

FANTASY OF FIRE

THE TAINTED ACCORDS



Kelly St. Clare

Fantasy of Fire

Book Three of the Tainted Accords

KELLY ST. CLARE

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*To my lovely Nan, Frances.
For telling me the greatest readers make the best writers.
— You have no idea how those words stuck.
I hope they help other aspiring authors too.*

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 daydreams, despite the police sirens and chaos.

Books have always been magical and mysterious to her. One day she decided to start unraveling this mystery and began writing. Her aim: to write stories she would want to read. As it turns out, she failed miserably. Do you know what it is like to read something you've written? It's impossible. Not to mention, the ending is ruined before you've begun. Nevertheless, Kelly loves writing and wishes she had more time to squeeze it in alongside 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*, was released May 2015.

A New Zealander in origin and in heart, Kelly currently resides in Australia with her ginger-haired 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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I'm continuously surprised by how different each book is to write. But the people who help me bring these stories to life remain constant.

To my husband, Scott. It still feels rather strange to be calling you husband. But I hope to have a while to get used to it. Thank you for your encouragement, your hugs, and your support.

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And of course, multitudes of thanks to my readers. Meeting you guys and hearing your thoughts on *The Tainted Accords* is one of the best parts of the author bizzo (in my opinion).

– Kelly St. Clare

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Chapter One

An army is halfway to Glacium.

And not just any army—it belongs to my mother.

The only reason Mother's army hasn't been able to slaughter hundreds of Bruma in their sleep is because it takes a month to travel from Osolis to Glacium by foot. Even with this distance, Mother still may have been successful, if not for an unexpected warning I'd received.

I rise through the Oscala, the wings of a Soar strapped to my back. The floating islands I dodge between form the treacherous pathway between the two worlds that the Tatum's army currently marches upon. I follow an Ire boy named Jimmy, who flies ahead of me. Our flight from the castle in Sector Six, where I left King Jovan and Olandon, has been frantic.

Because every second the army draws nearer.

The history between Bruma and Solati is bloodied and unrelenting, but for the last one hundred years we've managed a tentative peace. It was written in the accords that every three years, a peace party of twelve would travel from one world to the other. This party would seek to refresh negotiations and 'strengthen bonds.' When I was the innocent Tatum of Osolis—next in line to rule—I believed this actually happened. Things had changed. I had changed. Now my eyes were open to the taint of the accords.

My mother, the Tatum of Osolis, has been planning her invasion of Glacium for quite some time. She hid this, acting the part during the peace delegations for revolutions. And had the relationship between our worlds remained tenuously peaceful, she might not have showed her true face just yet. But the murder of one of Glacium's princes and my subsequent kidnapping provided the Tatum with an opportunity—or rather, an *excuse* to invade, too good to pass up. Now we knew Mother's attempts to negotiate were merely a farce, designed to distract the king while Mother sent her army to attack.

An entire year has passed since my abduction from my home in the palace of Osolis. After Prince Kedrick's murder, the eleven remaining peace delegates from Glacium stole me away to be tried before their king. They'd believed me to be guilty of Kedrick's murder. During our journey through the Oscala, they found the opposite was true. I'd loved the prince of Glacium,

and his loss devastated me. Apart from a select few, he'd been the only person who was aware of the abusive treatment I received from my own mother. He remained in my heart as the first person I could be completely open with. A dear friend.

Tracking his murderer became my sole purpose as I struggled to cope with Kedrick's death and my own past. While attempting to find his assassin, I survived months in the fighting pits of the Outer Rings, only to discover a hidden community of mixed people, tucked away in the highest of the suspended islands of the Oscala. This place was called the Ire.

Now, the Ire folk are my only hope of stopping the army.

One thing binds me to the people here. It took a full sector after Kedrick's death to discover the truth myself; to understand the cause of my mother's hatred and the reason she's made me wear a veil my entire life.

I'd thought I was deformed or ugly for a long time, but my blue-black hair, olive skin tone, and height are all normal for a Solati woman.

My blue eyes are not.

Prior to my discovery of the Ire, there was only one place where you could find people with blue eyes. Unfortunately for me, that place was Glacium. I was the Tatuma of Osolis, but I had the features of an inhabitant of Glacium. I was half Solati and half Bruma, caught between the two worlds, just like the Ire folk. One fleeting glance into a mirror and my hopes and dreams to rule Osolis were crushed and swept away, along with everything else I'd ever known. My people will never stand behind someone who is half Bruma. They wouldn't even stand behind my mother if they discovered she'd slept with a Bruma, much less had a *child* with a Bruma. I didn't have to imagine their disgust. There's just one certainty in this: My mother's treatment has left me so scarred, I don't even know how deeply the scars go. Most days I'm surprised she didn't just kill me.

Life with the veil on is hard physically, but the loneliness is worse. People don't feel comfortable talking to a face they cannot see. It took me a long time to understand this sentiment. I know the isolation of my childhood still affects me a great deal. King Jovan and my brother, Olandon, are the only others who have seen the evidence of Mother's affair: the eyes. But I've told too many lies in the last half-revolution. I've created too many personas to keep them all straight anymore. The walls are closing in around me. One slip and Mother's sordid secret, which is now my own, will be unveiled.

“Willow?” Jimmy calls. I'm startled out of my morose thoughts. I flash the red-haired boy a semblance of a smile and correct my veering route.

Willow is one of my personas. In fact, I borrowed the name from my whore friend in the Outer Rings. Here, I couldn't use Olina, my real name, or even Frost—the name I used in the fighting pits. I feared someone would link the names and out me. Crystal, my friend from Alzona's barracks, told the Ire I was a pit fighter. Since Frost was the only woman to have ever fought in the arenas, it wouldn't be hard to find out who Willow really was if they went searching. Hopefully anyone curious enough to investigate would stop there. It's the reason I gave a different name to the Ire in the first place. Olina was the identity I had to protect at all costs. It's a traditional Solati name and I couldn't be sure how many Bruma and Ire folk knew about the Tatum Olina, the hostage of their king.

I look ahead at Jimmy, who's drooping with exhaustion. Solis knows how many hours he's been without sleep. The usually energetic boy has been far too quiet. The last remnants of my smile fade as I recall another problem, almost as big as the impending war.

I groan aloud as I remember the screams and gasps of the assembly as Jimmy *flew* from the castle ceiling. Jimmy warned us of the army's presence in the Oscala. Unfortunately, his prompt forewarning came at the expense of the Ire's secrecy.

Before that moment, the Ire had remained hidden for over five generations. Now the Bruma knew a whole other people existed ... somewhere. They knew these people had strap-on wings, too. I don't know if anyone has the Ire's general location figured out yet—I wouldn't be surprised if Jovan has guessed. But even if he hasn't, it wouldn't take long for other Bruma to realize the only place dangerous enough to warrant the use of wings are the perilous islands of the Oscala.

Secrets are almost considered a currency on Glacium. The assembly is close-mouthed. But eventually someone will pass on the information.

Word of the 'flying people' *will* get out. A circumstance I'm not eager to relate to the Ire leader, Adox.

* * *

I touch down onto Adox's island behind Jimmy. The Ire is quiet.

The low, dusty tents erected on the surrounding islands are still. The occupants within, asleep.

We made good time with Jimmy leading the way—unlike my solo journey not so long ago. My legs threaten to buckle beneath me, weak from the long flight. I wobble behind a bouncing Jimmy. Having grown up flying, he’s experiencing none of my current troubles.

“Jimmy, go wake Adox,” I say. I feel a little bad about waking the Ire leader. He must be pushing twenty-six revolutions, but the situation is dire and his reaction at being woken is the least of my worries. Every moment we wait means the Tatum’s army draws closer.

The boy hesitates for the barest moment. He’s seven years old, and it’s just occurring to him that his angry mother is the least of his problems. Adox will be furious to hear the child has singlehandedly destroyed the Ire’s secrecy.

“I have to tell him,” I explain softly. Jimmy’s breath begins to come short and fast as soon as I utter the words. I hurry to finish. “But I’ll also tell him how brave you are, and that you came because I asked.”

It’s only fair that I own up to my part of the blame. Yet one more promise I haven’t been able to keep. It seems there have been a lot of those. Kedrick’s killer still roams free, after all.

Jimmy gives a miserable nod and a few tears run down his freckled cheeks. He moves off with dragging steps and I turn my attention to the Soar, loosening straps and snapping rods to take the taut pressure off the stretched material of the wings behind me.

I told Jovan and Olandon I had a plan when I left them on the castle roof. And I do. But whether the plan will work depends on Adox. If he refuses to let the people of the Ire help me, then all hope is lost. The two worlds will fight, to the loss of hundreds of lives. And this would just be the beginning. It wasn’t one battle my mother planned, it was a war. The Satums, similar to the ministers on Glacium, and the court revered my mother for her foresight in building up the food supplies. She’d spouted lie after lie about contingency plans in case the Fourth fires spread and burned Osolis to the ground. Now, I knew the truth.

The stores were war rations.

I doubted my people were aware of her deception, even now.

My mother wanted what every Tatum before her had coveted. She

wanted Glacium's materials, their stone and iron. And if I was correct, she wanted control over the people. Her own private workforce. Slaves. Even knowing all this, the invasion still made no sense. She hated the Bruma and could barely stand the First Rotation on our fiery homeland, let alone the extreme cold of this world. Glacium could be the only thing she might hate more than me.

I unfold my arms as low murmurs in the tent turn to shuffling. Adox is limping my way when I turn toward the sound. He appears older than last time I saw him. Does he lay awake at night wondering if his fears of discovery will come true? That the Ire will be exposed? Little does he know it has already come to pass.

"Willow, what brings you to the Ire? These are not good times to be soaring. The Tatum's forces are making their way through the pathway. Apart from the traders, flying is restricted to the Ire only while the army passes below," he says, glancing irritably at Jimmy. The boy takes the hint and scuttles over to his Soar to leave.

I feel my own flash of irritation. How long ago did the Ire's scouts spot the army? How could Adox stand back and watch while two worlds killed each other? I swallow my anger and straighten under the seasoned leader's gaze.

He's not intimidating in the way I'm used to. With Jovan, it's his power—his strength. With Adox, it's his experience which makes my palms sweat.

"It's for this reason I'm here," I say, stepping forward. "We must talk." I see how my words cause him to close. How they shutter his expression and put him on guard.

Adox's father founded the Ire after his exile from Osolis. Those of mixed heritage were outcast from Osolis—a fact I'd been unaware of until I found this sanctuary. It was astonishing to discover so many of these people existed. People just like me. Some of the Ire could pass for Bruma, as I could, while others could pass for Solati, but those with obviously mixed features were unable to travel to the other worlds. Guilt sweeps through me as I realize it was probably my grandfather who exiled the founder of the Ire.

I follow Adox, watching with repressed impatience as he lights a fire. He's trying to regain composure. Once the flames are going to his satisfaction, he lowers himself onto the smoothed stone seat across from me.

He places his hands palm up on trousered knees and raises his head until his hard brown eyes meet mine over the fire.

“The Solati are coming through the ... great stairway,” I begin lamely, tripping over the Bruma word for Oscala. He nods and I continue.

“I come from King Jovan. Tatum Avanna has tried to trick us with a peace message while she sends an army to slaughter us. I read the deceitful words myself.” This wasn’t *strictly* true, but I trusted Jovan. “She seeks control of Glacium, and has betrayed the Peace Accords to do so.” Adox frowns at this, but otherwise doesn’t move.

“War is assured if the army should reach Glacium,” I say. The words turn his growing suspicions into understanding.

“Of course they will reach Glacium,” he says in a harsh tone. “Unless they decide to turn around.”

My heart sinks. I’d depended on Adox’s desire to save lives—depended on his morality.

“They wouldn’t if the Ire stepped in,” I say softly. My words fall on deaf ears. They fall so hard I wish I could take them back and try a different strategy. His expression hardens until it looks like it could be carved from stone.

“You get to your point,” he says and leans back, observing. I resist the urge to fidget.

“You hold a position near to the king,” he guesses. I keep my face smooth. In truth, his question digs up memories I’m still trying to repress. I’ve been closer to Jovan than anyone can ever know.

“Yes. I do.” I leave it at that, hoping he’ll assume I am some kind of relation or advisor.

He takes in a breath, not meeting my eyes. “Have you told him of us?”

I ignore the thudding in my chest as my heart pounds. “No,” I say. I hear his long exhale of relief and close my eyes to finish. “But Jimmy soared through the food hall in the castle. The whole assembly saw him.” The damning words are out.

I open my eyes after a few seconds.

Adox sits frozen, his expression beyond horrified. He looks like I must have the first time I saw my face. His world has been upturned, and he cannot imagine what to do next. The floor beneath him has collapsed and

caved inwards.

He might as well know the rest. I need to be completely transparent on this issue.

“There is no way I can think of to undo the damage. Even if the Bruma cannot find you now, they will attempt to mimic the Soar. Likely, some have already realized the Great Stairway is where you’ve remained unseen. Eventually they will find the Ire.”

Adox explodes upwards in a movement too powerful for his old frame. Fear helps him, I think. I’ve experienced the sensation often enough myself.

His limping pace halts after several minutes and I watch as he struggles to regain his calm.

“I think I could feel it,” he whispers. He places a trembling hand over his heart. “I blamed it on the Solati’s presence.” The wearied leader faces me, hands behind his back. “Jimmy has ruined us. I should have taken that Soar off him years ago.” The quiet words bounce off the cliff faces surrounding the fire pit. I hope Jimmy isn’t lingering nearby, listening. “This is my fault,” he whispers.

“Jimmy did so at my request,” I confess. “I asked him some time ago to tell me if he saw something unusual on the pathway. I didn’t anticipate he’d take my request to heart.” The words sound feeble; a weak excuse.

The growing morning light catches the tears in Adox’s eyes. His sadness is unbearable. There’s nothing worse than seeing an old man cry. “Do you realize what you have done?” he asks.

I blink several times to clear my own eyes. “Jimmy might have just saved hundreds of lives,” I remind him. They’re the wrong words to have uttered.

The leader’s face twists. “What do we care for the lives of Brumas and Solatis? What happens to us? There is nowhere left for us now. Everything my father worked for, thrown away with the foolish choice of a seven-year-old and the king’s conniving spy,” he says in a withering tone.

His defeat is heartbreaking. But I firm my resolve. The longer he has to dwell on my news, the more he will set against us. “Adox, I have a plan. One which will not expose the Ire to the Solati, but it will save many lives,” I say.

“I think the Ire has done enough for you,” he says. “If I’d known you

were close to the king, I would've barred you from leaving."

It's lucky he doesn't know I'm the Tatum, then.

"You hold the fate of many in your grasp. Will you not listen to reason? So many will die. Don't you care?" I ask, abandoning subtlety.

"When did Glacium or Osolis ever care about us?" he whispers furiously. I jump at the angry sound coming from the even-tempered man. "There has never been true peace! You're too busy pretending to tolerate each other to help your own people. It was only a matter of time until one of you killed the other off."

People are landing on Adox's Island now, woken by the light and drawn to the argument. I have to remind myself that the army's scouts will be unable to sight the Ire folk so high above the pathway they navigate, but sound travels far. The people know this and talk softly, frowns on their faces. There is no dancing and laughing. The Ire is far more subdued than I remember.

The leader's reaction is much worse than I expected it to be. The news has crushed him and he won't listen to reason. Or maybe he does hold a real grudge against the two worlds I've come from. I have to hope that's not the case. That he can see past his own emotion.

"Adox, you have learned many things tonight. I know I've failed you and the Ire. But please don't let this cloud your judgment. Glacium and Osolis haven't treated you kindly in the past and I can't change that. I didn't even *do* that. Whether you accept it or not, the Bruma are now aware of the Ire's existence. The Ire is hovering on the precipice of discovery. If you do not align with Glacium, Osolis will obliterate everything you've built. Maybe not today, maybe not next week, but one day you'll wake to find soldiers outside your tent. Don't burn this bridge," I plead to him. "You can't be certain when you'll need it. And I can't be certain if my king will offer you sanctuary again. Safety, Adox. For your *people*."

I might as well have stayed silent. My words bounce off his anger.

"Are you threatening me?" he hisses. I take in the curious people crowding around us. They didn't hear his words, but our body language gives us away. Several of the men are wondering if they should intervene.

I sigh in defeat. "No, Adox. Believe it or not, I'm trying to help you. I can see now is not the right time. I'm sorrier than you know for what has happened." I dip my head and walk to my Soar.

“The answer will always be no,” he says.
I smile sadly over my shoulder. “Always is a very long time.”

Chapter Two

There's no way I'm leaving. Adox will be furious to learn I haven't. But he has to see reason! So many lives depend on it.

I won't return to Glacium until he agrees to my plan, or until I'm forced to leave.

I fly to Isha's rock. The welcoming hugs from Crystal's parents, Isha and Cris, nearly bring me to tears after my sleepless night. They've yet to hear of my argument with their leader. As we prepare for breakfast, I warn them they might catch wind of the heated discussion from others during the day. I don't give them any particulars because I don't know how much Adox will tell the Ire. Out of respect, I leave it to him to decide what he wants to impart. I understand more about being the figurehead of a people than he'll ever know.

"Your tent is still standing if you wish to rest," Isha says with a sympathetic look. I met Crystal's parents on my first night in the Ire. Crystal, though born in the Ire, preferred life in the Outer Rings. I imagine her girlfriend, Alzona, had a fair amount to do with this choice. It took me a long time to realize the Ire girl and the barrack owner were together. I hoped they'd worked through their problems by now. The last exchange I witnessed between them had been tense.

I stoop to enter the tent, eyeing the packed mattress in the corner with longing. The only thing standing between me and sleep is the dusty black suit I'm wearing. Removing the skin-tight garment is a task in itself, but soon it's draped over one of the wooden supports of the tent. I take a single step toward the bed.

"Where is she?"

I freeze, recognizing the voice.

"Hamish," Isha says in greeting. "Willow has just laid down to rest."

Please don't come in here. I look over my shoulder at the closed tent flaps.

"Do you think she's still awake?" he asks, his voice moving closer. "Willow," he calls. I hold my breath, not answering. Instead, I tiptoe to the mattress and sink slowly down onto it so it doesn't make a sound. Footsteps sound outside the tent.

“Leave her be, Hamish. She looked dead on her feet.” The steps halt, but do not recede.

“I’ll tell her you stopped by,” Isha hints.

“Okay,” he says reluctantly. “Tell her I need to talk to her as soon as possible. Everyone’s saying she’s betrayed our location to the Bruma king.”

I tense, almost storming out to defend myself. I wait for Isha’s answer. I hope she doesn’t kick me off her island. I don’t think I could face anything else without sleeping first.

“If that’s so, I see no reason why she’d return to warn Adox,” she replies. I smile to myself, listening as Hamish leaves and Isha resumes her pottering. I close my eyes, snuggling into the blankets. Nothing in two worlds—not the war, or the firelight squeezing through the walls of the tent—could keep me awake.

* * *

After several failed attempts to rouse myself, I manage to pull my suit back on and stagger out of my tent. The Ire is dark; I’ve slept all day. The much-needed rest has cleared my head and given me strength. The smell of Isha’s cooking drifts over to me and I shiver, eager for the fire’s warmth. I’ve forgotten how bitterly cold it gets up here. It took a long time to accustom myself to the climate close to Glacium and I wonder how the Solati army, hundreds of meters below me, is faring with the cold.

“Hamish has come looking for you a few times,” Isha says. I nod as I chew the tender meat and bread. I withhold my moan of delight, but only just. Isha’s beef stew could nearly rival Avalanche’s.

“I’ll go and visit him tomorrow,” I say. Seeking out Hamish is not something I should be doing. He has feelings for me and I don’t return the sentiment. I know what I feel for Hamish: friendship. But conveying this to him is a different matter. Sometimes I miss the lack of emotion in Solati culture.

I swallow back the last delicious mouthful and look up, surprised, as Adox touches down onto Isha’s rock. I watch the old leader from the fire as he approaches and try to assess his anger. It takes me a few seconds to analyze his giveaways: the tension, the twitching, the tapping. They all mean something. What once came to me naturally has become harder without

regular practice. There's no need to search for the truth on Glacium. The Bruma there are blissfully, and often crudely, clear about what they mean.

Adox appears a great deal calmer now, but the hard line of his jaw and the uncharacteristic coldness of his eyes tells me much. He speaks quietly to Isha and she nods, strapping herself into a Soar.

He maintains eye contact as he limps to the fire, hands clasped behind his back. He doesn't sit this time. A bad sign. I wait.

Adox clears his throat. "I apologize for my anger earlier today. The tidings you brought were shocking, to say the least. I have come to give you my final answer," he says.

It's not favorable, I can already tell.

He holds up a hand as I open my mouth.

"I will not risk the lives of the families here, or the secrecy of our sanctuary. If continuing our hidden way of life is still a remote possibility, then we will operate as we always have and hope for the best," he starts. "If we help you, the risk to us is great and the consequences sizeable. I told you I was reluctant to help the two worlds who have treated us so appallingly because of our parents' choices, but this point is small in comparison to my other reasons."

He turns away from me and continues. "My decision is supported by those currently in power. In particular, the Tatum of Osolis, who is renowned for her cruelty toward her people. But ... I do have hesitations regarding your own king. He is young. I don't know much of him. To all reports, he stays secluded in the castle most of the time. How can I be assured he won't one day decide he wants to eliminate the Ire?" he asks. His reasoning is sound. It doesn't mean he's right, but I can understand his position.

"Why introduce such a risk when we could just carry on?" He turns back to me.

I choose my next words with care. "You will never have anything to fear from me. But your argument depends on the Ire remaining a secret. Adox, Jimmy flew into the king's castle. Your *people* are already discovered. How long will it take for Bruma to realize there's only one place flying could have gone unnoticed? Only one place where you would need a contraption such as the Soar? Without secrecy, the Ire is doomed. It cannot stand against two worlds. It cannot even stand against one." I stand next to him and stare into the fire. Really, I want to grab his stooped shoulders and shake sense into

him.

“Your hesitations about my king are understandable, but ill-founded. His reasoning is objective and sound. Your judgment of the Tatum, however, is accurate.” I frown and glance up from the fire. He’ll think I’m biased. Supporting my king while tearing down the enemy would be how a loyal subject would reply. How wrong he is.

I search his face. “Maybe, against all odds, you’ll get through this undetected. But one day, whether the population grows too large for the Ire, or someone is sighted soaring, you’ll be discovered. You have the opportunity to garner favor with Glacium and, in time, with Osolis for helping to prevent this war,” I say. “Take control of how you’re discovered. Don’t wait until you’re chased into a corner.”

The words ring inside of me. Adox fades away as I realize the words I’ve uttered exactly describe my predicament with the veil. Will I wait until I’m backed into a corner to reveal who I truly am? Or will I take control? It’s strange, but the thought resounds deep within me in a way it has never done. Suddenly the path I must take is vivid and clear. I have a few seconds of clarity before I remember what I’m in the middle of.

I glance up at Adox, but he’s missed my heart-dropping epiphany. Instead, he’s mulling over my words. It gives me some tiny hope. Perhaps time is all he needed.

“The only flaw in this reasoning is that Osolis would become our temporary enemy until, in your perfect world, they were to recognize our actions as a service,” he says. “There is no way the current ruler will see our interference in a good light. Possibly the Tatum, from what I am told, but she has little power and is currently in your king’s dungeons.”

I have to work hard so my expression doesn’t betray me. Is that what my mother is telling everyone?

I clear my dry throat. “If some kind of guarantee of the Ire’s future safety can be given from both Osolis and Glacium, will you help?” I breathe. His head tilts to the side, probably wondering if his ears are working properly.

“Such a thing would be impossible,” he says. The slightest uncertainty colors his words.

“But if it were?” I press.

He clasps his hands in front of him as he studies me, searching for a

trap. I hold his gaze until my eyes begin to water.

“Then that could change everything,” he says. I beam at him. It’s not a promise, but it’s progress. There’s a muted thud from someone landing behind me. Isha is back.

“But,” Adox’s voice rises. “Until I have that very doubtful assurance, I will stick to my original answer. I will not risk my people’s lives. Not even to save one Bruma or Solati. My decision might make me immoral, it might even prove to be wrong, but I believe this decision is best for the Ire.”

“It is your decision to make,” I say. “And your choice to change it.”

His eyes narrow, but he hangs on to his composure. “I’ve decided to let you leave the Ire again. Mainly because I doubt that we could actually hold you here. Last time we tried, you dealt with my largest men ... efficiently. I ask that you leave by early morning so you’re not sighted.”

My mouth dries. Only one night to make my own decision.

He stops in front of me and searches my face with weary brown eyes. “I know nothing can stop you from choosing to reveal our home to your king. I would kill you, but I fear this could start something the Ire could not finish. So I beg you not to disclose our whereabouts to anyone.”

I hold his gaze and nod, before turning back to the fire for some warmth. After a minute, someone sits beside me. I look up into green eyes.

The person landing was not Isha.

I study the handsome face next to me, again feeling that curious mix of attraction and regret. Regret, because I constantly feel like I’m hurting Hamish’s feelings. But the rest is harder to explain. Hamish wasn’t right for me. Once he might have been, but I wasn’t the same girl as before. Like Kedrick, there’s an openness and an innocence to Hamish, which I know will always prevent me from fully depending on him. I need someone who understands me. And more than that, I want someone who can handle my past and my future. Perhaps Hamish could do the first, but he’s proven on many occasions he might not be able to do the second. As attractive as he is, testing my feelings for him isn’t worth the gamble.

I’d also be fooling myself if I didn’t recognize that any eagerness to explore my feelings for Hamish would really be stemming from my need to forget Jovan.

The green eyes darken. “Really?” Hamish asks as I remain silent. “Nothing?”

I close my eyes and tilt my head back.

“Last I saw you, you were running off to save a friend.”

“Technically I didn’t run off,” I mutter. “I flew.” Hamish doesn’t appreciate the joke.

“And then we don’t hear from you for weeks! You never came back! For all we knew, you might have died out there!”

It did sound awful when he put like that. I had a terrible habit of forgetting my friends. A consequence of never having any friends and only needing to worry about myself. A scar.

“I’m sorry Hamish.” I turn to look at his hopeful face. It does affect me, but it doesn’t compare to how Jovan affects me—*affected* me.

“And then you come back here and make Adox angrier than I’ve ever seen him. What did you do?”

I avoid his steady gaze, wondering what I should tell him. Adox wants to keep my news from general knowledge or he wouldn’t have asked Isha to leave. Hamish is a friend. But one who will spend more time with Adox than with me.

“Adox doesn’t want me to say, and I have to respect that. I’m in his territory,” I decide. Hamish’s breath hisses at my response. I wince at his hurt expression.

“I see.” He stands. I reach out and grab his arm.

“No, you don’t see,” I say. “And I don’t want to keep this from you. But please just accept that I can’t tell you for good reason.”

“You never can tell me much, can you?” he asks. “You can’t tell me why you came here in the first place, why you were in the pits, why you suddenly left, and why you’re back. I’m beginning to wonder if I know you at all.”

His words are too near my own thoughts to deny.

Chapter Three

I watch in a trance as light forces its way between the overlapping tent coverings. Sleep last night wasn't elusive—it was impossible. My thoughts wander, and as I lay on the thin mattress, I wonder what punishment Jimmy's mother has concocted for him. Maybe she, Hamish and Adox will find some solace in discussing how much they dislike me once I've returned to Glacium.

Then there's the arrow...

Just before I leapt from the rooftop, Jovan had shared his theories about Kedrick's assassin possibly originating from the Ire. Something clicked into place when he spoke the words. Had I always known deep down my search of Glacium for the prince's murderer was hopeless? With nothing else left of Kedrick, I'd held on to finding the assassin with everything I had. After my lead of the Seedyr wood arrow took me to a dead end, there was no other option than to put the matter aside and hope another clue was yet to be discovered. That clue had been the Ire. I'd lived there for weeks, but never made the connection that the easiest place for an assassin to disappear would be to an unknown community on the Oscala. But Jovan had. At the same time he reminded me of my duty to Osolis and made me swear I would place prevention of the war as my highest priority. He didn't need to remind me, the fury that has blinded me for a long time is gone. I think. And true to my promise, I've forced my intentions to find Kedrick's killer to the side, while the army still marches. Once I would have felt guilty about this, like I'd failed my dear friend, but I'd learned vengeance could be served hot or cold, and mine was fourth sector freezing after so long. If the person is from the Ire, they probably feel secure here. They'll still be here when my duty is done. And then I'll collect.

Fear has kept me awake overnight. I estimate I've slept for about three hours. The rest of the time I've been coming to terms with what I must do. The thought of making my next move shocks me. It's something I would never have considered a year ago. I know that if I take this path now, there's no turning back, and I can't begin to predict what will happen as a result.

Adox is expecting me to go. He's likely feeling relief at his avoidance of discovery, but he's only burying his head in the snow. His plan is to

continue doing what the Ire has always done, though the situation has changed. He's afraid. But he's made a conditional agreement, despite the fact that he believes the terms are impossible to carry out. The surprise I'm about to deliver should persuade him otherwise.

Adox is awake when I soar to his rock. I'm sure the troubles I've brought to his door are responsible for his sleepless nights. His face hardens when he sees me. The first time he saw me, he was curious. The second time he was reasonable. Now I'm trying his patience. His island is full of quietly shuffling Ire folk going about their chores or waiting to speak with their leader. They make way for me. I could misinterpret their actions as respect or fear, but just like any other people, they're hoping I can provide them with the day's gossip. The older man is sitting down on the cushion where we once exchanged stories about the Ire's history and joked about who would tell Hamish my flying lessons were over. It feels like long ago. Time is deceptive that way.

"You said if I had some way of guaranteeing the Ire's safety you'd reconsider your decision," I say without preamble.

My words have the desired effect. Within seconds my forearm is encased in Adox's wiry grip. His eyes caution me to be silent.

"Perhaps there's somewhere private we can discuss this," I offer. He sighs and looks at the keen eyes and ears around us. He signals and a man steps forward to help him up. I walk beside Adox, following his lead as he straps himself into a magnificent Soar. I'm under no illusions. He's humoring me. I rush through putting on my Soar and trail him to a circular island I've yet to explore. A large tent is erected in the middle of it. It's far removed from any of the inhabited islands. Perfect for the conversation we're about to have.

He lands and I touch down close by.

"We will not be disturbed on the Meeting Island," he says, placing his Soar against a cliff face.

We enter the huge tent. Cushions are set around the inside wall. A large chair sits opposite the entrance. The ceiling is high, the tent spacious. I wouldn't be surprised if over fifty people could squeeze in.

Adox wastes no times with pleasantries.

"I was perfectly clear last night," he snaps. He lowers himself into the largest chair. "You test my patience."

I raise an eyebrow. “I was just following your own prompting, Adox. You said a guarantee could change your mind and I have one from both Osolis and Glacium. I’m not troubling you to repeat the same information,” I say.

He throws an arm out. “Go on, then. Tell me of this guarantee you’ve somehow produced between last night and now,” he says.

I conceal my shaking hands behind my back and take to a slow pace around the tent. I’m still not sure what I’m about to do is the right decision. I’ve only willingly done this once before. It has the potential to make the situation much, much worse. But if this is the only way to make Adox see reason, it must be done. Whatever the consequences. I hope I don’t live to regret my choice.

“I had the information last night. I was just undecided whether I would share it with you. What I am about to show you could have disastrous effects for both worlds ... and myself. You should know I don’t tell you this lightly. Combined with what you know about my proximity to King Jovan, it has the potential to create civil *and* interworld war.”

His silence is intrigued, not closed. This is it.

I reach into the front of my suit, drawing out my veil and the Kaur band. His eyes flicker to the objects and back to my face. He doesn’t understand. I flutter the veil up and down to hide the quiver in the material from my shaking fingers.

“I’m about to tell you something which can’t leave this tent. I’d like for you to accept my assurances of the Ire’s safety based on trust, but we are running out of time. So instead, I offer you information as important as the secrecy of the Ire.”

He scoffs quietly at my remark.

I continue. “I’ll have a secret of yours and you’ll have a secret of mine. If I let you down, you’ll have the power to destroy both worlds. It is the security you wish for, which you thought impossible.”

He leans toward me. Trembling nerves wrack my insides. It’s not just one person, after all. This moment marks a change of my life. Perhaps one of the biggest yet. I wish I knew if the change would lead me to good or bad.

I shake out the veil and flick it over my head before I can talk myself out of the decision. I place the heavy Kaur band on top.

The instant I do, I’m pitched into darkness. The muscles around my

ankles tense, trying to keep me balanced in absence of my vision.

“I don’t understand. What is this?” Adox asks from across the tent. I hold up a hand and blink until I can make out his outline. I know his hunters and traders provide him with regular reports. He knows who the Tatum is; he just hasn’t made the connection. Or doesn’t want to.

“You, along with too many people to count, have assumed I’ve always lived on Glacium. You are aware I’m of mixed blood, but you don’t know who my parents are. In truth, I only know one of them. I’ve worn this veil my whole life. You might have heard of this girl? Locked in a tower for all of her childhood by her mother, and then taken hostage by the Bruma delegates upon the murder of Prince Kedrick.” I take off the veil to gauge his reaction.

I watch as the blood drains from his face. His face is as pale as it was when he learned about Jimmy’s adventure.

“The Tatum is my mother and I am the Tatum, the future ruler of Osolis,” I say. He doesn’t really need this information, but it may help him to decide whether he feels disbelief or horror.

“You ... can’t be serious,” he chokes. I raise an eyebrow.

I hold up the band. “This band is Kaur wood.” We have fruit and nut trees on Osolis, but only Kaur wood is used as a material. And even then, only in controlled amounts. It’s not found anywhere other than Osolis, and possession of the wood indicates I’m highly positioned. I toss the band to him. “Surely you can see why the Tatum veiled me?” I add with a humorless smile.

I walk to the entrance to the tent and pretend to look over the Ire. Really, I’m doing my best to keep my posture relaxed with the tension running through my body. I wonder if I’ve gravitated toward the exit in case Adox’s reaction isn’t favorable. Jovan’s words ring in my mind. He’d pointed out my tendency to run from emotionally-charged situations. But it’s hard to pick up the signs that I’m panicking. These traits are obviously ingrained so deeply, I act subconsciously.

I stride back to the middle of the tent and plant my feet on the rocky ground. I’m not running away.

“My Solis,” he says. I smile at the Solati term. “It’s ... fantastical. Unbelievable. Horrific. But I think you must be telling the truth. No one could think up such a story, let alone deliver it with such factual calm.” He

looks up at me from his cushion.

“You are the Tatura Olina.”

“It is nice to hear my name again. You have no idea how long it’s been,” I say with a tight grin.

He doesn’t smile back. He looks back at the Kaur band and holds it out. I cross the tent and take it from him, crouching down by the chair to his level.

“You can see I’m not biased with regards to the king of Glacium. Of all people, I should be against him. But, on his behalf, I give his word nothing will happen to your people if my plan does not eventuate. He is worthy of trust.” I take his hand.

“My mother is another matter. I doubt anyone loathes my mother as much as I do. She was the torturer of the first six revolutions of my life. I haven’t been on Osolis for half a revolution, but I can share with you what my brother, Olandon, has recently told me,” I say, looking for confirmation from the Ire leader.

I haven’t got as much information as I’d like. But I’ll share what I’ve pieced together and what Olandon has been able to re-live so far.

Adox nods. The lines on his face are deeper than I’ve yet seen them, if it is possible.

“There is unrest on Osolis. The villagers are rebelling against the Tatum’s rule. It seems she’s regained control for now, enough to feel safe sending the army across the Oscala, anyway,” I say.

“In addition to what I’ve shared with you, you have my promise that should the Ire face discovery by Osolis while trying to prevent war, I’ll do my best to protect you from my mother.” I stand, tucking away the band and the veil. Adox watches my hands as I do so.

“All that time and the Tatura of Osolis was here.” A faint smile graces his mouth, stretching the age lines around it. I smile down at him and hold out my hand. He clears his throat and accepts my help to stand.

“I will need to think on what you’ve said,” he says. “This strengthens your plan considerably, but it doesn’t assure my aid or cooperation.”

“Don’t you want to hear my plan first?” I ask.

He grins. It’s the first real smile I’ve seen since I’ve been back. “I’d be a fool if I couldn’t figure out a plan only the Ire could carry out.” He pushes the tent flap back before limping out. “I’ll get you your answer by

tomorrow.”

I press my lips together to keep from trying to extract an answer from him on the spot. Adox could still fall either way. If I pressure him any further, it could backfire.

I repeat our conversation in my mind, listening to him hobble away. There was nothing more I could have said to sway Adox. That was the best I could do. If his answer is still no, I’ll have to return to Jovan with the bad news and the annoyance of having wasted time on a fruitless pursuit. The veil scratches against my skin from where I’ve stuffed it down my suit. At least there wasn’t any indication Adox would disclose my secret—for now. I knew I’d just opened a door I could never close. I may even regret it in a matter of weeks. I’d analyze the repercussions with Jovan and Olandon when I get back to Sector Six.

* * *

In an attempt to distract myself from the monumental importance of the Ire leader’s decision, I spend the day visiting the people I grew to know around the Ire. That’s what I tell myself, anyway; that I’m not searching for weaponry and Kedrick’s killer. I help for a couple of hours at the nursery, mindful of the Ire’s way of life; those who pull their weight are welcome to a share of food and supplies. And when I can’t find any trace of arrows, I even try to seek out Hamish to offer another apology, but he’s made himself scarce. With no one else to visit or help, I head out to Nancy’s Island.

Jimmy gives me a wide-eyed glance as I land. I didn’t need his added warning that his mother is pissed.

“You’re not welcome here!” his mother calls. The overweight woman bustles to where I stand, glaring at me and at Jimmy.

“I’ll say what I have to say and then leave,” I continue before she can interrupt. “Adox won’t agree with my telling you this, but I don’t think the news will be secret much longer,” I start.

The larger woman puts her hands on her hips and waits for me to continue. Red splotches color her cheeks. She’s furious with me and has every right to be. Jimmy shouldn’t have left the Ire, but part of the blame is mine. I’m certainly at fault for encouraging the young boy to disobey his mother and leader. Solis knew this woman could use some help with her

children. It was the reason Jimmy always got away with breaking the rules. Not for the first time I question where the children's father is.

I clear my throat. "Your son is one of the bravest boys I've ever known. I want to make sure you grasp what the effects of his actions will be," I say. "You know the Solati are making their way to Glacium. What you don't realize is my position close to the king of Glacium."

Nancy starts, her mouth dropping open.

"Your son, through unsanctioned actions with the best intentions, has just saved hundreds of lives. You see, the king had received a false message from the Tatum accepting his peace proposition. His army isn't even in the First Sector. Who knows how many would have died if Glacium was caught unawares, as the Tatum intended."

I haven't bothered to unstrap myself from my Soar. I wink at the miserable Jimmy, mouthing an "I'm sorry" as I walk to the edge.

* * *

I finally track down Hamish. He's at the Training Island where we'd spent weeks together as he taught me how to fly. A sheer cliff makes up one side of the rock, while the other side is a series of gradually deepening steps. I still remember the bruises from crash-landing onto them. It turned out the only way to force my body to go against its normal instincts was a life-or-death situation. I'd saved a toddler, Cara, who fell off Nursery Island.

"Miss our flying lessons?" I ask as I sit beside him. He stiffens and remains silent.

"Hamish. Can we talk about this?" I prod.

"It seems everything I want to talk to you about is some kind of secret," he says with a pout.

I repress a sigh. You'd never know he and Jovan were of a similar age. It's the difference between being allowed to grow up and being forced to grow up. "Look, I value your friendship and I want things to be easy between us, as they once were." I peek into his eyes, searching for the friendliness I used to find there. What I find is a stark contrast to that. The distance sits oddly on his face, like he's unpracticed at maintaining anger.

He sniffs and looks away. "It doesn't seem you do. You know everything about me, Willow. My family, my job, my ambitions. What about

you? You met Crystal when fighting in the Outer Rings. You have a friend who you'd risk capture by the king's watch for," he says. He looks back at me with blazing eyes.

Hamish doesn't know this "friend" was really my brother, Olandon. I'd raced from the Ire to save him from Jovan. Looking back, I wonder if I wasn't just waiting for an excuse to return to the castle.

"Where were you born? Do you have siblings? What's your favorite meal?"

He won't be happy with a few vague answers. I remove my hand from his. I know I'll just end up hurting him, so it's better if I go. "I'm sorry things couldn't be better between us. If my secrets only affected me, I'd tell you everything," I say.

He watches with a cold expression as I strap myself back into the Soar. So much for spending time with a friend. It would've been nice to forget all the problems surrounding me, even for a couple of minutes.

I give a sad smile and drop off the side of the rock into open air.

* * *

I pace around the small, stone-circled fire pit while Isha makes the morning meal the next day. I've spent my life hiding this kind of emotion, but if Adox doesn't agree, I've got nothing left to give. Isha and Cris exchange more than one glance at my jerky behavior.

I've just sat down, but I shoot to my feet when Adox lands. His face gives nothing away. It's grim. But whether it's because he's planning to deliver bad news, or grim with fear about his decision to help, I can't tell. I keep my breath shallow as he approaches, remembering to keep my hands loose.

I knew the consequences before, but as he approaches, it hits me how much hangs on his decision. How many people will die unnecessarily—how many of my friends and family will be slaughtered. And how the worlds will be forever changed if my mother gains rule of both Glacium and Osolis. So I'm grateful when Adox gives me his answer straightaway, in his direct manner and with four simple words.

"We are with you," he says.

I release a shuddering breath. "Thank you." I nod deeply. "I don't

think you understand how many people you have just saved.”

His lips regain their tightness. “If the Ire is found out, I hope you realize how many people I might have killed.”

Though I would never say the words out aloud, I did think he was incorrect about how his people would be treated afterwards. Maybe the thought was more a wish on how I wanted to be treated if my secret ever got out. I nod again. “I do.”

He gestures with an arm. “Then I imagine we should begin.”

We convene at the Meeting Island. Adox was busy planning before he came to Isha’s. The tent seems lighter than yesterday when I’d uncovered my face. Perhaps my relief is playing tricks on me. There are nearly thirty of the Ire gathered in the huge tent. Hamish is one of the Ire folk here, sitting and talking to a blonde woman from the Nursery Rock, whose name I forget. Adox also sent a scout the previous night to pinpoint the Solati’s current position.

Everyone fixes their eyes on Adox as we walk to the raised seat opposite the entrance. Adox stands in front of his cushioned chair, but doesn’t sit, while I hover awkwardly at his side, uncertain of Ire protocol.

He raises a hand and people begin to hush. Their words don’t vanish from their lips as they do when Jovan demands silence. Adox clears his throat and I see he’s nervous. I can imagine why. I doubt the information he’s about to impart will be well received.

“The people in this tent have been hand-selected for an important mission. A mission which will save many lives,” he begins. “Each of you were chosen because of your knowledge of the pathway between Osolis and Glacium, for your skill with Soaring and for your bravery.” I hold back a smile as I see his flattery is working on at least half of the audience. I tuck the trick away for future reference. A low murmuring starts after his words. He waits until it dies down to speak again.

“I know you’ve wondered at the tension between Willow and myself of late,” he says. A few people exchange glances. “Willow came to me three days ago and asked for my assistance in stopping the Solati army from reaching Glacium.” He barely gets the last word out before the gathering erupts. I keep my face expressionless as fingers are pointed in my direction. It takes me a moment to realize not everyone is protesting. Some are shouting agreement. A few hover between the two states. I feel eyes on me and look

over at Hamish. His stare is fevered and an excited grin covers his face.

This time Adox enlists the help of the two large bodyguards always at his side to bring the assembly under control.

“But why should we help them? Who is she to ask this of us?” someone from the entrance shouts.

Adox glances at me, double-checking on the story we decided upon. “Willow has a position close to the king of Glacium,” he says. “Do not think I agreed to this with ease. Until an assurance of our safety was brokered, I refused. Willow has now been able to provide such a guarantee. If caught, which is a small risk, the Ire is assured of protection in return for their aid. With this oath, I have decided we will give aid. My conscious will not allow the slaughter of defenseless thousands,” he says. The majority of people are silent at his words. His speech was cleverly done.

The person by the doorway is insistent. “How can she guarantee safety from both worlds? She’s Bruma. The Tatum will not hold to an oath,” they yell.

“Do you think this escaped my notice, Esus?” Adox bites out, not thrown off by the question. “Willow has provided her oath on King Jovan’s behalf. Currently, the Tatuma and the Tatum’s first son are staying in King Jovan’s castle. They’ve also sworn their oath regarding the future safety of the Ire.”

“But the Tatuma isn’t the ruler yet,” the same man speaks. I grind my teeth and keep my silence.

“You know how unbalanced Osolis is right now. I do not believe the Tatum will be in power for much longer.”

The man at the entrance, Esus, doesn’t reply and I roll the tension from my shoulders.

Adox looks around the group. “If you do not wish to participate, you must leave now. I give my promise, the mission is low risk, though there is some danger. It does not involve fighting, nor does it involve any communication with the Solati.” He pauses to check if anyone is leaving. I bite my cheek to stop from laughing at Hamish’s affronted expression. No one leaves. Not even Esus, who put up so much resistance.

At Adox’s command, the force take up the various cushions. There’s an even mix of male and females, ranging from teenagers to middle-aged. All are seated in a few moments. Adox gestures to me to take over as planned. I

move to the middle of the tent, hands clasped behind my back, shoulders back. I was never taught this. But Aquin was the closest thing I'd had to a father. In absence of another role model, I'd copied all of his movements. He'd been the best of the Elite and the Head of Guards, so I'm glad it was his way of moving I'd decided to mimic.

I survey the crowd, much like Adox just did. But instead of trying to puff them up, I look for signs of fear and distrust; signs of confidence and excitement. I take a couple of minutes to do so, splitting the group in my mind.

"You, you and you," I point. "Sit together." They're bewildered, but they do as I say. I go through the group of thirty, splitting them into twos and threes until there's only one person left, other than myself and Adox. Adox needs to stay at the Meeting Island and coordinate the attack. The other person will be my pair.

"Remember your group," I say. "This will be your company for the mission."

"But what are we actually doing?" asks Hamish—the only person without a group.

I raise an eyebrow. "We're going to destroy the pathway," I say.

Gasps meet my words. A handful are unsurprised, either smart enough to work it out on their own, or filled in by Adox earlier.

