion many times now. Too many times. I’ve learned my lesson, too. I either water it down or stop at a few. Malir, one of the delegates and the head Watchman, gave me this tip. Sometimes I wake with a slight headache, but it is rare. It’s actually quite enjoyable when I control how much I have.

“To the best record we’ve ever had!” The men take healthy gulps of the drink. I take a small sip. I don’t splutter and cough anymore. I’m quite proud of the fact, though it makes me worry about how my insides are faring. Crystal does the spluttering instead. I get up and pat her on the back as Sanjay’s wife, Fiona, once did for me as the men laugh.

Everyone takes a turn going around and making toasts. Soon it’s my turn.

“A toast!” I yell over loud laughter and the strumming of Blizzard’s patched guitar. I found out who created the haunting music, the drunken night after my first pit fight. I thought he was nearly as good as the man who played at the castle ball.

Avalanche steadies me as I lean to the side.

“Don’t you laugh at me!” I stab a finger at Shard’s shaking form. He shakes harder and is joined by Ice.

I ignore their silly man moment. “To the barracks, for...” I search my mind for the rest of the sentence.

“For what?” We all spin to see Alzona in the doorway. Ice starts and catches himself on Flurry’s arm. I point and giggle.

“For throwing us in a fighting pit each week!” Blizzard yells.

“For putting us with fighters we ain’t going to beat,” Ice adds, pounding the table.

“For not training us hard enough!” I yell and laugh with the others. Ice covers my mouth with one hand. I roll my eyes at the added proof of his laziness.

“For shitty mattresses!” Flurry howls to the roof. We stop and look at him. He shrugs. I glance over at Alzona as the others rib Flurry about his comment. Crystal is talking to her, holding her hand. Alzona rips her hand away and storms off. Crystal sighs and runs a hand through her long, straight hair. I run over what we’ve all just said and realize it wasn’t particularly nice.

I swirl the remaining contents of my cup, remembering why I choose not to drink large amounts. The others hit their glasses together as Shard stands on the bench and sings a loud bawdy song to Blizzard’s strumming. I give the expected smile, but the mood is ruined for me.

I think about the way Alzona left and I get up from the table, taking my cup with me. I find her on the roof. This is how she moves around at night. It’s how she was able to reach me in time to warn and recruit me.

I sit next to her and we stay there in silence for a long moment. I pass her the cup and she takes a sip.

“Uh, I hate alcohol,” she says, but then tips back the rest in a single gulp.

“So, I guess I know what you all think of me,” she continues, not meeting my gaze.

I keep my eyes forward, trying to gather my jumbled thoughts. “I’m grateful you took me in. Of all the people I could’ve run into out here, I thank my luck it was you.” I look at her. “Think of what you heard downstairs as suggestions. Nothing personal. You have a pool of experienced fighters who all want to return your favor.”

She sniffs hard. “I’m not a weak woman who needs help. And I only

helped you all to help myself.”

If she wants to hold on to that illusion, I’ll let her. It’s probably true, in part. But I’ve been here long enough to know there are easier places to get fighters than wandering the roofs at night. There’s more behind her words than what just happened downstairs. Her hurt goes deeper. I wonder if Blaine helped to instill these doubts in the most determined, albeit overly ambitious, woman I’ve ever met.

I lean back onto my hands. “You’re the only female to own a barracks. You have six fighters who fight for *you*. Not just to save their skin or fill their pockets with coin.”

“Really?” she asks.

I nod, swaying slightly. “It can’t have been easy.” And I truly believe it. I wouldn’t have had the slightest idea where to start building a barrack.

“You drunk bitch, look at you.” She snorts and stands, holding a hand down to me. I take it and she pulls me to my feet.

We jump down to the trap door in the roof. I stop her with a hand as she lowers herself. “Between you and I, I think it would be considered failing if you didn’t take the advice given to you by your friends.”

From that day forward, the relationship between Alzona and I becomes more respectful. We both know the other is running from some kind of trouble and we’ve both helped each other evade it. To the ecstasy of the other fighters, Alzona heeds my advice and announces some changes at breakfast a couple of days before our next fight.

She has just announced Shard is to help her with matching fights. Though she will have the final say. Blizzard will be in charge of sourcing new equipment and maintaining it.

Crystal clears her throat, grabbing everyone’s attention and earning an arched eyebrow from Alzona. It was against the rules to interrupt. Anyone else would’ve gotten her verbal smack down.

“I wouldn’t mind some help. With Frost’s arrival, I’ve been swamped. And with the tournament coming up...” she trails off, face reddening. Her eyes flicker between Alzona and me. She avoids the gaze of the others.

“I’ll cook.” Avalanche grunts, arms across his huge chest. His scarred face moves grotesquely when he talks.

Silence.

“What?” Shard asks.

“I’ll cook,” he repeats.

“Since when do you cook?” Ice asks, not even trying to hide the grin on his face. I tuck mine away. With great difficulty.

Avalanche shrugs. He makes Rhone seem downright chatty.

“Will you...cook the food?” Blizzard asks into the dumbfounded, but thoughtful silence. “Or just eat it?” I choke on a laugh at his genuine question. Flurry elbows him in the side.

“What? It’s fair enough. We’ve all seen him inhale his food. Once I swear he ate the plate, too,” Blizzard continues. I can’t help it. I burst into gales of mirth.

“We could give him a trial,” Shard says. His suggestion meets general agreement.

“It’s decided then. Avalanche will temp as the new cook,” Alzona announces.

“Ugliest cook I ever saw,” Ice whispers loudly. Avalanche throws a mug at his head. Alzona glares at us until we quiet again.

“Don’t think you all get a say in the decisions around here, just because I’ve asked for input this once. The rules still stand.” She clears her throat and looks at me while the others groan about the rules. I smile at her and nod my head.

“I have one more point for discussion.” Her voice is nervous. “I want Frost to be trainer.” I freeze mid-nod.

“Frost is a consistently hard worker and Shard says she’s the best fighter. I think this will benefit us all,” Alzona finishes quickly.

I look around at the others, hoping this won’t make things uncomfortable. It could be an insult to those who have been here longer. To my surprise though, most of the men are nodding. Ice doesn’t look too pleased. But I imagine it’s because he foresees hard work in his immediate future.

Shard leans forwards, resting his elbows on the table while he analyses her announcement. “It’s a good idea,” he agrees slowly, then adds with more energy, “It will provide structure and give me a chance to learn a few of her tricks.”

“She knows stuff we need to do. She watches us train,” Flurry adds.

“And you watch her,” Blizzard mutters. Flurry hits him over the head and goes pink. I blink several times, struck speechless. Do they realize I have no idea how to run a training session?

The men nod and murmur their agreement. Before I can fully process

what's going on, Alzona has ended the discussion and everyone is leaving for their rooms. I haven't even agreed to this, but my gut tells me a refusal would fall on deaf ears anyway.

It looks like I'm the new trainer.

I escort Alzona and Shard to Tricks' the next morning for Alzona's routine "before the pit chat" and then leave to meet up with the whore. I don't even know her name. It seems wrong to call her the whore.

Four goldies sit in the top of my boot. Three was the deal, but if she gives me decent information, I'll give her four. She must get a lot of intel from those who...hire her. She may be of use in the future.

I stand opposite the whorehouse and wait. It doesn't take long until I see her swaying form approaching.

"Greetings, Frost," she chimes. Her voice tinkles like a wind charm. I wonder how long she practiced that for.

"Greetings...sorry, I don't know your name," I say.

She plays with the folds of her dress. "Not many people do," she says, but doesn't elaborate.

I scan the rooftops and the people around us for eavesdroppers. It's no point really. Alzona clued me into the fact there are hundreds of hiding places on the streets here. I wonder how many people are listening to our conversation right now. "The information?" I ask. She folds her arms.

"Yes. That was harder than I thought," she says. Inspecting her nails. It strikes me she might be drawing this out. For entertainment?

"I paid you for information, not a show," I say. I expect her to be insulted, but she laughs. It's a breathy sound. Men whip their heads around when they hear it. Their eyes drink her in.

"You never react how I expect. I enjoy it," she claps her hands, moving closer until our bodies are against each other. "I couldn't find out anything about Seedyr arrows." I can tell by her tone she's annoyed by this. She doesn't hear the word "no" often. "I found out about Seedyr spears, darts, but not arrows."

"Ven-, Uh, fuck," I pull my head back so I can watch her face.

"I love a good one," she says with a laugh. She sighs at my confused look.

"I have the name of the weaponry joint which sells the other Seedyr weapons. I believe this is your best bet. It's called Jazyrs. It's located where

the First Sector meets the Sixth.” It isn’t exactly what I hoped for, but it isn’t another dead end like I’ve grown used to.

“Thank you,” I say and extract the four coins.

“You’re *most* welcome. I’ll even tell you if I pick anything else up,” she says. The coins disappear into her fist. She doesn’t walk away as I expect, but stays by my side. I let my eyes wander over the building in front of me. “What does a whorehouse look like inside?” I ask.

She laughs again. “You mean a brothel?” She looks at me for a long moment. “Y’know what? Come with me. I’ll show you, if only to see your virgin expression.”

“Uh...is it safe?” I ask.

“Pretty much. Though I don’t know why *you’re* worried.”

Curiosity wins over caution. I follow her through the crowd who part for her. Or rather, she stops men in their tracks, making it easier to walk around them. It’s faster to walk when I stay next to her. Lust ranks higher than fear out here.

We walk through the entrance to the building and I feel my eyes trying to leave their sockets. There are naked women everywhere. Five of them stand in a line as a man walks back and forth in front of them. I avert my eyes and focus on the stairs, but there are some there, too.

“Your cheeks are bright red,” she whispers in my ear with a giggle. “I’ll show you my room.”

Anything to get away from all the nakedness. She pulls me up several flights of stairs to the top room where I’ve seen her dancing.

“Are you the top, uh, whore?” I ask. She dips her head and moves to her wardrobe.

“I enjoy what I do. You’ve probably seen the ones who don’t?” She turns to make sure I understand before turning back. “They’re normally down the bottom.” My shock from downstairs has worn off enough that I realize what I’m looking at.

I stand up and approach her wardrobe.

“You have so many clothes,” I say. I reach to touch the fabric, but then remember what she’s been doing in them and snatch my hand back.

She looks at me. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they? And some are extraordinarily expensive.” She draws the last word out and giggles. “Just like me.”

“Have you decided what you’ll be spending the seven goldies on?”

She laughs. "Four goldies now. I already spent the others." She doesn't thank me for the extra coin.

"With all the money you've spent on these clothes, you could've left the brothel." I say, hinting once more.

She shrugs. "I told you. I love it. The others though," she grows serious. "I don't agree people should be forced into this life. Or into any life. There are girls down there who would kill to have what you have. Your fighting ability."

Her words interrupt my examination of her clothing. "Why don't they learn?" I ask. I survey the rest of her wardrobe. There's no black cloth, the rest is either too thick or too thin. I deny the lightness which fills me with the discovery. Surely, it's not relief.

She snorts. "Where would they learn to do that? And how would they pay for it? Those girls don't earn coin because they don't like what they do. And only those who want to bed someone against that person's wish will hire them. It's a short life span for many."

I look at her in horror. "That's...terrible." She blinks a few times to clear her misty eyes, turning to swing the wardrobe doors shut.

"You don't have anything black in there," I say. I hold my breath waiting for her answer. She shakes her head.

"No. I don't suit black. You though, would look great in black. It would bring out the blue tinge of your hair a bit more."

Damn my guilty conscience. I can't get away from it. "I was thinking of getting a dress." I walk to her wardrobe and open it again. "I want a material about half as thick as this. And, if you say black would suit me, then I suppose it would have to be black," I say. There's no doubt about it. I definitely feel relief and even happiness when she shakes her head.

"I don't know where you expect to find that. If it existed, I would have it. I'd recommend going for the thinner material instead. Men like it because it is flimsy and rips easily," she confides with a wolfish smile. I clear my throat.

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for showing me your...home." I say, backing to the door.

"Oh, I should probably thank you, Frost. You've just done wonders for my reputation." She smirks at me. I puzzle at her words, but cannot make sense of them.

"And it's Willow by the way," she says just before I close the door.

I escape the stream of naked woman and leering men, and make it outside. The top of Alzona's black head is in sight and I shove my way towards her.

"What happened to you? You're pale," Shard asks. I shake my head. No one is going to hear about my visit to the brothel.

Chapter Seven

A fist slams into the stone next to my head. I roll beneath the arm and slam the heel of my palm into the person's side. A rib breaks and I know I'll win. Sure enough the man falters soon after. I keep him in a chokehold until he loses consciousness.

I walk out, swatting away Sin's hand as he tries to touch my backside.

"Don't touch what you can't afford," I say without breaking my stride. I'd heard Willow say this the other day.

Shard chucks me a cloth to wipe the beads of sweat from my body.

"Good fight," he says. I high five the team, then move into my cool down while I watch the next fight. I don't know the two men. They're from barracks in another sector. The men are only decent fighters and evenly matched. I look up at the crowd to judge the reaction. A massive frame sticks out from the rest. Is that Rhone? I squint and edge a little closer.

The sound of screaming stops me from finding out. It comes from above. The fifth or sixth level. What's happening? Several bells start ringing at once. I stand on the spot as chaos erupts, dumbfounded by the sudden scramble around me.

"Watchmen!" Shard shouts and grabs my hand. "We have to get out of the Cells. Quick." I grab Crystal's hand and see the others ahead. Avalanche carves a pathway through the panicking crowd. Shard whistles to him when we reach the third level and throws an arm in front of me and pushes me into the shadows of the columns. I pull Crystal with me.

All eight of us crouch in the dark. Avalanche barely fits behind his. We're the only ones who try and hide. The others from the Cells are running, eyes wild.

I hold my breath as Watchmen pour down to the bottom level. Too many to count. How long do we sit here for? I squeeze Shard's hand and he squeezes it back.

"Wait," he breathes in my ear.

The sounds of fighting reach us in the darkness. Not the kind of fighting we do. This sounds frenzied, brutal, squelching. My legs begin to tingle from my cramped position. I hold my breath as the Watch come back past us, certain they'll hear it. Crystal gasps at the line of chained fighters trailing after them.

Not everyone got out.

The two competitors who were in the pit during the raid are there. They're followed by what I assume is most of their barracks who must have tried to free them. The captives are bloodied and beaten, but worse than this, their eyes are empty. They've lost all hope.

We wait ten more minutes before leaving our spot. And then each of us takes a turn creeping to the next level to check the coast is clear. The underground arena is deserted, with only a few leftover signs of the anarchy which swept through not long ago. Smeared blood on the wall and abandoned goblets. I trip over something soft. Ice catches my arm before I fall.

"Don't look down," he hisses. His warning comes too late.

I only recognize her as female because of her clothing.

There is no more talk until we're safely away from the pits. I think each of us expected the Watchmen to be waiting at the top.

"What happens to the prisoners?" I ask Shard, pushed by some kind of morbid curiosity. I know it's against the rules to ask a question. And I think I already know the answer, too.

"You don't want to know."

Alzona announces at breakfast that Tricks' group is all accounted for. It's the last time the raid of the Cells is talked about, though I notice a subtle change in the Outer Rings for a few days afterward, a heaviness in the normally bustling atmosphere. A new weariness in the people's faces.

I run my first training session. It's almost easy, natural even. Certainly easier than my sleepless night led me to expect. I work on specific issues I saw in the others' performances yesterday. The men train with me for half of the day and fill the remaining time with self-led training. Most of them spend the time practicing techniques I taught them that morning. Ice, predictably, does very little in the latter half of his day. Instead distracting each of us in turn, with non-stop chatter. He reminds me of one of my twin brothers, Oberon. But older, ruder and harder to shut up.

With no other guide, and no experience, I've copied many of Aquin's techniques. The yearning it creates to see my old trainer is unbearable. Though I sometimes go days without thinking about him, there is always sadness in my heart which stops me from feeling quite right. I haven't seen the closest person to a father I have in the better part of a year and his advancing age worries me. He'd been a little strange when we'd last spoken, too. If I stay here I'll never see him again.

We sit around the table waiting for Avalanche's first meal. The room is tense. Not because it's awkward or someone's angry, but because we're trying not to laugh at the sight of the hulking man cooking. He's obviously nervous.

I elbow Ice as a strangled noise escapes him.

"What have you cooked?" Crystal asks the massive man. She's the most composed of us all.

"Beef," he grunts. Cooking has made him talkative.

He's such a contradiction. The first time I met the looming man, every survival instinct told me to run away. Quickly. Then he hugged me after my first fight, and now he's confessed a secret yearning to cook. I find it almost as funny as Bruma loving birthday parties. I hope this means Avalanche has been the recipient of someone's love during his lifetime. Judging by the scars crisscrossing his face, it hasn't always been so. He doesn't talk much, but his actions outside of the pit are gentle. And he's Shard's best friend. I've learned Shard always displays exceptionally good judgement.

Avalanche places a massive platter in the middle of the table and hovers behind it anxiously. Everyone looks at each other. Sighing, I make the first move. The chunk of meat hardly needs any encouragement from my knife to fall off the main haunch. I put it on my plate and cut off a smaller piece. Ice holds his breath as I place one of the portions in my mouth.

I look up at Avalanche with wide eyes.

"It's delicious!" It's difficult to shout around my mouthful of food, but I manage it.

His great shoulders sag as the tension leaves him. A smile spreads across his face. Not just his usual one either. He's beaming. I grin back at him.

Everyone wants a piece then. Murmurs and groans sound around the table as each person gets their first taste of the rich, tender meal. Avalanche settles down at the end of the bench next to Shard and prepares his usual dog bowl. The smile doesn't leave his face.

I wait until the meal is over.

"So," I start. "We're going to need some new equipment to train for the tournament." My first comment earns a few cursory glances from those around the table.

"We have two months to train and I believe we can win if we work

hard enough.” I want to start integrating the new elements for this competition straightaway.

This time I achieve complete silence. A momentous occurrence. Flurry stops halfway through chewing.

“Really?” Alzona sounds doubtful. It’s a poor start.

“Yes. I watched the top three compounds fight yesterday. There’s no reason why we can’t win. But I need two things.” Ice gestures impatiently for me to continue.

“I need a vow everyone here will give tournament training their best.” I look around the table. Everyone nods. Ice grudgingly does the same after a few seconds.

“And I’ll need that equipment.” I look at Alzona.

“Of course. If you really think we can win. Discuss it with Blizzard,” she says, “As long as you don’t go overboard with the coin.” I stare at her for a moment wondering if I’ve missed something. That was too easy.

“I’ve heard Jazyrs is good,” I say to Blizzard. Two birds, one stone. I’ll investigate the arrow while I’m there.

He nods. “I think Tricks uses him.”

“There’s one other thing,” Shard says. He looks at me for a moment before turning to Alzona. She looks at him and waits. He taps a finger on the table.

“We can’t fight in the few weeks before the tournament,” he declares. Alzona opens her mouth. She’s going to say no, I can already tell. And I have to say I agree with her. We need all the practice we can get.

Shard holds up a hand. “Every year Hale’s compound takes out their biggest competitors during that time. Last revolution it was me and Blizzard. We couldn’t compete because of our injuries. My ribs took two months to heal. If you want to win the tournament, you’ll have to keep us out of the pits in the few weeks before. Even Tricks only puts in his bottom fighters.”

I rethink my position. When he puts it like that, it makes sense.

Alzona is silent for a long time. She looks at Crystal who arches an eyebrow. Their wordless communication makes me think of Olandon. We do that, too.

She narrows her eyes. “Alright,” she says. The word draws out like it’s dragged from her. She won’t be happy missing the lost coin. I’m surprised she’s agreeing at all. The prize for Overall Barracks must be huge.

“Also, Frost needs to fight Slay before we go in. Sometime in the next

couple of weeks,” he adds.

“What!” I explode. I thought Shard wanted us fit for the tournament.

“Without winning against Slay, our chance at coming in as top barracks is slim. You have the ability to take him down, but his speed has a way of taking people by surprise. You need to experience it firsthand and train with it in mind. And we need to do it soon so he doesn’t think about killing you to take you out of the tournament.”

I blink at him. He speaks so casually about my death. Slay is the best fighter for a reason. It would be an extremely difficult fight. The men contemplate it, expressions serious.

“It’s a good idea,” Blizzard says. Avalanche nods.

“Wha—” I sputter.

“If we do it soon, he won’t kill her,” Ice says.

“He’s really quick.” At least Flurry is semi-apologetic.

Blizzard, Ice and I make our way through the tangled paths of the Outer Ring. I’ve made sense of the lanes in the First Sector, learning by memorizing the twists and turns, but this new territory makes my head spin. Glacium is set up with its two castles in the center with the assembly residences immediately outside the gates. The assembly is like my mother’s court on Osolis. The richest civilians live in the Inner Ring surrounding the assembly, and then the Middle Ring surrounds them. Finally, the poorest Bruma live in the Outer Ring which extends nearly all the way to the edges of their world. As to the organization of the Outer Rings, I honestly don’t think there is one. Where the Inner and Middle Rings are built in consistent layers, like an onion, with large roads between them, the lanes here are a jumbled mess.

“Why are most of the fights in the First Sector?” I ask.

“Best weather,” Blizzard says. “Gives the other barracks a break.” He tosses a bit of bread to an elderly homeless woman sleeping on the side of the road. One of the hundreds in this area. The woman grabs at the morsel, tearing large chunks from the loaf. I don’t know how. She doesn’t appear to have any teeth. I glimpse Blizzard’s expression as he watches her and I know he’s been this hungry before. He’s more like Alzona, in that he’s striking, rather than handsome. The opinionated fighter argues with everyone in the barracks, usually several times per week. It’d be easy to dislike him if you didn’t witness acts like this which explained why he did things like yell at Flurry over wasting water. You couldn’t help respecting him when you saw

him feeding the hungry or handing out his old clothes. He remains the only Bruma I've seen helping another in the Outer Rings, just because he can.

"Here we are," Ice calls out. I tilt my head back and see a faded sign above a low, sprawling building. Jazyrs. I take a swig of water, my mouth dry. At least the name isn't Jazyrs' Slime.

We enter the building and I scan the room with forced disinterest as Blizzard talks to an overweight man. Weapons of all sorts are chained to the walls and four men sit in the corners of the room. No doubt they're armed against thieves. I immediately want to see how skilled they are, but I shove the urge away. Blizzard motions to me and I take over the discussion with the owner, quickly describing what I'm after. It's not a long list; lengths of rope, a few new weapons, and weights. I glance over my shoulder. Blizzard and Ice are examining a massive sword. I turn back to the heavy man.

"I'd also like to buy some Seedyr wood arrows," I say casually.

"Seedyr wood arrows? What you want those for? Useless," he says and barks a laugh. It pushes the smell of his breath to me. I mask my revulsion.

"Why I want it is my business." I slip a coin into his hand. "What can you tell me of the arrows?"

He turns the coin over in his hand, lips pursed. He darts a look at Blizzard and Ice. "I can tell you I don't know of anyone who uses them. I only source Seedyr spears to sell to the poor for hunting." He strokes his moustache. "Don't sell many bows and arrows at all. Not so good in the wind around here." He leans in closer. I hold myself still, but narrow my eyes at him in warning. "About Seedyr itself? An easy grain to straighten. Wouldn't be hard to make arrows, I s'pose. Don't know why you'd bother. They'd just snap." His words ring true with what I already know from Tomi and Jovan.

I don't speak a word on the trip home, warring between fury and devastation. Blizzard pushes the barrow near overflowing with the new equipment. Ice and I walk on either side of the cart to guide it over the more uneven parts of the pathway. The others must sense my mood, because they don't attempt to draw me into their conversation.

My time in the Outer Ring has been a waste. This was my best lead. I've risked my life over and over again and I keep coming up empty-handed. All those hours spent in the whore's courtyard shoved and ignored. Now I have no way back and nothing to show Jovan for the trouble I've caused, even if I can somehow find a veil. A dead end with the delegates. Dead end

searching Blaine's room. Dead end matching the castle arrows to Kedrick's arrow. Dead end with the Seedyr wood. Dead just like Kedrick.

I ignore the others when we get back. I change into my training gear and decline dinner to escape to the gymnasium. I wrap my hands and move to the punching bag.

I let loose a string of swear words as I rain blow after blow on the swinging bag.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I scream in time to my punches.

Eventually I stop speaking, but I continue to work out for hours. When I sink to the ground, I'm so tired I can't even cry. Sighing, I unwrap my hands and head into the mess room. To my surprise no one has gone to bed. I go to the bench and scoop water out of the trough. Avalanche intercepts me and wraps me in a hug so tight I can barely breathe. He puts me down and goes back to his preparation for tomorrow's meals.

I sit down and everyone seems absorbed in their own thoughts, no one speaks. One by one, as they get up to leave, they pat me on the back or squeeze my hand. Crystal kisses me on the cheek. By the time it's down to Shard and Avalanche, I'm struggling to keep my tears at bay. I doubt they know exactly what I'm upset about. But they know something happened today and they've all stayed up to show their support. I swallow the lump in my throat.

"You okay now?" Shard asks.

I think about it. There's a heavy weight in my heart, but I'm clear-headed for the moment.

"Yes. I am," I say hoarsely. He gives me a tired smile and leaves with Avalanche.

I was wrong. My time here hasn't been a waste. I didn't find what I wanted, but perhaps I've found what I need.

Chapter Eight

With new equipment, I launch into a fresh set of training exercises. The tournament consists of one-on-one and group fighting. The first category is easy; we all have experience with this. I spend time correcting bad habits. By their recommendation, I start lifting more weights. I thought the added bulk would slow me, so I've never done it before. My punches and kicks only grow more powerful, more efficient.

For me, the group category is the most exciting part of our sessions. I start the men on easier drills and make them more complicated and dangerous each week. I know they're curious as to why I am giving them these aerobic exercises and dance-like routines. The depth of their trust keeps me awake at night, praying I don't let them down.

This week I fight Slay. The odds are against me. Our skill levels are similar, but he has many revolutions of fighting experience. Still, I don't plan to make it easy for him. I'll gather information for the real fight at the tournament. And if I win - even better.

"I heard something interesting yesterday," Shard says. I chew my meal with eyes closed. Avalanche has outdone himself. I don't know what the meat is and I don't want to ask, but it tastes delicious.

"What's that?" I'm more interested in my plate than his gossip.

"I heard Frost, the fierce female warrior, visited Leila. The First Sector's most sought after whore," he says.

"Who's Leila?" I ask.

He tilts his head in amusement. "The woman who dances in the top room. I've seen you talking to her."

My confusion clears. "Oh, you mean—" I realize Willow's name isn't common knowledge. "I know who you mean." I finish lamely. "Yes, I went into her room." I shrug. "What of it?"

I look up to see the whole table staring at me. Flurry shifts uncomfortably on the bench.

"You spent time with Leila?" Blizzard asks, he sighs and closes his eyes. "That would have been a sight to see."

Ice wrinkles his nose. "I dunno. That's like watching your sister do it."

Blizzard shudders in response. "True."

I gasp when I understand what they're all thinking. "She just showed me her clothes! Nothing like *that* happened." I remember Willow's comment as I left. She knew my visit would be taken this way. Alzona and Crystal share a small smile.

"Well, the whole Outer Ring is talking about it," Shard says once the others stop laughing. He rests his elbows on the table as he leans forward. "You'll hear about it in the Cells. I'd just go with it. You'll have most of the fighters distracted. And it makes you seem untouchable. Don't show the gossip bothers you and you'll be fine." When Shard says something like this, he's normally right.

The warning bell tolls. I'm struggling to focus. It's how I know I'm more nervous than I've ever been. Slay prowls past our bench without looking my way.

"How was she?" a man from an unknown barracks yells as I move to follow my deadly opponent.

"I'd tell you to try her, but she's picky about who she has," I call over my shoulder. I smile at the groans that result from my words - or Alzona's words in a last minute coaching session.

I take the five steps down into the pit. Focus, Olina.

Slay.

The best and most evil of Hale's fighters. The tales of him and his brother, Butcher, are sickening. The duo is knee-deep in most of the crime occurring in the Outer Ring. And with the size of Hale's barracks, they are near unstoppable. He dances in front of me.

We both tense as the second bell sounds. It strikes me he may be a little...concerned about the outcome.

"You finally got balls, Snowdrop." He hisses, spittle spraying towards me. He begins to circle.

"Had to see what all the fuss was about. Can't say I'm impressed so far." His eyes narrow at my insult, but he doesn't take the bait. He's too clever for that. Has probably heard something similar every week for the last ten years.

I know I'm in trouble when he flashes a punch at my face so quickly I have to give him two meters to recover. Shard wasn't exaggerating his speed. We begin our dance.

We exchange blow after blow. I block most of his hits, but some get

through. I've only landed the same amount of hits as he has. The simple fact that he's bigger and stronger will give him the win if I don't change my tactics.

The crowd is quiet from the growing tension between me and Slay. It's the longest fight I've had yet. I know my endurance is flagging, but he doesn't look so good either. We fly around the stone circle in powerful bursts of movement. I pant with the effort, aiming a kick at his cheekbone. There is a split second where I realize my eyes have given away the destination of my strike.

A crushing fist hits me in the side of the head. I stagger back.

The crowd sounds funny, muted. They're moving in slow motion. The floor slams into me.

I force open heavy eyelids to find a circle of concerned faces hovering over me. I wince and gingerly sit up, holding my head. Crystal is wringing out a bloodied cloth. I feel around and find a large cut above my ear and a huge lump on my jaw. Not broken.

"You just lasted half an hour in the ring with Slay, girly! The whole arena is talking about it." Ice jumps up and down. Only he could pull this off and still look tough.

I squint up at him. "I lost. Why are you happy?"

Shard and Blizzard crouch down next to me. "What happened?" Shard asks.

"Got tired. Forgot to filter my expression."

"Thought so. There are a couple of things Blizzard and I picked up that we think you should work on, too."

"Endurance," I say and then groan as my jaw protests. "Talk later." I roll back down onto my back.

Blizzard grips my shoulder. "You did well. You've gained a lot of respect today from the fighters and the crowd, too. Next time, his arse is yours."

It takes me two days to regain normal vision. It makes me glad I don't get knocked out often. Thank Solis for Alzona's set of rules. I use the time to finalize my training plans, adding my own personal goals after a talk with Shard and Blizzard. The fight with Slay will come down to stamina. He has no pattern I can see and I know I don't have one, barring my tell, which I've

been practicing on.

The men are eating lunch in the mess room. I go to the office off the side of the gym to find Crystal. The door is open. Which is why Alzona and Crystal don't know I am there.

I stare, mouth open, at the sight of them with their lips locked together. I must make a sound. Alzona whips her head around.

"Uh," I stammer.

"Dammit," Alzona says. Crystal turns pink. I put up both hands.

"I just had a question for Crystal, don't worry I'll ask later. Won't tell anyone." I stop babbling as I turn and almost run across the gym. I hear laughter behind me.

What the hell was that? Alzona and Crystal were together? Females actually did that? I thought it was just male fantasy. How long had it been going on? Crystal was so young.

I pause before opening the door to the mess room. It's not hard to switch off my emotions. Slower than it used to be in my mother's palace, but I guess I've let my guard down a lot. Bruma are easy to relax around. The pause is to ensure my expression is normal. It's also why I keep my head down when the pair enter a few minutes later.

We complete our final round in the pits. After my round with Slay, it was decided none of us would compete against anyone from Hale's group. Alzona added a new rule after some shouted threats. Things had been unstable with them since the match, even though I lost - which they never failed to remind me about. Now, none of us are to leave the barracks alone.

"What should I do about Ice?" I ask Shard. He turns to look at the wiry man, who is babbling away at Flurry by the weights. Ice is still lagging behind in his output. With some badgering from the rest of the men, his effort raised infinitesimally. But overall, the others have quadrupled their work-rate, while his has only doubled. I've added the final elements to our group fight, but we're only as strong as our weakest link. I'm out of ideas to motivate him.

Shard slams another punch into the bag and shifts his weight onto his front foot to leap back from the imaginary opponent's return swing. He turns to me.

"I truly don't know. I'll think on it."

He's interrupted by a scream.

Shard and I are at the back of the gym, farthest from the door. We break out of our shock and rush toward the sound; the footsteps of Flurry, Avalanche, Blizzard and Ice pound ahead of us. The scream came from the front of the barracks.

All of the gates are open. They clang behind us as we push through.

“Don’t look!” Flurry grabs my arm. Please, don’t let it be Crystal or Alzona. I shake his arm off and skirt around Avalanche who is also trying to block my view.

I can’t close my eyes against the horrific sight. Bile rises in my throat.

It’s a woman. She’s dead. Strung up in our alley. I assume from her garments she was a brothel worker. Crystal’s screaming. I realize the sound was there before and I was just too panicked to hear it. Alzona whispers to her, rocking her back and forth. She gives Avalanche a beseeching look and he picks up the hysterical girl, taking her away from the awful sight. The woman has been brutally beaten, her throat slit. But the mutilation and blood below her waist is the true confirmation her killer had no humanity.

“Why?” Ice’s whisper breaks our numbed silence.

“It’s a message,” Shard says. I look at him. I can’t see his face through my tears. He moves over and envelops me in a tight hug. “But I don’t know who from.”

Blizzard and Flurry usher me back inside as Ice and Shard free the woman from the rope. I don’t know what they do with her body. But I trust Blizzard to do as much as he can for her.

Training is over for the day. The message has achieved its goal. Our barracks are rattled.

We sit in the mess room, taking comfort in each other’s company. Crystal and Alzona come in a few hours later. Crystal goes straight to the alcohol stash beneath the sink and downs a large mug full.

“Well don’t hog it all,” Flurry says in a gentle voice. He grabs more mugs and fills them.

We sit around and quietly sip the brew. Crystal leaves after a while, gesturing for Alzona to stay. I know she wants privacy, but I remember what the others did for me a few weeks ago. I walk down the hallway and climb up through the trapdoor. People seem to come to this spot when they’re sad. Except me. I beat up a bag for a few hours. Crystal stiffens, but doesn’t turn around.

“Go away,” she says in a broken whisper.

“I will. I just wanted you to know we’re all here for you. If you need me, just let me know.” I turn to leave, but I’m stopped by her soft words.

“Do you know I was raped?”

I freeze. She turns to me and I see she was trying to hide her tears before.

“I gather you didn’t. I’ve seen you watch me with the men and thought you may have guessed. I can’t be completely comfortable with them. Even ones I love, like the men downstairs.” She takes a shaking breath.

“Alzona knows,” she adds. A shockwave of disbelief courses through me. What monster would do that to this sweet girl?

“What happened?” I ask. She hesitates and I rush to rectify my mistake. “It’s okay if you don’t want to talk. Just don’t tell Alzona I asked a question.” She lets out a weak chuckle.

I climb out of the trap door and sit beside her. It takes a few moments for her to begin. “I was fourteen. I had just...moved to the Middle Rings and I was late coming home from a friend’s house one night.”

“Last year?” I ask.

She looks at me, assessing me. She tilts her head back and looks at the sky. “No. It was eight years ago. I’m twenty-two.”

I straighten with her revelation. I never would have guessed her to be so old. “That makes me feel better about what you and Alzona were doing. I thought I was going to have to save you or something.”

A real laugh comes from her this time. “Bet you’re glad you don’t have to do that.” Her voice catches and tears drip off her chin. “There were four of them, but only one raped me. I suppose I should be thankful for that,” she says bitterly. “Afterward, they left me to die in the cold. I should’ve died. Sometimes I wish I had.”

I don’t know how I should react. Should I hug her? This goes beyond my experience. I’ve been beaten and tortured, but never violated in this way. Nothing I can think of seems enough. So I just listen.

“Alzona found me. You know how she tends to stroll over the rooftops in the early morning?” She shuffles around on the ledge. “I hate when she does that. I always worry.”

“You two have been together a while I take it? I never guessed.” And it’s true, I’ve never once suspected they were anything more than friends.

Crystal smiles. “You’re not hard to fool with those kinds of things.”

“That’s a nicer way to put it than Leila did,” I say. My laugh echoes

into silence as we look out across the sprawling houses and ruins. “Did you ever find the men who did that to you?” If they’re still alive, they are officially on borrowed time.

I look at her and nearly jerk away with how quickly her expression twists into fury, thinking it’s at my question.

“Oh, yes. I see him all the time.” She looks straight ahead again.

“It was Slay.”

The mood is subdued the next day, but our training reaches a new level of ferocity. Someone is screwing with our barracks. Blizzard splits open the punching bag. I knew the second Crystal told me about Slay, that he left the woman at our door. There was no such thing as coincidence in the Outer Rings. It was a warning to me, or a reminder to Crystal. Probably both. A cruel and terrible way to unsettle us.

The fight between us was now personal.

After a quick talk with Alzona, I jog down to Willow’s brothel. I wave to her until she sees me and then enter the building wedged between two men. They don’t give me more than a cursory glance until she glides down the stairs towards me. Then they spin to look between us so quickly, I’m surprised they don’t fall over. It seems the rumor has travelled far.

“How can I help you, lover?” she asks me. The man closest to me gulps. I move toward her and grab her arm.

“I just couldn’t stop thinking about you,” I say through gritted teeth. She titters as I drag her upstairs and shut the door.

She claps her hands. “That was fun.”

I’m not sure about fun. More like horrendously uncomfortable. I still wasn’t sure what to think about this new type of relationship. I clear my throat.

“Willow,” I say. “There was a lady left outside our barracks last night. She had brown hair to her waist and a square-ish kind of face—”

Willow cuts me off, her frivolity gone. “A little taller than me?” she asks. I nod.

“Ursa. Beth was her street name.” She sighs and sits on the bed. “We suspected something was wrong when she didn’t return last night. What happened?”

I tell her, skipping over the worst parts. I sit down and wrap an arm around her as tears well in her luminous blue eyes.

“I need to know who she was with last night,” I say softly. She

immediately shakes her head.

“That’s something we don’t notice here.” She stands. My arm drops to my side.

“I understand. I have my own suspicions as to who did it.” I watch her eyes and posture. “I think it was Slay.” Her reaction is subtle. Perhaps a Bruma wouldn’t have noticed the way her eyes flashed, or how her hands tightened in her lap. To a Solati though, she’s answered my question as though she spoke out loud.

I continue. “Slay raped a friend of mine. I assume he does this regularly. I didn’t know Ursa, but no one should have to die like that. I will do my best to...deal with him in the next few weeks.” I move to the door.

“I can’t tell you anything. It’s against Mistress’ rules. But I will tell you that you have very good instincts. And I would say if you deal with him, you would gain our everlasting gratitude.” She looks directly into my eyes.

“Anything in particular you want me to tell the Cells this time?” I ask. She laughs, back to normal for all appearances, and waves me out of the door.

I’ve confirmed it was Slay. This allows me to tell the others without giving Crystal’s secret away. I leave the whorehouse, lost in my own thoughts. I bump into someone. This isn’t unusual in the Outer Ring. I move aside, but jerk back at the flash of red in the corner of my eye. I look up into familiar blue eyes and jerk a second time. The eyes belong to Sanjay, one of the peace delegates

“You lost?” I squeak. I clear my throat. I’ve never made that sound in my life. He glances down at me and I note his pale, green-tinged face. The assembly doesn’t come to the Outer Rings. What is he doing here?

“Yes. Lost. I, uh. Shit!” He shakes his head. “Where am I?”

“Outa Rings,” I mumble, while I soak up the sight of my friend. Though concern mars my happiness. This place is dangerous for him. He stands out like a candle in a deep cave.

“I...I don’t remember.” He looks down at me with wide eyes. There’s none of the amused bravado I’ve grown used to. “What way to the Middle Rings?” he croaks. I point back the way I came.

He presses a coin into my hand and stumbles toward the path. My heart gallops in my chest. What’s happened to him? Has someone attacked him? He certainly isn’t himself. Is he looking for me? Is King Jovan still fleecing Glacium for me, after all this time? I thought the attempts to find me

would have halted by now. And why would Jovan send a delegate? Watchmen were usually given these jobs. At least that's who Jovan sent to find the thugs who beat me an inch from death while I was staying in the castle. Maybe he was changing tactics after coming up empty. The delegates were among those on Glacium who knew me best. They'd technically kidnapped me from Osolis after Kedrick's death, mistakenly thinking I was the assassin. Somehow they'd become good friends in the process.

I follow Sanjay to the edge of the Middle Rings, making sure he escapes safely. I watch until his shoulders disappear around a corner before circling back to the barracks with a sigh.

Everyone is eating lunch when I return. I shake off the episode with Sanjay. I'm about to do something that requires my full attention.

"I went down to the brothel and spoke with Leila," I say. It is an odd enough comment that it draws everyone's immediate attention. "The woman's name was Beth, real name Ursa. She left with Slay last night. A fact which doesn't leave this room." I look each of them in the eye. I don't want this coming back on Willow.

Blizzard pounds his fists onto the table. "Hale's men are playing games with us because we're not going to the pits."

I flick a glance at Crystal. "Yes, I believe it is a challenge to me. But we aren't going to rise to the bait. Now is not the time to strike. However, I don't trust them not to attempt something else. One of us needs to watch their barracks."

"I'll do it," Ice says. He stands up and looks between Alzona and myself. I look at Alzona. His eagerness to follow Blaine in the arena has stuck in my mind.

"I don't think he should be allowed to," I say.

"Why?" Ice sputters. He's genuinely baffled. He won't be for long.

"You know why. Or at least you should. You're the weakest link of the six of us. If Alzona gives you permission to do this, you'll miss out on more and become a bigger liability."

"Are you saying I can't fight?" he asks, eyes sparking.

"I'm saying you have the ability to be a *great* fighter, but your work ethic is poor. I'm not rating you on your potential. I'm rating you on what I've seen. Can you honestly tell me you don't know this?"

I can see him searching for an excuse. I continue, not giving him a chance to respond. "This is only one of my concerns, Ice. My other is that

your lazy mentality will carry over into spying on Hale's group and put you in danger."

"It will not," he says hotly.

I arch my brow. "I could take your word. But so far your word hasn't meant much—as far as training goes. Do you remember when we sat here and the five of you vowed to give your best at training so we could win?" I look around at the others. They're avoiding Ice's gaze.

Ice looks at his feet. I catch an amused glance from Shard and give him a wink - he's guessed what I'm up to. I let Ice simmer until his cheeks begin to color.

"Tell you what. If Alzona agrees, I'll put you on trial." Ice raises his head. "If you work hard enough the first half of the day, you can have the rest of the day off to spy." I play my part and wait for Alzona's response, but we have already discussed this. She purses her lips for show and agrees.

"Yes! I'll do it," Ice assures me.

I continue. "It's a decision which will be made daily. If you do not perform, you do not spy. Is this fair?" I ask the table. Everyone shows their agreement. I look back at Ice and his face is the most determined I've ever seen it.

"I'll do it. I'll pull my weight better," he vows.

"Glad to hear it. As for the spying, I'll leave that up to you."

Ice mutters to himself. "I think it's best if I watch the barracks for part of the night. I assume they'll also be training during the day. Maybe I should keep tabs on the brothel, too."

I allow myself a smile as he jabbers on about his strategy.

Chapter Nine

We enter the final week before the tournament. A rumor has been leaked to the Watchmen that the event will take place in the Sixth Sector. So of course, it will be held in the Second. Flurry says this ruse works every time. I'm nervous about the group category. We've never practiced against anyone other than ourselves. I know some of the other barracks organize meets, but since our strategy is unique, I don't want to give away our element of surprise.

Shard and I sit in companionable silence watching Avalanche cook. "It's nice to see him enjoying himself. The business with Ursa in the alley shook him bad," he says softly. I lift my eyebrows. I certainly missed that. I've been completely absorbed in my training sessions. Ice has been working harder than all of us since our talk and Blizzard has soared ahead. With the new swords, daggers and spears, we've shed most of our rustiness in weapon combat also.

I give Avalanche a quick glance. Why is Shard offering this information on the giant man so casually? I barely know anything about the men in the barracks. Avalanche nods at Shard over my head, who leans forward to pour me a drink.

"His mother was a whore, you know? He loved her. And she was real good to him. Taught him to cook and cared for him as well as she could." He takes a long sip and I do the same.

Avalanche has given him permission to tell me his story. I was touched he trusted me so much.

"One night he woke to a scream and found his mother dead, a man standing over her. The murderer took Avalanche and kept him tied up. He beat him every few days."

I gasp. I can't help it. What a horrible childhood.

"But the man didn't count on Avalanche growing so tall. When Avalanche turned thirteen, he broke the man's neck and left. He worked as muscle at the door of The Slime for a while. That's where I met him." Shard flashes a grin over his shoulder. "We grew to be friends over the years and then Alzona recruited us when she came around looking for fighters." He speaks simply and without emotion, like he's stating facts. I've come to assume Avalanche doesn't like talking because of the way his scars move.

But I now wonder if he prefers to have Shard's emotionless delivery of his story. You can tell his treatment was worse than a beating every few days. The evenly spaced cuts on his face are the work of twisted, cold-blooded scum.

I walk to Avalanche and grip his forearms to pull him down. When his face is level with mine, I say, "That man tried his best. But he didn't damage you at all. Not where it counts." I place my hand over his heart and then hug him around the waist. He pats me on the back and holds me for a few moments.

Normal conversation resumes, as though we didn't just discuss Avalanches horrific treatment by his mother's killer. I wonder how he and Shard came to be friends. Shard catches my curious look and smiles. There's a bit of a challenge in his expression. I can guess what he's telling me; I can't ask him for his story, without giving up my own.

The night before we leave for the tournament, Alzona enters with a bag. I'm proud of how far she's come. By accepting help, she has created a stronger business. If anything, her willingness to put aside her pride and study the bigger picture makes her even scarier – if that were possible.

At the moment she's glaring around the table. Eventually the men stop talking. It's a game between us to see who is brave enough to talk the longest. Ice is the bravest today, he stops talking after a minute and immediately falters under her blistering gaze.

"I want you to hear me out," she starts.

"She's entered as a fighter," Blizzard guesses.

"She's taking over matches again," Ice groans.

"She's gonna make us fight topless," Flurry says. We stare at him. He says the weirdest things. But Alzona arches an eyebrow.

"Exactly!" She opens her bag as we stare dumbly. I hope it doesn't apply to me. "You've all seen how the crowd reacts to fighters like Sin. The more skin you show, the more you gain the crowd's attention." I laugh as she tosses black leather pants at the men. Flurry holds his up. There's an 'A' stitched on the right hip.

"A for Alzona?" I ask Crystal. She nods, sucking her cheeks in to contain her mirth. I giggle again.

"I don't know why you're laughing, you haven't seen yours yet," Shard says.

I shut my mouth.

They leave to put their outfits on and my mouth drops open when they return. “Uh, wow, you guys actually look really good in those,” I say. And they do. I tuck away a smile as they preen at my comment. Even Shard grins.

Flurry and Ice are in their early twenties and have youth on their side as an extra advantage, though none are over thirty. All of the men are in excellent shape after the last two months of hard training.

“Yes, very good. Those will do. You admit they look shit-hot?” she asks me. I narrow my eyes at her and remain silent as she draws out the black harness from months ago. “If you wear this, you’ll look just as good as they do. You’re the only female in the competition. You should play on that strength. It’s not cheap. Use it. It’s a weapon.”

I point at the other fighters. “You don’t have them trussed up in straps! There’s nothing to this...thing!” I look at the others for support and am rudely surprised to find them agreeing with Alzona.

“Seriously?” I ask no one in particular.

Shard straddles the bench in front of me. “I think Alzona’s right. You’ve given us every possible advantage you could think of in the last two months. This is just another edge. And it’s a good one. I don’t think you understand how distracting these things can be for males.”

I think of Willow dancing up in her window and of all the men stopping in their tracks.

“I understand,” I say. Alzona’s smile could light up the room. I hurry on. “I’m not saying I’ll wear it, but I will think about what you’ve said.”

I snatch the stupid harness and with a last glare, I escape to my room to figure out how to put the damn thing on.

We trek to the Second Sector the day before the tournament. I’ve come this way twice now. I lead the way for most of the trek. We arrive at Tricks’ barracks and settle into our rooms. I bunk with Crystal and Alzona, despite repeated invitations from Sin. He’s renewed his ardent vows of love and assures me he doesn’t mind my attraction to women. He claims he’ll change my mind. Wrath pushes Sin’s face into a plate of food to shut him up.

Most of Tricks’ men are nice. I’m starting to count a few of them as friends. Although I notice this time, a group of men sit apart from the others. The rest of Tricks’ men don’t seem to like them much. After studying them, I decide they may be better suited to Hale’s group.

It’s of little surprise when I don’t sleep well. I toss and turn for hours, knowing everyone’s performance will reflect on me as their trainer.

There's no banter at breakfast, but the tension in the air is palpable. The elimination rounds for the one-on-one competition are today. The matches start early and continue until only the top twenty fighters are still standing. The next day this group of twenty is further thinned until the final two remain. This final is only fought after the group competitions are over on the third day. We'd need every skill at our disposal - and a little luck - to win top barracks.

I return to the room and look at the black harness half sticking out of my bag.

Fuck it.

"Crystal!" I call. She pops her head out of the washroom. "Come help me with this thing." Maybe I'll give it to Leila after the competition.

Alzona enters after I've struggled into the contraption. She whistles. "Wow, Frost. If I wasn't with Crystal, I would totally do you."

An uncomfortable laugh leaves my lips. "If I liked women?"

Alzona shrugs. "What were Sin's words? I can change your mind. I'm just that gorgeous," she says, doing her best impression of his smile.

"Something like that," I say, twisting around. "You sure they won't laugh at me? I feel very conscious of how little I'm wearing."

"They'll only laugh at you if they sense you feel self-conscious," Crystal says. "If you're gonna wear it, you need to own it."

I immediately think of Willow and how she walks, the saucy looks she gives all the men. Can I pull that off?

"I guess I'll test it first." I take a deep breath and walk out to the mess room. Most of the men are there. They don't all turn at once like they do with Willow, but conversation grinds to a satisfying halt. Sin continues to pour water into an already full goblet. I walk over to our table, swaying my hips slightly, hoping I don't look like a complete idiot. I close Wrath's mouth as I pass. A lot of men, who never gave me more than half a glance in my other clothes, are outright staring. It seems clothing, or lack thereof, does make a big difference here.

"Boys. We must've done something right in our lives," Tricks says.

"Best breakfast I ever had," Sin whispers.

I ignore everyone and sit down with my barracks.

"Can you move in it?" Shard asks, always practical.

"Surprisingly well, actually." The leather straps crisscross my breasts, stomach and back and lead into a "v" shaped panel which covers most of my

backside and the area between my legs. The back and front panels are laced up the sides with thin leather lengths. I made sure to do these up securely. It isn't as bad as I feared. The bits I don't want anyone to see are mostly secure and out of sight.

As it happens, I'm glad I've practiced on the men at breakfast. I hold my head high as we trail down through the levels to the Cells. I act as though by letting them look, I'm doing them a favor. Heads turn, but no one touches me. They know me and they know what I can do to them.

"Would ya look at that reaction?" Ice says in my ear with a quiet laugh. I chuckle softly with him. I could get used to these clothes.

The levels are unusually quiet at the moment, with only a few onlookers scattered throughout the levels. Blizzard tells me the crowds tend to come at the end of the day, when the more exciting fights are on. The first draw has already been decided and every owner is given a copy. I scan ours when Alzona hands it to me.

"Is the draw legible this revolution?" Shard asks. "Last time someone from the Outer Rings attempted it, the draw was a disaster," he says, scanning the bit of paper. "Must have someone from the Middle or Inner Ring this time."

The details of the round are scribbled along the top. There are one hundred and sixty entrants. I knew what we faced, but it's still incredible. A hundred and forty fighters would need to be eliminated by the end of the day. We only had six competitors. Six *great* competitors, I remind myself. But the odds are certainly against us. Blizzard is the only one of us facing a top fighter in the first round. Two months ago he might have lost. But unless something goes horribly wrong, he won't have any trouble.

These rounds were luck of the draw. Tomorrow would be more complicated. During our last bout in the pits, I memorized the top twenty opponents. I hope these haven't changed since I last fought. I realize, too late, I should have attended these last matches.

The fighting begins and the pace is more ruthless than what I expected after Flurry's description. No sooner is the felled man dragged out of the pit, the next round is started. There's nothing of the relaxed attitude I've grown accustomed to. The jingle of coins passed around overhead is constant. As the morning goes on, the crowds begin to cram into the levels above.

Blizzard goes in and sure enough, he knocks Thunder out with a

roundhouse minutes into the fight. I look around to gauge the reaction. Tricks' men look a little shocked, I think. And there is a group further around who are pointing and talking among themselves. I smile and high five Blizzard as he walks over to us.

The first round goes into the early afternoon. Eighty fights take place, some only last seconds, some several minutes. As I've predicted from the list, the rest of us move through to the next round without much difficulty. Some of the fighters don't even land a single blow on us.

There is a slight delay while the last few winners are added to the next draw. Crystal has been running back and forward copying each part of the list as it's decided. I'm surprised at their efficiency once again. I suppose if the tournament drags out, it increases the risk of the Watch finding us. I don't know why they didn't just station Watchmen at each of the arenas. They knew where each one was. But then I remember the hundred or so Watchmen needed to overwhelm us the last time. There weren't enough of them to spread out like this.

Crystal passes me the completed copy of the next draw. Forty fights. My heart sinks as I see Shard faces one of Hale's top men. It will be a close match. I'd hoped to get through another round before this happened. I need Shard in the top twenty with me. If he's exhausted after this match, it will be hard for him to win the final fight of the day. I'll also face a top-twenty fighter, but he's at the lower end. It will be a good chance to get rid of some competition. He's from a compound currently in Sector Five.

I sit on the edge of our bench during Shard's fight, wincing at every hit connecting with his head and ribs. Finally, with a blow to the middle of the chest, Shard gains the upper hand. A win follows soon after. The next draw really needs to be in his favor. He nods at me as I slap him on the back. Our eyes meet and I know we're thinking the same thing.

Hale is livid. Crystal gasps as he kicks the unconscious fighter Shard beat moments before.

I sway into the arena when my fight comes around. I smile and wink at the crowds who are screaming my name. I shouldn't be flattered by how they all know my name, but I am.

The man I'm facing has the look of someone who knows he's going to lose. He's lost his mental edge, but I don't let my guard down. People who have nothing to lose are the most unpredictable. Turns out that's not the case. It takes mere minutes to put him flat on his back and kick him across the face

to knock him out. It's a low blow, but by the time I reach the bottom of the five steps into the pit, my morality has disappeared. It's strange to think about how honorable your hits are when you're here in the pit in the first place. And I could be sure Slay wouldn't hesitate to fight dirty.

Flurry, Ice, Avalanche and Blizzard make it through, but Flurry gets a bad kick to the head which has me worried about his next fight. He doesn't seem to be walking entirely straight.

Night must have fallen by the time the third round starts. It's impossible to tell so far underground. I would have thought the crowd had yelled themselves hoarse by now, but if anything, they're louder. The drink is most likely to blame for this - and for their increasing state of nakedness.

I get the next draw. "Crap," I say under my breath. I hand the draw to Shard.

"Crap indeed," he says. He's matched with Slay's brother who I would put in the top ten. Shard's also in the top ten. If he'd fought him earlier, it would be different. But Butcher has competed in two easy rounds. Actually, most of Hale's group has ended up with easy fights.

I'm up against one of Tricks' men, Vice. He's not as good as Sin, but arrogance or a slip on my part could be all he needs to take the win. There are two other questionable fights for us. Flurry and Avalanche will need to be at their best. I talk over the game plan with everyone during their warm ups and then leave them to finish their stretches. They're focused and hungering for a win.

Alzona's a mess.

Her nails are chewed right down. She's abandoned her ever-present cool demeanor. Crystal does her best to distract the owner, but I suspect she's having her own trouble with facing Slay after what he did to the woman outside our barracks.

Flurry enters the pit. Is it wrong to be happy when I see his opponent, Jack, is not in the best shape? I decide it's not and chuckle over the man's normal name. That is, until he makes his first move. Jack means business. It's one of the longest bouts yet. The kind of fight which comes down to how much each person wants it.

Jack crashes to the floor after a heel to the jaw. Turns out Flurry wanted it more.

Two fights later, without any warning, Slay grabs a weapon from the wall and kills his opponent. Crowd and competitors alike are stunned at the

bloody gore splattered before them. No one dares to boo him. The man he killed wasn't even in the top five. He shouldn't have been a problem for Slay. Was there something personal between them? Or was this another message to me? I get my answer when he points his bloody sword my way. I quash down my horror and squeeze Crystal's hand, making her a silent promise.

Despite their best efforts, Shard and Avalanche are both knocked out by their opponents in the following matches. The fighters who beat them are in better shape after the first rounds, and in Avalanche's case, the other man is simply better. It takes four men to carry my giant friend out.

It's a heavy blow for our odds of winning, but after watching Slay murder his opponent before, I decide I'm just glad they're safe. I hope more than I've ever hoped before, that Ice, Flurry and Blizzard don't come up against him tomorrow. I doubt I'd be able to stand back and watch one of my friends die.

My turn again. The bell rings. Vice dances forward. He's quick on his feet and stronger than me, like most of the other males here. I watch him move. He's favoring his right leg slightly. His left must have been injured in a previous fight. I tuck the information away. I bait him until he makes the first move. Normally, I'd exchange a few blows first, but I need to hit hard and fast. The rounds tomorrow are more important than the crowd's entertainment today. I dodge and kick at his left knee as he makes his move. I don't need to kick hard enough to break the bone or end his career. A moderate kick is enough to make the leg a liability. I remember how it felt when my leg was broken by my uncle. I'd never do that to anyone. Not even Slay.

The match is over soon after. Vice knows it as well. He limps away and evades a few more hits before I step in front of him and kick my leg straight up underneath his chin - my favorite kick. Out cold. The crowd chants my name once more. I do a couple of flips to keep them happy. Alzona will be proud.

We trudge home, so wearied most of us can't string two words together. In a bizarre twist, Avalanche is chattering nonstop after his knockout. I worry about injury to his brain. The first day is over. Four of our fighters are in the top twenty. Our barracks are in third place behind Tricks', with five fighters, and Hale, who has six. For all of my conviction when encouraging the others, this is the first time I truly believe we can win top

barracks.

Everything depends on tomorrow.

Chapter Ten

The twenty competitors remaining are ranked and the top six are placed evenly throughout the draw. The main priority is to give a good show. This isn't achieved by accidentally drawing the top two to fight each other. I've earned second place. Slay and I have been placed at opposite ends of the draw. Blizzard's in sixth place. Sin in fourth. Slay's brother, Butcher, in third place and a man called Thrash from a different compound, in fifth. He's the only fighter from his barrack in the top twenty.

There is another announcement that the top twenty is now officially the top *eighteen*. Two fighters have dropped out of the tournament under mysterious circumstances. Alzona overhears someone saying their injuries from yesterday were too severe. But there are additional whispers of foul play. I wouldn't put it past Hale's group to have taken them out.

I'm almost sick with worry one of the men will be pitted against Slay. Looking at the draw is almost as bad as the first time I took off my veil.

My fear is unfounded. None of them draw the lethal man in the first fight. I'm facing an unknown from Arman's compound. I haven't placed him in the top twenty, so either he's been training hard or he got lucky in one of his fights. He's short for a Bruma; about Shard's height. It should work in my favor, but I could count on him having speed.

I'm lucky I've worked so hard on my endurance.

The fight lasts for twenty minutes, until I bring him crashing down with a head butt to the nose. I smash his head against the pit to finish him.

Blizzard gets through, beating one of Hale's men. It gives our group and, judging by the grins, a few other groups, extreme satisfaction. Slay doesn't kill his opponent in his round either. He must be in a good mood today.

Flurry gets knocked out by Sin. He still wasn't quite on form after the head knock from yesterday, though Sin would have been a miracle win for him anyway. And when Ice brings Wrath crashing to the floor I've never felt prouder. There's no way he could've won without his hard work this month. As the round finishes, we get the rankings. We have three fighters in the top ten. Tricks only has two, now Wrath and two other men I don't know the names of, are out. Another man, Blight, got lucky in his fight, and Hale has four fighters. The top ten.

Alzona is ecstatic. “Second place so far! That’s a lot better than *last* place,” she says. I can practically see the coins flashing in her eyes. “We’ll expand, get better equipment.”

I tune out as she makes her business plans. We didn’t come here for second place, we came here for first. With our group fight plan and our current ranking, winning is within our grasp. We can do this; we can beat Hale’s barracks!

“We could do it,” Flurry whispers, echoing my thoughts. “After all this time. We could win this thing.”

We have the ranking, but it doesn’t mean today’s fighting is over. There are still five fights to whittle numbers down to the final pair.

The top ten is set out differently. But again, it is beneficial to have ranked high. In second place, I’ll face the man, Blight, in ninth place. And Blizzard will fight Tricks’ second man, Rage, who got lucky in his last fight. Ice, in seventh place will fight Sin. I don’t see how Hale wrangled this draw, but the four competitors from his barracks are facing each other. I would bet my favorite boots the matches will be staged.

They don’t exceed my expectations. Torture gives a couple of halfhearted attempts before he’s knocked out by Butcher. And after I knock out Fury, I watch while Shredder hardly lifts an arm in defense of Slay’s cross. The crowd hates it. They openly boo the brothers, which they’ve never done before. It’s a smart move, though. I’m tired after my fight against Blight, even though it was easier than the previous match. Butcher, who I’ll face next, is fresh after a thirty second, staged round. There are benefits to placing in the top two. Slay and I have one less fight than the others in the top twenty.

The crowd is wilder than I’ve ever seen them as the tension mounts. Sin beats Ice, which we knew was likely. Ice’s job was to wear Sin down so Blizzard is more likely to beat him after eliminating Rage. I know we need numbers in the top five to win, but I can’t help but hope Sin will beat Blizzard. Slay will face the winner of their match and I fear for my friend’s life if he should enter that pit.

Shard laughs as I try to summon a disappointed expression when Sin knocks Blizzard out.

“You still look relieved. Try lowering your eyebrows,” he whispers. I don’t even try to deny it.

I have my work cut out for me with Butcher. He’s ranked third for a

reason. I know his weaknesses and he knows mine. He wants to win so he can give Slay the easy victory. And if he can't win, there's no doubt the orders are to hurt me as much as possible for the final.

I need to finish this quickly.

The crowd blurs into the background as the bell tolls. I can see their forms jumping up and down. They may even be screaming my name, but I hear nothing except the thudding of my heart in my ears. I only see the small contractions going through Butcher, giving away his movements a second before he makes them. I feel the rhythm of his chest rising and falling, knowing he will take a sharp breath just before striking. Sweat rolls down my face.

He charges and I do the same. Normally I'd dodge him, but he'll be prepared for this. It's time for Flurry's kick.

Butcher punches with his right arm, there's no weight behind the blow because he expects me to dodge. Instead, I grip his extended forearm with both hands, hardly slowing. Using the momentum from my charge, I swing underneath his arm. I kick off the ground, pushing upward, twisting. My body circles around his arm until it comes to the height of his head. I line up my heel with his jaw.

He's starting to react when I extend my leg in a rapid kick, all of my weight powering the blow.

Landing on soft toes, I watch as Butcher makes two full circles. He staggers back. He staggers forward. Seriously?

His eyes start to roll back beyond his control. He topples to the side with a resounding boom and stays down.

The bell signals the end of the fight. The cavernous arena is shaking with the force of a Dromeda stampede as the crowd erupts. I'm truly worried the ceiling will cave in. But I keep my expression smooth and circle the pit, interacting with the crowd. I don't touch them. I just walk past them and try to look menacing. They love it. Frost isn't scared of anything, not like Olina.

I follow Butcher's unconscious form as he's dragged out. I pass Sin, who is preparing for his fight with Slay.

"If I make it through this, will your lips be mine?" he asks in a woeful voice.

I laugh and meet his eyes, hoping he reads my warning there. He lifts one shoulder and smiles wryly before brushing past me to enter the pit. He really didn't need to brush past. There's enough space for three people to get

through at once.

Alzona rushes to hug me as I approach. Crystal's next.

"I haven't won yet," I mutter into Avalanche's waist.

"You'll do it. I know you will," Flurry says, grabbing me and twirling me around. He's touching me and doesn't even go pink.

"Jeez, no pressure, Flurry," Blizzard says, holding his bleeding head. I lift an eyebrow.

He shakes his head. "It's not too bad. Sin went easy on both of us," he says, gesturing to Ice. "Tricks' guys know they can't win it themselves now. They want us to outrank Hale's Barracks nearly as much as we do."

Tricks' group still wouldn't win top barracks, even if they won the group fight. I make a note to thank Sin for not concussing the men too badly. I hear the bell and turn to watch.

Every minute he's in there, I thank him again in my head. Slay doesn't dare make a grab for a weapon. Tricks doesn't own the highest ranking barracks, but he *is* the richest and has just as many fighters as Hale, if not quite as skilled. He could make Hale's life hell. Also Sin is a crowd favorite. The Outer Rings will bring the roof down if he's killed. I watch the crowd wondering if they would tear Slay apart.

Then I see something impossible.

Kedrick in the crowd. I shake my head and blink my eyes. I squint into the row of wealthy observers on the second level. No, it's not Kedrick, but it's still someone who shouldn't be here.

Ashawns is in the crowd.

It wasn't the first time I'd been duped by his likeness to Kedrick. The King's youngest brother is at an illegal fighting tournament. Jovan can't possibly know about it. What is Ashawns thinking? If anyone recognizes him it will mean backlash for Jovan and worse, it will make the King furious. Why would he risk it? The mystery clears somewhat as I get a clear line of vision to the person hovering next to him.

Blaine. Out of the Sixth Sector early, I see. I doubt the King is aware of this either. But at least Blaine's involvement protects Ashawns. Blaine can't turn Ashawns in without turning himself in. I warn Alzona Blaine's here and she pulls up the hood of her coat, but doesn't move. It looks like she's come to some kind of decision.

Slay wins. And gives Sin a brutal knockout. But leaves him with his life.

“He won’t kill her! Not after seeing her fight Butcher. He wants Frost gone, but not if there’s a risk of him getting slit,” Blizzard says during our walk back to Tricks’.

Shard raises an eyebrow. “Why don’t you just talk as though she isn’t right here?”

Blizzard grins at me.

“I think he’ll try,” Ice calls out. “The girly’s only been up for a few months and she’s just as good as him. He’ll take her out while he can. It’ll be too late by the next time.”

I turn my head to Ice and nod. It’s what I’d do if I were Slay. Then I properly hear what the men are saying. They expect me to stay until the next tournament in a revolution’s time.

They’re saying it like it’s fact.

Chapter Eleven

Alzona mutters and throws another dark look my way as we warm up the next morning. We'll be in the first group fight of the day.

Out of the ten barracks, only nine are competing. The tenth barrack no longer has enough participants to enter. The two men who suspiciously disappeared had belonged to their group.

Normally the groups would fight in pairs until the final two, but it was decided the barracks will now compete in threes. The winners of each match go through to the final match. Three teams in the pit won't allow for much space, which is perfect for us. We've got this. I'm nearly confident about it.

Alzona wants me to pull out of the group fight to ensure I'm fresh for the fight with Slay. I've reminded her that the aim has always been top barracks, not top individual. We want the business and the reputation, not the glory - though this would be nice, too. Plus, Slay is also participating. We'll be as worn out as each other.

Groaning fills the arena.

I look up from the space where I am stretching and see Tricks, Hale and our own fighters, shaking their heads. Crystal hands me the draw. I groan as well. The three top barracks are fighting against each other! Who made this draw? I sneak a peek at Hale, who is white with fury. He speaks to one of his fighters briefly and they leave the Cells. Whoever wrote this should make their selves scarce.

After my initial reaction, I soon see the benefits of this draw. This is actually great news. Tricks' group can act as our allies. Their barracks have no way of winning and they've already said they want Hale's group out of the top spot. This is probably the easiest way to get Slay and his crew out of the running. After that, there are only two other barracks which might give us some trouble. Hopefully they'll get eliminated in the next rounds. I find Wrath looking our way. He nods at me, and gives me a long, direct look. Tricks looks over and smiles, too. They're with us.

The warning bell tolls.

Our group of six enters the pit. It feels odd to be in here with my friends. It's hard to take the fight seriously. It feels like we're just training.

We stand in a circle, close to the curved wall. I glance around the arena and meet the grins of Ice and Flurry. Are we going to put on a show, or

what? The crowd has never seen anything like this. I survey the two other teams. Sin waggles his eyebrows at me and Slay narrows his eyes as he looks between us. He turns to his brother who has glared at me without blinking since we stepped in. Whispers spread between the six members of their group. We've lost the element of surprise about our alliance, but we don't need it. We outnumber them, two-to-one. The bell will sound soon. We tense in readiness.

I hear a noise and stumble forward, catching myself mid-spring in confusion. The other fighters have done the same. The noise was different. A horn, not a bell. The foreign horn sounds again, echoing from above. People start screaming, the arena shaking under stampeding feet. There is a brief instant where all three teams share looks of bewilderment. What's happening?

I only understand when I see horror on Shard's face.

The Watchmen are here.

All eighteen fighters rush for the single door. It's locked! They always lock us in. I pace inside the door. The door's the only way out, unless we get up and over the barrier on the second level. I already see how this would end. Not everyone will be able to escape. At least one person would be trapped. Probably Avalanche, who would help to boost the others out.

Screams are coming from the bottom level! We race to the side and peer through the grates. Watchmen are flooding through the single doorway to the Cells.

"How'd they get down here so quick?" Flurry shouts, echoing my thoughts.

"Look at the way they're dressed," Shard says, rushing forward to the wall. I follow him and quickly see what he means. The Watchmen are disguised as Bruma from the Outer Rings. They must have infiltrated and lain in wait until we were in the pit.

"Quick. Come. I'll toss you," Avalanche says. He grabs my waist to do so. I shake my head and struggle out of his grip.

"I'm not leaving you all. And you can't throw us all out. Blizzard, Ice and Flurry are too big," I say.

"You must escape," he says.

"Alzona got out!" Flurry shouts.

Ice gasps. "No!" We all race to his spot to look out the small openings. A Watchman is pinning a terrified Crystal to the ground, tying her

hands behind her back.

Shard steps in front of me and grips my shoulders. “You need to let Avalanche throw you out. You can save Crystal and if you’re lucky, you can unlock the door and let us out. There are nearly twenty of us. We may be able to fight our way out.” I look into his intelligent blue eyes and know he’s right. I also know he doesn’t believe I’ll be able to save them.

I signal to Avalanche and he bends his knees and cups his hands as we have practiced over and over again in recent months. The actions are automatic now. I’m running to him when a voice speaks. The voice is brusque, short, and all too familiar.

“Stop or they die.”

We were so caught up in our plans for saving Crystal we hadn’t noticed the entrance of Watchmen into the pit. Two hold their swords to Vice and Butcher’s throats. I look behind me and see Rhone has Blizzard at sword point. Rhone observes me with a guarded expression. Why is he looking at me? My heart races. Is this just a raid, or have I been found?

“Lie face down, legs and arms wide,” he orders. Tricks and our own group obey after a shared look. We won’t escape at the expense of our friend’s life. Maybe there will be a chance to escape later on. If there is a later on. Slay delays the longest before snapping at his men to back down. If it were not his brother with a sword to his throat, I have no doubt Slay would’ve attempted to escape.

Like Crystal, our hands are tied behind our backs. I share an exasperated look with Sin in front of me as our feet are manacled. I’d hoped they’d forget about our legs. Any of the fighters here could kick themselves to freedom. How long had Rhone and the Watchmen been observing us? They were well prepared. Had they been down in the arena this whole time, blending in with the crowd in their dirty rags?

Two rows of Watchmen escort us on either side as we shuffle up the six levels, our chains clinking and jerking. Rhone doesn’t look at me again.

We depart the unassuming building at the surface exit. The surrounding buildings and lanes are empty for all appearances, but I’m not deceived. There will be a hundred eyes on us. Alzona’s included. Rhone must feel this, too. He directs several of his men to keep lookout as we are shoved into a convoy of covered wagons.

Inside, there are two tiny windows with three wooden bars across them. The bars could be kicked out, but the window is too small to climb

through, even for me. I take a seat and watch who else is shoved into the same wagon. It looks like they've split the teams up. Shard is in the wagon with me, but the others are a mixture of the two teams. The wagons lurch forward after a yell from the driver.

I stand and peer through the window. The other wagons follow ours. A foul smell fills the confined space. I scrunch my nose and look over my shoulder. One of Slay's men has wet trousers. No one says a word. I have no idea what's happening.

"Where are they taking us?" I ask Shard, keeping my voice as low as possible to hide my ignorance from the others.

"They are taking us to our execution. We're all going to die." The man who has wet himself whimpers. I ignore him.

"They only take numbers like this for one reason." Shard looks at me and my heart quickens at the hopelessness in his expression. "We're going to the dome." I should know what the dome is, but I don't. Luckily the other men speak up.

"I've heard they put you in there with no weapons and let them slaughter you," one says.

Vice speaks up. "I saw one once. Watchmen just keep pouring in until all the fighters are dead."

"We're going to die." The terrified man whimpers again, rocking. "We're going to die."

I whisper to Shard while the others erupt into argument. "No one lives?" I ask.

He nods and grips my hand tightly. "I wish you weren't in here," he says. "The dome hasn't run in six years. Last revolution the King had only just taken his mantle and didn't do it. We all thought it was the end of it."

I pat his hand. "It's not your fault, Shard. How could any of us have expected such an ambush?"

I look out of the window again as we bump through the Middle Rings. Soon I see the telltale signs of grandeur, indicating we have entered the Inner Rings. People are running past the wagon, ahead of us.

"Are all of these people going to the dome?" I ask. Some of them are blatantly from the Outer Rings.

"People won't miss a good show. They don't like the dome, but they'll still cheer along with the rest of them," Shard says when I point this out. Traitors.

As we move past the Inner Rings, I see what must be the First Sector castle in the distance to my right. The exterior is similar to the second castle on Glacium. Just like the palaces on Osolis are identical.

I know we're nearing our stop by the faint roaring of the crowd. The noise builds as we lurch closer. I crane my neck and get my first look at the dome. It's a circular shape. And huge. Wide, where the underground arena was tall. There still must be space for a few levels within, but it's hard to tell from the outside. Rough walls keep the interior from view.

One of the fighters begins to sob as the wagon grows dark and grinds to a halt. I don't blame him. Cold tendrils of fear are spreading through my body. The door swings open and we're ordered out. The other wagons unload behind us as we stand off to the side. I search for signs of injury and I'm relieved to see they're okay.

Shard makes a horrified sound. I follow his gaze and echo the sound when I see Crystal huddling against Avalanche. Why have they brought her here? Crystal's not a fighter! The rest of us can protect ourselves, but she has no hope. Why does Jovan do this to people?

We're pushed down a torch-lit tunnel until the way is blocked by a gate. I'm pressed against its rough surface as the others are herded in behind me. The wood vibrates, shaking under my cheeks in time to the crowd's stamping. The same people who have shouted encouragement are now screaming for my death.

My death. Am I really going to die here? I may be saved if the King recognizes me, if he's even *here*. But if not, I'll die nameless, or at least not with my true name. No one will ever know what became of me. My family and friends will never get the closure which I have so desperately sought after Kedrick's death. My heart sinks anew as I realize all the other barrack members will die with me. Shard, Ice, Flurry, Avalanche and Blizzard. And Crystal, too. Even if Jovan is here, it's too much to hope for him to let two thirds of the fighters go just because an Outer Rings woman asks him to. And that is how it will appear to everyone else.

"What are they waiting for?" someone asks from behind me.

"Waiting for the place to fill up," a muffled response. Sure enough, the sound swells until it's at least ten times that of the underground arena. There is a commotion behind us. I'm jammed hard against the solid door.

"Raise the gate!" a Watchman calls out.

The door is cranked upward and I am thrust forward.

I'm in the dome.

I blink away the light's glare after the darkness of the tunnel.

The ground is stone. Some kind of gritty substance is sprinkled over it. I test it with my boots. It may be slippery. Any disadvantage we have, the Watchmen will also have.

Though the outside of the dome is circular, the inside is not. A gate sits in the middle of each wall of the rectangular pit. Four massive banners hang over each gate, black and red - the colors of Glacium.

Like the arena, the poorest of the crowd are at the top, but there are four levels inside. Not three like I initially guessed. People from the Outer Rings stand on the two highest floors. The wealthier Bruma are seated in the levels closest to us.

I turn a full circle looking for the King. I spot the sparkle of a throne on a jutting balcony down the far end. The assembly is there, too. I can see the sparkle of their jewels and finery. I can see Jovan's outline, but not his face and, therefore, too far for him to see *my* face.

The dome floor where we stand is expansive and sparse. Simple and made for fighting. The only irregularities are two small-railed stages sticking out from the middle of the longest sides, a few meters off the ground.

"Spread out! One line!" a man orders. I stand beside Crystal's shaking form and whisper softly to her. I don't think she hears anything.

An older Watchman marches down the line. "Any sudden movement and you will be shot dead," he shouts, pointing up behind us. I realize there's a walkway on top of the highest level, under the dome roof.

A small group of archers stand there, bows drawn. As I look up, I see the red and black banners are not actually connected to the dome itself. Four large beams are suspended by rope from the dome and the banners hang from these.

Our manacles are removed, though our hands remain tied. A shout goes up. The Watchman looks over his shoulder where the King has moved, now standing at the balcony's railing. He is holding up a finger. The man bows and turns back to face us.

"The King will speak with one representative," he says.

I look around. Half don't seem to know what a representative is. It contains a few too many syllables. The line share baffled looks. I see Shard start to open his mouth, but I tread on his foot.

"I'll go," I say. The man looks at me and laughs. His eyes move down

my body. I'm in my black strappy suit which I had managed to forget until his look. His eyes linger and I hold his gaze. I'm the only chance these men have to survive. I need to let Jovan know I'm here, maybe he'll be more lenient and let some of us go. I dare to hope he'll let everyone leave, but I'll give up my newfound freedom ten times over if my friends aren't slaughtered like pigs.