Osolis and Glacium sat at the same level, with the floating islands connecting them. Logically, it would seem you could just walk in a straight line, hopping island to island to get from one planet to the next. The reality was different. The islands were all shapes, sizes, and heights. When our ancestors created the pathway, they spent years finding the easiest route. They then built the supports between those of the floating islands you couldn't simply jump between, and made two maps. Before navigating the Oscala myself, I would've thought the journey would be easy. Surely you would see the next support, or the next part of the trail would be clear. I know better now. The pathway is twisting, doubling, and clawing. Needless to say, the only people to traverse the pathway were peace delegations, those with a death wish, or, in this case, several hundred soldiers. Of course, with my discovery of the Ire and their flying contraptions, the pathway is no longer the only means of traversing the distance between the worlds. In fact, it takes a baffling three days to go from Osolis to Glacium using a Soar—if you time

it right with the smoke layer around my home world. Three days on a Soar, or a month on foot with a high risk of dying? I know which way I'd choose to navigate the Oscala.

"Each group will destroy two to three of the supports on the pathway," I say while they're still grasping what I've told them. "Hamish and I will deal with those closest to the Solati army." Hamish's green eyes meet mine, and he grins again. I return his smile.

"Each group will help to destroy the obstacles in front of the Solati army," I continue. "The teams starting here," I gesture to those beside Hamish, who seem the most confident, "will deal with the obstacles next to Hamish and myself. The group next to them deals with the next lot after, and so on." I point to the Ire folk furthest from Hamish, made up of two young males and a timid-looking girl. "Your team will deal with the pathway supports closest to Glacium."

Assured that everyone understands this, I move on. "Adox will discuss the exact locations you're expected to tackle with each group, so there's no confusion. As to how each obstacle is destroyed, that's up to you. You'll carry a few tools; axes, knives, saws. However you do it, keep the noise to a minimum." I turn in a slow circle.

"I shouldn't need to say this, but I will anyway. Your top priority is not to be seen. If the people closest to the army deem action unsafe, you are ordered to wait, or to move on to the next part of the pathway. We want to save lives, but not at the loss of your own. Is this understood?" I ask. Thirty serious faces nod back at me.

"In the unlikely event you're seen, hide as quickly as possible. Remember, this army has been travelling for weeks now, and slowly. They're tired and have no reason to suspect an attack from above. They may pass the sighting off as a trick of the light. Report any sightings to Adox." On my crossing, I'd mistaken cracks in the rocks for Tellio lizards, and thought I was going crazy when I saw flashes of red. Later I learned the flashes of red were from Jimmy, who had been tailing us through the Oscala.

I look over my shoulder at Adox with a quirked eyebrow. He thinks for a moment and moves forward.

Hi voice is strong. "Keep this among yourselves for now. I will call a gathering once you're gone to explain the happenings to the rest of the Ire," he says. "You leave once the light dims. Take a small amount of food, wear

dark clothing and select the right Soar for your location on the pathway.” I make a quiet noise as he gestures the timid group forward to discuss their targets. His last suggestion was smart. The color in the Oscala depended on whether you were closer to Glacium or Osolis. The very center was black, the surrounding islands blocking all of Osolis’s firelight. The tinge of the sky either side of the dark middle was a gradient of yellows, reds, purples, and blues. Red tinges meant you were closer to Osolis, Blue tinges meant you were closer to Glacium.

The rest of the morning passes quickly as Adox works tirelessly to make sure every group knows where they’re meant to be. Surprisingly, I’m approached almost as much to answer questions about equipment and, to my annoyance, the king of Glacium. I keep my information vague, though not always by intention. It bothers me that I don’t know the little things about Jovan that the Ire folk are asking. Is he handsome? Yes, devastatingly so. What does he do when he’s not being king? No idea. I’d guess training, but I don’t really know.

Hamish throws himself down onto the cushion next to me. “So. Close to the king?” he asks, with a sideways peek at me. “Is that why you couldn’t say anything?”

“One of the reasons,” I say, not willing to lie. He studies me for a long time. I don’t meet his gaze.

He sighs. “Then I guess I can deal with that for now. Maybe one day you’ll trust me enough to confide in me.”

“It’s not—” I start.

“I know, I know.” He waves an aggravated hand in the air. “Plus, I had to forgive you after being selected for the most dangerous mission. And with the king’s emissary, too!” He fans his face. I laugh and shove him.

“Whatever,” I say, still chuckling.

“You ready for our ‘mission’ then?”

I shrug. How do I explain to him that the things which should make me afraid, no longer do? “I guess so. It should be simple enough,” I say. He nods.

“And the most excitement I’ve had in my life!” he says with gusto. A few people near us laugh at his eagerness. I notice the blonde woman staring over. She waves enthusiastically when he notices. He gives half a wave back before standing and pulling me to my feet.

The sky is starting to dim by the time everyone is ready. The rest of the Ire are gathering on Adox's rock. Adox is there too, while I take over the group of thirty on the Meeting Island.

Hamish and I strap ourselves into Soars, side by side. The groups needing to travel farthest are already gone. Before they left, I'd made the leader of each group confirm their first target by pointing to it on the map rolled out on the tent floor. A twinge of nerves hits me as I think of what they're risking. If this goes wrong, it will be on my shoulders. I asked Adox to do this. It's times like this when Mother's words come back to me. She'd always told me I'd be the ruin of Osolis. I thought she'd meant I'd destroy everything through error, but now I knew she'd meant it would be because of what I am. What I can't hide. I wonder how often my mother had lain awake wishing Olandon was born before me; the position of Tatuma always went to the eldest child.

"You ready?" Hamish asks. I start and look up at him. He's grown progressively more silent over the last couple of hours. His excitement has turned into a nervous tension. Several had thrown up over the side of the Meeting Island—if I was lucky, it would land on Uncle Cassius's head.

I borrow Jimmy's phrase. "I was born ready."

We set off with three other groups, sticking as close to the passing islands for cover as we dare. Adox hadn't wanted me to go in the first group. He had a point. My flying ability is nowhere near the level of the others. But I firmly believed the most dangerous mission should sit on my shoulders, as it wasn't really the Ire's problem. Hamish was with me because I knew him better than anyone, and partially because he would've been angry with me if I hadn't selected him.

One group peels off after a time without a sound, heading off toward their section of the pathway. Adox wanted to destroy the whole of the pathway, but I'd disagreed. We only needed to cause a major delay to the army. Enough so the Solati's food supplies would dwindle, and frustration and suspicion would affect morale. No doubt they'd wonder if Glacium had suspected they were attacking all along and had ruined the pathway long ago. My mother would have to call her army back from where she sat in her comfortable throne on Osolis.

Another two groups split from us and fly away together. They'll separate as they get closer to their part of the pathway. I'm glad Hamish

knows the Oscala so well. I have no idea where I'm going.

Our progress as we draw close is slower. We stop at each island and survey the area around us. There'll be Solati guards with hawk-like vision on overnight sentry duty. The darkness cloaks us well, but the slight sheen of the Soar's material could catch a scout's eye if they are paying attention. Our team will start on the supports ten islands in front of the army's current location. The Osolis scouts will be slightly in front of the army—perhaps four or five islands. We'll have several islands between us, so the scout's vision should be obscured, especially with the way the pathway bends and twists.

It takes a long time to get to the first island. By the time we touch down, I'm hardly breathing, though I can hear Hamish's breath coming fast. I signal to him to wait and unstrap my Soar, scanning the area before circling back. He takes off his own Soar and we approach the rope bridge before us. It should be easy enough. The bridge is one unit made of wooden planks roped together. It's stretched out between four heavy studs, two on each of the connected islands. Thick rope coils around the studs to hold the walkway in place, providing a rudimentary handrail either side of the suspended walkway.

"Saw." Hamish holds out his hand toward me.

I stare at the outstretched limb dumbly. "What?" I jerk around to look at the Soars. No bag. "I thought you had the saw!"

He turns and we share a horrified look.

"Axe?" he whispers. I shake my head and cover my mouth.

We don't have time to go back and get them.

"Maybe we could catch up to the next group and get one off of them," I say. Hamish shakes his head.

"Not enough time. Fuck!" he hisses. "How did I forget them? They were right next to us in a bag," he says in a louder voice.

I place my hand over his mouth. "I know, I saw them there. We both screwed up. But we'll figure something out," I say.

"I brought you a saw and axe," a voice says from the darkness. I clamp down on a scream and whirl toward the voice.

"Who's there?" Hamish demands. I crouch, darting furtive looks around the rest of the clearing for signs of an ambush. The person comes out from behind the rock. I straighten and scowl at the young boy.

"Jimmy. What are you *doing* here?" I demand. His mother was going

to kill me.

“W-well, I saw your tools lying there and thought you might need them,” he stutters.

I frown down at him. “You mean you took them so you’d have an excuse to follow us.” No wonder I’d thought Hamish had them, and he’d thought I had them. The brat had swiped them before we left. “This isn’t a game, Jimmy!” I whisper furiously. “What if something had happened to you and we didn’t know where you were or weren’t able to destroy the pathway?”

Jimmy looks down at his stitched shoes. Hamish is silent behind me. I glance at him and see he almost looks relieved. I frown at him until he gets the hint and attempts a somber expression. He achieves the same half-annoyed expression he gave me at the training rock.

I take the tools from Jimmy and pass them to Hamish, who hastens to get started on the first support.

I turn back to the young boy with a sigh. “You’ll have to come with us now. I can’t send you back by yourself. Jimmy, I realize I’ve asked you to disobey your mother and Adox in the past, and that was very wrong of me,” I say. Jimmy looks up, eyes wide.

“The time will come to have your adventures. It will come sooner than you think. But what is the point of having those adventures if the people back home don’t trust you and cannot rely on you?” I ask, feeling a bit hypocritical.

“I guess not much,” he mumbles.

“No, not much at all. Plus, I don’t think Adox is far away from confiscating your Soar. Better to fly where you’re supposed to, than not fly at all,” I say. His whole body spasms at my words and his eyes are wide in disbelief. He shakes his head in horror at the future I’ve laid before him. I don’t know why Adox hasn’t done it before now. The boy drives me crazy and I’ve only known him for a few months.

It takes awhile to sever all the ropes. The pathway was made to last, and our work must be done slowly so the sound doesn’t carry. Hamish is cutting the final strands when I join him. I strap myself into the Soar and guide the weight of the bridge down so it doesn’t crash into the other island. The bridge still makes a slight clatter as it connects with rock. All three of us still pause for any sign of alarm.

Soon we’ve cut the other side and hauled the bridge up. The soldiers

will reach this island tomorrow and not be able to cross to the second—not without wasting materials and time. Between us, we fly the mass of ropes and wood over to an isolated island while Jimmy watches with riveted attention. The Solati will never find the support, but having the bridge close will make it easier to fix the pathway once the army returns to Osolis.

It must be somewhere in the early hours of the morning. Maybe two or three. It's hard to tell in the darkness, but it took us a few hours to fly here and get rid of the first target. The second support is two islands away. And due to the zig-zagging and up-and-down nature of the pathway, the support is closer again to the Solati Army, but beneath their current position. I wonder how many of my people are sleeping on the various flat surfaces and caves throughout the Oscala.

We land on the island behind our next target.

“I don't like it,” I decide, lips pursed. “If we land at the top, then anyone looking down from the islands above us will see us.” This support is to aid in scaling a sheer cliff face. There are no footholds at all, so without the rope currently hanging down the side, it will be almost impossible to scale. It's similar to the one I'd saved Sole from when he slipped. It was luck and timing which saved the delegate. I'd thrown myself over the side to catch him, rope in hand, earning myself a dislocated shoulder and broken wrist. Though, I'd come to think the pain was worth it because that was the turning point of my friendship with the delegates.

“We have to get rid of it,” Hamish says, looking around the sky. “There's no one there.”

“The Solati sentries are hand-picked and well trained.” I shake my head. “We can't both go up there,” I decide.

“I'll go.”

I shake my head. “No. I need you waiting at the bottom to deaden the sound of the falling rope,” I say. “I'm smaller and ... no offence, more adept at sneaking.”

Hamish gives me a wry grin, but nods and soars down to his position.

“Stay here,” I say to Jimmy. He turns his head away, still sulking a little at my earlier words.

I fly to the other side of the cliff, which has shelves and looks relatively easy to climb. My only other option is to jump across the gap from this island to the next—not happening. I unstrap myself so the shiny material

doesn't give me away, and climb with quick hands. It's easier than climbing out from my room in the palace—just with a higher chance of death if I fall.

I pause upon reaching the top and peek upward, but I can't see anything. I can't be sure if that's normal or not. I'm certain my sight has been affected by having the veil on for so long. It's possible the sentries are there and I just can't see them. But time is short. It's now or never.

I skim across the top of the island toward the sheer cliff and the dangling rope, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. At the top, I don't dare pause to see if I've been spotted. I take out the small saw and begin slow, steady strokes, wincing at the grating noise it generates. I'm sure Hamish can barely hear it, but it sounds as loud as the fighting pits in the silence of early morning. At least there's only one rope to cut through. I manage to saw the final strand and don't even wait to see if Hamish catches it at the bottom. If it does make a sound I'll be the thing they catch sight of, not him.

I do pause briefly once out of sight. There are no alarmed voices or sounds of scraping rock. I didn't even hear the rope fall. Hamish must have caught the bulk of it. I soar back over to where Jimmy is, thankfully, still standing.

"Hamish took the rope over there." He points. I look over and see Hamish is making his way back.

We deal with the last support easily. It's farther away, a long single rope looped around a rock on an island above, used to swing over a large gap. We hide the rope and start back, following the same pattern as we used to get here, stopping at each island to check the coast is clear.

We're nearly at the third island and the closest we'll be to the pathway when an echoing sound reaches us.

The sound comes again. I've never heard anything like it in the Oscala before. What is it?

The noise echoes again and I get a sense of its locations. It's coming from above us. But what is it? My eyes widen as I hear the hollow echo once more. I don't need Hamish's whispered confirmation a second later. It's the sound of wood hitting stone! Something's falling. One of the teams has dropped a support.

The shock of the booming disturbance loses its edge as it falls past ours and the army's location. There's one last resounding boom ... then

deadly silence. I exchange a grimace with Hamish before dread settles in my stomach.

I whip my head around, realizing we're in plain sight. A shout goes up behind us.

"Hide," I hiss. Abandoning caution, we hurtle to the next island and throw our Soars to the ground before flattening ourselves against the rock.

I squeeze my eyes shut, not wiping at the bead of sweat rolling down the side of my face.

Another shout. Soon a flurry of activity has started around us.

"Do you think they saw us?" Hamish asks. I don't answer. I don't know.

Hamish lies half a pace away from me and we stare at each other, wordlessly sharing the horror of our predicament. I remember Jimmy and turn my head to see he lies not far away, creeping toward the edge.

"Jimmy," I hiss and give him a don't-you-dare look. He shuffles back our way with a guilty expression.

"What are we going to do?" Hamish asks in a low voice. I rub my forehead. Jovan would know what to do. Solis, I miss him. And I shouldn't.

"We wait," I decide. "We'll have to watch for the right moment. They'll be on extra alert after hearing that. I'm not sure we'll get away unseen," I say truthfully.

"Shit," he says. I nod in agreement.

"Shit," says Jimmy, causing a grin to spread over Hamish's face. I ignore the small boy and shake my head at Hamish, who shrugs.

"At least we can just wait here," he says.

And we do. Hours pass with us shifting uncomfortably as rocks go out of their way to dig into one or another part of our bodies. Half of this time is spent explaining to Jimmy why we can't go and peek over the edge at the Solati army. The only break in monotony is finding one of the rods in Jimmy's Soar has snapped during our rush for cover. The contraption no longer folds properly and will need to be left behind. Jimmy will have to fly with Hamish.

Eventually, the waiting gets so monotonous, my heart stops pounding and I let my mind wander. I think about my brother and his journey through the Oscala. Olandon attempted to traverse the pathway without a map. No wonder he got lost. In fact, he may be the only person in Bruma and Solati

history to successfully make the journey from one world to the other without a map. That's not to say the crossing didn't take its toll. My brother had hovered on the brink of death for weeks.

I look up as there's a change in sound. There's been a steady noise above us for hours, but the army hasn't broken camp until now. It must take a long time to move so many people.

"We still have a few more hours until dark," Hamish groans, rolling onto his back. I shrug. Better than dying.

"We knew this was a possibility." I stop talking as Hamish spasms.

"Willow," he chokes. I sit up.

"What is it?" I search his face.

"I'm an idiot," he mutters to himself. "The pathway goes above where we are." My entire body tightens in disbelief.

He twists from side to side, examining our position. "The army will march underneath and up to the islands on our right side. Those islands are positioned before the supports we've destroyed." he says, pointing over to his right and up slightly. "They'll have a perfect view of us from up there. We need to *move*."

I swear long and quiet.

"I'm sorry," Hamish says. I shake my head at him.

"Not your fault. But you can feel bad once we survive this," I say, looking around me. The island is flat, unusually so. I curse our luck at being on the only part of the Oscala without a place to hide. Most islands have caves and cliffs. A small raised bit of rock opposite us would hide most of Jimmy, but nothing else.

My mind rattles.

"They're two islands away," calls Jimmy from the edge. Hamish drags him back by his feet.

"Jimmy, for once in your life do as you're bloody told," Hamish growls.

"I can see some of the soldiers!" the boy exclaims.

"Get down. Now," I snap, at the limits of my patience.

We listen to the bustle fully surrounding us. "The stream of guards will be constant," Hamish says. "I don't know if we'll be able to wait until full darkness," he says.

"We hold as long as we can," I say. "Get your Soar on." I do the

same, trying to stay low while I strap the contraption in place.

I curse the person who alerted the army to our presence by dropping the support. We were so close to getting away. Two more islands and we would've had enough cover to return to the Ire, even with the noise.

"The sky's starting to dim," Hamish says.

"Is it?" I ask. I couldn't discern any great difference.

"Slightly, but it will soon become dark this deep into the pathway," he says. I remember how dark it was for the middle two weeks of our trip. Though I hadn't been particularly observant during that time— too absorbed in my grief.

I look at the island to our left. It's lower and close by. It would take a matter of a few seconds to reach it. I could count on most people's eyes being fixed on their feet. I remember how mine had rarely left the pathway. Gazing at the Oscala scenery was the kind of oversight which could mean your life. It took one stumble or slip to put you over the edge. We need to move now, before the Solati reach the elevated island! But how many Solati would see us? It would only take one clear sighting by a respected soldier to ruin everything.

A yell goes up, then another. It's like a repeat of the morning, when the sentries heard the foreign sound. Yelling moves throughout the pathway until it tracks underneath us. An entire army marches there. I know if the islands were connected, they'd be shaking with the force of the soldier's movement.

"We have to move *now*," I decide.

"We should wait for darkness," Hamish stutters.

"No. The longer we wait, the more likely they'll encircle and see us." I shuffle the wings beside me. I realize we should've gone hours ago.

"The Solati will see us!" he hisses. "And Adox will kill us."

"Better one person see us and think they're crazy, than a whole army see us and know they're sane. Adox will understand," I give him an unflinching gaze. "We move now." I turn to Jimmy. "Jimmy, you're going with Hamish."

We crawl to the far edge of the island.

I grip Hamish's arm. "If they see you, they'll shoot you down. Go quickly." He nods grimly, strapping Jimmy in front of him.

The shouts swell as the unbroken chain of Solati soldiers pass a

command between them. We must act.

I look over the side, blanching at the steady trail of soldiers winding upwards. They're my people, but right now we're enemies.

I take a steadying breath and look into Hamish's pale face. "In three. One ... two ... three!"

I push forward and throw myself over the side. There isn't a chorus of alarm from the soldiers, like I expect. Or maybe I'm too focused to hear.

I jerk on the bar of my Soar, having just passed the first island. Hamish and Jimmy are in front of me, nearly safe. Could we make it out of this undetected?

Someone shouts and fear punches me deep in the gut.

With dreadful, stupid curiosity, I tilt the Soar to look behind me. In the next few moments, although the Soar continues to glide forward, my body seizes in absolute, all-consuming terror. Because there, standing at the edge of the island above me, two men flanking him, is Cassius.

My nightmare.

He looks just as I remember. My mother's male counterpart. His long chestnut hair is pulled into a severe tie at the back. He still wears robes, likely too conceited to believe Glacium's garments to be superior in the cold. But his expression. His face has featured in every horrifying childhood experience I've ever had, and several since. That expression is always with me, somewhere.

His eyes are black, empty, devoid of life. And his smile looks like it's held up with strings. The soulless eyes reach into me, and all of the progress I thought I'd made since leaving Osolis, all the healing and strengthening, is gone. I'm a girl again and he is smashing my head against the floor.

"Willow!" a voice screams.

I jerk out of my panicked hold and wrench on the bar to avoid crashing into the floating cliff face before me. I hurtle, spinning around the rock, reaching the safety of cover from the army.

But the damage is done. My uncle has seen us flying. Now he knows there are other people here.

"Keep going," I call forward in a trembling voice. Hamish gives me a searching look, but thankfully does as I've asked, leading the way back to the Ire.

My hands shake on the bar underneath me. Cassius saw me. But did

he know it was me? Did I have enough of a resemblance to my mother? Or did he recognize my father in me? A sob escapes me and I grit my teeth. Was I still so weak? Could one look at my torturer unravel the person I'd become?

At least my mother wasn't there. A small part of me had wondered if she'd travel with the army. It was good to know the Tatum hadn't exceeded my expectations and was safe on her cowardly throne. It would take a messenger a couple of weeks to report this sighting.

Veni, what will Adox say?

It takes most of our return journey to the Ire for me to calm. But eventually, I feel strength returning to me. It was bound to be a shock seeing Cassius the first time. He'd tortured and humiliated me more times than I could count. It would be the same when I saw Mother. I wasn't going to beat myself up about it, or feel ashamed. I was a different person now to the person they knew before. And now I'd seen Cassius, the next time would be easier.

I'd know what to expect at our next meeting.

But he sure as hell wouldn't.

Chapter Four

A large gathering of relieved and weary Ire folk greets us when we finally land on Adox's rock. I imagine we're in a similar condition. My legs shake with fatigue as I get rid of the Soar and stretch my body in slow, tired movements.

"We feared the worst had happened to you," Adox calls, interrupting my head count. He's drowned out and overtaken by a large woman.

"Jimmy! Where have you been?"

I wince and turn toward Jimmy's large mother. She meets my eyes with a sharp glare. Jimmy shuffles over to her, not meeting her gaze.

"And where is your Soar! If you've lost it, you won't be getting a new one. Here, hold your brother." She shoves a squalling baby into his arms.

"Nancy, now is hardly the time. Take Jimmy away. I'll speak with him later," Adox says, rubbing a hand over his eyes. He must've been up all night. I doubt he'd slept the night before, either.

I clasp hands with Adox in greeting as he searches my face.

"What happened?"

"One of the groups dropped a support."

Adox's eyes flick over to the left, and I follow his gaze to a guilty-looking pair. They must've told him of the incident already.

"It alerted the Solati. We were in plain sight. We could only flatten ourselves against the island. But Hamish realized the Great Stairway would lead the army above our hiding spot and put us in clear view." I glance at Hamish; his green eyes are still bright from the night's events. I feel the opposite—wrung out.

"I made the call to move, hoping only a few would see us and not the entire army."

Adox's eyes widen with my words. He whispers, "And..."

I shudder as I remember looking back and seeing Uncle Cassius standing on an island looking straight at me.

"We were seen, Adox. What's more is, Jimmy's Soar was damaged and we had to leave it behind. We hid it as best we could." I'd shoved it behind the sole rock on the island. "But if the army sees it, the scouts will try to retrieve it. They know we're here. They'll be on the alert." I lean in and

whisper for only Adox to hear. “Solati archers are excellent. Please don’t attempt to recover the Soar.”

I expect anger or denial. I’ve prepared my arguments in case he accuses me of betrayal. This is his worst fear come to life. His expression firms and I feel my eyebrows raise when he gives me a terse nod.

“You did all you could in an impossible situation. I’ll send out an alert to our traders to take the long routes home.”

I mask my surprise as I nod back. What has sparked this change of attitude?

“How did the other groups do?” I ask, taking a mug of stew from one of the cooks.

“Everyone destroyed their obstacles successfully.” He rubs the back of his neck. “We are in this now. For better or for worse. It will take the Solati months to get through the Oscala without the supports. Supplies will run low. They’ll be forced to turn around.” We’d only destroyed the pathway in front of the army so they’d be able to retreat with ease. They were still my people.

I stand, stew forgotten, startling the old man. “Then I must go report.”

“Where are you going?” Hamish steps behind me. I jolt and frown at him over my shoulder.

“To update my king,” I shoot back at him. “Adox, I imagine King Jovan has figured out where the Ire is located by now. Would you like to try and keep your whereabouts secret from him for as long as possible?” Adox peruses me over intertwined fingers. He then looks beyond me, to glaciun, silent in contemplation.

“Adox, are you all right?” Hamish bends down beside him and places a hand on his frail frame.

“No,” Adox booms, making the people around him jump. The man stands and limps towards me. My bemusement must be clear because he gives me a dry grimace.

“The Tatum will soon be aware of our presence here.” He leans heavily on his left leg. “The Solati who sighted you will make sure of that.” I repress another shudder at the reminder of Uncle Cassius. “We must align ourselves with allies. Tell the king of us. Tell him I give this information freely as a gesture of goodwill. You will remind him of our help and make it abundantly clear we wouldn’t be in this situation otherwise.” His brown eyes

look into my blue eyes. “The Ire will be safe,” he states, wrinkled mouth set in a hard line. And it’s clear: this man will do whatever he has to in order to achieve his people’s future.

“You know I’ll help the Ire however I can. He’s a good king, and loyal. He won’t let you down.” I hesitate before plowing on. “I believe an explanation to the king’s assembly is advised as well. Left with no reason for the flying boy, rumors will run rampant and cause more damage than the truth would.”

Adox stops on my right side. I look ahead, and he does the same. “I leave that to the king to decide. I suppose it must be done.” He swings his head around, checking the area, leaning in so Hamish can’t hear. “I am trusting you, Tatuma.”

Guilt stabs me at the anguished look on his face. Is it possible for a man to age years in just a few days? Does he regret agreeing to help us, or even allowing me to stay here? I shake off the blame. It’s possible he’s regretting the decision to let Crystal live on Glacium; then she would never have brought me here. It’s no point analyzing the past. With a solemn nod, I turn from him and walk to the far edge, in the direction of Glacium, toward my Soar.

If I stop I’ll be asleep for a full day and Jovan has already been waiting a week—he’ll be half insane. For some reason I can’t wait to get back. He’s probably taking his temper out on everyone around him. The smile slips from my face. I hope that person isn’t Olandon.

I turn back to look at the weary band of Ire folk behind me as a clattering sound catches my attention. It wouldn’t normally, but it sounds out of place in the subdued Ire of late. I stare unblinkingly at the source of the clattering noise, blaming the fogginess of sleep for how long I take to understand what I’m seeing.

I even blink several times to make sure what I’m seeing is really there, that it isn’t some cruel hallucination. But the vision is still there afterward. A quiver of arrows, fallen on its side.

But there isn’t just one quiver. I quickly count—there are six! The broken fletching from Kedrick’s murder is tucked away with my other belongings in the castle. I’d stopped carrying the fletching in my boot some time ago. I wish I had it with me now, but I really don’t need the remnant to confirm what I’m already certain of. I’ve spent hours staring at the bit of

wood that took my friend from me. I know without a hint of uncertainty that if I get closer, I'll find six quivers full of Seedyr wood arrows. Six quivers full of the same arrow which killed the prince.

I've found them at last.

"Willow, wait!" Hamish calls.

I turn to him in a haze.

"So I've been thinking ... where's the fun in knowing someone's deepest darkest secret straight away? These things have to be earned, right?" he says.

"Hamish..." I interrupt. He stutters to a stop.

"Why are those arrows there?" I drag him a few steps toward the circle and point.

He shrugs and I have an irrational urge to punch him.

"The tradesmen are getting ready to leave," he says around a yawn. "Sometimes they hunt, so they take weapons."

I know they hunt! I want to scream. One of them hunted and killed my friend for money.

He misinterprets my murderous expression as confusion. "You must've seen them when you were last here. They come back every month or so to rest. Other than that, they're back and forth all the time, bartering goods with Glacium or Osolis. We're lucky they were here to help destroy the pathway. Traders are the best flyers, and used to dealing with danger."

My heart pounds in my chest, threatening to escape. A trader. This whole time. Such a position would've given Kedrick's assassin the perfect chance to kill me. Because I'd been the intended target. But the person didn't count on Kedrick pushing me out of the way. I still wish, every day, he hadn't. But this regret didn't mean I'd waste Kedrick's gift now Jovan had forced me to see his brother's actions in this light.

"I only ask because those arrows look like Seedyr wood."

Hamish gives me a so-what look at my comment.

"On Glacium, this wood is considered too weak for weaponry," I add, teeth gritted.

"Oh, that," he says cheerfully. "It's all in the drying of the wood and the way you cut it."

I'm staring at the arrows like a starving man looking at food, but I can't help it. In one sentence Hamish has answered a mystery that has

plagued me for months. “Are the traders here right now?” My voice is unrecognizable.

“What’s wrong?” Hamish asks. I glare at him and he backs up.

“They’re over there.” He jabs a fingers across the clearing.

I study the six men gathered in a tight group on the outskirts of the Meeting Island. All of them are tall. All of them have dark hair. After half a revolution, I still have only a pitiful amount of information about Kedrick’s killer.

A sobering thought strikes me. What if more than one of them was involved?

“Which traders go to Osolis?” I struggle to keep my voice from shaking. The assassin had first struck there. He’d also tried to kill Ashawn on Glacium, but that wasn’t until much later.

“Firo, Nosh, and Jude.”

I take note of the three lean men Hamish points out. My hands tremble beside me and I realize they’ve been doing it for some time. Why don’t I feel anything when I look at these men? There’s no change in the burning wrongness I feel. No resounding clarity, or sense of condemnation. I always thought I’d know when I came face-to-face with the murderer of the first boy I loved.

Now, six men stand before me and I have absolutely no idea who it could be. But I know the perfect way to get each of them to talk! A few broken fingers will get me my answers. And then I can end this once and for all! I feel the lick of white-hot rage as my fury directs my line of thought.

Hamish puts a hand on my shoulder. “Willow?”

I scowl up at him and he flinches back, his hand covering his mouth. Shock splices through the weight of my anger, enough for me to recognize I’m seconds away from losing it. And I can’t. I can’t lose it. I take shuddering breaths. I’m not here to find Kedrick’s killer. But I’ve destroyed the pathway now! Glacium is safe. Maybe it’s my turn to do something *I* want. I struggle to suppress the overpowering rage before it consumes me.

Glacium and the Ire have just forged an alliance. I am playing the part of ambassador to King Jovan. There are over fifty Ire folk here right now, plus the leader of the Ire. If I torture five men, and kill the sixth, I can count the alliance over.

Peace used to lead me. Does it still? Or is peace for naïve little girls,

like the person I used to be?

My teeth are clenched so tightly, they feel like they're going to break.

"Fuck!" I whisper, curling my hands into fists. There are too many people here. Unless I want to undo everything I've accomplished with Adox, I need to walk away.

I still want peace.

"Hamish," I snap.

He jerks from where he watches me, two meters away. I take another breath. "Hamish." My voice is calmer. False calm. Inside I'm a churning mess. I want to snap the traders like twigs. I want Glacium to be safe. I want to forge a lasting union between two peoples. I want revenge on the person who slaughtered Kedrick like an animal!

Hamish edges closer and I turn to him.

"I need everything you know about those six men. Everything. Right now."

* * *

I fly in a stupor for the majority of the trip back to Glacium. Hamish's information and my anger are the only things keeping me awake. One day, when everyone is safe, I'll return. And Kedrick's killer will meet the end they deserve.

I'm roused by the sight of an army camped at the bottom of the Oscala. Jovan's army. The tents spread back as far as the eye can see. The king has been busy in my absence. He's mobilized the entirety of his force, as promised, in case I failed in stopping the Solati's progress.

The enormity of the Bruma army is what's always kept Glacium on even footing against the Solati force. My people are a single, one-minded unit, commanded by the Head of Guards. Bruma don't have the same discipline. Though skilled, they rely on numbers and brute strength to match our carefully designed war strategies and rigorously trained soldiers. There must be a thousand men camped below. Jovan is probably there with them. I hesitate for a few seconds, wondering if I should land close by and check if he's there. The men are tiny dots from up here, but as I peer closer, I notice their faces are tilting up, looking at me. Some of them are pointing!

How well can they see me? I don't have my veil on. It's stuffed down

the front of my suit. Surely their eyesight is not that good. The unwanted attention makes my decision for me. I press forward on the bar to pick up my pace, and soon the camp is behind me. Lucky Adox gave the king permission to expose the Ire because, as well as the assembly, a whole army had now witnessed someone flying.

I fly over Glacium, vaguely noting the six semi-defined areas the Bruma call Sectors. Both worlds are split into six areas. But on Osolis we call them Rotations. The two worlds lay side by side, with the area closest to the other world earning the label of “First Rotation or Sector.” The areas were then numbered in a circle from one through to six. The worlds spin slowly, meaning it takes an entire three years to revolve through all six spaces, back to the start. Meanwhile, the Oscala or Great Stairway stays immobile—an unmoving connection between the two opposing planets.

In many ways, Glacium is the complete opposite of my home world. There are different animals, food, and clothing. The trees are brown with green leaves, instead of black with deep red-purple leaves. But the main difference is that where Osolis is full of fire, smoke, cracked ground, yellowed grass, and shriveled vines, Glacium is a planet of frost, snowy mountains, blizzards and ice. The Bruma consider us snobbish, without humor, and prim. Solati consider the Bruma barbaric, unrefined, and primitive.

It’s no mystery why we find ourselves on the brink of war.

But there is one thing we share.

We *depend* on the other world’s climate to regulate our own. We hate each other, but need each other to survive.

The Fourth—on each planet—is the farthest you can get from the other world. The Fourth Sector of Glacium is uninhabitable, with weather so cold, you could freeze in minutes. The Fourth Rotation of Osolis so hot your clothes could burst into flame—if you didn’t die from the smoke first. The Fourth areas of Glacium and Osolis are a constant reminder to us that if Osolis does not give off heat and firelight and if Glacium does not provide cold, we will all perish. The fire will spread through Osolis and burn everyone, while Glacium drowns.

I reach the First Sector and alter my course to the Sixth where the king and his assembly are situated. The ruler and their court tend to only move through the first, second, and third areas, migrating every half-

revolution to avoid the fourth. The villagers simply move around the fourth, from the third to the fifth, therefore making the most of whatever housing they're able to find. Because the wealthier citizens move more often, the rich of both worlds have two residencies—one for living in while the other house is rotating through the fourth, fifth, and sixth. It's unusual for a royal to be based in the Sixth. King Jovan only did this to remain close to the pathway in case of attack. It was a lucky thing he did.

I weave my way toward the ground a fair distance from the castle and after a careful landing, fold my Soar. Previously, I've landed in one of the courtyards behind the castle, but the watch may have orders to shoot. Unlikely, but not worth the risk. Pulling out my veil, I give a furtive glance at the thick trees around me and throw it over my head, placing the wooden band on top. My vision is instantly dimmed. I reach out a hand to the tree trunk next to me and wait for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. I tuck my Soar underneath my arm and begin a quick walk in the direction of the castle.

I've landed on the outskirts of the Inner Ring, on the cobbled pathway which connects the richest and most prominent Bruma with access to the castle. A part of me wishes I could walk the other way, through the Inner Ring, then the Middle Ring, to the Outer Rings.

The rings on Glacium separated the different classes. The Inner Ring held the wealthy and was situated in the space closest to the castle. The Outer Rings held the penniless and was furthest from the castle, occupying the outer edges of this word. The Outer Rings may be the poorest part of Glacium, and riddled with danger, but some of my closest friends lived there in the fighting barracks. I'll always remember my time there as the most uncomplicated and the most freeing part of my life. You fought, you survived, you ate and you drank.

I twist side to side as the wind catches the folded Soar under my arm, and ignore the few blue-eyed Brumas who pass me on my way. They gawk at my clothing and the contraption pinned to my side. I also have the veil on—which I tend to forget about now. That will draw almost as much attention as my clothing and the Soar. There was a time when I was painfully aware of the veil. But every time I removed the material, it became easier. Now *I* control the veil, not the other way around. I remember my jarring epiphany while talking to Adox. The path before me was still as clear as it had been in that soul-ringing moment. I couldn't build my future on lies, like my mother.

The only way forward for me was to reveal my true identity. Of course, I wouldn't go about it like a fool. But if I had my way, the veil would never control me again. *I will* to decide how my secret is revealed. I won't be forced into a corner.

A call goes up as I'm sighted. The portcullis is raised. I pass under the lattice of iron bars.

One of the watchmen runs toward me as fast as his full armor will allow him. I'm not sure why the watch wears such cumbersome equipment. The man gives an awkward bow, a terrorized expression on his face. "Tatuma Olina, the king has o-ordered you be taken to him immediately upon your arrival." Well, that explains his fear. I doubt Jovan's order was polite.

I nod calmly, despite the nervous thrill that jolts through me at his words. "That will be fine. Show me to him." I wonder if this is one of the guards I tricked when I escaped to the Outer Rings.

The guard looks from me to the portcullis and back.

I smile beneath my veil. "Unless ... you cannot leave your post?"

"But he did tell me to take you, and—"

I hold up a hand, trying to stem my laughter. "That's fine. I'll go to him directly and assure him of your determination to fulfill both of his commands."

I leave while the watchman is still bowing. That one wasn't picked for his brains.

It hits me as soon as I enter the heavy wooden entrance of the castle ... I'm about to see Jovan! I stop in my tracks, halfway to the meeting room. The lack of sleep and stress of the last week has to be showing. I wonder what I look like. I shake my head to clear my foggy mind. What am I thinking? I resume my walk, ignoring the new tension.

"Uh, Lina?" I whip my head toward the sound. It's Cameron. The little son of Tomi, one of the delegates.

"Cam, hello. Do you need something?" I ask.

"Nah, I'm all right. King wants to see you. I heard."

Had Jovan given the order to everyone? I steadfastly ignore the warmth flooding through me. I'm tired enough to admit I feel this way because I've missed him. I'm too weary to pretend it's just eagerness to relay the news of what happened in the Ire. But knowing my feelings and acting on them are two different things.

“I’m just on my way. Will you show me?”

I trail behind the young, chubby boy until we arrive at the meeting room. Do I knock? It seems too timid for my liking.

I push through the door, and a wave of noise hits me.

“Blaine! What you’re proposing is ridiculous,” comes the voice of Drummond, Arla’s father.

Someone slams a fist on the table and I finally process what I just heard. Did someone just say Blaine? Jovan can’t have made him an advisor! I gasp, knowing all too well about Blaine’s dodgy dealings. It can’t be. I feel a hand on my arm, and feel my muscles tighten in defense. I relax as I identify Roscoe, Jovan’s most trusted advisor and the father of one of the delegates, Adnan. The older man is always polite. An unusual trait for a Bruma.

“Tatuma Olina, I welcome you back. The king is most eager to see you.” He guides me around the meeting table—a great big stone circle. We pass the other advisors on our way. They stop talking and stare at me. I gently extract myself from Roscoe’s guiding arm and walk tall. Most of them appear relaxed, but there are those who still—whether in wariness or dislike, I don’t know. My heart begins to thud the closer I get to Jovan. Is he looking at me? I beg my feet not to stumble, though they haven’t since I was a child. I want to see him, but I feel sick at the same time. Is this normal?

I sigh in relief and a bit of disappointment as I see Jovan is in hot debate with the person to his left. It gives me a chance to control my racing thoughts. I always have this reaction when I first see him: a rightness, and a tingling down my spine, as though water were being trickled over me. Despite all my determination out in the hall, I can feel my resolve crumbling—just at the *sight* of him.

He’s as imposing and strong as ever in his chest armor. He sits in the ruler’s throne at the top of the stone circle, commanding the room without trying. I swallow as I get closer and finally see his face. The stubble on his chin is longer than when I last saw him. No doubt shaving has lost priority since news of my mother’s betrayal. His skin has the grime of travel and dried sweat. It’s likely he’s only just returned from the front line. His unwashed state doesn’t stop me wanting to touch him. My eyes move everywhere, over his shoulders, his arms, and his shoulder-length light-brown hair.

The sooner I can return to Osolis, the better.

“My King.” Roscoe interrupts him mid-conversation.

Jovan is annoyed at the interruption. But I watch with a doomed sense of sweetness as he sees me and his face transforms from irritation to relief, then settles into his usual confident—bordering on arrogant—lines.

“Tatuma, you are returned. And in one piece, too,” he says in a low voice. A tremor ripples through me. I’m close enough to see his eyes. The blue color is so vibrant; it always draws my gaze, piercing straight through me. At the moment his eyes roam over my frame. My flight suit doesn’t leave much to the imagination, though it’s not the worst outfit I’ve ever worn. The harness holds that honor.

I clear my throat. “Yes.” He raises an eyebrow at my short response. Doesn’t he know it’s all I can manage when he looks at me that way?

“And were you successful?” He frowns. I feel the men behind me shift forward to hear my answer.

I give a curt nod. “Yes. The army has been stopped for now.” I really need to speak to him alone. I turn my head to the door behind the throne. I know from my time in the two identical castles on Glacium that a smaller meeting room is situated there.

There is some celebrating behind me. But there’s something else too. An uneasiness. The advisors are unsure whether they can trust me—and with good reason after my mother’s actions. I barely take in their reaction, though. I’m locked on Jovan. His gaze is narrowed on me. I tilt my head to the door once more and restrain laughter as he understands my hint at last. A Solati could have picked up from the shortness of my responses that I wished to speak alone. It took several hints for a Bruma because they were so forthright. I found I’d largely adapted to their ways, but I supposed some traits were too ingrained in me. To the error of my people, the Bruma’s boldness didn’t mean they were unintelligent. They were just straightforward, not used to hints and subtlety. Most of the time I preferred it.

“The Tatuma and I will speak privately.” The King rises from his throne to his full height and I’m left staring at his chest. As always, it makes me feel tiny, but I don’t find his towering frame intimidating anymore. Perhaps because he doesn’t try to intimidate me this way anymore.

“Jovan, are you sure that’s wise? It would be easier to advise you if we hear the account directly from her,” an advisor says.

The man is ignored as Jovan turns for the door in a swirl of fur,

weaponry, and leather.

Jovan slams the door as soon as I've moved through behind him.

Then, in three long strides he's in front of me, hands at my veil. He rips it off. Did I really expect any less? The king of Glacium peers down at me. And I stand tall, refusing to be self-conscious of the way I appear. I cringe as another thought strikes me—or the way I smell.

"When was the last time you slept?" he growls. I wince and snatch the veil from him.

"Do you want to know what happened or not?" I attempt to put the veil back on, but he grips my hand and peels my fingers off the material, one by one. I let out an exasperated noise as he tucks the retrieved veil into the pocket of his tunic.

"Of course I do. But first let me tell you I'm glad you're home," he says with a grin.

"I am glad to be back at the *castle*," I say. His eyes glint in an unusual way.

"You've been at the front?" I ask. He nods, while his deft hands make quick work of the straps holding his chest armor in place. His blue eyes don't leave mine during the process. The heat in my cheeks rises and I let my gaze slide away as he stretches, pulling the plate over his head.

I squeeze my eyes shut. "There are a few things I need to tell you." I open them and gesture to a seat.

He doesn't take the hint, silently staring down at me, massive arms folded over the planes of his chest. I shake my head and take a deep breath, launching into a comprehensive recount of my time in the Ire.

King Jovan is statue-still, mouth slightly open when I finish. He started pacing during the middle of my account and has only just stopped.

"It's a lot to take in ..." My words seem to jolt him out of his stupor. I didn't realize how much information I'd just unloaded on him. I've had months to process the discovery of the Ire and the events that have happened since.

"I'd figured the flying people were on the Great Stairway. But you say they're all mixed? You showed your face to the leader to gain their help, almost got caught while destroying the pathway, and were sighted by the

soon-to-be-dead uncle who used to beat you.” He summarizes. I nod slowly. I can’t tell if he is annoyed or angry.

“How the fuck do you get yourself into this stuff?” He’s angry.

“I ... don’t know.” The truth of my words hits me and I let out a giggle. The storm on Jovan’s face breaks briefly before coming back full-force. I’m surprised he didn’t lose his temper when I’d told him about Cassius, but somehow he reined himself in.

“Why did you show the leader your face?” he asks, jaw ticking.

I shrug. “It was the only way to prevent war.”

His eyes are narrowed. Oddly, I’m much more comfortable dealing with annoyed Jovan. “Do I need to kill him?” he asks.

If anyone else said this I’d think they were joking. “No.” I frown. “I know the consequences of what I did. And I trust Adox. As much as you can trust anyone.”

He grunts at this and resumes his pacing for several minutes. I can see him trying to process everything I’ve said. Hidden people, flying, halted army, Olina sighted. I bet he’s still wondering if he needs to kill the Ire’s leader.

He stops in front of me with a long, drawn-out sigh. “You have a plan?”

I sigh. “Not really.”

He moves to brush my hair back from my face. I recall who we are just in time to jerk back. His hand curls into a fist and he lowers it to his side.

I avoid his gaze, and in doing so I see little things I’ve missed. The circles under his eyes. The tightness in his shoulders.

I move to place my hand on his, but pull it back. Tiredness is lowering my guard. “How have you been?” I ask.

He looks up warily. I know he doesn’t like to share his thoughts. It’s one thing we have in common. Actually, one of many traits we share. “I saw your men camped in the First Sector. They saw me flying.”

He rolls his head around on his shoulders. “You’re lucky they didn’t shoot you down.”

I stare at him and wait.

He glares and takes the hint. “Yes, they marched two days after you left for the ... Ire.”

My blinks are getting longer. “What are we going to do?” I ask

wearily.

“We?” he asks. I narrow my eyes at the humor in his voice.

“Yes. What are you, as the king of Glacium, and me, as the Tatum of Osolis, going to do about this?” I can tell he wants to smile, but he doesn’t. He leans forward and taps a finger against my lips. It’s distracting beyond all reason. I swat him away, before giving in to temptation and risking a look at his mouth. I bite back a groan when I see it’s just the same—smooth and hard all at once.

When I look up, his gaze is steeled. I pull back, confused.

“I think the best course of action is to wait to see what the army does with the delay.” He resumes his pacing. “It sounds as though there’s a good chance they’ll be forced to turn around. There’s really nothing else we can do with the pathway destroyed anyway.”

“I agree. But I also know my mother won’t stop. Not now she’s so openly declared herself. She won’t be thwarted by those she deems beneath her. I also fear for the Ire folk. I assured Adox we would do our best to protect them,” I say, standing up from where I lean on the table.

Jovan waves a hand. “Of course, of course.” I knew Jovan wouldn’t let the Ire down. I was right to trust him.