"Frost," Shard says in a low tone. I step forward and look at my friends and then down at Tricks' group, who have edged closer.

"Do you remember the sled on the way back from Sector Six?" I ask. One by one all eleven men nod. Crystal does the same. Their looks turn to surprise. And worse, some turn to hope.

I turn to the Watchman again.

"I will go," I repeat. He laughs and pokes fun at the men for letting a woman do their dirty work.

There is some muttering from Slay's group, but they're shut up by angry hisses from the others. The man smiles and darts a look at my bare legs before untying my hands and pushing me ahead of him. Another joins him. Now that my hands are free I could take them easily. And then there's only the trifling matter of breaking twenty people out of the dome.

The men march me up and through the richer audience members on the first level. The well-dressed people shy back as I walk past. A couple of women hold their hands over their mouths. I'm either terrifying or I stink. A spear jabs me in the back, directing me up the carved steps. I grit my teeth, quelling the desire to break the man's spear over his back.

The raised balcony is filled with assembly members on tiered benches. A wide set of stairs create an aisle between the seating to the top. A girl I vaguely recognize squeals and throws herself away from me as a man behind her gives her a teasing push in my direction. All of my friends are in attendance, except for Malir and Rhone. I ignore them, as someone from the Outer Rings would do, and start up the stairs before I can be jabbed again. My eyes follow the stairs to their highest point where the King's throne is positioned, his advisors' chairs on either side. I see familiar booted feet and lift my gaze until I am looking at Jovan's face. Roscoe, Adnan's father, is murmuring in his ear. Jovan's eyes glaze over me as he agrees with whatever the older man is saying.

He suddenly slams back into his throne.

I meet his wide-eyed stare with a smile.

I see shock, anger, horror take their turns on his expression, and then briefly see something else as he looks down my frame. My skin rises in bumps where his gaze moves. I shiver.

He isn't wearing a tunic today. None of the assembly is. It must be custom. He looks just like the fighters in the arena. But bigger and not as scarred. His chest is hard muscle. I shake away my odd thoughts and refocus on staying alive for another hour. It only takes him a heartbeat longer to collect himself. We're lucky only Roscoe and Ashawn have witnessed the strength of his reaction.

"You...are one of the fighters?" he asks and clears his throat. I nod, keeping my face smooth.

A spear prods me in the back. I turn over my shoulder and scowl at the guard. He steps back quickly. This one must have seen me fight. I smile and shake my head.

I look back at Jovan. "Yes, m'king," I say.

I can see he doesn't know how to go on. So I speak. "So you throw a coupla hundred Watchmen at us til we're killed?" I'm a little proud of my slang.

His expression doesn't change. I almost groan. Come on, Jovan.

"What's wrong? Afraid of a fair fight?" I prompt. The other Watchman growls and swings to knock me to my knees, but I jump over his spear and step aside, laughing at him.

The King holds up his hand and the man stops. "Everyone here will die," he says, his eyes piercing into my own. "They deserve to die. They are murders, rapists and thieves." I arch one brow, but stay silent as he continues. "However, we do not slaughter women."

I press a finger to my lips. "There's another girly down there. Guess you'll let her go, too," I say.

His eyes flash with anger, but he accedes to my request. He can hardly do otherwise.

I can save one life, or I can risk my life, and Crystal's, to try and save the other men. If there were some guarantee they *could* be saved, my choice would be easy. I hesitate on the brink of accepting Jovan's offer. I know the others would understand. That they would commend me on saving Crystal. But then I remember how Kedrick's death used to weigh on me. Could I handle the death of so many, knowing I hadn't done my best to save them? There is a slim chance Jovan will call off the fight. Can I force his hand?

I cross my arms and plant my feet wide. I tilt my chin up and look down my nose at all his advisors. I give them the look I would have given Slay if I had faced him in the arena. Death in combat is better than deciding the fate of my friends in cold blood. Time to piss off the assembly and seal my fate. If they're calling for my blood, Jovan won't be able to prevent my return to the dome.

I strut down the line, swinging my hips. "How could one weak woman fight?" I ask. One of the advisors laughs.

Another, Arla's father, goes further and wraps a hand around my hip as I pass him. I have stolen the younger guard's spear and have it aimed beneath the groping man's ribs before he can blink. I pause and smile at Drummond's terrified look before tossing the spear back at the Watchman. The King barks an order when the older Watchman starts to draw his sword. The sword is sheathed.

"Well, m'King." I bow with a flourish. "I've made my choice. You couldn't find better men than those you plan on murdering. I'd rather die among them, than live with all of you. So you can shove the offer up your royal arse," I say. There's a gasp from the assembly closest to the throne. Probably from some of my friends here.

Jovan narrows his eyes at me and I see the muscles of his square jaw clench. I give him a challenging look in return. I know he's searching for a way to force me out of this. But he can't let me go now. I've insulted him in front of witnesses. He can't reveal who I am either. He's the only other living person to have seen my face, apart from my mother. He knows how disastrous it would be for both worlds if everyone knew the Tatuma had blue eyes. I give him a smile I've seen Willow give and wink at him. I receive the compliment of his gaze running over me again. In a guilty moment, I do the same to him.

"Come on, boys," I say to my guarded escort. I turn and walk down the steps, scaring a few of the assembly as I go.

"I'll delay the fight by ten minutes," Jovan calls to my back. "If you should change your mind, raise your arm."

I'm shoved back through the gate. The Watchmen lock the door behind me, not entering with me. I dart a look up at the King's platform and see Jovan is standing at the edge now. I jog back to my men and the whole group gathers around me. Even Slay's barrack. Everyone's hands have been untied. There are no Watchmen left on the dome floor. They must be

preparing for the slaughter.

“We only have one chance,” I say as I crouch in the middle of them. “The King is going to kill us. He thinks we’re all criminals.” Slay cackles at this.

“Our only shot is to show everyone that we aren’t,” I continue.

There are shouts and murmurs over this. “And how the fuck d’you reckon we’ll do that?” Slay scoffs. He doesn’t expect an answer, but I give him one.

I take a deep breath. “We don’t kill the Watchmen. We only hit to disable.”

There’s a general roar at my words. I let them continue for one minute before I interrupt. Time is precious. “If we don’t do this, we all die. If you do as I say, we *may* survive,” I say. I can see most of the others are starting to agree.

Slay steps into the middle. “We’re dead anyway. We may as well take some of the King’s filthy men with us!” he shouts. A few of the men agree with him. There’s no time to change their minds.

“Then I ask that you fight separately from us. If you’re going to condemn yourselves, I’d rather not be mixed up with you.”

In perhaps the only decent thing I’ve ever seen Slay do, he jerks his head to the others and starts over to the opposite side of the space. All of his men follow. And with a hesitant look, one of Tricks’ men also joins them. Idiot.

The men fold around me again and look at me expectantly. I shove down my panic. There must only be a few minutes left.

“How are we going to survive against that many of them?” Sin asks.

“Avalanche and I will be working to block the gates. If we can funnel them so only a small number get through, we should be able to manage. Our group strategy is excellent. Shard, give Tricks’ men a brief rundown of the basic components. We only have a few minutes.”

Shard nods and takes my place in the circle as I take Avalanche away from the group.

“How high can you throw me?” I ask. He looks around.

“Can you throw me to the balustrade of the first level?” I press. He gauges the distance.

“Yes,” he grunts.

“Good. I’ll need you to throw me over there first.” I jerk my thumb to

the wall behind me.

We rejoin the men and I see Crystal. Shit.

A thunderous horn sounds. And the men fall into two staggered lines. I run down the front of the line, yelling over the noise. “Your number one priority is to protect Crystal. Your second priority is not to die.” Some of them let out chuckles at my weak attempt at humor.

“If we survive this—” Sin says. I roll my eyes.

“If we survive this, everyone left standing will kiss you. How about that?” I ask and turn to address the others. “No guard is to be killed. Anything else goes! Let’s show them we’re not all scum,” I yell. The men roar with me and we look around us as the four gates of the dome begin to rise.

Chapter Twelve

I meet Avalanche's gaze and we break from the rest. We jog away from each other. My men know what we're doing. The others yell at me as I run closer to an opening gate. I can hear the Watch behind me.

The distance is right.

I sprint toward the hulking man. He starts to turn before I reach out to him. We clasp arms and he spins us both in a rapid circle. He releases my arms and I fly. I don't worry that I'll land somewhere other than where I should. We've practiced this a thousand times and he hasn't missed for over a month now.

I twist in the air and land on the barrier facing a line of shocked Inner circle citizens. They scramble away. I look left and right and spot the stairs. Two Watchmen guard the bottom. One earns a roundhouse to the face; the other gets knocked out with his own spear. I continue all the way up to the top level. It seems only the Inner Ring gets added protection. No one is in pursuit.

I dodge through the top Outer Rings level, trying to locate the stairs to the walkway. The Outer Ring cheers me on. Happy with their private show. There is a single guard at the entrance to the walkway. I dash up the few stairs to the walkway after dealing with him.

I need to eliminate the archers.

There's no point attempting to block the gates if they can shoot my fighters like fish in a barrel. I crouch and run down to where the bowmen are stationed.

I peer around the corner, my back to the wall. There are five. The arrows are in one large bucket behind them. I won't be able to lift it. I strain my eyes to check what it's made of. There are torches all down the walkway. But if I stand to get one, they will see me.

The sound of sword meeting sword clangs through the dome. Every second I wait, another Watchman is trying to kill my friends. I need to act now.

Ditching any attempt at subtlety, I leave my hiding spot and race down the walkway. I jump up and heft the torch free as the first man turns. I shove it into the arrows. I won't be able to do anything about the ones they already have, but Jovan's archers weren't very good six months ago.

Hopefully they haven't gotten any better.

The archers see the flaming arrows.

I hardly break my sprint as I run to the man on the end and sink a fist into his gut, swiping his dagger. I don't fight them. There are more important things to do.

"Get her!" one shouts.

I look to my left and gauge the distance. I try not to think about what I'm about to do. Hesitation will kill me. I launch myself over the walkway barrier, into space.

A whirl of an arrow sounds behind me. The Watchman misses.

The swing of the beam takes me off guard as I land. My stomach lurches as I work to regain my balance. The crowd gasps. Whoever built this dome shouldn't have hung their banners off four beams suspended above the gates. It was the perfect means to block the entries onto the dome floor. They'd need twenty or more men to move them.

I steady myself and quickly get to work, cutting one rope and then running along the wide beam. I slash through the second rope and then the third in the middle, leaping off onto the level below as the beam falls. I hope the beam doesn't land on anyone. But Jovan may forgive me for killing guards and I'm certain I'm making enough of a spectacle up here that the Watchmen will be aware of my movements.

A second later there's a resounding crash.

I don't know what the Watch is expecting. But I don't think they expected me to repeat the same process along the next wall. When I fling myself onto this beam, I'm more prepared for the sudden sway. There are shouts. The five archers are heading toward me. I cut the ropes and grab the railing of the level below as I leap off. Two Outer Ring Bruma pull me over the side.

A thunderous noise signals my success. I repeat my actions on the third beam and don't wait for the crash before moving to the final beam. The Watchmen know where I'll be this time. Two of them meet me at the bottom of the stairs. It was a mistake for them to split up. Sweat dripping in my eyes, I disable them and run to the top. The others had not expecting me to get through. I dodge past them and jump onto the last beam. There is a whirl. I drop and something brushes the top of my head.

This time I cut both outside ropes and then dance along the beam to the middle. I take a quick breath and cut the third rope.

I ride the beam down to the first level where I jump off onto the balustrade. The air whooshes out of my lungs as I cling to the barrier. This time I can feel vibrations in the stone as the beam hits. Wheezing, I stand on the barrier and grab a drink from a man and tilt it back, draining the whole goblet. It could be my last drink.

I give a loud ‘yip’ over my shoulder and hear one in response. I spread my arms wide and fall backward, laughing at the look on the Bruma’s faces.

Air rushes past me. I bring my arms to my sides and push my legs together. Avalanche catches me and flings me up. I land on the dome floor once more. Not before adding a couple of tumbles. The crowd roars at my display. I promptly forget them and take in my immediate surroundings.

The men are in two staggered lines. All sweating. All fighting for their lives and entirely focused on what they’re doing. Slay and his men have a pile of bleeding Watchmen at their feet on the opposite side of the dome.

I look beyond them and my heart sinks. So many got through. There are still about a hundred Watchmen to fight. Three of the beams are in place. The fourth one has rolled forward slightly. And I can see guards are squeezing through in a slow trickle. We now have the tiniest chance to survive.

Crystal is standing behind the men with her arms wrapped around herself. The two upper levels are chanting and stamping their feet. The whole place is shaking. They are screaming my name. I crouch as a spear hurtles past me and I finally see what the small jutting stages are for. Malir and the other commander are barking orders to those below them. They’re coordinating the Watch.

“Avalanche!” I yell over the noise. He grunts as I explain what I want to do. I back up a shorter distance. He throws me and I’m just able to latch onto the side of the balcony holding the unknown commander. I push myself up and dodge his sword. I follow this with a punch to the throat. I turn around using the wall behind him and punch him across the jaw. He drops, but is still blinking. I kick him to make sure he’s down for the fight. I realize as I look over the side there isn’t any good way to get back to my men. Might as well do it my way.

I jump over the balcony and land on a Watchman’s shoulders. Before he reacts, I leap onto the next man’s.

I shout as I go. “Commander down! Commander down!” I dance over

the top of them and jump over the pile of unconscious bodies to get back to my men. My ploy has worked. The Watchmen are turning in confusion to their lone commander. Their faces uncertain. The onslaught slows.

“Regroup!” Malir yells. He has been directing the men down at the opposite end, but now he’ll have to split his attention between both groups. The Watchmen drop back. I’m not going to take out Malir, if I even could. He’s my friend - or was.

“Wait!” I yell as Blizzard moves to chase them. He falls back.

I run along the line, puffing. “Fall back a little to the corner so they can’t get around us to Crystal. Catch your breath. This time they won’t be stopping.” I look up and then turn back to the men. “There are fifty or so left. We can do this!”

“But they’ll probably kill us at the end anyway!” Ice says, lifting his head from where he’s trying to catch his breath.

“They might. They also might not. If they do? You’ll all become legends. The only fighters to have ever beat the Watchmen,” I say.

I pick up an abandoned spear. The men shuffle back twenty meters to the corner. I nod at Crystal and turn back to the Watchmen who have regained their lines.

“Charge!” Malir barks to his Watch.

My eyes flick down. There’s a rope lying across the pit from one of the beams I released. I run, faster than I ever have, dropping my spear next to me as I seize the rope with both hands. As the front line nears I pull using all my strength and body weight. It isn’t enough.

Then the rope lifts. I look over my shoulder at Shard and Blizzard. I have time to give them a hint of a smile before the rope is ripped from my hands, tearing at the skin of my palms.

The front row of men falls over each other. It stops their charge and the men behind them.

I pick up my spear and we rejoin the other men, who are cheering, even as they knock out the fallen guards with the blunt ends of their spears. Thirty men or so are now in front of us. Ten against Slay’s crew. I don’t know how many of Slay’s men are left. Not many, if they only sent ten fighters there.

For the next undeterminable period of time, the eleven of us fight. All of us begin to flake and I know, without a shadow of a doubt, if we haven’t been training so hard lately we’d be dead already. Everyone is bleeding from

some wound or another. Most of us have been hit several times.

I arch my back and spin the spear around to cut through the thighs of three men. I reverse the spear and hit the same men over the face with the blunt end. While they are clutching their faces, I bring them to the ground, one after the other.

Less than twenty left.

I fall behind the line and assess the situation. I look up at Malir, to see if I can judge what his next move will be. My heart stops. Butcher is on the level above him. He has a sword in his hand. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what he plans to do.

I dodge through the fighting front; spear in hand. As Butcher begins his jump I take two galloping steps and release the spear.

It catches him halfway down, through the mouth, pinning him to the wall above Malir's head.

Time slows. Malir looks behind him. Then at me. A roaring blast splits through the dome in the second of silence after the spear impaled its target. I turn toward the source of the most inhuman sound I've ever heard. Slay cuts the head off his opponent in a vicious strike and begins his charge towards me, bloodied sword gleaming in his hand. A weapon would be ideal.

Suddenly the ten remaining Watchmen are the least of my problems. They aren't paying me any attention anyway. There aren't enough of them to fight on two fronts.

"Yip!" I look up and see a sword spinning in a slow lob toward me. I catch it and raise it in thanks at Shard.

"Yip!" I catch a second sword from Flurry. And vaguely notice Avalanche knocking two of the Watchmen's heads together while Ice cuts through their calves.

Slay is halfway across the dome now. He's enraged and moving quickly. I test the balance of the swords and circle them twice, then stroll into the middle of the dome. It looks like we'll get our match after all.

He doesn't stop, but he does roar. "You killed my brother, you fucking whore!" The last word is screamed.

His eyes are crazed as he swings his sword down on me. I parry the blow with crossed swords, but I'm still forced back several meters by the fury he puts into it. Every thrust I block or push aside makes my arms tremble. And his blows are as rapid as I remember. But his anger has taken away his calculation and calm.

“He looks like a pig up there,” I say and watch his face contort into pure rage. He swings wildly and I dart beneath his guard, slicing his right thigh. He bellows and jabs his blade my way, catching my upper left arm.

We rain blows on each other in our deadly dance. I cannot hear anything other than his breathing and I cannot sense anything other than his intentions. I operate solely on my instinct. We’re not interrupted. The other guards have been dealt with.

“You’re going to die, bitch. And then I’m going to piss on your dead body,” he spits and slashes at me. I wheel away.

His comment doesn’t affect me as it was intended to. Instead it reminds me of the woman he raped, mutilated and strung up. She looked about twenty or so. Just younger than Crystal. No doubt he raped Crystal while thinking she was a child.

White fury, like I haven’t felt since Kedrick’s death, licks my stomach. There is renewed force in my thrusts as I unleash a torrent of attacks down on him. I have the satisfaction of seeing his eyes widen. He’s not thinking of his brother anymore. He is realizing I’m a better fighter. He overcommits on a thrust. It’s my chance. I hold down his blade with one of my swords, ducking his crushing fist, and bury my other sword all the way to the hilt in his stomach.

I dance back with my single sword. Even like this he’s still dangerous. I kick his weapon away when he brings both hands to the sword protruding from his stomach. I remember Kedrick doing the same with the arrow sticking out of his chest. I shake the haunting memory away.

Slay falls to his knees. I look behind me. The others are watching. The crowd is chanting my name again. Or maybe they never stopped.

“Crystal,” I call and gesture to her.

She looks my way and shuffles forwards. I give her a hurry-up gesture and she jogs over.

“Want the honors?” I ask and hold out the sword.

She looks at the sword and back up at me in disbelief. Her heart-shaped face hardens. “Yes,” she says and grips the hilt, almost snatching the weapon from my hands.

I move behind Slay and hold his hands behind him. I don’t want him to try anything. Crystal stands in front of him. I can tell she’s afraid to be so close to him. I wonder if she’ll do it.

Slay speaks between gasps. “You were one of my favorites. You had

such a tight little –”

Crystal swings and cuts into his neck. It doesn't make it all the way through. She pulls it out and swings again. Blood sprays me.

“Murderer!” she screams. I let go and he falls to the ground. His head is off now. She hacks at his body.

“Rapist!” she screams. When she lifts the sword next time, I catch her wrist and take it from her, pulling her into my arms. I hold her as she sobs in my arms like the broken girl she has been. The crowd is hushed.

I rock her, stroking her hair.

“Frost! Come quickly!” Shard calls.

I whip my head around. The men are all circled around something. What are they staring at? Tugging Crystal with me, I walk toward them.

Then the men part and I see who is lying, dead still, in the middle.

Chapter Thirteen

I drop Crystal's hand and sprint the rest of the way, my entire being is screaming.

Not Flurry!

Sin's men part and back away as I scramble on my knees next to Flurry's still frame. No, not still. He's breathing. Gasping, struggling for breath.

"What happened?" I look at Blizzard who holds Flurry's head in his hands.

"Watchmen got him, just under the ribs," he says. His eyes are bloodshot and his chin trembles, on the edge of losing it. Every fighter here knows "under the ribs" is never good. I grab one of Flurry's bloody hands as Crystal drops to her knees on my other side. There is so much blood. He has no tunic on to soak it up, so it just runs down his sides. I turn to Shard. I don't even get a chance to say anything before he shakes his head at me. I hold his gaze and read the hopelessness in his eyes. Another person I cared about was going to die.

Flurry coughs.

"You're alright, brother," Ice says. He has a firm hold of Flurry's other hand.

"No, I'm not," Flurry says and lets out a short laugh, which turns into a coughing fit. Crystal is crying again. I gesture to Avalanche and jerk my head at her. I hope he comforts her.

Flurry looks up at me. "You got him. You...got Slay," he gasps, expression contorting in pain.

"You bet I did," I say, my vision becoming blurry.

"Then we won," he says and closes his eyes with a tired smile. It takes a moment to understand he's talking about the tournament. It seems so long ago.

"We kicked ass. Top fighter and top ranking," Blizzard says. Tears drip down his face, onto the gritty ground of the dome.

"No need to—," he says and rolls, clutching the area just under his heart, "look so sad." The wave of pain passes and Ice rolls him onto his back again. "I always wanted to win the tournament."

"We did it. You did it." Shard crouches down and grips Flurry's

shoulder.

“Just one more thing,” he says. His words are slurring now. I feel a traitorous tear trek its way down my face. I have no right to cry when Flurry is being so strong in his last moments. I grip his hand as though I can hold him here somehow.

“What?” I ask in a thick voice. I don’t think anyone else can speak.

Flurry looks up at me again and though he is on his deathbed his cheeks blush. “A kiss.”

“Why didn’t you just say so,” Sin says, pushing through the circle of men around us. Ice glares up at him, until Flurry laughs. It gives the rest of us the permission to do so, though the sound is forced. It makes the moment all the more heartbreaking.

“Someone...a bit prettier,” Flurry gasps. He twitches a finger in my direction and whispers, “Frost.”

I smile at him with trembling lips. The men are laughing softly at Sin’s spluttering denials behind me. I shuffle forward and take his head in both of my hands. A couple of tears splash onto his bloodied, sweat-streaked face. His head is dead weight in my hands. He no longer has the strength to lift it himself. Shivers wrack his body and his eyes keep sliding off me as though he’s having trouble focusing.

I lean over and touch my lips to his and pull back. He sighs and the sound rattles in his chest. I see him fading. I want to reach into his eyes and pull the light back into them, but I don’t know where it’s disappearing to.

I press a last sobbing kiss to his forehead.

He’s gone.

Blizzard hugs Flurry’s body fiercely, muttering words I can’t hear. Ice is shouting while Shard tries his best to comfort him. I hug myself, not bothering to hide my tears. A large hand rests on my shoulders and I look up at Avalanche. He opens his arms and I fling myself into them. He picks me up and hugs me tightly as I sob into his shoulder. I feel his tears landing on my head. Flurry is gone. Sweet Flurry, who had somehow been dragged into this life when he shouldn’t have been. He never had a chance to be a husband, or to be a father.

Avalanche starts to put me down. I wonder why until I see Jovan, his personal guard, and Malir are nearing. While we were occupied with Flurry, they’ve cleared a beam away from one of the doors.

Sin and his men are already in a line. Our grieving group joins them.

There are two men who were with Slay still down the other end - the only survivors of their group. One of them Hale's, and the second is the man who left Sin's group. Jovan approaches them.

"What's he doing?" Shard whispers.

Hale's man attacks. Jovan's sword is there before my eyes can process the action, and then the man's head is sailing through the air.

"Fuck," Shard says. He hardly ever curses.

The remaining man from Tricks' barracks drops his weapon and puts up his hands. Two guards grab his arms and drag him in front of our line. Jovan circles the man slowly and holds his palms out. Startled, I remember the crowd. They are roaring, screaming for the man's death. The people from the Outer Rings who have watched this man fight over and over again are doing the same. They laugh and throw rubbish from their perches. Jovan looks up at me and raises an eyebrow. I look away from him. The man's scream hardly sounds before he, too, is dead.

There is the thud of boots as Jovan walks up and down the line. He looks into each man's face for several moments. He ignores me the first time and then stops during his return walk and stands right in front of me.

I tilt my head up, a bit ashamed of my tear-streaked face. His eyes flicker over my features, no doubt taking all of this in. I'm too sad to give him the defiant look I planned on. The probing blue eyes probably see this as well. Since I first met him he'd appeared to have the eerie ability to read my thoughts.

"But would they have done the same without your guidance?" he finally asks. I answer him, though it was rhetorical. I can't watch anymore of my friends die.

"Yes," I say. I'm speaking of the others from my own barracks. I would include Wrath, Sin and Vice also. I don't really know about the others.

Sure enough, Jovan's eyes come to rest on Tricks' men. Sin shuffles beside me.

The King returns his gaze to mine and he growls, turning away.

"Please," I breathe. He stills for a moment and then continues to his own guard. I ignore the questioning looks from Sin and Avalanche. Is he going to kill them? Will he kill me?

The crowd is booing now. And chanting my name. I don't know what they make of his extra attention toward me. The King draws his sword. The crowd boos louder. They don't want him to do it. Perhaps they're not as

bloodthirsty as I thought.

“No death, no death, no death!” The crowd chants. The King holds up one hand and the crowd tapers to a stop. Some of the men in the line fidget, unsettled by this display of power.

“Today we have witnessed something never seen before,” he roars. The crowd roars back. He gives them a moment before raising his hand once again.

“And as such, I will do something never done before.”

Sin draws in a sharp breath next to me. Please let them go. Jovan’s eyes flicker to mine.

“These men,” he pauses as the crowd chants my name once more, “and the women.” He concedes.

I snort and quickly hold my breath as he stops and walks in front of the line again. I realize he’s working the crowd just as we do. Irony.

“Will be spared!” he shouts to the crowd. The dome shakes with the people’s reaction.

And for the first time today they are not chanting my name, they are chanting their King’s.

We don’t even have time to celebrate our escape from death before we’re ordered toward the gates. I look over my shoulder to make sure Crystal is safe. Shard has her. Avalanche barely restrains Blizzard as two guards drag our friend’s body away. Ice watches until we are in the tunnels under the stadium and Flurry is out of sight.

We walk through the torch-lit passageways beneath the dome and are paraded in front of the assembly. Jovan breaks off from the front of the line and returns to his throne, ignoring me. I can sense his fury. It’s understandable considering the situation I just put him in. We made a mockery of his guards and his dome. Plus, there is all the rest I’ve put him through with escaping.

We leave the dome and continue marching. I have no idea where we’re going. I can’t believe we’re alive. Nearly all of us, and more than I’d dared to hope. My throat constricts as I think of Flurry. I wish it had been someone else. One of Sin’s men. It’s a horrible thought, but true nevertheless. The sky starts to darken and my wounds begin to throb. I have several of them. I can see blood dripping off Avalanche’s fingers.

There are whispers down the line. I peer around Sin’s frame and gasp when I see where we are. Why is Jovan bringing us here? Unfortunately, I

know it's my doing. Several of the other men do, too. I can see their darting glances. I recall the King's specific words. He'd said we would be spared, not *released*.

The experience of entering this castle is almost identical to the first time I arrived in the Third Sector. The portcullis is raised and then lowered behind us. We are walked up the enormous stairs and through the imposing entrance. This time I'm not led through the archway to be judged by the King, and I'm not led up the stairway to my old isolated room.

This castle appears to be slightly different in its design. It's more comfortable and there's more decoration. Jovan's mother must have done it in her lifetime. It was either her, or Arla. I didn't particularly like the thought of Arla doing it. I doubted the rest of the female assembly would either.

"You. Woman." I look at the Watchman barking at me and lift my eyebrows. Four men surround me and Crystal is shoved toward me. She looks up with panicked eyes and I remember the others will all be terrified, not having had any prior experience with the castle. I wish I could reassure her, but I'm worried for reasons of my own.

I wave at Shard as the men are led in a different direction.

"This way," a guard says and shoves Crystal again. I grab her hand and hold it in an iron grip.

"We'll follow. There's no need to push," I say and hold his gaze until he steps back. As promised, we follow them without resistance. They halt in front of a door and swing it open.

The problems start when I try to enter the room after Crystal.

"Not you," the lead Watchman says.

I fold my arms across my chest. "Why not?"

The men exchange glances. One of them shrugs and looks baffled. I bite back a smile. On Osolis our guard is selected for their prowess with combat, but also for their initiative and problem solving ability. These skills are clearly not a prerequisite for the Watch.

"King's orders," one of them finally grunts beneath his helmet. I plant my feet at his reply. Crystal needs someone with her. The four Watchmen shuffle their feet. They've just seen me fight. They know exactly what I am capable of.

"Frost. It's fine. *I'll* be fine," Crystal says. "Please...I'm sick of the fighting." I look at her and see she's barely holding back tears. I nod and move forward to hug her.

“You shouldn’t be alone after what happened, and then Flurry, too. Are you sure you’ll be okay?” I ask.

She nods into my shoulder. “Thank you so much. For everything.”

I’m led up to the second floor. I wonder if Arla and Macy sleep in the same rooms in this castle. I travel with my escort to the end of the hallway and then up a few stairs into a short passageway. There are only two rooms down this hallway. I’m left in the closest room.

It’s much nicer than my last room. Colorful drapes soften the pillars around the bed. An alcove, layered with bright cushions is situated in one corner. Another door lies to my right, but when I tug at the handle, I find it’s locked. A tub sits behind a screen. It’s like Fiona’s with the pyope beads underneath it for heating. I spin in a slow circle taking in the tapestries, the ornate wooden furniture, the intricate stone-work. After my shoebox in the barracks, this is a dream. I love it. Is this the guest room? I never believed the room I had occupied in the Third had been the dungeon, but it did seem that way compared to this splendor. The distraction of the room doesn’t last long. I lower myself onto a polished settee at the end of the bed, muscles aching - heart included.

Flurry’s gone.

Fresh tears spill down my cheeks. The excitement of the fight is leaving. My shoulders slump as I remember every hit and kick leading up to his death. What man had landed the killing blow? If I’d kicked someone harder would Flurry still be alive?

At least I saved Malir’s life. And rid the world of two soulless men. I know we were lucky to have only lost one man, but it doesn’t feel that way.

A knock sounds at the door, causing me to frantically scrub at my face. I frown at the entrance when it doesn’t immediately open. Another, more insistent knock echoes through the room.

I stand and circle to the door, wondering if it’s a trick. I try the latch. To my astonishment, it opens. I hadn’t even bothered to try it, sure it would be locked. Apparently I’m not a prisoner. Is this the same for the other fighters? Or is this why I’ve been separated from them?

I stand, mouth open, as a parade of women enter. Garments are laid out on the bed. The tub is filled and the beads lit underneath. The screen is opened in front. I squeak as Sadra enters and sit frozen in shock as she tends to my left arm where Slay got beneath my guard. I wait for her to recognize me, for her to match the height of the Tatuma with the height of Frost. For

her to match the Tatuma's disappearance with Frost's appearance. She doesn't. I think my silence is putting her off. But Olina would certainly put her at ease. Frost wouldn't give a damn.

Sadra's hands shake so much I wonder why she's helping me. A stuttered thanks for saving Malir's life answers my question. I realize my delegate friends will be here. In all the excitement it slipped my mind. Fiona, Jacqueline, Roman and the others. Will they be able to tell it's me? My short stature on Glacium is rare in itself. I'm lucky Crystal is also here and of a similar height. It may stop them from becoming suspicious.

The servants leave in the same order which they arrived.

I swing the door closed behind them, my mouth open once more. What is all this? I look at the steam rising above the screen. Jovan ordered them to bring all of this. A whole tub of water! I can't remember the last time I soaked in a bath. Is everyone receiving this treatment?

I intend to stay in until the water goes cold, but the water won't go cold with the fire underneath. How is the bottom of the bath not burning me anyway? Adnan has probably told me at some point. I tend to drift off when he gets carried away with the complexities of his inventions. I groan at the situation I'm in, having to live behind the backs of my friends. I really can't blame Jovan though. I backed him into a corner. I'll just have to make sure I don't slip up and do something Olina would do. Jovan's the only person on Glacium who knows my secret, and that's how it's going to stay.

After painstakingly cleaning my torn palms, skinned legs, rope burn and replacing Sadra's bandages, I get out of the water. It's tempting to sink back into the warm depths, but one look at the filthy water deters me. I step out and wrap myself in a fur, eyeing the clean garments draped atop the bed. They will be soft, well-made and clean. I long to wear them. They'll also set me apart if the rest of the men and Crystal have not received such treatment.

With a sigh, I grab my harness costume and clean as much of the blood and grit off as possible in the bath water. This done, I put it back on and immediately braid my hair and begin to pull it into a bun at the base of my neck. My hands halt. Jacqueline has seen my hair in this style. I take it out of the bun and leave my blue-black hair in a long braid down the middle of my back, a normal enough sight in the Outer Rings.

A knock sounds. I swing the heavy door open.

"Come," the Watchman grunts. My eyebrows rise.

"Or do you not want to eat?" he asks. My stomach demands I put

away my pride and follow the man. I trail after him. Three other guards surround me. Are we going to eat with the assembly? I assumed we would be fed in isolation. Isn't Jovan afraid we might attack? Wait. I forget I'm talking of Jovan. The King is that arrogant. And that right, too. The barracks will have no wish to throw away their second chance at life.

I'm in full-Frost mode as I stroll through the stone archway. But my heart is pounding. The initial wave of consuming grief after Flurry's death has washed through me, leaving me devastated, but still able to focus on what is coming. How will Jovan react to my capture? I recall the intensity of his gaze earlier today. Furious is an understatement, I think, but I've known what would face me if I returned.

Despite the guards murmured instructions, I stop when I'm in the middle of the room. I survey the seated assembly, gaze unimpressed, avoiding the table of delegates. My traitorous eyes sneak a quick look anyway. My breath catches as I see they're looking my way like everyone else. I *do* manage to avoid looking at Jovan and eventually spot Avalanche in the back corner of the hall, as far from the King as possible. Suits me. I wasn't eager for our conversation.

"That'll be all, boys," I call over my shoulder to the Watchmen. I grin as they linger, unsure of what to do.

The eyes of some of the assembly men are drawn to me as I saunter down the aisle. Some are impressed, some dismiss me. But just like in the Cells, I act like their attention is beneath me, regardless of their attraction. It's the only way I can deal with the discomfort I feel.

All the surviving barrack fighters are present, Crystal, too. I was right to stay in my fighting gear. None of the others have been given new garments. A sweeping glance eases my concerns the Watchmen may have been less than welcoming towards my friends. There are no visible injuries beyond those they acquired in the dome, and they've been allowed to wash. Avalanche's shoulder wound is bound. The only thing out of character is the wariness and apprehension in their expressions. I move around and hug all of them. It causes the assembly to whisper. They were most likely starving for more gossip and wished us to fight amongst each other like savages. Wealthy people who surrounded royalty were the same wherever you went, whether it was Osolis or Glacium.

Shard holds me for longer. "You saved us in there. I was too shocked to say it earlier, but thank you."

“Were you told anything? Where did they put you all?” I ask, pulling back.

“We’re in the barracks.” He smiles. “It’s like we never left.” I snort. He loses his smile.

“The main man. The commander who was in the dome. He told us we’d be briefed tomorrow.” I hear his questioning tone and give him a loaded look. There are too many listening ears. I know I’ll eventually have to give an explanation as to why Jovan spared them. I have no idea what I’ll say. What could possibly explain the relationship the King and I had displayed?

I hear a gigantic rumble from Avalanche’s complaining stomach and glance around the seated men. The assembly is eating. I know I’m not technically a prisoner, but I am unsure about the position of the barrack members. Are we guests of some description? I glance around. There are more Watchmen than usual in the food hall, but Jovan knows he holds our lives in his hands. We have all been shown to the food hall. I assume we’re here to eat, but no one has bothered to tell us. They’re probably taking pleasure in our discomfort.

“Come with me,” I say to Avalanche and start toward the food tables. I ignore the whistles of appreciation as I pass some of the assembly men. They’re like puppies trying to bark compared to the crass comments in the pits. Avalanche lumbers beside me. We stop in front of the mountain of food. I peek up under my eyelashes at the massive man next to me. His eyes are nearly popping out of his head. I laugh at him and he grins, pushing me gently with his uninjured arm.

I walk down the table and stop in my tracks when I realize where I’m going.

I can’t eat a pear.

They’re well-known to be Olina’s favorite food. What was I thinking? I look longingly at the basket of luscious fruit before turning to get some meat. Always meat. I long for vegetables and apples. I throw the food on my dish, taking delight in watching Avalanche.

Plate loaded, I head back to the table. Avalanche doesn’t look like he’ll be leaving his current station any time soon. I stop and blink at the chest in front of me. I peek up into Sin’s deep blue eyes.

I gather my thoughts and raise an eyebrow. “What?” I ask.

He circles me, tossing the locks of hair from his forehead. “Oh, nothing.” He sighs. I give him a strange look and move around him.

“Just remembering the little promise you made,” he calls when I’m several steps away.

I turn and search his face for the answer, genuinely confused. “What promise?”

He clutches his heart and makes a pained sound. “You don’t even remember our love pact?” I bite my cheek to contain my smile. Those closest to us are listening intently. He’s such an attention seeker. I’m quite certain I would remember a love pact. Sin is working the crowd as always. He grins as he saunters over.

“You promised me a kiss if we survived.” His voice is much louder than necessary.

Blood must drain from my face because the silken fighter’s grin grows ten-fold. “Sin, I didn’t actually think we’d survive. And I seem to recall promising we would *all* kiss you. Have the others made good on the bargain?” I ask. I keep my voice low, but the immediate assembly overhears and start sniggering.

“I will...collect those in due time. Are you going back on your word?” he booms dramatically. I roll my eyes and his eyes fill with glee.

He walks behind me and pushes the loose strands of hair away from my neck. He leans his mouth to my ear and whispers. “Should we give them a show, Princess?” His question is low and seductive. And completely wasted on me. I press my lips together to stop my laughter. He is unbelievable. He’s only doing this is to get the other female’s attention.

I turn to him and give him a look Willow would be proud of. I tuck away my smile when his eyes widen, noticeably startled to see me playing along. I put a finger to his mouth and trace his full upper lip and then rise up on my toes and press a whisper-soft, lingering kiss to his mouth. He groans as I move away and tries to pull me back, his eyes still closed. I grin and spin, sweeping his legs from underneath him. I hear the satisfying whoosh of breath as the air is forced from his lungs when he lands on his back.

Laughter rings through the hall. Avalanche joins me, finally done amassing food. Our group is still slapping the table when I reach them. Wrath gives me a stinging high-five.

I lean back against Blizzard’s shoulder. I’ve eaten too much. Easy to do with the wealth of food before us. Ice shares a heavy look with Blizzard and the despondent hollowness I’ve temporarily placed to one side rises up.

Ice stands. "Flurry was...a good man, all the way through. The most decent man I ever met." He clears his throat. "He was born in the Outer Rings. Hard to be born there and turn out that way." He draws a hand down over his face before continuing. "I was honored to know him, honored to battle by his side, and honored to be there at the end." Crystal puts an arm around his collapsed shoulders as he sits. Flurry's death was terrible for me, but the others have known him much longer. Blizzard is next to share a memory of Flurry. We all take a turn, tipping back brew after every memory. This brew, which I used to water down, is like honey now compared to what I've been drinking in the Outer Rings - It doesn't mean it's any less potent.