He stops in front of me. “What are you smiling at?” he asks. I’m startled and blank my face.

“I’ll be happy to assure the Ire of our alliance when they arrive to give their report in a week.” I cover my slip.

“I will meet them when they come.” This is within Adox’s request. I nod, forcing my eyes to stay open as they become blurry with sleep. This time I don’t catch his hand before it grasps my chin in a gentle grip.

“What were you really smiling at?” he asks. I shake my head and close my eyes.

“You need sleep, Olina.”

“Yes,” I mumble.

“Preferably not while you’re upright,” he grumbles. I roll my eyes at him. I’ve only done that once. Maybe twice.

“I’ll sleep once I talk to Landon,” I say. I want to check how my brother’s been coping during my absence.

“You may see him once you’ve rested,” Jovan orders. My eyelids snap open at his demanding voice.

A crease forms between my eyebrows as our gazes lock. The tension becomes unbearable and then somehow, it changes to something more. But there's still that hardness in his gaze. Why is that there? I need to say something. I need to tell him nothing can happen between us. I even thought about what I could say, that I don't think I'll ever have a normal relationship. That's my life. The only man who is strong enough to handle my destiny, is the one man I can never have. If I'm somehow able to rule Osolis, our subjects will never stand for a relationship between us. If I *can't* rule, it will be because everyone knows I'm half-Bruma and Jovan's people will raise hell. We're stuck either way.

"Do you fear me now?" he asks in a hoarse voice, startling me.

"What?" I ask, shock sharpening my voice.

"For what happened after the ball." His jaw clenches. Is this why he's acting strange?

My face warms as I understand we're having *this* conversation. I'd identified my attraction to Jovan soon after returning from the Outer Rings. I guess I'd been too sad about Kedrick to notice him before. The night of the First Sector ball we both drank enough to forget ourselves. The next morning I'd run to the Ire with Crystal, afraid of what I felt for Jovan, and afraid of what he'd unleashed in me. I'd been determined to forget him for the good of everyone.

He still grips my face and I can't say a word. Embarrassment twists my tongue.

"I was so patient. So careful with you," he says softly. "But my control slipped that night. I'm older, and more experienced. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you." He's breathing hard when he finishes. His hand releases my chin and he steps back. "Please accept my apologies, if you can."

His words turn over in my stunned mind. I struggle to understand them at first. But eventually the meaning becomes clear. I tilt my head in bewilderment. He's got it all wrong. I won't have him shoulder the blame for both of us.

"Y-you think you took advantage of me?" I ask, shocked to believe he could think so. But he was nearly five years older, so I can see how he'd come to the ridiculous conclusion.

His eyes are dark as they rest on me.

I shake my head again. "If anything, it was the other way around."

Jovan throws his head back in uproarious laughter. I listen to him battle for breath, enjoying the rare sound. I don't understand why he's laughing, but that's not unusual for me here.

"How do you figure that?" he says. "You were inexperienced. You should have been courted, not taken to bed after one kiss."

My whole being wants to get out of here. This isn't a conversation I ever wanted to have. With anyone! There's not even a thread to pick on my flying suit to distract me. "Jovan, we were drunk," I mumble, surveying the floor. "We forgot our stations because of our ... mutual attraction," I force out, cringing. "I knew what my actions would lead to. I wanted them to lead to ... *that*. And I didn't run because I was afraid of you, or felt disrespected. Things here are so different from Osolis. I'm aware of that and I can handle it." I meet his eyes for the first time, begging him to see the truth there.

"Then why did you run from me?" he asks in low voice.

It strikes me for the first time that I've hurt him terribly. The realization is oddly painful. "I thought to give us time to regain the proper distance expected of two opposing rulers. I refuse to put myself at risk of repeating my mother's mistake."

His expression is blank. I can't glean anything from it.

I give him an exasperated look, trying to figure him out. "There can be nothing between us! You know this ..."

It's tense and deadly silent. I close my eyes so I don't have to see his horrible, hard face.

He moves to the second exit. It leads back into the hallway. "I think it's best if you rest. We can discuss these updates more completely when you're refreshed." I walk up to him, avoiding his penetrating gaze. Times like these, when he's closed down, I have to convince myself he was smiling moments before.

He grabs my arm as I squeeze past him. "I'm sorry that you have any cause to regret what we shared. The night was one of the best of my life." His words are a statement. He enjoyed what we shared. I smile down at his hand on mine, unreasonably happy at his words. He's reassured some small insecurities I had from our night together. He puts a hand on the wall by my head, caging me.

I crane my neck to peek up at him in the doorway, deciding to set one matter straight before I close this matter for good. "I never said I regretted

what we shared. It just can't happen again," I say. I congratulate myself on getting the hard words out. "For what it's worth ..." I look down again. "I'm happy it happened with you."

Something sparks in his piercing blue eyes. I move between his eyes, trying to understand the sudden energy in his face. The tension is at overwhelming levels now. He opens his mouth to speak again, but I dart under his arm.

"You should get some sleep as well," I call over my shoulder.

Chapter Five

I wake late during the next day. I'm back in the drab "dungeon" room from my first stay. It's not that bad, really, but it pales in splendor compared to the room adjoining the king's, where I stayed as Frost. I miss the comfort and space of the prettier room. But I can imagine the talk if I moved back there as Olina.

Looking around the stone walls, I notice how bare it is. Where are Olandon's belongings? I swing my feet onto the cold floor and hurry through washing and dressing. A long bath can wait until evening.

Four guards stand to attention as I stride out of the door. I recognize one of them instantly.

"Wrath!" I say, and kick myself mentally.

Wrath looks at me curiously as the others share a look. He sees their confusion and shifts uncomfortably.

"Tatuma Olina," he addresses me. "I don't go by that name anymore. Please call me Warren." I bite my lip under the veil. Warren ... a dependable, stable name. Just like the man before me. It's still weird.

"I apologize, Warren. I'm glad you are one of my guards. I've heard your fighting ability would rival many of our best on Osolis." One of the watchmen snorts. I turn my attention on him.

"Is something the matter, watchman?" I ask. He looks down at me with contempt in his gaze. The man to his left elbows him.

"No, Tatuma, nothing is the matter." I step up to him.

"Then you'd do well to be respectful in my presence. I'm sure the king demands nothing less than the utmost professionalism." I let my words hang in the air. Most of the castle Bruma are accustomed to me now, but clearly not everyone.

The contempt is still there, but he drops his eyes. "Understood, Tatuma Olina."

Lunch is in full swing as I pass through the archway, veil in place. I relax at the familiar sight of the food hall, with its beamed ceilings and stone walls. Large tapestries hang from the walls—a new addition since I was last here. Had my complaint to Jovan about the dullness of this castle sparked this change? The tapestries are extraordinary, running from the ceiling, most of

the way to the floor. It must have taken years and many hands to undertake such a task. I trip as another thought occurs to me. Did Arla organize all this finery? Was she trying to get her claws into Jovan again?

Predictably, the assembly quiets when I enter. I am so used to this now, it hardly bothers me. I grab a plateful of food and head to the delegates' table.

"Where is everyone?" I ask Jaquiline. She's the wife of one of the delegates, Roman.

She barely lifts her head. "In the First Sector, protecting us from *your* people." She turns away. I rock back, surprised by the venom in her tone. The woman welcomed me, had stuck up for me from the start. She'd been upset with me since my return from the Outer Rings. I would've thought she'd be over her anger by now.

"Oh, shut up, Jacky. You sound like an idiot," Fiona snaps. She moves around the table to hug me. Fiona's anger surprises me nearly as much. I wasn't gone that long, was I? Why is everyone out of sorts?

"I'm glad you're back safe. Jovan announced you've delayed your mother's army indefinitely. Everyone's so grateful to you," Fiona says.

"More like suspicious," Jacqueline murmurs.

Fiona stamps her foot. "Just piss off, why don't you?" My eyebrows shoot upward. Fiona just swore!

Jacky looks up from her meal, glaring at the pair of us. She stands, and marches off to another table.

"I've never seen you so mad before," I say. Has Jacky done something to her?

Sanjay's usually gentle wife throws herself onto the bench beside me. "I shouldn't have lost my temper, I suppose. She's just been so mean lately. And I don't know why. She's been hanging around with Arla more and more, too. She used to *hate* her! And she's so nasty about ... well, you," she admits. "And I'm pregnant."

"What!" I exclaim after digesting all the information all at once. "Congratulations!" I give her another hug. "You and Sanjay must be so happy." I expect her smile to grow. But it fades instead. To my horror, tears well in her light blue eyes. Fiona could bring down an army with her sadness. She's so tender-hearted you immediately want to cherish her. She shifts her blonde hair forward to hide her tears from the rest of the assembly.

“Sanjay says he’s happy about it. But I think he’s lying. He’s grown so distant, Olina. I don’t know what’s wrong! It feels like everyone here has changed. I’m so glad you’re back,” she sobs.

“Remember, we’re on the brink of war.” I squeeze her hand softly. “Sanjay’s mood might be no more than his worry about keeping his new family safe.” I’m glad to see my words have the desired effect. Sanjay loves Fiona. I can’t imagine them apart.

“I never thought of that,” she says happily.

“The tapestries are a new addition,” I note in an attempt to distract her.

She latches on to the topic. “Yes! Aren’t they beautiful? They were the king’s mothers. It took us forever to get them up! But it would probably take more effort to get them back off the wall, I think.”

Someone weighs down the bench beside me. “I must talk with the Tatuma,” a low voice says. Fiona dips into an immediate curtsy, leaving immediately.

“That was rude.” I stab my pear with a knife.

The king ignores my comment. “I want you to join my council.”

I choke on a piece of the fruit. “What on Solis for? Your advisors will ...”

His eyes glint with mischief. “Hate it? I don’t care. You have the best ties to the Ire, and the most recent information. You also possess fighting skill. You’ll be a valuable asset,” he finishes.

I swallow my pear and lick my fingers. An asset, huh? “I’ll get back to you on that,” I say.

His silence is gratifying.

“Joining my advisory is an honor, Olina,” he states. His voice hasn’t changed, but I know he’s angry. I grin and pat his hand.

“Keep your fur on. I was joking. You Bruma have no sense of humor,” I say with a sigh.

“That’s the first and last time I’ll ever hear a Solati say that,” he says dryly. I chuckle and then remember a question I had from last night.

“Why is Blaine on your council?” I ask. Jovan picks up a slice of my pear and eats it.

He makes a questioning sound in the back of his throat. “He was one of my father’s most trusted advisors, after Rhone and Drummond. He was an

advisor before I exiled him, too.”

“It doesn’t worry you ... that you exiled him and he’s regained his position so easily?” I ask. Jovan’s posture tightens.

“My father trusted him implicitly. There’s no reason to suspect otherwise,” he says.

My instincts won’t allow me to be so trusting. “I don’t know if I’d be so forgiving,” I say quietly.

“Lucky you’re not king, then.” He stands. “Meeting room after you finish.”

I sit, simmering for a time at Jovan’s dismissal. There must be more to Blaine’s return than Jovan’s letting on. There’s no way he could just forgive everything Blaine had done on Osolis so easily. Was there? A familiar laugh sounds from across the room. The noise tugs a reluctant smile from me. I get up from the now-empty table and cross the room to my brother. He’s laughing with Ashawn. Not something I thought I’d ever see.

I shake off disappointment at Jovan’s cold treatment. This is what I’d asked for; a distance appropriate for our station. I wasn’t going to ask him to change that, so I wouldn’t voice my complaints. This is what I wanted.

“Brother,” I say in greeting.

“Tatuma. I was just on my way to see you.” He bows and then hugs me. I blink at his affection. To say Olandon was shocked when he found out about my blue eyes was an understatement. And then everything moved so quickly after Jimmy warned us of the army’s approach that there wasn’t enough time to talk at length. Olandon seemed to take the news well at the time, but I hadn’t been entirely sure about what reception I’d get from him.

“You look well,” I say as I hold my brother at arm’s length. It’s harder than it used to be. He’s grown much since our time on Osolis together. I’m relieved to see he’s gained more weight still from his near-lethal crossing of the Oscala. Goosebumps rise on my arms as I feel the fear of almost losing him anew.

“I am well,” he says with a smile. He means it.

“Someone’s been looking after him,” Ashawn calls out. A table of women next to us burst into giggles. I watch with interest as my brother shifts on his feet.

“Indeed,” I say. I’m unsure what to make of that comment.

Olandon folds his hands behind his back. “Sister, I must talk with

you.”

I groan at the timing. This is what I’ve been waiting for—Olandon’s report. He has news on mother, my people, and on her plans, I know it. He’d only given me the bare minimum so far, gravely ill from his Oscala crossing. I grimace. If I skip it, I wouldn’t put it past Jovan to carry me in there over his shoulder. I’d rather retain my dignity. “Of course, Landon. I’m impatient to hear of it,” I admit. “But King Jovan wishes me to sit in on the council session.”

He bows. “I will find you after.” Something has changed in him since my time spent destroying the pathway.

“You are more relaxed,” I venture.

He nods, reflecting. “I am. I’ve found Ashawn to be interesting enough. I decided I should make the best of this hovel while I’m here. It will make the time until we’re home pass all the more quickly.” I hum in the back of my throat, displeased with his words. Sadly, this is progress.

“The king has asked me to join his advisory,” I confide. Olandon’s expression doesn’t change, but he leans in to me.

“That can be no bad thing. You will be able to see the inner workings of their councils. It might prove useful.” He speaks quietly, for only me to hear.

I frown at his words as I leave for the meeting room. Olandon has many great qualities. But he is Solati through and through, and perhaps a bit too much under my mother’s thumb, though he’d always resisted her command when it came to me.

The council room is still filling up when I arrive. The old advisors take their seats around the stone circle. It was where the king first interrogated me, and now I was on his council. I stand awkwardly to one side of the circle table, unsure of where to sit. Mother only let me attend a few of her sessions with the Satums, always trying to keep me in ignorance of her rulings. Apart from my thorough knowledge of our histories and my experience in the spotlight, I really know nothing of leading my people. This will be a good opportunity to learn.

Jovan strides into the room with Roscoe and Drummond in tow. Drummond is unhappy.

“Be seated. There is much to discuss,” Jovan commands. I stay where I am, waiting to see where everyone else sits. I lean against the table and

cross my arms, eager to convey confidence despite my uncertainty. Roscoe looks up and sees my predicament. He whispers in Jovan's ear.

"Tatuma Olina, welcome. Please take a seat next to Roscoe," he instructs. The man next to Roscoe splutters in outrage. I imagine Blaine's eyes are glittering too. He'll also be displaced. Jovan ignores his men, obviously in no doubt the men will obey his order, despite their fury.

"I've invited the Tatuma to join my advisory for the duration of her stay on Glacium," he says. He looks around the room expectantly. But it appears they advisors have been struck into shocked silence.

Eventually one rouses himself enough to voice his opinion. "You've invited a *Solati* to join the council?" This unleashes the predictable torrent of complaints.

"She'll run straight to the Tatum!"

Jovan sits back and lets them have their say. But one comment catches his attention.

"This is preposterous! What would your father think?" a red-cheeked man shouts.

The king stands, fists on the stone table before him. "Might I remind you, Yate, that I am king—not my father. I strive to do my best to his memory, but you will remember who holds the throne. The Tatuma has graciously agreed to help us. She's the most informed of us all." He sits back down and gestures me to his right. I plant my feet.

"With respect, King Jovan, I will be sitting here." I point to the seat in front of me. The one directly opposite him. It had occurred to me I wanted to assert my position here. I wasn't one of Jovan's men. I was the Tatuma of Osolis. And though it was unlikely I could rule, if I did, this would make me the king's equal. I would sit opposite him, instead of displacing his own men and creating bad will.

Jovan studies me in that quiet, dangerous way of his.

"As you wish." He gives a slight bow and I take my seat, straight-backed in the hard chair.

"I'm about to tell you something that will be difficult to believe. But for those of you who saw the young boy fly into the food hall last week, perhaps it won't overly stretch your imaginations," Jovan begins. "Do not make comment until I finish."

This ought to be interesting. I only wish Blaine wasn't about to hear

all of this.

“The Tatum has discovered a race of people living among the isles of the Great Stairway. They call themselves the Ire. They’ve survived on the floating islands for many generations using flying contraptions, called Soars. The boy you saw knew the Tatum and came to warn her. This is how we learned of the Tatum’s betrayal.” Several of the men look my way to see how I’m taking this comment. Don’t they realize I hate my mother? I take no offense to Jovan’s words.

He continues. “Olina returned to the Ire with the boy and managed to convince their leader ... Arox?”

“Adox,” I correct him.

“Managed to convince Adox to help,” he says with a nod to me. “Over the last week the Ire have removed the supports on the pathway to Osolis.”

There are murmurs at this news. I can’t discern the overall feeling.

“The Tatum will be receiving weekly updates from the Ire regarding the army’s progress. She’s negotiated what promises to be an advantageous alliance between Glacium and this new community,” he says. “Unfortunately, during the removal of these supports, we believe Cassius—the leader of the Solati army—sighted the Soars.” I notice he leaves out the part where Cassius is my uncle. I know many of the people in the room will realize this anyway.

“How convenient that the leader of the army found out about the Ire,” Drummond says dryly.

Jovan opens his mouth to respond, but I cut in. “Drummond, I can understand your misgivings. Perhaps it would help you to understand if I explain that another of the groups dropped one of the wooden supports they were meant to be destroying and it gave us away. The noise alerted the Solati to our presence. During our attempt to return to the Ire we were spotted. I recognize you have nothing but my word on this. But I hope my actions in forging an alliance between Glacium and the Ire will go some way in securing the probation of your judgment.” I take a shaking breath, grateful I got that all out without fumbling.

“I’m interested to hear what you promised this Adox in return for our alliance,” Blaine cuts in. The man next to him nods fervently.

I don’t try to conceal my dislike of him. “Blaine, how nice to see you’ve returned from exile.” My voice is dripping with politeness. “I simply

promised, on behalf of the king, that we would protect the Ire from Osolis.”

“She says ‘we’ like she belongs here,” one whispers. I feel my face burn under the veil.

Jovan holds up a hand. “The problem of war is solved for now—though delayed, not ended. The Tatuma and I agree that the Tatum will not stop now she has shown her hand.”

“We need to attack while they’re not expecting it. Set fire to their world. That’s the sure way to finish this for good,” the man next to Blaine blusters. I’m so outraged I see red for half a second.

“Gerden, what do you think happens to ice when it melts?” Jovan asks quietly. I simmer in my seat. My hands are in tight fists. I uncurl them and place them flat on my thighs.

“It turns to water,” Gerden stutters. Jovan continues to glare at him for a long moment. The man sags when Jovan returns his attention to the rest of the room.

“Half of our force will remain in the First Sector as security, with the rest returning here, or to their homes to conserve resources at camp,” Jovan concludes. The men murmur their agreement to this order.

“This problem aside for now, we must address the civil issues which Blaine has recently brought to my attention,” he starts.

Civil issues?

“There has been unrest in the Outer Rings since before my father’s rule. This has recently turned to mass unrest. Reports.”

His order meets silence.

“In front of her?” one asks.

Jovan stands for the second time. I’ve never seen his men question him like this. Outside of the council everyone hastens to his beck and call. Do they question him because they’re in session? Or because of how strongly they oppose me witnessing their civil agenda?

“The next person to question why the Tatuma is here will never utter another word,” he says. “You insult me by doing so. I do not tolerate insults well,” he warns softly. A shiver runs down my spine.

His threat seems to do the trick.

I sit back against the cold stone of the chair, astonished as I listen to Yate speak. The Outer Rings are uniting in rebellion and attacking the Middle Ring. Possibly gathering weapons. What started this? Was it the Dome? I

lean forward, listening closely to the conversation around me.

“King Jovan, we have reason to suppose the whorehounds are close to the root of the trouble,” Blaine states, looking toward Jovan and then quickly around the group. The whorehounds were a criminal gang who collected young boys and girls for prostitution. I’d killed seven of them who tried to take me when I ran to the Outer Rings. Blaine leans forward and covers his mouth with a few fingers. “This group have been slowly strengthening for years. They’re involved in most of the crime rampant in the Outer Rings.” He covers his mouth again briefly, and points at Jovan. “Mark my words, the whorehounds are at the root of the trouble.”

Roscoe addresses the group next, but I don’t hear him because I’m reeling inside.

The quick head movements, the covering of the mouth, the pointing, and the word repetition. Blaine is lying!

Two sectors ago, I’d searched Blaine and Macy’s room, trying to find some evidence he was Prince Kedrick’s murderer. Instead, I’d found documents. Incriminating documents. At the time, I honestly hadn’t cared what happened to Glacium, so I’d hidden them away in my room and forgotten them. But the details of those letters flood back to me now that I’ve caught the greasy delegate lying to his king. Much of the content of those letters could be linked to what was now happening in the Outer Rings! On top of that, I’d seen Blaine’s relationship with Hale’s shady barracks, and then there was his presence in the dodgiest part of Glacium during his exile.

Blaine was behind this.

I should’ve shown the letters to Jovan. Then all of this could’ve been avoided. Now the letters were in the castle in the Third Sector, days’ travel from here.

“You need to be seen helping the Outer Rings in some way,” a man, Jak interjects. “This will calm them. Paint you in a favorable light.”

“Is it possible the instigator of this rebellion could be from the wealthier rings?” I interrupt. Silence meets my words. I press. “It seems odd that the Outer Rings has previously only caused trouble on a small level. I don’t feel as though these whorehounds you speak of would be able to spark such a movement. Surely if they cause the majority of crime in the Outer Rings, they’d be avoided, not followed.”

“I agree, Tatuma,” Roscoe puts in. “I’ve had the same suspicion

myself. With the king's reign still in its early stages and with war at our doorstep, it's not unreasonable to suppose there's disquiet in the general populace. A rebel may consider this an opportune time to take over." Outraged murmurs fill the room.

Jovan is leaning forward looking across at me. Unlike the others, he knows I have firsthand experience living in the Outer Rings. He'll read between the lines of what I am saying.

"We need to talk to a source." Yate pounds his fist on the table. "A local." It's a good idea. I nod along with the others and murmur my approval. He continues. "Whatever happened to that Frost woman?"

* * *

"I wish I could've seen your face when he said that," Jovan laughs in my ear at dinner. I've been dragged up to the throne table despite my protestations. At least I got one meal down with my friends. Adnan is there tonight, Roscoe's son. He must have travelled back from the front line. It's nice to see one of my delegate friends. The others will soon be back as well, with Jovan's latest order.

I grin, even though Jovan can't see it. "It did shock me," I whisper. "But now that I've thought of it, I think the idea has merit."

Jovan chokes on his drink and I laugh, leaning in. I know Olandon listens on my other side.

"Frost can get your answers. I can get in contact with my friends in the Outer Rings and find out what's really happening," I say in a low, rapid voice. I want to find out what Blaine's really doing in the Outer Rings.

"No." Jovan sets his jaw. I wait for his reason. He usually has a good explanation for saying no.

It doesn't come.

"You can't survive an attack on two fronts, Jovan." I remind him. "I could leave under cover of a meeting with the Ire." I sit back in my chair and fidget with the hem of my tunic. Jovan continues eating. The ignoring tactic might work with his subjects, but it won't work with me. Time for a countermove.

"There is something else I've been meaning to speak with you two about. Adox has now seen my face. The number of people who've seen my

face is growing—even if they don't know my name. It only takes one person to figure out who I am, and then everything is out of my control." I turn to Olandon to make sure he's listening. "I want to get an idea of a larger reaction to my face," I say.

Olandon looks at me with confusion.

Jovan lowers the goblet from his mouth, looking around. Only Jak and Gerden remain up here, and they're several seats away.

"You want to show people?" he asks. There's no mistaking the eagerness in his voice. I tuck away a smile as I nod. Jovan has made his view on my veil clear, time and again.

He continues. "I mean, it's always been a matter of when someone would find out, rather than *if*," he agrees. "But I've several ideas on the subject. I think it best if you show those closest to you first and build a small support group."

I blink a few times. I knew he wanted the veil gone, but how long has he been planning this for?

"What if this group you show do not react the way you expect?" Olandon asks. My heart beats rapidly at the thought.

"That risk has long kept me quiet on the matter. But I won't know how to proceed if I don't know how people will react. I believe this is necessary, whatever the outcome." Olandon doesn't agree with what I am saying. But he won't say more here. A small part of me wonders if he's embarrassed about the plan. Ashamed to have a mixed sister.

"You seem very ... calm about this," Jovan speculates. I don't blame him. In the past, any talk of removing my veil has resulted in a panic attack. I'm not calm about this to any degree. But it's easy to control when I can think of removing the veil as some distant event. And I walked around without a veil for a whole sector. Part of my fear in removing the material was always based on what people would think. After my time in the Outer Rings, I knew the reaction to my appearance. I knew I looked the same as others. The part which still terrified me was their reaction to who I *was*. My position.

"Let's just say I had a moment of clarity," I say. "Plus, soon both worlds will find out an entire mixed race exists, i'm not alone anymore. And I know I can go to the Ire—if all else fails."

I frown at a faint growling noise from Jovan and I go in for the kill

now that he's distracted.

"I'll want to show the delegates. But I also want to show the members of the barracks."

"The poor people?" Olandon says incredulously.

"They're richer than you or I will ever be," I say with a bite.

Jovan changes position, sprawling back on his throne. This time it's not a dismissal. He's contemplating everything I've said. He won't talk until he's ready.

Several minutes pass before he leans toward me, knuckles resting on the table. "Well played, Tatuma. You can go and collect your friends. Though it goes against my instincts to tell anyone not within my reach. These people from the Outer Rings will be much harder to kill than the delegates," he says.

"Jovan!" I reprimand. The thought of my friends dying makes my stomach churn.

"You'd be surprised what I'd do to keep you safe," he says. My mouth snaps shut. My mind is screaming at me to check Olandon's reaction, but I resist.

Jovan continues. "However, it's your secret to tell, and I'll help you if you deem them worthy."

I blink back a few tears, wondering if I'm not more emotional about this than I thought.

"I'm sending men with you," Jovan decided.

I'm shaking my head before he's finished. "They'll expose me."

The king's hand shakes. He's seconds away from slamming his fist on the table. "Dammit, Olina, don't be so stubborn."

"I'm not—"

"My sister is fully capable of protecting herself," Olandon interjects. I groan inwardly as I feel the Jovan's anger

"A fact I'm constantly made aware of," the King says coolly. "But I don't think you realize the current dangers waiting for your sister in the Outer Rings." It's the scary voice. I lower my head into my hands, staring at Kaura underneath the table. She tilts her adorable head to the side, whining slightly. She always knows when something's wrong. I scrunch my eyes closed at the angry comments passing over my head, chuckling when Kaura buries her face under her paws.

“I know, girl. Believe me, I know.”
It looks like I’ll be going back to the barracks.

Chapter Six

I duck out the back of the house before day has broken.

Fiona's aware of the sneaking I'm about to do. Jovan spoke to her briefly—well, *ordered* her—to let her know that I'd be using her house to ditch my watchmen in order to carry out “official” business. If all went according to plan, my guards would soon be experiencing a timely distraction.

It's much easier to run away when the king of Glacium is in on my plan.

My veil is off, and I'm in the poorest quality clothing I was able to source. Unfortunately, even the kitchen helper's garments are far better than the rags worn in the Outer Rings.

I clamber over the low stone walls separating the assembly housing until I reach the pathway into the Inner Ring. Hoisting my pack, I take confident strides, worthy of my Frost persona, in the direction of the Second Sector. I hope to find Alzona there. And my other friends from the pits too. They should have returned to the barracks after the ball in the First, but I haven't spoken to any of them since Crystal left the Ire. I need their help. Frost is the best hope we have of getting accurate information, or any information not fed to the council by Blaine. I have a few of my own ideas I want to set in motion as well.

I stick to the wide lanes during my travels, knowing I'll make more ground by using the roads in the wealthier circles. In the Inner and Middle Rings, the housing is split into neat blocks with lanes and ways in between each block. The Outer Rings, in contrast, are a mass of winding, dead-end alleys I've yet to completely figure out. A journey between two sectors using the *Outer Ring's* paths could take a full day—if you knew where you were going—because as well as being impossible to figure out, there was more ground to cover; the Outer Rings are the largest of the three rings, wrapping around the far outskirts of Glacium. I needed to keep this visit as short as possible to avoid raising suspicions in the castle, as the Tatuma's absence would be noticed. It meant the main roads for me.

The sky has long grown dark as I cut into the Second Sector and turn toward the edge of Glacium. Though I spent nearly a whole sector out here,

the tall shadows and quiet rustlings from above unnerve me. I know a dozen pairs of eyes linger on me right now. Soon everyone will know Frost has returned.

Luckily I have a fearsome reputation now. While living in the barracks I'd beaten most of my opponents in the fighting pits at one time or another. The people here knew the penalty of trying to fight me. Or they used to ...

I find the main cobbled walkway in complete darkness, secretly proud of myself for remembering the way. The difference between my first fumbling journey to these streets and my return is like fire to ice. In no time, I'm turning down the alleyway to Alzona's barracks. I just hope they're here. They could be at the pit fights in another sector, though it's mid-week.

I take a deep breath and raise my fist to knock on the first of many heavy gates into the compound.

It takes several minutes of knocking to get a response.

"This better be fucking good." I bounce on my feet when Alzona's grumbling reaches me over the uncovered, barbed gates into the barracks. "If it's those little shits again, I'm going to get Avalanche to kick them into Sector Four."

"They only do it because they're hungry. Maybe if you gave them our scraps they wouldn't annoy you." I smile at Blizzard's reprimand. He never stops thinking of others.

"Save your 'feed the world' crap," she snarls. "Plus, Avalanche doesn't leave scraps."

They reach the final gate and glare through the slits at me. I wave at them, lamely.

"Frost!" Blizzard exclaims. Alzona wrenches open the gate and I'm enfolded in a hard hug before she pushes me away and replaces her look of shock with a scowl.

"There's no king chasing you this time, is there?" she asks. Jovan had chased me to the barracks after I escaped the castle for the second time. I laugh, glad Jovan didn't hear that, and attempt to reassure her over my shoulder as I'm dragged into Blizzard's arms.

I trail happily after my friends, looking fondly around the damp, chilly stone and wood surroundings that I've come to love. There was a time when I couldn't wait to escape this place. Now the narrow hallways and thin

walls are familiar. Cheering noises fill the kitchen when I'm presented, Blizzard's arm still wrapped around my shoulders. I'm passed around to receive hugs from everyone: Shard, Avalanche, Ice and Crystal. I look around for a moment, waiting for Flurry before remembering he's gone, that he never survived the Dome. The realization delivers a solid blow to my elation at returning. I recover my smile as I catch a questioning look from Crystal.

"I'll tell you later," I whisper to her. Last she'd seen me, I was still in the Ire and not planning to return to Glacium anytime soon.

A drink is shoved in my hands as Shard straddles the bench next to me.

"What brings the mighty Frost back?" he says, a twinkle in his eye. It softens the sharpness of his features.

I smile. "I've been wanting to see you all for a long time."

"Look! The girly's gone and got all fancy on us again," Ice blurts. I feel my cheeks heat as they laugh. They don't know who I am, but my language, and that of Shard's and Blizzard's, sets us apart as outsiders in the Outer Rings. I've guessed the others think I'm from the Inner Ring. Nerves rattle in my abdomen as I remember my plan. Talking to Jovan and Olandon about my unveiling is one thing, doing it is another. Do I have the courage to confess my true identity?

"My time since seeing you all has been ... interesting, to say the least." I smile quickly at Crystal. Alzona scowls at her. My heart sinks as I see things haven't improved there.

"I need to know what's happening in the Outer Rings. And ... I have a couple of favors to ask."

Blizzard smashes his cup on the table, sloshing liquid over Avalanche, who whacks him in the back of the head.

"About bloody time people made a stir in my opinion. The situation here has been too bad for too long! The king needs to do something about it." He speaks loudly, and stares daggers around the table, daring anyone to disagree.

"Yes, but why now? What's changed?" I direct my question to the group.

"You couldn't feel it on your way in? Didn't see it?" Shard inquires. I shake my head, thinking back on the last part of my journey. But the Outer

Rings always felt dangerous to me. I'd have to pay more attention.

"Your question needs to be 'who,' not what. You know I like to keep an eye on things," Ice answers. "There have been a lot of murmurings going around. Hale's been busy. Not putting many in the pits nowadays, really." Ice follows up his words with an evil grin. "Makes me wonder where he's getting his goldies."

"I don't care. Hale's absence from the arena has been *great* for business," inserts Alzona with a face-splitting beam. Crystal rolls her eyes.

"I knew it," I say.

"Knew what?" Ice asks quickly. Shard snorts.

It's funny what I can tell this group of people that I wouldn't dare tell others. I would die for every person here, and they me. "I think Blaine is behind all this," I say truthfully. I watch closely for Alzona's reaction to my words. I'm not disappointed. Her eyes widen. She knows something, but what I'm not sure. Last sector, during a pit fight, Zona caught sight of Blaine and hid, emerging incapable of speech once the slimy delegate was gone. There was some kind of history there, and I had hopes she knew something about his plans.

Ice has a frown between his brows. "The man I followed for you in the arena that time?" he asks. I nod.

"Ain't seen him, but there's been a few fancy-dressed outsiders about. He might be staying away, keepin' clean."

"This is the first favor I want to ask of you." I turn to Ice. "I want you to spy on Hale and any of the unrest in the Outer Rings and report to me." Ice is nodding before I finish, but not everyone is happy with this.

"I happen to be the owner of these barracks. You want one of my fighters, that'll cost ya. Especially because you're working for the king."

"You'll be telling the king everything? What makes you think we want to help him?" says Blizzard, arms crossed.

I address Blizzard first. "If Hale is involved, it can't be good. Who would you trust more? Hale or your king?"

"The king put me in the Dome," he retorts.

"Yes, he did. But then when you proved your worth, he treated you as a guest. He gave you clothing, food, drink, and offered you a place amongst the watch," I say quietly. "This in no way excuses the monstrosity of the Dome, but Hale would sooner slit your throat than give you bread. I know

who I'd choose." I don't add that Jovan could just kill him if he doesn't help. Jovan has his ways, and I have mine.

I turn to Alzona. "You'll be compensated for Ice's time, of course. I will pay you the coin for one match won each week."

"I want the price of two matches, considering the risk to Ice." I narrow my eyes at her. She's a fearsome businesswoman, but I wonder if she's ever tried to convince twin boys to stop pranking their nannies.

"The price of one match won. It's no certainty he'd win each week. This is more than you'd normally receive." I ignore Ice's splutters. "Might I also remind you, you'll be in the king's favor. This might prove ... beneficial." Her eyes sparkle with my words.

"I feel like a piece of meat," Ice says with a happy grin.

"You said there was more than one favor?" Shard presses. He's sat quietly this whole time, no doubt observing me closely.

"The king wants to garner goodwill from the Outer Rings to help settle the unrest." This wasn't strictly true. But it was what Jovan needed to be doing, I was just getting the ball rolling. Jovan's rule was excellent, but he had no experience in the Outer Rings, and therefore no strategy to calm his people here.

"I've talked to him about the main issues this area faces. In particular, the violence against women and children." I look around at the others and know they'll be remembering the whore, Ursa, who was strung up, dead in our alley. By the way Crystal's face pinches, I gather she's recalling her own horrific experience with Slay.

"The king wants to fund a fighting program for women. I wanted to propose this to you as a side business, Alzona. You'd start it in your two premises on Glacium. I'd gather the women for your first group," I offer.

Alzona stands and walks away from the table, her back to us. We wait on tenterhooks.

Ice has only slightly more patience than Flurry used to. "So...?" he says.

"It would revolutionize the Outer Rings," Alzona whispers. She turns back excitedly. "Two evenings a week. Led by my own experienced fighters! We'd expand once word got out. Increase the sessions to daily, or maybe double that." She stands at the table in front of me. "I'll do it," she says.

I raise my eyebrows. "Don't you want to discuss prices first?" I ask.

Alzona always wants to discuss how much money she'll be making. She waves a hand at me.

"Not for this," she sniffs. I try not to gape. Zona's going to do this for free? Blizzard, ever the humanitarian, claps her on the back and she stumbles forward with a glare at him. A smaller woman would've ended up on the ground.

"Can I refer these people directly to you?" I ask. I relax my shoulders as she nods.

Avalanche pours me another drink. That was the business side of things out the way.

"How have the pits been?" I ask.

"We're smashing it, girly. Tricks' barracks are our only competition." Ice puffs out his chest, earning a punch on the shoulder from Blizzard. I feel a tug in my chest. Part of me misses the arena. A huge part, if I'm honest. It wouldn't be so bad if I could openly train at the castle. But at the moment I'm stuck training inside my chambers.

"How are Tricks and the men?"

Crystal rolls her eyes. "The same. Especially Sin; he never stops. You know he slept with Arla at the ball?" I wrinkle my nose. Poor Sin.

"Taking advantage of yet another female," Shard hisses. I share a glance with Avalanche after he levels a look Shard's way.

"Have you seen Wrath up at the Castle?" Blizzard asks. I turn my attention from Shard. Wrath was previously part of Tricks' barracks, but accepted a post in the king's watch after the dome.

"Yes, he's one of my guards, actually." I jerk at my slip, but relax as the others have a good laugh at the thought of the king thinking I need protection.

The mood is a happy one, but I have to know. "Can I ask? Did you bury Flurry?" The jubilation stutters to a halt.

Shard answers, pointed face heavy with grief. "We took him out of the rings, into the trees."

Tears choke me. "I wish I'd been there."

Avalanche drops a hand on my shoulder and we all sit for a moment, remembering our friend. I was determined Jovan would put a stop to the Dome. It was nothing more than brutal slaughter.

"Flurry wouldn't want us to be sitting around all glum like," Ice

sniffs.

“You’re right. And I think Frost has something else to ask us.” Shard raises a fine eyebrow.

The mood sharpens and I attempt to keep my nerves from showing. Shoulders relaxed, face impassive, hands loose. I won’t be fooling Shard for one moment. “I need all of you to be at the castle in three days’ time,” I blurt. A predictable bewilderment meets my words.

“You won’t miss a fight. And you won’t need to stay longer than a night if you don’t want to. My reasons are personal only. Nothing to do with the king. But it’s important to me that you’re there,” I say quickly.

Shard eyes me for a long moment. “Done,” he says.

“Sure thing, girly.”

Blizzard and Crystal nod.

Avalanche smiles at me, while Alzona stays silent. That aside, there’s just one thing left for me to do here.

“Alzona? Can I speak to you in private?” She doesn’t want to grant my request. I think my mention of Blaine has already put her on alert. I hold her gaze and eventually she huffs, leading the way out of the mess room.

She steps into the tiny space I used to occupy and shuts the door. Some of my possessions are still scattered around.

“What?” she asks.

This isn’t going to be easy, and I don’t know where to start. After a small deliberation, I decide to start at the beginning, and take a deep breath.

“What I’ve always liked about this place is we each have a past we’re running from, and that’s respected. I understand sharing your past is not an easy thing. I know this firsthand. We hide the truth so deeply it becomes second nature to keep it buried.” I take another breath as I edge sideways in the tiny space between the bed and wall.

“Glacium’s situation is dire. You’re aware of the civil unrest, but I wonder what you know of the inter-world situation?” I ask.

“Nothing,” she says. “Just rumors.”

It’s what I expected. Even with the army mobilizing to the First. “The Solati army is on the Great Stairway,” I say, without preamble. “The king’s watch are camped at the top of the First Sector lying in wait. For now the Tatum’s army is delayed. But it’s not certain she’s stopped.”

Alzona gasps. Obviously the people spreading the rumors are

misinformed.

"This is told to you in the utmost secrecy." I need to outline the gravity of what's happening right now. "If this civil rebellion gets any bigger and the Tatum's army makes it through the Great Stairway, then Glacium will crumble beneath the power of the Solati army. The king cannot fight two wars. I doubt anyone can."

"That's why I'm helping the women, and lending you Ice," she says hesitantly. She knows I'm not finished.

"I need more from you, and I truly apologize for what I'm going to ask you, but it cannot be helped." I look up into her fierce cobalt eyes.

"What do you know of Blaine?"

Her eyes harden, even as her breath comes quickly. It's self-preservation in its simplest form.

"He is the cause of this," I continue. "I have proof. Letters, documents. But if you know Blaine at all, you'll know how sly he is. Apparently, he was also the previous king's trusted friend."

"I know that!" she snaps.

"Then you realize why I need to make sure he's trapped before I present my evidence to the king. He requires proof." Because he's too stubbornly loyal to believe me, I silently add. Alzona sits on the bed and studies her hands. She knows deep down I wouldn't make this request if the situation wasn't dire. But she's successfully hidden for years. I know how difficult it is to throw off self-oppression, so I resist the urge to shake her. "You could give Glacium a fighting chance against this attack. If we remove Blaine from the head of this movement, then I believe we can end the troubles crippling Glacium from within," I say breathlessly.

"Do it," a voice says from the doorway. I whirl, dropping into a crouch.

Crystal stands there. She stares down at Alzona with emotionless eyes, though I gather from her clenched fists that she's not as calm as she'd like us to believe.

"You said you wanted to make things right between us," Crystal says in a brittle voice. "Then do this."

Alzona sits up straight. "How will doing *this* make us any better? You're angry because I didn't jump into the Dome to save you! How will my story make anything right?" She leaps to her feet. I back away so she doesn't

feel trapped. It's easier said than done in the minuscule area. I really shouldn't complain about my room back at the castle.

"Because I know what it means to you!" Crystal cries. "If you can give this up because I ask it, then I'll know I mean something to you. If saving this world isn't good enough for you, then do it for me."

"Trust goes both ways. I still don't know who you really are," Alzona retorts.

"Adox has revealed the Ire to the king," I interject softly. Alzona will have no idea what I'm saying, but I direct the comment at Crystal who starts, looking at me with fearful eyes. She'll understand this means she can tell Zona. She'll also know something huge has happened to make Adox divulge their location. No doubt Crystal will have a few questions about the Ire for me later.

Crystal turns to Alzona. "If you can do this for me, I'll tell you all you wish. And you'll see why I couldn't tell you before," she says to the taller, dark-haired woman. Their eyes lock as they communicate without words.

Alzona is the first to lower her eyes. "I'll do it," she croaks. Crystal gives a short jerk of her head and spins around, leaving the room. I lean against the paper-thin wall, hoping it doesn't give way while I wait for Alzona to collect her thoughts. My old grey uniform is sitting folded on the bed. I wonder who placed it there. The tough yet free life I had here seems like an age ago.

Alzona pushes her hair back with shaking hands. I straighten, sensing she's ready to begin.

"There's no easy way to say this, so I'll just go ahead and get it out," she says in a small voice. I hate the sound. It doesn't sit right on her.

The barracks owner stares at a spot on the wall beside me.

"Blaine is my father."

Chapter Seven

“What?” I stare at her in horror. Blaine is Alzona’s father?

“I’m his only legitimate child, from his first marriage,” she states. The delivery of her words is emotionless. I recognize it as the same tone Shard used while relating Avalanche’s tortured history. Alzona is trying to distance herself from the terrors of her past. I watch as she opens and closes her mouth. She doesn’t seem to know how to continue.

“I know his current wife, Macy. It was she who approached me, asking for self-defense to use against Blaine,” I offer.

Alzona doesn’t display shock like most would at this news. Her reaction tells me more than anything else so far. Empathy for Macy burns from her dark blue eyes.

“Then it’s easier to say,” she sighs. “He beat me. He beat us both. One day he beat my mother until she was a pulpy mess on the kitchen floor. He killed her.” Her voice breaks. She stands, hugging herself. My heart breaks as I finally see her without her sarcastic, defensive and ruthless armor. Her vulnerability will haunt me forever.

“I ran away that night,” she whispers. “I’m the sole witness to his crime. He’ll want me dead. He’s been searching for me for a long time. But I have no idea what his plans are. I haven’t seen him in nearly fifteen years. I don’t want to ever see him again,” she begs.

I edge closer and enfold her in my arms, not sure whether this will make her shut down. She shakes in my arms.

I reach up to stroke her hair. “While Blaine is allowed to roam free, you’ll always be looking behind you. Help me. Help *yourself* to be rid of him once and for all.”

* * *

I sleep on the lumpy mattress in my cramped room filled with the echoes of the night. I force my eyes to stay open as long as possible, but eventually I fall asleep to the beautiful strumming of Blizzard’s guitar. It sounds odd, though, without Flurry’s snores punctuating through at regular intervals.

Despite this, I feel curiously content the next day. I’d intended to

return to the castle, but there's other business to attend to. If I do it today, I won't have to return to the Outer Rings. I'm not sure when I'll get another chance.

The mess room is in full swing when I enter. Avalanche is serving up breakfast from a large pot. Ice slides a loaded plate down the table to me as I sit.

"You got yerself some followers," he says.

I dig into the food, swallowing a hot mouthful of eggs. "What?" I ask, eyes watering. The others share a grim look.

"Two men. Never seem 'em before, so I guess they aren't taking their eyes off these barracks because they're taggin' you for someone," he replies.

A thought occurs to me. I open my mouth to speak, but I'm cut off. "Not king's men," Ice continues.

It's gratifying to know Jovan didn't go against my request.

"Can you find out who they belong to?" I ask.

Ice snorts, spraying eggs over Crystal. Shard and I share an amused glance as Crystal picks the bits out of her strawberry-blonde hair, a disgusted expression on her delicate face. "Course I can, girly."

I start to rise from the table, eggs forgotten, but a pointed look from Avalanche has me sinking back down and picking up some bread. He's as soft as fur despite his scarred features, but he's still four times my size, and he gets offended when people don't eat his food.

"I've got things to do today. I've got to go see Wi-, uh, Leila," I say.

"You need the tags gone?" Ice asks. I nod.

"Preferably. I don't want to cause trouble for the brothel." I shovel the last bite in and stand. This time Shard stands behind me. Across from me, Blizzard folds his arms over his muscled chest and grins.

"You'll have your chance to visit the whorehouse. But I think it's high time you did some training. That fancy stuff at the castle has probably taken your edge away," Shard says.

They do have a point. I have all day. A smile spreads across my face. A little training can't hurt...

* * *

I hobble down the laneway in the direction of the courtyard. Training

hurt.

I blink as a hunched woman waves at me, displaying all three of her teeth. I swear that very same woman told me to fuck off last sector. It doesn't stop. As I continue, children run ahead of me, giggling, and toothless men dip their head as I pass.

The thrashing crowd parts like a hot knife through butter.

What on Solis is going on? The habits from my childhood kick in, I measure my gait and relax my shoulders, never once giving away my discomfort. But unlike my mother's court, the people around me don't seem hostile. In fact, it seems like ... approval? I've seen the masses part for Willow, in lust. And I've seen them part for Blizzard, in respect.

"You'll help us kill 'em all, girly," a man slurs. I push him out of the way, then recall Shard's words about "feeling the difference."

I look back for the man, but he's disappeared in the throng of poor. My eyes dart side to side. Did people used to have their heads together in whispered conversation? I don't remember, but there are several concentrated groups of dodgy-looking men.

I enter the whorehouse and keep my expression neutral at the multitude of naked women before me. At least I know what to expect this time. A finely dressed older woman I've seen before but never spoken with whispers to a young girl—I shudder to think how young. The naked girl runs up the stairs and the woman approaches me.

"You are Frost," she states.

"I am." I nod. "And you own this ... establishment?" I ask politely. The woman gives a tinkling laugh in response. I wonder if she copied it from Willow, or the other way around.

"I can see what Willow means."

I frown. "I'm not sure—"

She grips my elbow in a clawed hand and directs me to the side. She leans in close, breath sweet. "I must thank you for ridding us of Slay. He was a menace to this world. This house is glad to be free of him."

I remove my elbow from her grip and level a look into her keen blue eyes. From the limited bits of information I gathered during my time in the Outer Rings, I know Slay raped and brutalized many women here. There's a connection between the whorehounds, Hale's barracks, and the brothel. The scum must own, or have power over the whores here. "You're welcome. He

lived far longer than he should've. Ursa's family and the countless others here can rest easy now."

The woman's eyes become misty, but she doesn't trouble to hide it from me. "We are each other's family. And yes, it's ... easier now he's gone." She looks over her shoulder at a group of men, moving away without another word when one scowls in our direction. One of Hale's men? Or a whorehound?

I've always assumed the workers here would leave once they found another way to live, but perhaps it isn't that simple. Maybe the women here are not *allowed* to leave.

A chiming laugh lights up the room. A smile spreads on my face. It's hard not to smile around Willow—the real Willow, that is, not my Ire persona. I climb the stairs to meet the Outer Ring's most sought-after whore. She takes my hand in a tender hold. I give her a dry look and see her eyes dance with mischief.

"Come, my lover," she says in a throaty voice. I snort quietly at the deep groans below us.

She doesn't break character as she draws me up the stairs, giving me smoky looks. A few men trail us up the stairs until she closes the door of her room in their faces. She's the best whore for a reason. I know many of her clients are from the middle and inner ring. With her long black hair and lithe, barely clothed frame, she drove the men wild, drawing in those around her without effort.

"What brings you here, Frost?" She smiles without artifice away from the salivating men.

I glance around her room with interest. Soft furs and floaty fabrics are draped artistically around the large bed—the room's centerpiece—to create a sultry and inviting view. I doubt the men who visit Willow even notice, but it's artfully decorated.

An understated wardrobe sits against the wall, but I know this is her pride and joy.

"Bought any new dresses?" I ask. Her expression asks if I'm serious. She flings the doors open with glee and carefully removes a deep red dress. Really, it could be a scarf. I know not to embarrass myself by asking if this is the case.

"Did you ever get that black material?" she asks. I used the lie as a

cover story when I was looking for fabric to replace my veil last sector.

“Yes, in a way,” I muse, thinking of the dress I wore to the ball. Memories of the dress still mortified me. She gives me an odd look, waiting for me to explain.

I get back to business instead. “I have a proposition for you. For all of the women here.”

“Mmmhmm,” she says. She places the red dress back in the wardrobe with loving hands.

“I work for the king now,” I say.

“With him, or under him?” she asks.

I tilt my head trying to dissect the amused look she’s giving me. “Well, under him. He’s the king.” She bursts out laughing. Not the chime laugh—a real one.

I frown and move on once she’s settled. “The king is aware of the issues in the Outer Rings. There are many ways he wishes to improve the situation for the poor of Glacium, and I’ve encouraged him to start with protecting the women and children.”

This stops her laughter. She dashes a lingering tear away, stepping toward me. “How?”

There are only a few things in life that Willow takes seriously, but the safety of the women here is one of them. I outline my plan for her in detail. There’s no laughter in her eyes as she listens to my words.

“And Alzona...” she says dubiously, “...is okay with this plan?”

Alzona will be proud of her cutthroat reputation. “You’d be surprised at how passionate Zona is about it,” I say, remembering her reaction last night. Alzona *never* did anything for free.

I stand, giving the beautiful young woman some space. “From what I’ve heard, the women below you are shown great cruelty by the scum living in the Outer Rings. Who better to teach self-defense to?”

“The idea is sound. It’s the mistress I’ll have to convince. You’re high in her regard after dealing with Slay, but there’s the whorehounds to consider. They control this show. They won’t be happy to know we’re learning to defend ourselves,” she says.

My dealings with the whorehounds is limited, but bloodied. I didn’t know how many they were, or really anything else about them, other than the fact they pushed the young into prostitution. You don’t have to count how

many teeth a dog has to know it can bite. Every part of my being told me the whorehounds were evil.

I'm already prepared for this. "Long term, the whorehounds will be out of the picture. In the short term I thought we could invite a few of them to a 'fake training.' If we show them a clumsy, weak act, they'll see it as a joke."

A wicked smile curves Willow's red lips. "A joke until we crush them?"

I shrug with feigned innocence and head to the door. "I return to the castle tomorrow. If you don't have your answer before then—"

"We'll do it."

Willow faces me. The light behind illuminates her frame underneath the thin material and I keep my gaze steadfastly on her face. I know she isn't embarrassed by these things, but I am.

"I'll convince the mistress. This is the way forward. I see it. You won't lead us astray." I'm dumbfounded by her sincerity. It reminds me of the behavior I witnessed outside.

"In that case, Alzona will be in touch to arrange the particulars." I place my hand on the doorknob. "Have you noticed anything different around here? I saw a couple of weird things on my way over," I venture.

She shrugs. "You mean the uprising?" I try not to gape at her openness. I'd mentioned the king's plan to improve the Outer Rings, but not the rebellion itself. I should've known she'd see straight through that. "Uh, yeah."

"Most of the men here are involved," she says. "A couple of weeks ago they organized raids in the Middle Ring. Killed a whole heap of rich folk. But they've had to go underground now that the king's men are sniffing them out." She winks at me. "Best stay inside after dark. Though they'll probably just want to recruit you."

"About that. Do you know why everyone's suddenly being nice to me here?" I ask.

It is her turn to be surprised. It quickly turns to amusement. "Only you wouldn't guess the reason," she chimes, swaying toward me. "You saved two barracks from slaughter and took out Slay in the same day. You laughed at death while nearly destroying the Dome. Some say you drank an entire flagon of brew during the fight. Others are saying you kissed the mouth of everyone

you killed.” The mischievous glint is back in her eyes. “I started that one.”

“Thanks,” I say dryly. She giggles.

“You’re a hero, Frost.” Her words make my insides freeze. I swing the door open.

Willow speaks behind me and I pause on the threshold. “You’re *our* hero. The one who rose from the Outer Rings, the one who showed the king that people here have worth. Now you’re here to change things for the better, once again,” she says. “I’d get used to the crowd parting for you.”

I dip my head slightly to the mistress and squeeze out of the brothel’s uneven doors between two slimy men. My uneasiness intensifies as I think over Willow’s words. As soon as I see the blurriness at the edges of my vision, I begin the process of breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth. The feeling I’ve begun to recognize as panic is trying to batter its way out.

I’m not even from the Outer Rings. What happens when they find out? I’m about to show my face to an entire group of people who view me as one of their own—some kind of hero. I falter on a cobblestone, but stay straight and regain my measured gait. The scene before me tightens and stretches. I wonder if these people can tell I’m an inch away from screaming. A whispering noise overrides my senses. Are the crowds drawing closer? No. I force another breath out. It’s in my head!

I put my hand in my pocket and grab a pinch of material. I roll it between my fingers and focus on the texture. Soft ... malleable. This is part of the plan. I want people to find out. I can’t control everyone else. I don’t want to—even if I could—because that would make me like my mother.

It will work out.

I release another breath, refusing to let it shake on its way out. The crowds move back ... if they were ever really close in the first place.

* * *

I hoist my pack up as I stand at the last gate outside the barracks. It’s just past dawn, but everyone in the barracks is all gathered there with me.

“You didn’t have to get up. I’ll see you in two days,” I grumble half-heartedly. Avalanche sweeps me up in a crushing hug. My nervousness about what I’ll be doing when I next see them makes my stomach revolt. The force

of the hug threatens to make me sick. Shard gives me a searching look.

Ice bends and taps my nose. “On with ya, girly. I’ll be following your *followers* to flush out the rat.” I exchange an evil snigger with him. He’d taken up this spying job with gusto. There’d been several young boys and girls darting in and out of the barracks yesterday—Ice’s network. And now Ice was going to follow me home to see who my tails worked for. It was odd thinking about them following me, and Ice following them. I hope no one followed Ice.

“You better leave if you want to get back to the castle before nightfall,” Alzona murmurs, half asleep. I wonder if she was up all night making plans after I told her the brothel was on board.

I heave a sigh and start down the alleyway, resisting the urge to check the rooftops for spies. They were just amateurs—according to Ice. My heart tugs in my chest as I leave the barracks. I look over my shoulder and see my friends watching me. Avalanche waves. I lift my hand in farewell.

It’s still there. The temptation. The urge to bury my head in the dirt and pretend nothing is wrong. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that things—or a certain person—have a way of finding you no matter how hard you try to hide. You can only delay the inevitable for so long.

I take careful note on my journey back to the castle. Maybe it’s because Shard put the thought in my mind, but there’s a tension through the pitted ruins of the Outer Rings I hadn’t noticed before. More screams pierce the air than I remember, and low whispers follow my retreat from the barracks. All is not well in the Outer Rings.

I see further evidence of this when I reach the Middle Ring by midday. The people here are furtive, darting glances around all the while as they keep the hoods of their cloaks raised, hurrying to get business done. I veer off my previous pathway out of curiosity, and discover several blocks of Middle Ring homes, destroyed by fire, just as Willow described. The windows of many other blocks are broken, the shelters emptied. I’d heard the advisor’s reports. But it was so much worse than that. Seeing the destruction and feeling the general dissent forces me to acknowledge this uprising is very real. And very dangerous. No wonder Jovan had been so resistant to me leaving alone.

I trek through the Inner Ring as the light is fading. The Inner Ring is the only place seemingly untouched by the revolt. Then again, the night is

young, and I only pass two Bruma on the way. The rest are probably locked in their homes, knowing they're next.

I take a tangling dance through the assembly lodgings, pausing at intervals to make sure I haven't been followed. Ice told me he'd make sure the tags didn't follow me past the Inner Ring, but I want to be safe, just in case. I replace my veil when in sight of the castle.

The king is waiting for me at the gate this time. I shriek when I'm a few meters from him, not expecting his presence just yet.

"Solis, Jovan. You scared me." Usually I'm summoned. Is it just coincidence he's here? Has he been waiting, or did one of his men alert him?

"Where have you been?" he says, jaw clenched. He leans down until we're face-to-material. He has to bend a fair way to do so.

"I told you I'd be a few days," I hedge.

"You said two."

"Or three," I correct. I slide the straps of my pack off my back. Jovan takes the bundle as I roll my shoulders.

"Thanks." I trudge beside him into the castle. I peek up and find he's looking at me too. My heart races, as always, and I face forward. The whole forgetting my feelings for Jovan thing isn't going well. In fact, the feelings seem to intensify each time I see him.

"Were you successful?" he asks after a few moments.

I listen to our surroundings for eavesdroppers while rubbing the tightness in my neck. Most of the tension is from training the day before. Maybe I've grown soft, like Shard was teasing me. I'd have to add an hour on to what I was already doing in my quarters.

I bring the king up to speed on everything that happened over the last three days. Everything except the self-defense classes, which I want to trial first. I hesitate over what I've found out about Blaine and I need to tell him.

"Jovan ... about Blaine," I start.

He sighs and leans against the wall. "Can we talk about it later?"

I blink. Really, I want to insist he listens now, but at least he's receptive to some kind of discussion, even if it's tomorrow. "Okay," I agree. A yawn attacks me.

"You're tired. I can have food sent to your room if you'd like," he says. I smile up at him—though he can't see it.

"I'm actually longing for a bath," I say truthfully.

Something happens when I say “bath.” The air tightens around us. It’s as if my insides contract and swirl, all at the same time. It’s happened before, several times, but perhaps I didn’t recognize it for what it was. I don’t know how my mind has leaped from bath to thinking about Jovan without clothes. But it does. The king leans in, eyes contemplative. I acknowledge the feeling for what it is.

Hunger.

I should move. The same reason which had me walking *away* from the barracks today, instead of running back, is screaming at me to be responsible. Step back, push him away, or clear your damn throat. Do something!

I stay frozen. I was able to walk away from the barracks, but right now leaning away from Jovan requires more strength than I have.

I twist away, though he has yet to touch me, and place a hand on the stone wall of the hallway to steady myself so my knees don’t buckle—because I’m reeling with a dreadful discovery. I don’t just have feelings for Jovan, I—

“My King, a message has arrived from Minister Harris,” a watchman interrupts. I close my eyes, hoping our display wasn’t witnessed.

“Bring it to my chambers.” Jovan’s voice sounds unsteady. Is he as affected as I am? “And send order to the kitchens for a bath to be drawn for the Tatuma in her chamber.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly without looking at him. I can’t. Surely he will know what I’m thinking if I face him.

“Always,” he says.

* * *

The bath is incredible. Pure, unadulterated bliss. I reach for my veil as the door creaks open.

“Only me,” Olandon murmurs from behind the screen. I relax back in the tub. It’s been well over an hour. I should get out.

“I’ve got food for you,” he says. There’s an edge to his voice I don’t understand.

I stand up and water drips from me in noisy splashes, sloshing over the sides. “Is something the matter?” I ask.

“The king of Glacium treats me like a common lackey. Even if you are my sister, he has no right to order me around. I was going to bring you food myself before he even said to.”

I bite back a laugh. It seems Jovan has found the perfect way to get under my brother’s skin. My brother’s anger is adorable. It reminds me of young Olandon, before he got moody and contemplative.

“And someone is playing tricks on me,” he continues as I dry myself with a fur.

“Oh?” I prod.

“Ashawn thinks it must be one of the kitchen staff, though this does not feel right to me. The pranks are harmless, but it is hardly respectful.” I listen as he storms about the room. When he finds out it’s Ashawn pranking him, he’ll be furious.

“Indeed, brother. Do you think they do it because you are Solati?” I ask.

“They don’t do it to you,” he says. “Do they?”

“No,” I reply and clutch my stomach in laughter, still out of sight, as he resumes his furious pacing. His footsteps scrape on the stone flooring. “Well, why would they only do it to you?” I pull on fresh clothing and round the screen to see his bewildered expression.

“I don’t know,” he says. “What do I care what a Bruma thinks of me anyway?” he scoffs.

I push my hair up into a low knot. “I thought you might care what one person in particular thinks, actually.”

Olandon stiffens, his face horrified. I mock frown. “Brother, I was only teasing.” But now I know there *is* some truth to Ashawn’s comment the other day—someone, a woman, had been ‘taking care’ of my brother—whatever that means. I’ll be interrogating Fiona for the truth. I turn to the pear and biscuits before me, wondering if Jovan made the plate up for me.

I place a hand on Olandon’s arm. “Please, brother. Tell me of these pranks. We’ll see if we can get to the bottom of it all.”

* * *

I burst into laughter, throwing myself back on the bed. “You stepped in what!”

A reluctant grin spreads across my brother's face. "It seems funny now, but I can assure you it wasn't at the time. I thought I was protecting the castle by stamping out the fire. Then I am rewarded with animal leavings on the sole of my boot."

I think it's 'animal leavings' that tips me over the edge. I roll around on the bed, lost in a fit of giggles. Olandon eventually gives up and laughs with me.

We munch on the last of the fruit and settle into companionable silence. The diet here is much heavier than I'm used to. The food we've just eaten would be considered a mere snack to a Glacium warrior. On Osolis, we stick to a diet of nuts, vegetables, and fruit, with very little meat. I smile when I catch Olandon studying my face. He does this a lot when we're alone and I wonder what he's searching for. It's times like these, when he relaxes, that I feel I'm with the brother I knew as a child. It's when I feel this closeness that I can pretend everything is like it was before Kedrick, the delegation, and all of the mess since then. Though now there are some parts I don't want to forget.

"There is much I must tell you, sister. Things I should have told you when I first regained consciousness," he says guiltily.

The lingering smile falls from my face. "Tell me. Just please tell me the twins are okay first." My mind had been running rampant while waiting for him to confide in me.

He grabs my hand as my heart thuds in my chest. "They were fine when I last saw them. What I have to tell you is bigger than us, or our family."

I stroke his hair back, as I used to when he was young. He hasn't allowed me to do so in the last few years, but he lets me do it now. His reassurance about the twins is dubious. If something happened to them, I don't know if I could come back from the loss. It must require a tremendous amount of strength to return to yourself as Jovan has, after losing family members.

"Mother is starving our people," he says, eyes squeezed shut. My hand stops, arm frozen in the air. I stare at my brother in disbelief. He opens his brown eyes and I see he believes he's telling the truth.

"For years. That's why the stores are so big. We've been fooled, sister. The happiness we see on the migration back to First Rotation is

planned to keep Mother's court complacent. Not that they'd care" He hangs his head.

"I saw a great deal on my journey," he whispers.

"She—" I croak. I don't understand. I knew she'd been stockpiling for the war. I never realized she was doing it by slowly starving our people! I thought she was sowing more seeds, not killing innocent Solati. Once again, my mother's cruelty steals the ground from under me. I'm shocked. I should be past this astonishment by now. But I can't fathom how someone could be so heartless and without mercy.

"She feeds them enough to work and survive. The villagers told me the rations were lowered so gradually they didn't really notice until last year when the peace delegation arrived. The Tatum started taking more and more from them." Olandon struggles to hold back his emotion. I don't even bother to hold back my own as I wonder if it was my friendship with Kedrick that tipped the balance.

His voice cracks as he continues. "Your capture was the last straw. You were their hope. You still *are* their hope. When you were taken, they weren't angry—they were desperate. They began to speak out against Mother."

"They rebelled?" I whisper. I need to know. All this time they've been suffering, and I've been living in relative comfort.

"For more than one Rotation, but not anymore," he says darkly. "Mother ... made an example." He rubs a hand over his face, looking older than he should. "Do you remember a man named Turin?" he asks. The name does strike a chord, but I cannot place it.

"He had a young son. A daughter, too. The boy tried to remove your veil in the village?"

I gasp as the memory reaches me. The toddler who tried to lift my veil. I grasp Olandon's forearms. "What did she do?" I ask. "Tell me!" Memories of the village girl's slit throat flash in front of my eyes.

He winces as I dig my fingers in. I can't loosen them because I'm in horror's thrall. I know what happens next.

"They were slaughtered and hung from the Oscala in the First Rotation," he says quietly.

I flinch at his words, swallowing the bile threatening to rise.

The punishment was well known on Osolis, if rarely used. The bodies

were hung off the Oscala, so every Solati would get a chance to see the decaying corpses during a revolution. Turin had a wife, a son, and a daughter. Now they were all dead. A whole family. Because of me—because I wasn't there to stop my mother.

More time must pass than I realize, because suddenly Olandon is stroking my hand. “You could not have controlled what happened to Turin and his family—even if you were there,” he murmurs.

“Did the villagers stop after that?” I ask eventually. My mouth feels thick as it forms the question.

Olandon’s lips press into a grim line. “It took others, many others, until the villagers were convinced.” He looks away from me and clears his throat. “The villages are not the happy places you believed them to be. But everyone was too afraid to speak. The peasants in the Royal Rotations fare better than the rest. But not much.”

The population of Osolis was much smaller than Glacium’s. Each rotation on my home planet had a sole village. Each community was large and held all the necessary tradesmen, farmers, and craftsmen. Most were located as close as possible to a water supply, whether the man-made rivers or Lake Aveni. Why did Mother allow me to go to the village if she wanted to squeeze the life from her people? I have my answer the next moment: the peace delegation. It was all an act. But then my brother and Kedrick had toured Osolis, along with the other delegates. How did my mother orchestrate a subterfuge of this scale?

I scrunch my eyes closed. This news is so much worse than I expected. I can’t believe my brother is only telling me now. No wonder he’s so anxious to get back.

“Thank you. It cannot have been an easy tale to carry, or to share.” I kiss him on the cheek.

He doesn’t smile like I expect him to. He doesn’t quite meet my eyes. Dread pools in my chest.

“There’s more,” I say in a dull voice.

He sighs. I know that sound. It’s the weight of two worlds on his shoulders. Olandon looks at me. Grave beyond his seventeen years.

“On my travels, I came across a woman. I thought she was insane at first, but then...” His eyes flicker and he swallows hard. “Did you know Uncle Cassius has a wife?”

Chapter Eight

The aftershock of my conversation with Olandon echoes within me as I hurry to the meeting room. My people have been starving for revolutions while I pranced through their masses, completely unaware, thinking I was helping by delivering a box of apples once a week. What a fool.

And there was the small part about having an aunt I never knew about.

I'd spoken with my brother long into the night, soaking up any detail he imparted about Osolis and Uncle Cassius's wife, Jain, who apparently looked after me as a baby. Cassius never did have an 'O' at the start of his name. I'd thought it was a way of telling the court he was married to my mother's service. It didn't happen often in our history, but it *did* happen. Usually, the 'O' was dropped to show you were taken. I was Olina. When I married, I'd be Lina. It was an easy way of telling who was still available. I suppose, looking back, it's designed so emotionally embarrassing conversations can be avoided.

I throw open the door to the meeting room. The important men jump in their seats and stare as I take my seat opposite Jovan's empty throne. Great. Now *I'm* slamming doors.

They jump again as the door behind the throne slams back. Jovan strides through, unaware—or uncaring—that he's frightened them. The advisors fall back into their circling arguments and I sit, barely listening as I reflect on what I've learned about Uncle Cassius's wife. About what she *knew*. Mother exiled her as soon as I was old enough to be left alone. Auntie Jain had known about my blue eyes. She became a dangerous liability to the Tatum.

I have no memories of her face, but then I doubt my veil was taken off much. I spent years with a woman who, from Olandon's account, may have loved me. Someone may have *loved* me. That news rocked me as much as Olandon's other startling revelations.

He said she'd asked him to tell me a story. One she'd told me as a toddler. I'd known the ending, though I couldn't ever recall hearing it.

"What do you think, Tatum?" Roscoe asks.

I sit up straight. "Sorry?" There's a smattering of muffled laughter,

not all of it nasty. I don't think I'm alone in my inattention. A man several seats to my left looks to have fallen asleep on his hand.

"Perhaps the Tatuma had a late night?" A snide voice speaks. "Now I think of it, where has the Tatuma been these last few days?"

I turn to Blaine. "I'm sure if the king wanted you to know, he would tell you," I say sweetly.

Drummond barks with amusement. "She's got you there, Blainey boy." This raises Drummond three pegs in my book, giving him a total of three pegs.

* * *

"What is the matter?" Jovan speaks into my ear. I barely refrain from jumping out of my skin. I nearly walked right past him on my way to our table. I search the immediate area in the food hall. No one is close enough to listen.

"Jovan," I say. I breathe in his scent; it has a way of settling me.

I hear him inhale deeply. "I could listen to you say that all day," he says casually.

His name? He likes the sound of it? If he doesn't move away, I might be convinced to say it again. His smell is driving me insane.

"Are you worried about tomorrow?" he asks.

Tomorrow! Olandon's news pushed my 'unveiling' from my mind. I shake my head, rattled by the extra stress. "I'm ... preoccupied by my brother's tidings of Osolis," I say. Jovan gestures me to the wall. He stands like a shield, blocking me from the view of the food hall as I relate the most important aspects to him.

He abandons his protective role as I finish and leans on the wall beside me. My view is now unobstructed and I see we stand by Arla's table. My jaw drops when I see Jacqueline next to her. Fiona was right! Jacqueline is hanging around Arla. But Jacky hates her! The whole situation is baffling. Arla looks my way, posture tight. It looks like I'm on her naughty list again. She's always viewed Jovan as her property. As the highest-ranking Bruma female here, being Drummond's daughter, she's probably been groomed for the position of queen. The woman, a prior bed-partner of the king, had not so nicely warned me to stay away from him shortly after my arrival on Glacium.

I'd heard someone call her a gold-digger before. The description fit. We'd had many run-ins, and I'd always found great humor in our exchanges. Which is why the white-hot anger in my stomach takes me completely by surprise. Apparently, I now care very much.

"How could your mother treat her people this way?"

I hear Jovan's furious question and try to rein in my jealousy as well as I can. It's an entirely new experience for me. I almost feel sick.

"I don't know," I reply in a hollow tone. His fingers rest beside mine, just touching the side of my hand. I hope Arla sees it.

"It's not your fault. You couldn't have known. This is on your mother's shoulders," he continues.

He's right. A part of me knows what he says is true. Even if I'd known what she was doing, any attempt to stop her would have resulted in my execution.

"And this Auntie Jain of yours had information on your father?" he asks.

"Not much," I admit. "Only that he was a good singer. Landon said she often lost track of her thoughts. He thought she might have been badly tortured. Said there were scars on her hands."

He inspects the hilt of his sword with disinterest. "Since you returned, I've been expecting you to check my archives daily."

I laugh shortly. "With all that spare time?"

He concedes this with a chuckle, pushing off the wall.

I double-check to make sure the area is clear. The assembly always gives the king a wide berth, perhaps a remnant of his lengthy self-imposed isolation. "Jovan ... I know you have trouble with my brother. But could he search the archives in my stead?" I ask. "He'll have strict instructions."

"It's not that I dislike him, Olina. It's that he glares at me every time I look at you," he says. "Which is very often." His tone is irritated amusement. A reluctant smile spreads across my face. Maybe it's because he pointed it out before, but suddenly the sound of my name on his lips makes my stomach clench.

"You're right."

"Of course." He says. "What about?"

"What?" I ask.

He gives me an odd look. "You said, 'you're right.' I asked what

about?”

I freeze. Veni, I said that aloud? I open my mouth to lie, but a grating giggle from Arla stops me. My mouth snaps shut. I know it's petty. It should be beneath me. But I can't see Jovan with her. Maybe not anyone. Not until I'm away from Glacium and not destined to return. He deserves a happy life, but I can't bear to see it.

I take a deep breath, knowing I'm a horrible person for encouraging this.

“I like hearing you say my name too,” I say.

I nearly run to my seat at the throne table, placing both hands on my cheeks to cool them. What was I thinking? And more importantly, what was *he* thinking now? I hadn't waited around to assess his reaction, or hear his reply. Why did I do that?

Olandon's comments last night should have sharpened my resolve against Jovan. In effect, the opposite was true. All day, a part of me yearned for him. To lean on him for a while and share my troubles. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut as guilt floods through me. No one told me these feelings would be so unshakeable and so *permanent*. No mother, or aunty, or friend, had ever shown me the force of such caring.

I don't want what I feel for Jovan to stop. And I should.

* * *

I roll onto my other side again, then onto my back. This is ridiculous. Well, maybe not. I suppose a sleepless night is warranted considering I'll be forever changing the course of my life tomorrow.

A knock sounds at my door. I reach for the veil, sitting up in bed as the door creaks open. Thugs don't knock. Is it one of the guards?

“You awake?” Jovan asks, closing the door behind him.

“You knocked,” I gasp. “I knew you could knock!” Silence is my only answer. Why do I get the feeling he's holding back his laughter?

“I thought you might still be up,” he says, sitting on the edge of my bed.

“What do the guards think when you come up here?” I ask. I shove the veil back under my pillow.

His huge shoulders shrug. “I get my watch to go down and give them

orders to move.”

I shift back and lean against the plush, warm pillows. “You don’t worry they’ll talk?”

He doesn’t dignify me with an answer. I narrow my eyes as another thought occurs to me.

“You’re not here to check if I’ve run away, are you?”

He kicks off his boots and moves next to me, sitting in the same position against the wall. I hold my breath, heart accelerating at his closeness. I welcome the feeling of yearning rising inside of me.

“Would you believe me if I said the thought hadn’t crossed my mind?” He turns toward me in the darkness.

“No.”

He laughs. “One of the best qualities you possess is a desire to be your strongest self.”

It makes me traitorously happy to hear his words.

He bends one knee, resting one massive hand over the top. “When you came to realize running away was a potential weakness, you eliminated it. It was quite impressive to see. I wish my advisors could do it.”

We fall into a silence as I turn his comments over in my mind. Well, half of my mind does. The other half watches his hand lying palm up between us. Does he want me to hold it? What if he doesn’t and I put my hand there, and then he feels like he has to hold it?

“Is it gone then? My weakness?” I ask, frowning.

“Can the scars of your childhood ever truly be gone?” He clears his throat. “I know mine aren’t. Have you eliminated the running away, only to develop another way of coping? Or worse still, will you keep it inside until it changes you?” He swallows, and I barely breathe. Something inside me breaks. Not because he’s outlining my future. I know I’ll never be my mother. It breaks because he’s talking about himself.

“You speak as if you know,” I say.

He exhales slowly. “After the deaths of my mother and father I did the exact same. I didn’t run away. Not in the literal sense. Though by shutting myself away I essentially was. I’ve always been solitary, but not reclusive. I obtained and ruled the kingdom fiercely during this time. But away from those duties ... There were not many I could tolerate other than Kedrick, Roscoe, and others who had been close to my father.”

I know Blaine is one of these people. My heart sinks at how ingrained the slippery traitor is in Jovan's past. How he's taken advantage of Jovan's previous grief to secure the king's favor. How am I ever going to get Jovan to listen?

Jovan's hand clenches. "It happened so gradually I didn't see I was changing, or didn't want to. No one dared to tell me because I was king. It wasn't until recently that I began to see my life for what it has turned into. I've started to feel a connection with my people again," he says.

I glance at his hand between us and place mine inside his. He closes his eyes and a ghost of a smile lights his face. His fingers enclose my own in a warm hold.

"I know a little about your mother, but not much of your father," I say. His smile flickers and goes out. Jovan opening up happens nearly as often as Solati asking questions.

"My father was everything I aim to be," he says simply. I try to grasp the undercurrent in his words. "He was a great fighter, a strong and iron-fisted king, and a clear-headed, concise ruler."

"You're all of those things," I say. He gives me a doubtful look and plays with my hand.

"I have a long way to go before I can claim to be close to his legacy—as I'm often reminded," he grunts. I'm sure if it wasn't so dark, his cheeks would be red. He's unsure. It's such a rare emotion for Jovan.

"How did you eventually see what you had become?" I ask to relieve his discomfort. Maybe I can apply his experience to my own situation. I haven't felt what he's describing. Possibly it takes time to internalize enough panic and fear for it to change who you are. What else could I possibly do to replace running away?

I shudder. If Jovan hadn't noticed what was happening to him, would he have ended up like my mother? I feel the heat from his hand clasping mine and banish that line of thought. Jovan would never let himself become that. He may have been distant and ruthless, but he wasn't evil.

"It wasn't a matter of how, it was a matter of *who*," he says. "Some time ago now, a woman came to the castle and my life hasn't been the same since."

I stiffen, and only just keep my hand in his by resisting all instincts to do otherwise. The statement hangs heavy around us. Does he mean me? Any

elation I feel is swiftly stomped and crushed by fear. I'm then acutely aware we're in a bed for the first time since we slept together. I scramble for a change of topic.

"I can't help thinking tomorrow is going to go horrendously wrong." I wince at the shake in my voice. Hopefully he thinks it's fear for tomorrow's events.

"You don't have to do this, you know," he answers.

Has Jovan got cold feet? A large finger across my lips stops me from speaking.

"No, listen. You're torn between a life without discrimination and a life without secrecy. It's the most difficult choice you'll ever make. Whatever my personal desires, I want you to do what you believe will make you happy. If you're doing this for any other reason than that, you need to rethink your next move."

I release a slow breath when he takes his finger away, surprised to feel tears balancing in both eyes. Maybe I needed to hear those words. I needed someone to recognize how hard this was going to be and to absolve me of selfishness. "Thank you," I whisper.

Silence settles over us, and I shift onto my side, lying down.

"If I couldn't sleep back on Osolis, I'd just go to the springs under the palace," I say in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"What are they like?" he asks softly. I untangle my hand and tuck it under my head. His hand curls into a tight fist.

"There are dark tunnels, weaving underneath where we sleep. The fires in the Fourth keep the water warm throughout Osolis. It gets too hot to bathe in once you reach the Third Rotation, but I bathe daily in the First and Second." I sigh at the memory. "I had my own private bath. I know it was to keep me separate from the others, in case they saw my face, but I loved it. The other caverns are split into a roster, or if you're positioned highly you get designated a bath." I close my eyes and rest my head back.

"You miss it."

"I do," I say. I open my eyes as I realize that's not completely true. Sometimes I miss my twin brothers so much I think it will crush me, and I worry for Aquin. I miss galloping on my favorite Dromeda and running through the long grass before harvest. I wish I could sprint to training or down to the orphanage, leaping over vines before they've dried and fallen off

in the Second Rotation.

I correct myself. “I do. *Sometimes*. Little things mostly. And my twin brothers. I wish to see them every day.”

His voice remains like stone. “You’ve been here a long time now. Longer than any Solati in history.” I turn toward him and see he’s looking at me. I have nothing to say in return, so I try to be circumspect as I memorize his face with half-open eyes. He isn’t fooled; he’s always seen straight through me. I rely on him to do so.

I was a fool not to recognize what that meant when I first met him.

“Why did you tell me all of these things tonight?” I ask quietly. I close my eyes so I don’t have to see his reaction.

His answer is immediate. “I’ve wanted to tell you for some time. They are things the future queen should know.”

I smile. “Tatum, Jovan.”

I crack open my eyes to see him once more. Just one last time. He’s deciding what to say, I know that much. But I see so many things: vulnerability, gentleness, impatience and fear. There isn’t a single emotion I can think of which combines all of these.

I must be out of practice.

He leans forward slowly, letting me know at every moment what he’s about to do. It’s how I’d approach untamed Dromeda. I tell myself I’m too tired to move as his face nears mine, but in truth I’m desperate to confirm what I discovered that night of the ball.

His lips touch mine.

It’s just as I remember: soft and unyielding. How can one kiss feel so good? The intimate gesture is unconditional, but it’s reinforced by the thought bouncing around my mind. Jovan’s touch is better than anything I’ve felt in my life. What if no one else can make me feel this way? And if there isn’t anyone else, can I live without it?

I gasp, and he jerks back, eyes piercing through the dim light, pinning me in place. After living on Osolis, I’d never have described blue as the color of fire. But that simple knowledge dissolves as I meet his heated gaze. I wonder if my own are burning back, or if he knows I’m hanging on to a single tendril of awareness which prevents me from closing the gap between us.

And the thought which pulls my world apart just as it’s beginning to

build again: what if I don't want to live without this?

* * *

I squeeze Landon's hand reassuringly as light knock comes from my door. A light knock doesn't necessarily mean the news is good. In fact, I've learned the opposite is usually true. It means they don't want to cause a scene. My room is secluded in a tower. Avoided. But the court loved to gossip and went out of their way for any fresh talk.

Olandon clings to me with desperate hands. He's three revolutions old and too young for this kind of fear. Yet, the guilt I feel for sharing this terror with him is overridden by my need to lessen my burden. He's my only friend. The only one she'll let me have.

"Hide under the bed, Lina," he cries. He always pleads. I let him do it because it's normal, but I've learned begging makes things worse. It doesn't prevent them from giving you the bruises in the first places. And if you beg, then you lose your pride.

Pride is all I have left.

I straighten the veil my mother makes me wear as the light knock comes again. The same sound, the same pattern. Three soft raps from one of the Elite's knuckles.

I peek underneath the material over my face to make sure my robes and sandals are immaculate. Mother doesn't like me untidy. She says she wants the court to forget how ugly I am. If I'm tidy, she says maybe one day, someone will like me. She says that in the Fifth Rotation there are some nearly as grotesque as I. I wonder if they wear veils too. I think she's lying to get my hopes up, but I cling to the thought that someday I'll meet other ugly people. Maybe they won't hurt me all the time.

I pull open the door and peer up at a woman. There are six Elite today. I must have done something really bad; my usual escort is three or four. Despite the regularity of my beatings, I have to swallow a lump of fear. The urge to crawl under the bed, or into the wardrobe nearly overwhelms me. But Olandon is behind me, preventing me from going back inside.

I slip out and shut the door quickly, starting in the direction of the balcony room. It's where the guards hit me while my mother and uncle watch. I've been trying to think of a name for it. I heard Aquin use the word

“torture” the other day, just before he showed Landon and me how to inflict pain for answers. I think Torture Room might do. Though, mother doesn’t ask me questions at all. I wish she would. Sometimes their kicking hurts so much, I’d tell her anything.

I only have one secret I’ll never tell.

Heads poke out of doorways as we travel through the twisting black hallways. I roll my eyes at the court. They don’t even bother to hide their snooping.

The front two Elite move ahead and swing the double doors open. I bite the inside of my cheek to stop a whimper as I see the inside of the room. It’s all polished darkness. That’s not what bothers me, though. It’s that the walls always start moving when I step inside. They throb like an injured ankle I once had after training. Sometimes I think the walls will close over me and confine me in the tiniest of spaces, like the time Uncle Cassius locked me in a trunk for two days. It was one of the worst things ever done to me.

Then there are the blood spatters.

I know they’re not really there. But it doesn’t mean I can’t see them. The blood is there and all of it is mine. I look around this room and remember every single hit, kick, smash, and break I’ve earned. One pace from my left is where they peeled my right thumbnail off, and two paces to my right was where I jumped on the spot for three hours. That one wasn’t so bad. I pretended I was at training and eventually the Elite got bored and let me go.

I wonder where I’ll bleed today.

I look up in the direction of the balcony. Usually there’s a little speech about some transgression. A transgression must be something bad because they always seem to be saying it right before my face is split open.

My mother doesn’t look down from her conversation with my monstrous uncle. She waves a regal hand in the air. There’s no speech today.

“Begin,” she commands.

** * **

I don’t eat breakfast, still shaking from the most realistic nightmare I’ve had in a long time. I fell asleep to tales of Jovan’s childhood, and when I woke he was gone. I’m glad he hadn’t seen the effect my past terrors still had

on me. I'd thought I was past being haunted by mother—at night, anyway.

Olandon finds me, informing me the king is rounding up those I wish to tell. I begin to wish Jovan was keeping me company, leaving my brother to the task of collecting everyone. Olandon seems determined to voice every doubt and concern about revealing my secret I've silently had in the last week.

“You know if news gets out about your eyes there will be much trouble becoming Tatum. I don't understand why you're facilitating its discovery,” he whispers in furious tones. I don't bother answering. I've wasted my breath for the last two hours while pacing my room. Instead, I focus on convincing myself not to back out.

“I have trouble understanding, and I am your brother.” He grips my shoulders, stopping me mid-pace. “You have a death wish.”

It infuriates me that he'll be able to see the panic on my face. I wish my veil was on.

“I don't know why you're doing this! You clearly don't *want* to. It's that king,” he hisses. “He's making you do this.” His dislike breaks through my fear. I snort, and then snort again at the disgust on his face at the sound.

I hug my brother around the waist. He's much taller than me now. I wish he'd grow in other ways.

“Wait here,” I say. I turn to the long seat at the foot of the bed and pick up my veil. I return to my brother.

“You've struggled to learn how to understand the feelings of others. You seem to have gained some measure of empathy in your journeys around Osolis, and I can't wait for the day when you come into your full potential. I know you'll find it in your own time.” I can see my words hurt him; my frayed temper has made me blunt. “Perhaps, until then, you'll better understand if you experience my life for yourself,” I say.

I catch his expression as he eyes the veil in my hands. Terror. It stuns me. He's afraid of the veil? He watches it like it's about to explode in his face.

“I don't think I've ever realized the pain *you've* gone through, Landon.” Tears choke my voice. His eyes begin to shimmer as I speak. I grip his forearm with my free hand. I finally understand what this material has meant to his life. All the times he cried because I was dragged away, or beaten bloody and left broken on the floor. Every time he had to sneak

around to help me, or was prevented from a normal upbringing because of his forbidden sister. All of it was because of the cloth in my hand.

My voice is hoarse. "I'll share something with you. I didn't believe it the first time, but I've come to be convinced of it." I hold up the veil. "This is just material. It does what we tell it to do," I say and feel my face hardening. "It's the symbol of our mother. And it does not control us anymore."

Something passes between us: wordless, a shift within—an unbreakable determination that our mother will never regain that power. We won't allow ourselves to be oppressed like that ever again. He nods and I place the veil over his head. The wooden band doesn't fit him, so I toss it aside.

Olandon takes a few experimental steps and knocks his shin against the long seat. I know exactly what he's feeling.

"Veni," he curses, stumbling back in pain. I place a hand on his back when he nears me and he jumps, whirling around.

"I can't see anything." He rips it off his head and the material drifts to the ground. "How? How have you done that? How have you even walked?"

I stare down at the veil. "You may have been too young to remember, but I had a very hard time when I was first let out of my room. I only knew the layout of my room, and then the way to Aquin's, when mother first started allowing me to watch your trainings."

I don't think I've ever spoken of this. It's like rubbing at a newly healed cut.

"When I fell for the first time on the very first day outside and heard their laughter and comments, I understood they were my mother's people. They'd never be mine. I'd hoped to find friends waiting just outside my door once I was freed. Dreams of this kept me sane for years. You can imagine my utter devastation when I learned this wouldn't happen."

"I know you memorized the castle," Olandon says.

I dip my head in acknowledgement. "Yes, I did. After my first humiliation, I'd go out at night to practice. And with time I managed to survive by paying attention to slight movements of people's bodies: to light disappearing between their fingers, the slightest turning away, or shrug of the shoulders. Anything to make up for being unable to see their facial expressions." I look over at my younger brother and smile. "I only knew your face because I'd been so close to you, so often. Even now, there are new things I see when I look at you with the veil off."

Olandon crouches before the veil, not touching it. “I’ve grown up with your promises, your plans for Osolis. Where some children had lullabies, I held on to your words like they were a prophecy that would eventually come to pass. At times I feel betrayed. What has changed that you will not give up everything to see your plans eventuate?”

I jerk at his vehemence. He thinks I’ve given up? That I’ve let go of my hopes and dreams? It’s true they’re not in my every thought. Just as finding Kedrick’s killer is no longer in my every thought. It doesn’t mean I feel the urgency of either any less.

I’ve learned there’s more to life than revenge. I’ve also learned that when you don’t take in the bigger picture, you make mistakes. I want to twist the head from the assassin’s body, slowly. I want to hear the murderer’s screams. I want to rule Osolis on my terms. I want to heal my people, fix my world, and rule with fairness.

I want these things so badly.

But am I going to ignore a civil war to rush headlong into something I’ll later regret? Am I going to sacrifice my own happiness to achieve these things?

Not if I can help it.

“I understand what this means to you,” he continues. “Wearing the veil is a terrible thing, and I wish with every part of my being there could be another way. But do you not see what it will mean for our people? *Your* people? They need you to be Tatum, and to be *Tatum* you must wear the veil. They cannot know you have blue eyes. You cannot show these...” he searches for the right word and hisses it. “Foreigners your face.”

The door swings open behind me. I don’t bother turning; only Jovan steps that lightly. The air between me and my brother is tense. How can I remind him of his position while signaling my appreciation for his opinion?

“Were it up to you,” I begin, emphasizing the first word, “what would you have me do?”

“Stop this foolishness. Limit the amount of people who know to those who already know. Keep your difference a secret. Return to Osolis immediately.” He scowls at King Jovan. “And take your rightful place as Tatum. The veil must remain. It is an upsetting sacrifice on your behalf—”

Jovan breaks his silence. “Upsetting!” I groan and glance over my shoulder, silently begging him to stay quiet. He glares at me and crosses his

arms, straightening to his full height.

"I agree with you, in part," I say. "But I also believe one principal can be applied to most problems, and that is, we should learn from the past. Mother based her life on secrets, and now that a single foundation has weakened, she's in danger of the whole building crashing down around her. Not only that, but her fear of discovery has leeched Osolis dry—no matter what her initial intentions were. Would you advise me to follow her down this path?"

I approach Olandon, being careful not to touch him. "There's much I'm still trying to figure out, but I know if I'm unhappy, Osolis will eventually be unhappy too." Jovan's words from last night ring in my mind. "The two are tied. They are for any ruler." I wonder what Jovan thinks of that. "I can't be happy with the veil on. I've tasted life without it, and if I can find *any* way live with it off, I will."

Olandon's eyes harden. "Mother was right. You will destroy Osolis," he says in a bitter voice. My shoulders slump as he pushes past me.

"Sorry you had to hear that," I say in small voice. I face Jovan with a tired smile.

"It's hard for him," I explain. And it is. More than I'd previously thought. I talk of the Tatum's world crumbling to the ground, but in Olandon's mind, my actions are tearing at the unstable holds he's clinging to. He probably feels like he's still on the Oscala.

"They are assembled in the meeting room," Jovan says in a stiff voice. He's mad. Scary mad. My face falls.

"Okay, okay. Right," I croak. I search for the veil, flustered. Where did I put it? Jovan bends and holds the material out to me, along with the band.

"T-thanks," I stutter and grab the veil with trembling hands. He places a kiss on the palm of both my hands once the veil is in place.

"You're making the right choice. The boy is young. He doesn't understand the sacrifice he's asking of you."

"He's only a year younger, maybe two. I don't really know," I babble. I believed my mother lied about my age to distance herself from the peace delegation, but I had no proof.

Jovan shakes his head. "You know what I mean. You should be that young, but you aren't. Circumstances changed you. You can do this. I'll be

there with you the whole time.”

My body is full of nervous tension. I feel like I could fight twenty people all at once. Then do it all over again. My eyes adjust to the new darkness and I make out the king’s frame.

Jovan will be there. I won’t be alone. “Let’s go.”

If anyone could have distracted me on the walk to the meeting room, it would’ve been Jovan. But though I hear his voice, and know he’s talking, I can’t focus on anything he’s saying. Instead, I go through the list of people in the room; Malir, Sadra, Rhone, Adnan, Sanjay, Roman, Fiona, Shard, Avalanche, Blizzard, Ice, Alzona, Crystal, and Jacqueline. Hopefully, seeing my face might make Jacky realize what I did wasn’t personal, or disloyal. I could regain a friend today. I trusted each of these people, in differing ways. But doubts run rampant in my mind. What if Alzona decided to sell the information for gold? What if Sanjay got drunk and said too much? What if they couldn’t get over their disgust of my mixed blood? At least Crystal would understand. But then she’d know I took advantage of her to escape Jovan last sector.