"I have a toast," Crystal speaks, wobbling atop the bench. "To Frost. For saving our sorry arses." She belches softly behind her hand.

"To Frost!" I cringe as they yell my fake name loudly and clink their glasses.

I hear someone mutter. "For now." However the man's quite justified concern over his future longevity is drowned out.

"Speech!" The chant goes up. Perhaps no one wants to think about what will happen tomorrow.

I clamber onto the bench seat, face warm. The assembly has been drinking - as is usual after dinner, but they stay far away from our table. The louder we get, the sharper their glares become. They don't like that we've lost our meekness so quickly. Still, the men and women watch our tired group and listen, desperate at the same time for the promised show. No one has come to hasten us out of the hall with our growing noise, confirming my guess. Jovan has declared we are to stay on in a guest capacity...with guards.

"I don't know what to say," I say with a shrug. I start when I see Jovan glowering my way. I gulp and turn back to the fighters.

"I couldn't have fought with better people today." I make sure to tailor my words, mindful of our current company. "Every one of us contributed. If there had even been one weak link in the chain, that was us, gone." I scan the men's faces and suddenly grin.

"But did you see our moves?" I say to Tricks' men. "There's no doubt we would have kicked your ass in the group category. You never stood a chance." Tricks' men stand up, shouting their denials. Our barrack argues back. Crystal looks between the groups laughing. I'm so busy celebrating the chaos I've created that I don't notice Fury and Vice until it's too late. They grab my arms before I can react and I splutter and gasp as Wrath pours brew

down my throat.

They sit me back on the table and I wipe the alcohol from my face and chest, still giggling. “You can give me that over the shit in the Outer Rings any day,” I say.

“What’s going to happen?” Shard asks quietly. I look around the drooping heads, my own head beginning to dip with weariness. Each of us have battled for our lives and grieved the loss of a dear friend today. I know he is asking on behalf of the others. No doubt he wants to reassure them somehow.

I shake my head, resting a hand on his lean shoulders.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “Really, I don’t.”

Chapter Fourteen

Back in my chamber, I curse as I attempt to undo the side laces of my harness. There's no reason I can't wear the new garments to bed where no one will see. Soft material on my skin! The locked side door I attempted to open earlier crashes open. I grip the loose ends of my outfit and whirl toward the disruption. A part of me already knows who it is. Only one person throws doors around like the doors purposely try to slow him down.

Jovan stalks into the room, slamming the door behind him. His face is tight with fury. The King of Glacium doesn't bother with greetings.

"Do you have any idea, the shit you've caused?"

I jerk my head towards the front of my chamber. Surely the guards would hear his roar from outside.

"The walls are thick," he says.

"They'd have to be really thick," I mutter. I catch him looking at the unfettered laces down the side of my breasts. I turn from him and quickly do them up.

"I get a message halfway through the tour informing me the Tatuma has disappeared. Do you understand how much time I...how much time the Watch wasted looking for you? And now you turn up *without your veil*. Are you fucking insane?"

"Jovan, give me a minute to explain," I say. I know he's been looking for me. I saw him with Rhone in the Sixth Sector. Somehow I don't think he'd be happy to hear this.

"You took your chance to run back to Osolis," he continues, ignoring my request. "I gather what you encountered on your way was more than you planned for. You were trapped in the Outer Rings. And you can fight," he accuses. "You hid your skill the whole time."

"It wasn't exactly in my best interest to tell everyone," I say calmly.

"And I thought I had to look out for you because you're so small. What a fool you must have thought me this whole time," he says.

I frown. Out of everything I've done, this is what annoys him the most? "I don't think you're a fool. I've hidden my ability to fight my whole life. Only two people on Osolis know," I say.

I see a tiny flicker of interest amongst the fury in his eyes. "And there never would be a third person if you'd been successful in getting to the Great

Stairway.”

“Jovan, that’s not—”

“Don’t lie to me,” he booms.

I sigh and turn away; he’s still treating me like a child. He is right, in part. I didn’t expect the Outer Rings to be quite so...savage. But I never planned to go back to Osolis. I’m not that stupid. Even *if* I made it, mother would kill me. I go to the tub and push the screen back, picking up the washcloth. A servant has been in to empty the dirty water.

“What are you doing?” he demands. “We’re talking.”

I shrug without turning, continuing my tidying. “No, *you’re* talking. I don’t think I’ll waste my breath. It’s like talking to a wall.”

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I whirl around to find him right in front of me. He’s still bare-chested from the dome. My eyes move over the hard planes of his chest and down to his ridged stomach. I look back up to his face, confused, and see a tinge of smugness in his furious gaze.

“Olina, I have thought you dead for the last month or more. Did you die alone in a blizzard? Were you raped by criminals? Or murdered for the quality of your coat? Did you starve on the stairway?” He runs his hands through his hair. “A whole sector has passed. I’ve been half insane with the wondering,” he says in a soft voice. His dangerous voice. “Do you have any idea what you’ve put your friends through?”

I hang my head, unable to meet his gaze. Guilt floods through me with his words. His question unlocks feelings which I’ve forced into a box for the last six months. “Please believe me when I tell you how sorry I am. Hurting my friends was never my intent. There was a lead on Kedrick’s arrow. I expected to be back in a few days, but my veil was ruined and I couldn’t return.” Or didn’t want to return, I add silently.

“Hmm,” he replies doubtfully. My eyes fly back to his. Disappointment clouds his features as he looks down at me.

“You still left as our worlds were on the brink of war. I understand you wish to find my brother’s killer, as I do, but there is a time to pursue this. It shouldn’t have been your priority in that moment. What’s your justification for abandoning your people? I didn’t think you were a coward, or without honor.”

“Are we at war?” I quickly ask, searching his face. I let his other remarks go. They’re just bait.

“Do you even care what my answer is?”

I narrow my eyes. "Of course. They are my people."

"You have a funny way of showing it," he scoffs.

I sigh. "Don't be petty. My decision wasn't clear-cut. I *lost* my veil. How was I supposed to return?" I try to turn away to collect myself. He spins me back and grabs both my arms as he has done in the past. This calm façade he's had since entering the room has finally cracked, his anger unleashed.

"Bullshit! You could have just come to me. You could've crept into the castle. Apparently you're an expert at sneaking around. I could have found a damned veil for you." I look pointedly at his hands and he lets go, clenching his fists by his sides.

He hasn't finished. "And what was that idiocy you pulled in the dome? You backed me into a damn corner with your foolish act. There were at least two dozen times you could have died out there!" I watch him pace. "And you risked everyone finding out who you really are. Why did you not take my offer? Is it out of some kind of loyalty to the scum now sleeping in my castle?" he shouts.

I swallow. "They are my friends, Jovan, believe it or not. I had to try and save them. I apologize for the position I put you in. But I would do it again. And I *did* look for material."

"You seem awfully chummy with the men downstairs. I'm sure you've been trying your hardest to get back." His sarcastic reply. "And to think I was worried about someone hurting you." Every line in his face is fury. I always knew it would be bad when I came back, but this was beyond my expectations. A bad scolding, ignoring me, pinning me to the wall, but not breaking past all my flimsy excuses.

"I don't think anyone has connected Frost and Olina," I say.

"Then you haven't seen the looks Rhone is giving you. You better be damn careful no one figures out who you are." That was news to me, but I shouldn't have expected less of the astute delegate.

"No one has more personal interest in keeping *that* a secret," I say. His eyes lock on mine and I refuse to flinch away from the chill there. "Do you want to know what delayed my return?"

"I think I've made it abundantly clear that I do," he says.

I ignore his response. "Who will follow a blue-eyed Solati?" I try to say it matter-of-factly, but my voice wavers a little. His arms are crossed over his chest. He doesn't reply. Because there's nothing to say. He knows as well as I do.

“Furthermore, what damage could knowledge of a blue-eyed Tatuma do, in the wrong hands?” I look at him and see he understands. He’s probably already figured all this out. “Yes, the thought of remaining anonymous in the Outer Rings has an allure. It still does.” I sigh and move around the room briefly lost in my coveted thoughts. “No responsibilities, no past. And by staying there I might be doing my world a service. I might be saving my people from future harm, rather than the *immediate* harm of the war.”

I walk up to him. His eyes move down my body and return to mine. I give him the same smug look he gave me earlier and his eyes glint. “I always knew there was something wrong with my face. A deformity of some kind, or maybe I was just ugly, though nothing felt unusual to me.” I shrug. Jovan snorts.

“I can assure you that’s not the case.” My heart skips, but I pretend not to hear him.

“The moment I looked in a mirror, I knew.” I gaze at him but he doesn’t show surprise as he lowers himself to sit on the bed. He’s heard about the broken mirror at Fiona’s and he pieced the story together.

“I could take my veil off, and become an outcast. This would pitch Osolis into anarchy while the people dethroned my mother and found another leader - a person who had not disgraced herself by sleeping with a Bruma.” I glance at Jovan wondering why he hasn’t interrupted, but he’s just listening...calmly, even. I sit next to him and continue, watching him closely. “Or I could leave my veil on and remain the outcast I was before, just not as obviously. And one day I will rule - if I survive this long - and be forever afraid someone will reveal my own secret. Perhaps they will use the knowledge to blackmail me. Perhaps they will use it to blackmail my children after me. And what if my children have blue eyes? I could not veil them, as I have been.” I give him a fleeting look. “So yes, staying in the Outer Rings crossed my mind. A part of me desires that life, but it might also be the best alternative for my people.” I repeat and rest my head on the stone pillar beside me. I’m so tired.

“You are worried I might do this,” he says.

I close my eyes against his angry tone. “I’m still figuring that out.” Who knew a stone pillar could be so comfortable? I yawn.

“Did anyone mistreat you there?” he asks softly. I shake my head.

“Am I forgiven yet?” I ask into the silence which falls after his question.

“Forgiven, perhaps. Trusted - no.”

I pull my lips down in a weary pout, but really, I wouldn’t expect any different. “Fair enough,” I mumble.

“How long have you been fighting? You’ve destroyed my dome. We’ll have to reattach the beams, with chains this time. Every piece of scum will try to cut through the ropes after your stunt.”

“A long time.” I sigh, ignoring the second part of his comment.

I’m lifted up and deposited onto something soft.

“That arrow is going to be the death of you,” a deep voice whispers in my hair. “I wish you’d let him go.”

Chapter Fifteen

The eleven survivors from the dome sit in silence at breakfast. Sore isn't a good enough word to describe the level of aching in my body. Even waking up was a colossal effort, much less getting to my feet. A cleared throat startles us out of our stupor. Malir stands at the end of the table. I straighten.

"For the next two weeks, per the King's orders, you will train with the Watchmen. *If* selected, you may choose to remain here as part of the Watch, or you may return to the Outer Rings."

Whispers are thrown around the table. Most of the fighters are amazed they might actually be allowed to leave the castle, let alone offered a Watch position.

Malir looks directly at me. I catch the slight confusion in his gaze. No doubt he's wondering why I saved his life. I wish I could tell him, instead of continuing this deception. As it is, I struggle to keep the recognition from my face. I remind myself; eyes cold, mouth straight, Frost attitude on.

Malir addresses Crystal. "You will be expected to help with the castle duties, in addition to tasks given to you by my wife, Sadra." I try to reassure Crystal with a glance as she's whisked away by Sadra. Malir's wife would never harm her. But Crystal doesn't know this.

We follow Malir out of the food hall. I walk beside Shard as we head toward the training yard, accompanied by our guard. King Jovan is talking to Roman, but peers our way as we pass, watching until we're out of sight.

"Did anything happen in the barracks?" I ask Shard.

"Surprisingly, no. We were kept separate from the Watch. Flurry would have loved the mattresses," he adds. I laugh, though the sound catches in my throat. We exchange a sad look, and in a rare moment, Shard lets down his guard, revealing the depth of his hurt.

We file into the training yard and, honestly, I'm a little excited. How many times have I watched the training with Fiona and Jacqueline and wished I could join in? Malir has the watchmen practicing archery again. I see his men aren't any better than they were in the last sector. Jovan's army is deadly with a huge array of weaponry, but a bow and arrow is simply not one of them. On Osolis, archery is utilized by even the poorest of villagers, but not here. A few of the Watch show improvement, but the majority hit the target

less than half of the time, and nowhere near the center.

I stand to one side, trying not to laugh at Adnan, who is fumbling around in his attempts to get an arrow nocked onto the bowstring. It must be his day of the week to train. I know the young inventor hates it. And I have to admit, Fiona or Crystal could probably best his blundering attempts to draw the arrow.

I take pity and approach him.

“You haven’t done this much,” I say. He spins around and looks down at the bow in his hand.

“That obvious?” He ducks his head, his face turning red.

“Yes,” I reply with an arched brow. I take the bow from him.

“There are a few places you’re going wrong.” I take him through the process and then walk around him as he holds his draw. I knock his elbow a little higher and widen his stance, then angle his shoulders.

“Aim and release.” He releases the arrow with a twang. It hits the target. Not exactly in the middle, but not a bad shot.

He turns to me with a beaming smile. “I think that’s the first time I’ve hit the target.”

“Practice what I’ve shown you,” I say.

“You have experience with this?” a voice calls. I turn and see Malir. He’s standing next to the commander I knocked out in the dome yesterday. The second commander is glaring at me - with his good eye anyway. I flash him a Frost grin.

There is no way to avoid answering and no way to deny it after my display with Adnan. “Some,” I say.

“You’re training with us for two weeks. Perhaps you could give us some tips.” He says it politely enough, but I know Malir well enough to sense this is an order.

I shrug. I don’t really want to help them improve when I know who they’ll be shooting at.

A movement catches my eye. Jovan has arrived and is standing at the bottom of the stairs. He’s grinning at my dilemma. I hold back my glare. Just.

“Two weeks isn’t nearly long enough to fix all of your mistakes.” The Watch grumbles at my words. Ice hides a smile behind his hand.

“Watch and learn,” I say, picking up the smallest bow I can find. I line myself up, rattling off instructions, just like Aquin used to do for me. I let loose the arrow and it hits the border of the bull’s-eye. I select a second

arrow and repeat the process, but this time I hit the bull's-eye in the center. I'm showing off now, but I'm excited I can shoot so well without my veil on. Usually I'm the one missing the target while Olandon pierces the center.

I barely aim the third arrow before releasing and hitting my target.

I turn around and roll my eyes at the men who haven't moved.

"You're not going to get better by standing there!" I shoo them away and they scramble into their positions.

Malir takes over my orders. He's been watching closely, and I worry as I see their shooting improve drastically.

"If I was trying not to laugh at your expression right now, I would thank you for showing my army how to shoot. It might come in handy."

I don't turn my head. "Their shooting is beyond pitiful."

Jovan snorts and picks up a bow. He shoots with no more than a quick glance and hits the target. He throws a grin over his shoulder at me. I look up at the screaming females who have gathered on the walkway above to watch. I think one of them just fainted. Though, the King has some competition today. Half of them are lusting after Sin, who flexes his muscles for his genteel audience. I look back at Jovan as he shoots a second time. When he shoots you can see the muscles in his back and thighs tensing, too.

I look up and see he's caught me watching. Shit. "This is too easy for you. You need moving targets," I say, to cover my embarrassment.

I hurry to where the other archers are practicing. Wrath is a natural, so is Blizzard. I fix a couple of the other's mistakes and then pick up a bow to join them. A warm body presses against my back. I stiffen and look over my shoulder.

Sin.

I give him a dry look. "You again. I thought you'd still be catching your breath after last night."

He brushes his nose against mine. "Last night was amazing." The others snigger.

"Don't you twist my words. *That* is not going to happen." I elbow him.

"What is this 'that' you refer to? I just thought you could use some tips on your shooting." He grabs my hips and twists them around, then slides his hands up over my stomach.

"Sin, if I was going to get advice, it wouldn't be from you." I look pointedly at his almost empty target. A couple of the closer Watchmen laugh.

He keeps sliding his hands. It's making me uncomfortable, but I keep my expression blank while I prepare to flatten him again. I'm saved the trouble. A large body stands in front of me.

King Jovan darts a hand out and grabs Sin around the neck. Just as he had with Gabel when I first came to the castle. My eyes widen.

"What is your name, scum?" he asks softly. I watch Shard put a hand across Fury's chest to hold him back.

"Sin," is his gasping reply. He doesn't look so good when veins pop out of his face. I try to squeeze out from the middle of the two men, but Jovan rests his other hand on my shoulder.

"Well, *Sin*. Since you're new here, you may not realize that when we are in the training yard, we train." Sin gurgles. "Be sure to remember it." He drops him and drags me off, out of earshot of the others.

"This is why we don't train women," he growls in my face.

"Oh, so it's not because you think woman are weaker than men and you're afraid they'll be better than you?" I ask. He frowns at me. I continue. "It's not my fault he did that. It's just Sin. He does that to all the women. It's nothing."

Jovan snorts. "Believe me, he's serious. And why aren't you wearing the clothes I sent you?"

"Because you haven't given any of the others new clothing!" I fist my hands to avoid the temptation to whack him. He is so frustrating! "They'll see I'm getting preferential treatment." I glance over my shoulder and see the others giving me odd looks. I step back, realizing we're too close. "And, while we're on that note, you need to back off. If you keep this up, people will guess we know each other. Go back to distant, broody Jovan."

"Distant, broody Jovan?" he asks. I look at him suspiciously. As always, his face is blank, but his tone is too casual.

"It's not funny," I say.

The corners of his mouth twitch. I'm a little happy I managed to guess he was laughing at me. "You're right. About the clothing. Not on the second count though. By paying you attention, I'm saving you from the other men," he says.

"You are?" I ask dumbly. I look behind me. One taller assembly male catches my eye and winks. I consider smiling back at him to prove a point. "It seems to be working really well," I say instead.

Jovan jerks me back around. "Exactly. So don't entice them any more

than your outfit already does for you.”

I bow as low as I can. “I live to serve, King Jovan.”

I enjoy his answering growl as I walk away.

Jovan has taken my advice about practicing on moving targets. I’m throwing pears for him in the training yard. I don’t know why he chose pears. He releases an arrow and the pear explodes in a wet burst. I glumly watch as the pieces splatter on the ground.

He scowls over his shoulder as Sin waves to the women on the walkway. Sin wears his new tunic and trousers which all the men received a few days ago. Though the other men don’t wear their tunics half open to show off the bruises around their necks. Sin has decided the marks are a sign of his devotion to me - proof of the endurance of his love. Really, he just likes to show off his body.

“Fucking idiot,” Jovan mutters. He starts to put down his bow, but stops as Malir approaches Sin and whacks him over the head with a bow.

Malir’s been quicker to deal with Sin, now that the Watch and the barracks aren’t breaking out into brawls all the time. It had been a tense week. Some of the Watch had friends murdered by Slay’s group in the dome, though most seem to realize we spared them when we could’ve done otherwise.

I hurl another pear. “You shouldn’t worry about Sin, you know. I’m sure the women still think you’re more attractive. You’re a King. That has to count for something.”

Jovan whips his head back toward me, his arrow missing the pear completely. “What?” he says.

I tilt my head, smiling to myself. “Never mind.”

He steps closer.

“No, what did you mean?” he demands. I see at least two curious men listening to our conversation.

I throw a pear into the air and then follow it with another to distract him. Surely one of his minions could do this job. This only makes me hungry and I want to practice. Plus, Blizzard’s been on my case every night about wasting food.

“Does it mean you find me more attractive than Sin?” he asks with a smirk.

I laugh, but my laughter dies when I see he’s serious. My cheeks warm. “I hardly think that’s appropriate,” I whisper, adding a meaningful

stare. He's acting too familiar, especially with others close by.

"You either do or you don't," he presses as his gaze flicks over me. It makes me feel as though I'm still in my harness costume.

I shrug. "Neither of you is attractive." I don't bother to conceal a grin at my offensive comment as I throw the next pear.

He arches a dark brown brow. "Lying again, I see."

The grin slips off my face. "No, I'm not. You're both too conceited for my taste." I put down the pear and walk toward Shard, ignoring the booming laughter behind me. He can throw his own damn pears. Shard raises an eyebrow at my approach.

"Tell a good joke?" he asks.

I nod. "You know me. Frost the comedian," I say. He laughs and strides beside me.

"You may want to know, Malir asked Wrath why you killed Butcher." He keeps his voice low, glancing around us. I keep my attention on selecting an arrow from the drum.

"Oh?" I say and look at him over a fletching with a raised brow. "What are you asking, Shard?" His eyes twinkle. I put the arrow back.

"It's nothing, just odd that you saved one commander, but had no qualms about knocking the other one out," he says. I freeze at his next words. "Someone might think you knew Malir." He passes me the arrows he's selected. I take them automatically, my mouth dry.

"Which is why I stepped in to tell Malir that you had a personal background with Butcher. That you had been after him ever since," he continues. "You might wish to stick to this story if asked."

He knows I'm in up to my neck and I know he has my back.

"Thank you," I whisper and move to squeeze his hand. He yanks away before I touch him.

"What did you do that for?" I ask. He grins, but it's uneasy. He's never pulled away before. Neither of us displays affection often, but when it's offered, it's always been accepted. He darts a look at the King who is shooting another pear.

"Touching you isn't good for my lifespan. I think of you in the light of a sister. I want to make sure this is obvious to the giant man who can decide if I live or die," he says. "You can squeeze my hand anytime you want. When he's not around." He jerks his head toward Jovan with another grin. It slides off when he discovers the King is now watching.

I groan. “Not you, too.” Shard chuckles as he moves away and toward Ice.

I walk with Crystal to the food hall that night. We no longer have guards. I guess we’ve proved we aren’t a threat. We turn through the archway and Crystal walks into someone’s back. I steady her as she bounces back. The “someone” is Ashawn, Jovan’s youngest brother. My heart twists only a little at his familiar blue eyes and carved face. But the reminder of Kedrick is not as bad as it once was.

He looks over Crystal’s head at me. “Frost, isn’t it?” he asks. Has he been waiting here for me to pass?

I give a short nod and try to keep my breath even. This is the closest I’ve ever been to Ashawn. There is no way his smile would be so genuine if he knew I’m the Tatuma.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. And a pleasure to have seen you fight,” he adds.

I raise my eyebrow. “In the dome or the pit?” I ask and immediately bite my tongue. That was not smart.

His answering smile is dashing and charming and I find myself wanting to smile with him. Kedrick had the same charisma, Jovan, too, when he uses it. Within Ashawn’s smile, I do detect some slight alarm.

“My, Miss Frost, in the dome, of course,” he replies.

“My thanks for the compliment, Prince Ashawn. Please excuse us,” I say and gesture Crystal ahead of me.

There is a commotion at our end of the hall. It seems Shard and Ice are the cause, though several of the Watch appear to have joined in.

“Girly! You gotta try this,” Ice yells. He catches a bit of fruit in his mouth. I shake my head at him and escape to get something to eat. I’m tossing up whether I can safely take a pear when someone sidles up beside me.

It’s Macy, Blaine’s wife. Timid Macy is braver than the tenacious people she sits with, the first female of the assembly to approach me yet.

“H-hello, Frost,” she says. I dip my head at her and continue picking up food, making sure to react in the opposite way to my instinctive response.

“I wondered if...I could ask you a question?” she asks, placing a large portion of meat on her plate. She follows this with two more hunks of meat. I doubt she’s aware of what she’s doing.

“Go ahead.” I’m burning with curiosity, but I make it sound like I’m

doing her a massive favor.

“How would someone learn to punch like you?” She speaks so quickly, it takes me a moment to comprehend her words. When I understand, I can hardly believe it.

“You want to fight? Why?”

She starts loading on bread rolls with shaking hands. I can’t help a wide-eyed glance as she adds this to her already decent pile. Macy follows my look down to her mass of food and blushes. “I had a plan – letters. But someone stole them. Now I have nothing. I can’t get away.” Her words spill out in a tumble.

My mouth dries. Letters? Is she talking about the urn of documents I took? My heart sinks.

Some of those letters are revolutions old. She’s been planning an escape from Blaine for so long and I ruined her carefully laid plans.

“Does this man hurt you?” I ask softly. She looks down at me with wide eyes and clamps her mouth shut. I hurry on, sensing her withdrawal.

“In my childhood, I was severely beaten. I know how it is to be hurt this way.”

“You do?” she asks. Tears welling in her eyes. I nod.

“Yes,” she whispers. “He h-hurts me.”

Blaine beat his own wife. Vile, disgusting excuse for a man. Why doesn’t Sole do something about it? He was the most timid of the delegates, or actually, of any Bruma I’d met, but it was his sister! Surely he could summon the courage to protect her. Jovan must not be aware of Blaine’s cruelty. I remember how he reacted to my beating. I’ve never experienced such tight fury on my behalf. Jovan would kill him - which wouldn’t be such a bad thing - but I knew from my own experiences Macy wouldn’t want her troubles advertised.

I put my plate down and grip her hand. “I don’t know of any place where a woman can learn to fight, but leave this with me. I’m sure there must be others who want the same thing, noble or otherwise. Perhaps something can be set up.”

She bobs her head up and down frantically. “I have money I’ve put aside. I can pay you! I just need a couple of moves to hold him back.”

I smile at her eagerness. Learning self-defense is a lot more complicated than she thinks. I doubt training her personally will fit into Jovan’s plans. But maybe I can get in touch with Alzona. She’s always

looking to make money. “In the meantime, do you want me to deal with him?”

She makes a squeaking sound. It takes me a moment to realize it’s a laugh.

“No, he isn’t back for another month. I was hoping by then I could have learned a little,” she says.

“Macy,” someone calls out. “Stop talking to the trash, dear.” I look over my shoulder. Arla.

“Stop talking to the trash, dear,” I mimic under my breath. Macy laughs. A real laugh this time. I smile as her eyes light up. She should still be beautiful. Blaine has aged her prematurely. He’s made her forget happiness, taken away any liveliness. I can’t wait to make him pay.

“I do that, too,” she whispers. “Thank you.” She shuffles back to her position in front of the throne table.

I sit off to the side and listen as Blizzard rages about how many people could be fed with the food the others are wasting in their game. A tournament has started between the four tables around us, and our own. Something involving catching fruit in your mouth from changing distances. It looks kind of fun, but I can see Blizzard’s point. These men are already full and there are people in the Outer Rings who will starve to death tonight.

Blizzard nudges me, giving me a look. I relax my brow, realizing I am frowning. It’s too quiet. Why has everyone hushed? I swivel around.

Jovan is standing.

“We near the end of the First Sector,” he speaks. There is a groan. No one wants to leave the warmer weather of this time of revolution. ‘Warm weather’ is relative to Glacium. There is still a frost on the ground every morning. The King smiles. “But, it is not all bad news. As is tradition, there will be a ball at the end of the week.” The women cheer, the men groan.

“As Arla did such a good job last time, she will organize the festivities again.”

I snigger as I remember the lies I told her before I left the castle. The beautiful woman casts a coy look to Jovan. I snigger again when the intended target misses it completely.

“She makes me sick,” a woman whispers loudly. I look over and see it is Greta. I giggle and she gives me an uncertain smile.

“This ball will also act as a farewell for those of our Outer Ring guests who decide to return to their homes. Announcements will be made the

day before for those who have been selected to join the Watch. Those who are asked will give their answer at this time,” he continues and looks down briefly at his fisted hands, which he is leaning on behind the throne table.

“As you know, I have been in war negotiations with Tatum Avanna on Osolis.”

My mouth dries. I thought the hall was silent before, but it wasn’t. It is now.

The others at our table exchange hushed murmurs. Obviously, news of the possibility of war hasn’t reached farther, which I find strange. Shard and Ice don’t seem surprised, though.

“Unless a satisfactory peace agreement is reached on both sides by the end of the Second Sector, the assembly will be moved to the Sixth Sector instead of continuing on to the Third. This will enable the Watch to stay close to the Great Stairway,” he says.

The shouting starts.

“But we don’t even have the Tatuma anymore!”

“They’re the ones who killed Prince Kedrick!”

“That is all,” Jovan finishes.

I leave the hall straightaway, not trusting my face to remain emotionless with this news. Jovan must think war is eminent. Why else would he be planning this unusual shift back to the Sixth Sector?

I reach my room and pace. Unless Jovan is lying through his teeth, my mother is resisting all efforts at peace. It’s been months. Surely if peace were attainable, it would have been achieved by now. Twelve messages should have been exchanged in the year since Kedrick’s death. I scrunch my face, pausing briefly in my frantic movements. Actually, twelve didn’t seem like that many. Only six answers, six attempts at negotiations by each party.

Could a ruler decide they were going to war after so little communication? Maybe I’m panicking over nothing.

The door crashes open and Jovan bursts in.

I look up at the ceiling instead of glaring at him. “I see your manners haven’t improved at all. What if I was having a bath?” I ask.

“If you were having a bath, I would join you,” he shoots back.

I gasp at his rudeness. “You forget who I am, King Jovan. Do not talk to me like that.”

He glowers at me, his eyes searching the room. “You’re still here.”

I look around. Has he lost his mind? “Why wouldn’t I be?” I ask.

“I thought my news might make you run,” he says. “I’ve learned running is how you deal with things.”

I huff and fling myself backward on the bed. “For the last time, I wasn’t running back to Osolis! Why would I do it without the map? I don’t have a death wish.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

I groan. “Solis, you are so annoying,” I mutter under my breath and flop an arm over my eyes.

“What?” he asks. I don’t answer. The bed dips as he sits beside me. My skin prickles. Is he looking at me?

“If you weren’t trying to get back to Osolis, what did you find out about the assassin’s arrow?” he asks.

I lift my arm and look at him. Our close proximity on the bed is making me notice things about him I don’t normally notice. Like how his lips seem soft, though the rest of his face is all hard planes and chiseled features. And how some hair hangs across his forehead.

“Took you long enough,” I say. “I thought this would have been the first thing you asked me.”

“Unlike you, I’m not throwing myself into dangerous situations to find Kedrick’s killer. I think you’re a fool if you think my brother would have wanted you to die bent on revenge.” Ouch.

I swallow hard and break eye contact. “It was another dead end. Seedyr wood is only used to make spears for the very poorest of the Outer Rings. The weapons master I talked with said no one sold Seedyr wood arrows. There would be no point as the wood is easily broken.” I put my arm back over my face as I continue.

“The arrow was made by the assassin, and apart from knowing they must be poor, I have no further leads,” I mumble.

“You’ve had the arrow the whole time,” he guesses, in a low rumble.

“Yes.”

“You lied to me?”

He pulls my arm from my face and leans over me, his hair falling forward. I brush the silky strands off my cheek. I push at his shoulder and he sits back. “You can’t get angry at me for lying. You’ve lied to me, too.”

“When did I lie to you?” His expression goes blank. Its absence makes me realize how expressive he’s been since I’ve been back.

I put a finger on my lips. “Hmm, let’s see. How about when I asked

you if there had been another message from Osolis before you left on tour.”

His cheeks redden.

“Jovan, what’s going on? Why didn’t you tell me before you told the assembly? I know you’re still angry at me, but I would have liked some warning.”

“I was unsure how you would react. I judged it best to tell you at the same time as the others. And I only lied because your mother made some... cruel remarks in the message. I did not want to repeat her words and hurt you.”

I shrug. “It wouldn’t be anything I haven’t heard before. What was it? ‘You can kill her if you want, it would save me the job’? ‘She’s been tainted by your world’?”

He looks at me with startled eyes. “Did you read the message?”

I laugh. “No, I just know my dear mother. Please tell me what is happening. Not knowing has been wreaking havoc on my mind for months.”

Jovan lies on the bed next to me. “Things are...not good. Your mother is demanding exuberant payment for the ‘insult’ of stealing you. She says she will take this in the form of a portion of land on Glacium.” He turns to give me a sheepish look. “I told her I was torturing you for information and you would be killed if she didn’t return with a more reasonable negotiation.”

I ponder this seriously. “Might have worked with a mother who loved her child,” I decide.

He raises his eyebrows and props his hands under his head. “So it seems. That was when I got her reply saying it was good riddance.”

“I doubt you’ll give her land. Will you give her money?”

Jovan snaps, “Of course not. My brother was killed on her fucking world! It seems she’s conveniently forgotten that.”

“It will be war then,” I say, disappointment coloring my voice. I sit up on the edge of the bed.

The King’s voice is tight. “Olina, I have tried my best. But I can only reason with a reasonable person.”

I nod and take a shaky breath. “I know. Believe me, I’m not blaming you. If anything, I blame myself. If I hadn’t tried to show Kedrick my face, none of this would have happened. Kedrick would still be alive and we wouldn’t be trembling on the edge of anarchy. It’s just. Now, there are people on both worlds I don’t want to see hurt. It’s conflicting and more than a little

confusing.”

He sits up next to me, not touching me. “This war has never been about you. Kedrick’s death and your capture provided the perfect cover to mask the Tatum’s ulterior motive. Her true designs are now apparent, and you’ve become the scapegoat. If there is a war it will be because your mother is a greedy bitch, not for any other reason.” He grips my shoulders and squeezes. I don’t voice my disagreement. I just stare ahead of me, gaze unfocused.

“I must be one of these people on Glacium you don’t wish to see hurt,” he says. I ignore the stab in my gut at the thought. He’s teasing me, trying to distract me.

I roll my eyes. “I think you can take care of yourself.”

He gets up and clears his throat. “Will you be coming to the ball?”

I stand as well and lean against the pillar. “No.”

“What?” He turns to me. “But, you aren’t angry at me this time.” The day before the last ball, Jovan had been brutally furious when he found Rhone was going to show me how to work the sleds. His father had died in a sledding accident. Jovan had pinned me to the wall. I panicked and ran from him.

My cheeks heat. “I wasn’t angry at you last time, either. Well, maybe a little. I just didn’t want to dance with you. Or anyone really.”

He frowns, as he tries to recall.

“I would have rather danced with you than Arla,” he muses.

I speak before thinking. “How can you say that about the woman you’re sleeping with?” I ask. I don’t like Arla, she’s vicious and vain, but no woman sharing a man’s bed should be treated in this way.

He lets out a short laugh. “Who told you that? I haven’t slept with Arla in a long time.” He looks at me curiously, waiting for an answer.

“Uh...Arla did,” I say. He looks baffled for a few moments.

“Well, regardless, you won’t need to dance with me this time. You are Frost, not Olina at the moment,” he reminds me.

“Yes, but I don’t have a dress. Neither does Crystal.”

He groans. “Women. Why don’t you just go in that?” He gestures at my trousers and tunic.

“Can I?” I perk up. “I would rather wear this than the dresses you have here. Tiny scraps of nearly see-through cloth barely covering my chest and—” I cut off my description as the King’s eyes darken and he stalks

forward. My eyes widen.

“Your friend, Crystal. She asked Sadra if she could be released before the ball to return to the Outer Rings.” His voice is unfocused. I wonder what he’s truly thinking of. But I smile. Crystal will be eager to return to Alzona.

“I’ll have the dress brought to you,” he says finally.

“What? I thought I was allowed to wear this,” I say.

He grins over his shoulder. “No, I’ve changed my mind.” He slams the door behind him. I run over to tug on it. The door doesn’t move, locked again.

I swear I hear muffled laughter on the other side.

Chapter Sixteen

“Slut!” one of Arla’s lackeys snarls as I pass. She’s in the middle of a group of the assembly. I doubt she’d insult me without them acting as a buffer.

“Good morning,” I call back.

I sit down.

“Why the frown?” Blizzard asks. I glance up at him.

“I just got called a slut for the fifth time since we got here. I’m trying to figure out if it’s just because I’ve come from the Outer Rings, or if it was my outfit when I first arrived?”

“Neither, I imagine,” Shard mumbles around the leg of some animal.

I turn to face him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He raises both of his eyebrows and gives me a dry look. “It means it’s not for those reasons. It’s because you’re sleeping with King Jovan.”

“What!” I leap from my seat. The conversation around us halts. I sit back down and wait for conversation to resume.

“Why do people think that?” I whisper to my friends.

They search my face. “I knew it!” Ice says.

“You aren’t?” Shards asks.

“But you’re sleeping in the room next to him. The way he’s been acting at trainings, too. Everyone thinks you are,” Blizzard adds. The room next to mine is Jovan’s room!

I blink back a few tears. Is that what everyone thinks? “Why didn’t you guys tell me?” I whisper. They wilt noticeably before my eyes.

“None of our business,” Ice says weakly.

I stand up from the table, mortified. Has Jovan heard this talk? I know my face is red as I walk out of the food hall and I long to cover it. I escape to my room. I’m not going to training this afternoon. I’ll burrow under the furs instead. Did Jovan know what everyone was saying? I cover my face and groan.

The door crashes open. Why me?

“Go away. I’m not training today.” My voice is muffled by the pile of furs I’m hiding under.

He pulls the furs from my grasp. “Why not? Are you sick? I saw you rush out of the hall earlier. Should I get Sadra?” Jovan asks.

Why is he talking so much? “No, I’m not sick. I just don’t want to see anyone,” I say. I don’t want to see *you*, I add silently. I meet his eyes and glance away, tugging on the furs.

He leans over the bed and grabs my chin, forcing it up. I close my eyes.

“You will tell me what’s wrong,” he demands. I shake my head from his grasp and roll away.

“No. Leave me alone,” I whisper.

“Olina...has anyone hurt you? I’ve rarely seen you so defeated. Is this a...female thing?” I’ve survived the dome only to die of embarrassment. I shake my head and hear him release an exasperated breath behind me.

“Well, in that case,” he says. His weight shifts on the bed.

I jerk back my head as a pear is dangled in front of me.

“A pear.” I grin, sitting up. He laughs at my reaction.

He leans against the wall behind the bed. “Yes. I’ve finished amusing myself by making you throw them for me to shoot.”

I stare at him. My mouth drops open.

“You’ve been doing that for fun? That’s so...mean.” I say.

His grin couldn’t get any wider. “I was still angry you ran away. You have no idea how fun it’s been to watch your face. And in the food hall, too. Causing this agony made up for the agony I felt.” I gape at him. He made me throw them for an entire week. I punch his arm halfheartedly, but I’m too distracted by the pear in his hand.

I look up at him. My breath hitches at the laughter in his eyes. I remember everyone thinks we’re sleeping together and turn my head to the side.

“The pear was meant to cheer you up,” he says after a moment.

“It has.” I hesitate, deciding whether I should tell him. Maybe it’s best if I do, then he can back off at trainings. “It’s just...people are talking about me.” I pick at a fur.

I don’t know what I expect. A kind word. Awkwardness. One of the ‘toughen up’ talks which Aquin loves to give me.

I don’t expect him to roar with laughter.

I frown at him and get off the bed.

“You destroyed my dome, defeated my Watch,” he says as he collects himself. “Your best friends are a band of criminals from the Outer Rings. You show up half naked in that costume. You’re worried people are talking

about you? You've worn a bloody veil for most of your life." His hilarity dries as a thought strikes him. "What are they saying? It must be horrible."

"Don't worry," I mutter. I'm not going to tell him after that reaction.