Jovan leaves me at the door. “I need to do something before we enter. Wait for me here; I won’t be long.”

I stay silent instead of asking him questions and exposing my fear.

He grips my shoulders. “I won’t be long, I promise you,” he reassures.

I wave him off with more courage than I feel. “I’ll be okay.”

I sit, back stiff with tension. What if Olandon is right? Will I look back on this moment and wish I could take it back, like so many other moments in my life?

I stare with unseeing eyes at the meeting room door. A dull murmuring hits my senses. They’re in there—my friends! Will they still be my friends in half an hour?

I move on shaky limbs to the door. When the walls start pulsating around me, I have a second of surprise that it hasn’t happened earlier. I lean in until both hands are on the door. I know what I have to do to make it go away. I’m in control. It’s coming from me. I’m the one who can make it go away. And it will go away. I know, because I’ve done it before. Eventually the walls, rather than pulsing, will throb, then vibrate. In the end, they’ll just shimmer.

The walls stop moving.

I stare at the heavy wooden barrier in front of me. The murmuring is still there. My friends are on the other side making that sound, not my enemies.

They are not my enemies, I repeat.

Good or bad, I need to know what attitudes I'll be facing if I want any degree of happiness in my future.

I look over my shoulder.

The king said to wait for him to enter the room. But he won't always be around to lean on. I shouldn't grow accustomed to it. I take a fortifying breath as I force my clenched fingers to take hold of the weighted clasp on the door. I set my mind on the impossible future I can't help desiring.

There is nowhere left to go but forward.

Chapter Nine

The door creaks shut behind me. My abrupt arrival snaps the conversation to a halt. I imagine that fourteen curious people are currently staring my way. Six of them will have no idea who this veiled figure is. Of all of them, Rhone may be the only person here that might be able to guess what's about to happen.

They sit in two groups. The barracks to the left, and the delegates and their wives to the right. They must be wondering what they could possibly have in common that they'd be summoned here together. I doubt they've spoken at all, even though the men from the barracks spent several weeks at the castle training with some of the delegates. It must be hard work ignoring a group of people no more than five meters from you. Both groups do it anyway. A bubble of hysterical laughter spouts up and I clamp my lips shut.

"Tatuma Olina." Malir approaches with a bow. Though always polite, he's stepping up the manners for the present barracks company. "Do you know why we've been summoned?"

I wonder if Shard will recognize my voice.

"The king will be along shortly and you'll be told what is to happen," I say. I don't mean my voice to sound cold, but it does—overcompensating for my nerves, I think. I watch from the corner of my eye as Alzona and the others turn their heads to face one another. My heart beats wildly. Have they guessed?

I rest against the stone-circle table, but quickly see my legs aren't going to hold me up. I take measured steps past the barracks members and catch Crystal's wide-eyed glance. She believes she's looking at the Tatuma of Osolis. Do the others know what a Tatuma is? Am I really that different with the veil on that they can't tell it's me?

I take my usual seat opposite the throne and wait.

It speaks volumes of the tension in the room that Sanjay remains quiet.

The king throws the door open with a crash and I almost slide onto the ground in a fainted heap. If I could ever love that grating slam it would be now. My brother trails behind him. Is that where Jovan disappeared to? Emotion swells within me. He knew I needed Olandon here with me.

Neither of the men greet my friends with a welcome.

Olandon moves to the table in front of me and bends down on one knee. Subservient. He is dressed in robes. He must be freezing, but it's a good move; the robes show our link to Osolis. And his deference will help as well.

He glances up at me and I gesture to my right. He moves his head back in slight surprise. No doubt he thought he'd be banished to my left. The king approaches me, leaving his conversation with Rhone. He leans close to me over the table.

"You didn't wait," he says.

"I wanted to do it myself," I whisper back.

He makes an exasperated noise in the back of his throat. "Of course you did." He pushes against the table and turns to the room.

"Take a seat," he booms. I roll my eyes at his rudeness.

"Who of the two groups are sitting next to each other?" I ask Olandon.

"There is a seat between them, but Rhone and a man even larger than him with scars all over his face," he says. Avalanche.

There's silence in the room. I start when I realize Jovan has turned my way.

"Tatuma, I believe you had something you wanted to say?" he prompts. Dread doesn't just slap me in the face; it rolls through me with the force of a galloping herd. I hadn't given any thought to this exact moment. Getting through the door had consumed me entirely. How was I going to tell them?

The walls begin to shimmer.

I must make some sign because Olandon grips my hand beneath the table and squeezes.

"Y-yes King Jovan, I do." I stand as he moves around the table. He doesn't take the position to my left. He doesn't sit down either. He stands just behind me, giving me the floor and quite literally watching my back.

I clear my throat wondering where to begin. The silence is so loud, and I know everyone wonders why I'm not talking. Fear beats in my chest.

Words so low I barely hear them sound behind me. "From the beginning, Lina." Jovan saying my name is like a key. The block in my mind opens and I know exactly where to start.

“Likely you are all wondering why you’ve been called here today,” I say, relieved my voice is clear. “The truth is, though you don’t know it yet, you’re all important to me.”

“What’d the girly say?” I hear Ice whisper. The others hush him.

“For those of you who aren’t ... accustomed to me, I am the Tatuma Olina. In Bruma terms, this means I’m the princess, the heir to the throne of Osolis.” I take a calming breath. “I’ve been veiled since birth by my mother. You may have heard of her dislike of me, even here—it is certainly no secret on my home world.” I sigh heavily. “In truth, I don’t like to talk of my childhood. Most of it was spent locked in a room, and when I was allowed out at ten years of age, it was only to discover a dark and twisted world.” There’s a sharp intake of air behind me. Oops, I don’t think Jovan knew that particular detail. I continue. “I suffered greatly at the hands of my mother. I was beaten bloody too many times to count. What was done is too horrific and personal to repeat.”

Someone gasps. Fiona.

“Luckily my brother, Olandon, helped me as much as he could. He, along with my young twin brothers and an old friend, made life bearable.” I rest a hand on my brother’s shoulder.

“My life continued this way, and I didn’t expect it to change until the peace delegation came from Glacium. Some of you were in that party,” I say, gesturing to where Roman, Adnan and the others sit. “But I came to know one in particular. Prince Kedrick. While the accords were renegotiated, we got to know each other well. He eventually came to ask why I was veiled.” I glance over to where the assembly are sitting. “Those of you who knew him can imagine how much control he had to exert not to ask me before that moment.” Sanjay chuckles at the back of the meeting room.

I pause for a few moments, trying to perfectly form what I want to say.

“Can you believe I had never seen my own face before coming to Glacium?” I ask.

It is so quiet I can hear Jovan’s breathing.

“I know you’d think it near impossible. But my mother went to great lengths to prevent it happening. Mirrors were destroyed, lakes were filled in, and still water was forbidden.” I look around the circle. Though I cannot see them, I know the action will make them feel like I can. “Osolis is not like

Glacium. The population is much smaller and there is nowhere to hide from the Tatum. To break her rule is instant death—for you, and for your family. She made others fear me. People in the court loathed me because they thought they might garner favor with my mother. But not only did she make others fear me, she made me fear myself.”

I let out a bitter chuckle. “It seems strange, doesn’t it? To be afraid of yourself? I knew I could take the veil off. However, I also knew what she would do to those people who saw me. I knew, because once, while still young, I showed a village girl. The young girl’s throat was slit in front of me. Her blood was all over my hands. It still is.” The hollow confession causes me physical pain to say aloud.

Someone’s crying. A woman.

“Whenever I was tempted to show my brother, memories of blood spurting from the girl’s throat would quickly remind me it was not worth the risk.”

“Olandon hadn’t even seen you?” Adnan asks, dumbfounded.

“No, no one had seen my face since birth, I assume, excepting an aunty who possibly cared for me,” I reply.

I walk around the table as I talk. I need to move. The tension in the room is unbearable.

“Over time, I began to fear the veil. What if it slid off while I was working at the orphanage? What family would my mother kill? What if it flew off in training? Would she kill Aquin, my old instructor? My mother carved this fear into me by design. But I only found that out later.” My movements become jerky. I plant my feet in the middle of the ring and screw my eyes shut.

“Kedrick eventually figured it out. The Tatum didn’t want me to remove the veil. It wasn’t anything to do with my degree of ugliness. She was *afraid* of me taking it off. It seems obvious, doesn’t it? It was to your prince. What was the Tatum trying to hide? Eventually, when facing a beating that likely would have killed me, I threatened to remove the veil. It is one of my favorite memories: the moment I saw my mother terrified.”

Someone speaks up. “Prince Kedrick warned us a month before we left. He didn’t give any details—just told us to be alert for danger.”

I dip my head at the person speaking. Roman, maybe. “It was because he knew I’d given Mother an ultimatum. Touch me again or hurt those I love

and I will show everyone my face.”

I tug on the veil. A nervous gesture I can't remember doing for some time. “Prince Kedrick saw my face just before he was shot saving me. His death sparked a cascade of events for me.”

Sounds of agreement from the delegates make me smile.

“Fiona, Jacky. Do you remember the day I asked you to teach me how to sew?”

“Of course,” Fiona says in a wobbling voice. It is she who was crying earlier. I suppose the pregnancy is making her emotional.

“You cut your hand on the mirror, and it brought up bad memories,” she says.

“A lie I thought necessary at the time. I apologize,” I say. “I looked at my face for the first time that day.” I toy with the bottom of my veil. The barracks are probably still wondering what's going on. I keep expecting Shard to figure it out. Frost isn't here, after all, and she said she would be.

“It took a colossal effort to remove this light material after years of habitual defeat. And, unfortunately, with its removal, all of my hopes and ambitions vanished into thin air. For the first time I discovered the reason my mother veiled me. It was not the happy ending I envisioned. You see, if I'd just been ugly, or beautiful, or deformed, it wouldn't have been a problem...”

I take a better grip of the veil and face the barracks.

“You'll soon understand your part in all this,” I say to my Outer Rings friends. “I'm sorry, but you come later in the story. For now, I wish to show you all my face.”

There are hushed whispers in the back of the room. The king clears his throat and the extra sound disappears.

“I show you because you're all dear to me and I wish to live without lies. But I also show you because I wish for your support. Recent events forced me to show my face to an outsider. There are several others who have seen me too. I feel it is only a matter of time until the truth becomes known, one way or the other. I'd rather tell you in the way you deserve.”

I can't resist the urge. I turn to find Jovan. He's not there. I search for him and see he's stepped to my right. He stands just a breath away, but he's there and I know he won't leave me alone. I take off the Kaur band and look at my brother. After a few moments he nods, moving to stand to my left.

He'll never know what that means to me.

Bunching the coarse fabric in my hands, I inhale, knowing my world is about to change, and then exhale, feeling some kind of peace that soon the secret will be a secret no longer. The burden will no longer be on my shoulders alone.

I've always closed my eyes when lifting the veil in front of someone new. This time my eyes stay open as I draw the veil up over the tips of my shoulders. I focus on keeping the tremble from my hands as it comes to my chin, my nose, and with a final tug, ridding my face of emotion, I pull it entirely from my head.

Chapter Ten

The veil floats to the ground in a delicate whisper that belies its evil past.

I look at the room of people, and they gaze back at me.

The dam breaks.

They turn to each other whispering frantically, then everyone starts doing the same and they start shouting to be heard over the explosion of noise. I keep my back straight and my friends stare at me and talk, then stare and talk some more. My eyes water in my determination not to blink too often and look like I'm hiding my eyes.

I take one staggering step back.

“Silence!” roars Jovan. The assembly stops. The barracks are half a step behind, but nowhere near as bad as when Alzona attempts to shut them up. The king steps behind me and I feel his warmth at my back. He rests his hands on my shoulders, probably glaring at my jury over my head.

“We are here to answer your questions, but don't squawk like a bunch of fucking chickens. Ask Olina,” he orders. No one wants to be the first. They glance at each other wondering who will be brave enough to do it. The lack of noise is worse.

It's up to me. I turn to the barracks and give some semblance of a smile. “Maybe now I can ask you what an Avalanche is,” I say.

They don't understand straight away. But then Shard smacks his hand on the table.

“It all makes so much sense now!” he says. He scoots around the table. “All those times you said something out of place and we chalked it to you being fancy and coming from the castle.” He shakes his head, a broad grin on his face. “You're a bloody Solati? This whole time.” He throws his head back and laughs again. He reaches me and holds me at arm's length.

“You got big balls, Frost. Maybe bigger than Avalanche's,” he says. We grimace at the same time. Malir gives him a withering look.

He leans in, eyes kind. I know my apprehension is all over my face. “I always assumed you knew this before, but might I say you're as pretty as they come.” He pulls me into a tight hug.

It's something I've always wanted to hear. My friend's reaction is

perfect. It turns out, it's the last straw on a very stressful week. I take shuddering gasps as torrents of tears flood down my face on to his shoulder. Shard steps back and awkwardly pats my arm, looking at the barracks with an expression of alarm. I giggle on a sob as he hovers, unsure how to console me.

"Oh, watch out! Men and tears." Fiona steps around him and kisses me on the cheek. She dabs her eyes. "I don't know why I'm crying. You just have such a s-sad story. I always knew you'd be beautiful. Inside and out." Her voice catches on the last word and she turns into Sanjay's chest behind her. He pulls me into a one-arm hug around her.

"I'm not sure if anybody has told you this, Olina, but you have blue eyes," Sanjay stage-whispers.

The tension explodes into a boom of laughter. I mouth my thank-you to him, wondering at a small frown between his brows as he studies my face. I don't have time to wonder for long; a line is forming.

"I've always wondered why Frost saved me that day in the Dome," Malir says seriously. "Thank you, Tatuma. I'm sorry you were ever in that position."

"Malir, you know to call me Olina. And I do have to say, it's quite interesting to experience the Dome from the other side—as someone facing execution, not just watching. I've been speaking to the king about it, as well. But at least you can put your mind to rest about your security on the migration. It was easy to sneak out as a Bruma." He beams at me and looks sheepishly at Sadra next to him. She clicks her tongue at him and moves to kiss my forehead.

"Well, my dear, it seems you were looking out for us the entire time. I thank you all over again for saving my husband. Though I haven't enjoyed listening to him fret about gaps in his migration strategies." It's my turn to be sheepish. Malir flashes me a grin.

Crystal's next. She punches me lightly on the shoulder and pulls back as though burned. "Oops. Can I do that now that you're a Tatuma?" She darts an anxious look behind me. I turn to see a stern Jovan there. I raise my eyebrows at him, but he doesn't break from his tense posture.

I smile as I peer back into the eyes of my Ire friend. "I've always been the Tatuma. You treat me as you did before."

She gasps. "You made me help a Solati escape the king!"

Uh-oh. Jovan didn't know it was her. She goes on as I share an uneasy look with Alzona. Crystal extended an offer of help when she thought Jovan was taking advantage of me after surviving the Dome. I'd escaped after sleeping with the king, and the young woman had led me to the Ire to save me. I've dreaded the day she discovered I wasn't actually in trouble at the time, just wanting some space from Glacium's leader. To say Jovan had been pissed was an understatement. I hope he doesn't turn his grudge against the petite woman.

"I mean, I knew you were mixed, but I thought he was making you have sex with him against your will or something."

I resist the urge to cover my face as Alzona leans forward and covers Crystal's mouth, dragging her out of the line. I feel two points on my back where the king is staring into my back. I don't dare look at my brother.

I turn my red face instead to Adnan. He's one of the only people here who won't pursue the sex comment. He holds his hand out for the veil.

"I've always been most curious about this material. May I?" he asks. I wordlessly pass it over and get a quick smile from him. I smile back, knowing what he wants say, though he can't find the words—not without a fair amount of brew anyway. He's most comfortable when Sanjay is in the immediate conversation.

I go through them all; Blizzard and Ice, who seem to think it's a great joke—like Shard. Avalanche gives me a hug tight enough to crush every bone in my body.

"How long have you known?" I ask Rhone when he approaches. His face splits into a rare smile.

"I suspected when I saw your interaction with the king in the Dome. There were the obvious clues: the height, the chest size," he gestures. I cover my chest with my arms self-consciously. Olandon moves to my side.

Rhone glances over at Crystal. "I'd also seen you lay Kedrick on his back when he snuck up on you that time on Osolis. But I was sure you were Olina, and not the other short girl over there, when I brought Kaura into the food hall."

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" I ask. A larger grin is my only response before Sanjay shoves Rhone.

"You knew? And you didn't tell me? Your best bud? Why?" Sanjay jokes.

Rhone snorts. "I can keep my mouth shut, that's why."

Sanjay presses a hand to his chest as though he's injured. "Why do I have a feeling there's an 'Unlike you, Sanjay' at the end of that sentence."

I giggle, turning to share the moment with Jovan. He's scowling at the back corner. He sees me watching and quickly changes his expression, giving me a hurried smile. It's too late; I've noticed something is wrong. The delegates have purposely been blocking my view of Jacky and Roman. The smile drops from my face as I see they're fighting ferociously in low voices. The noise becomes steadily louder, making it harder and harder to pretend we can't hear them.

Roman looks up and sees the rest of us standing awkwardly. He flings Jacqueline's hand from his arm and stalks to me with a stinging glare aimed her way. The king stands in front of me at his approach. I touch Jovan's elbow and step to his side. Roman licks his lips, darting a look at his king.

"Olina, my dear friend. I'm so terribly sorry for the ordeals you've been through, and I am honored, both on my behalf, and on Jacqueline's, that you deemed us worthy of telling. The man who captures your interest is a very lucky man indeed, for you are courageous and loyal to a fault."

His words are sincere, though I wonder if he's overdoing it to anger Jacqueline. He should have known Jacky isn't one to simmer in silence.

"You can keep my name from that speech, *husband*," she says through clenched teeth.

Fiona approaches her, but Jacky flings her arms out. "Fuck off, Fiona. You've kissed her. I don't want you near me."

I gasp, as do most of the people in the room. Roman is shaking, he's so furious. But it's not him I'm worried about. I grip Jovan's straining forearm and use all my body weight when he starts toward Jacky.

"Someone better shut that bitch up before I take to her with my right fist," Alzona calls. "Then my left."

Ice cracks his knuckles. "You said it, Zona." I know he'd never follow through on his words, but Jacqueline doesn't. She takes a couple of steps back and glances at Roman. When she sees he hasn't moved she gets angry all over again.

"How can you all have overlooked the fact that she's mixed! She is part Bruma, and part Solati. She doesn't belong anywhere. She is a *monstrosity*, an abomination." She spits on the floor beside her.

“Uh, actually, I think you’ll find there’s a place—” Crystal starts.

“Crystal,” I say. She falls silent. Mentioning the Ire in front of Jacky would not be a good thing right now. Jovan hasn’t shared the actual details with his people yet.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Jacky,” I say. “If I’m honest, part of me hoped this would help you forgive me for leaving you all on the way to the First Sector.” I move closer to her, interlocking my hands behind my back.

“I knew,” she breathes heavily. “I never have seen that particular blue-black of your hair before. I saw you in the Dome, saw the light reflecting off your hair, saw the way you stared at our table from the back, and I *knew* it was you. That a vile half-breed had been sitting next to me, eating *my* food for months.”

The extent of her hatred leaves a sour taste in my mouth. Her words will never leave me as they reinforce my every fear.

“Shut your mouth, for once in your life!” Roman roars. Half of the room jumps. I wonder if they’ve ever seen him that angry. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him stand up to Jacky.

Jacquiline stares at him with wide eyes.

I run through my options: letting Jovan take over, listening to Roman and Jacquiline argue, or leaving her at the mercy of angry pit fighters.

“You’re all fooled by a pair of tits and a smile,” she starts again, swiping her hand against her mouth.

A dagger sinks into the wall by her head. One of Shard’s.

“I’d be careful what you say next. He missed on purpose,” Blizzard says. “Then again, maybe you should keep talking and do us all a favor.” He grins maniacally. I know him, and it’s still terrifying.

I go for the final option: stepping in myself.

I walk toward Jacky, palms raised in a non-threatening gesture. “It sounds as though your mind is made up, and I won’t waste my time changing the mind of someone so set on hatred. But for the sake of what we had before you found out how repulsive I am, can you tell me *why* you hate the mixed so much?” I ask in my calmest voice.

There’s a flicker of something on her face. Perhaps she’s realized she’s hopelessly outnumbered, but I tell myself it’s the Jacky I used to know. The one who stuck up for me against Arla all those months ago.

“Your kind bring nothing but pain and suffering,” she says, eyes

filling with tears. Her hatred is personal. And obviously still fresh, or repressed for too long.

The king wraps his arm around me. “Roman, if you do not shut your wife up, I will, and then I’ll deal with you after.” He doesn’t raise his voice. He doesn’t need to. Roman hurries toward Jacqueline as the king addresses my former friend.

“As your king I’m ashamed one of my subjects could react in this way. You heard what Olina’s life has been, but because of something in your past, you’re blind to any kind of empathy. I feel for you the same revolt and abhorrence you hold for the woman by my side, who is wholly undeserving of your ignorance and viciousness. You have made a grievous misjudgment.”

The blood drains from Jacky’s face. She bends slightly at the waist as though hit in the stomach.

“Jovan,” I whisper to him.

He speaks over me. “Even now, she’s trying to save you by asking me to stop. I don’t like to cause her discomfort, but I have one more thing to say. It’s a warning. One you should take very seriously.” He lets go of me and stalks toward her, death in every step. The room is suddenly cold, as if Jovan controls Glacium itself.

“If you even think about repeating what you’ve witnessed here today. If the betraying words hover only for a second on the tip of your tongue before you swallow them back. Then run far, and run fast, because I will separate your head from your body before you can summon the air to scream for your husband.”

I shiver at the hardness of his promise. Not a single person in the room doubts he will carry through on it if she should be foolish enough to test him. He stands over her, every inch of him coiled for attack. She brought this on herself through sheer stupidity, and it’s my life she holds in her hands. I was an imbecile to think I could trust her.

“Have you got anything you wish to say, Tatuma?” he asks.

There’s a lot I could say, but none of it would make a shred of difference. “Nothing at all.” I’m unable to keep the sadness from my voice.

Jacquiline stares at the ground, tears falling at her feet. They mean nothing to the man in front of her.

“Get out,” he says with deadly calm. She scrambles for the door.

“Roman!” barks Jovan. Roman scurries to his side. The king grabs

him by the front of the tunic and lifts him onto his toes. “You better make sure her mouth stays shut.” His anger is getting out of control. I slip forward. Jovan lowers him, still vibrating with anger.

“Roman.” I place a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorrier than you can know to come between the two of you.” The older man’s eyes well up at my words. “It’s not your fault she dislikes me and please don’t think it is.”

“Her mother was killed by a mixed man, and no one believed her when she said she saw the murderer fly off,” he mumbles quickly. “I’ve never seen her like this.”

“I see,” I say. Even though I don’t. How is this an excuse for hating all mixed? “If you’re able to prevent her from spreading the news, I would be very thankful.” I nod.

“You don’t even have to ask. I meant what I said earlier.” Roman bows and hurries out the door after his wife. I don’t envy him at all.

Jovan stands completely, furiously still. I peer up at him and it takes a few moments for him to meet my gaze. I don’t dare tell him I’m fine, or everything is okay. I know him better now.

I shrug and smile slightly. “One out of fourteen...”

He softens infinitesimally, but still looks infuriated. “It should have been zero out of fourteen.”

I can’t help feeling desolate at having lost a person who used to be a good friend. I think a part of me knew the relationship we had was irretrievable. “I suppose it’s unreasonable to think everyone will love me,” I joke.

A calloused finger tilts my chin. His angry blue eyes capture mine. “It’s not unreasonable at all,” he says.

I step away from his touch, too aware of the surrounding people. He growls as I turn to face the others.

“Some of this attitude will be unavoidable, though perhaps in time, my story will encourage other mixed to come out of hiding. I believe progress has been made here already,” I say.

“Don’t worry about Jacqueline,” Alzona calls as she fixes the tie on her tunic. “She always was a bitch.” Her comment grabs the attention of almost everybody there, except me and Crystal.

“You’ve decided?” I ask, brow arched. She arches one in response.

“Thank you,” I say. The more witnesses I gather, the easier Blaine’s

demise will be.

“I’d ask those of you from the barracks to remain here for a few days. I’d like some help with a few things.” I look at Ice, who taps his nose with a knowing expression.

The nods and noises of agreement fill the room. My friends begin talking amongst themselves. I’m happy to see Shard and Malir talking, as well as Sanjay and Blizzard, though I imagine it won’t be long until Sanjay makes Blizzard lose his temper. I pull Ice aside and out of earshot.

“What have you found?” I ask.

“You have blue eyes,” he answers instead. I give him a dry look.

“You’re Sluti.”

“Solati,” I correct.

“Yeah, one of those.” He rubs his chin thoughtfully. “Should I be helping you?”

I shrug. “The king’s right there, and technically I’m doing this for Glacium, not Osolis.”

He shakes his head quickly. “Okay, just had to get that straight. Wouldn’t be good for guilt if I did the wrong thing.” I grin at his logic.

“Followed your two tails back from the Sixth. I’ve been staying close in case they make another move. You lost ‘em before reaching the castle. I traced the rats back to their base to get a lookie at the top dog. The person is Inner Rings or a fancy castle man, finely dressed. Below average height for a male here, and a little rounder in the gut. Thinning hair, nervous eyes.”

I sift through the assembly members in my mind. “Could be half a dozen men in the assembly. I’d have no idea about the Inner Ring.”

“I’ll take a look at dinner. I get dinner, right?” he asks. He sounds more concerned about this than he was about helping a Solati.

I assure him he’ll be fed and mentally check him off my list before moving on to the next task. Sanjay stands next to Fiona. He’s looking at me with consternation.

Alzona grabs my arm. “It’s all set. Starts in two weeks,” she says. I clap my hands and bounce up and down in excitement.

“How many?” I ask.

“You’re not gonna believe it, but all of them—even Leila,” she says with awe, talking of Willow. Leila was her working name. My own jaw drops. This was huge. Willow said she’d get the brothel’s mistress on board,

but I'd no idea she intended to participate herself! Leila was the brothel's top whore; no wonder all the women at the whorehouse joined.

"I don't think it's gonna be long until some of the smaller brothels join in," she says in a quick whisper.

"I'm probably going to need Ice for a bit, and perhaps Blizzard as well..." I trail off as her jaw tightens. She doesn't like me stealing her men.

She exhales through tight nostrils, then brightens as an idea strikes her. "That's fine. If this takes off, I'll move out of the pits anyway. I'll offer positions to a few of the more reluctant whores. I'll still need one or two fighters to take the sessions, though," she says.

I nod. "Great idea, and I'll help where I can."

"You can't help. You're the Tatuma, for fuck's sake," she curses. I stare into her eyes until she realizes how stupid that sounded.

"I guess you've been doing it for a while now," she admits. I feel eyes on me and give Olandon a quick smile. He stands in the corner, not talking to anyone. He looks completely baffled. It will have to wait.

"Rhone," I call. His expression doesn't change as he moves in front of me. I crane my neck to see his face.

"I need you to do something for me," I say. "Straightaway, or it will be too late." He continues to wait. It doesn't put me off. He's never wasted words.

"I have some documents I ... acquired."

He snorts. "You stole them?"

I quickly shush him and give the ever-watchful king an innocent look. Jovan narrows his eyes in response.

"So what, you need me to get them?" he asks, bending low.

"They're hidden behind a rock I pried from the wall in my dungeon room, er, the room I was first put in." I see a glimmer of humor flash in his eyes. I close my eyes and count.

"It's on the left wall behind the bath. Seven across from the left, and six down. There's a little white mark I made in the right-hand corner of the rock," I say.

"Why can't you get them yourself?" he grunts. I nearly smack myself on the forehead.

"Sorry. They're in the Third Sector castle. That's why I need you to go now. Soon it will be too close to the Fourth to retrieve them. And they are

very important to Glacium's future," I say. I don't worry that I'm saying too much to Rhone. He's proven himself time and again.

"I have one task to complete for the king. I'll leave directly afterward," he says with a small bow. I squeeze his arm in thanks.

"What are you up to?" a rumbling voice says directly behind me. I squeal and jump.

I scowl at Jovan and move away to say farewell some of the delegates. It's a chaotic time for Glacium; it's a miracle everyone was able to be here at the same time.

"Sadra, Fiona," I say. "Do you think you could get someone to organize rooms for our Outer Rings guests?" For some reason Sadra beams widely and sneaks a quick peek at the king before nodding at my request. I follow her look and catch Jovan smiling too.

It takes another half an hour for the room to empty, leaving Jovan, Olandon, and myself.

I collapse into an exhausted pile on a hard seat wishing it were my bed. We all stare at each other wordlessly. Jovan breaks out into a large grin and my grin quickly follows suit. He grabs me from the seat, hands on my waist and spins me in endless circles. Peals of uncontrollable laughter leave me as I struggle for breath.

"Put my sister down," Olandon says. The king ignores him.

"Jovan," I gasp. "Put me down please." Another giggle leaves me as I'm placed on my feet once more.

"You did it," Jovan says. A slow smile spreads across my face. I take a shaking breath as relief and happiness choke me.

"I did," I say softly.

"What about the woman, Jacqueline," my brother says. His tone is off. I peer at him curiously, and he turns his face—the equivalent of telling me to mind my own business. I answer his surface question while trying to figure out what's wrong.

"I believe she'll remain quiet. I hope in time her temper will cool and she'll see things reasonably. Though I think our friendship is over," I say.

He turns his head back briefly and I catch sight of redness around his eye. "What has happened to your eye, Landon?" I ask. It is barely there; his eyes flicker to the man behind me and back.

"I admit I lost my temper, sister. You know these people better than I.

What just occurred in here..." His bafflement resurfaces. "I should have deferred to your judgment immediately and I apologize." His eyes flicker to Jovan once more before he bows and leaves the room.

"Why is my brother acting like that?" I ask.

"I would guess he's discovering the things he knew as truths are not truths at all."

The cryptic reply tells me nothing. "And the mark on his face?" I fold my arms across my chest and wait, tapping my toe.

"I hit your brother," Jovan admits. I wait.

"He needed some sense knocked into him," he adds. "I've been itching to do it for weeks now."

I smile a little at that and sigh. "Did you hit him hard?" Jovan's head bobs down to my level.

"No harder than necessary to make him see my way." He grins. I push his head back and make for the door, picking up my veil and band on the way.

"You can't knock sense into everyone," I say, looking back over my shoulder sweetly. "It's barbaric."

His eyes roam over my body, making me tremble.

"I've never pretended to be anything else."

Chapter Eleven

I sit next to Jovan that night. My brother remains several seats down between Drummond and Gerden. The advisors look distinctly uncomfortable and I quietly applaud my brother from where I'm placed. I swing my legs beneath the seat as I chew through the crunchy goodness of a pear, wishing I could see to the back of the room where the barracks are sitting. But it's enough knowing nearly all the people I love are here. If Aquin and the twins arrived, it would be perfect. I throw a bit of meat to Kaura, who lies by my feet.

I only see him when he is up on the throne platform.

"Excuse me, m'King, could I have a word?" Ice asks.

"You may," Jovan accedes. I lean in with interest.

Ice comes in close. Right up to Jovan, but on my side, so I can hear. Jovan tenses, not liking Ice so close. He's certainly pushing the boundaries of appropriate behavior, but I imagine my friend has his reasons.

"Third table back, closest row, second from right," he says. Ice followed my two tags back to see who they reported to. He'd said the person looked like assembly or Inner Rings. The person is in this room.

"Jovan, who is it?" I ask. Damned veil. I resist prompting him again in the short pause.

"Sole," he says curiously. My jaw drops open and I sit back in my chair, unable to help the reaction.

Sole.

I lean back in, giving instructions in a low voice. "New target while you're in the castle," I order. Ice jerks his head in acquiescence.

"He's not the type to run it," I say. "Find who he's answering to." I already know who the source is. But who will believe a Solati? Even Jovan won't believe me and he kisses me on occasion. Ice bows to the king and moves back.

Several minutes pass until the disturbance has been forgotten and the hum of the food hall has resumed.

"We need to talk," Jovan says in my ear.

Finally, he's listening.

"I agree. And you're too close." I look nervously at Roscoe over his

shoulder. Roscoe looks tired. I assume, as the king's right-hand man, he's been working day and night for some time now.

"I'm not close enough," he disagrees in a heated voice. I shudder as yearning ripples through me once again.

"Meet me at the baths tonight," he says. "Late."

I open and shut my mouth twice before saying slowly. "An odd place for a meeting."

He gives me a slow smile. The kind I'm embarrassed other people might see. "Well, if you're scared..." he says. Warmth unfurls in my stomach. I know what the baths mean: no clothes. That would go directly against what I've decided to do.

"Clothes stay on." I state my terms, cheeks burning under my veil.

Jovan booms with laughter, slapping a hand on the table, making the plates around us jump and clatter.

"Hush!" I scold. There must be many curious eyes on us because he waits another few minutes to return with his next proposal.

"How about, your clothes can stay on ... if you wish them to?" His voice is so quiet I have to lean closer to hear. There's no way he misses my sharp intake. The laughter dies as he waits for my answer.

There's no danger of my clothes coming off.

I dip my head slowly, agreeing to his terms and push back from the table, whistling to Kaura. For some reason I'm no longer hungry.

I have no idea where the barracks are staying, so I head to my room with Kaura in tow, aiming to get in some training. My stomach flutters nervously. I think a lot of training is in order. I dodge up the stairs to my chamber.

"You full, girl?" I ask her. She waves her tail manically in response. I was happy to discover our relationship hadn't suffered. She still obeyed my every command; Rhone's too, now. And she kept growing. She was well above my knee now. Rhone said she wouldn't be fully grown for another couple of revolutions.

A hand grabs my elbow. I react, like I did with Kedrick. I pull the culprit toward me, taking his center away. I roll the man over my hip, using his momentum, and throw him into the wall to my right. My guards clatter over to me, Ashawn one of them, Wrath on his other side.

"That was awesome," Ashawn says. "I didn't know you could fight."

I shrug in return, not wanting to lie to him, but uneasy about agreeing while there are three other guards here.

A groan pulls my attention to my attacker. The red hair makes my stomach drop. No wonder Kaura didn't react! She sits licking my attacker's face instead.

"Shit!" Sanjay rolls onto his back, pushing her away.

I drop to my knees by his side. "Dammit, Sanjay, what were you thinking."

His eyes aren't completely focusing. A laughing Ashawn moves forward to help the other man up. I point to my room and Jovan's brother dumps him on a chair by the fire. Kaura moves up to the bed and settles in the furs there, bored with the drama around her.

"Probably should've said something first," Sanjay whispers.

"That would've been a good idea. Did you need me for something?" I ask. Sanjay glances up at Ashawn, who returns the look with a glare and doesn't budge. Despite his joking, he's begun to take Jovan's orders quite seriously.

"Prince Ashawn, a moment please," I request.

He leaves the room in a jangle of armor after threatening Sanjay a few times. I really should ask Jovan to let his brother out of the cumbersome battlewear. Many people thought it was just punishment. But I suspected the confinement doubled as protection for Ashawn as well. The archer hadn't been found and Ashawn was his last target. Whatever the youngest brother's mistakes—and they had been many—he seemed to have recovered his good character. More attention from Jovan had done wonders for the youngest prince.

Sanjay's face loses color as he looks at me. I remember his odd behavior earlier and dismiss my worry; it's a reaction from hitting his head against a stone wall. He clears his throat as I take a seat opposite him, removing my veil and placing it on my lap. It gives me a thrill to do so.

He stares at me for several moments afterward. I would smile, but I've rarely seen him this serious.

"It is you," he says, voice hoarse.

I frown. "What?"

"From the whorehouse," he says. "I saw you there."

I frown in concentration for a few seconds. Is he calling me a

prostitute? Then I recall seeing a very agitated Sanjay in the courtyard. I'd followed him to the Middle Ring to make sure he returned safely. "Oh, of course. I'd forgotten about that," I say in a rush. That explains his odd look as he tried to place me.

"You saw someone from the assembly in the Outer Rings and you forgot?" he says incredulously.

"You'd be surprised," I say drily, thinking of Rhone, Ashawn, and Blaine.

"Well, I... That is, did you?" He darts a look at me. "Do you know why I was there? At the whorehouse?" he blurts.

I sit back in confusion. If anyone else had said that, I'd think the answer was obvious: to see a whore. "You don't remember why you were there?"

He shakes his head. "I had a drink, in the Inner Ring. Next thing, I'm waking up between two naked women with no idea what I've done or how I got there." He rubs a hand over his face.

All of the small inconsistencies in his behavior click into place. "Is this why you've been acting strangely?"

"It's driving me insane." He stands up and lights the fire in angry movements. "I don't know if I've betrayed Fiona, and don't want to tell her in case she leaves me, but I don't feel right about touching her while I might have."

"She's noticed your strange behavior," I agree.

He turns panicked eyes to me. "What happened in that room, Olina? If you were there, maybe you can help me."

"I was there," I say. Trying to get information out of Willow about Seedyr wood arrows, but he doesn't need to know that. "I have friends in the brothel there. I might be able to find out for you. It will cost you, though. She doesn't give many things for free."

"I don't care what it costs me. I need the answer," he says fervently.

"Good or bad?" I ask quietly. His face falls.

"Good or bad," he says solemnly.

I tap my finger on my knee as I watch the normally energetic Bruma looking completely drained of all happiness.

"Who gave you the drink?" I ask.

"Some friends of Blaine. He wanted me to meet someone who'd

apparently developed a lighter, more durable type of sled. I've been interested in this for some time so I agreed to the meeting." He shrugs. "The man's ideas were rubbish, the designs worse than the sleds Adnan and I have already developed. Waste of time."

I rest back in the chair, somehow unsurprised by Blaine's involvement. "And what did Blaine have to say about all this?"

Sanjay swallows. "He said I was adamant about visiting the brothel. He refused to go, but said some of his friends took me there," he says.

My fury grows with each uttered word.

Sanjay sits back down. "That's the thing. I asked Blaine to keep quiet about it until I could speak to Fiona. He wanted to know something trivial about an invention Adnan and I have been working on. Weaponry, you understand?"

"I do."

"But he's been asking more and more questions. Amounts of weapons. Their exact workings. Plans. He doesn't mention telling Fiona anything, but the threat is there, you know? The only reason I answer is because he can't do anything with the knowledge. Can he? He's an advisor."

I pick at my trousers wondering how much I should reveal to Sanjay.

"I can ask my friend at the brothel for you. Of course I'll do that. I think you should know that despite King Jovan trusting Blaine, I have my own suspicions about him." I lean forward to hold my friend's gaze.

"I'm currently gathering proof of Blaine's guilt. I believe he's behind the unrest in the Outer Rings. Please keep that to yourself," I add a bit harshly. "Sanjay, you're one of a handful of people who I'd like to testify against him during council."

"But what can I say?" he splutters. There's more to his remark. He's worried people will judge him.

"You can tie Blaine to wanting detailed information about weaponry," I say. "I know as an advisor that isn't bad by itself, but you can prove he used blackmail to do so. Every piece of information I present to the king helps to bring Blaine down." Sanjay's expression darkens as I put a label on what the manipulative hateful man is doing to him.

I stand and rest a hand on his shoulder. "Let's see what we hear back first. Then we can decide. You don't have to do anything you don't wish to do."

Blue eyes look up at me. “You see a lot under that veil, don’t you?” he asks.

“Not as much as I’d like to,” I reply in complete honesty.

* * *

I pace in my chambers, thankful Olandon now sleeps in the royal wing of the castle. But perhaps his presence would solve my current predicament.

Nothing was going to happen. I’d made that clear. The clothes were staying on. I straighten. It was just a meeting between two leaders. It in no way violated my intention to stay away from the king of Glacium.

It was just a meeting ... in the baths. I groan and sink to the floor beside my bed.

Hours later I creak open the door, a wide smile beneath my veil because I’ve figured a way out of the meeting. My guards will follow me down. When they see Jovan’s guards there, they’ll make their own assumptions. It would be damaging to our reputations and spark more unsettlement in a time of unrest.

My excuses die on my lips as I take a step out of the door and look around me. My watch are gone! I close the door behind me and walk down the hall and wide stone steps. Maybe they’re at the bottom?

They’re not.

I fume that Jovan has foiled my escape plans. No doubt the guards think they’re on some ‘important mission.’ I stand at the base of the steps, looking back up to my room, and then to my right—in the direction of the baths. Tapping my foot, I let the two sides of me engage in a furious debate. It’s easy to analyze the head, not so easy to interpret the heart. Being Solati hasn’t helped me much there.

Jovan will be waiting.

I throw my hands in the air and stomp down the hall in the direction of the baths, disrupting the quiet, flickering firelight from the torches lining the walls. Like last sector, I skim around the kitchens through the meeting rooms, just in case there are Bruma there, and duck out of the doorway. *Unlike* last time, the walkway to the baths has now been covered in. It would take my people a year to do this much work. Our smaller population hindered

rapid progress such as this.

I push open the door and stride into the baths with measured steps. I listen carefully for sound. Jovan's not here. My shoulders sag, though there is a sharpness in my chest, which makes me think I'm feeling something other than relief at the discovery he's not here. Pricking my ears once more, I remove my veil to take a better look around the baths while I wait for him.

He'll come. He's the one who asked me here.

"I didn't think you'd show," a voice says. I squeak and jump around to face the sound.

I stare wide-eyed for a few moments before whirling back to face the wall. Jovan standing. Naked. In the water. I squeeze my eyes shut against the image of his hard chest as my stomach flips inside of me. Triple backflips, by the feel of it.

"A half hour had passed since our arranged appointment. I decided to put the time to good use and enjoy the baths," he continues. My eyes narrow at the laughter I detect in his voice.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I say in a high voice. I frown and clear my throat. "I'll just leave to you to it, with my apologies," I say, nearly running for the door.

"Olina. We spent a night together. You've seen my body many times. Unless, you find the sight displeasing?" he asks, drawing the word out. I refuse to answer. Anything I might say would just make the situation worse. But I do know I could never find Jovan's sculptured body displeasing. Splashes behind me let me know he's submerged himself.

I retrace my steps, taking a seat on the cold stone bench as the king resurfaces. He meets my eyes with an amused glance and I glare at him, refusing to look away. He raises an eyebrow and gestures to the surrounding water.

"There's enough water for two in here," he offers. His words make me angry. I know enough to see the implication in his words, and where it may lead.

"Jovan, you're not helping. You know we can't repeat what happened." My words echo loudly across the cavernous room.

I watch as he runs water up his arm and it trickles back down to join the pool. "And why would it be so disastrous to repeat?" he asks calmly. I wrench my gaze up to his, spluttering.

“Are you serious? We can never be together properly. Despite what happened between us, I’m not the kind of person to have ... relations with any attractive male. I’m not going to sleep with you for the sake of it,” I say in an outraged voice, standing up.

Jovan, on the other hand, remains composed, trickling water over his other arm.

“That’s all there is to it?” he asks. “You worry what people will think?”

I move to the bath’s edge. “I worry what people will *do*,” I clarify.

He runs a hand over his chest, and I give up trying to look away until he chuckles. I flush and look at the bench beside me.

“Has it ever occurred to you that a union between us could strengthen the relationship between our worlds?” he asks softly.

I’m rendered immobile for a few moments, and unfurl my crossed arms, glancing back to meet his wary eyes. What did he just say? My heart thuds in my chest and my hands shake beside me. I ball them into fists, nails digging into palms.

“Strengthen?” I say weakly, giving a short, humorless laugh.

He shrugs one massive, sculpted shoulder. “Why not? It’s a new idea, but surely you can see the merits,” he says.

“I...” I snap my mouth shut. “Why would you *want* to, though?” My voice quickens as my reaction escapes me. Solis, he can’t be serious. How could two worlds possibly be joined in this way?

He’s judging me. His gaze is scorching, and full of something more. I saw it the night of the first ball as we sat listening to the musicians. It’s the look he had as he pinned me to the wall telling me I wouldn’t be learning to handle the dogsleds. It’s the same expression he had as we moved together *that* night. I stand tense, strung so tightly I feel my spine may crack from the strain. I watch as he shutter his expression. The burning in his eyes slowly fades as he contemplates me.

“There’s no need to be alarmed, Tatuma. It’s merely an idea. Bad times sometimes call for dramatic change. Entering into a union, while perhaps not our first choice, could secure peace for our worlds. It is something to think on,” he says, an edge to his voice.

I ignore the painful jab I feel at his words, "not our first choice." A slight anger creeps into my shock as he reveals his true reason for suggesting

such a thing. “Yes,” I say shortly. “It can be reserved as a last attempt to help our worlds.” His back muscles tighten for all of two seconds.

“What was your Outer Rings friend talking about at dinner?” he asks brusquely.

I roll my shoulders, asking myself why I came here. Jovan isn’t going to like what I say next. For some reason that doesn’t bother me anymore.

“When I returned to the barracks, two men followed me.” I hold up a hand as he turns in a swirl of water, mouth opened angrily.

“I was never approached. Didn’t know they were even there until Ice spotted them.” I smile at my friend’s cleverness. “I asked Ice to tail them back to their employer.”

“They reported to Sole,” I say quietly. “Were you aware of any of this?”

Jovan simmers, on the edge of boiling over. He slams a hand down onto the water's surface and begins striding out. I hasten to give him some privacy.

“No. I had no fucking idea,” he growls. My cheeks heat as I feel his movement behind me as though I were right next to him. “But I’m going to find out.”

“Wait,” I say, risking a quick peek. His trousers are on—it’s safe. “I’ve asked Ice to trail Sole and see who he’s working for. You know Sole. There’s no way he’s operating alone.” Jovan is being purposely obtuse. Everyone knows who Sole works for. He’s an introverted Bruma who tends to keep to himself. Since my journey with the delegates through the Oscala, I’d puzzled over the timid deference Sole pays to Blaine. It all started to make sense when I found out Blaine was married to Macy.

“I could just beat the truth out of him,” he says. It’s tempting, if only for the fact Jovan would hear Blaine’s name from someone other than myself.

I move forward to grip his arm. “I believe he’s being controlled through his sister, Macy,” I say, hoping he’ll understand.

The confusion on his face baffles me. I’m unused to having to point out details to Jovan. I roll the left wrist I dislocated when saving Sole on the pathway.

All the pent-up frustration I have toward Jovan for his stubbornness threatens to boil over. “You know Sole answers to Blaine. Blaine threatens to harm Macy, so Sole does his bidding,” I explain slowly.

He scoffs. "Oh, this is about Blaine again," he says.

"What do you mean 'again'?" I ask in annoyance.

He sits on the bench, returning me glare for glare. "You have something against him. He's spoken to me about it himself, trying to speculate as to why."

I hate that Jovan's been speaking to Blaine about me, when he won't talk to me about the slimy traitor. I stare at Jovan, stunned. "And you believed that?"

He clenches his jaw stubbornly and dangles his hands over his knees in his favorite posture. I open my mouth to explain about Sanjay and Alzona, about Hale and Ashawn, or what I saw as Frost. He cuts me off.

"I would ask you to stop trying to turn my people against him," he says shortly. "He is not a traitor. He's one of the highest positioned Bruma in my assembly. My father trusted him as a brother! He bounced me on his knee when I was a young boy," He breathes shallowly, running a hand through his hair. "Besides," he says, "I questioned Macy. She didn't know what I was talking about, and she didn't appear to be lying. You must have been mistaken about Blaine beating her."

My jaw drops. "She said she wasn't beaten by him?" The news rocks me. I *know* she's lying, but why would she do this?

Jovan stands up, towering over me. He's not even trying to intimidate me with the act. Then I understand. Macy is afraid of men, and with her knowledge of Blaine's importance to Jovan, she'd probably been terrified of telling the truth.

"She is too afraid to tell you," I say.

I see anger flash in Jovan's eyes as he contemplates me. "Are you saying one of my subjects is too scared to tell me she's being abused?"

My own anger rises to join his. It's not really about Macy or Blaine or Sole. We're both angry about before. I'm hurt he only sees me as a resolution to the broken accords. This suddenly seems like the perfect outlet.

"Is it so surprising? You didn't even know who she was until I pointed her out," I say, stepping up to him. "You heard what you wanted to hear. I have other proof, Jovan. Actual written proof. I have witnesses who have had dealings with Blaine. Witnesses who can prove he's a murderer, and a traitor." I barely pause for breath. "I saw him in the Outer Rings when he was exiled to the Sixth Sector. He was joking with the man now helping

him with Outer Rings rebellion. Why won't you listen to me, Jovan?" It hurts so much that he won't believe me.

He trembles with restrained fury. Is he seeing the truth? "You think, after a few sectors here, you know my own people better than myself? How many times do I need to tell you Bruma are not like Solati? There is honor in our culture, loyalty, and trust," he withers. I gasp at his words.

"Blaine was there for me when no one else was," he roars. "Every time I look at him, I see my father's friend. You'd have me kill one of the last remnants of my father? You Solati know nothing of loyalty. I shouldn't be surprised you're pursuing this. Subterfuge always comes from within your court, so why would you ever think someone outside of this castle could be behind the rebellion?"

Is he really going to ignore everything I just told him? "You're blind to what's happening around you!" I shout. "And all because that evil man bounced you on his damn knee?" I grip him just above the elbows and shake him. It doesn't have much effect. "Open your eyes, Jovan. He's stealing your kingdom from underneath your stubborn Bruma ass!" I swallow as I look up into his eyes. His rage emanates from him, rising from him like steam. "Please just stop and listen to me. Talk to some of my witnesses. Ask Macy again, or Ice, or Sanjay, but please don't sit there and let him do this to you!"

He stoops to bring his face close to mine. "You're mistaken. You mean well, but you don't know Blaine, or what you're speaking of. Perhaps this is your new way of coping." His warm breath tickles my skin as a tendril of doubt worms into my conviction. I never thought about that. Is it me?

"Whatever it is, Tatuma, this is me telling you to stop. I don't want to hear any more of your theories about Blaine, I don't want you spreading lies to anyone else, either. This stops here. It's the last time I'll warn you."

I refuse to let my eyes water as I hold his gaze. He growls when he sees I won't agree and straightens. I step back from him, crossing my arms. Jovan opens his mouth again, but decides otherwise, turning for the door. He glances back over his shoulder as he pushes the door open in front of him, expression blank—which I hate—and ducks his head to walk out.

This is the first time in a long time I've felt like he's the king of Glacium, and I'm the Tatuma of Osolis.

Now would be the perfect time to possess a punching bag. I think of the one swinging at the barracks and clench my fists. I'm so angry with

Jovan. I look around uselessly and realize I'm on my own. No one's going to help me take down Blaine. And Jovan's proven he won't, or can't, listen.

I have to take down Blaine on my own.

I dash away a few traitorous tears, and then settle my gaze on the bath behind me. Sleep will be a miracle for me tonight. At least for next few hours. I reach for the bottom hem of my tunic, wishing I'd just joined Jovan when he asked.

* * *

I stumble blearily into the council meeting. The advisors, used to me, barely glimpse up as I take my seat, trying to pick up the topic. It's probably the same topic as the last five meetings, and it will probably have the same outcome. Nothing.

I yawn. Loudly. Merc chuckles at the sound.

"Sorry, Tatum Olina. Are we keeping you up?" Blaine asks.

I wave my hand at him. "No, Barry, please continue." Several someones choke off laughter at my comment. Jovan will be pissed. And I don't care.

A door opens to my right. Malir stands there, Rhone beside him. "My King. Forgive the intrusion," Malir bows. "We have a problem. There's a crowd out front. Growing quickly. People from the Outer Rings."

I straighten, tiredness gone.

"Are they violent?" Jovan asks, standing and moving toward Malir.

"Not yet, but they have several Inner Ring hostages they've captured on the way here," Malir reports. "They're demanding to be heard."

"Outrageous!" splutters someone, Drummond, by the pompous sound of it.

Blaine stands and moves next to Jovan. I remain seated, thinking furiously. Glacium is teetering on the edge of anarchy. This *cannot* happen right now. It could take years to resolve a civil war with the Outer Rings population, let alone the Middle Ring—if they decided to join in. And if the hostages are killed, soon all Bruma will be seeking their own retribution. Chaos.

"You must show a swift and decisive front, my King," Blaine speaks. "You'd do no less for any other who spoke against you. Crush them."

I raise my eyebrows, quickly preparing to voice my opinion, but Roscoe beats me to it.

“And strengthen their cause by creating martyrs? If they are angry enough to come in great number, they wish to be taken seriously. Killing them will spark an inferno. You need the hostages safe and the horde dispersed. Talk with them, see if you can find a solution.” There’s a reason Adnan’s father is Jovan’s top advisor.

“That would be wise,” Rhone offers from where he stands next to Malir.

“Your opinion isn’t wanted here,” Drummond snarls at Rhone. I start at the venom in his voice. “They’re your people,” Drummond continues. “Perhaps you are the traitor in our midst.”

I blink several times as a mystery falls into place. Rhone is from the Outer Rings?

How the hell did he get into the assembly? No wonder he keeps to himself. Or perhaps his isolation isn’t self-imposed, judging by the comments directed toward him.

Drummond snaps his mouth shut with a gesture from Jovan. I wait for Rhone’s reply, even looking at him expectantly, but there isn’t one. Why doesn’t he put Drummond in his place?

I move around the table as the council hurries after Jovan.

Malir leads us to a safe vantage point. I go on tiptoes to peek out the window, gasping at the vast outline of the force gathered.

“How is this possible?” someone whispers. I shake my head. This was not going to end well.

“There are several hundred of them.”

It could be worse. The Outer Rings population is the largest of any of the rings. They number in the thousands. If they united, the Outer Rings could overrun the castle with ease. Which I’m sure is the basis of Blaine’s plan.

As we stand watching, I hear the sound of something hitting the wall of the castle. I strain to hear further noises of objects hurtling toward the castle, but it seems the person throwing is alone for now. I hope it’s not the beginning of the end. If the Outer Rings become violent, they’ll force Jovan’s hand. If the hostages are killed, Jovan will have to strike back to show power. My mind hurtles, already making contingency plans for the worst-case

scenario.

I look to the side, awaiting the king's decision. Why is he stalling? Then I remember his comments about living up to his father's legacy.

"My King?" Malir prompts, as several more of what I'm assuming are stones hit the castle walls.

Jovan stands tense for several moments. He looks my way three times. "I have a feeling they're not going to disperse quietly. But we'll try nonetheless. If we put more men out there, it's going to stoke the flames. An announcement will do the same thing. We will give them time to disperse of their own accord. If they don't, force will be used."

I hum. What is Jovan really thinking? I can tell even he doesn't believe what he's saying.

"A sound plan, my King. Your father would be proud," Blaine says. I screw my nose up at his patronizing tone. Are we walking straight into Blaine's trap?

Jovan begins barking orders at Malir and the advisors scurry after him, leaving me to watch what's happening outside. More are joining every minute. My ears strain as stones begin flying and the Bruma push against the portcullis. How much pressure will that take?

Rhone stands beside me.

"Outer Rings, huh?" I say. He grunts.

"Should've guessed, I suppose. It explains why you're so much smarter than most of the people in this assembly," I say truthfully. I listen as the breath catches in his throat. I lay a hand on Rhone's arm; the muscles bulge from long hours on the sleds.

"Next time Drummond says something like that, put a spear to his throat," I offer. "I've found it works rather well." It had certainly stilled his wandering hands in the Dome last sector.

"And should I hold a spear to every person who makes such a comment?" he asks.

I shrug. "You could change it up. Spear, sword, jab to the throat." He snorts and I continue. "Maybe you could train Leo to bite anyone who says 'Outer Rings.'"

I watch the throbbing, angry mass shout at the castle, shout at their king. I could ask how Blaine has possibly created a rebellion of this magnitude, but I don't believe it would really be too difficult. Jovan's people

are poverty-stricken. They're hungry, homeless, and in constant danger. It's been this way for generations, with no leader willing to change the situation. In Jovan's defense, I truly don't think he realized how bad it is there.

No, it wouldn't take much. All Blaine had to do was dangle a bit of hope in front of the pitiable Bruma to fire them to a frenzy. I look up at the giant beside me, tilting my head right back.

"Rhone?"

"Mmmhmm?" he mumbles.

"I have something for you to do."

Chapter Twelve

The yelling and screaming is that much louder from down here. I hold my head high as I strut through the angry mass of people. My hair ripples over my bare back, sending a shiver through me as my body adjusts to the lack of fur clothing. I tell myself the shiver isn't worry that I'm currently Frost in the middle of a rebel group. Or because I've left Crystal underneath my veil in the castle. As long as she doesn't move or speak much, the ruse will be fine. I hope.

"It's Frost," someone squeals. I push them roughly aside, feeling the person's ribs through their meager clothing. The thin girl looks up at me from her seat on the ground with a wide toothless beam. I ignore the penniless woman and continue on. My priority is to gather information on who's running this show. But my presence out here serves two purposes. The second of which is already starting to happen. People stop throwing things and shouting when they see me. My presence probably seems mysterious and unexpected. Unless they're from the Second Sector, the Outer Rings residents won't have seen me since the Dome.

"Frost's gonna help us!" a woman yells. I give her a menacing scowl. Not for any reason; it's just what they expect a pit fighter to do. She jerks back and then exchanges a knowing glance with her friend. For months I tried to befriend, bribe, and threaten my way into their midst. But it took killing Slay in the Dome and escaping certain death to apparently make me untouchable in their eyes.

News of my presence spreads in front of me and to either side. I can almost see its effect rippling out through the masses. The advisor was right: there must be several hundred people here. They spill out over the cobbled road leading to the portcullis from the direction of the Inner Ring. As one ragged person turns to the next, the stamping stops, and people shift their attention from the castle to me as I stand in the middle of the group—and of disaster.

I need to find the hostages and keep them safe until Rhone gets word to Jovan about what I'm doing, what my brittle plan is. Filthy men and women turn to each other, confusion on their face, wondering why Frost has arrived. That's how I find the people I'm looking for. They stand nearest to

the castle and continue to shout and encourage those around them to do the same. Five bloodied people, merchants by the look of them, cower on the ground at their feet, hands tied behind their backs.

I cross my arms, simply observing the ringleaders for several minutes before approaching. The crowd grows still as I do. People jab those still talking to shut them up. There's sound, but it seems eerily quiet after the deafening noise a moment ago. I shake back my long hair, tightening my arms under my breasts. I know it does wonders for me in the harness—a series of leather straps which hardly deserves the description of clothing. Sin used to do the same with his chest muscles to make the audience crazy. Bizarrely, the thought makes me want to burst into laughter. Keep it together, Olina.

“What’s this?” I ask the crowd closest to the ringleaders. My expression is cold. I stare at the surrounding people. The man to my right, the one throwing rocks over the wall, has to be one of Blaine’s men. I don’t address him directly. That would be admitting he has power. And I mean to have that power all to myself.

He talks anyway. Bait taken.

“What do y’think, stupid bitch,” he snarls to my right. Those nearest us scramble back as I slowly turn to look at the hulking man, who’s balding with ruddy cheeks.

After a short pause, I ask my question again. This time with my foot pressing on his throat.

“We’re rising up,” he chokes from the ground. “Sick of the poverty, sick of being hungry, sick of the—”

I push down, then ease the pressure a little as his lips gain a blue tinge. From the murmur around me, the rest of the gathering agrees. I can’t even blame them.

“Maybe you’d prefer living on the fire world,” I joke. The hunched people closest to me laugh uproariously, high on tension. I watch the hostages out of the corner of my eyes. They’re whispering to each other. I hope they don’t try anything stupid.

Four other men move forward. I smile at them, honestly happy they’ve come to me instead of me having to find them. But surely there are more. The man beneath my foot stops moving and I remove my foot. He should still be alive.

“Hello, boys,” I say. These men missed out on their fair share of good looks. However, it’s the menace they emanate which makes them appear almost as ugly as Blaine.

“Who’re you?” the largest one asks in a brusque tone.

I laugh, slinging my arm around the neck of a stocky man standing at my side, ignoring the smell of animal blood. I hope he’s a butcher. The man I casually embrace chortles with me, as do those watching. I’m working the crowd and I thank Alzona and Shard for pushing me to experiment in the pits.

“She’s Frost, idiot,” an old man mutters. One of the four whips around to the elderly man and unleashes a vicious punch. The frail man crumples to the ground.

I don’t see it, but I sense it. The crowd turns against Blaine’s men. Not physically. Not yet. But they just stacked their favor with me. The thug is smart enough to perceive the change. He shifts uncomfortably as everyone looks at the old man on the cold ground, then fixes him with a blank look. The circle tightens around us.

“You lot listening to these guys?” I ask the crowd. There’s no way five people started this. But no one else is stepping up.

“That one there was knocking on doors, shouting for us to come,” a washerwoman says. She points and the crowd nearest to her close around as one of Blaine’s thugs takes a threatening step towards her. I move to stand between them also, grinning evilly up at the man. The mob holds its breath. His eyes dart furtively around, taking stock of the situation.

“Smart man.” I congratulate him when he stumbles away. I circle their group of four and the man unconscious on the ground, looking at the people around me. “These men have their own agenda.” My words ring out across the silence. I wait as the Bruma discuss that possibility. Rhone should have had ample time to deliver my message to the king. Come on Jovan. Even after last night, I don’t doubt that he’ll come to my aid.

“Go and free the hostages,” I order the butcherman next to me. He takes the dagger I hold out to him and plods over to the frightened Inner Ring members. The hostages shrink back as he saws through their restraints.

I turn to the four standing men. Maybe the fifth is dead, after all. “I think it’s time you went.”

I catalog each of the ringleader’s features as they slink back into the mass, realizing they’ve lost. The horde inhibits their movement by bunching

together. I narrow my eyes at the action. I'd bet ten goldies they used to do that to me on purpose. I always wondered how Shard moved so easily through the courtyard.

A boy is pushed forward by his friends. He gulps as he looks up at me. "But we're hungry," he says. He's no older than Oberon and Ochave, my twin brothers. My face softens as I bend down to his level.

"I know you are," I say solemnly. Jovan, where are you? They turn to me expectantly, waiting for me to solve their problems. I open my mouth to address them, to stall for more time, but a groaning sound catches the words in my throat. I sag in relief as I see the portcullis rising over the five ragged rows of unwashed Bruma between me and the castle. I approach the gate.

Jovan stands there, a sizeable chunk of his army behind him.

The whores and cutthroats around me shuffle back. Shouting for a fight, and actually fighting are two different things, especially with the tension largely dissipated. The five freed hostages drag themselves toward their king, who ignores them. The butcher and my favorite dagger are gone. Damn thief.

I relax my face into blank lines as King Jovan addresses the masses.

"I have heard your pleas," he calls. Somehow his voice carries out over the gathered crowd. There is a hiss at the word 'plea,' but I congratulate him in assuming control of the crowd. The word 'demands' would have given them too much strength.

"I am displeased to find this small assembly at my door," he says, meeting the eyes of a group of scowling men. The scowls immediately disappear. His voice alone could cut through ice. Add it to a large, muscled frame with a deadly glare and you had the King of Glacium. I watch the poor. They've already lost, but they are yet to decide if they're happy about it.

"Though perhaps you have no other way to voice your *requests*. I must say I wonder about your tactics." He glances at the old man still lying on the ground. "Is it common practice to beat the elderly?"

I nearly beam up at him. The murmur of the Bruma is angry. But they're angry that their King thinks they would do that. In one sentence Jovan has turned their fury to the four men *and* made them eager to prove to their king otherwise.

He paces along the wall. "I am your king!" he roars. "You are my people." There are several cheers with this. I allow a couple of nods. I don't

want to seem too eager, but if people are watching they'll be influenced by my support.

"As such, I will talk with one representative," he says, scanning the hundreds in front of him. His subjects exchange confused looks.

"Who will speak for you?" he booms. I should've warned him to limit the number of syllables. My insides roil as I wait on tenterhooks.

"Frost!" someone shouts. I close my eyes. They can take my reaction however they want. I'm someone they've all seen. I'm really the only candidate available to them right now. It's no surprise when the cry is taken up by others. Jovan holds up one massive hand. His people quiet immediately.

"Where is this Frost?" he asks.

I almost roll my eyes. A ring of clear space already surrounds me. The ring doubles in size as the threadbare Bruma step away from me. Or rather, away from the king's attention.

"Here, m'King," I call up. I cock a hip out. Sin would be so proud.

"You will discuss the troubles of the Outer Rings with me," he says. It's a statement, but I act like it's a question.

I fold my arms and peruse him, giving a show of making a judgment. It's important I don't roll over. I drop my hands to my sides after a minute. "I reckon I will," I say. "But I want my buddy Blizzard to come along."

Hopefully, Jovan can deal with that last-minute change. Blizzard's name is taken up with vigor alongside my own. The Outer Rings are happy with my choice. Many of them know Blizzard. Maybe some have been fed by him, or given spare clothing and blankets. I wanted to speak with my friend on the matter before he left the castle and then quietly introduce the idea to Jovan in a few weeks. Though, who knows if Jovan will listen to anything I say now. And I'm afraid Blizzard no longer has a choice—not by the enormity of the people's response.

It's impossible to gauge the king's reaction from where I stand. Likely, his face is expressionless. The face he's only just stopped showing to the assembly. The one he showed me again last night.

He nods regally. "It will be done."

"Enter," he orders me. "And someone pick up the old man," he barks over his shoulder. I bite back a smile as I saunter toward the watch. Nice touch.

Several watchmen aid the Inner Ring hostages into the safety of the castle. Blaine's men did a thorough job of beating them half to death. Malir braves the now-calmed rebellion to gather up the still unconscious old man and take him inside, probably straight to Sadra.

I walk through the high gates and look for Jovan. He's ascended to the walkway atop the gate. He addresses the subdued crowd, arms raised.

"The outcome of this meeting will reach you through your chosen speakers. You will address any problems to Frost or Blizzard," he declares. "You may all return home now. But know this. I consider it my duty as your king to hear your troubles. Now that the issue of communication has been dealt with, you can be assured any *repeats* of this," he gestures at the crowd, "will be swiftly, and brutally dealt with." He straightens and glowers until some of the bedraggled poor scamper away in fear.

He twirls, furred cloak spinning with him. I wink at those glancing worriedly at me through the portcullis. They grin uncertainly at my unfazed demeanor. I'm just glad the hard part's over. Not that I'm out of danger. I hope Crystal is coping all right.

Jovan sweeps ahead of his watch, not sparing me a glance. It's what he should do, but I wonder if he's angry at my actions. It seems we're taking turns being angry at each other at the moment.

I follow, herded by a group of watchmen. We march straight to the meeting room. Jovan points at the chair in the middle, ignoring the 'Tatuma' sitting in her normal spot. Crystal is probably pissing herself under my veil. Jovan's advisors clap him on the back-even Blaine, though there's a jerkiness to his movements belying his happy expression. Some of the council turn to me, glaring at me in disapproval. Like Frost would give a shit.

I saunter into the middle of the room, making sure no one is reminded of the Tatuma sitting there a couple of sectors ago. The harness catches the eye of the men closest to me and I give them a teasing wave. Last time I sat here, I was dressed in Kedrick's oversized trousers and coat. I doubt anyone is remembering the Tatuma Olina.

"Where's me mate?" I ask, picking at my teeth. Humor sprints across the king's face. I swear he almost laughs, coughing several times behind his hand before facing me with a flushed face. I bite down on an escaping giggle.

"Your friend is on his way," he says tersely. "Please take a seat."

I deliberate my choices and walk around to take Blaine's chair.

There are a few gasps from the council.

“I meant the chair in the middle,” Jovan says drily. I raise my hands in innocence, but don’t move, instead kicking my feet on top of the table.

“My King,” Blaine starts. Jovan silences him and the greasy man selects a seat directly beside me while I grin at his humiliation and bat my eyelashes his way. Actually, this is a good opportunity.

“Ain’t I seen you at the pit fights before?” I ask Blaine. My word as Frost means nothing in here—not against an advisor.

“You are mistaken,” Blaine sneers.

“Naw, I don’t think so.” I say. “But I can see why you wouldn’t want anyone to know.” I give an exaggerated tilt of the head to the rest of the room. I glance at Jovan and he looks away, jaw ticking. Blaine remains silent. I’m pleased to see his lips are white with fury.

I glance up as Blizzard is shoved into the room. The door slams shut behind him. He scowls around the room, sunk down in a defensive position.

“Blizzard,” I call. He whips his head around.

“Uh, Frost?” he stammers. I smile and move to fake greet my friend.

“I’ve missed you,” I say. He pulls me in for a hug and I whisper hurriedly, keeping my voice low. “Crystal is in my place. Don’t look at her. And I’m sorry, I meant to ask you first.” His eyebrows pinch at my words. He’ll understand them momentarily.

“Blizzard,” Jovan greets, voice hard. I glance at him and see he’s glaring at where my hand rests on Blizzard’s shoulder.

The pit fighter nods at Jovan as I drag the new Outer Ring’s representative to my empty seat. I place him there and lean against Blaine’s neighboring seat. He shuffles away to the other side and I don’t bother hiding my grin.

Jovan turns to me. “Frost, you’ve been chosen by the Outer Rings to bring their concerns and requests to me formally, and without violence,” he states.

“I have some stuff you may find interesting, but he’s the real one you wanna talk to about the bad things,” I jerk my thumb at Blizzard and he stiffens.

I continue. “This one’s right in the thick of it. Handing out food, all nice like. Helping out the orphans and the beat-up whores. He’s the one stopping the thugs from slitting old women’s gullets.” Jovan’s eye twitches

before he musters the control to turn to my friend. Blizzard stares at me in shock. I watch as his eyes narrow in accusation. I shrug my apology at him for now. I'm going to owe him big. The silence grows painful as the advisors and Jovan wait for him to speak.

"Just ask him a question," I say. "You'll see."

Jovan gives me a loaded look before facing Blizzard once more. "In your opinion, what are the main problems faced by my subjects in the Outer Rings?" Jovan asks.

Blizzard's eyes show steel. "There are many, my King. Where do ya want me to start?"

I wait for the fighter to explode. He just needs the right provocation. Jovan's eyes flash at his response. I catch myself leaning forward and tip my head back and close my eyes in bored Frost fashion.

"I do not think there can be that many," Jovan growls.

I grin and open one eye to watch as Blizzard's face turn white with rage. It then turns red, and lastly, it turns purple.

Then, he loses it.

* * *

Blizzard stabs the roast potato on his plate with too much force, bending the knife backwards as we all sit and gawk. I sneak a glance at Crystal sitting up at the throne table. Is that what I usually look like? Small and mysterious. I'd be afraid to approach someone looking like that too.

I hope Jovan and Olandon are looking after her. Probably just Jovan, judging by the scowl on my brother's face. He's not very happy with what I'm wearing. He'd nearly given me away when he first caught sight of the harness. The delegates present here tonight haven't stopped laughing at him, entertained by my subterfuge and Olandon's clear disapproval.

"Where's Zona?" I ask.

Shard gives me a pointed look. "Oh," I say, looking in Blaine's direction.

A hard vegetable flies off Blizzard's plate and disappears under a neighboring table. The occupants glare his way until he turns the full force of his scowl on them.

They find things to do.

“Blizzard,” I say. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to put you in that position. It’s been on my mind for a while after watching you with the sick and poor in the Outer Rings. But it should’ve been your decision.”

He’d been appointed the Minister of the People, a previously unheard of position. Jovan’s move was clever, bordering on genius, but I felt for my friend. The king hadn’t exactly given him a choice about it. I dip my head. “I apologize most sincerely.”

He looks up at me with angry eyes. “Damn right I should’ve been given a choice. I haven’t got the juice for this crap. Shit! It’s going to end in blood and guts.” I sit up at his words. I make my way around the table and hug him, locking my hands around his neck to stare into his eyes.

“You will make a great minister.” I let him see the truth in my eyes before I continue. “Who’s more qualified than someone who has lived in the Rings? Instead of using the clothes off your own back, you’ll give those made by the king’s servants, or collected from the other rings. It’s what you’ve been doing for years, but on a larger scale.” I kiss him on the cheek, and smile when he flushes. It’s a sweet side to him I don’t often get to see.

“Instead of changing one life per week, you can change ten a day,” I finish quietly.

Shard leans forward. “She’s right, Blizzard. I couldn’t name anyone better for this position. You know our Frost is a smart one. She wouldn’t have picked you if she though you were two blocks short of a house.” Avalanche and Ice snigger either side of me. A woman gives Avalanche an alarmed glance as his scars stretch with the movement.

Blizzard starts a lecture about the quality of housing in the Outer Rings, and Shard turns to me with a desperate look. I shake my head and turn to Ice, Shard walked into his own trap. There’s no way I’m getting drawn in to Blizzard’s sermon.

“Did you follow him?” I ask quietly, talking of Sole. Ice nods, eyes gleaming.

“You won’t be surprised,” he says. “It’s our friend from the Arena, just like you thought.” I stop breathing for a second or two. Having strong suspicions of Blaine’s involvement and having absolute proof are different things. Now is the time to strike. Right now, as soon as possible. The Outer Rings were cooled today. Jovan has more control than he’s had in a while. The momentum needs to be used before the traitorous piece of filth sitting

four from Jovan's right can reassemble his forces.

I turn to Shard, deciding to save him after all. "Can you give Alzona a message? I have something for her to do. It needs to be done immediately. Things here are heating up." I stare at Shard as a hint of amusement crosses his face.

He waves me on. "Sorry, just ironic. You talking about things heating up." The others snigger away at his words.

"Funny." I glare at the fighters. "You and Avalanche may want to go with her for protection." I lean forward, though I'm certain no one can overhear us, and whisper my message in his ear.

My gaze draws back over the assembly, stopping on Sole, seated next to Tomir—yet another delegate. I settle on Macy for a long moment; she cowers in her seat, flinching whenever someone nearby moves suddenly. It tightens my determination.

Blaine is going down.

Chapter Thirteen

“Never again!” Crystal wails, shaking in my arms. “That was terrifying. I didn’t want to talk! You have such a,” she makes a motion with her hand, “voice, you know?”

I chuckle as I let her go and take the veil from her hand. “No, I don’t know.”

Her face warms. “You know, like people should listen to you.”

“I’m bossy?” I ask, a frown on my face. Her face warms further and I grin. “Just joking.”

She punches me in the shoulder, then grips her hand painfully. I add “teaching Crystal to punch” to my overwhelming to-do list.

I catch an armful of fur from Olandon. “You must be freezing, sister. Put some clothes on.” I drop the pile on the floor and pick through it.

“Landon, there’s two of everything in here,” I say.

He throws a menacing glare at the strappy leather I’m wearing. “You can never have too much on,” he mutters darkly. Crystal giggles behind me.

“I think I’ll get going,” Crystal says, a happy smile still gracing her delicate features, but she looks exhausted. She’d ended up acting as Tatum for most of the day. Fear is draining. She slips out the door as I select a few out of the dozen garments at my feet.

“You were in that thing while outside of the castle,” Olandon says. I nod distractedly.

“Mainly just in the actual pits. Helped with the crowds and distracted the men I was fighting.”

I hear a sniff and look up. “If something is bothering you, I’d rather you just spit it out,” I say.

He jerks his head up, completely appalled.

I sigh, reining in my own response. “As in, I’d rather you just come out and tell me what the matter is.”

A little bit of disgust stays on his face. “This world is rubbing off on you too much,” he says after a short pause.

“I’m taking the damn harness off,” I complain.

“It’s more than that,” he says. “The lightness in you, the humor and openness with those who are your inferiors in position. You laugh more. And

often I don't understand what the joke is. Occasionally, I'm left wondering whether the sister I grew up with is still there."

It takes everything I have not to let my jaw drop. It's harder to keep the hurt from my features.

"Landon," I say with difficulty. "It worries me you feel we have grown apart. I've changed a great deal since our time on Osolis, but you have too." I walk over and take his hand. "But we know each other where it counts." I lay my hand over his heart. "You know I will always be there for you. I'll always fight for you, and I will always be honest with you."

I take a deep breath. "And that includes telling you that all the changes you mentioned are good changes. What you're observing is my happiness." My heart breaks at the sadness I see on his face.

He turns sorrowful brown eyes toward me. "But why does *Glacium* make you feel that way?"

I shrug. "It's just the absence of mother. The people here haven't been poisoned by her and Cassius. I have friends here. People who genuinely like me."

He dips his head. "It has taken me a long time to warm to the Bruma here. One thing eventually broke through." I raise my brows at him to go on.

"The way your friends treated you when you showed them your face," he says softly. "You never would have received that reaction on Osolis. You never *will*. Where the Bruma lack civility, they have heart." He touches my cheeks and I start. Trails of tears track down my cheeks. I'm so proud of my brother. I don't care if Landon objects; I wrap my arms around his waist and squeeze tightly.

"That ... bitch, Jacky, made me realize I'd been acting quite harshly, too," he says gruffly. I laugh up into his face.

"You just swore!" I whack him on the shoulder. He finally returns my hug, a wide grin on his face. I smile into his chest.

"I'll always protect you," I say.

"My life for yours," he says, letting me go. "You were halfway through dressing," he reminds me.

I salute him as he heads to the door.

I retreat behind the screen and strip out of the harness. Jovan called the guards away while I crept up here. The king had declared Frost a useless representative of the people and declared Blizzard sole minister. There's no

way I would've been able to keep up the Frost appearances. And Crystal would die of stress if I asked her to pretend to be me again. Of course, Frost didn't leave without giving Jovan a piece of her mind. I grin as I remember my exact words.

"If I put half as much effort into the Outer Rings that I put into growing so large, Glacium would be a better place."

It takes me half a second to realize the words I'm thinking have been said aloud. I scream and whirl, searching for the voice. I scream again when I see a large shadow on the other side of the screen.

"Jovan!" I cover my chest. I wouldn't put it past him to peer over the top. He was Bruma, after all.

"I believe those were your very words," he says.

I leave the trousers half done up and tug my tunic on. I round the screen and aim a punch at his ribs. He grabs my hand and pulls me tight against his body, ignoring my glare to run one large hand through my hair. He takes a gentle handful of it and brings it to his nose. I wiggle in place, but stop dead-still as I feel something against my stomach. He lets me jerk away, amusement flitting across his features.

"We got lucky today," he says. He's decided not to tease me. I jump on the topic as though it's my lifeline while he moves to sit down at the end of the bed.

"The crowd could have gone either way," I say truthfully. I lower myself onto the long seat beside him.

He plays with the hilt of his sword. "And you still went out?" he asks.

I raise one shoulder and watch as he takes several breaths. He runs his hand through his light brown hair. I itch to do it myself.

"I've failed you," he mumbles and I stop in my tracks.

"What?" I say dumbly.

"I should have come up with something to keep you from feeling you had to put yourself in danger." He shakes his head angrily, and I give into temptation, reaching up to brush a few light brown tendrils from his face. He gives me a curious look.

My face warms and I pull back. "I knew you wouldn't ask. I thought the idea had occurred to you. I saw you glance my way a few times. And the danger from the people for myself was minimal; it was more a matter of how many of Blaine's ... uh, how many instigators where out there," I stutter. He

tenses at the mention of Blaine, but doesn't pursue my slip. The issue is still raw from last night. Obviously neither of us wishes to revisit it. It doesn't mean my resolution to bring Blaine down is gone. But Jovan has made it clear he won't be a part of it. And right now? I just want to feel some normalcy between us.

Jovan nods. "I keep running the situation over in my mind. There's no other way it could have ended so well." He turns and gives me a whisper of a kiss on my lips. As always, all thought goes out of my head. I lean into him, trying to deepen the kiss, but he leans away and peruses me with serious eyes, noses nearly touching. "Thank you," he says.

I clear my throat. "Things seem to go better when we work together." It just slips out. I wince at the admission.

"They do," he says softly. He leans in and kisses me again. Deeper this time. I relish the feeling of how my lips meld with the warmth of his. Who knows how many more times I'll feel his mouth on mine? A breathless moan escapes me and I jerk at the sound. But Jovan doesn't seem to mind it one bit. He reaches over and grabs my hips, sliding me onto his lap, unbuckling his sword belt with one hand and throwing it to the floor when it gets in the way. I stare at him, my mind in turmoil. This shouldn't be happening, but I want it to. I even orchestrated it: stroking his hair, encouraging his kiss.

"Lina," he whispers, gripping my chin. "Stop."

He closes the distance between us, a groan escaping him just before we touch. I focus on the kiss, wondering if he's enjoying himself. I want him to enjoy this. His hips start moving beneath mine. I push myself closer, winding my hands around his neck. He likes it—he groans again. He nibbles my top lip. The slight pain startles me; simultaneously, fire rushes through me.

He smiles against my lips and I smile back, happy beyond words to be in his arms. He runs a hand underneath my tunic.

"I need to," he talks into my mouth.

"Need to what?" I sigh. He grips my lower back with one hand and takes ahold of one of my breasts. I arch into his hand, feeling an even deeper pleasure than his kiss. We rock against each other. I'm out of control, my embarrassment vanished.

He leans his head into the crook of my neck and stills my hips with

firm hands.

“No,” he mutters.

I try to push forward, but he holds me in place with an iron grip.

“Stop, Lina. This isn’t how it’s meant to happen.”

I frown at his words, cheeks heating, but stay in place on top of him. I try to interpret his pained expression. “I didn’t come here tonight to take you to bed,” he says.

My face falls. Did I force that on him again? I drop my gaze and try to climb off his lap. The iron grip doesn’t abate. “No. Let me explain,” he demands, then softens his tone. “Fuck.” He closes his eyes briefly.

I stop struggling to get off him and stare as he continues, flustered.

“It’s all new to you, and last time we jumped into it before you were ready.” He stops talking and fixes his penetrating eyes on me. I stare back, trying to decide if I’m more interested or more worried about how serious he sounds.

I decide I’m worried. “Jovan, this thing—,” I start.

His eyes darken and silences me with a hurried kiss. “I don’t want you to over-think this. Ignore what I said last night about uniting the worlds; ignore everything. It’s just ... usually when a man is interested in a woman, he courts her. We missed that and I want you to have it,” he blurts. He lifts me up and deposits me on the bench next to him, quickly standing.

“I—” I feel like my eyes couldn’t get any bigger. How did his visit turn into this? And does he mean he’s going to court me? Or is it that he’s saying someone else will do it?

He frowns suddenly. “Sometimes I think I might...” He might what? He shakes his head, eyes flicking down to my lips again. I peer up at him and I see he was definitely affected by what we were doing mere minutes ago. Jovan never acts this way.

I tilt my head back fully to meet his gaze. His hands twitch at his sides, but the moment I think he’s about to lose control and grab me, he turns away in a rapid whirl.

The door smashes against the wall as he stalks out.

I blink at the open door, listening as he yells at some poor watchman down the hall.

I leap onto the bed and hug a fur to my chest, a wide grin on my face. I have no idea why the exchange with Jovan has left me so unreasonably

happy. I wiggle into a comfortable position and close my eyes. I haven't done this since Osolis, but as used to be my practice, I sit, memorizing exactly what happened. When I'm Tatum, I want to be able to remember his every word in detail.

* * *

I skip the council meeting the next day, sending Wrath, who still doesn't know my true identify, with my apologies.

I sit with the delegates for my meal, hoping to get a moment with Sanjay. Fiona doesn't appear to be very cheerful. She doesn't know about Sanjay's predicament, but she feels the change in her husband. She keeps huddling around her growing belly, darting looks at Sanjay. Fiona will be creating her own theories as to why her husband is avoiding her. No doubt, she believes he's having an affair. I hope he can soon reassure her this isn't the case. I worry for the previously happy couple. They work so well together; Fiona tempers Sanjay's runaway mouth. I'd hate for them to fall apart because of this. Whatever happened, Sanjay wasn't in control of himself.

Olandon excuses himself quickly, barely touching his food. He's oddly eager to get to the archives. He's remained close-lipped on any progress he's made. I don't know what to make of it. I simultaneously want to know who my father is, or was, and am filled with nerves at the thought of finding out. Most of the time I wonder if I'm better off not knowing.

Shard, Crystal, Alzona, and Avalanche, who left to talk to the real Willow, are absent at breakfast.

Eventually, Greta drags Fiona away. I turn to Sanjay.

"I need you to speak to the king," I whisper. It's one last-ditch effort to get to Jovan. He'd known Sanjay his whole life. He'd trusted the red-haired man to go to Osolis as a delegate. Maybe Jovan would listen to him.

Sanjay chokes on his drink. "What?"

"He won't listen to me. He's completely deaf when Blaine is concerned," I say. "I thought if he spoke to someone else who knows about Blaine, then the information might be better received."

Sanjay sits ramrod straight on the bench. I recognize terror when I see it. "Please, Sanjay. You're going to tell him anyway. If he doesn't come

around I'll have to go behind his back to take Blaine down. I'd prefer to avoid that."

* * *

I spend the morning putting the last of my plan into motion, speaking to the last two people who will be instrumental in bringing Blaine down: Macy and Sole. By lunch, I'm exhausted. I decide to give myself the afternoon off Tatum duties. There's nothing else I can do to ensure Blaine's demise. It's up to Rhone and my Outer Rings friends now.

"Where were you today?" Jovan asks. He's already eaten and sits sprawled on his throne, watching his assembly. Sometimes he puts on this pose to fluster his subjects. But I think he genuinely finds this position comfortable too. I wonder what he thinks about as he looks at his people. Does he love them? Does he only see his past?

"Doing this and that. How was the council?" I ask. He makes an exasperated sound in his throat.

"It would be different if something were being decided," he replies. I nod, fully understanding his predicament.

"It's not really a problem we have on Osolis. The Tatum is more of a dictatorial position. Mother tells her Satums what to do upon hearing their evaluations. The only time nothing is decided is when she meets with the peace delegation to discuss the treaty—her way of delaying progress, I imagine. I like your way, though it's more long-winded. It makes sense to gather different views and then decide on the best one as a group."

"I'm certain both have their advantages." Roscoe joins in from Jovan's other side. I dip my head his way and enter into conversation with the polite older man.

Jovan sits quietly between us, a mountain beside me. I catch him staring at me more than once. He observes me over a hand, which absently plays with the light stubble on his face.

"We have a meeting with the Ire tonight." He interrupts Roscoe mid-sentence. Roscoe flashes me a wry smile, obviously quite used to this.

"Excuse me, Roscoe," I say and turn to Jovan. "It's been a week already? I'd lost track of time."

"Yes. I assume the messenger will use the cover of darkness," he

says. I agree with a slow nod.

“It would make sense. The person won’t be harmed?” I ask.

“I’ve given the warning I’m expecting company. The order has gone out that no arrows are to be shot.”

* * *

I stand on the rooftop with the king, waiting for the person from the Ire. My rushed conversation with Adox to organize this meeting hadn’t included details on who would be delivering the report. I hope it’s not one of Adox’s two burly men. I don’t particularly like them. I’m sure the feeling is mutual. I lean against the barred railing surrounding the Hawk’s entrance. The giant messenger hawks are used to carry communication between our two worlds. They can fly straight into the food hall in the King’s castle through the trap door openings in the castle roof, though I’ve only been lucky enough to see them do this once. The railing I lean on protects patrolling watchmen from a nasty fall to the bottom of the food hall.

“What are you thinking about?” Jovan asks. I smile at him since he can actually see it. I’ve removed my veil for the meeting as Willow, my Ire persona, doesn’t wear one.

“The Ire,” I say.

“What’s it like there?” He sits down against the parapet and looks at me expectantly. He rolled his eyes when I told him I was going up to wait, but he’d joined me nevertheless, grumbling something about how the king isn’t supposed to wait for anyone.

“It’s ... incredible. Have you even been on the Oscala?” I ask. He gives a minute shake of the head, not taking his blue eyes off me. It reminds me of our conversation the other day.

“Just to the base of it, for drills,” he clarifies. I launch into a description of the Ire, trying to remember the very best parts. I end up telling him about most of my stay there. Most of it.

While I talk, he sits silently with the rapt attention of a child. It’s unnerving, and ... flattering. I sit next to him and prod him in the leg.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, crossing my legs.

He tilts his head to me. “That I like the sound of your voice. I always liked stories.” He shrugs one shoulder, as he tends to do when uncomfortable.

“Also, that I haven’t seen very much of my world.”

“You’ve been busy. And it’s easy to rectify. You probably need to visit the Outer Rings with Blizzard soon. And not when you’re chasing me,” I add, ignoring his raised brow. “Go during the day when nothing is hidden. When the people aren’t hiding away, trying to survive the night. Go when there’s daylight so you can see the people stabbed to death in the alleyways, and the devastation.”

He rests his hands on bent knees, deep in thought, or, I realize a moment later, trying to conceal his reaction to my brutal words.

“Do you know I’ve only seen half of Osolis?” I ask. “Mother wouldn’t let me out of the royal rotations, so I’ve only seen the first three rotations. When I go back, I’d like to travel around all of them extensively. I need to get an idea of how badly she’s been treating the villagers. Perhaps I’ll do a tour, as you do.”

His answer seems stilted when he eventually makes it. “That makes me feel better about not seeing my world,” he says roughly. “The difference being, I could have easily visited the Outer Rings if I wished. I only visit the Inner and Middle Rings during my tour. But I have a visit planned with Blizzard tomorrow.” He waves his hand and stops with it in mid-air as he squints ahead of us.

“Someone’s coming.” He stands and falls naturally into his commanding posture.

“Remember, I’m your inferior,” I say.

“My minion?” he asks.

I debate standing on his foot. The messenger lands on whisper-soft feet. He still has the best landing I’ve ever seen.

“I nearly missed the place.” Hamish unstraps himself and places the Soar on the ground, poking fun at the obnoxious size of the castle. I laugh and get swept into a twirling hug.

“Good flight?” I look slightly up into his green eyes, under the mop of curly black hair. The mischievous twinkle I got to know while he taught me to fly is still there. I can’t see anything but friendship in his eyes. I’m glad he seems to have gotten past his feelings for me.

“Barely a bump,” he says with gusto. He kisses me loudly on the cheek. “Willow, you’re a sight for sore eyes!”

I untangle myself, aware of who stands behind me. Two spots burn in

my back.

“Hamish, this is King Jovan of Glacium,” I say respectfully, stepping to the side. “My King, this is Hamish of the Ire.” I expect Jovan to smirk at the “my king,” but he gives me a loaded look that sends a shiver down my spine.

“King Jovan. It is a pleasure to meet you,” Hamish says, eyes flicking between us. “Our leader, Adox, has tasked me with telling you what’s happening on the Great Stairway.”

The king clasps his hands behind his back and straightens his shoulders. “Go ahead,” he orders. I conceal my wince as I see Hamish frown, but he recovers and mimics Jovan’s posture.

“The Solati army initially made some ground, but now remains at a complete standstill. They sit about two-thirds of the way here, out of materials, according to our scout’s. From what we can gather, messengers run back and forth, carrying orders from the Tatum. Their force numbers two hundred at last count.” Hamish glances at me. “The man who spotted us must have ordered them on high alert. A couple of our people have been shot at. We haven’t dared to get close enough to learn more.”

My mouth tightens as I think of Cassius, Mother’s brother and right-hand man. The man who allowed his wife to be exiled to the Fifth Rotation for nearly twenty years. The Fifth was the hardest rotation to live in, full of smoking, charred remains and ash. There was a special well of hate I reserved just for my dear uncle.

Jovan’s eyes rest on me, and I give him a confused look in return. He steps beside me, standing close. Much too close. Hamish’s eyes narrow at the movement and I see Jovan lengthen to his full height. I begin to understand what’s happening and feel the irritating tickle of anger myself.

“Adox has recommended maintaining weekly contact until they begin to turn around,” Hamish continues with a bite. “He said to tell you his instincts are that they won’t back down easily. He warns you to remain alert.”

“There can’t be any harm in doing that,” I agree, voice false-calm. “How are Adox and the others?” I ask. Hamish beams, stepping closer.

“Can you believe Jimmy’s been behaving himself?” he asks. I purposely step away from Jovan, screwing up my face in mock thought.

“No, I really can’t,” I decide, grinning.

“It’s possibly because Adox confiscated his Soar,” he adds. I burst out

laughing at the thought of the child being island-bound. Took long enough.

“Poor Jimmy! He must be going insane.”

Hamish doesn't disagree. “The nursery women said to say hello,” he says.

I look at him surprised. “Really?”

He reaches out and taps me on the nose. “They do like you, you know. Well, after you saved Cara from falling. Before that, they thought you were going to kill their children.”

“You save people from falling a lot,” Jovan mutters from my other side. He's speaking of Sole.

“Yes, my king,” I say and add a bow so I can glare at him without Hamish seeing. Dark humor crosses Jovan's features.

At least Jovan gets the hint. He resumes discussion with Hamish, rattling off a list of questions. Hamish answers them as best as he can. Mother's army is doing their best to build their own supports. Apparently, the army trains several times a day, though they're stranded on the Oscala. It is an unusual feeling to be proud of an army, but detest them at the same time.

“Adox also wishes to know if you've revealed the Ire to your assembly yet,” Hamish asks. My shoulders are just starting to relax. Maybe Hamish and Jovan can get along.