He gets off the bed and takes a single step towards me. I nearly roll my eyes before I see he holds my pear in his hand. My eyes fly up to meet his.

"Not my pear." I groan. He looks at the bit of fruit. Rolling the stalk between his thumb and forefinger so the pear spins.

"Tell me. And I'll let the pear go." His expression is blank, but there is humor there, in the depths of his eyes. It's breathtaking. I blink away the sight and weigh the consequences. I really want that pear. And if I tell him, maybe he'll move me to another room.

"They're calling me a slut." My face warms. "It seems everyone thinks we are...that we have been...sleeping together." I finish lamely and look at the massive boots in front of me. I wish I could melt into the stone beneath me. I dart a quick glance at the pear.

"Is that all? Who do you think started the rumors? I needed some way to keep an eye on you without raising suspicion."

His words are so shocking they don't quite sink in.

"You...what?" I demand.

"I've encouraged the talk. It wasn't hard. You're a beautiful woman."

His compliment is lost as red tinges my eyesight. All of his attention since I've been here has been part of an act to keep me from running again.

He grins at me and lifts the pear to his mouth.

"Do not. Bite that," I say in a dark voice.

It's the wrong thing to say. I see the gleam in his eyes a second before he brings the pear to his mouth and pushes through the soft flesh. As soon as I see its sweet juice dripping over the stubble on his chin, I lose it. With a strangled cry, I charge him.

Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't that.

I force the breath from him. I hope he chokes on the damn fruit! I capitalize on his instability and he's on his back before he can chew three times.

I dart away before he responds. "You deserved that," I say. "You started the rumors! I can't believe it. It's not nice to be called a slut, you know. Especially when I haven't earned the title. I think you should apologize. *And* you ate my fucking pear!"

I trail off as Jovan rolls to his feet and gives me a look so filled with deadly promise, I peek a look at the door. He suddenly seems a lot bigger. The width of his shoulders is double mine. Perhaps I should've run straightaway.

"You want an apology?" he asks. "How exactly are you going to get that?"

I snort at him.

"Putting you on your ass was enough." I cock my hip out and grin at him. He prowls toward me.

"I have daydreamed about sparring with you since watching you in the dome. I bet you've wondered the same?" he says. We share a smile.

"So. If you pin me, you get the pear, your apology, and I'll back off," he finishes.

"And if you win?" I ask.

His lips purse and he grins. "You forgive me and I eat the rest of your pear in front of you."

I sigh. "You can eat the pear anyway. I want a new one. That one's been infected." I gesture at the dripping fruit.

He glares at me, offended. I bite my cheek to hold back my laughter.

He puts down the pear and I launch myself at him. He didn't stipulate it had to be a fair match and I'll need every advantage I can get.

He reacts too quickly to drop him again. The wrestling begins.

We break away after another flurry of exchanged blows.

Jovan stands in front of the door. I launch the pitcher at his head and move in while he dodges. The pitcher smashes. He steps around me and we swap places. I face him, both of us on the balls of our feet. With no warning, the door swings into me, causing me to stumble forward.

"Is everything alright in—"

I turn toward the Watchman and it's over in a second. I'm on my back, pinned, Jovan's forearm across my chest. I kick my legs. He waves away the Watchman with his other hand. The man retreats with a startled look on his face.

"That's not fair! I couldn't hit you when your Watch was here!" I gasp, writhing under his hold.

He just laughs, bringing his face to mine. "If you can attack while my back is turned, I can attack while yours is. I win," he says looking into my eyes. His gaze drifts down to my lips. "And I've changed my mind. I don't

even like pears.”

He ducks his head to close the little space remaining between us. My breath hitches as his mouth presses to mine. His kiss is firm, but his lips are devastatingly soft. It’s the direct opposite of Sin’s kiss. And then the tingles start. The ones I’ve only felt a couple of times before. His light stubble scratches at my skin and an alarming thought breaks through the haze. I’m kissing Jovan. The King of Glacium. I turn my head and take a shallow breath. His calloused finger strokes down the side of my face.

He stands and pulls me to my feet. I keep my eyes averted. A rare chuckle sounds from him and I peek up to find him watching with an amused expression.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” I glare.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” He turns to the door and kicks the shattered remains of the pitcher out of the way. It clangs as it hits the overturned basin.

“Good fight!” he calls over his shoulder.

I pull fingers at him as he leaves with an unsurprising crash of the door.

Furs are all over the floor after I attempted to wrap the King in one and he tried to use a few to net me. The screen has holes punched though it and there are puddles of water on the ground. In his odd way, the King has taken my mind off what happened earlier. It’s been replaced by something which should be worse, but isn’t. Why had he kissed me?

Hunger takes me to the food hall later and it’s easy to brush off questions about my whereabouts that afternoon. I don’t even look at the pears as I usually do. Somehow I know Jovan will be watching and I’m determined not to give him the satisfaction.

“We’re going to go down to the baths with some of the Watch. Wanna come?” Ice asks as I sit down again.

“Baths?” I ask.

“Yep, big baths apparently. A time is set aside for the Watch each week. And you can go when you’re off duty. We haven’t been invited before.”

I turn my head in Adnan’s direction, remembering he was busy setting up these baths while the assembly was in the Third Sector. They are obviously a success. I shake my head at Ice. There’s no way I am taking a bath with the Watch. Training with men is one thing, getting naked and

bathing with them is another.

“Somehow, I don’t think that would help the ‘slut’ comments,” I say, giving him a look.

Crystal giggles. “Don’t worry about that. Every person in this room is probably one or has been one. It’s an easy insult to make.”

That doesn’t make me feel any better. I lower my voice and lean forward. “Have you heard from Alzona?” I ask. We had an agreement not to mention the owners. The penalty for possessing a barracks was just as bad as being an actual competitor.

Her face drops and I immediately regret asking. She shakes her head, her spine stiff. I puzzle over her angry reaction.

“Hey, if you guys are asked to join the watch what will you say?” Blizzard asks. The men from Tricks’ barrack lean in as well.

For some reason, everyone looks at me and Shard. I shrug. I won’t be leaving here. I doubt Jovan will let me. They turn to Shard.

“I don’t know how you all came to be where you are. But...our barrack owner saved our hides. She got me out of a bad situation and stopped me from falling into a horrible life. All of this,” he gestures around the hall, “is a dream. If I accept, any family I might one day have would be cared for.” He taps a finger on the table, his intelligent eyes far away under his frowning brows. “But I don’t think I can ignore my debt and desert her in this way.” Blizzard and Ice murmur their agreement, as do most of Tricks’ men.

Wrath is more hesitant. I give him a questioning look and he shrugs with a small smile.

I haven’t given this a thought until now. I assumed anyone who was offered the position would stay. I had even looked forward to having some of them around. The assembly is my friends. Some of them, great friends. But there is a bond forged when you fight next to someone, which is stronger than any other bond.

Shard has raised a valid point. I think of the goldies stashed in my mattress at Alzona’s. I will give these to her as repayment for her help in my first night in the Outer Rings. Now I realize, heart sinking, I may only have a few more days before they go. In another life I would have gone with them. If we hadn’t been captured, I might never have come back to the castle. Now I’m here, and there’s a possibility of war.

I’m still unsure of what part I will play in one day ruling Osolis, but I’ve made my decision.

I must stay.

Chapter Seventeen

I can't sleep. The first time I've ever had this trouble in the castle. I sit up with an annoyed sigh and walk around the room. My gaze lands on the bath. I wonder if I can wake someone to fill it.

I dismiss the thought, but another takes its place. It must be past midnight. This big bath Ice told me of would surely be empty. I hesitate before throwing caution aside. I'm wide awake. At least I'll go look at them.

Wrapping myself in a fur, I swing open my door and nod at the King's Watch, standing guard several paces away.

My padding footsteps slap on the cold ground. They seem much louder than they actually are in the absence of daily bustle. The torches are dying down. It's peaceful. I hear the murmur of voices in the kitchen and take the longer path to avoid meeting them. They'd probably think I'd come to kill them. I peek out of a small window as I near the far corner of the castle. I've since learned they purposely build the openings small to keep the heat inside. A half-finished tunnel juts out from a new square-shaped building. Blocks of stone lay in stacks where the partially built walkway ends. I assume the tunnel will eventually join with the castle.

Pulling the fur tightly around me, I brace for the wind and duck out the door, skimming across the wet ground. I reach the relative shelter of the unfinished tunnel and remove my hair from where it's wrapped around my face.

I move in an awed circle as I step into the cavernous room. How did Adnan build this? Well, I suppose Sanjay did. That's how they worked. Adnan thought of the idea and Sanjay turned it into reality. If I could trust myself to keep my expression bland, I'd ask them about it.

Though I missed the delegates, at least I could watch them from afar. And if Jovan could find the appropriate material for a veil, I could come back as Tatum once my Outer Rings friends left.

I fold the fur over a sculpted bench and look around to make sure the baths are truly empty. Satisfied, I raise the soft black nightgown over my head and drop it in a dry patch close to the edge of the pool. I dip a toe into the smooth water. It's warm - like the underground springs on Osolis. I sigh in pleasure as I wade in and arch backward to wet my hair. Afterward I float on my back, not wanting to cut the experience short.

Coming here was supposed to settle my mind. Instead the water is reminding me of home. I miss my brothers. I miss Aquin. I want to feel firelight on my skin and smell the smoky tinge of the air in the Second Rotation. I want to leap over the vines hanging between the Kaur trees. I allow a few tears to slip from the corner of my eyes.

A shuffling sound in the far corner of the room catches my attention.

With a splash, I submerge myself underneath the water. I push my hair out of the way and cover my chest, which rises up in the water.

“Who’s there?” I demand.

“Shit. This is gonna look bad,” a mutter comes from the shadows. Jovan steps into the light.

I gape at him. “What the fuck? Why are you watching me?” I try to sink as far under the water as I can without drowning myself. He holds up both hands and looks hard at the ceiling.

“Look. My guards woke me to tell me you left. I thought you might be running, so I followed.” I could almost enjoy how flustered he was, if I weren’t completely naked.

“How long have you been watching!”

He darts a look at me. “Only while you got into the bath and then I thought you wouldn’t like it if I watched, so I stared over there,” he blurts, pointing at the far wall. The way he says this makes me think he didn’t avert his gaze as religiously as he’d like me to believe. I open my mouth to give him an Alzona tongue lashing.

“Why are you crying?” he asks. I cover my face with both hands and groan. Of course. The one time I cry, he sees it. I hear his gasp and peek through my fingers. I whip my hands back down when I realize what he’s looking at.

“You’re fighting a losing battle there,” he murmurs. “Are you still upset about what people are saying about us?”

“Why do you always want to know how I’m feeling?” I ask, turning away from him. There is only the gentle slap of the disturbed water on the walls of the bath. “I don’t know,” he finally says.

I roll my eyes. If I gave him that answer he’d have badgered me until I gave an adequate response. “I was just missing my family and my world,” I say. “Turn around, I’m getting out.” And never coming here again.

There’s a bit of a dilemma as I get out. I planned to dry myself with the fur and then dress, but I want to dress as quickly as possible now and I

don't want to get my single nightgown wet. I settle for wrapping myself in the fur and balling up my nightgown to change into it once I reach my room.

"Here," Jovan says. I look over my shoulder and see he's shed his tunic and holds it out to me.

I reach for it after a brief pause. "Thanks," I mutter and wait for him to turn around.

I chuck the tunic on, inhaling the scent of clean male as I do. The tunic goes all the way to my knees. There was a time when I might have felt self-conscious in the length. Not after wearing Frost's attire.

I head for the door.

"You should dry your hair, you know," he says. I give him a curious look and watch with interest as some color tinges his cheeks.

"That's what my mother used to say. Uh, forget it," he mutters. I peer at him sideways. It's the first time he's mentioned his mother. Most of the things I know about Jovan, I've heard from other people. He occasionally lets something slip. Actually, he's only slipped when he's drunk, or now, when he's tired or possibly flustered. I tuck away the thought.

"Well, I would say you should always listen to your mother's advice, but I won't for obvious reasons," I answer with a half-smile.

He shakes his head as he walks through the hall next to me, chest bare. The cold doesn't seem to affect him at all. "It still makes me angry. What she did to you."

I shrug. "It happens everywhere. It's not right, but it's not uncommon."

"It doesn't happen here," he mumbles into a yawn. I stay silent and he stops in his tracks after a moment. I stop, too, a few steps in front. His expression is thunderous, expectant.

"You'd be surprised," I settle for saying.

"What. Who?" he demands.

"Can I be assured of your silence on the matter? Normally I wouldn't ask, but it's not my secret. I'm only telling you in case I can't get something set up before her husband returns."

"Keep it a secret? I'll tear the fucker apart. How's that for keeping a secret?" he asks, his face a storm.

"I'm serious, Jovan. I won't tell you unless you promise to act discreetly." I resume my walk. We're nearly back up on the second floor when he's calmed enough to respond.

“Alright, I promise.”

“Macy,” I whisper and wait for comprehension to dawn on his face. It doesn’t.

“Oh, come on! The blond who sits by Arla. Blaine’s wife. Sole’s sister,” I add. His expression doesn’t change. “That’s bad. You don’t even know your own assembly.”

I hope he’s ashamed of himself. I should know better. “That’s the Queen’s job. And I don’t have one. I’ll look for Macy in the morning. I won’t have that going on in my castle. How did you even find out?” he asks.

“She came to Frost asking for help, although I suspected before. She has the look about her. I think it may also be why Sole is so afraid of Blaine, but I’m not entirely sure,” I say.

“Observant.” He strokes his chin making a light rasping sound as he moves over stubble. The stubble which gently scratched my face when he kissed me. We come to a halt outside my door.

He clears his throat. “I apologize for the mother comment earlier.” He pitches his voice low, glancing at the four Watchmen down the hall. I think for a moment he’s talking about *my* mother. But I brought that up, not him.

He’s talking about mentioning his own mother. In such a trivial comment, too.

My eyes search his face and for the first time I gather the depth of hurt which his mother’s death has left him with. Let alone his father’s. I don’t dare place a consoling hand on his arm. Dealing with Olandon has taught me this much about a man’s pride.

“Don’t be ashamed to talk of her. It’s obvious you loved her very much.” I turn from him to the door and speak over my shoulder, “I’ll leave your tunic by the door. Pervert.”

I jog down to breakfast, eager to watch the show. It’s the morning of the ball and I know the females of the assembly will be causing a commotion. I sneak covert peeks at Jacquiline and Fiona up by the Throne table. Fiona snaps at Sanjay.

I laugh under my breath. It’s just like last time.

“When are you leaving, girly?” Ice says to Crystal.

Crystal’s eyes find me. “I was going to ask Frost if she needed any help with her hair,” she replies.

I look at her dumbly. “I don’t know. Do I?” I ask. Crystal doesn’t say anything, but she appears to be biting back a smile as she nods.

We leave the food hall well after the other females have left. “They’ll probably be doing the whole works. You don’t need make up, so that cuts a lot of time,” she says. A straggling woman overhears and scoffs at her remark.

We move under the archway. Rhone is there. I stop in my tracks as I see who is by his side.

Kaura!

She’s older now, grown – a puppy no longer. She whines, preparing to approach me. Horror dawns. She’s going to give me away. Being as subtle as possible, I hold up my hand in the signal for her to freeze. Kaura responds and sinks back onto her haunches. I force my feet to move again, not daring to let out my held breath, though it happened so quickly it probably just looked like I stumbled.

I look up at Rhone as we pass, careful to keep my expression neutral. His eyes are contemplative. Kaura’s whining increases. I don’t dare signal for her to be silent this close to Rhone.

“It’s rude to stare, you know,” I snarl, going into Frost bitchiness mode.

“Yes, it’s considered rude on both Glacium and Osolis,” he says. I try not to freeze again at his words. What does he mean?

“Well, if you’d like to move sometime today, then maybe we can get past you and your disgusting dog.”

He stands aside, gesturing Kaura to the side. I allow myself one more look at her. My heart pangs. She isn’t disgusting, she’s beautiful. Her chest is snowy-white to match the tips of her ears and her feet. The rest of her is black, except for her cobalt blue eyes.

Which look at me like I’m a traitor.

“Well, that guy was weird. He was looking at you strange,” Crystal says once we round a couple of corners. I’m afraid Jovan is right. Rhone suspects I’m Olin and might have just used Kaura to confirm it. I hope my act put him off the trail.

We detour to the kitchen to get some scissors. I’m not particularly vain about my hair, but I do wonder, fleetingly, if Crystal knows what she’s doing. It must show on my face because she laughs.

“Don’t look so worried. My mother does this for a living,” she says. I didn’t know she still had family. It is a surprise. I just assumed she was orphaned.

We reach my room. Luckily Jovan's tunic is gone. I'd completely forgotten about it. I smile as my eyes land on a bowl full of pears on top of the bed. I don't care if they're a pity prize from Jovan. I rush to the bowl and devour one in record time. It's only Crystal after all.

"Whoa...you like pears, huh?" She watches me as I remove the last of the juice from my face. I grin at her, too happy to be embarrassed.

"So. I have something to tell you," she starts, dragging a chair into the middle of the room. I sit on it and start undoing my braid. The hair tumbles down my back. "Hair that falls to your waist is sexy," she says. "Hair you can nearly sit on - not so much. We're going to cut it. Let me do my thing and you will look amazing tonight. Stop me, and you'll look like Avalanche's chest hair."

I laugh and close my eyes as she works, only gulping once when she shows me how much she cut off. We talk companionably as she works.

"Here, come look," she beckons, tugging me toward the mirror. I swallow my uneasiness. I haven't looked in the mirror once since sleeping in this room. I don't like seeing my eyes, but also, I'm just not used to looking at myself. I only mean to sneak a quick glance, but my mouth falls open as I see my reflection.

"How did you get it to go around my face like that?" I ask.

"You got your bad-ass fighting skill, I got my bad-ass hair skills," she says. I hug her.

"Thank you."

Crystal pulls back and looks at me. We're the same height. It's nice not to tilt my head back to talk to someone. The smile drops from my face as I see her serious expression.

"No, Frost. Thank *you*." She keeps hold of my shoulders. "You saved my life. Whatever you say, none of us would have survived that dome if not for you. And then you gave me my vengeance, too, with Slay. For the first time since I was...raped, I feel like I'm in control again. Like a weight has lifted and I can breathe." Tears brim over and drip down her face. I don't think I gave her these things. I think she took them back herself. I have noticed how carefree she's been with the men lately, but I didn't make the connection.

"Crystal, I—" I start, unsure of how to accept her thanks.

"I'm gonna cut to the chase here. I get the feeling you're, as Alzona says, 'in balls-deep'." My face blanks as my heart starts to beat rapidly. How

much has she guessed?

She hurries on. "And I don't want to know what's going on. I just want you to know, if you ever need somewhere to hide, somewhere *no one* will find you, come to me. I owe you and this is my way of offering repayment." I think I nod, and then she's all business again.

Crystal slumps on the bed. "Alright, you're done," she says. "And so am I."

I take a deep breath and look at the black dress, which appeared on my bed yesterday. I'm embarrassed to even look at it. I move behind the new screen and unlace my clothing, careful not to jostle my hair. The dress flows over my frame like a whisper. I tug it into place and look down. *Veni!* It even looks bad from this view. I shuffle, adjusting the fine gold chains around my hips so the light, whispery material covers the important parts.

My stomach churns. I can't wear this! There's a large length of bare thigh and hip up each side where the sparkling chain connects the front panel to the back panel. My back is bare and there are only two strips covering my chest. Maybe I should just go in my other clothes. It was the material that made it so bad. At least in the harness I didn't worry everything was going to fall out.

"Are you done yet?" Crystal complains. I gather myself. I did the harness outfit. I can do this. I repeat the line ten times.

I step out from the cover of the screen.

Crystal chokes on her pear, which I begrudgingly gave her after her stomach growled for an hour. "Is it that bad?" I smooth the front.

"Shit balls. You look amazing!" she exclaims. I perk up. She doesn't swear very much. I must look good.

"It's not too revealing?" I ask and twirl in a circle. Slow, so nothing flies up.

She snorts. "I don't think you could reveal any more, but you are owning that dress. Sin is going to die."

It's not Sin I'm worried about.

I reach up and adjust the two panels covering each of my breasts down to my waist where they connect into the front panel. It moves the thin golden chain, which travels down the length of my back. "I'm worried the material won't stay in place," I admit.

"Frost, every man in that hall will be hoping your dress doesn't stay in place. And so what if it doesn't? You have a great body. Honestly, the line

in the middle of your stomach meets up with your cleavage. You are in disgustingly good shape.” I giggle at her silliness and give a faster twirl. The black dress doesn’t fly up as much as I thought it would.

“Aren’t you going to look in the mirror?” she asks as she moves to the door.

I shake my head. “I’ll lose my nerve.”

Crystal stops with the door half open. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. If you act like you’re comfortable in the dress, everyone will treat you as though you’re comfortable. Own it Frost. And...remember my other offer,” she adds, with a pointed look. I run up and hug her. I’m not sure when I’ll see her again.

“Say hello to Alzona for me,” I whisper.

I pace around my chamber for a while. When am I supposed to go downstairs? A knock sounds at the door. I open it and eye the Watchman, whose mouth has dropped open.

“U-uh, the King...thought. The King...he wanted me to—” he stutters as he looks down my frame. This is worse than expected.

The man gives up talking and holds out a pair of shoes. I planned to wear my boots, but these are much better. I rest back against the cold wood with a giggle after closing the door. After a bit of puzzlement, I work out the jeweled shoes and get them on. I wonder what type of stones these are? A black color with a blue tinge. Actually, I wonder where Jovan got this dress. It’s my size and I’m much smaller than a Bruma female. Maybe there’s a child somewhere he borrowed it from? I shudder at the thought of a child wearing this clothing.

Music trails up the stairs and excited nerves flutter in my chest. At least there’s one thing to look forward to. I crack open the door and listen to the sounds of people leaving their rooms down the hallway. Loud calls and squeals reach me.

After a few minutes, everything is silent. This is it.

I take a deep breath, reminding myself I’m Frost, not Olina, and leave the room.

The halls are mostly empty, except for the Watch. Everyone must have raced downstairs as soon as the music started.

I practice ignoring the guards’ reaction to my dress on the way down. I force myself not to reach behind me to make sure the material at the back is in place as the men whisper behind me.

I reach the archway. I'm beginning to hate the sight of it. I breathe a sigh of relief as people continue their conversations. I slide through the packed room, trying to find my friends. I pass Jacqueline and Fiona, who look beautiful. Jacqueline's dress is much more revealing than mine. Roman can't take his eyes off of her. I'm envious of how confident she appears.

There seem to be more people in attendance than just the assembly. Maybe some people from the Inner Ring are here. I hadn't noticed this last time. Men elbow each other as they recognize me. Next, groups of the assembly stop talking. It's because I'm from the Outer Rings. It's because I'm from the Outer Rings. Maybe if I repeat it enough times, I'll believe it.

I've never been happier to spot Avalanche. The barrack men are in the back corner. I rush to them. "Here you are! I couldn't find any of you," I scold, placing my hands on my hips.

A stunned silence meets my reprimand. I look around the gaping group. "Oh no, please not you, too."

Blizzard swallows hard. "Sometimes, you make it hard for me to see you as a sister," he says. The others murmur their agreement and do their best to look elsewhere. Ice is failing miserably.

"Princess," a gravelly voice whispers in my ear. "You've done the impossible." I whirl around to face Sin, who stands much too close.

"I don't even want to hear what that is," I say truthfully and walk off. Or try to. Sin grabs two drinks and hurries after me.

"You've surpassed my own beauty," he calls behind me. I snort, but his comment makes me walk a little taller, letting him catch up. The middle of the room is starting to push back to clear space for the dancing. We hover on the edge of the circle.

I eye the drinks in his hands. "You trying to get me drunk?" I ask.

He smiles down at me. "It's the only way you'll agree to get in my bed," he drawls. I laugh and take the drink. You always know where you're with Sin, unlike Jovan.

The dancing starts up. I watch as the King dances with Arla, the highest ranking female, as dictated by tradition. His face is neutral. Hers is beaming. I wonder how many ladies present are hoping she'll mess it up. She doesn't slip one foot, and I dislike her immensely for it.

I peer around the hall. This time Arla has gone with a nature theme. Trees have been brought in and flowers are braided around the rafters. They hang down the walls. She's outdone herself. It's beautiful. Like last time,

cushions are at the far end of the hall and there are rows of goblets on the table. They're taken almost as quickly as they're filled to the brim. I feel my own drink take hold and forget a little of my discomfort. Sin hands me another. I roll my eyes at him and take it, toying with one of the hanging flowers.

"You're despicable," I say and turn to watch the musicians. His arm wraps around my waist. He plucks a flower off the chain and pushes it behind my ear. A hand slips beneath the scant material over my stomach. His heat warms my back and I enjoy it for a moment, despite his hand. I'm surprised to even feel a pleasant shiver. I've never had that with him before. He spins me to face him.

"I am despicable and persistent," he says, drawing out the word. "Just give in. I'll make it worth your while."

I laugh as the moment is broken and step out of his arms. I come against another warm barrier at my back. Hot, calloused hands rest on my upper arms.

Chapter Eighteen

I look at the hands and recognize them instantly. Jovan has a scar on his right pointer finger.

“You got the dress and shoes, I see,” the King says in his loud voice. The people around us share wide-eyed looks. I jam my foot on top of his booted toes. It has almost no effect in these soft sandals. Why did he say that? Now I’ll be insulted all night.

Sin and Jovan are having a stare off. I twist and look up at Jovan, but he ignores me, so I fold my arms and wait, foot tapping.

Sin finally breaks off his stare and after a final, glum look, he sighs and turns away. There’s a rumble from the hard chest behind me. Jovan’s scowling at the crowd around us. They suddenly find things to do.

“I’m having enough trouble convincing people we aren’t...you know, without you making announcements!” I hiss. His expression makes me falter. His eyes are dark and hot, scorching my skin. He plucks the flower out of my hair and chucks it on the ground.

“I knew that dress would look stunning on you, but those words don’t quite do it justice. You look unbelievable,” he says. I flush and look over him as an excuse to move my eyes from his.

He’s wearing a leather tunic. It’s black and tight with a few laces undone at the top. I swallow a few times as I take him in. A soft chuckle comes from the chest I’m having trouble looking away from. I wrench my gaze back to his, blinking at the dangerous smile on his face.

“I’ve danced with everyone I must for diplomacy’s sake. Will you dance with me now, for pleasure?” he asks.

I shake my head, “I don’t know how. We don’t dance on—” I gulp. “I don’t dance.”

He narrows his eyes at me, but doesn’t push the matter. For once.

I grab two drinks off a passing tray and hand him one.

He looks at it and sighs. “Fuck it.” He takes a sip.

I raise my eyebrows at him and he shrugs. “Don’t drink much,” he says.

I’m going to call him on his lie, when I realize it’s true. The only time I’ve ever seen him drunk was the night he first unveiled me.

My shoulders lose some of the tension I usually feel in his company

as we continue to talk. After a couple of drinks he's even as playful, as he occasionally is in private. It's a shame he isn't this free without the alcohol. But I understand, better than perhaps anyone else in this room, the pressures of having to act a certain way when you hold a position such as his.

"You're monopolizing the prettiest woman in the room, Jovan. Give me a turn." Ashawn approaches. Arla, who has been close by the whole time, flicks her hair and mutters something in reply. I have no doubt it's uncomplimentary. Ashawn gives her a beaming smile until she turns away and then he rolls his eyes. A reluctant giggle is dragged from me. It's the first good judgement I've seen him display.

"Brother, go away. You have to do your kingly duties for a while. The flock is growing restless," he says. Jovan's lip twitches in a smile.

He squeezes my hand as he leaves. My fingers move afterward, trying to remember the feeling.

"I hope he wasn't boring you. I would have been here sooner to save you, but I was deep in preparations for tonight," Ashawn says. It's clear he's had a fair amount to drink already. I follow him over to the cushions and he sits down, patting the spot next to him. I settle on the adjacent cushion and he laughs.

"Wait for it." He points at Arla's father, Drummond. I give him a strange look, and do as I've been directed.

A yell sounds across the room. Drummond turns. I cover my mouth with my hand and double over in fits of laughter. His trousers have split open - he isn't wearing anything underneath. Ashawn chuckles beside me.

"Did you do that?" I ask in horrified amusement. He gives me a wink and gestures for drinks, handing me one.

"Don't tell my brother. See you at the bottom," he says. I look at him. What does that mean? He's drinking as fast as he can. I follow suit after a few seconds.

"Tonight is my grand return. I've been remiss in my pranks for a while now," he continues and looks down at the goblet in his hands.

"Because of your brother's death?" I ask. It might be the least tactful comment I've ever made, but I feel safe asking. Every Bruma knows Prince Kedrick is dead.

He looks at me, surprised. "Yes. I guess so."

We sip away at our drinks in silence. It doesn't escape me this is completely wrong. I should hate Ashawn, and I know he hates me. The real

me. I'm still sure he was behind hiring the three thugs who beat me last sector.

"And other things," he says. I make a questioning sound, trying to remember what we'd been speaking about.

"There are things I've done in the last year I'm not particularly proud of. Things I wish I could take back and change. I did one terrible thing."

My breath hitches. Is he talking about my beating? I chose my words carefully. "We all make mistakes. Especially when we're grieving. What matters is we learn from them, try our best to fix them, and don't make the same mistakes again," I say and bite my lip before adding, "I would also point out a prince visiting the Outer Rings is not a good look for the King or for his rule."

Ashawn gives me a tired smile. "I thought you must have seen me. I'm surprised you recognized me." He chuckles and shrugs a shoulder. "The Outer Rings are fun. Since Kedrick's gone, I feel there's nothing for me to do. He was always my partner in crime." Fun is the last word I'd use to describe the Outer Rings.

There's no doubt that, like Kedrick, he's inherited the trait of saying whatever he's thinking. Maybe he can open up to a stranger with more ease than someone he knows. His confession has something to do with his young age and the amount of alcohol in his system.

"What about joining the King in his work?" I ask. Ashawn gives me a bitter look.

"My brother doesn't want me around," he mutters and rises quickly. I accept his help to stand, making sure I keep my parts covered.

I sway a little as I straighten and place a hand on his arm. I turn it into a consoling pat.

"I think you're incorrect, Prince Ashawn," I say. He looks at me and I detect the slightest bit of hope in his eyes. I smile at him and call out to Blizzard who is passing by.

"Don't touch the fruit punch," Ashawn whispers before handing me over.

I attempt to talk to Blizzard, but his attention is riveted on the musicians.

"Look at his guitar," he says with longing. Most of his other comments regarding machine heads and fret board have confused me, but this one I can understand. His guitar is on its last leg. He could probably afford

one if he didn't give all of his money away.

Jovan is talking to Macy. I'm feeling courageous. I beckon him over. He raises his brow incredulously.

"I hope you're ready to play for the assembly," I say to Blizzard as the King approaches.

"What?" Blizzard splutters next to me.

"Did you just beckon me?" Jovan asks in a soft voice. I shiver as he bends his head to the crook of my neck. I remember my purpose and take a half step back, gesturing at Blizzard.

"Jovan, this is Blizzard. He plays guitar and has a beautiful voice. Can he play us a song on Tomi's guitar?" I ask. Jovan snaps his head to me. The warning in his gaze confuses me. I feel like I should understand what he's trying to tell me, but my mind is a little fuzzy. He waves one of his minions over and murmurs to them. Blizzard follows the guard, throwing me a look of nervous excitement.

"I think I better stay with you now," Jovan says.

"Why?" I ask. He doesn't answer as he tugs me after him. I pull my hand free.

"You should spend more time with your brother. He thinks you don't want him around."

Jovan grabs my hand again and weaves through the plush seating to the cushions in the far corner.

"What? He said that?" he speaks over his shoulder.

"Pretty much," I say. Jovan looks thoughtful as he pulls me down beside him. I rearrange the skimpy parts of my dress when I see his gaze trailing down the strip of bare skin from my neck to the bottom of my stomach. I tap my finger where it's resting on the thin chain over my hip. The movement catches his attention and I quickly stop.

Blizzard starts playing, blissfully distracting Jovan. People closest to the stage turn to watch. I close my eyes and listen.

"He's very good. I would not have thought it of someone from the Outer Rings," he says.

I grin at him. "You thought the only thing he was good at was brawling?" I ask. "You'd be surprised." His interested expression encourages me. "Avalanche, for example, is an amazing cook. If he wanted to stay here, I'd recommend him for the kitchens." I point at Shard. "Shard is amazingly intelligent. He has an ability to remove himself from a situation emotionally

and consider it objectively. Ice, would make a great spy. And Blizzard cares so much about helping people in the Outer Rings it destroys him a little every time he can't save someone," I say.

"And what about the one who died?" he asks. My breath falters.

"Flurry? All he wanted was a kiss and a good mattress," I say. My voice cracks and I blink back tears.

Jovan bends his head down and kisses my palm. My breath falters for an entirely different reason. I look up at him.

"I am sorry for my part in his death," he says. Something uncoils at his words. Had I been blaming him, deep down?

"Does this mean you'll close the dome?" I ask, grabbing drinks from a tray. Although we're at the back, the staff goes out of their way to serve the King.

He shakes his head as he takes one. "No, that couldn't be done. It has kept crime rates down for over a hundred years. It wouldn't be feasible. I do, however, plan on offering an out to those who participate with honor."

I rest my hand on his arm, feeling hard muscle. It's a start. "Thank you." That means more than his apology for Flurry's death.

He frowns as he looks at my arm. "You're cold."

"No, I'm warm enough." I look down and see I have raised bumps over my arms. I must be colder than I thought.

"You have goose bumps," he says.

"Goose bumps?" I ask, looking at my arm. "Why would you call them that?"

He laughs. "You know what? I have no idea." He starts tugging off his tunic.

"What are you doing?" I hiss. Is he insane? Jovan laughs again. I giggle, too. The sound is infectious. Some of that hidden charisma he possesses in droves is peeking out.

He hands me the tunic. "Put this on." I look at him like he's crazy and just in case he missed my look, I tell him.

"You're cold, put it on. Some of the other women have a tunic on," he says. I glance around and see he's right. Many women wear them. And none of the half-naked males appear cold in the slightest. The First is the warmest time of revolution for them.

"Please." The undercurrent in his tone has me reaching for the tunic. I ignore the few gasps as I take it.

“Here, you don’t want to mess your hair up.” He guides it over my head. “Your hair looks beautiful. It’s the same color as the gems on your shoes.”

Had he personally selected my shoes? I thought he’d ordered a minion to do it. I peek at him and give a tentative smile. I need more liquid courage for the conversation’s current direction.

“Where’s the dress from?” I ask.

He searches my face for a long while and then looks out over the slowly dancing crowd. It’s thinned considerably, couples no doubt ducking away to find a private corner or room. Sin dances with Arla. I grin and shake my head, not hurt in the slightest. Shard doesn’t seem happy about it, though. He stands by the goblet table, glaring their way.

“Shard, my friend, you’re better off,” I mutter.

“What?” Jovan says and I shake my head.

Ice and Blizzard are nowhere to be seen. I don’t think too long on what that means. Avalanche is scarfing back food at the table and, surprisingly, talking to Rhone.

“Do you know why every person, except Wrath, has refused to join my Watch?” Jovan murmurs, wrapping a strand of my hair around his finger, the one with the scar.

“Yes,” I say, a bit confused by the sensation he’s creating.

“Are you going to follow up that comment?” he asks.

I shrug. “What will you do for it?” I mimic his past answer.

He grips my face while I sit there bewildered, and moves in close. It’s like a gate lifts and I’m drowning in the hunger of his gaze.

“What do you want me to do?” he says softly. It’s his dangerous voice. I lick my dry lips. I can’t think of anything. I don’t know what his “pear” is.

“They’re too loyal to the barracks owners. Most of us were saved by Tricks and Alzona. They don’t feel like they can leave honorably, though most want to.” I reach my hand up and pry his hand off my chin, finger by finger. Jovan chuckles at my attempts and makes no move to help, or resist.

I yawn a little. His tunic feels like a blanket, still warm from his body. “Bedtime?” he asks. I giggle at how stupid the term sounds coming from his mouth.

He pulls me up.

People stare as we walk out. I know exactly what they’re thinking and

I can't bring myself to care. I wave at my friends. Shard raises an eyebrow at me. I raise one back and giggle again. What's his problem?

Jovan and I climb the stairs, grabbing at each other when we weave too close to a wall or an armored decoration. We collapse outside my door, gasping with laughter after he walks into a wall.

I get up once I find my legs and start to shrug off his tunic. He stops me. "No, you keep it until tomorrow. That's how it works."

How what works? Our gazes meet and I forget my question. He places one hand on the wall behind me. I catch my breath as he leans in.

Errant party-goers shout down the hall, breaking the moment. He pushes back with a sigh.

"Goodnight," he growls and walks off without another glance. I know because I watch him until he disappears around the corner.

I tug off the tunic, back in my room, and hang it over the chair. I lean against one of the bed pillars, head swimming. Is it wrong to be disappointed he didn't come in with me? That he didn't at least kiss me. What would have happened if he did come in here?

A nagging voice - the one I like to ignore - gives me the answer.

The side door creaks open and then shuts. Still resting on the pillar, I keep my eyes closed, taking quick, shallow breaths. Light footsteps sound until the person stops in front of me. I know who it is. I know what he wants. Do I want this, too?

I open my eyes and look at him.

I want him. More than I've ever wanted anyone. He crosses over to me in one long stride. I know my expression is just as hungry as his.

He lifts me up so I'm standing on the bed seat, his hands high on my ribs beneath my breasts. He pulls my head forward and I grasp his face and kiss him. He slips his tongue into my mouth and I don't think about why, I just copy him, smelling his clean, male scent. His hands are everywhere. Sliding down my back, skimming over my flat stomach, stroking my arms. He pulls back and runs his fingers between my breasts, continuing down the length of the line in the middle of my torso.

"Olina, are you sure?" he murmurs into my skin. "We've both had a lot to drink. We can do this another time." I know he'll go if I ask him to. I think of the clambering men back on Osolis and then Jovan, and I know what's about to happen is right. I'm sick of worrying over every detail. Tonight I'm just going to feel.

I reach up and grasp the chain behind my neck in answer to his question. In the bravest move I've ever made, I pull it over my head and let it drop. His guttural groan has me dancing inside. My gasping breath fills the room and is only interrupted by his growling between frantic kissing. The rest of my dress is off. He pushes me onto the bed and looks his fill as he takes off the rest of his clothing. A thrill of nervousness goes through me as he moves toward me over the furs of the bed. He grabs my bent knees and pushes them apart.

"Jovan," I say, with a nervous tremble in my voice.

"Let go, Olina," he murmurs. "Trust me."

I do trust him. Some instinct has me tilting my hips upward. I gasp at the sensation and try not to push back.

"Relax, baby." Suddenly, when I think I can't bear it anymore, he freezes. I look up through hazy eyes to see his horrified look.

"You're a—" he gasps. I can't move. Something inside warns me not to move. Jovan shudders above me, as much as I tremble.

"I can't stop," he whispers, tortured, and plunges forward.