“No. But soon. You may tell Adox that he'll be informed once I've done so,” Jovan orders. “And that I have a large force of men ready in case the Solati army regains their march. You can deliver my guarantee to your leader that the Ire has our protection. That will be all.” Jovan dismisses him with flick of the hand.

I step forward and Hamish ducks his head toward me at my approach.

“You'll need to come back for a Sunday once everything settles down.” Hamish smiles over my head. He sidles up to me and whispers loudly in my ear. “I want another dance with you.”

I close my eyes for the briefest of moments, knowing the damage his comment will do. A heavy arm rests across my shoulders and I groan inwardly. I open my eyes, tensing as Hamish jerks his head back at the intrusion.

“Willow is kept busy here, carrying out the duties I assign her,” Jovan says in a cold voice. Hamish raises an eyebrow and gives me a questioning glance. I shrug awkwardly under Jovan's arm.

“She may accompany me when I eventually come to the Ire to meet your leader, but this not guaranteed.” He invades Hamish’s personal space once more. I see my Ire friend swallow hard, though he keeps his ground.

“You see,” he continues, expression blank, “Willow is very important to the running of Glacium.” He doesn’t break the stare.

I’ve had enough. I pinch the king. Hard. I don’t dare move away from his side. I’m still supposed to be his inferior. I doubt he’d let me anyway.

I smooth my expression as Hamish’s face turns a furious shade of red.

I take a deep breath and try to smooth the incident over. “Maybe when things settle down,” I say with an apologetic smile.

Jovan turns his mouth against my ear. “Unlikely,” he growls loudly enough for Hamish to hear.

I’m going to kill him! I jerk my head away, addressing Hamish. “Do you need to stay here for the night? Are you hungry?”

Hamish looks between the king and I for a long moment and clears his throat, disappointment evident. “No ... No, I should be fine,” he says, giving me a smile that doesn’t meet his eyes.

“I mean, Breena gave me food for the journey,” he recovers, pointing behind him.

“Oh,” I say as he picks up the Soar and reverses the process of half an hour before. I escape from Jovan’s hold and approach.

“Well, goodbye,” I say awkwardly.

Hamish darts a glance at Jovan. “Are you okay, Willow?” he asks in a low voice.

“Of course.” I smile. *I’m* okay, but Jovan isn’t going to be once Hamish is out of sight. “I’m glad everyone at the Ire is safe. Please send the king’s regards to Adox, and tell him I said hello.”

He nods, not entirely convinced by my show. “See you in a week,” he calls, plunging from the castle roof.

I step back next to the towering presence of the king as Hamish disappears into the darkness; my anger rising.

“What was that?” I demand, crossing my arms and glaring up at Jovan.

He crossed his own bulging arms, visible through his tunic. “Just making sure he knew he didn’t have a chance.”

I sputter, speechless and furious at the same time. “He’s my *friend*,” I

say and Jovan scoffs.

“He doesn’t want to be your friend, Olina. That boy wants to bed you.”

I gasp at his crass words. “Stop calling him a boy,” I say loudly, rubbing my forehead. “I can’t even believe we’re having this conversation. You realize you need to forge relationships right now? He’ll be reporting what happened to Adox.”

He scoffs again, the sound grating on my ears. “I’m sure an old man knows a jealous pup when he sees him.”

“He’s not the only one.” I give him his own insult back.

“You’ve danced with him!” he says, placing his hands on either side of my head against the wall. I scowl into his face.

“So what?” I demand. He doesn’t answer. His jaw ticks instead, which is worse. He strokes a finger lightly down the side of my face. The action is possessive, just like his furious gaze. I push him away.

“Jovan, who I want to be with is none of your business,” I say, voice trembling with rage.

“Like fuck,” he says.

I plow on, ignoring him. “If I want to be with Hamish or a dozen other men, I will.” I artfully evade his grabbing hands. “I don’t even *like* dancing,” I add as an afterthought.

“Well, I assumed that was a reason you said no to me at the ball,” he says. He’s regained his calm. It infuriates me.

“I won’t stand by and let you treat Hamish that way again. Or any of my friends.” I slap his hands from my hip and move to the door. I strain to pull it open.

It doesn’t budge.

I need to get off this roof! A big, calloused hand snakes around my waist, brushing my skin. I know if I check, I’ll have goosebumps where he’s touched me. It only adds to my anger. He reaches for the handle, and opens the traitorous door with a quick pull.

“Thank you,” I mutter the ungrateful words over my shoulder as I stomp down the stairs.

Chapter Fourteen

I listen as Kaura bowls after a leather ball in the front courtyard. Half a minute goes by before she trots back to where I stand at the base of the stairs and drops the slobbering mess in my hand. I give her head a fond scratch.

The doors creak open behind me as I throw the ball once more.

“I’ve been telling father for months we should just clear out the Outer Rings. But does he listen to me? And now look, poor Jovan has to actually *go* there just so we don’t get murdered in our sleep.” I screw up my nose at the nasal tone of Arla’s voice.

“He’s so brave,” another sighs. Arla chuckles like she knows a secret. It irritates me beyond reason. A sudden hush followed by whispers tells me they’ve spotted me.

I cock back my arm and throw the ball again. I always hope no one is in the way. If I’m lucky, they’ll see the ball coming and move. I usually use the empty courtyard at the back of the castle, but Kaura has grown too large to get a real run around there. Really, she needs to be exercised with the sleds, and Rhone has been training her, but with him gone to the Third Sector, she’s not getting nearly as much exercise as she should. When this is all over, I’ll spend more time with her. Though I’m not sure how she’ll do in Osolis with the heat.

“Come on, ladies. Let’s take this to a ... cleaner location.”

I struggle for control as I recognize Jacqueline’s voice. She’s hanging around Arla again. I swallow down my reaction to her obvious jab about my mixed blood. I worry for a moment my former friend may have told Arla my secret. But I shake off that thought immediately. I would’ve received Arla’s threats by now if she knew.

The large group of women sweeps by me with a few giggles and I ignore them. But a stuttering voice stops me in my tracks.

“Tatuma, how are you today?” I peer through my veil to confirm the person’s identity.

“Good, Macy. How are your flowers?” I smile inwardly at her defiance against Arla and the rest of the group. Macy thought Frost contacted me while she was at the castle speaking to the council. She thought Frost had

passed on her knowledge about the mistreatment from Blaine. When I mentioned I knew of her beatings, she didn't even attempt to deny them. But then Sole was also present. Maybe this helped.

"They look beautiful at the moment. But they will close soon when we move into colder temperatures." She pauses briefly. "Y-you are most welcome to come visit," she says.

"I would love to," I reply, warming my voice as much as I can. A true smile lights her face as she curtsies before moving back.

The creaking of the portcullis sounds behind me. Kaura butts my hand impatiently. I grab for the ball in her mouth, dismissing the others.

"Kaura," I say in a stern voice, wiggling at the ball gripped in her mouth. She makes playful growling noises in return. "It's going to be like that, is it?" I laugh at her and tug harder.

"King Jovan, you've returned!" Arla's high-pitched voice carries back to me. I continue wrestling with Kaura, now listening carefully.

"As you see," he replies. I smile at his short reply.

"Was it terrible?" she asks, a tremor in her voice. "I just feel like taking in all those sick children out there."

I barely restrain my burst of laughter. At the same time I have this overwhelming want to scratch her. Kaura whines, sensing something is wrong. I pull the ball from her mouth while she's distracted. Soon she's chasing it across the courtyard once again.

"The situation there is not good. But the new Minister of the People has some excellent plans to begin changing that," Jovan says.

I wonder what Blizzard is thinking right now. I turn toward the group, just making out the king's outline.

"Oh, just look at your cloak. It's covered in filth. Let me take it for you," Arla cries. "Come now. I won't take no for an answer," she fake scolds. I grit my teeth as she presses herself against him to take it off. I can't see the finer detail, but I can imagine she's taking advantage of the opportunity.

I turn away, whistling for Kaura. She comes to me as I make my way in. She begins running to the kennels, but I call her to me as I climb the large stone steps. I think I'll need a friend today.

A council session is planned for after the noon meal. I bite into a juicy pear, happy some things stay constant. Unlike kings of Glacium.

"I'm starving," Olandon says as he plonks down into the chair beside

me. I look at him, bemused. He looks up and waves at someone in the assembly. I wonder who.

“Been training all day with Ashawn,” he continues, shoveling food into his mouth. I blink, breaking from my shock.

“I see,” I say slowly.

He reaches for his goblet and a loud tearing sound makes the advisors around us jump. Olandon puts down his goblet with a clunk and reaches for the back of his tunic. Laughter trickles up to us from the front tables.

“This has happened five times now,” he mutters angrily. A small giggle escapes me. I clamp down as I receive the brunt of his glower. He’s mortified.

“They obviously aren’t made properly,” he says, face red.

I know the advisors around me are listening. “It does seem convenient that it’s happened to ... did you say five tunics?” I trail off, waiting for him to grasp my meaning.

“You mean, someone is doing this on purpose?” he asks.

I giggle again. I can’t help it.

“But who?” he asks. I purse my lips, wondering if I should tell him. My brother has made real progress in the last few days. I decide to reward him with a hint.

“Sometimes, it’s the people we’d least expect who do these things to us. You could also reason, those closest to us have the best opportunity.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You know who it is,” he accuses. He takes a sip from his goblet again. “I will think on what you have said,” he says.

“Once you figure it out, might I recommend something?” I ask. He dips his head. “Turning the tables could be more satisfactory than other pathways you may wish to take.”

A wide grin spreads over his face and he resumes eating. Drummond to my right, chuckles loudly as he chews some roast meat. I grimace at the loud, wet sounds his mouth makes.

“Such occurrences as these can also be turned in your favor. For instance, many of the females here find you attractive. If you wanted, you could turn this around to strengthen your position, rather than lose footing.” With that said I stand and face the tables in front of me.

“You’ll have to excuse my brother. He’s gaining muscle quickly with

the delicious food here. It seems he'll soon need larger tunics." With that, I turn to him expectantly. Whatever my brother is, he's not slow.

He stands also with a searching glance my way. "They do seem to be a bit small," he says woodenly. I sit and watch the assembly as he peels off the ruined tunic. I try not to laugh at the whistles and giggles I hear erupting with his display.

Olandon sits down, tossing the tunic behind him. I press a hand to my mouth under my veil as he sits tall, trying to appear as big as possible.

"That worked damn well," Drummond congratulates. "Wish I'd tried that when my pants split at the ball last sector."

There's laughter down the table at his comment. I hear Jovan's deep chuckle.

"The problem there, Drum, is you need something impressive underneath," Jovan says loudly. The plates rattle and bounce and the men around me slap their hands on the table and roar. I peek at my brother and see he's struggling to restrain his own humor. I elbow him and his laughter bursts out, adding to the noise of the others.

* * *

The king speaks quietly to the council. He doesn't need to raise his voice. Everyone pays the utmost attention. There's been a subtle shift in the advisors' attitudes since the Outer Rings showed up outside the castle gates. They've seen Jovan in action. I rest my head back and listen to the changes Blizzard has proposed. Short-term plans to distribute food and clothing, and long-term plans to decrease crime rates and improve housing conditions. Blizzard won't be worth talking to for months—poor Ice.

The advisors leap on board with the drafted plans, raising points they believe may become issues. A discussion opens which Jovan directs with ease. I wonder if they've been comparing Jovan to his father this whole time. This might be the first time they're seeing him as a complete king in his own right, and listening to what their king says out of respect for Jovan himself, rather than respect for his position. After all, he's only just approaching his twenty-fifth birthday. I often forget his age; he's so competent most of the time.

"I think we should bring Frost back in," Blaine says, interrupting

Roscoe.

“Your reasons?” Roscoe asks stiffly. I don’t blame him. He’s second in command here, and Blaine’s interruption was disrespectful.

“I think she would be a useful asset for deciding how to decrease crime rates,” he says.

I narrow my eyes, trying to guess his real reason.

“Blizzard should suffice, being a pit fighter as well,” Drummond says. He looks at Jovan, who gives nothing away.

“Yes, but my sources tell me Frost has connections in the prostitution circles. Perhaps she is one. And her knowledge there could serve as doubly useful.” He presses the point, not wanting to back down.

I feel my hands curling into fists under the table. Blaine wants to know who I’ve been talking to. He wants to weed out the weak links in his underground crime system. Or maybe his spies are pulling up blanks on Frost’s whereabouts. This could be a ploy to flush me out so he can try to tag me again. He obviously knows Frost is on to something after her involvement with the angry mob outside the castle. Or maybe he sees her as an opposing force.

“A proposition I’ll keep in mind, but I don’t think it’s necessary for now,” Jovan says. He can hardly do otherwise.

“Of course, my King,” Blaine purrs.

* * *

The rest of the day continues in the same fashion. Fiona runs out of dinner crying, leaving a glum Sanjay staring at his plate. I wonder if she’s confronted the delegate about his unusual behavior. I hope she forgives me for not telling her straightaway once everything is revealed.

Alzona and the others should be back tomorrow night. I hope the news from Willow is in Sanjay’s favor.

For all my witnesses against Blaine and the stack of intelligence gathered by Ice, I’m not sure it will be enough without the documents from Rhone. I’m becoming increasingly nervous about calling the advisor out. I need those papers from the Third Sector castle, but I feel like Blaine is breathing down my neck. And now he might know my secret. He hasn’t gotten this far by being stupid. Even if he doesn’t know about my alter ego,

he's bound to notice the behavior of Macy, Sanjay or Sole. And if he catches a single glimpse of Alzona in the castle, he'll know something is happening. And what if one of Ice's spies reports to Hale for more money?

No, I have to strike as soon as Alzona and the others return from the whorehouse, regardless of whether Rhone is back.

* * *

I lay in bed, wrapped and curled beneath stacks of warm fur. At least if I have to go through days like today, there's comfort knowing a bed is at the end of it.

I smile into the pillow at nothing in particular, pushing at the warm, heavy mass of Kaura, who encroaches on my space.

The door creaks open and I still, breath held.

"Just me," whispers Jovan. I smile at the irony of the words. Saying something is "just Jovan" will always be a ridiculous understatement. I shift to look up at him and remember my lack of clothing. Heart racing, I turn on my side away from him, drawing the furs up to my chin.

"Hello." I wince at the strained sound of my voice. It was hard enough to control myself around Jovan when we were both dressed.

The bed dips behind me and I listen, tense as Jovan's boots thud against the ground, followed by the sound of fabric moving over skin. He lays down and shuffles around until he's a solid presence at my back. One of his arms rests on top of the furs wrapped around me, only a thin layer away from resting on my naked skin. Veni! He throws one of his legs over the blanket on my thighs.

I observe this process before asking. "What are you doing?"

He nestles his face into my hair, breathing deeply. "It's been a shitty day. I just want to be here with you," he says.

The request for him to leave catches in my throat. "It has been a shitty day," I say instead.

"Mm-mm." He kisses the side of my neck. "I don't like fighting with you. Makes everything worse."

I think on his words. Is that why I've been so out of sorts today? I tilt my head up so he can't access my neck. "Your stubble tickles," I scold. He chuckles against my back.

“The Outer Rings were bad,” I ask. I remember the first time I walked through them. The moment is seared into my memory.

“I’ve never seen such...” he searches for the right word.

“Carnage?” I offer. He makes a noise of agreement.

“Things are going to change,” he says in a hard voice.

I extract one of my hands and grasp the hand lying over my hip. He twines our fingers together.

“This may be a good time to tell you I arranged self-defense classes for the whores in the Second Sector. Classes start in a week,” I admit. “If it proves helpful, I believe it would be a worthwhile investment for the other sectors.”

He stretches behind me and curls back into position, remaining silent for some time. I don’t blame him.

“I don’t know whether to yell or laugh,” he says finally. “Thank you,” he offers. I twist to peek at him.

“Your kindness has always amazed me.” He kisses my forehead.

“At the risk of you putting me on a pedestal, I should mention the self-defense classes are funded with money stolen from seven whorehounds I killed.”

He stiffens and then kisses my ear.

“That ... does put a different spin on it,” he agrees, making me giggle. He brushes his nose against mine.

“That sound,” he says. I smile at him and turn back around, closing my eyes.

“It would be nice if every moment were like this,” he sighs, his breath deepening. The sound makes my own eyes heavy.

“Enjoy it. You’ll be pissed at me again tomorrow,” I mumble. He shakes with sleepy laughter. “Really pissed,” I mumble.

“Have to do with where Rhone is?”

“Yep, and Blaine,” I say, snuggling back into his warmth. I sigh, half-asleep, and squeeze the hand I hold. I’ve never been so comfortable in my life.

When Jovan speaks, I’m so far down the path of sleep I barely recall what we were talking about.

“Consider me warned,” he mutters.

Chapter Fifteen

“Fucking fuck!” a voice says.

I frown and nuzzle into a warm shoulder. At the same time, an arm tightens around my waist. On my bare skin.

A door slams and I jerk awake; the body next to me does the same. I blink sleepily and remember Jovan is there. Some part of me must already know because I’m not particularly worried. In fact, I’m supremely content.

My mind begins to process every observation I’ve made in the last few moments. Firstly, the furs that were wrapped around me last night are no longer there. Jovan lies raised on one elbow and I’m facing him, our legs twisted together. He’s not looking at me. The man I’m lying with is looking straight ahead. I follow his gaze and shriek.

It wasn’t Jovan that spoke.

Ashawn stands at the foot of the bed, gaping through his raised visor.

“Get out,” Jovan whispers. Ashawn’s eyes dip down, and I realize my chest is completely bare at the same moment Jovan does. He throws an arm over my breasts while I locate a fur, face burning. Jovan is vibrating. A sign he’s seconds away from bringing the place down.

“There are other guards outside,” I remind him. They can’t know the king is here. I peek through the furs, watching him take shallow breaths.

Ashawn clangs to the side of the bed in his armor. “So ... what I’m thinking is...”

He looks between us and around the room, eyes resting on Kaura and then moving back to me. Jovan’s youngest brother hasn’t blinked in several minutes.

“I don’t know what I think,” he finally admits.

I retrieve my veil from underneath the pillow and hold it up helpfully. Jovan growls and jerks the fur up over my shoulder.

“Fuck,” Ashawn says, removing his helmet. He drops it on the bed seat. “Fucking shit.”

“We have something to tell you, Ash,” Jovan says. For some reason, I’m struggling not to giggle. I’m completely mortified, and it crosses my mind that I haven’t even thought about the fact I’m supposed to be terrified of him seeing my face. Even with that, I can’t help finding the whole

situation hysterically funny.

One tiny giggle slips out and I lose it. I cover my mouth with both hands and laugh so hard, and for so long, they both probably think I'm insane.

Jovan pries my hands away, an adorable bashful look on his face. "I apologize, Lina. I was supposed to sneak away before morning."

"This is so bad," I say, wiping tears from my eyes and giggling again. Jovan snorts, amusement crossing his features for a moment before he gives his brother a hard look.

"Turn and face the wall while the Tatum dresses," he commands. His brother blinks and rattles around to face the wall.

Jovan leans in close and kisses my cheek. "You were naked all night?" he asks. I nod and dart up to place a returning kiss on the cheek closest to me.

"Please don't do that while I'm in here," Ashawn calls.

I untangle myself from the furs and hurry to wrap myself in one before Jovan can see too much.

"There's a sight to remember," the king says as I retreat behind the screen. I hope it's a good sight.

Jovan starts to explain my story to his brother as I dress. He brushes over my history and the actions of my mother.

"You're Frost? But you're the Tatum? You ran away from here and somehow became a *pit fighter*?" he says incredulously. "That's damned hilarious!" He high-fives me as I take a seat next to Jovan.

"You can't tell anyone about this." Jovan doesn't stand over Ashawn as he says it. Instead, he gives him a level look. The look of an equal.

"No shit, brother," he says seriously. "And what about the other thing?" Ashawn asks, looking at the rumpled bed behind us.

I feel my cheeks heat and turn to Jovan. This isn't something we've dealt with before. I still don't even know what happened last night.

Jovan wraps a hand around my jaw, thumb grazing over my cheekbone. "Could you give me a minute alone with Ashawn?" he asks gently. I nod with a small smile and place my veil over my head, giving my eyes a couple of moments to adjust.

"I'll see you both at breakfast. I'll tell the guards you're cleaning up Kaura's mess," I say to Ashawn with a grin. I stop next to him, missing his

shoulder the first time.

“Sorry, it takes a few minutes to get used to it when I’ve had it off,” I say. I find his shoulder the second time and squeeze it gently. “I trust you to do the right thing.” My words are sincere. The Ashawn here now is not the headstrong, bitter person I first met. I believe Olandon has helped him a great deal. Given him a friend and a distraction, allowing him to regain some normalcy in his routine.

“Plus,” I say, “what were the words you once used?” I pretend to think. “Frost is oddly nice for a paid fighter – once you get past the fact she can probably end you.” I snigger as he shifts uncomfortably.

I head for the door, hearing him continue talking behind me. “I should’ve known. Her tits are just the same!”

I smile at his grunt of pain as I slip out of the door.

As I enter the food hall, I remember what I’ll be doing today. Blaine may be dead by darkness. Or maybe it will be me. I wind around the long way to the food benches. Alzona, Shard and Avalanche are still absent. I was going to launch my plan as soon as they got back.

I pass by the delegates’ table and my heart falls at Rhone’s empty spot. He’d said he would only take three days, but any number of things could go wrong with the sleds. I need those papers!

I grab a pear off the bench and head to the kennels to see if the dogs are back. Maybe Rhone’s just skipped breakfast. I nod a greeting here and there, squeezing specific shoulders as I go. Small things to alert the select people that today might be the day. I hear Macy gulp audibly when I nod to her. She must be terrified. Out of everyone, she has the most at risk. Today could be everything she’s dreamed of, or her worst nightmare come true. I myself am wondering if Jovan will smile at me as tenderly as he did last night once I force his hand in this matter.

The kennels have a few teams in them, but not Rhone’s favorite set of dogs. Nerves flare in my stomach. Where is he?

I sit through the morning council, noticing Ashawn is there today. The two brothers have come to some kind of understanding. I’m glad for them both. Kedrick used to connect the pair, but it seems they’ve finally found a way to salvage their relationship. I’m glad Jovan will have someone he doesn’t have to pretend with once I’m gone.

I’m not called upon for an opinion and I’m grateful for it because I’m

frantically running through the main points in my mind, trying to identify holes, readying myself for Blaine's rebuttal. The rest of the time I'm distracted by the king, who keeps turning his head my way. Does he feel my tension and wonder at it? I feel a thrill of terror as I think of what I'm about to do to him. I realize I haven't been trying hard enough to convince Jovan of Blaine's guilt. I should've tied him down and forced him to listen. I need to try just once more.

But I get no such chance over lunch and my stomach threatens to revolt. If I do the trial without telling Jovan, he'll look like a fool. I calm myself with the reminder that Sanjay was going to talk to him.

I take the long way to the food tables again and see Shard and the others have returned and sit with only Alzona absent, who will be waiting in the room she shares with Crystal. I lean my head in. If I'm quick Blaine won't see what I'm doing.

"Please wait for Sanjay after the meal," I say softly. "Alzona too. Crystal, meet me at the food bench." I don't wait to see if they've heard. I can't risk Blaine catching me. I grab a bread roll from the table, fiddling with my food as I wait for Crystal.

She sidles next to me a couple of minutes later, running a gentle hand over the wall tapestry, pretending to admire the beautiful make of it.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Alzona's dad paid the mistress to set Sanjay up. She says he was dragged in by two men and put in the bed, and the girls were only paid to be there when he woke up. Nothing else happened," she replies, barely moving her mouth.

Whatever happens today, at least Sanjay and Fiona will be okay. I breathe a sigh of relief that something has gone right.

"Thank you," I murmur, moving away. I stop at the delegates' table, sitting next to Sanjay. When Fiona is distracted, talking to Greta, I swoop in.

"I tried, I swear!" He cuts me off before I can begin. "Every time I asked to speak to him, he waved me off."

Damn it, Jovan! He knew Sanjay was one of my witnesses. I knew this pig-headedness stemmed from his desperation not to lose yet another person from his life, but it was getting beyond ridiculous. If only Macy had told him the truth. One of my witnesses was too scared to confess and Jovan was avoiding Sanjay. He'd heard Ice's reports from the man's own lips. He

knew Blaine had been in the pits and talking to dodgy criminals. I'd told him I had written proof.

I was officially at a loss as to how I could get Jovan to listen. He'd left me with no other choice. Every instinct in my body was telling me Blaine had to be taken down as quickly as possible. I had to do this now. Today.

I remember I have good tidings for Sanjay and quietly relate the news after giving him instructions for the afternoon. His joy is so blatant that I scold him to tone it down. He still turns to Fiona and kisses her long and hard. She sits stunned afterward, looking at him uncertainly. Kissing her like that is something the old Sanjay would've done. Fiona doesn't know what to make of his action and turns away.

Everyone has their orders. My witnesses will be waiting in the small room behind the meeting chamber for me to call them forward.

"Has anyone seen Rhone?" I ask.

Adnan looks up from the object he's working with. "I haven't seen him in several days," he says.

"Three, I think," Roman says. It must be hard for him. Things between Roman and Jacqueline appear to still be unresolved. They've been sitting at separate tables since I revealed my secret.

I debate whether there's time to check the kennels again before the next session.

"The king's finished eating," Sanjay whispers. My stomach flips and I stand, walking up to the throne platform.

"King Jovan. Would you mind if my brother sat in on a council session? I think the experience will serve him well."

Jovan immediately approves my request. His expression is blank. Perhaps he's just recalling my words last night, my warning. He knows I'm up to something. It's only a slight reassurance. He moves to turn away.

"Jovan!" I call. He pauses to look back over his shoulder. "Enter through the back room," I say softly.

Olandon steps into place beside me as we leave the food hall. I've already given him his instructions, which is lucky, because I'm too nervous to speak right now. We're the first to reach the room, my anxiety making me punctual. I fidget, preoccupied with controlling my emotion as the room fills. Blaine takes his seat – hopefully unaware of what is to befall him.

Ten minutes go by and Jovan hasn't entered. At first the advisors talk

amongst themselves, but soon, when twenty minutes go by, they begin to speculate on Jovan's whereabouts.

His tardiness is answered a second later as he enters, not through the hall entrance, but through the door behind his throne. He listened to me, but my nervousness doesn't abate, because I still don't know if he'll be letting me speak today. An ultimatum is before him; will he choose to remain loyal to Blaine? Or to trust in me?

He's just walked into a room full of my witnesses. But has he sent them away? Has he destroyed all my hard work? Or has he opened his eyes? Is he willing to give me a chance?

"Veni!" I curse under my breath.

"The king is pale," Landon wonders. "I've never seen him so unsettled."

I'm shaking inside. What was he going to do? I'd worked so hard to orchestrate this! I half-rise from my chair, on my way to demand an audience with him.

"We were to discuss strategies for food distribution to the Outer Rings," Jovan booms. Olandon pulls me back down to the hard stone of my chair. I tense, ready to jump back up.

"But there has been a change of plan," he continues.

My mouth dries as I look up.

"Tatuma Olina, I believe you have a matter you wish to bring to my advisors' attention," he says softly.

Hot relief floods through me and I slump in my chair from the weight of it. He's going to let me speak. Jovan chose *me*. For a minute, I can't think past his words. Unfortunately, when I do, his tone of voice raises more questions. Jovan is allowing me to speak, but he's not convinced.

Olandon prods me in the side. I stand, hoping no one can see me trembling as I make my way around the table. This is it. I just hope my legs don't give way underneath me.

I clear my mind of everything: Jovan's discovery of the truth, the advisors' confusion, my own worry. Calm.

I straighten my shoulders and begin.

"Why are the Outer Rings rebelling? It's a question I've heard a hundredfold since joining you in council. We have some of those answers now ... but I believe the real question has been lost. The question we should

be asking is, why now?" I clasp my hands behind my back and pace in measured steps.

"The Outer Rings have always been full of poverty – according to your own accounts – so why has the rebellion come just as the Tatum's army hovers on the edge of Glacium? Especially as the poor here are typically unaware of the interworld problems Glacium faces, having to focus all their strength on surviving one day to the next. Could this timing just be coincidence?"

I stop in front of Jovan. "Is it all just a convenient inconvenience?" I ask softly. There are murmurs from the others. Some may understand what I'm talking about; most won't.

I resume my walk around the stone table. "I may have thought so, if I didn't catch someone lying in this very room."

That shuts them up.

"I know who this person is. The king and I have known for quite some time. As you know, Solati pride themselves on revealing true meaning in conversation. It is a game to us, but also a way of life. Slight movements, repetitions, and changes in voice can tell us many things." I turn to face them. "I knew there was a traitor amongst you as soon as the lie was spoken, weeks ago, but King Jovan rightfully requested I supply proof before he condemned this person. I have that evidence today."

I hope Jovan plays along. If I have my way, his advisors will never know how stubborn he was.

I stand in the middle and peer around them all, even though I can't see the men's faces. Each of them feels threatened.

"On that day, when one of you lied to your king, I came to realize the question we should have been asking all along." I look straight at the very still, and possibly very angry Jovan, and ask him my question.

"*Who* has been planning to usurp the king?"

The uproar from my question is tumultuous.

"You can't come in here and point fingers!" Drummond blurts. "Who do you think you are?"

I step up to him. "I am the Tatum of Osolis." I keep my voice calm. "I was invited to this council, and as such, can offer my opinions. Unless you have a certain reason for wanting me to stop now?"

He splutters in response, but can't say anything or risk worsening his

position.

“What have you got to lose?” I ask them, sweeping around, palms up. “If I’m wrong, I’m wrong. But if I’m right and there’s a *traitor* in your midst...” I straighten. “That is something the council must know.” I turn to Olandon. “Brother, please escort the witnesses in.”

“This is absolutely ludicrous,” Blaine says. I listen carefully to see who agrees with him—only Gerden. I’m glad Blaine’s reach isn’t further entrenched.

“Please, do try to bear with me, Blaine,” I say sweetly.

The advisors know who the accused is as soon as they see the first two witnesses: Blaine’s wife and his brother-in-law step into the chamber, followed by an otherwise random group.

I call loudly over the fever-pitched noise, feeling like I’ve waited one hundred revolutions for this moment. I’ve detested this man since I first met him. This is long overdue.

“Blaine, I accuse you of the intention to usurp King Jovan.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Silence!” roars Jovan in the immediate aftermath. I make sure Olandon is tensed and ready to intervene if Blaine tries to run. But he doesn’t. He’s too busy sitting in shock, staring at Alzona.

“Charity?” Blaine says hoarsely. I frown and look at the row of witnesses.

“Hello, Father,” Alzona says with disgust. A few choking noises sound behind me. Alzona’s name is *Charity*? I plan to join Ice and Shard in uproarious laughter when all of this is over. If I’m still alive.

I continue over the shocked murmurs. “We will get to the witnesses of the actual crimes. But first, in digging into Blaine’s history I have found some ... interesting, should we say, skeletons?” I ask him. The skeleton of his first wife, for starters.

“You would use my own daughter against me?” Blaine asks. A few of the advisors gasp, yet to make the connection.

“You’ll get a chance to defend yourself,” Jovan says, silencing him.

“Alzona, will you please repeat what you told me?” I step aside as she takes the attention. I try to regain some semblance of calm as she speaks, detailing the regular beatings and the brutal killing of her mother, and then telling how she preferred life in the Outer Rings to an abusive yet privileged life in the assembly. Her retelling is just as shocking the second time around. But I’m more interested to see how Blaine will react.

How much has Charity’s appearance startled him?

“Her mother was killed by criminals. Something I’ve tried very hard to put behind me. You’d condemn me based on the memories of an eleven-year-old?” he scoffs.

“Not at all,” I say mildly. I’d expected him to try and say Alzona wasn’t his child, but his initial reaction foiled that defense.

“Macy?” I say over my shoulder. I lead her to the chair. She’s shaking so much I fear she’ll fall over.

“Macy, how long have you been married to Blaine?” I ask.

“F-fifteen years,” she says.

“And how many years has he been beating you?” I ask. There are hushed whispers from the advisors. Maybe even the other witnesses.

“Fourteen,” she says, eyes screwed shut. Someone gasps loudly.

“How badly?” I ask.

“Never the face. He didn’t want anyone to see. Mainly the stomach and back, and the legs,” she whispers. “I’ve miscarried four times.” Angry noise rises up from around the room. My own eyes widen at her admission.

“Please tell us what you know of Blaine’s recent dealings,” I ask.

She shakes her head, avoiding the area where Blaine sits. “They’re not just recent,” she says. “He’s been doing it for as long as I’ve been with him. He always complained about King Borin’s rule. Said he was a-a stupid bastard who didn’t know the First Sector from the Second.” I dart a quick glance at Jovan, who still stays remarkably silent.

“Blaine disappears all hours of the night from the house. That’s why he stays there while I stay in the castle. He doesn’t want his activity noticed by the watch.” She takes a gulp of breath, eager to hurry through this.

“When he does make me return to the house, all sorts of people come to the door. Thugs, criminals, cut-throats. He takes them into his office and shuts the door so I can’t see anything. But he’s doing something wrong. I know it!” she finishes. I thank her as she leaves, and watch as Alzona wraps her arms around Blaine’s wife. I ready myself for Blaine’s retort.

It’s dry when it does come. He tries to feign disinterest. “So I beat her a few times. If she stopped sleeping around I wouldn’t have to.” There’s a shocked sound, while Macy just hangs her head, long devoid of fighting back. “The men coming to my door are the men I use to gather my intelligence. They need to look the part to fit in the Outer Rings. She’s a foolish woman who doesn’t understand what she was seeing,” he rebuts.

“If this is the case, you shouldn’t have anything to worry about,” I say smoothly.

“Sanjay,” I call.

The red-haired man strides into the center of the room and glares at Blaine, radiating fury. The young delegate has an explosive temper. I hope he keeps it in check.

“Blaine has been blackmailing me for several months,” Sanjay begins abruptly.

“How so?” asks Jovan. He shows interest for the first time.

Sanjay explains how he came to be left at the whorehouse and how Blaine has used it to question him about the recent advances he and Adnan

have made in weaponry.

“My source tells me Blaine himself paid the mistress of the establishment to have Sanjay awaken in the presence of two naked whores. Understandably, Sanjay has thought he was disloyal to his wife this whole time.”

Sanjay bows to the king. “I am sorry to have divulged the secrets of your army. I accept whatever punishment you decide upon,” he says, staying prone before his king.

“I will decide on this at a later time, if I deem there to be substance to these accusations against Blaine,” Jovan says in a cold voice. I squeeze my friend’s hand as he returns to his chair, not even bothering to respond to Blaine’s protests about lack of proof.

“The eyewitness can be brought in if necessary, though I doubt we’ll need to go to the trouble,” I add. I beckon Ice forward and start when I’m greeted by Shard instead.

“Forgive me, Tatum Olina, but I would like to present my own information on what I know of the accused,” he says with a bow. I wave him forward, nervous about what he will say. This isn’t part of the plan.

“I was born in the Middle Ring, the son of a very successful whorehound, their leader, in fact,” he says. I tense at this unknown fact.

“I ran from my father ten years ago at the age of seventeen, seeing that my only future there was to follow in his footsteps.” He paces the room as I did earlier and stops in front of Blaine. “But for several years before I left, I remember this man meeting with my father. I remember this vividly because my father spoke often of how he now had the backing of a rich assembly member. He would brag about it to his friends over brew. Or while one of them was raping a girl in the back room.” I flinch at his graphic words.

“Let us speak to this man, your father. Have him identify me,” Blaine yells, slamming a fist on the table. It doesn’t bother the pit fighter in front of him. The sharp featured, sharper-witted man leans close to Blaine with a somber expression.

“I imagine you only offer because you know he’s dead,” Shard says in a wry voice. “He’s been dead for a whole sector or more, along with six of his top workers.” He hesitates and stands straight. “Frost killed them.”

It’s as though someone has punched me in the stomach. I can’t help a small sound of despair escaping my lips. It’s lost in the sounds of interest

Shard's comment has generated.

I killed Shard's father?

How could he even look at me? I blink back my shocked reaction as Shard moves past without a glance my way. Has our entire friendship been a lie?

"I grow bored with this," Blaine drawls. "You've never liked me, Tatum. I must say, the feeling is returned. I find you selfish, sulky, and immature. However, you do not see me deliberately attempting to discredit you to your family and your friends."

I push thoughts of Shard aside. I'll have time to process this news later. I need to stay in the game or Blaine will worm his way out of it and Jovan will never trust me again.

"You are certainly entitled to your opinion of me, Blaine. And if you wish to discredit me, be my guest. And though I can't say you've done anything much to me at all, I'm thankful I've never been alone with you. From what we've learned today, I would be beaten, blackmailed, or dead."

Ice slinks up to me, darting looks around the room.

"Frost had this man spying for her in the Outer Rings," I say. "Ice, tell us what you've seen with your own eyes."

"I seen heaps, girly." He jerks his thumb at Blaine. "This guy's got a finger in everything from the whorehouses, to the pit fights, to the hounds." Ice draws a rolled paper from his tunic as he speaks. "The barrack member named Hale is his main lapdog, and all Hale's fighters are neck-deep in the crime throughout the Outer Rings." He twists around to speak to those behind him. "Want to rape someone? Or cut someone? Hale's the man to go to. In the two weeks I've had 'em watched, Blaine and Hale met once. Rest of the time, Blaine's lackeys met with Hale and then reported back to him. I've also seen him in Hale's company three other times in the pits. Frost has too."

"Who was the other person who met with Hale?" I ask.

"Him," Ice says, pointing at Sole. The entire room stares at the timid man standing beside Macy.

"Thank you, Ice," I say. Hope takes hold in my gut. The odds are stacking against the greasy delegate.

"Nope. I got this here as well." Ice waves the rolled paper. "I've only had a couple of weeks, so I'm sure there's more. But there are five weapon caches my team has found in the First, Second, and Sixth." He unrolls the

paper and slaps it down in front of Jovan, who views it with clenched fists.

I can venture a guess the king's finally seeing the truth, and that the truth makes him feel like a fool. The part of me which views his behavior as a betrayal says it serves him right. If he'd just listened to me, we could've resolved this privately, without the audience. The rest of me mourns the fact that Blaine's guilt will reinforce Jovan's deepest fear that everyone he cares for will eventually be taken from him.

"What is in these stores?" the king asks through clenched teeth.

"Everything you'd need to defeat an army like yours, I'd say," Ice replies.

Several of the advisors stand to look at the maps. I'm curious myself to see their location, as Ice hadn't told me of this discovery.

Blaine doesn't move. He doesn't say a word.

"Sole," I call. The advisors scurry back to their seats, eager for the last witness. The high energy that's kept me going is starting to flag.

Sole hurries to take the seat in the middle of the room. I roll my eyes at his guilty demeanor.

"Sole, as Ice stated, you have been working on Blaine's behalf. Can you tell us how long you've done this?" I ask.

"Fifteen years," he says quietly, head down.

"Why have you done such a thing?" I ask, voice neutral.

"H-he threatened my sister. Said he'd break every bone in her body," he says, trembling.

"Did he ever make good on these threats?" I ask flatly. He nods frantically.

"I refused to search the king's rooms for messages from the Tatum." He rushes and pulls up short, giving a quick peek over his shoulder. "That's when Macy had her fourth miscarriage," he chokes, visibly crumpling. This man has nothing left.

I lay a hand on his shoulder. "You have been oppressed for too long, controlled by fear for someone you love more than your own life," I say softly and he lifts his head. "Tell us, Sole. What does Blaine want?" I ask.

"W-what he's always wanted," Sole says, wiping his nose on his tunic. He looks around as though waiting for us to realize the obvious. I suppose it is obvious to him after fifteen years.

"To be king," he clarifies.

I question Sole for an hour. Much of it, I already know. Sole's information is detailed, with names, dates, locations, and numbers. The king takes over partway through. It's the sign I've been waiting for, that he believes me. The sound has steadily disappeared in the last couple of hours as the heaviness of Blaine's doom becomes impossible to ignore. Jovan's final question silences the room.

"Why, after all this time, when you could have gone to my father or come to me, have you decided to speak up?" the King asks Sole.

Sole gives me a wide-eyed glance and then settles his gaze at the king's feet. "Well, you k-know this already. The Tatum saved me from death on the Great Stairway. She broke her wrist and dislocated her shoulder." He shudders. "I told her then that I was in her debt. She called me aside several days ago and told me this is what she wanted me to do to repay her." He ducks his head. "The weight of this has been crushing me for so long, all I felt was relief at her request." He stands and bows. "I would've come to you, my king, but Blaine watched me very closely around you. I'm not sure if you've ever noticed, but there has been only one opportunity in the four years of your kingship for me to speak to you in private. It was when you interrogated each delegate after Prince Kedrick's death. And Blaine warned he would be holding a knife to Macy's throat in case I made the wrong choice. Blaine was so close to the previous king, I knew you'd have no cause to believe me," the delegate says. Jovan's head turns my way briefly. "I guess it became more habit than anything else. This fear is all I have known for so long. It stopped occurring to me to try," Sole finishes.

The silence is absolute.

"You have no proof!" hisses Blaine. "You have the cheap words of a weak-willed man, a couple of whores, and a man who cheats on his wife. And this Outer Rings scum," he spits at the barracks. I raise my eyebrows, but remain quiet. He's showing his true colors. I'm not going to stop him.

He points at me. "You've twisted them all against me with your Solati filth and mind tricks. None of this is true!"

The door slams on the wall as it's thrown open. Only one other person opens doors that way. I nearly sink to the ground in a heap as a fur-clad Rhone steps into the room. Snow falls from him with every step.

He walks to me and reaches into his vest to extract a bag. I know exactly what's in it.

“I expected you earlier,” I say.

He grunts and guilt swamps me. It did sound a little ungrateful. “Leo was injured,” he says shortly.

“Is he all right,” I ask in apology. Rhone shrugs and leaves with a bow to the king.

I refocus and open the bag carefully, checking the contents with a quick glance. “You say we shouldn’t trust the firsthand witness of the gathered men and women. Though, if we cannot trust the word of so many, what could we trust in?” I say, deliberating. “Perhaps your own good word?” I ask.

“Of course,” he snarls. I smile and draw the papers out of the bag.

“I’m glad you think so,” I say, “because Rhone has been so good to collect this stack of documents for me from the Third Sector. You may recognize them, being as they are all written by you.” I let the heap drop in front of Jovan with a loud smack.

“Instructions to Hale, word received from the whorehounds. Crime after heinous crime, listed in that stack,” I say pointing. “And all of them written by you.”

“How did you get these?” Blaine asks, fury tight in his voice.

“I stole them from your room a long time ago,” I confess.

“You stole—”

“Silence!” roars Jovan, slowly rising from his seat. I step back, not scared to admit his rage terrifies me.

“Betrayal and mutiny of the most disloyal kind. For years, I have been blind to your ... depraved acts, and corrupt soul!” Jovan snarls, fists curled tightly. “There is no punishment I can think of for your crimes against the people of Glacium. No word I can think of for how utterly dissolute you are. You hurt my people.” The king moves into the stone ring and stands next to me. “That the Tatuma of our enemy is the only person who saw you for what you were, I’m more ashamed of than I can admit.”

I want to grab his arm and make him stop talking. Any more and the advisors will guess his ignorance of Blaine’s involvement.

He moves to the witnesses. My mouth dries as he bends to one knee in front of them.

“All of you have my sincerest and most humble apologies. Your pain and heartache falls on my shoulders, and it is something I’ll not forget. I will

make this right for you,” he vows.

Tears track down my cheeks, hidden behind my veil. I focus on Jovan. Of course he would take the entire blame for what has happened over the last fifteen years.

I don't have time to scream.

I jerk my head away as the sword swings, feeling the sting as it slices through the flesh above my jaw. The tip of the weapon comes to rest at my throat.

Barely breathing, without moving my head, I look to my right to where Blaine stands at the edge of the sword currently cutting into my throat. I then track the sword held to *Blaine's* throat to its owner, Jovan. The king, Blaine, and I stand in a deadly triangle. Blaine in the perfect position to kill me, and Jovan in the perfect position to kill Blaine. Who will die first?

My inhale hitches in my throat at the white fury on Jovan's face. It's one of the few times I've seen him use the large sword always buckled at his side. No one in the meeting room makes a noise. Or maybe they do and I'm too focused on the sharp metal gouging my neck to hear.

“Let me go safely, or I'll kill the Tatum,” Blaine hisses, too desperate to be afraid of the king. He should be. His death is looking straight at him through clear blue eyes.

Jovan's head turns slightly toward me, and then slowly back to Blaine. “Old *friend*,” he says. I shiver at the softness, the finality of his voice. “You will die here today. How you die is up to you,” Jovan says.

“Just like your father, unable to make a decision. Glacium will die under your control.” I see Blaine's hand tighten and tense in readiness.

I roll away as Jovan strikes without a sound. Blaine's sword cuts through my veil to the exposed area of my throat.

I grasp the side of my neck, looking back in time to see Blaine's traitorous head flying through the meeting room. It hits the far wall with a wet thud. His body crumples to the ground in a deadened and bloody heap in front of me.

The king's roar bounces around the room as Olandon rushes to my side. He touches my hand and holds it up. I see the blood on his shaking hands.

“You are badly hurt,” Olandon asks me.

I have no idea. I'm still standing, aren't I? The ground underneath

makes me realize I'm not. There's a clatter of a sword behind him and I'm jerked from my brother's ministrations and clutched in Jovan's arms.

"Let me see," he demands, drawing the veil up to my jaw. I hear his intake of breath.

"Nothing serious," I mutter. "We both know I'd be dead by now. He only got muscle." It's just blood loss.

"He got you twice," he says through clenched teeth, stroking above my jaw where Blaine first got me.

"And you got him once," I say, nodding to his body on the ground. Someone is vomiting behind me.

Jovan clenches his hands into massive fists and glares above my head. "One death is not enough for that fucking traitor! I could kill him one hundred times and want to kill him a hundred times more."

There's something off in Jovan's words, like even now, he doesn't believe that to be true. The king checks my throat again to reassure himself and then nods to Olandon.

"Take care of her," he says to him.

"That wouldn't have occurred to me without your help," Olandon answers. I grip my brother's arm. He doesn't want to mess with the king of Glacium right now.

"We will break for dinner," Jovan booms, stalking around the room. "Be prepared to be up through the night. We must strike before Blaine is missed by his network." He points across the room. "You, Ice. I want you to leave now and find out as much about the weapon caches as you can." He turns and looks at his advisors, who are still in shocked silence, staring at Blaine's beheaded form.

"And not a fucking word to anyone or your heads will join his," he says, jerking his head at Blaine. "Leave!"