Chapter Nineteen

My eyes fly open. The room is shrouded in darkness. I blink a couple of times to adjust my vision and as I do, a hand shifts around my waist. I freeze and slowly turn to look behind me. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Jovan's in bed with me! I bite down on my fist to stop from screaming. Blurry memories rush back at me as I stare in disbelief at the King of Glacium. In my bed.

He shifts away, rolling onto his other side. The fur falls down around his hips.

Veni, what have I done? I slide out of bed in increments, wincing at the soreness between my thighs.

I had sex with Kedrick's brother! I sit in shock before my mind starts to work. The responsibilities I carry as Tatum begin to blanket my desires and wishes. They keep accumulating until I see my decision last night for what it really was. A selfish and rash act.

What had we been thinking? A tear trickles and drips off my chin. The King of Glacium and the Tatum of Osolis. If word got out, it would be disastrous. My blue eyes would pale in significance to the disgust of...our interbreeding.

How am I any different from my mother? I've lived through the devastation of her choices, but here I was repeating her mistakes.

I didn't regret the moment. But I'm terrified about what it means now.

I look toward the exit as the walls begin to close in on me.

Solis, I practically threw myself at him! He wanted to stop. He asked me if I wanted to do it another time. What if I hadn't done it right? Tears begin to build in my eyes. I wince as I recall some of the things I did and said, unable to stop a small groan as I remember him washing me afterward. Was he as drunk as I was?

But I remember *he* came to my chamber. And *he* kissed me first. My eyes widen. What if he cared for me?

Jovan's breaths are steady underneath the furs. His breathing hadn't been steady last night. Neither had mine. I slither into my trousers and feel for my tunic. It's nowhere to be found. I remember Jovan's tunic from last night. I grab it off the chair.

I can't see the horror in his eyes when he comes to the same

conclusions I have. There's no way I'm sticking around to watch. I don't think I could bear it. This will be proof to him I always run, but it's for the best. Crystal said she had a place for me to go. I slide my feet into my boots. She said it was a place where no one would ever find me. Maybe a mountain somewhere. I'll just go for a while. A week or two. Give us both some space to collect ourselves and to remember we have others to think about. I'm doing it for our people. We'll have time to rid ourselves of any deeper unsanctioned feelings.

When I think I can look Jovan in the eye again, I'll come back. I'll return as a cold, distant Tatuma.

I reach for the door and realize the guards will have orders to wake Jovan if I leave. The others from the barracks were given permission to come and go as they pleased after the ball, but I suspect the orders for me are different. Tears threaten again. I rest my head against the wood. What if I'm pregnant? I'll have a baby who's mixed and they'll be shunned like I am. Did Jovan have some way to stop me becoming pregnant? Without a caring mother and no female friends during childhood, I'm entirely ignorant of the finer workings of sleeping with someone.

This thought puts a new urgency into my actions. I look up at the door. Is it smaller than it was a moment ago? I need to get out. Now.

I take a deep breath and peek at Jovan once more, knowing it will be the last time I'll see him in my bed only wearing furs.

I slip into the hallway and close the door with a soft thud. I wave at the guards and stroll around the corner. As soon as I'm out of sight, I start running.

When I first came to the castle in the Third Sector, I explored different ways to escape once my wrist and shoulder had healed. In the end I never used them. I was grateful for that fact. I take another stairway, leaping over someone slumbering halfway up. The guards could be waking Jovan right now.

I sprint through the meeting room and take the passageway to the kennels. I listen for signs anyone else is there and creep down to the cage levers. The dogs whine and bark as they sense the intruder in their midst. Gripping one lever, I pull down and release a team of dogs. I do the same for the other four teams. I dodge through the pack and pull open the entrance to the kennels. The dogs spill out into the courtyard. Yells start up outside. I watch as the four Watchmen desert their posts and rush down from the castle

walkway. The portcullis has been left open for any straggling guests. I slip outside, crouch and run along the dark wall of the courtyard, keeping flush with the shadows.

No one spots me. I run down the path leading away from the castle. Time is short. I must act like Jovan is right behind me. He probably is.

I get lost in the Middle Ring, but orientate myself and soon I reach Alzona's barracks, wild and out of breath. The sounds of my fist pounding on the door echoes down the alley behind me.

It's not long before it's yanked open. The wary scowl on Alzona's face turns into surprise as she recognizes me.

"Frost. What's wrong?" She rushes to open the gate. I hurry in, gasping for air.

I wait until we are inside. "I need to talk to Crystal. Is she here?" I ask. Alzona nods, not wasting time with questions before she retreats down the hall.

Crystal hurries in, eyes alert. She must have woken with the noise as well. The men can't have made it back yet or they'd be out here, too. As soon as she sees my face, her expression sharpens.

"You're taking me up on my offer?" she asks.

"I need to hide," I whisper. "And quickly." She gives me a terse nod.

I hasten to my room with only a fleeting glance at Alzona, who is looking between Crystal and me.

I thrust a hand into the lumpy mattress and draw out my money and the arrow. I take my warmest jacket and swap my trousers for thicker ones. I don't know where I'm going, but I'd rather be too warm than too cold. I grab the hat, gloves and my wooden band. I look at the veil - it's useless. I tear it into unrecognizable pieces and shove it back in the mattress. A loud hammering comes from the front of the barracks. My mouth dries. There isn't time to get anything else.

I dash to the mess hall. Alzona is gesturing at Crystal, who shakes her head.

"I can't tell you. Please just trust me," Crystal pleads.

"Open this door! In the name of the King!" someone yells.

"Open this fucking door!" another roars. I jolt as I recognize Jovan's voice. "I know what you're thinking. Don't you dare run."

The others turn to me with wide eyes. Crystal gives me a searching look and I nod even as Jovan's plea causes a pang of longing in my chest. It's

the reason I'm leaving. She grabs my hand.

"Come on, we'll go out through the roof." She stops to kiss Alzona, who turns her head away.

"I'm sorry," I mumble to Alzona as we leave.

Crystal and I push through the trap door, running along the rooftops. I have no idea where she's taking me. I'm hard-pressed to ignore the deep ache in my stomach, which is objecting to our jolting pace.

The sky begins to lighten and we slow to a walk to navigate around a large frosty mound. Crystal draws in gulping breaths. I'm surprised she's been able to keep going for so long. I look up as we break from the trees and see the Oscala ahead. The familiar sight of thousands of floating rocks informs me we're moving *away* from the mountains. Where is she taking me?

There are no houses this close to Glacium's edge. Just trees, and birds that have woken early to feast. She turns off the path and we resume our jog for a while before she stops in front of a tree. I look at her, opening my mouth to speak.

I bite back the question as she reaches into a hollow of the tree and pulls out some kind of contraption. She swings it over her back.

"Climb," she orders.

This time I don't stop the question. "What? Why?"

She looks at me with raised eyebrows. "Frost, how long do you think it would have taken them to find the roof exit? And then how long before they found one of the hundred or so people we've passed on our way here? Then how long before they see our footsteps in the wet ground? There is no time for questions. Climb the damn tree," she says.

Well, when she puts it like that. I grip a rough limb and begin to haul myself up. I stop halfway.

"Keep on going," she says below me. "All the way to the top."

I keep going until the branches start to complain at my weight. Crystal pulls up beside me and begins to work at the contraption, snapping rods into place and pulling straps free. It starts to form a "v" shape. The material is something I haven't ever seen before. Shiny, flexible, but obviously tough. She swings the large frame behind her and gestures to me with an impatient hand. Biting my lip to keep another question at bay, I approach. Crystal is a sensible woman. Surely she isn't meaning to do what I think she is. She spins me so my back is to her and reaches around to fasten a strap around our hips. Her touch is efficient, not like Jovan's warm hands had been. I resist the

sudden temptation to sob like a child.

She reaches pale arms around me and fastens another belt around my chest, then releases a thin wooden frame from the stretched material above our heads and lowers it in front of us until it's at hip level. I grip onto a neighboring branch as we wobble precariously.

"Hold onto the bar," she instructs and hurries through more pulling and tightening. "Feet in the loops." I look down as she kicks two leather loops next to my feet. I slip into them and she slots her feet behind mine.

"It's lucky we're both on the smaller side. This frame isn't really designed to fly two people," she mutters. "Alright, hold onto the bar. *Don't kick*. Just keep still. I'll do the rest," she instructs.

I twist my head over my shoulder. Did she just say fly?

I don't get a chance to ask my question. Crystal tips us forward off the branch.

My stomach lurches as we drop and then again as the wind catches beneath the frame and we're lifted upward. I'm so terrified I can't make a sound.

"Sorry, it doesn't normally drop so much! It's because of the extra weight. I'm going to move us higher now," she yells over the howl. I gag as she does, drawing the wings in so we drop a little and suddenly pushing them out so we soar higher.

"What is this?" I scream, having finally found my voice.

"Flying! Isn't it amazing?" she says.

Those aren't the words I'd choose. My heart has slowed marginally. Enough for me to realize where we're going.

"We're going to the Oscala?" I yell. She confirms this with a shout in my ear.

We fly between the islands of rock and dodge the cliff-faces and jutting stones. Crystal pushes us higher and higher, until I start to feel queasy. This isn't the ideal motion for a hangover. I focus on the thought I'm moving further away from Jovan to take my mind off my complaining stomach. Solis! What must he think of me? I'd rather be locked in a tower than see him again.

Deep in my misery, it takes a few seconds to realize Crystal is lowering us. I open my eyes and feel my jaw drop.

There are houses up here. I close my eyes and open them again, but the houses don't go away. I twist my head around to look as far around us as

possible. The crude houses carry on as far as the eye can see. They're dotted everywhere. Some of the shelters carved into the sides of rock faces, or in caves. Others just material slung over wooden frames.

"What is this place?" I gasp.

"It's where I grew up," she says shortly. "Brace yourself. Landings are harder with two people."

I tense my arms as she brings us closer to the ground. She slips her feet out of the loops from above mine and angles the contraption backward. I can feel the wind's resistance slowing us, counteracting our forwards momentum. Crystal's body is tense behind mine as she pulls on the bar in front of us. She seems to know what she's doing.

"Feet out of the loops," she commands when we're just above the ground. I slip my feet out and the flying frame wrenches upright, dropping us to the ground. The jarring vibrates through my bones. I take a couple of lurching steps, forgetting I'm strapped to Crystal. We tumble to the ground in a heap of arms, legs and wooden rods.

"Sorry," I cough as she removes her elbow from my chest. I do my best to stand, but my legs feel like water. I sink back to the ground. Crystal laughs.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to that." She crouches down beside me. "Now listen. The others aren't going to be pleased I brought you here. You're only allowed to bring back your spouse, technically speaking," she says. "We are the Ire. A secret sanctuary for those of merged bloodlines. Everyone born here is a mix of Solati and Bruma." She settles back on her heels to watch as I gape at her. She knows. She knows what I am.

But she said everyone here is mixed. How can that be?

"How long have you known?" I finally ask.

She dusts off her trousers and stands, holding a hand out to me. "I knew as soon as you told me your age. I've only ever known people of our height on Glacium to be mixed. Though the women who come in from Osolis, say our height is normal there." I release my held breath. She doesn't know my true identity.

I lift a shaking hand and place it in hers, trying to absorb it all as she pulls me up. I wonder at what stage my mind will just overload. A secret village? How long has it existed under the noses of Osolis and Glacium? The housing we've passed is not new. I even saw livestock. How many people are here? Exiled from our worlds because of their mixed blood.

Crystal leaves me outside of a shelter. On closer inspection I see the housing is made of a thick material. The cooking equipment is set up in an area sheltered from the wind. I'm glad I brought my warmer clothing with me. Though, I realize, the temperature must always stay the same here. The Ire can't migrate like we do. It's an odd concept to grasp. These people wouldn't have to migrate. There's a whispered argument coming from the tent.

The material over the entrance is swept aside and a tall man stoops his shoulders as he steps out. He has strawberry blond hair and powder-blue eyes, just like Crystal. This must be her father. He stares at me and I stare back. His daughter steps out and grips his forearm.

"Daddy, this is my friend. She saved my life. This is my way of repaying my debt," Crystal says. Her father jerks at her words.

The man looks down at her. "That may be, my bird. But Adox won't allow her to stay here," he speaks. "You know how stringent he is." His sentence is loaded. I gather the people who aren't accepted are also not allowed to leave. I hover awkwardly to the side as her smile falls. I hope Crystal doesn't get in trouble over this.

Why couldn't it have just been a mountain somewhere?

I watch as Crystal's face loses its uncertainty. "Well, I'll just have to convince him. He's always liked me," she says in a blazing tone.

Her father lets out an exasperated breath. "He'd have to love you for this. But what's done is done. He'll not be up yet. Bide here and have some food before you go," he says and moves toward me, arm extended.

"But no matter what happens later, I am honored to meet the person who saved my daughter's life. I'm Cris." I shake his hand.

"I'm called Willow," I say, letting go of his hand. I don't want anyone here to connect me as Frost and definitely not Olina. Crystal gives me a look, but doesn't say anything. We sit around the fire as Crystal's mother, Isha, comes out and introduces herself. She has more of a Solati look to her. Her expression is blank and I can't tell what she thinks of my presence here - which is saying something. Isha helps Cris to prepare the fire and food. I chew on the dry, unfamiliar food, thinking of the pears I never got to eat back in the castle.

I look around with growing uneasiness, beginning to see coming here wasn't going to be as simple as I thought. I'd misunderstood her. Crystal brought me here to live - permanently. I groan and put my throbbing head in

my hands. I choke back tears and shake my head at Crystal's questioning glance. Isha throws a motherly look my way, which nearly undoes me at the seams.

I worry about what happened to Alzona after we left. I bet Jovan would have ordered his guard to turn the barracks upside down. She'll be pissed. Crystal has been surprisingly unworried about it. Saying something about "It will serve her right to be in my shoes." I didn't know what was going on between them, but I hope it doesn't last. Crystal isn't solving anything by avoiding Alzona. I ignore the fact I'm essentially doing the same thing with Jovan.

Why did I do it? Why did I run? The issue of sex aside, maintaining a good relationship with Jovan for the peaceful futures of our worlds was paramount. We had finally been talking as one equal to another. A warm feeling unfurls in my stomach, swiftly overridden by icy dismay. The *warm* feeling is exactly what I fear. Is this how my mother felt after sleeping with her Bruma, my father? I feel some kind of weird kinship with her for a brief moment.

Cris joins us and we fly to a rocky island a few minutes away.

We land on a crowded rock. At least I don't fall on my face this time. Every one of the people hushes as they see I'm a stranger. I hear the word "mixed" whispered around. It's strange this crowd instantly recognizes what I am, when my mother has managed to fool two entire worlds for so long. I still don't know if I should be terrified or not. But their staring almost makes me laugh. Is there anywhere on *any* world I can go without people gawking at me for one reason or another?

Unfazed by their hostility, I walk behind Crystal and her father. We approach a man with white hair. I hadn't expected Adox to be so old. I can't help a surprised noise from escaping my lips when I see his brown eyes. Solati eyes. Curious now, I take a closer look at those around me. My astonishment at the range of shapes, sizes and colors of the people around me. Beneath my uncertainty a glowing sense of understanding takes root.

I'm not alone.

Adox's keen eyes move over my features before shifting his perusal to Crystal, who flushes up to the roots of her hair.

"Well met, Adox," she says, using a Solati greeting. She has hidden all of this so well.

He tilts his head to the side. "You have finally returned, Crystal.

And...you have brought company with you," he says. I'm not fooled by his polite words, though I might have been if not for Cris' words earlier. I can feel how unwelcome I am. Despite the connection I have to this race, do I really want to stay here? My head gives a painful throb. I need sleep, I can't think straight.

Crystal flushes a deeper red, if it were possible. "This is my friend and the person who saved my life..." Her eyes widen in panic. I step in.

"Willow," I say, smoothing over her slip. "My name is Willow." Adox isn't convinced. He hums and observes me. I meet his unwavering gaze with my own. Was he born on Osolis? Or up here? If I stayed, I could learn more about this mixed culture and their technology.

"We do not generally receive visitors in the Ire," he replies and gestures unnecessarily around him. I use it as an excuse to break off our stare down. In doing so, I get another look at the hostile faces around me. Though perhaps some are simply curious.

"Don't you?" I ask a bit dryly. His eyes flash in amusement, I hope. He keeps his eyes on me as he questions Crystal and then her father. He's shaking his head. I can see Crystal is growing angry. Her fists are clenching.

"You should not have made a promise you couldn't keep!" someone yells. I see the exact moment when Crystal has had enough.

I don't expect her shouted confession.

"I was raped!" she says, eyes scrunched closed. I turn to her and speak rapidly as the crowd gasps.

"No. You don't have to do this. Please don't do this." I turn to Adox and speak out. "I'll leave. I assure you, no one will hear of the Ire from me."

Crystal's father stares at her with white-faced horror.

"Crystal, don't," I plead. She pushes me away.

"I was raped a few years ago. By a monster. His name was Slay. Every time I saw him I was so petrified I could hardly speak. But it wasn't only that. I was a shadow of a person after it. Some days I didn't even know if I was alive," she says, gasping between some of the words. What have I done? Crystal is baring her soul to her entire community just because I couldn't handle the repercussions of sleeping with Jovan.

"Not long ago, our barracks was arrested and thrown into the dome," she continues. From the gasps filling the air I gather everyone knows what this is.

"Willow was our best fighter. She saved my life. Saved all of our

lives and then she fought Slay and let me take my revenge. I cut him into pieces. Just like he did to me over the years. She's mixed! Anyone can see that. When did we start turning people away who needed help? I thought I'd be able to offer her this refuge as some way of repaying what I owe her, but it seems I won't even be able to do that." She throws a glare at Adox and grabs my arm.

"Come on, we're going," she says and drags me away. Cris stands in the same spot, shocked expression unchanged. I jog to keep up with her. I look over my shoulder and see Adox gesture to two of the bigger men. We're nearly at the flying contraptions. The men approach, one moves to grab Crystal, and it's my turn to snap. I've had a bad day. I elbow mine in the throat and wrap my legs around him as he falls to his knees. He's on the ground mere moments after I slam his head on the rock. I deal with the second man before his hand grips Crystal's forearm. I turn around and lift my chin, staring defiantly at the gaping crowd.

"You may not let me stay. But you will let me leave. You have my word that this sanctuary will remain secret." I join Crystal where she assembles the flying device. Murmuring builds behind us.

A short bark interrupts the crowd. The sound is unexpected. Adox is...laughing?

"You always were a fiery one, Crystal. I apologize. The reasons for your actions are good reasons indeed. I am convinced you did not bring Willow here out of a flight of fancy." He stands from his chair and limps over to us, arm extended.

"Willow, I welcome you to the Ire. Everyone is expected to contribute here in some way. In return you will be given food and housing. Do you have any skills?" he asks.

I stare at him and gesture at the groaning men behind me. "I can fight. And I've worked with children for many years," I say.

His eyes twinkle at my contradicting skill set. "I'm sure that will be plenty enough for now. Please talk with Isha, she will direct you to the proper places. Crystal, you will teach her how to fly," he says.

Crystal leans in and speaks in a low voice. "I will stay a short while, but I must get back to my employer, or lose my job." I look at her, a bit alarmed to find out the only person I know is going to leave me. Can I go with her, too? How will I get back if she flies off? All I can hear is Jovan in my ear talking about unforeseen consequences.

Adox looks a bit annoyed at her reply, but he gives a curt nod and surveys the lingering crowd.

“Hamish,” he calls. A handsome young man approaches. He has curly black hair and friendly green eyes. He looks to be about my age, maybe a little older. “You will show Willow how to fly,” he says. Hamish looks at me and an appreciative whistle sounds on his lips. He grins at Adox, who makes another odd barking laugh and limps away to settle the onlookers.

Hamish looks at Crystal and flicks her cheek. “Nice to see you, pipsqueak. Still like to cause a stir, I see,” he says. He darts a look at me and I find myself smiling in return.

“Stop making eyes at my friend, you dolt. She’s not interested,” Crystal grumbles and fastens the straps around us both.

“I’ll just have to wear her down while I teach her to fly.” He steps in and tightens the belt around my waist. He holds his hands there too long and I hear Crystal give a suffering sigh behind me. I shift my gaze from his green one and step into the loops he holds out. Crystal slips her feet behind my own.

“I’ll be seeing you,” he says and winks. I ignore him and brace myself for the lurch in my stomach as we tip off the edge.

While Crystal has a much needed talk with her parents, I take a good look at Crystal’s Soar - as she calls it. Adnan would die of happiness if he saw it. And my brother’s eyes would nearly pop out of his head. I can’t begin to understand its finer workings, but some of the parts are obvious. It has a similar shape to bird’s wings. Several lightweight rods travel from tip to tip of the wings and keep them straight so the wind catches underneath. These rods separate in the middle so the wings can fold. On our way here we supported our weight through a square frame which pulls down from the wings. There are a variety of other rods framing the wings and then there are leather straps. One for the chest, one for the hips, and loops for the feet. Quite simply, it’s amazing.

During the day, young children fly past Isha’s island to get a look at the stranger in their midst. The most persistent of the group, a boy with flaming red hair, hardly leaves our sight. I badger Crystal with questions until weariness and my sore head finally get the best of me.

I lay in my new tent, which Cris assembled for me, thinking over what I was told. Adox’s father set up the secret village after he was exiled from Osolis as a teenager. The Ire’s made up of family islands, each

suspended landmass named after the eldest female living there. When there's no matriarch, it is named after the eldest male. The communal islands have obvious names like, Farm Rock and Nursery Rock.

I doubt I'll be here long enough to memorize all of the names, but it doesn't curb my acute interest. A whole race of people! Surviving amongst the floating islands of the Oscala. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would think it myth or a fantastical story.

I have no idea if I should be here or not. But I'm in no shape to make a decision right now. I'll do what I should've done before leaving the castle, wait a few days before making a choice.

Chapter Twenty

I wake the next day as someone whistles outside of my tent. It takes a while to remember where I am and how I got here.

I crawl outside and blink up into green eyes.

“Is all that hair yours?” he asks.

“There used to be more of it,” Crystal calls. My face warms and I duck back inside to put on more layers and braid my hair.

I exit and join him where he’s receiving breakfast from Isha. She hands me a type of dense bread and fried mushrooms with a sad smile. I heard mother and daughter arguing as I left the fire last night. It was impossible not to overhear. Isha felt betrayed she was the last to know about her daughter’s rape. I could understand why Crystal told strangers first. It was like Ashawn making his confession, or like me showing Kedrick my face, instead of showing my brother. Sometimes it’s easier to tell a person you don’t know. Then if the person judges you, it doesn’t mean as much.

“I’ve slept late,” I mumble around my food.

“It’s normal until you get used to the thin air up here,” Isha says.

“Now, your routine. Until you have learned to fly on your own, you will do half a day with Hamish and half a day looking after the children at Nursery Rock.”

I nod and shove the food into my mouth so I can take the clothing she’s holding out. She smiles again as she turns away and a pang of guilt hits me. They all expect me to stay. Less than two days and I have a job, a house and clothing. How can I tell them?

Stooping over in the tent and with more than a little difficulty, I shrug into the tight-fitting garment. The material is similar to that of the flying contraption, but not as thick and a bit shinier. I do a few experimental squats. It’s flexible and doesn’t limit me. It will do.

The flight over to the practicing area is uncomfortable, to say the least. It’s not often I’m pressed flush against a male body. It’s happened more in the last two days than the rest of my life put together. I clench my teeth so tightly they grind, to distract myself from comparing Jovan’s chest to the one currently behind me.

When we land, I barely feel the impact through the balls of my feet. The Soar he’s using is different. He said it’s made specifically for two

people. It has two sets of straps and is wider. With this, Hamish glides off Isha's rock, instead of plunging off like Crystal the day before. He unstraps me and I look around to avoid his gaze.

There are two sides to the island. One side is sheer and drops away into nothingness, like most of the rocks. The other side has five steps cut into it. Each step is bigger than the one above it. The top step is only half a meter. The final step twenty times this height. It's called the Training Rock.

"Usually we teach the kids from the top, the smallest step, in case they fall, but you can handle a bit higher. You should be flying by lunch time. We'll start you on the third step down," he says. We walk down a stairway carved into one side of the training steps. I peer over the edge of the third step. There are only a few meters between here and the dark, solid rock at the bottom. The surface is smooth, possibly from years of children landing there. It will hurt if I mess up, but it won't kill me.

Hamish has brought a second Soar. As he shows me, I start to understand how when you push and pull on the bar with your hands, it shifts the rods in the top of the frame to tilt the wings. This is how you change your speed and control your landing. And when you pull up on the bar, the rods at the top slide into one another, drawing the wings inward. This is how Crystal gained height, by drawing the wings in and then flinging them out again. I go through assembling it for an hour before he's confident I've gotten it right. I welcome the mental distraction it brings. At least the soreness isn't around to remind me today.

"I want you to catch the air and attempt a circle before you land. Do you remember what I told you? You have to go against your instincts. You'll want to bring your legs down, but if you do this while your feet are in the loops, you'll tilt backward and won't take flight. Push and pull on the bar to slow before landing and only take your feet out the moment before touching the ground. You'll be fine - it's simple." I give him an uneasy look. It seems like a lot to remember.

I stand on the edge and shuffle the weight of the Soar until it's in a comfortable position. My set of wings is smaller than Hamish's. More like Crystal's.

"Don't hurt yourself." He winks and moves a few steps away. His lack of concern gives me confidence. Children do this. I'll be fine.

I take a deep breath and launch myself off the step.

I groan and roll onto my back at the bottom of the third step, looking

up at the underside of the island above.

“Willow!” Hamish looms over me. I wheeze back at him, it’s all I can manage. Veni, that was higher than it looked.

He deftly unstraps me and then sits me up. “Why did you put your legs down? I said not to do that.” He is hugging me now that he’s rattled my teeth.

“I think...I panicked.” I gasp. At least that’s the only explanation I have to describe the feeling of my body overruling my mind a few minutes ago. Normally when my body does that, it’s to help me. Not to smash me against rocks.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone actually fall before. I mean it’s not far, but it doesn’t have to be because the Soar should catch straightaway. Really, the steps are just meant to build confidence before you jump into thin air for the first time,” he babbles. Great. So I was the only person in the history of the Ire to get this wrong. He bends my arms and legs to make sure they’re okay. It’s a nice gesture, but becomes annoying after a while. I push him away and stand, picking up the Soar.

“Alright, let’s go again,” I say, swinging my arms in circles.

Hamish laughs, but breaks off at my curious look. “What? You’re serious?” he asks. “No way are you doing that again. You need rest or something.”

I roll my eyes and hike up the stairs on the side. Hamish checks the Soar for damage and I strap myself in once more.

“This is a bad idea,” he says.

“It will be with that attitude,” I retort and jump.

I glare up at him, temporarily unable to speak due to the air being forced from my lungs.

“It’s not my fault,” he says, “I told you not to go again.”

I don’t even know what I’m doing wrong. It’s like my mind has absolutely no say in what happens and then it’s over by the time my body decides it can’t work the Soar by itself.

Hamish calls it a morning and we head back to Isha’s. I’m going to be covered with bruises by tomorrow. There’s already one forming on my arm.

“How did it go?” Cris asks.

Hamish looks at me and grins. “Uh...not well. I’ve seen five year olds who—” He backs up a little at my scowl. “But it will get better!” he rushes to

say. I snort and drag my aching body to my tent.

“I hope,” he says to my back.

The next morning I’m demoted to the second step of the Training Rock for “safety”. All it means is I practice eating rock from a lower height. Looking after the younger children yesterday afternoon was a breeze compared to this humiliation.

“I’m going to strap your bloody feet into the Soar soon!” Hamish says.

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” I snap, rubbing my left shoulder. Thanks to my training in the barracks, my shoulder has fully recovered after it was dislocated during the climb up Oscala a year ago, but I am still wary of reinjuring it.

A hand rests on my shoulder. “I’m not angry at you, I’m angry you’ve been hurt. It’s not nice to watch. Plus, I can’t tie your feet, you won’t be able to land,” he jokes, green eyes lighted with mirth. I give him a dry look and step away when he doesn’t move his hand.

Hamish drops me at the Nursery after our lesson. A large net is strung up between the four islands surrounding the nursery as a safety against children escaping through the fence and falling. I hobble over to Mona, who is what I would call a Matron.

“Flying lessons not going so well?” she asks blandly. She isn’t actually interested in my answer, but feels she has to ask because I’m limping.

The women here are polite to me, perhaps reserving judgement for the moment while they test me. Better than name calling and wiping spit off my boots, I say. And I honestly don’t care what they think. A large part of me knows I’m unlikely to be here long enough to make real friends and their treatment is manageable, so I shrug and get to work, fixing a patch in the low fence surrounding the edge of the island. There is no lack of attention from the tiny children who are curious about the stranger, and too young to dislike me for it. It’s nice to know, wherever I go, children are always the same.

Crystal joins me at the fire that evening and bursts into laughter at my sullen look when she asks how my flying went. She laughs for so long, I eventually join in. It’s a bit ridiculous after all. I’m the best pit fighter on Glacium, but I can’t get the hang of a stupid bit of material on pieces of wood.

“You’ll get it. You’re just overthinking,” she says.

Footsteps sound behind us. I tense, but roll my shoulders to relax them as Hamish thuds down beside me.

“What are you doing here?” Crystal asks. “Again.”

Hamish shrugs, but I don’t miss the fleeting look he sends my way. Neither does Crystal.

She crosses her arms. “Please Ham. She is so out of your league, it’s not funny.”

I stay silent in case Hamish is offended. He stiffens the slightest bit, but jokes it off. “Well, I’d hardly go for someone in my own league. Plus, I have a secret weapon,” he whispers loudly.

“Persistence,” he says to Crystal’s questioning look. She scoffs. Both of them talk like I’m not here.

He clucks his tongue, just like Mona does in the nursery. “You just wait. I’ll wear her down and eventually she’ll just give up and settle for me.”

I blink at his response. That sounds horrible. “Would you want to be the person someone settled for?” I ask. Crystal laughs, but I’m completely serious.

“No,” Hamish admits, “But my ego is so big, I don’t actually think you’ll have to settle. You’ll eventually fall in love with my charm.”

I make the expected giggle, but his words concern me. With Sin, I always knew his attention was for fun. But Hamish beams at my giggle as though I’ve given him a present.

This sparks a thought. “It’s my birthday soon!” I say.

“That was a change of subject if I ever heard one,” Crystal mutters.

I count the days. “I think it’s in two days. I’ll be nineteen,” I look between them waiting for their gleeful reaction. Hamish congratulates me with a bemused expression I can’t understand. Crystal smiles at my confusion.

“We don’t celebrate birthdays here. Not like they do on Glacium. We’re closer to the Solati in this custom. I’m afraid there won’t be any presents this year,” she says.

I look back at Hamish and find he’s looking at Crystal. “What? Why do they celebrate birthdays?” he asks. “That’s weird.” His reaction almost exactly reflected my own when I was dragged to my birthday party a year ago. I clamp down firmly on a bubble of laughter.

The Ire was a blend of customs from both Glacium and Osolis. They asked questions, but they didn’t celebrate birthdays. Some were careful with

their body language, like Isha. Others, like Hamish, were expressive. Many of the Ire folk had appearances which would allow them to live on either Osolis or Glacium, people like me or Crystal. Others I've seen here would be recognized as mixed in an instant. There is a little girl at the Nursery Island who has different colored eyes, and there are several people with red or blond hair with brown eyes, a combination not seen on either world.

Despite my own troubles, the workings of the sanctuary make me deeply excited. It is solid proof our two cultures can live together if there is a strong enough reason to. The Ire have to come together to hide their mixed heritage and survive. The key to sustained peace between Glacium and Osolis is finding something to unite them in a common cause.

The third morning I'm taken to the first step, the baby step. Just to further accentuate my failure. If anything, I do worse with the smaller distance - though it doesn't hurt as much.

I'm not leaving the damn Ire until I learn how to fly.

Hamish throws stones off the side of the step where we sit after I've failed enough times to satisfy him.

"I don't know what else we can do. I guess we just keep on going until you get it," he says. I flush and brandish a pebble, throwing it to the wind. It falls off into nothingness. I hope it doesn't land on someone below, but Hamish doesn't seem worried.

"This is a new experience for you, isn't it?" he asks.

"What? Flying?" I ask. He shakes his head.

"Sucking at something," he says. I think about showing some offense, but he seems like he's genuinely asking. I shrug and nod.

"Thought so. You kicked Rub and Tommy's arses the other day, when you were talking to Adox. How long have you been fighting?" he asks.

I stand up and brush off the back of my black flying suit. "A while," I say. I don't want my past following me here. Most mornings I wake up, I expect someone to have connected the dots. To realize I'm Frost and then to realize I am the Tatuma. How many lies can I tell before I'm caught? I'm lucky no one except Jovan and possibly Rhone knew Frost and Olina were one and the same.

"Alright, alright. I get it. No talking about the past." He stands up and lifts his hands in surrender. I turn to him.

He got my hint. I don't think someone has caught one of my hints in nearly a year. It's a nice change from the Bruma. He catches my look of

surprise and takes it as an opportunity to push my braid back over my shoulder.

“I just want you to know, watching you drop them both was one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen,” he says.

Now would be the ideal time to get in my own Soar and glide off, but that would mean I could actually fly. I stand, tense, while I’m strapped in front of Hamish for the return journey.

Over the next few weeks, I realize there’s a pattern. Every Sunday, the Ire gathers at Adox’s island where they share stories, food and dancing. They’ve taken the custom of music from Glacium, though there’s no alcohol in sight. Crystal says it is banned because it was too dangerous. People have stumbled off the sides, never to be seen again and there were some instances where people flew into rock faces. This doesn’t stop the Ire folk from celebrating. The more time that passes, the more my mental unrest grows. I could stay here. Life could be this easy. But could it be enough for me? And how long would the Ire be peaceful if I did not return. A war between the unsuspecting worlds would affect their trade and their way of life.

I couldn’t shake the feeling of something being unfinished. Belatedly, I see it would have been easier to talk to Jovan right away. Each day which passes makes the thought of facing him more awkward. I should have learned this from removing my veil the first time; rip the bandage off.

A pair of familiar green eyes stare at me. Hamish hasn’t given up on me, either with flying lessons or with ‘wearing me down’. I like Hamish, I really do. He’s handsome and funny, like Sanjay. But every time he grabs my hand or smiles, I compare him to Jovan against my will. Hamish’s eyes make me smile, but they don’t heat my skin like the King’s piercing gaze. Is this normal after sleeping with someone? I know people move onto other partners. Bruma do it all the time. Maybe it’s just different for Solati. I bet Jovan has already been with someone else. He’s probably already forgotten our night together.

A thought occurs to me. “Hey, you’re not sabotaging my flying lessons to spend time with me are you?” I ask Hamish. He laughs and I notice many of the young women give him yearning looks. Surprisingly, they don’t seem to begrudge me for holding his attention. Either they’re being respectful or they’re good at hiding their thoughts.

He shies back in a dramatic gesture. “No, I swear I’m not. Though I wish I’d thought of that. I’m afraid you’re just genuinely bad,” he says.

Crystal laughs with him while I pretend to scowl. I've had a hard-to-swallow lesson in humility with the Soar, but I've decided to try and see it in a funny light, like everyone else does.

I watch as Hamish and Crystal talk.

"I'll be heading back tomorrow." The words break me from my thoughts.

"You are?" I ask Crystal.

She nods. "It's a shame you can't fly yet. You could have come for a visit," she says. "Although, it's probably not safe to do that. Best you stay here." I try to think of some way around her comment. Some way to let her know I want to go back, without revealing my pitiful reason for exposing her.

"Yes, it's probably best," I finally echo.

Sighing, I turn my attention to the family next to me. Jimmy, the young red-haired boy who had flown around Isha's island for a full day when I arrived, is trying to sneak unobtrusively into the celebrations.

"Jimmy! You better not have been soaring your nose in the wrong places again," his mother yells. There are loud chuckles from the watching crowd. Jimmy is always off exploring, much to the exasperation of his mother. His father is often away trading on the black market with Osolis, as many of the men who passed for Solati or Bruma did.

"But Mama, you know I see stuff. You liked it when I warned you about all those Bruma and the veiled lady that time," he says. I freeze.

"We have scouts for that. It's too dangerous for a little boy," she scolds him while juggling two other young children and a parcel of food. I see Adox watching me and smooth my features. The small boy crosses his arms and sulks, muttering under his breath. "Well Hannah just sleeps on her watch, and no one goes as far as I do."

"Can we go exploring one day?" I ask Hamish. He thinks hard for a moment. His playfulness reminds me of Kedrick sometimes.

"How about when you can *fly*, we'll go exploring," he says.

I arch my brow in an expression of innocence. "Oh, you don't want me strapped to you for the whole day?" I ask. I laugh at his crestfallen expression. Crystal high-fives me as we walk to our Soar.

"You've got him dancing in the palm of your hand." She laughs and then stops me with soft pull on my forearm. "Don't hurt him, though. He's kind of like a brother to me. And an idiot most of the time, but...he's nice," she says. "And we both know that's not a quality every man has."

“I don’t think I could be with him,” I admit. She waits for me to expand on my comment. I shrug. “I have too much behind me and too many obstacles in front.”

She is silent while she thinks about my words. It’s one of the many things I like about her.

“If so, you need to tell him you’re not interested,” she says.

I turn to her. “Why do I have to do that?” If I ignore his advances he’ll get the hint. This is how it works on Osolis anyway. Much better than the cringe-worthy conversation she advocates.

She shakes her head. “He shows an interest and you let him know if he’s got a chance or not. That’s how it works. If you don’t, he’ll get hurt in the long run and it will ruin your friendship.”

I think her proposed plan would ruin our friendship, but I don’t say anything. “Okay, I’ll think about it.”

Crystal’s right about one thing. Hamish *is* nice. I can’t help but feel he’s *too* nice for the person I’ve become. He would have been perfect for the girl on Osolis before Kedrick died, but too much has happened. I can’t drag him into my mess of a life. He doesn’t deserve it. And I wasn’t entirely sure he could handle it either.

The women at the nursery are still distant. I’ve guessed it’s me caring for their children which makes them so untrusting. I stand to one side to practice strapping myself into the Soar. Hamish says if I can beat him, we can go down to the pathway tomorrow.

“Cara, come back here!” one of the petite blond women calls to the sweet toddler with the unusual eyes. Cara continues on, oblivious. I trace her current path to the edge fence, only a couple of meters in front of her. I’m about to look away again when I see the small hole in the barrier.

“Cara!” The woman is running now, but I’m well ahead of her, already standing on the edge ten meters from the small girl. I leap over the low fence, shove my feet in the loops and snap the bar down.

There’s a high pitched scream as Cara realizes she’s on the edge. Her balance at this age is not good enough to correct her mistake. She flails and disappears over the edge.

I’m only a split second behind her. I snatch the back of her clothing, thanking whoever makes these flying suits when the material holds.

Clinging to her with one arm, I force the trembling muscles of my free arm to pop the wings as I’ve felt Crystal and Hamish do before. I bring

us back around to the nursery and fumble my way through a landing. The women are in various states of shock, except for Mona. Cara is squealing in delight, wriggling in my tight hold.

Mona takes her from me and gives her to the now sobbing blond woman who first spotted the toddler. Mona pulls me into a hug.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” She pulls back. “The nets are there, but there have been incidents before. You know, broken necks. Parts of the net giving way.” She squeezes my shoulder again.

The nets. I’d completely forgotten about them. I’m a bit ashamed of my panic now. Though if what Mona says is true, the nets wouldn’t have assured Cara’s safety.

“Hey, Willow!” another young woman calls. “You flew! We all saw you.” The others shout their congratulations.

A wide grin spreads over my face. “You’re right. I did it!” I just soared.

I couldn’t wait to tell Hamish.

Chapter Twenty-one

I don't see Hamish that night and I don't tell him about the incident yesterday as we fly to the Training Rock. Word doesn't spread so quickly here. I add a mental point to the Bruma side.

I've started keeping tally.

"Are you alright?" he asks, watching me as I laugh at another of his comments.

I bite my cheek to stop the grin spreading and nod. "Maybe your jokes are just funny today. For once," I say and lean back as he tries to flick my cheek.

I strap myself into my Soar when we get there and as he heads towards the edge of the first step I run in the opposite direction. To the side that falls into sheer nothingness - unless you hit the rocks on the way down first.

"Willow!" I hear his scream behind me.

I keep my legs straight and push the wings out.

I plunge out of sight, and then with a mighty push, I surge up above his head and circle him twice before landing near the edge. He's frozen halfway through the process of strapping himself in.

"You just—" he splutters.

I beam at him. "I know! I did it by accident yesterday and now I've got the feel for it..." I trail off as his face falls.

"Do you know how much you just scared me?" he asks. His expression is like Kaura's when I tell her off. It's not angry. He looks at me like I've betrayed him. My grin slips.

"It was only meant as a joke, I apologize." It's something the fighters from the barracks would have found hilarious. Obviously, near death experiences don't make Hamish laugh. I suppose the Outer Rings skewed my humor.

He narrows his eyes at me, but then sighs and drops his anger. Just like that. It's incredible. He smiles and strolls toward me, inspecting his hand.

"I'll forgive you," he says. "But only if you—"

"Wait, let me guess," I roll my eyes, "You want a kiss. Oh no, wait. Maybe you'll say you want a pear and then kiss me anyway. Males. You're so original." I stop as I realize I sound crazy.

His face goes red and he stutters his reply. “N-no. I was going to say I’ll forgive you if you race me back to Isha’s.” I look at him as his face gets redder still with his obvious lie. My own cheeks are red from my rant, so I grin at him and tip off the cliff.

Even with a head start, he wins.

After this, my lessons speed up. He shows me the layout, the safest air paths between the rocks. He shows me how to navigate longer distances with the color gradient. This is how the Ire navigates the Oscala so easily. If you’re lost, you only need to soar to higher ground and find yourself again. It’s hard to see the colors in the middle. Hamish has taught me what they all mean. Orange near Osolis, to grey, to white near Glacium. And, as promised, he takes me exploring.

Jimmy comes with us. His mother is so thankful she almost cries. The pale, freckled boy zips around me. Hamish keeps calling him back and, a dozen times, my heart skips a beat whenever he comes within a breath of a rock face. Somehow he always pulls back in time. It’s like the Soar is a part of him.

“How is he so good at seven years old?” I yell to Hamish as the air rushes past us.

“Just a natural,” he shouts back.

We stop for the noon meal and I polish off every crumb. The fresh air makes me hungry, but I don’t drop in an exhausted heap in my tent at the end of the day anymore.

I tilt my head back so I can look straight up.

“You would never know there are a few hundred people up there. You can’t hear a thing,” I say.

Hamish lies back beside me. “Nope. The scouts say they get the occasional whisper of sound coming through during our Sunday celebrations. Of course we always make sure the pathway is empty before starting,”

“How long does it take to get from Glacium to Osolis?” I ask.

He purses his lips. “Two days. If you time it right. There’s the smoke to take into account.” I gape at him. Two days! It took me a month to walk the Oscala.

He continues. “I’ve never done it. Father doesn’t think I should get into trade.” The way he says this lets me know what he thinks about his father’s opinion. I know he usually tends the animals. I guess someone else has done this while he’s been teaching me to fly.

I wish I could launch into a discussion of how the Soars could revolutionize the communication between Glacium and Osolis. But I don't know Hamish well enough to broach the subject yet. Especially considering secrecy is the Ire's greatest code.

"That's where I saw 'em," Jimmy interrupts, pointing over to a large spiraling rock.

Hamish has walked out of listening range. I follow the direction of his finger and start when I see we're on the pathway. I didn't notice how far down we'd flown. A thin, nearly forgotten memory bothers me. I latch onto it and it comes back to me. On the Oscala, I thought I was going crazy. Rock crevices started to look like Tellio lizards, and there was a flash of red one day, which I'd dismissed as another illusion. I wonder now if this was something after all. The red of Jimmy's hair is a similar color. If so, it was lucky he wasn't spotted by Malir or Rhone. They hadn't been impeded by a veil.

"Jimmy."

"Yeah?" he replies.

I have to phrase this carefully. "I don't want you to disobey your mother by going exploring on your own," I say. "But if you go along with others and spot something unusual, could you tell me?" I ask.

He thinks this over. I know what's holding him back.

"Of course, no one would ever hear anything from me. You know, about where you, and the people you've gone with, have been." He smiles at me, sticking out his chubby hand. I shake it with a laugh.

I chew my lip before adding, "Be careful."

We fly far enough through the islands to get a look at the smoky barrier of Osolis. The smell of it brings a bursting desire to see my brothers. They sit underneath me somewhere. What are they doing? Are the twins still causing chaos for their nannies? Is Olandon still enjoying the attention of all the young women? After an entire year, I am within sight of my world! I could slip away with the Soar. I still don't have a veil. But I've seen several materials unique to Osolis since arriving here. The Ire might have the right fabric to make a new one. They do trade with both worlds after all.

"We better head back. It's late," Hamish says. I wrench myself away from the edge.

If this opportunity had come a year ago, I would have leaped at the chance handed to me. Now I'm almost certain if I return, I'll be slaughtered

by my mother. The thought is twisted, but no less true for being so.

The next evening at the weekly celebration, I once again find myself in complete disbelief as to how this village has escaped notice for so long. Adox's father must have been very clever. I know Adox is. He's reasonable and gives good advice, isn't prone to anger and rewards honesty and honor. He truly cherishes his people.

"You don't need lessons anymore," Adox says as I take a seat close to him.

I contain a smile. "No, I don't."

"Do you want to tell him, or should I?" he asks with a pointed look at Hamish.

I laugh softly, but I do feel a pang at losing Hamish's regular companionship. "I'll do it," I say.

Adox echoes my laugh. "Good luck." I wonder how old he is. He has nearly as many wrinkles as Aquin.

I look into the crackling fire which heats my skin. My thoughts quickly turn to my least favorite Bruma. Fire always reminds me of him. Of the way he makes me feel. I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to drive the thoughts away. Why won't they go away?

"Who did you leave behind, young one?" he asks.

I clear my throat, not turning. "No one."

An amused sound tells me what he thinks of my answer. "Well whoever 'no one' is, they must have held a big space in your heart to make you look so sad," he says, rising slowly from his seat. I watch as he limps off, my heart falling in my chest.

I smile as I watch Hamish spin one of the women from the nursery around the dance floor. He catches me watching and winks. I jerk back from the fire, worried he'll drag me up to dance again. I didn't enjoy that experience at all.

He sprawls next to me a few minutes later, puffing for breath. With a chuckle, he throws a warm arm around my shoulders.

"Don't worry, baby. It was just a dance," he says.

"Don't call me baby," I snap. There's only one person who has called me that, and I don't appreciate the reminder. "You can dance with whomever you wish." I stop talking. I sound like I'm insanely jealous. He grins at me and leans in. I quickly pull my head away.

"Come on, Willow. I'm sorry."

I sigh and untangle myself from his arms. “Contrary to how it sounds, I really don’t care who you dance with. In fact, I hope you dance with many more women tonight and find some nice girl who will love you as you deserve. I’m going back to Isha’s,” I say as I clamber up from the low seat and move swiftly away from the dancing. I think I made myself pretty clear. If he didn’t get that hint, he was as dense as the rock under my feet.

“Willow, wait!” I turn to see Jimmy’s flash of red hair. I smile at the boy as he stands to attention.

“Jimmy, well met.” I smile at him.

He leans up against a rock and slides his eyes to me, arms folded. “So. You said you wanted to know if I saw anything,” he says casually. I grin at him and mimic his pose against the rock.

“Find anything interesting?” I ask, studying my nails.

“You can’t tell Mama.” I have to bite my tongue when he mimics my action. I assure him I won’t.

He blurts out his story. “I was out near Glacium and saw them take a man off the pathway,” he blurts.

“Who is ‘them’ Jimmy?”

He rolls his eyes. “The guards of course.” That’s unusual, but I’m not worried. I shrug.

“That’s what they’re meant to do,” I say, standing to swoop up my Soar.

“But do they normally find Solati?”

I whip my head back, freeze from where I’ve started strapping myself in. “What?”

“I know. They were dragging him off to the King. I heard them talking about it.”

I grip the boy’s shoulder. “How close were you? What did the man look like?” Jimmy looks up at me with wide eyes. I relax my grip.

“H-he had black hair, kind of like yours, how it’s a bit blue. His eyes were dark. I know because they called him Solati and I got real close and checked. He was thin, too. Kind of like my Uncle when he got sick,” he says.

I breathe in and out, trying to clear my head. It can’t be! It can’t be Olandon!

I shake my head and squeeze Jimmy’s shoulder absently. But what if it is?

“Thank you so much. You’ve done well,” I say. I fasten the chest

strap with shaking hands. The man Jimmy's described could be any of a hundred Solatis. But how many of these men had a reason to travel the Oscala? And how many have the same hair color?

I fly faster than I've ever flown before, landing on Isha's island at a run, and throwing the Soar to the ground. There's no one else here. They're still at Adox's. I pace back and forth, jerking my hands through my wind-blown hair. I stop at the edge of the island and look in the direction of Glacium, using the color gradient to guide me.

I take a couple of minutes to think my decision through. I inhale and release it slowly. Am I overreacting? It all depends on whether the man is my brother.

I make my choice.

I've got to go. It's not worth the risk. It will take me back to the man I've grown desperate to avoid. But if it's my brother and something has happened to him, I'll never forgive myself.

Isha, Cris and Hamish touch down behind me.

Hamish rushes over. "We saw you run. What's wrong?"

I shake my head and push his hands away, approaching Isha instead.

"Isha. I need some black material. The type I want is heavy, but you can see through it. Do you know the kind?" I ask.

She shares a glance with Cris. "Yes, we call it Videre."

"I need some, about this much." I show her with my hands. "Do you think you can get some for me? Quickly, I need it quickly," I say. I want to grip her arms, but I clench my fists by my side.

"Well, of course, but what's wrong? Won't you tell us?"

I hesitate, about to say no, but I can't just leave without an explanation. "I...a friend is in trouble. Please understand, I can't tell you more than this." I look at each of them and lower my eyes. "I'm sorry." They are shocked, surprised, confused. I close my eyes and swallow.

Isha picks up a Soar and moves to the edge. "I'll be back in ten minutes."

"You're not serious!" Hamish says incredulously.

"She saved my daughter's life. Yes, I'm serious," she says while strapping herself in. She disappears over the side.

"Could I please get some food for the journey? Just a little?" I ask Cris. He takes the hint and retreats to the dugout cave where they keep their supplies.

“You can’t do this. You can’t leave on your own,” Hamish says. I close my eyes, loathe to see his look of betrayal. It’s different. Running away from him. I knew Jovan could handle it. But Hamish just seems so breakable sometimes.

“Hamish—” I start.

“No. I’ll come with you. Surely the more help there is, the better for your friend.”

“You can’t,” I say. Hamish pulls up short and I see his hurt. I hurry on. “You can’t go where I’m going. And I think you forget I used to be in the fighting rings. I’ll be safe.” His eyes darken. He doesn’t believe me. Even though he’s seen me fight. I gesture helplessly. I don’t know what to say.

Hamish closes the distance between us. His movements are so angry I barely turn my head in time to divert his kiss to the side of my mouth. His kiss is still warm. It’s secure. He would always be there, if I needed him. But I’ve chosen.

I pull away, and meet his gaze. “I go alone.”

Cris exits with the food in a satchel. He’s probably been waiting for us to finish arguing before coming out. He hands the bag to me and I sling it over my back.

“If you see Crystal...” Cris starts.

“Then I’ll be sure to tell her how you both are,” I say and give him a hug. “Thank you. I’m sorry I can’t tell you more. Please repeat my apologies to Adox and assure him the sanctuary will be safe if I’m unable to make it back.”

“I’ll do that.” He gives me a brief hug.

Isha lands on feather-light feet behind me. She holds out the material to me. My heart leaps into my throat. I can’t deny a large part of me hoped to never see the symbol of my childhood abuse again. But if it’s my brother, he’ll need help. I need to go back as Olina, not Frost.

Running to my tent, I grab Kedrick’s arrow and slide it into my boot and then grab the wooden band which keeps my veil on. I shove this down the front of my suit followed by the veil. Every time I leave somewhere, I lose more of my possessions.

Hamish is gone when I exit the tent. I ignore the pang of guilt from hurting him and hug Isha goodbye.

“You’ll always be welcome here,” she says.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

I stand at the edge and look down, unafraid with the Soar strapped to my back. I look up at the bright white light in the distance.

I jump.

Chapter Twenty-two

It takes me much longer to reach just the edge of Glacium than it took Crystal to make the whole journey. She, like the rest of the Ire, has the route memorized. I've had to rise to the top of the rocky islands twice to orientate myself. But finally, as the last light is fading, I see Glacium looming in front of me. Last time I trekked to this world, it still took the delegates and me several days to reach the castle from our first sighting of the world. With the flying device, it takes less than an hour until I'm flying over solid ground. It's pitch black, apart from the thin streams of light struggling through the compact windows of the Bruma houses far below. At least I don't have to worry about running into a cliff now that I've left the Ire.

I make sure to keep the mountains on my right. Hopefully by doing this, I'll arrive somewhere in the Third Sector. The wind will be an issue, though. I won't be able to fly in this. I'll have to land in the Second and travel the rest of the way on foot. My only consolation is it will take the Watch a long time to get this far with their Solati prisoner. I should arrive before them. Maybe I can wait for them along the path and free the Solati before they even reach the castle. Then I won't have to speak to Jovan at all.

The journey overhead is much quicker than walking. If you keep to the large roads and use the dog sled you could travel from the bottom of the Oscala across to the Third Sector in a single, long, hurried day. When I migrated from the Third to the First Sector with the assembly, it was slower, mainly due to the late starts, furniture and the sheer numbers. That journey had taken three days. If you were travelling through the smaller lanes in the middle of the Sectors I can imagine the journey from one end of Glacium to the other taking a week or more. No wonder I'm only now starting to understand the layout of this world.

My mind wanders as I fly over the Second Sector. What if my brother is here? The logical part of me doesn't want it to be Olandon. The rest of me longs to see him. A thrill of excitement runs through me. I might see my brother, at last! All the awkwardness at seeing Jovan will be worth it if the Solati is Olandon. I think about the haunting memories of the ball and a terrible thought slams into me. I wrench the bar back.

Jovan announced they were going to the Sixth Sector instead of the Third this revolution! He wanted his army close to the Great Stairway. I

could be heading to the wrong sector.

I hesitate for a moment, drifting slowly. What if these plans have changed?

If they went to the Sixth Sector, the watchmen and their prisoner might already be at the castle. If they were going to the Third, then I should have time to get back here if Jovan has changed his mind.

I wrench the bar beneath me and bank sharply in a turn to the Sixth Sector. I lean forward into the bar and soon I'm hurtling through the night as fast as Jimmy.

I soar high above the treetops and between the valleys of mountains, which up until now, I've always walked around. Internally, I prepare for what's ahead. Jovan treats me well. Or he used to. Will he extend the same courtesy to this person? What if he treats him badly because of what I've done?

How am I going to look Jovan in the eye?

The castle looms in the distance after one of the most frustrating hours of my life. I angle toward it. The watch won't see me. I'm still dressed in my tight, black flying suit. And the material of the Soar is dark also. Plus, why would they think to look up? Enemies don't come from above. Or if they did, we never knew about it before now.

I drop into the courtyard where Jovan once threw me over his shoulder to lock me in my room. I snap the Soar together and hide it behind the single tree against the surrounding stone wall, making sure to wedge the contraption deep so it won't be found. I might have left the Ire, but I'm determined not to betray them.

Reaching down the front of the bodysuit, I retrieve the soft material. There's no time to feel sorry for myself. I force down my abhorrence and let my hands work the veil as though it were never off, throwing it over my head and placing the wooden band over the top.

My first thought is that it's too dark. I stumble toward the door and then decide it's stupid and lift the veil above my eyes to get to the door. I've grown too dependent on my sight.

How casually I lift my veil now. In this moment I know my fear is broken. The moment warrants some celebration, but there's no time.

It's easier inside. I sprint down to the archway and when I hear the hushed silence ahead of me, I know something is happening in the food hall. The usual roaring and smashing is absent. They're here.

I race through the archway, slowing to a jog as I reach the middle of the room. The people immediately surrounding me see me straightaway.

I hear snatches of their shocked whispers. "Olina...Tatuma...alive."

Gasps fill the hall as more and more people turn to see what the disturbance is.

I stare at the Throne table trying to see past the Watchmen.

I don't have to try for long. They turn toward the source of the new commotion and I glimpse the person between them.

The person is thin and filthy. Jimmy's right, they do have black hair, but it's not my brother. Definitely not. He couldn't be this sick. This *emaciated*.

The Solati turns his head to me and my world stops.

"Olandon," my voice is so hoarse I hardly recognize it. I take a staggering step forward and then I'm flying down the hall to his side.

"Landon!" I wrench my brother from the hands of the Watchmen. One tries to pull me away, but suddenly stops the assault and stands back.

"Landon. What has happened to you? Who did this?" I whisper. He begins to shake in my arms.

"Lina. Are you real?" He half sighs, half speaks the words, as though he has no energy to form them. The mere effort of breathing seems almost too much. "You're alive. You're really here?"

"I'm here, brother. Of course I'm here. Is it the twins? Are they hurt?" I ask as I pull back and look at him.

"Twins...are fine. I thought you dead," he chokes and pulls me to him with a well of temporary strength. When did he last eat? How did he get this way?

"Shh, I'm okay. You're okay." I rock Olandon as I would a child, and look over his head at King Jovan.

The hall is so quiet I could be convinced there weren't a hundred people or so behind me. Jovan's eyes are locked on me. His expression is blank, but his posture is tense. I've seen him this way enough to know if I were closer, and my veil was off, his eyes would be glittering.

Jovan is beyond angry, he's livid. Whether at my brother, my entrance or my leaving, I don't know. But whatever awkwardness I'd envisioned for this moment is not there. Olandon is my priority, not some petty personal drama between me and the King.

“Will he be okay?” I ask softly. Jovan stays sprawled on his throne, scrutinizing me. He’s angry all right, or disgusted, I can’t tell which.

Olandon goes limp in my arms. “Landon!” He can’t have died. Please not him, too. I struggle under his weight, slight though he has become.

Then the pressure eases. I look up as the King picks up my brother’s slim frame. Hands shaking, I put my ear to Olandon’s chest, almost crying when I hear his regular beat.

I sit back and swallow a large lump in my throat. “Thank you,” I whisper. The King doesn’t say a word. But I don’t care, because he is helping my brother. That’s enough for me.

He barks an order at someone behind me. I don’t take my gaze off Olandon to check who it is, but I hear their soft footsteps behind me as I follow Jovan’s striding frame. He carries him to the room I used when I first arrived. The one I thought was the dungeon. Compared to the chamber I occupied as Frost, it is. But there is a fire and a warm bed. With how furious Jovan is, I’m surprised he’s even given us this much. But whatever I’ve found him to be, he’s never been malicious. He drops Olandon onto the bed and grunts something at the person behind me.

He meets my eyes for a split second before lowering his head. He leaves without a word.

I sigh. I turn around and start when I see it is Malir’s wife who followed us.

“Sadra,” I greet her. She smiles at me, a bit hesitantly. I realize what a shock my sudden appearance will be to all the delegates and my other friends.

A servant comes up with water and broth and then Sadra is all business. She pours the liquids down his throat in minute amounts while I wash him. I use pitcher after pitcher of water until he’s as clean as I can get him. Tears track down my face as I discover I can circle my fingers around his lower leg. He’s gaunt, near unrecognizable, and his skin seems papery and fragile. I press the veil into my face to mop the tears as his protruding ribs are revealed.

“Will he be okay?” I stutter. Sadra is clearing her supplies.

“He will need broth and water every half an hour for the next two days. Just a spoonful or two of each,” she says. I nod and see she’s left a pitcher of each beside the bed.

“I’ll return in the morning to check on him.” She heads to the door

and then turns back with a smile. “And I’m glad to see you again, Tatuma.” The door closes with a soft thud.

She never told me he would be okay.

I stay by Olandon’s side for the entire two days, feeding him as Sadra has instructed. Someone brings me food, but I cannot eat it. The only times I sleep are the four or five times a day she comes in to briefly check him.

My brother does not regain consciousness during this time and she still doesn’t answer my question. Though I’m too afraid to ask again. I know him slipping under for so long is not a good sign.

It’s night again. I can’t remember exactly what night it is. The third? Maybe the fourth? I catch myself dozing off, and stand to walk around the room. Is it time to feed him again? It must be. I prop his weight up to dribble water and broth down his throat. He groans when I’m done. It’s the first sound he’s made.

“Landon?” I ask. There’s no answer. I talk to him anyway. “You’re okay, brother. I’m here. I’ll look after you and you’ll be safe. I promise.” I lean over and kiss his forehead.

“I love you.”

My head flops to the side as I’m lifted; barely rousing me from the deepest sleep I have ever been in. Strong arms place me on furs. I sink into them like they are feathers.

A hand stroking the top of my head wakes me. Blinking wearily, I look through my veil at Olandon.

“Hello,” I yawn and then sit upright. “You’re awake!”

I twist my way free of the furs to get a better look. His face is still drawn and gaunt, but there is some life in his eyes. And he’s conscious. This has to be a good sign. I stare at him, immeasurably grateful, but still afraid he’ll be taken away.

“Yes. My apologies for waking you, but I’m desperate for some water and cannot get it myself,” he croaks. The old Olandon would have been embarrassed to admit this, but the man in front of me says it factually.

“Of course.” My voice cracks, betraying my emotion. I clear my throat. “I don’t know when I fell asleep.” I smile at Olandon and then remember he can’t see it. I frown as I remember the strong arms placing me in the furs. Had it been Jovan?

He's so thirsty I give him five spoonfuls of water. "You can have more once Sadra says so. Too much is bad at the moment," I say. I urge him to rest.

"You haven't told me off for coming through the Oscala," he notes. I stroke his hair. Yes, I soon guessed this is what he'd done, after the initial shock of seeing him wore off, though I hadn't been quite able to believe it until hearing his confirmation just now.

"I'm waiting until you're stronger." For now, I'm more worried about *why* he came through. "Are the twins okay? Is Aquin okay? The orphange?" I ask.

He smiles at me around his cracked lips, dry from lack of water. "They're all fine. And you're alive. Everything is well." Except for him.

I sigh and look out of the window as sun streams in. "We have much to talk about." I turn back when he doesn't respond and see he's slipped back into unconsciousness or sleep. I draw the furs over him and move the pitcher back as I watch him.

I'll have to tell him of course - that I have blue eyes. I couldn't keep something so monumental from him, not when the consequences affected him as well. I hoped it would be delayed as long as possible. I may have broken my phobia of the material itself, but I fear the act of showing my face will always be unbearable.

The room goes predictably silent when I enter the food hall.

A rumbling stomach this morning reminded me I haven't eaten in several days. I walk straight to the table and grab two pears and some biscuits. Enough so I won't have to come back down again until tomorrow. I glance toward the back of the food hall, but I can't see any of my barrack friends there. They've likely returned to the Outer Rings. My plan was to walk straight out again, but a voice calls to me from the front.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Sanjay stands up by the delegate's table. One more thing I hadn't been looking forward to. Taking a deep breath, I approach, scanning my group of friends. I see Jacqueline looks unhappy to see me. There are smiles on the other faces. The dread lessens a little.

"Hello," I say stupidly. There is silence and then Sanjay laughs.

"If you could look sheepish with a veil on, I reckon you're doing it." His comment breaks the tension and I join in the laughter.

Fiona hugs me and Sadra hugs me again. Adnan, Malir and Roman greet me and Rhone raises his brow, which I ignore and pull him into a hug. I worry the raised eyebrow may be a challenge of sorts. I'm still uncertain if Rhone has connected me with Frost.

Jacquiline stands and walks off before I reach her. Roman apologizes and trails after her while I give Sanjay a punch on the arm.

"You've been gone for months! Where did you disappear to? We were all looking for you. And what are you wearing?" Sanjay blurts out.

"You shouldn't hold all that in, Sanjay. It can't be good for you," I say and the others laugh. I successfully dodge his questions. Adnan is looking at my suit with interest. No doubt he's wondering what kind of material it is. He's probably already thinking of all the things he could make with it. I hadn't thought about my apparel sparking unwanted interest. In reality, I didn't have anything to change into anyway.

"And I'm sincerely sorry for deceiving you all. It wasn't my intent to be away for more than a few days. There were things I needed to do, but you don't deserve the worry I've caused. I hope you will accept my apology in time," I say with a bow.

Malir clears his throat. "About that. We'll be having a long chat about how you managed to evade the Watch on your way out." I duck my head.

As long as it's not a long chat about how I saved his life in the dome. The King must have given Malir an earful when I disappeared. Sadra smiles at Malir and slips a hand into his.

"Sorry," I repeat.

Sanjay snorts. "Whatever you guys say. I think it's hilarious. A tiny slip of a girl, and she had us all running in circles for months."

Fiona lays a hand on his arm. "Are you pretending you weren't as worried as the rest of us?" she asks.

His neck reddens and the others laugh at his discomfort. My own laughter catches in my throat. I hadn't realized how much I missed these people. Even after I tricked them all and ran away, they're willing to put it behind them. Just like that. Well, except Jacqueline. I wonder why she is so angry. I suppose she's taken the betrayal more personally than the rest.

"I'd like to talk more, but I must return to my brother. I don't wish to leave him alone in case he wakes again," I say.

"He woke up?" Sadra asks, standing. "Why didn't you tell me?" I stand aside as she brushes past and I scramble to catch up - Malir's deep

chuckle ringing behind me.

Sadra reports Olandon's heart is stronger and his skin a healthier color. She says he'll be in bed for a few weeks to regain his strength. And even then he'll need exercise to regain his muscle. She mentions there may be some permanent effects on his health. I'm just happy he'll live.

"How do you know you aren't just exhausting yourself more?" I ask Olandon. He's eager to get out of the room and has decided to speed his recovery by doing exercises in bed. He's staying awake longer now. And can stand while I help him wash.

"It has to be done eventually," he grunts, sliding a heel back and forward under the furs. Every day that his face fills out a little more is a good day for me.

"I want you to get so fat I can't see any of your ribs and you have three chins," I say. He laughs.

"You want me to look like Satum Ofrid," he asks.

I grimace. I didn't like the Satum of Treasury back on Osolis at all. "Maybe only two chins."

"I'll be needing breakfast then," he says. I leave for the food hall, heart warm at hearing him laugh.

"Brother, we need to talk—"

His jaw sets and he glances away. I wait for the reply I know won't come. It is not the first time I've asked.

I sigh and let it go for now. "I'll go get you some food."

I get the normal anxiety as I enter the crowded room. It's been two weeks and Jovan still hasn't spoken a word to me. He doesn't even look at me. Well, I wouldn't know if he *did* look at me because I'm determined to not look at him. Soon after my first appearance to get food, three sets of clothing were brought to the chamber. Fiona said it wasn't her this time. I wonder if Jovan ordered it. At least I came back as the Tatuma and had the veil across my face. I don't know if I could have come back as Frost. I couldn't have trusted my expression around the King.

I wave to the delegates and get a few waves back. I'm glad things with them are slowly returning to normal. I go to the food tables, and walk down to the end to stare at the empty platter, which usually holds my pears. Who's eaten them all? No one ever eats the pears! Is this some kind of revenge from Jovan?

I groan and roll my shoulders, moving my head back in a circle to work out some stiffness from caring for Olandon.

I don't know what makes me look back. Perhaps it's the twinkle as light hits the arrowhead.

It takes another second for my mind to believe what I'm seeing is real.

That there really is an archer high up in the rafters. His bow is drawn. I haven't even had time to feel horrified as I follow his line of sight to arrow's target.

I throw the solid platter at the same time I scream his name.

His intended target shies away from the platter hurling toward him and in some bizarre twist of luck the arrow glances off the platter and embeds in the wall behind him.

Chapter Twenty-three

Ashawn clutches his head where the platter has struck him. The others at the Throne table are gaping at me in disbelief. Most don't know what's happened.

"Don't let him escape!" Jovan roars, pointing up at the archer, who must be a little shocked because the tall, thin, unknown man hasn't moved. I jump onto the Throne platform and wrench the arrow out of the wall.

Hands shaking, I pull Kedrick's arrow from my boot and hold them side by side. I don't really need to compare them. I have Kedrick's arrow memorized.

The sensation is unlike anything I've ever felt. Everything is in slow motion. But in the same instance my awareness is moving too rapidly for comfort.

The arrows are the same. Finally, I've found its match.

A roaring builds in my ears. The rage I thought dried up and gone, billows up from somewhere deep within me, in a fury so hot it must blister my insides. The arrows fall from my grip as I launch off the platform after the assassin.

I always thought I would kill the person with Kedrick's arrow. That it would serve as poetic justice. But the arrow will only slow me down. I'm going to kill him with my bare hands.

I'm lifted and slammed down onto my back.

Jovan hovers over me. "You're not going after him," he says, breathing hard.

"Jovan, you better get the fuck off me, right now. The arrow is the same! That man killed Kedrick," I whisper harshly. I want to scream the words, but he's crushing me. He can't know, or he wouldn't hold me back. Once he realizes, he'll let me go.

He pins me down and grabs my chin with his other hand. His eyes don't look like they should. There is no anger in them. There is...fear?

"No," he says in soft voice. I struggle in his grasp in earnest. He barely manages to hold me down as I throw every move in my arsenal at him. I know too much time has passed now for me to find the archer. But I still thrash side to side to throw him off.

"Excuse me, my King?" someone says.

“What?” he snaps over his shoulder.

“I’ve gathered my initial report. None of the sentries saw the assassin enter or exit. I’ve doubled the Watch outside and placed guards on the rooftop.” Malir gives his curt report. “At this stage it looks like he has disappeared.” Gasps sound from the assembly.

A despairing cry leaves my mouth. The fight leaves me and useless tears fall down my cheeks as I slump, defeated. The dark-haired assassin has slipped between my fingers yet again. And it is Jovan’s fault.

“Is it possible he’s still in the castle?” he demands. “The man wasn’t one of ours. I didn’t recognize him.” I hear the man’s negative reply. I push against Jovan again and he sits back on his heels and finally lets me up. The Watchman runs off and the King finally turns toward me, still on his knees - the perfect height.

I punch him in the face as hard as I can. I hear several people coming up behind me as the hall explodes into angry shouting. Jovan holds up a hand, working his jaw back and forward.

My throat is torn, and when I do speak it’s a hoarse whisper. “You let your brother’s murderer get away. How could you do that?” He doesn’t answer. “How could you do that to *me*?” My voice is so raspy the words barely sound.

I look at him, kneeling in front of me, gazing steadily at where he judges my eyes to be, and I hate him.

I pace inside the room for the next couple of hours, thankful Olandon is asleep or he’d demand to know what happened. I long for the punching bag in the barracks. Jovan stopped me. Why? He knows I can take care of myself.

Is that what his problem was? He didn’t want me to reveal my fighting abilities. For people to realize I was Frost. And he deserved that punch. I ignore the pangs of guilt. I wasn’t going to feel bad about it. And the man was a stranger! I didn’t recognize him at all. The sole blessing in this was the delegates were cleared of guilt.

I never want to go to the food hall again, but the four Watchmen who come to our door have other plans. Everyone is to sleep in the food hall until the castle has been swept properly. No one else even left the hall. I point out the assassination attempt happened where we’re intended to sleep. I’m assured Watchmen have been placed on the roof and the area is secure. They also inform me the King thought I might need some help with Olandon. I

laugh bitterly as I collect a few things. Of course he wants to help now, when it's too late.

The Watch wait outside while I help Olandon dress. The four men come in and two gather up our bedding while the others offer my brother aid. He brushes them off. Sighing, I pass the pitchers to one of the men, and slip an arm around him. He relaxes some of his weight onto me and I laugh quietly at his pride. He chuckles with me after a delay.

It takes a long time to get my brother down the stairs. When we get to the archway I make a questioning sound and he nods. I wait until he proves he can stand himself and then lead the way into the hall.

People avoid me with their best efforts. I haven't felt this since I last walked through one of the villages on Osolis. But once again the people are treating me like I have some kind of disease they'll catch. No one hits their King and gets away with it. This time I earned it.

The Watchmen direct us up to the Throne platform and set up our furs in one corner. I look at Olandon and see he's sweating with the effort of remaining upright. Pride is an understandable thing. It has its place, as long as you can see past it. I'm about to help him down when someone brushes past me. Ashawn lowers my brother, ignoring Olandon's protesting hands, and then stands, turning to face me.

He glances around us and behind him at my brother, who appears to have fainted. Then he kneels in front of me and takes my hand in his. "I am so incredibly sorry," he whispers. "For everything. I thought it was you who killed my brother." His grip borders on painful. "But you saved me. After everything I've done, you save me. I don't deserve it," he says in a flustered rush.

"I forgive you," I say and squeeze his fingers before trying to tug free.

"No, you don't understand," he says. "My grief blinded me. He was my best friend and my only excuse is that I just could not bear it. I paid some men—"

I slap a hand over his mouth, perhaps too firmly. "I know what you did." I stare at him until his eyes widen and I see he understands. "And I forgive you. We all make mistakes and although yours was a bigger mistake than most, it seems you have learned your lesson."

He sits back on the platform edge. "You are more compassionate than I would be," he says finally. "How long have you known?"

I shrug. "Kedrick always said he thought we would be friends. I like

to respect his memory when I can. But I have also spent enough time with young men,” I look down at my brother, “to recognize when one has lost their way. And I would imagine nothing I say now could make you feel as bad as you already do.” I ignore his second question. Ashawn blinks rapidly. Tears. He’s blinking back tears. It seems to be the theme of the evening.

“There is one thing I would ask,” I add quickly, eager to finish and leave him to lick his wounds.

I choose my words with care. “Keeping company with thugs, or even hiring them is a slippery slope. I need you to promise me you’ll get off this slippery slope immediately, and that you’ll never have anyone beaten again.” I look at Ashawn for the expected promise, but he’s looking over my shoulder, his expression horrified.

“What. Did you just say?” The soft, dangerous voice sounds behind me. I dart a look at Ashawn. How much did Jovan overhear? I open my mouth to speak, but Ashawn beats me to it.

“I hired thugs to have the Tatum beaten when we were in the Third Sector,” he blurts. I turn around to assess how bad the fallout is going to be. And it’s bad. Jovan is trembling with suppressed rage. His jaw is bruising where I hit him earlier. I step in front of his brother.

Ashawn continues, speaking over my head. “Then I hired more thugs to silence the first thugs. But I didn’t know they were going to cut out their tongues,” he says. I look up at him and see genuine remorse in his eyes. How did he think the thugs would silence them? I look between the two men. One ferocious and one frantic. This is going downhill, fast.

I step up to Jovan with both hands raised, casting aside my lingering anger towards him for now. “Ashawn made a mistake,” I start.

“A mistake?” he hisses. “He broke your ribs, had you kicked in the back over and over again. He gave you so many hits to the face, it’s a wonder you didn’t die.”

“It wasn’t him,” I say weakly.

“It might as well have been. I swore to bring the pig who did it to justice!” he yells, control gone. The room hushes. I watch as he struggles to regain control. I’ve never seen him this furious. He puts on some semblance of a blank face and glares around him until the bustle halfheartedly resumes.

“Ashawn is your brother. The only one you have left,” I say quietly.

“And yet he has not acted with human decency. He thinks himself immune to my laws.”

“I will accept my punishment, whatever it is,” Ashawn says quietly. Jovan closes the gap in an instant, his expression wild.

“Jovan. Stop!” I shout. He turns his livid gaze on me. I hold my ground.

“Why are you defending him?” he asks. “Do you not see how twisted that is? Or did your mother beat you so much you enjoy having the shit kicked out of you?”

I inhale sharply at his words, staggering back like he’s hit me. I look behind me at Ashawn who is looking at me with wide eyes. He heard. He knows now, too.

“Ashawn might have hurt me physically, but you’ve hurt me much more with your words,” I say. “You deserved that punch after all.”

His face drains of color. “I’m sorry. I was just—”

I turn away from him, both of them, and stride into the meeting room near the Throne platform. I close the door quietly behind me and burst into tears.

I return when everyone is sleeping and wake my brother to feed him before lying down to sleep with my back to the Throne platform.

I wake three more times during the night to feed Olandon. Greta, who has positioned herself nearby helps me to sit him up each time.

I’m woken by the bustle and murmur of people moving the next morning. I would like nothing more than to melt away and continue sleeping. I feel wrung out after the emotional overload yesterday. I can already tell it’s going to be one of those days when I feel like I’ve failed everyone. Kedrick first and foremost.

The castle help is setting up the food tables. I check my veil and freshly braid my hair beneath it. I leave my brother to sleep and fold up my furs, ignoring the Throne table. I can see Jovan’s boots next to me. I can feel him watching me.

“Landon,” I call, shaking him awake. His fist flies straight into the air and I barely move my head in time.

“Veni. Lina! I’m sorry,” he mutters, rubbing his hands over his face. There are dark rings under his eyes and I know this disruption in his sleep hasn’t been healthy for him.

“Starvation hasn’t dulled your reflexes, I see,” I say. He smiles and rolls to the side. I fold his blankets and two watchmen come and take our bedding from us.

“Does this happen often?” he asks, looking around with narrowed eyes as the assembly grows louder and louder. Tables are brought in from the main hallway for breakfast.

“It’s the first time I’ve slept in the hall since I got here. It’s the first assassination attempt since I got here, too. But if you’re asking if they’re always this loud, then no.”

Relief washes over his face. I let him keep it for a moment.

“They’re usually much louder,” I add, laughing as he jerks in horror.

The tables are brought in and I guide Olandon over to my friends. I worry about what the reception will be after my fight with Jovan. But they’re as friendly as ever. I guess they, more than anyone here, know how Kedrick’s death affected me. The hairs on the back of my neck let me know Jovan is still watching me. I sigh, wishing I could take back so many things. That everything between me and him could be as it was before. I’ll take an argument over this awkward mess any day.

“This is my brother, Olandon,” I say for the benefit of the females. The delegates murmur their hellos. Everyone, barring Rhone, is present. Sanjay has a sly grin on his face, which makes me a bit uneasy.

Olandon moves over to Sadra and bows to her. “You have helped bring me back to health. I thank you.” He moves back to sit beside me. Sadra blushes. In fact, many of the females are noting my brother with interest, now he was only a quarter starved. They should wait until he’s not hungry at all. I doubt they’d be able to restrain themselves, if this reaction was anything to go by.

Malir, reliable as ever, asks after his health.

“The Tatuma has looked after me very well,” Olandon replies. I put a hand on his shoulder.

“Everyone at this table calls me Olina,” I say. My brother’s mouth drops open. I almost laugh, but a twinge of embarrassment stops me.

“They...all do?” he stutters. I nod, my discomfort growing. Letting so many people drop my title would be considered shocking on Osolis. It would show people I thought myself cheap and imply I had several lovers. Here it’s as normal as the cold weather.

“There is also a couple at that table,” I point to Tomi and a few of the other delegates. “And the King and the older man on his right,” I say, pointing to Roscoe. I scan the table while I have the excuse to look that way. Ashawn is nowhere to be seen. I wonder if Jovan’s bruise is worse. I can’t

see with the veil on.

Olandon is deeply shocked. I can sense the slight disapproval emanating from him by how he leans slightly away from me. The others focus on their meals.

Rolling my eyes, I make my way to the food benches and gather up some fruit for both of us. I hesitate and grab some meat for my brother, too. I doubt he'll eat it, though it will help him recover. It's worth a try.

He surprises me by near inhaling it. I return and get more for him. Sadra watches him and stops him halfway through his second plate, urging him to be cautious. He listens.

"You know these people well," Olandon says. I peek at him. He is more disturbed by my revelation than I thought. Has it been so long I've forgotten the importance of our customs? It's just different here. I do things on Glacium I would never consider doing on Osolis - I've adapted.

"I do. You don't recognize these men? They are the delegates from Osolis," I say. My brother jerks in his seat. The equivalent of exploding from sitting to standing on our world. He's done it twice today already.

"These men took you hostage and you still allow them to drop your title?" he asks.

"I suppose it does sound bad when you put it that way." I laugh. It works, the tension at the table dissipates somewhat.

"That's because it is bad. They treated you - the next-to-rule - like some kind of villager," Olandon says.

"Brother," I warn, "much has happened since Kedrick's death. Much you don't know of yet. I will ask you to reserve judgement until we have a better chance to talk."

It is his turn to flush, red-faced. He dips his head. "As you say, Tatuma."

Fiona speaks up, breaking any remaining tension. "How long will we be in here?"

"Not long, my flower. The guards should be done soon," Sanjay says giving her a loud kiss. Adnan punches him when the kiss goes on too long.

"They do that a lot, the punching thing. It means they like you," I explain to Olandon. The table stares at me. Malir scratches his head.

"Huh," he says, "I suppose it does."

I smile at him and look towards a disturbance in the archway. I'm half standing before I can help it. Rhone has appeared. Kaura sits by his side. Of

course he was allowed to wander the castle while the rest of us were kept in here. He must have been in the kennels.

I leap up from the bench and whistle her. Will she remember me?

Her furry head whips in my direction. I see her sniffing the air. Then she's flying down the middle of the tables toward me. Laughing, I open my arms to welcome her. Just before I can hold her, a body stands in front of me. Kaura halts and arches her back, growling.

"Landon, what are you doing?" I ask.

"That thing is attacking you," he says, not taking his eyes off my beloved pet.

I signal to Kaura to back down. "She's mine," I say.

I step around my brother and bowl her to the ground in a hug. Kaura whines, beating her tail ferociously against my side. She rolls onto her back and wiggles side to side just like she used to.

"Kaura is my puppy. Well, I suppose she's a dog now," I explain to my silent brother. She licks my hands, my arms. Any of my bare skin. I hug her to me, tightly. Her unconditional acceptance of me after my disappearance means so much.

"I love you, girl. I'm sorry I left you," I scratch her belly while she kicks a leg. "Isn't she cute," I say over my shoulder.

"I'm not sure," Olandon says. Kaura growls at him as I pull myself back onto the bench, closer to him.

"She's not sure of you either." I smile at his offended expression.

The castle is cleared by lunch. My brother has been silent for the last two hours. I think it's a mixture of shock and exhaustion. This time he accepts the help of a Watchman to get back upstairs.

In our room, the man sets Olandon on the bed and pushes back his helmet.

"Ashawn!" I say. "What are you doing here?" He shrugs. As well as someone in armor can shrug. The Watch usually only wears a chest plate and open helmet in the castle. Why is he in full armor?

"This is my punishment. I must guard you and wear armor for the duration of your stay," he explains. I grimace. That won't be comfortable.

"What are you being punished for?" Olandon asks. I quickly nip this line of conversation in the bud. There's no way my brother will forgive the Prince for beating me. I don't want to set up more tension between our worlds than I've already caused with Jovan.

“Something for which he has apologized and is making right,” I say. A faint sense of unease teases me, but I cannot put my finger on what bothers me.

Olandon eyes him from where he’s swaying. “You helped me last night,” he says.

I inhale slowly. I’m fighting frustration at the way he is talking. If he wants to be introduced why doesn’t he just ask?

“Olandon, this is Prince Ashawn. Ashawn, this is my brother Olandon. Who would also be considered a Prince on Osolis,” I say with a wave between them.

Comprehension dawns on my brother’s face. “Ah, yes. That is who he reminds me of. He looks like Prince Kedrick.”

Ashawn stiffens and shifts a little.

Olandon covers a yawn as he gets into the furs. “I liked Kedrick. We sparred together several times. I’m sorry he’s dead,” he slurs. The sound of his steady breathing soon fills the room. I doubt he even knew what he was saying.

Ashawn chuckles. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone fall asleep that fast. What happened to him?” he asks.

I shrug. “He hasn’t been well enough to speak at length yet. But I imagine he came through Oscala without a map,”

“What’s Oscala?”

“The Great Stairway,” I explain.

He makes a sound of surprise. “That would be a story to hear.”

Ashawn lowers his visor and clangs to the door. “I’ll be just outside if you need anything.”

The reason for my uneasiness comes to me.

“You’re not going to play any pranks on me are you?” I call.

“Not on you,” he says elusively.

I walk over to cover Olandon in furs and laugh quietly. A few pranks might be just what my brother needs.

Chapter Twenty-four

It takes Olandon another week before he is able to leave the room for small portions of the day. Greta drops off fresh clothes for him. She seems to have taken an interest, though my brother seems a little scared of her bold attitude. Fiona thinks it's hilarious.

"I didn't have a map," Olandon says as we walk down to the training yard. When I first mentioned the training yard, I saw the first glint of intrigue in my brother's eyes since his arrival.

I stuff the ends of my veil beneath my tunic as Ashawn pulls the door open and the wind gusts around us. Olandon is dressed in a long fur coat which Bruma would normally wear in the depths of the Third Sector. He's still shivering in this. I'm only in my short-sleeved tunic and barely feel the cold. I'm a hardened Bruma now, I smile.

"Yes, I know," I say. And then the dam breaks. "You're an idiot! What were you thinking?" I sound like Jovan. I remember what his voice sounds like though we haven't exchanged a word since the night of Ashawn's confession.

"You could have been killed and I would never have known until I got back," I say, refocusing on my brother.

I stop a short distance from the females already gathered to watch the training.

Olandon looks at the ground, hands clasped behind his back. "I think I went a bit insane when you were taken." He clears his throat. "At first I thought you had run off with Kedrick to Glacium. This is what mother told us. Even I temporarily accepted her attempts to discredit you. But then Kedrick's body was found. She tried to keep it from me, from everyone, but I discovered the truth. I finally saw her manipulation for what it was."

He takes my hand in both of his. "Lina. You will never know the dread I felt in that moment where I thought mother had you killed alongside the Prince." He looks over to the snow-covered mountains visible from the walkway. "I accused mother of your murder. She was so adamant in her denial." He looks down at me and my breath catches at the pain I see there.

"I didn't know if she told a lie or the truth, but you were gone and my mind refused to accept your death. I came to decide you were exiled. It was the only conclusion I could accept," he says, "For months I searched Osolis.

In every dark corner and village hovel. You would have been proud of me. I made friends with some of the poor.”

His eyes flash with dark amusement. “Did you know there were riots after your disappearance?” This news has me reeling. How badly have they been revolting? I fear interrupting his story will make him stop.

“I didn’t think so,” he mutters. “Mother would have kept it quiet to prevent us from appearing weak. It wasn’t the safest time for a royal to travel. The villagers knew, you see. They had seen the delegates dragging away your unconscious form to the Oscala. They were calling for Bruma blood, for war, desperate to seek vengeance for the loss of their favorite royal, and their hopes for a future under your rule.”

Olandon was yet to make the main connection. The war hadn’t been sought by the villagers. I always assumed mother would leap on the fact the delegates took me hostage. She could use this to convince the people to fight. But what she’d done was brilliant in its perverseness. Why convince the people when you didn’t have to? She’d manipulated the Solati people into begging for a war and then, playing the role of generous ruler and grieving mother, had yielded to their demands. She got what she wanted, and gained the loyalty of the villagers. The situation was direr than I suspected.

Olandon continues. “I went to Aquin, already knowing I was going to go to Glacium and get you back. But the old man wasn’t the same when I got there.”

“Is he okay?” I ask, mouth dry.

Olandon grips my shoulder. “He is not the same, sister.”

“What? Is he sick?” I ask.

Olandon shakes his head. “No, nothing physical. He was acting strangely. I worried he might be passing word to the Tatum.” He released a held breath. “Thinking the Elite may already be breathing down my neck, I gathered warm clothing and...food for my journey. It crossed my mind to steal the map, but I decided it was better that mother think I was still somewhere on Osolis. The Oscala didn’t look so bad,” he says. He clenches his jaw tightly.

“You...you didn’t tell *anyone* before you left?” I ask in a low voice. From Osolis, the Oscala pathway did look deceptively straightforward. Of course, it was another matter entirely once you were in the depths of the rocks. I could actually relate in part to his decision. But the rest of his story...

“Ouch! What was that for?” he splutters as I whack him over the

head.

“That’s for wasting a year of your life searching for me,” I say.

Olandon laughs suddenly, making me jump. He pulls me close for a rare hug. “I am so happy to find you safe,” he says. “You don’t know how the not knowing tortured me. I feel a piece of me is back where it should be.”

As I speak my next words I suddenly understand how Jovan perceives my continued efforts for vengeance. “Seeking closure can make you rash. It can blind you. Which is why I forgive you for being careless with your life,” I reply, hugging him tightly in return. “And I love you. But if you ever do something that stupid again, I will hunt you down and save you the trouble of killing yourself.”

He laughs and pulls back. “That makes little sense, but consider me warned. There is much to tell regarding our world, I’m afraid.”

A clanging signals Ashawn’s approach. “Yes we must talk more on this,” I whisper.

Visor up, the youngest Prince moves beside us and looks down into the yard with longing. Olandon lets out a low whistle as he finally pays attention the happenings below where the King spars.

“He can fight,” he says.

I shake my head in warning as he looks at me and tilts his head to the training yard. No one knows about my fighting here. Well, except for the person he’s talking about.

“I’ve seen better,” I joke. Ashawn snorts. Olandon misses the joke and nods seriously.

“I wonder how he would do against Frost. *That* would be a fight to see,” Ashawn says. I stay silent, trying not to freeze and give myself away.

Ashawn looks at me. “Oh, you weren’t here, were you?” I feel Olandon’s eyes on me. This is the first he’s heard I was elsewhere for a time.

Ashawn continues. “She was the most amazing fighter I’ve ever seen. So small, but ruthless, and damn easy on the eyes. She wore this little costume...” he glances at me and stops with a short cough. “Anyway, she and the other survivors stayed here for a couple of weeks after the dome. I spoke to her a couple of times. Oddly nice for a paid fighter, once you got past the fact she could probably end you.” He grins down at Jovan. “My brother was the only man brave enough to try it on with her. But he told us he had no luck.” A deep elation warms me. Jovan hasn’t told anyone about us. I didn’t expect him to, but I knew from my time in the barracks it wasn’t unusual to

brag the day after. I clear my throat.

“I’m sorry I missed it.”

“What’s a dome?” Olandon asks. I start to answer and cut myself off.

“Uh, yes. What is that?” I ask to cover my slip. It’s not a bad slip.

Most of the assembly likely assumes I’ve been hiding somewhere on Glacium during my absence. I could have knowledge of the dome. Best to play it safe. I listen with half an ear as Ashawn gives us a brief explanation.

“What happened to her and the rest of the fighters?” I ask. I only see Wrath down below.

He shifts uncomfortably in his armor. He’s been doing this for the last few days. I imagine it’s chaffed the skin in several places. “Most of them went back to the Outer Rings. I guess she did, too,” he says. “Jovan should have made her stay, in my opinion. She could have trained us up to kill all the...uh—”

“I’m sure,” I say dryly. At least one of the Outer Rings men decided to stay. It will be nice to have the reminder around. I doubt I’ll get a chance to see them again.

Fiona calls us over and we approach the chattering group of women at the opposite corner of the raised walkway. Greta corners Olandon right away and I’m surprised when he starts the conversation between them.

“You fight,” he says, a question in his voice. She looks at him like he’s crazy and bursts into laughter.

“Females don’t fight! Well, not in the assembly anyway,” she amends.

He looks from Greta to the training yard and back again. “Then why are you watching?” he asks.

It’s my turn to laugh. “They watch because they enjoy the view.”

Fiona giggles beside me. I even see a reluctant smile on Jacky’s face. Eventually, understanding dawns on my brother’s face and he turns away from us with a sniff. It just makes me laugh harder.

I glance back at Ashawn to see if he’s laughing, too. My amusement trails off when I see him talking to a thin, greasy-haired man I know all too well. Blaine is back. I’d forgotten his year of exile was up. Hopefully Jovan has been able to protect Macy from him. I recall Jovan talking to her at the ball after his dance with Arla. I now knew Blaine hadn’t been the actual person to shoot the arrow. But had he hired someone to come down the Oscala? Had he somehow copied the map?

I look down and see Jovan has finally spotted us.

“Time for us to go,” I say, pulling at Olandon’s arm. “We’ll go and see Kaura.”

“The dog. Again. You do that every day. I would rather stay and watch this.”

“Yes, I know.” He’s made no secret of his dislike for Kaura, or her to him. “But I think Jovan is coming to throw us out, so we need to go. He doesn’t like Solati males watching,” I reply.

“Why only males?” he asks.

“Apparently women are nothing to worry about,” I say. Olandon bursts out laughing, drawing the appreciative gaze of several young women. I know by the way he stands a bit taller, he realizes this, too.

“That’s ridiculous,” he says.

Ashawn trails us down the barren halls toward the kennels. I much prefer the other, more festive castle in the Third Sector. Though Adnan told me the big baths have been installed here, too. It redeems the bland greyness slightly. Someone should really put some decoration here and there. My thoughts sour as I realize the person to do it would probably be Arla. As the ex-bed partner of Jovan and the highest ranking Bruma female, she was usually in charge of the Sector balls. I bet she’d love to be given the honor. I can hear her gloating about it now.

Jovan can ask whoever he wants, I suppose. It’s not like I have any claim on him.

“Ashawn!” I call over my shoulder, recalling his recent chat with Blaine.

“Yes?” he asks.

“Do you remember the slippery slope you promised to get off?” I ask, though there’s no doubt he will remember I’m talking about our conversation in the food hall after his confession. I’ve learned by now Ashawn’s perception and analysis isn’t his strongest quality.

“I do,” he says slowly. He’s wondering why I’m bringing it up.

“Blaine is someone who I would consider a slippery slope. The people surrounding him seem to suffer by his hand. You would do well to get off this slope before you get stuck in the middle and gather speed. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He’s silent for a long time. Olandon listens to our exchange. Nothing I have said will reveal the young Prince’s actions.

A breath is let out behind me. "I will try," he concedes.

"Whatever things you've done while in his company." I stop and turn to him. "Whatever *places* you may have been taken. I would take this chance to come clean with your brother and perhaps forewarn him of the kind of person Blaine is. Jovan will be angrier if you wait to tell him, when you have the chance to confess now." I know I'm dancing on the line of revealing information only Frost could know. But I have a suspicion Ashawn views me as some mysterious, all-knowing Solati. If he picks this up, he'll disregard it.

"But Jovan was so angry," he whispers. "He already hates me." His words remind me he's only seventeen.

"Ashawn, your brother doesn't hate you. He is *disappointed* in you, just as you are disappointed in yourself. The only way you will regain his respect is through your actions. You are a man now, you must act like one," I say with a bite.

He straightens at my sharp tone. "It will be done, Tatuma."

I'm surprised to see Olandon is at the Throne platform talking to the King when I return from collecting my breakfast. My stomach twists. What is he doing?

I barely wait until he sits down. "What were you talking to him about?" I hate that I'm so curious.

"I was just telling King Jovan that you should be seated at the Throne table," he whispers back.

"What!" I yell and cover my face over the top of the veil. I wait until the table goes back to its normal volume.

"Why did you do that? I don't want to sit by Jovan. I would much rather sit down here, with my friends," I say.

"Your position dictates you should sit with royalty. I no longer hold an official title and belong with the commoners. You do not," he says. My brother abandoned his birthright as Head of the Guard to search for me. I see Jacky's mouth drop open at being called a commoner. Roman squeezes her hand on top of the table.

Veni, Jovan will think I sent Olandon to do my bidding. Does he think I miss him? That I'm desperate?

My tone is mild. I don't want to cause more of a scene than I already have. And I'm confident he will sense my fury. "You are not on Osolis anymore, brother." I stand up and signal Kaura to follow.

Olandon apologizes when he gets back to our room. I can tell he doesn't understand my anger. Just as he cannot see the Bruma as individuals after hearing them called savages his whole life. He sits with them, eats their food, he *lives* because of the King's hospitality, but he can't see past what he's been told. This close-mindedness has always been the difference between us and out of the Bruma's company he's mostly the same Olandon I know and love. If he cannot soften his preconceived ideas, what will he do if I show him I'm half Bruma? That my eyes are blue. I see his contempt in the food hall. He doesn't join in conversations; he's barely interested in what happens around him.

I watch as my brother crawls into bed to rest.

I jump as he yells and leaps out of bed, rubbing his back. He rips back the furs and holds up a prickly plant I don't recognize.

"There's a stabby cone in the bed," he says incredulously.

"How on Solis did it get there?" I ask, injecting the right amount of surprise into my voice. I smile beneath my veil at the muffled laughter from the hallway.

How long will it take my brother to realize these pranks aren't random occurrences?

I open the door under the guise of asking Ashawn for a pitcher of water and give him a subtle high-five.

I won't tell him tonight. Olandon needs time. Time to realize he can form his own opinion of Glacium, and maybe forge some friendships. Then maybe his reaction to my eyes will be less extreme. I'll tell him soon.

I now find myself sitting two seats from the King's right. It's awkward and embarrassing. Drummond, Arla's father - one of his advisors - informed me yesterday my request had been granted. *My* request! It was worse because Jovan thought I wanted to be here. At least I'm far enough so I don't have to look his way, let alone talk to him. It would be better still if I weren't wholly aware of Jovan's every action. Olandon is seated next to me, despite his untitled state - Jovan insisted. My brother is ignorant to the fact the King of Glacium is laughing at him.

The delegates grin at me from their lower table, two rows back. They know I'm not happy with this arrangement. But I didn't have the heart to humiliate my Olandon in front of Jovan. It doesn't mean I won't take some kind of revenge out on my brother. I'm going to make him stay after dinner as payback. I content myself by anticipating how this will affront his

sensibilities. I snigger.

“So you like meat, huh?” I ask Olandon when he gives me a questioning glance.

He swallows another mouthful. “It has helped me to recover, I think.”

A ruckus of shouting and yelling alerts our entire table to a disturbance in the back of the hall. The Watch and assembly members there are pointing up. Is there someone in the rafters? People have taken to watching them during meals, even though there are Watchmen guarding the stairs to the roof and hawk’s entrance at all times now.

Jovan’s standing. I long to rip off my veil. But I’m not hearing screams of panic. In fact, the shouting is turning to a hushed silence.

“Hey, do any of you know where Willow is?”

My stomach plummets like it did when Crystal plunged off the tree.

All I can see is an outline as the boy swoops down from the rafters over the tables. The assembly screams, then gasp in awe when he circles the room twice. It gives me a chance to confirm the person’s identity.

Jimmy does a backward loop, landing on a table in the middle of the hall.

“Fuck,” I say under my breath, sitting back down. I squeeze Olandon’s hand to alert him. This is bad. Jimmy knows what I look like. And what is he doing *here*? Adox will kill him.

Jimmy is talking to his stupefied audience. “You’d know her if you’d seen her. She’s the prettiest lady I ever saw. She has long, long black hair, but it’s kinda blue sometimes,” he continues. The word “blue” jolts me into action.

I push my chair back with a loud scrapping noise. “Jimmy!” I call. I slither under the Throne table, not wanting to waste the time needed to walk around the long bench. The assembly turns to me almost as one. It’s eerily synchronized.

“Hi,” he calls, “Do you know Willow?”

“It’s me,” I say as I hurry down between the tables. “I’m just wearing a veil.” As soon as the words leave my mouth I wish I could take them back. I should have pretended to be an acquaintance of Willow instead. Excitement stirs the crowd. The Tatuma doesn’t always wear her veil? Why has she shown this boy? Where did he come from?

I can’t imagine what Olandon’s thinking right now.

I reach Jimmy and unstrap him from the Soar, taking the rods out in

record time, folding the device into its most compact form. Hamish would be proud.

“Why do you cover your face, Willow? I like your face,” he says and beams up at me. I wince as I swing him off the table. I tuck the Soar under my arm and take him by the hand.

I need to get Jimmy out of the castle without him betraying my identity somehow. And why is he here?

“You hungry?” I ask. He nods so frantically, I’m surprised his head doesn’t fall off. But it does stop him from accidentally revealing my second darkest secret.

“Does your Mama know you’re here?” I ask once we’re at the food table. The assembly is still buzzing behind us. Someone literally flew into the room. I make a subtle gesture to Olandon who rises and moves to join us. This little boy has just destroyed all of the Ire’s secrecy. There is no way Jovan or my brother will leave this alone. No way anyone will forget what they have seen. Jovan will gather I’ve been with these flying people for the last few weeks. He’s too smart, it won’t take him long to realize there’s only one place where these people could have existed unnoticed. Is there any lie I can create to protect the Ire’s secret?

“I didn’t tell Mama. I just came,” he continues, mumbling around some bread. “I know Adox says we don’t tell anyone. But he also says not to leave the Ire and he knows I do that all the time,” he babbles. I narrow my eyes. Jimmy is too carefree. He is pretending he doesn’t know what he’s done.

“Adox says these things for a reason, Jimmy. It is to protect the people who live in the Ire.” I really don’t want to be having this conversation here, though we are away from the tables.

“You said I should tell you if I saw anything important. And there were so many of them. I knew you’d want to know,” he says, voice rising in upset. His words stop me in my tracks.

I hold a finger to his lips when he opens them to tell me more. “Hold onto that thought.”

I stare wordlessly at my brother as he reaches us. “Tell Jovan he’ll want to hear this,” I say.

Jovan spends five precious minutes convincing his advisors they didn’t need to be in the room with us. I know he understands Jimmy has the potential to expose me. He’ll think I want to talk to him about this. Really it’s

just an excuse to get him alone. I lean against the meeting room door after shutting it. Gathering myself, I place the Soar on the circle table and turn to Jimmy, dreading what he has to say.

“Jimmy, this is my brother, Olandon, and the King of Glacium,” I say. “Please tell me what you saw on Oscala.” Olandon and Jovan’s sounds of surprise are drowned out by Jimmy’s reply.

“Solatis! Hundreds of them. They’re already up to the third cave, but the line goes all the way down to the smoke and they just keep on coming. I watched for ages to make sure,” he blurts.

“What? What is he talking about?” Jovan glares at the boy from where he’s sprawled in a chair.

This is not the time for settling personal grievances. I walk up to him. “Mother has sent her army.”

He stares at me, frozen. “What?”

“That’s what Jimmy means. He scouts the Great Stairway.” I keep this vague. Maybe the others will assume Jimmy lives on Glacium instead of on the actual Oscala. He can certainly pass for Bruma. “There is an army of Solati about a third of their way here.”

Jovan jerks to his feet, but he’s shaking his head. “That’s impossible,” he says. “I received a message from your mother a couple of days ago accepting my latest offer. Peace is imminent.”

Why is he surprised my mother could lie? I leave him to work through his denial and turn back to Jimmy. “How fast are they moving?”

“Slowly. They’re carrying heaps of stuff. Swords and bows. A creepy man is in front.”

“Uncle Cassius,” I murmur to myself. He doesn’t deserve to be at the head of any army. “No one saw you?” I ask.

The boy puffs his chest out. “Of course not.”

I hug him tightly. I wish he could have gotten word to me without exposing his people, but this was too much to expect of a seven year old boy. And if his warning prevents war, his coming was worth it. “You’ve done so well. You may have saved a lot of people. Mama might be angry, but she’ll be proud of you in the end,” I say. His small shoulders relax.

I move to the door and swing it open, call to Rhone and make a quick request. I can’t let Jimmy out of the room, but I don’t want him to overhear too much.

Jovan is questioning Jimmy. The young boy trembles, he’s so scared

of the imposing man. I take his hand as Jovan decides he finally believes there is an army on their way here.

“That fucking traitorous bitch!” he shouts. I cover Jimmy’s ears until he stops. I can’t blame him though. I would say the same in his position.

“How did you know where to find me?” I ask Jimmy.

I narrow my eyes at his mischievous smile. “I followed you when you left to help your friend. All the way to this big grey place. I thought you might have seen me when you swerved this one time.”

I remember the flash of red I’d written off. For the second time Jimmy had successfully spied on me. I should introduce him to Ice.

“And then I didn’t know how to get inside, but I noticed these big doors on top,” he continues. Jovan growls at that.

“There’s supposed to be a damn guard there,” he says.

“There *was* a man there. But I didn’t see him right away. I peeped through one of the giant doors and saw the people and I thought to try another way so no one would see. But then I heard him coming for me so I hopped inside to escape.” I curse the Watchman silently. If he hadn’t scared Jimmy through the hawk’s entrance, the Ire’s secrecy would be intact.

Rhone returns with Kaura and leaves. Hopefully my request has caused some confusion in the curious assembly outside. I set Jimmy up with Kaura and leave the pair playing at the far end of the room.

I turn to Olandon. “Firstly, there’s something you need to see.” I reach for the veil and lift it halfway.

My brother stumbles over his feet in his haste to get to me.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes - cheating - before lifting the veil off completely. The band clatters to the ground.

Hands grip the sides of my face. Shaking hands. “Sister,” he says in a thick voice. “I always knew you would be stunning. To think mother was jealous of you! This whole time.”

“Uh,” I hedge. I can’t help the tremor in my voice. A warm, calloused hand squeezes my upper arm. Jovan’s hand.

“Open them, Olina. Your eyes are beautiful,” Jovan says. The thrill his words create pushes through the panic.

I open my eyes.

Chapter Twenty-five

If I thought Jovan's reaction was extreme, it puts my brother's to shame. Olandon falls over, staggering to one knee. I suppose it's a bigger shock to someone who has known me their whole life. So much time passes while he stares at me in horror that I feel tears burning my eyes.

"Say something, you fool! You're upsetting her," Jovan demands. Olandon wrenches his gaze from mine and stares at the King instead.

"Y-you knew? How?" Olandon asks the King. I blink rapidly while the attention is off me and reach for my band to put the veil back on. A hand closes over my own.

"Leave it off, for now," Jovan says in a soft voice. I look up to him and quickly step back when my nose brushes his cheek.

"Your eyes are blue," Olandon chokes.

I clear my throat and harden my resolve. "Yes. I think mother dearest slept with a Bruma on a peace year. My age doesn't match up with a delegation, but I think this was a cover. I believe I'm anywhere from six months to a year older. At least that's the closest delegation to my birth. I have clear memories of you as a baby, so I don't believe it was the delegation before, or I would be younger than you." The pitiful amount I've figured out about my birth is explained in a few breaths.

"So you're really twenty or so?" he says slowly. I think he's still in shock. I give him a quick nod.

"How long have you known?" he asks.

"I would have told you if I knew on Osolis. I've known for a Rotation," I say.

"You've had more than enough time to tell me before now!" he glares at me.

Jovan steps in front of me. "There is an army on the way to kill my people. We do not have time for your petty hurts. Be grateful she told you at all after the way you sit and sneer at the Bruma around you."

The two men glare at each other.

"I have a plan to stop our army from making it to Glacium," I say, stepping up beside the King.

"What!" Olandon says, getting to his feet. "You're going to help Glacium?"

His accusing words make me furious, though I'm honest enough to know some of my anger is defensive, too. Has my attitude toward the Bruma softened that much?

I keep my voice as calm as possible. "I would help both worlds, Olandon." Suddenly, I remember my conversation with Satum Jerin so long ago. He spoke of how the Tatum had stores to last Osolis several revolutions. My mouth dries as I realize how long she must have been planning this. We've all been fooled. "Mother has been planning this war under everyone's noses."

I meet my brother's brown eyes. "Prince Kedrick was killed on *our* world. Yet you do not see Glacium bringing war to our doorstep. We have all been played. The Tatum is not interested in compromising. She has drawn King Jovan along while winning over the villagers and assembling our forces. With her latest message she attempted to trick him into relaxing while she sends our army in for a sneak attack." I'm disgusted to be her daughter.

"Perhaps the flying boy is mistaken. And you trust this Bruma King has told you the truth about the communications between our worlds? He could be trying to placate us while assembling his own army."

The question startles me. Do I trust Jovan? He is sometimes overbearing and has a tendency to lash out when people are hurt, but he's only lied once, and that was to protect my feelings.

"Yes, I do," I say shortly, ignoring the way my face warms. I change the subject. "You seem against the idea of peace, brother."

His reply is spluttering, "Of course I want peace. Who doesn't?"

"I only ask because it's one thing to say you do, and another to actively pursue it. So I'll ask you straight. Do you want peace?"

His gaze becomes stony. "Yes, Tatuma."

"What would your reaction be to Glacium's Army sneaking through the Oscala to us in our sleep?" I ask. I turn from him and stare up at Jovan with unfocused eyes as I wait for his reply.

"What Mother is doing is beyond dishonorable. I am disgusted to be her son," he says. I let out a breath and turn back to him.

I press my point. "Then when I say I want to stop the Solati from launching an attack, it is not because I've switched sides," I snap. "I may have blue eyes, but I still love my people and I have the *honor* our mother lacks. I want what is best for both worlds and that is not another thirty revolution siege." I pace a few steps away from him, trying to contain my

anger.

“You said you have a plan. What is it?” Jovan speaks for the first time. “And I can show you the messages from your mother anytime you wish to see them,” he says.

I let out a slow breath and turn to him, ignoring his last comment, though when I return, I will take him up on his offer, as well as ask to study their archives. His eyes are heated as our eyes meet. My face warms. Is he thinking of our night together?

“I have a plan. An excellent plan. But...I can’t tell you the details. It would betray an oath I made,” I say. “I know it is hard, but I hope you can understand.”

“You cannot tell him?” Olandon asks, sounding pleased.

“Or you,” I add. His eyebrows furrow. I look at Jovan and we hold each other’s gaze.

“Bullshit,” Jovan says. “You’ll tell me now.”

I sigh. “Well, then we’ll have to think of another plan, because I can’t betray what I know.” I’m not going to, of course. My plan is the only way to stop the army getting to Glacium. I’ll wait until dark and retrieve the Soar.

“Hold on!” Olandon says. “You’re going to run.”

My eyes widen. “W-what?” How did he know that?

“Were you?” Jovan asks. I try to mask my guilty expression. He turns to my brother.

“How can you tell?” he asks.

“She always looks at the exits a few times when she’s thinking of it,” my brother says. I glare at him as I jam the veil and band onto my head.

“And why does she always run away?” I gasp at Jovan’s question.

Olandon shrugs. “She just always has. I probably would too if I’d been locked—”

“Landon!” I say sharply. He cuts off.

I avoid Jovan’s questioning gaze. Finally I throw my hands in the air. “Fine! I run away sometimes. But I always have a good reason!”

“You do it when you feel like you have no other option. When you feel trapped,” Jovan says. I know he isn’t just speaking about now. He is talking about me running from him after the ball.

“Yes. If you must know, I was going to run.” I say in a hot whisper. “But only because this is the only way to stop them from reaching Glacium. Sometimes running is the best option for our worlds.” I say to Jovan. His

head lifts with my last comment. He knows I'm speaking of *that* night.

He walks over to me and lifts my veil. His expression takes me by surprise. It is wary, hopeful and desperate all at the same time. He loves his people, too. I gaze up at him, willing him to understand.

"You realize how this looks?" he asks. It looks terrible. My mother is launching an attack and I am asking him to let me go. For all he knows I could be running to tell the army he's aware of their advance. I nod.

"Do you trust me?" I ask with a dry smile. Will he remember the words he said to me before we slept together?

"You frustrate me more than anyone I've ever met, but you've never intentionally done anything dishonorable or immoral. Yes, I trust you—and your ability to keep yourself safe," he says. I blink up at him. Did he really just say that?

He continues. "However, I'm concerned you might not have considered the other angles. You sometimes have trouble foreseeing the consequences of your actions. What if you are caught, for instance?"

He is being reasonable for the second time since meeting him, so I respect him by reflecting on his words. I know I tend to charge into things headfirst and, yes, he is speaking truth when he talks about unforeseen consequences. Would I have run to the Outer Rings if I'd thought about how it would affect my friends? Mother will kill me if I'm caught, there's no doubt, and then she will blame Jovan and the war we are desperate to avoid will ensue anyway.

"I have weighed the consequences, and it still needs to be done." I place a hand on his arm. "It is the only way," I say.

His blue eyes burn into mine. They aren't Kedrick's eyes anymore. They're Jovan's. "Will you be harmed?"

"I'll try my best not to be. Despite what you think, I don't enjoy getting beaten up."

He winces. "I regretted those words as soon as they left my mouth. You have my sincere apology they were ever uttered," he says. I smile at him and pry my veil from his fingers.

"Then I suppose I should apologize for hitting you, too," I say. A cough reminds me Olandon is watching. I step further away from Jovan, my hand tingling from where it touched his.

"How do you get to the roof?" I ask.

Chapter Twenty-six

It takes another hour to convince the King of Glacium of my plan when he realizes I intend to “risk my life” in the “death trap”. It isn’t helped by Olandon suddenly agreeing with everything he says.

Jovan retrieves my Soar from the courtyard while I grab provisions in front of the gawking assembly and visit the chamber to change into my flying suit. In my room, I warn Jimmy not to mention my veil to anyone in the Ire. I don’t know how much I can trust the boy. But I have no choice.

I take the Soar from Jovan who is turning it over in his hands. I begin snapping rods into place. Jovan and Olandon insisted on accompanying me to the roof, both still occasionally attempting to talk me out of my decision. I’m surprised Jovan hasn’t made good on his roaring promise to lock me in my chamber.

“Why are you letting me go?” I finally voice, unable to resist asking.

Jovan watches as I pull the strap tightly over my hips. “Return and I’ll tell you.”

“You’re desperate to stop the Tatum’s Army?” Olandon asks him.

“No,” he says shortly. He resumes the grimacing attention to my hands. “Are you sure you’ve done it right?” he snaps.

I sigh. “Jovan, I’ve done this a hundred times. Stop worrying. Olandon’s not.”

“I would not say that, sister. I just know better than to argue with you,” Olandon says.

“You’ll be preparing your army?” I ask, ignoring my brother. Jovan’s gaze loses its hard edge as he sees my anxiety.

“I have to, Olina. Though for what it’s worth, I hope you are successful and my own army is rendered useless.” I smile sadly at him.

“I understand. You must protect your people. I’d do the same.”

“You realize the archer could have left this way, too.” Jovan says, eyeing the Soar. I slide my veil off and stare up at him. Of course. That makes complete sense.

“I didn’t think of it,” I say, tucking my veil into my body suit. This whole time. I can’t believe it. No wonder I’d never found evidence on Glacium. I’d been so set on the assassin being Blaine I hadn’t considered the Ire. The answer had been right in front of me for weeks. Who else, but the

delegates and the Ire, had such access to Osolis?

"I didn't think so, or you'd already be rushing off to extract your revenge," he says. I roll my eyes at him.

He grabs my chin. "I only told you because it means you need to watch your back. Focus on what you're there for. If the assassin is part of this flying community, then you know how to find him."

He's right, not that I need the reminder. Preventing war is more important than avenging Kedrick right now. Jovan releases me once he sees his point has hit home.

"Maybe the boy should go first," he says. I laugh. Olandon looks at him in surprise.

"He's joking," I explain.

Jovan raises an eyebrow. "No, I'm not."

Jimmy's long been ready and waiting for me. Olandon helps me up onto the edge, gripping my hand as he hopes I'll come to my senses. It strikes me as I brace myself against the wind, many of the most pivotal moments of my life have occurred on rooftops. Meeting Alzona, running to the Ire with Crystal, and now leaving the Glacium castle to stop a war.

"Lina, are you sure about this? I know the boy did it. But it seems impossible," Olandon says, gripping my hand tightly.

I shrug the Soar into a better position. "It's actually quite fun once you get over thinking you're going to die," I say.

Jovan snorts. He stands casually beside me, but without the veil on I can see the small giveaways which tell me he's worried.

"Worried?" I ask. I expect him to shoot a retort at me like he usually does, but he just stares at me blankly, not answering.

I shoot a look at Jimmy. "Ready?" He just laughs and glides from the roof.

Jovan finally cracks.

"Fuck that. You're not going," he shouts.

I leap off the side, evading his clutches and hear two yells behind me as I dip out of sight. I feel the familiar lurch in my stomach as I pop the wings to fling upward. I rise to reach Jimmy, and look behind me at the two gaping figures on the roof.

I raise one hand up and wave. The slighter figure, Olandon, raises a hand in return. The other just watches, arms folded. I might be in trouble when I get back.

I turn to Jimmy. “Race ya?” I ask. The sooner we get to the Ire, the sooner I can stop the Tatum’s Army.

“You’re on!” he shouts.

Another cliff-hanger! Where's the rest?
!!!IT'S COMING IN JANUARY 2016!!!

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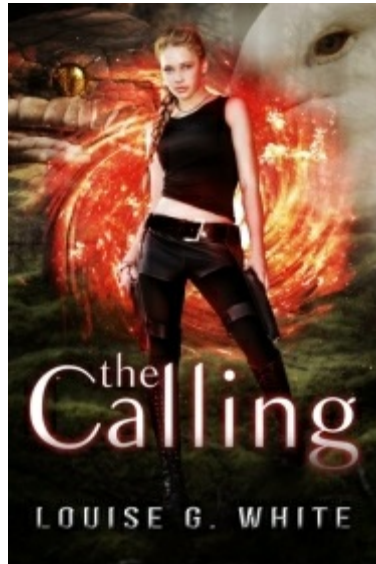
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