Advisors and Outer Rings alike scramble for the doors. Olandon passes me a wad of material and I push it to the side of my neck, as he helps me to my feet. Jovan has his back to us, facing an empty stone wall. I ache to console him, but he clearly wants to be alone. Why else has he turned away? He just executed someone he deemed nearly family, the "last remnant of his father."

I hope he doesn't hate me. I hope he understands I had no choice.

I'm lightheaded, though I'm unsure if it's from blood loss or from my

worry about Jovan. Our night together seems long ago and I wish we could be transported back to that moment.

“Lina...” Olandon whispers. His concerned voice brings me back, and I give a heavy sigh at the scene before me.

Jovan standing with his back to me. Blaine’s blood is everywhere.

“You need to have Gerden questioned. I’ll arrange to have him attained so he doesn’t have time to send any messages,” I say carefully. “I don’t know how involved he was in the rebellion, but he’s been reinforcing everything coming out of Blaine’s mouth in the last two weeks.”

The king turns and dips his head to indicate he’s heard me, then turns away once again.

“Jovan, I’m ... I’m so sorry,” I say, before turning to leave.

* * *

Two days pass and I barely see him, let alone get a chance to talk to him. Yet another meal passes in which the Bruma’s king isn’t present. He hasn’t done this since he heard the news of Kedrick. His people need him to enforce his position at the moment. Though they’re unaware of exactly what has happened, the assembly know something is amiss. The low mood gives me a small insight into how castle life may have been before my arrival here.

I keep wondering if I could’ve made it easier for Jovan. I feel like I have to explain myself. Maybe I should have tried harder to get him to listen to me about Blaine beforehand. Deep down, I know killing the advisor would have hurt just as much either way. I’d do it all over again to make sure he’s safe when I return to Osolis.

I don’t go to any of the council meetings, using my small injuries as an excuse. Really, I’m unsure about the reception I’ll get from the advisors and their leader. Olandon stays with me and Ashawn, and I see their friendship has grown more than I supposed. My barracks friends depart back to the Second Sector. All except Ice and Blizzard, who now have roles within the castle. Ice tried to look upset at the title of king’s spy, but he failed miserably. I expected Alzona to be upset about losing two fighters, but she said she’d struck a deal with the Glacium leader and the loss wouldn’t be a problem. It will be nice to have my barracks friends around.

The watch is a flurry of movement. Ashawn is now my sole guard,

while the others help fleece the Outer Rings, emptying any identified weapon caches and, with inside information, flushing out the criminal leaders in the Outer Rings. Hale and a handful of others were now dead. Much of his barracks were captured and thrown into the dungeons for “questioning.” That was one area I was happy to stay away from.

Best of all, Macy is a new woman and Sole a new man. Both look like they’ve lost ten years of age. And Fiona and Sanjay are making up for lost time—something that disgusts my brother during meals; his view from the throne table is unobstructed. I must get him a veil of his own.

The danger is largely gone, but I feel emptier than I can ever remember being.

* * *

It’s the first time I’ve been in the training yard as the Tatuma. How many times have I wanted to abandon my post on the walkway with the other ladies and exchange it for a position down here? I squash the familiar itch to pick up a weapon and break into a long, hard sweat. One day I’ll be able to train with the others. Even if it’s on Osolis instead of here.

The thud of a spear finding its mark echoes through the otherwise empty space.

“Why aren’t you in the food hall with the others?” Jovan says quietly.

I ignore his dismissal. “I just was. Are you eating?” I retort, circling closer to him. My feet want to take me straight to him. I force them to wait.

“I’ll have the servants make me something later.” Another thud rings through the yard.

“A good hit,” I remark softly.

Jovan unleashes a vicious kick at the stand of spears. They fall to the ground in a clatter. My heart beats loudly at the sudden noise.

“I should have bloody listened,” he says tightly, looking away from me. “I’ve been a fucking fool for years and never knew it.”

“Blaine was an accomplished liar.”

“That’s not good enough!” He hefts another spear up and releases it with unbridled strength. I hear a splitting sound from the other end of the courtyard. I frown, contemplating the tension in his massive shoulders.

“You can’t know everything, Jovan. That would be more than any

man or woman could do. More than your *father* could have done,” I say. “Don’t put the weight of two worlds on your shoulders. It can crush even the strongest of men.”

His shoulders sag and he lowers the spear he was about to throw.

“And what about the smallest of women?” he asks.

“Them too.” I smile woefully under my veil.

I retreat to the stone stairs and sit on the lowest step, listening to the rhythmic sound of weapon hitting wood. The whisper of his approaching step is one of my favorite sounds. I don’t stir when he sits beside me.

“My pride is the most wounded of all,” he admits, leaning back as he straightens and crosses his legs. “I can’t help wondering, if I wasn’t so...” he searches for the word, “damaged after my parents’ deaths, if I would have noticed his mutiny.”

I don’t say anything. All of us have been where he is at some stage. Doubting and picking at details of the past. Mine was not so long ago when Jovan made me realize I was running away from what was right. But I’ve learned not to wear away at the past; I’ve learned to grow wiser from it and move on.

“I want to be strong for my people. I want to be as strong as my father.” He squeezes my hand tightly. “I want to be strong for you,” he says softly. “The hardest thing is realizing Glacium has been balancing on the verge of carnage for most of my rule while I’ve foolishly thought I had a handle on it. How will I know if it happens again?”

I squeeze his hand before slipping from his grasp. How close are his guards? “Your men and people look up to you. They trust you. And now you have a system in place. You know the signs. Jovan, you are the strongest man I know,” I say. I squeeze my eyes shut. “For what it’s worth, I’m so very sorry.” I swallow a lump in my throat. “I’m sorry the person who betrayed you was someone you held dear. And I’m sorry I couldn’t make it easier for you. I feel as though I keep ripping people away from you. First Kedrick and now Blaine.”

He grabs my hand and this time I know I won’t be able to slip away.

“Never apologize for what you did. Glacium owes you a great debt,” he says and looks out across the training yard. “The thing that makes this all worse is you think I don’t trust you. That I wasn’t listening because I had no faith in you. But it wasn’t that,” he says with difficulty.

“I know.” I squeeze his hand. This had been his way of coping, one he hadn’t recognized for what it was: blind denial.

He kisses my palm. “Never think I’m resentful for what you did three days ago. My pride will heal and I’ll be smarter for this. And Lina, I swear to you, I’ll never treat you that way again. Never again.”

My face heats. “Even as you protected Blaine, I knew why you were doing so. Out of everyone, you know I understand. That I’ve been somewhere similar.”

“How do you see it all?” he asks.

I start at the sudden topic change. “I imagine the same way as you see things around you,” I answer, shifting on the stone steps. He shakes his head at my reply. He’s so handsome it breaks my heart to look at him.

“No, that’s not it.” He leans in and lifts my veil, kissing the healing scratch on my neck. I shiver as his lips brush the tender skin there.

“No,” he says softly. “You’re different. There’s no one like you on either world,” he says.

I lean into him. “What about the Ire?” I ask. He laughs, tilting his head back.

“Or the Ire,” he adds.

I sit next to his reclined form, distracted by the warmth of his leg. I tilt my face up to the sky, listening to the peaceful sounds of the night around me. It is tranquility layered over the muffled murmur and occasional peal of laughter from inside the castle.

“My people need me,” he finally says in a weighted tone. I don’t move from where I’m seated, loath to break the rightness of this moment—the full feeling in my head and heart.

“Yes,” I murmur. “They do.”

And so do mine.

* * *

I attend the next meeting with Jovan. Drummond greets me with a pat on the back, which almost pushes my face into the floor. Roscoe hugs me tightly, saying he’s proud of me, and several of the others murmur hearty welcomes. It’s a little startling to see how changed the advisors are toward me. I hear Ashawn sniggering as I pass him and laugh quietly in return. It

must look quite humorous. Jovan looks up at the sound, his expression too far away to read. I was disappointed he hadn't crept into my chamber last night. The thought showed I was long past what I should and shouldn't do.

The council has been busy while I've been avoiding them. I listen to the drastic changes already made.

"Ice still believes there are a number of caches stored in the Fifth Sector. Not to mention those coming out of the Fourth in the next six months," Merc says. It's a valid point. No one can live in the Fourth, but that doesn't mean Blaine has never utilized the space there. Even on Osolis we would store valuable goods in large Kaur cases, so the fire couldn't damage them; trees and archives.

"Any further reports of rebellion?" Jovan asks. He flicks through various documents in front of him, looking every bit the part of king.

"Several small groups. All have been dealt with," Ashawn speaks. "Malir estimates another few weeks until peace is restored. The men in the dungeons have talked. Rhone's been very efficient there. Every day we get more names and locations."

"Excellent," praises Jovan, smiling at his brother. He stands to address the rest of us. "I would like to propose additions to the council," he says next. "As you will see, Gerden opted to step down from his seat, leaving two open positions," he says. "One of the places, I give to Prince Ashawn. He is my successor and needs to familiarize himself with our processes should anything happen to me." My stomach drops at his words.

The advisors voice their agreement, though clearly waiting for the next person to be named. Ashawn was an obvious choice. Roman would be a good pick for the second position. I wonder who Jovan has in mind.

"The second person I would like to propose is Shard, whom you met several days ago," he says.

"The son of the whorehound?" a voice says incredulously. I'm almost as shocked, though for other reasons. Shard? Outer Rings Shard?

"Yes." Jovan speaks firmly and they quiet immediately. "Frost highly commends him, but that aside, you saw how he held himself here three days ago. I've watched him closely from the Dome until now. He is a rarity. And in Frost's words, he has an ability to remove himself from a situation and analyze it without emotion. I believe he will be invaluable for these reasons, but also for the link he presents to the Outer Rings," he says in a calm voice.

“The more ties we have to this part of Glacium, the less likely we are to have a repeat of the last fifteen years. The people will have a voice.”

I bounce a little in my chair, I'm so happy. The other men in the room exchange glances, but no one can fault Jovan's logic. They'll question Shard's origins, sure. And he'll have to earn their respect, just like everyone else here. A grin beams across my face at his words. Shard was made for the council—it's perfect!

“What about Frost? You seem to respect her advice,” Jak asks. Excited murmuring takes hold of the room.

“A woman on the council?” Jovan asks. I narrow my eyes. His tone's not offensive; it's more curious, if anything.

“Well, Frost's not just any woman, is she?” Yate says. “It seems like she's always helping anyway. The people love her. I admit, her attitude needs an adjustment.” I hear Jovan cough from across the room and I grin. “But I'm sure she'd come into line,” Yate finishes.

Ashawn begins to choke. Jovan stands up and begins circling around the ring.

“Sorry, Tatuma,” Yate remarks. “I didn't mean to imply anything. You can certainly hold your own.”

I'm assuring Yate I'm not offended, but half of me is distracted by Jovan, who has moved to stand directly behind me.

“What are you doing?” I mutter over my shoulder.

He leans forward and places his hands on my shoulders. “Do you trust me?”

“Why?” I ask in an uncertain voice. The room has fallen silent and I know we've become the center of attention.

“Do you?” he asks.

I don't even pause to think. “Of course.”

Jovan clears his throat and the room grows quieter still. I fidget underneath his hot hands, realizing he's asked me that question because he's about to do something I'll object to.

He squeezes me gently. “I think it's time for you all to know the truth. Perhaps then you'll understand how the Tatuma came to learn what she shared with you three days ago.”

What! My mouth dries. I frantically try to recall who is in the room. Unfortunately, I know the answer: every single advisor. Surely he can't mean

to...

“This knowledge is held by only a few. I trust you to keep what you’re about to see the solemnest of secrets. More than that, I ask you keep an open mind when you are shown the truth. I’m asking for your support, as your king, but also as your friend,” he says. “This woman has saved Glacium. She has saved us all. We owe her a great debt. Bruma don’t forget their debts.”

“Jovan!” I whisper. “What are you—?” I hear the clanging of Ashawn’s armor as he moves to stand next to his brother. My heart is beating so loudly the sound fills my ears, making all other noise blend in an unrecognizable hum. I stare up at him, turned in my seat. With the gentlest movement imaginable, he tilts my chin until I’m facing the advisors once again, who wait in silence. His fingertips brush my cheeks as he draws the material upward. The advisors begin to talk now they know what their king intends to do. The talking swells as they murmur excitedly and stand to get a closer look. Even Roscoe pushes forward to see, usual manners forgotten.

How many times have they wondered what’s under the Tatuma’s veil? How many times have they wanted to lift it themselves?

Just one peek.

Jovan grips the bottom of my veil and leans down to whisper in my ear.

“This is how it should be, Lina. You’ll see.”

Chapter Seventeen

I sit awkwardly in the uproar of the room. Papers litter the ground. Chairs lay upturned where they've been flung back to the wall as shouting men erupt out of their seats to argue their point. It's one of those moments where you realize how much has changed.

I've just allowed the king of Glacium to show my face to a whole room full of his advisors.

At least five minutes have passed now. Even Jovan hasn't been able to quiet them. Instead, he sits next to me, a wry half-smile on his face. Ashawn doesn't bother to hide his grin, winking at me whenever I catch his eye. I don't know how they can be so calm. My heart is threatening to beat out of my chest. Jak stands one meter from me, staring with his mouth open. It's very disconcerting.

"The Tatum is Frost!" I hear for the twentieth time. I hope this room is soundproofed.

"So the Tatum's dead?" someone asks. I sigh and lean my head back against the seat.

"What are you thinking?" Jovan asks.

I shrug one shoulder, folding my arms. "They handled civil war with less noise." I feel the warmth of his breath as he chuckles softly. I glare at him. "And if you're really asking whether I'm angry at you, I'm still deciding."

Jovan accepts this with a nod.

"This is how you were able to bring the Outer Rings and assembly together to fight Blaine?" Roscoe asks. The volume ebbs at his questions.

"So you *are* the Tatum?" Jak asks. He's finally closed his mouth.

I raise an eyebrow. "Yes, Jak."

"But ... you have *blue* eyes!" Drummond splutters. His face is pale. I wonder if he's going to faint.

"Yes," I say. With another glare at the king, I leap into a quick version of the events of the last few sectors. It's easier, now I've done it a couple of times. I tell them of my mother's likely affair, how I ran to the Outer Rings and the Ire, and how I've managed to continue the facade since returning to the castle. They stare at me as I finish; that will teach me to want

silence. I force my spine straight as they gawk.

“I have known of this from the beginning,” Jovan addresses them. I give him my own wry look. He made it sound a whole lot nicer than it was. The king ripped off my veil shortly after my arrival in the Third Sector. Most of the advisors have something to say about this, clearly angered by his secrecy. I can’t blame them. This is huge news. Some of the biggest in our collective history. The Tatuma is mixed? It changes everything—I know that best of all.

“Do all Solati women fight like you?” Ashawn asks.

“Those with the aptitude,” I answer. “We certainly do not rely so heavily on males on Osolis. Your own women could be fierce fighters if you allowed them.” That idea is quickly shot down. I content myself by thinking of the women training to fight in Alzona’s barracks.

“One thing at a time,” Jovan whispers in my ear. His smile blinds me when I glance up at him. For a second, my mind can’t seem to grasp how attractive I find the king of Glacium. The fatal feeling he causes baffles me. I quickly school my features. That’s all we need, for the advisors to notice the infatuation between us.

Jovan straightens and loses his smile. The king of Glacium is back. Menace creeps into the air around him, growing with every step as he pins each man in the room with his penetrating stare. He looks every advisor in the face for several moments. Obviously searching for something within each of them, though I’m not sure what. “Despite the bloodied history between Solati and Bruma, the Tatuma has done nothing but help this world since her arrival. Believe me when I say I have never met anyone more focused on doing what is right, rather than what is expected. This drive pushed her to the Outer Rings to search for my brother’s murderer.”

The familiar sense of failure stabs me.

“It compelled her to save those in the Dome at the risk of her own life.” He stalks around the meeting room. “One of those men she saved is to become my advisor. She has the ability to see potential in those around her, regardless of their station. She has the ability to see evil and deceit in men who breathe the same air as you and I. The Tatuma of Osolis has saved our world.”

“Jovan,” I say, cheeks warm from his praise. He doesn’t acknowledge my comment.

“The Tatuma is held high in my esteem. I trust her with my life and the life of my family.” He gestures at Ashawn. “We have done little to earn her trust. I want to show her what the word of a Bruma means. If news of her secret gets out, I will find who did it by any means possible,” he says with factual calm. “And that person will die a painful death.”

He turns and I gasp at the blazing vividness of his eyes.

“She will not be harmed,” he says.

* * *

“You’ve shown the advisors,” Olandon says at dinner. It only took him two minutes to discover the cause of the shift in dynamics. Likely because Drummond and Roscoe haven’t stopped staring at me since the meeting.

“I did,” I say.

“No she didn’t,” Jovan calls from two seats down. “I did.”

I sigh at his gleeful tone.

Olandon’s hand tightens around the shining goblet. “The king’s decision is wise, Tatuma.” He puts the hint of a question in his voice. I doubt anyone else hears it. They probably think he’s commending the king on his choice.

“They took it better than could be expected,” I say. “I’ve seen no falsities, or untruths in the rest of them.” I lean closer to my brother. “Some people leave a little kindness and open-mindedness to be desired.” That was understating the matter. Some of the advisors had been furious, but not at me, at their king for the subterfuge. And Yate had to work to hide his disgust the whole time. But I was Frost, someone they respected. And the Tatuma, who they owed a debt to. And then there was the fact that King Jovan recently beheaded one of their own and threatened them. I shouldn’t feel so calm about my unveiling, but I did. I couldn’t even be angry at Jovan for it. He knew his people, and had judged the time to be right.

Olandon squeezes my hand under the table and holds it. Just like he used to do when Mother or Cassius were humiliating me in front of the court.

“I worry for your life,” he says on a breath.

Tears prickle my eyes. I wish I could take away his worry somehow, but any promises I use to reassure him will be empty. Every time I unveil, my

life is at risk, but I can't stand the alternative. He's old enough to know the truth. In fact, I think he already knows what must happen. The truth is staring him in the face, but he's doing his best to avoid seeing it.

"Have you ever thought about the parallels between our worlds?" I ask quietly. He shakes his head, his head tilts to me in confusion. "I often think of mother's dining ring. The lesser court sits on the outside, while royalty sits at the inner table. It is the same on Glacium, you know, just on a larger scale. We sleep in the middle with the Outer Rings surrounding us, assuming the people there will act as a buffer between us and attack." There are other examples I can think of: the torture room in Mother's palace and the fighting pits in Glacium's Outer Rings.

"In reality, both king and Tatum are surrounded at all times. Our people *let* us sit in the middle, not the other way around." I fiddle with my knife. "The relationship between ruler and subjects is a balance of what the people need to know, and what they *don't* need to know. What will help them thrive, and what will make them crumble inwards. In my particular case, the balance is even more tenuous. I know that one day, the circle could look in and decide to crush me."

I squeeze his hand. "So, do I wait until I'm sitting on the throne to tell my people I'm mixed? They will feel tricked. Or, should I never breathe a word to anyone, hoping the secret won't get out? When my children are born with blue eyes, I veil them too. Or maybe I can prevent inflicting that sad existence on others by not having children in the first place?" My brother sits with his goblet frozen in the air, hanging on to my words.

"Or lastly, should I reveal my secret to my people before making any move for the throne? Then, if they put me in the middle of their circle, it will be because it has been their choice. I will be able to live; open, and unafraid—without a veil—happy."

"Without risk, I will not get to where I want to be," I say carefully. "Nothing I ever do will be risk-free. I've accepted that. And I have also accepted the possibility of my plan backfiring." I intertwine my fingers with his and sip at my goblet. "I know that by revealing my mixed blood now, I may never get a chance to rule. I'd rather suffer the disappointment early on."

"I never thought it would be this hard," he says in a rough voice. I don't know exactly what he's referring to. My rule? Or coming through the Oscala to find his sister has changed?

“Sometimes the hardest tasks yield the best results,” I hedge.

Screams start at the back of the hall. I tense, resisting the urge to rip off the veil. It’s the scene of some of my worst nightmares.

“What is it?” I ask Olandon tightly. Is the archer back? Which of the six will it be? This time I refuse to let the assassin get away. I hover, half-raised in my seat, prepared to launch myself down the food hall.

“It’s one of the Ire. They’re injured,” he says quickly.

“Description,” I order, heart sinking.

“Curly black hair, average Solati height, young male.”

Hamish!

“Where is he?” I stand in readiness.

Olandon rises with me. “Food benches,” he says. I’ve already started moving before he finishes.

Jovan booms for the assembly to move back from the injured man. Many of them have already seen Jimmy, but it doesn’t make the second sighting any less impossible for them to believe. With Solati armies and civil war, Jovan hasn’t had enough stability to break the news of the Ire folk. I fall to my knees beside the groaning man, quickly confirming it is Hamish.

“What happened?” I cry, trying to locate the source of his injury through my veil. He’s pale and his body spasms with the force of his shaking. I clamp down firmly on memories of Flurry in the Dome and a glass-eyed Kedrick.

“Get W-willow.” Hamish grips my forearm in a grip slippery from the blood covering it. “They’re coming.”

The assembly has heard it, and so have I.

Pandemonium erupts.

Sadra kneels beside me and starts examining Hamish as Jovan demands silence behind me.

After a brief assessment, Sadra nods behind her, and two watchmen pick up the groaning Ire man.

“Infirmary,” Jovan snaps. He talks quietly to Malir, who nods and moves swiftly to the archway. I hurry after the watchmen who are carrying my friend. Jovan falls in beside me, walking one stride to three of mine.

“What is his condition?” he barks at Sadra.

“Unstable, my King,” she stutters. “He appears to have been shot with an arrow. I’ve snapped off the end, but would like to assess him further before removing the tip.” She holds up the arrow end.

I grab the end off her and examine it. The wood is black.

“Kaur wood. A Solati arrow,” I say, handing it to Olandon on my other side. He surveys it with a grunt and passes the fletching to Roscoe. I glance over my shoulder and see the advisors are trailing us down the hall.

“He will need to be questioned before you care for him. Have you got something to wake him?” he asks Sadra. She nods quickly and runs to a wooden cabinet.

“It can’t wait?” I ask with a frown. I observe as the watchmen gingerly deposit a now unconscious Hamish on the bed.

“Olina, this must be done. I will be quick.” Jovan rests his hand on my shoulder as I force my feelings aside.

Sadra waves something under Hamish’s nose. I wrinkle my own nose from two meters away. Jovan leans in and holds the Ire man down as he jolts awake.

“Where is Willow?” Hamish demands, clutching his stomach.

I turn to Jovan. “Who’s in the room?” I ask.

“Get out!” he barks at two watchmen. He surveys the rest of the group. “All right,” he says. Everyone left in the room has seen my face before.

I turn back to Hamish and take off the veil. “I’m here, Hamish,” I say, perching on the bed on his other side. The sight is more horrific without the mask.

“That bad?” he says.

I smooth my features. “I’ve seen worse,” I say.

“Olina,” Jovan softly interrupts. I banish my shock, gripping my friend’s hand.

“What has happened?” I ask. “How were you hurt?”

He sets unfocused eyes on my face. “Jimmy went exploring,” he starts. My hand tightens and I loosen my grip as Hamish winces.

“He got caught by the Solati,” he whispers between coughs. Blood drains from my face.

“He’s dead?” I gasp.

He shakes his head, and his eyes flicker. Sadra waves more of the

strong-smelling concoction under his nose.

“That ... bloody stinks.” Hamish glares at Malir’s wife. “They’re holding him hostage. They said they would cut him into several pieces if the supports were not back in place in a day’s time,” he says, shifting uncomfortably as Sadra begins peeling material off the wound.

“That was a week ago,” he whispers.

Everyone in the room stops. The only sound comes from Sadra’s bustling movements.

“We were told any attempts to reach you would lead to Jimmy’s execution. You can imagine Adox...” He trails off.

I grip his shoulder as tears build in my eyes.

“I can,” I say. Adox would be absolutely distraught at the thought of one of his people coming to harm. This was exactly what he’d feared before I managed to convince him to an alliance with Jovan and myself.

“They’re nearly here,” he says. “They’ve picked up pace, traveling through the night as well. Adox thought ... a risk to reach you,” he squeezes his eyes together tightly at Sadra’s prodding. “To warn you,” he gasps.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I know what that might have cost the Ire.”

His eyes begin to close and I give Sadra a frantic look, clutching her wrist. She removes herself from my terrified grip.

“His pulse is still steady. It’s merely the blood loss and fatigue,” she says calmly. I’m not sure if she’s trying to placate me or if that’s the truth.

“I think that’s all we’re going to get,” the king says.

“Why was your face covered?”

I look back down and see Hamish staring at me with unfocused eyes. The blood is everywhere. How can someone survive such an injury? What if he dies never knowing the truth?

“Because I’m Tatum Olina of Osolis,” I say.

His eyes widen, searching my face for a lie. “Veni...”

“Forgive me?” I ask after a long silence.

“Always,” he says, shock sharpening his wits again. “I just can’t forgive the ... person who covered such a ... pretty face.”

A couple of tears track down my cheeks and I dash them away and he faints once more. “Please take care of him, Sadra,” I say.

She pats my cheek and shoos me away. I replace my veil, ignoring a penetrating look from Jovan.

I follow the council to the meeting room, Olandon entering with me.

“I’ve sent a message to the front line in the First Sector,” Jovan starts. “Our armies will need to mobilize as soon as possible,” he says. “It will take two days to shift the men, cavalry, and supplies that far. I’ve only left half of our force there.”

“A force will need to stay in the Outer Rings,” Roscoe says immediately.

“How many can we afford?” Jovan asks.

“A quarter,” Drummond responds. “Based on prior reports of the number of Solati approaching, combined with Malir’s reports from the last few days.”

“A quarter?” Jovan says softly. “I need those men.” He paces for a moment.

“All right,” he says, a frown between his brows. “It will take time for news to spread to the remaining rebels in the Third and Fifth Sectors. I give a fifth of the watch for this task. I want numbers focused in the Sixth through Second. If the battle does not require such numbers, I will send men back. The Solati’s group skill is unparalleled. From the Ire’s last report they are two hundred strong. We usually allow five men per Solati. I won’t go in with less than four.”

He turns to Malir. “Give the order; all able-bodied men must be ready to leave for the Great Stairway at first light. I want immediate deployment of the cavalry.”

Malir bows and rushes out of the room.

“Where was the warning from our bloody scouts?” Jovan roars. He turns to Terk. “I want the word to go out that all women and children of the assembly are to remain inside of the castle—effective in the next three hours.”

Jovan’s power emanates from his every motion. He is every inch the king as he barks orders to his subjects.

“What about guards for the women and children?” Jak asks.

“They will need to be taken from the number I’ve left you with,” the king says.

“I worry it’s not enough,” frets Drummond.

“It will have to do,” Jovan replies brusquely before turning to me. “Olina, what will we be facing?”

Olandon freezes beside me, and I also tense. I know what my brother is thinking. Should I, as the Tatum of the looming army, be helping my enemy? I'm at odds between loyalties to Osolis and doing what I know is right: foiling my mother's war. The silence thickens. I know many of the people he intends to kill; they are my people. But they brought this unnecessary war to Glacium's doorstep and there are people I care for here as well. I remind myself of my overall plan and the way forward is clear.

"They may undertake any number of strategies," I start. "However, we do have certain strategic battle plans. I imagine you are aware of these?"

"Unbelievable," Olandon says, rising.

I raise my voice. "Have you something to say, brother?" I ask. He's shaking with so much fury, I wonder if he'll be able to form the words.

"You are going to help them kill our people?" he says incredulously.

I don't have time to help him understand as I normally would. I let ice fill my veins and a stranger's voice, hard and unyielding, comes out of my mouth. "You would do well to stand down," I say.

He holds my gaze. I read the confusion and anger there. He dips his eyes and steps back to the right of my chair. "Tatuma," he says in an emotionless voice.

I turn back to the king. "They will do anything to make your numbers useless. The entirety of their force will focus in one area, whatever zone they deign the weakest. They'll aim to destroy your morale, and to destroy you, as the army's figurehead." I doubt anything I've said has surprised Jovan. These were normal war tactics. Likely, he's imagining how he'll counter this by encircling Mother's army, to cut them off from retreat. The thought of this slaughter makes me vaguely sick. I curl my trembling hands into tight fists.

"Thank you," Jovan says softly. He's belatedly realized what he's asked of me.

I hold up a hand, interrupting him mid-sentence. "I will help you, King Jovan, but I ask you one thing in return."

He doesn't speak. We're not friends in this moment. We are rulers on opposite sides of a war.

"I know there will be casualties, but when your soldiers have the opportunity to take hostages rather than kill, I ask you to show mercy. It is my mother's greed that forces these women and men to your doorstep. They only follow orders." I hear a couple of the advisors mutter their dissent. "I

also ask that any hostages taken are not mistreated.” I don’t know what happens during questioning, but I can guess.

“Agreed,” Jovan says.

I take a deep breath and close my heart against my brother’s disappointment. “Then there’s more you should know.”

Chapter Eighteen

I march with the delegates near the front of the procession, stomping through the shallow snow. My steps are fueled by memories of the unity I saw in the castle when Jovan addressed his assembly. The people in that room yesterday would die for their king—and gladly. The thought that the Bruma will have to do that makes me vaguely sick. “Men” as young as fifteen, walk with us—an unsettling fact. None of the Bruma seemed surprised about children going to battle. Perhaps their reaction was lost in the hour of chaos which erupted after hearing the Tatum’s army was on their doorstep. It wasn’t the only announcement Jovan made. I’m not sure telling his people about the Ire amid the chaos he’d already unleashed was wise. But I suppose if the Ire showed up at the battle, the momentary mayhem it caused for the assembly back at the castle would escalate to something a lot more like anarchy.

Shard strides beside me, having arrived to meet with the king this morning. He’d met with the bedlam of an army trying to ready itself. Jovan allowed all of two minutes to tell the ex-barracks member of his new position as an advisor and the head of my personal guard for the duration of the battle. Ice and Blizzard jumped on board immediately, not giving Shard any say in the matter. They would keep him humble. The remainder of my guard was made up of Sanjay, Ashawn, and Olandon. I know Olandon is furious not to be named in Shard’s place. To say I am unhappy with having a guard at all is an understatement. It is just one of several disagreements I’ve had with the king of Glacium since leaving. I aim a dirty look at Jovan’s back. The same sharp senses which make him a lethal fighter pick up my attention. He turns from where he gathers a report from Malir and Rhone. He can’t see my glare behind the veil, but I keep it up until he turns back to his men.

“I think you’re lucky to be allowed out of the castle,” Shard says quietly.

I laugh darkly. “Just try to leave me behind,” I say.

He holds up his hands. “Wouldn’t dare. But there were a few minutes where I wondered if he’d lock you in your room.”

Things have been awkward with my barracks friend since he revealed I was his father’s murderer. And why wouldn’t they be? I didn’t even blink

before killing those men. There wasn't one hesitation as I opened their throats with stolen daggers. I didn't stop to think about their families.

"Shard ... I killed your father," I start. How could he have gone this whole time without telling me? Did he hate me?

He grins at me. "Wondered how long it would take you to bring that up," he replies. His teasing tone takes me aback.

"You're not—what do you mean?" I ask.

He shrugs. "You did something I should've done years ago. My father did things so heinous I'm still sick when I remember them."

We fall silent. I know the others are listening in as well. His father was a whorehound. I know women were mistreated in front of Shard, but who knows what awful things were done to my friend?

I sigh heavily. "You're sure?" I ask. "I'm not going to wake up at night and find you standing over me with one of your cute little daggers?"

He laughs. "I have no desire to die," he says, then adds, "And they're not cute, they're manly."

Fixing our relationship is a small win considering what we're marching into, but it does make me feel better. I turn my thoughts back to what Jovan said to make me so angry. "Females stay at home," I scoff. Olandon laughs softly beside me. He seems to have broken the silent treatment today, though I'm left in no doubt as to his true sentiments. It hurt to know my brother viewed me as a traitor. But I'd had to do what I felt was right. I don't think my feelings got in the way of that...

"I thought you would end him right there," Olandon says. I furrow my eyebrows at the glee I hear.

"I don't think it would have come to that." Although I secretly wonder if it would have. "I don't know what got into him," I say with confusion.

"It's more what he wants to get into," says Sanjay cryptically. Blizzard and Ice share a grin.

"In those kinds of situations, our actions often don't make much sense," Sanjay continues. Ashawn sniggers and Olandon gives him a quizzical look. I puzzle over it as Shard tugs on my arm to guide me around a large tree.

I focus on weaving through the brown trees in the very slow, grating pace of Jovan's army. The three rings of Glacium are long behind us, and

we've entered the wilderness directly beyond the Outer Rings. We'd quickly caught up with the cavalry, though they left last night. The dawdling pace we've slowed to, to match the cavalry's progress, puts me on edge. If we didn't have to move all the bulky weaponry Glacium used, we could have reached the First Sector in a single day. As it currently was, it would take over two days. Ranks of men drag the equipment over roots, snow, and uneven ground now that we're in the trees, the smoother ring roads no longer present to aid their transport. The uneven step of several hundred men rumbles behind me. Another five hundred wait at the base of the Oscala. Glacium's army will greatly outnumber my mother's. It has always been the way of it. Solati skill pitted against Glacium's population.

"Why don't you keep the cavalry close to the First Sector?" I ask, voicing my irritation. I look back over my shoulder to see one of the wagons has just bogged. Occasionally, it still astounds me the ground here can get wet enough to sink into.

"Because then the Solati have access to it." A deep voice speaks in front of me. I bounce off the solid chest of the king. I moving around him, standing on his foot on purpose.

"Are you glaring at me under there?" he asks. I deign this question unworthy of an answer.

"You'd do better with an apology," Ashawn stage-whispers to his brother. I hear the thud of fist hitting flesh behind me.

"I won't hold my breath for one," I mutter.

"Leave us," Jovan commands. Blizzard elbows Ice to cut off his snigger. I continue forward, trying to escape the king. It would be easier if my legs were longer. Just once I'd like to outwalk him!

"Olina, I just want to protect you. Why can't you see that?" he says calmly. I stop suddenly, rubbing my temples.

"What if I asked you to stay at the castle," I say.

His derisive laugh is short, confused. He rests his fists over his sword belt as he answers. "Why, that would be ludicrous."

"Exactly." I feel the rough bark under my fingertips as I skirt around a tree.

"You think they're the same thing? Me asking you, and you asking me?" he asks slowly.

"I can protect myself," I say. He stops and drags me behind a tree.

Uniformed Bruma march past us on either side. He won't dare touch me. Not with so many curious eyes.

"That's why you're angry?" he asks blankly.

"Of course," I say, exasperated. Has he not been listening at all?

He tilts my chin up. "Since the Dome there's never been a doubt in my mind as to your fighting ability," he says. His eyes darken. "I believe you capable of protecting yourself. I just don't want you to be put in the situation where you need to do so." He releases my chin.

Finally, progress. "I see. I'm glad we understand each other," I say.

He nods. "So am I. You can return to the castle with the next messenger and your guard," he says.

"What!" I blurt.

He stops in his tracks. I note—with rage—he has the audacity to appear puzzled.

"Let me make it clear to *you*, King Jovan," I snap. "I will not be returning to the castle until the Solati are turned around."

He looms down at me, his face in front of mine. "Then you will be locked away at the start of battle!" he says, eyes blazing.

I lock wills with him, angry beyond words. "Just try it," I finally get out.

"It will be my fucking pleasure."

I turn and stride away. My guard close ranks on me as I move away from Jovan.

"Pig-headed bloody Bruma," I mutter under my breath.

Ice scoffs. "You can do better than that, girly," he says. "What about piece of shit-faced wank—" he quiets as King Jovan stalks past the group.

"You were saying?" Shard asks Ice politely.

A reluctant smile crosses my face as the others laugh.

* * *

We don't stop until the sky begins to dim and the snow is nearly gone. Glacium receives its light from the glow of the fourth's fire on Osolis. Each night as the smoke rolls out from the Fourth Rotation of my world, Glacium also darkens. It takes the Kaur trees on Osolis most of the night to suck the smoke back and lighten the skies once more. One of the numerous wars

between our worlds occurred when my ancestors cut down too many Kaur trees and cast Glacium and Osolis into darkness for three revolutions.

I stand next to my brother and watch with interest as triangle shelters are erected around us. They are a rudimentary form of the shelters seen in the Ire.

“What are they doing?” Olandon asks.

“Putting up tents,” calls Sanjay from where he hammers a bit of wood into the ground.

“Tents,” Olandon says with interest. I narrow my eyes, waiting for Sanjay’s story. I haven’t forgotten his lie about the piggies.

“You sleep in them,” he says simply. He demonstrates this to my brother, crawling into the erected structure. I see several men doing the same. He’s telling the truth; I relax.

“Huh,” grunts Olandon. He moves forward to get a closer look.

“You’ve just got to make sure you peg them down right,” Sanjay continues, looking around with anxious, jerky movements. “The mist around here has a strong, sage-like smell to it. It sends you into a deep sleep if it gets into your tent. If you inhale too much, it can kill you.”

“Why would Jovan come through here?” I ask, wide-eyed.

Sanjay gives me a grave look over his shoulder. “He’ll have his reasons, Tatuma. In the meantime let’s hope there’s no fog tonight.”

“That’s worrisome to the extreme,” Olandon says quietly as Sanjay moves away.

I nod, arms folded. The sage mist must act in a similar way to smoke. My attention is distracted by Ice, who appears to be having a fit.

“Are you all right?” I ask. He wipes at his eyes furiously. More tears appear as quickly as he can wipe them.

“Don’t tolerate sage well,” he chokes.

“Quickly then, we’ll need to put up your tent.” I hurry forward and take a peg to hammer into the ground.

* * *

I stare at the ceiling of my tent, tense for the first sight of mist. Can you even see it? I’ve taken off my veil just in case.

I toss a final time and decide to just get up and check. Deliberating

with my veil in hand, I decide to leave it on. I'll need to hold it up to navigate the ropes and pegs around the campsite. But there are no other women here. It's too risky to leave it behind. I hold my breath as I exit, using one hand to lift my veil and the other to feel my way.

I decide to walk to the top of a mound to check for fog in the distance.

"Where are you going?" comes Jovan's voice. I whirl, dropping my veil guiltily.

"I was checking for mist," I say. "Is that why you're out here?" I ask.

"What?"

"The sage fog," I say slowly. Has some of it gotten to the king? Jovan is silent for a long time. I take a peek under the material and stare in confusion as I see he's shaking with laughter. I leave the veil pushed up over my head.

"You've been talking to Sanjay," he says once he calms himself.

It takes me a few seconds before my jaw drops open in outrage. "This isn't a sage-fog area?" I ask, mortification filling me. The king chuckles hard as he shuts my mouth.

"No, this is not a sage-fog area. In fact, there is no such thing as sage-fog. It's a horror story we tell our children."

"But Ice and Blizzard knew about it too!" I object.

"You were caught in a lie, my—" he pulls back, his hand dropping to his side.

"Bloody Sanjay," I grumble. "I bet Landon is wide awake too."

"He'll live." He presses a tender kiss to my lips and I move into his embrace, safe in the knowledge he wouldn't do this if someone could see.

"You're not really going to lock me up, are you?" I nestle into his warmth against the bitter frost.

"I wish I could," he says in a low voice. "It would take a great weight off my shoulders to know you're safe. That you haven't been hurt ... or taken," he says after a pause. He picks up a tendril of my loosened hair and breathes it in. "But you'd damn well escape any place I tried to put you. And I would never do anything to make you feel like you did when your mother confined you," he says.

Finally, he sees to the core of the matter. I sniff. "I'm not going to thank you for seeing reason." He bites my bottom lip gently. I jolt and jerk my head back at the slight pain. He follows me forward and kisses the same

spot.

“Jovan?” I ask one instant before his mouth is crushing my own. It’s instant this time. The rush of heady pleasure. What is he unlocking inside of me? I press myself against him, trying to stay silent. The kiss is just what I needed. Brutal and desperate; life-affirming.

We part, gasping; my hands remain twisted in his tunic.

He looks down at me with an unfathomable expression. I push my veil up from where it’s dropping across one eye.

“That was...” I say, searching for the right word.

He brushes his lips against mine once more before resting his chin on the top of my head.

“Yes,” he says. “It was.”

* * *

The terrain becomes easier to navigate as the mountains and small hills ebb nearing the outer edge of Glacium’s First Sector. I watch the Oscala, like the men surrounding me. Waiting for a glimpse of the Tatum’s army and searching for the reason behind my disquiet.

“No sign of them, my King,” Malir reports.

Jovan nods shortly. “We must be ahead of the Solati.” His comment only increases my unease. How else should I feel going into battle? I shake it off and slow my march as we look over the campground of the five hundred Bruma already here. Their tents are placed in neat rows toward the base of the hill, leaving a relatively flat plane before the drop-off into the Great Stairway. The battlefield.

“I can always go and find their position,” I offer. I jostle the Soar slung across my back.

“Absolutely not,” Jovan says immediately. I grind my teeth.

“I never thought I’d be part of a battle like this,” says Shard. “It goes against nature, don’t you think? For a person to waste so many lives over greed.”

And that’s all my mother’s war was about. All those times Mother had me beaten has provided me with a good insight to her ambitions and character. She wanted Glacium’s resources. She wanted their iron, and she wanted their stone. And now I’d started to wonder if she also wanted control

of the huge Bruma population—her own private workforce. Slaves. She'd probably kill most of them, but the ones she left alive would be forced into grueling hard labor and torture for the rest of their lives, just as she was doing to her own people already. Maybe this is the odd feeling I can't shake. Maybe it doesn't sit right that the Tatum could be so depraved. I wouldn't have thought I could be surprised by this anymore.

"It's her mother," I hear Blizzard whisper on Shard's other side.

"Yeah, but she doesn't like her, idiot," Ice whispers back.

"I don't think everyone here knows that," muses Shard. I glance at him.

"If we lose you in the battle, watch your back," he warns. "Emotions are high, and while the Bruma you've lived with know you, those who come from elsewhere only have our word for it." He faces forward. "In the middle of battle they may start looking for someone to blame."

I glance over my shoulder at the hurried bustle behind me. Suddenly I feel as though a hundred unfriendly eyes are resting on me. That explains my discomfort.

"Understood," I say shortly.

* * *

I wake, refreshed after a night unworried about the adverse effect of sage-fog inhalation. A quiet word to my brother after breakfast the previous day relieved him of concern too. We would keep up the façade, though. Our revenge on Sanjay will be exacted at a moment of our choosing.

I wind through the camp flanked by my men, ignoring the halt in conversation as men see me. My tent is not far away from Jovan's. The guards recognize me and stand aside as I duck into the king's—much larger—tent.

The advisors are already inside bent over tables and maps.

"Good sleep, Tatuma?" the king looks up briefly.

"Much better," I say cryptically. I peer through the material and catch his tense smile before his head disappears over his work again.

I try to stay out of the way of the council, available if they need me. But soon it's not enough. I pace the tent. The feeling of yesterday is worse. Is this just battle nerves? Or do I just feel the animosity from others because

I'm their enemy? I frown as I change direction again.

No. Something else is wrong.

Drummond's whispered comment catches my attention. "My King, the Solati army should have been in sight by now, if the Ire boy was correct."

"Well, we're lucky they're not. The man Malir left in charge out here said he didn't receive the missive sent by King Jovan three days ago. The men here weren't even alert to the danger. They would have been overrun," Terk says.

His words are a trigger. I'm on the verge of discovery. "Why didn't he receive it?" I ask slowly. I feel like something important is right in front of me, but it's slippery and impossible to catch.

Terk shrugs. "They deserted, maybe?"

I don't feel like that's the answer. "But why aren't the Solati here?" I muse. The odd feeling I've had all day is intensifying. I stride over to the map and study it, trying to get close to see the detail. Damn veil.

"Landon, who is in the tent?" I ask.

"It is clear, Tatuma," he answers after a short pause.

I remove the veil, tucking it into my trousers, and survey the board. I repeat my question aloud. "Why aren't they here yet?"

A long narrow line on the map catches my attention.

"What's this?" I ask.

Drummond peers over my shoulder. "Trina's Valley."

"Not big enough to hide an army," the king says, moving to my side. "It's shallow and narrow. Could have been a stream at one point." Jovan surveys my face. "What's worrying you?"

I frown and trace the line up and down, absently. The messenger never arrived. He could've deserted, as Terk believed, or they could have injured themselves...

"How many messengers were sent?" I ask.

"Three," Jovan replies, rounding the table.

I finally get a weak hold on the sense of wrongness I feel. "Jovan, what if the messengers didn't desert?"

"Then they were injured," he says. He immediately shakes his head. "But the second and third would've continued on."

"So what if they were stopped from reaching the First Sector..." I voice the silent thought we're both having.

“But who would do that?” a voice asked.

I stare up at the king. “By Hamish’s calculations we should have arrived as the Solati army arrived, maybe a little after. So either the Solati army are somehow delayed and will arrive in the next few days, or...” I trail off.

Jovan’s face is grim as he looks down at the scratched line of Trina’s Valley visible on the map. “Or they’re already here.”

Chapter Nineteen

“But the party would need to be so small to travel through Trina’s Valley unnoticed, it would hardly be worth their while.” King Jovan prowls through the tent. “You can’t beat an army with one tiny band of men.”

I barely hear the words. My mind is working desperately.

“We would know if the army were already here,” says Roscoe. “My King, we would *see* them.”

“Not if the army is hanging back on the Oscala,” I interrupt. “Stalling and distracting us as the smaller force moves around Glacium. But this wouldn’t make sense. The clear advantage to Mother’s army was speed. Striking at your forces while the remainder of your army was still halfway here.”

“Remember who leads them,” Olandon murmurs.

He’s right. Uncle Cassius is the head of the Tatum’s army and can barely swing a sword. His battle strategy is appalling, if Olandon and Aquin are to be believed. And he’s too conceited to listen to anyone else. “What is Cassius up to?”

“I don’t see why they would send a squadron through. What purpose could it serve?” Malir interrupts.

I resume my pacing. Maybe I’m tackling this the wrong way. I turn my thoughts to what I know of Cassius. Evil, poor fighter, Mother’s lackey. I know very little actually—a consequence of avoiding him my entire life.

Olandon speaks, “He was always obsessed with one of our relations. The famous Tatum. The one that killed all those Bruma.” He swallows at a glower from Jovan.

“Tatum Ronsin?” I ask, heart racing. “Or Tatum Frinceska?”

“Tatum Rosin. It was definitely a male he talked about. Cassius always went on and on about him at the few trainings he turned up to. He’ll be using that Rosin’s tactics. He doesn’t know anything else, and he won’t listen to anyone who knows better. Never does. That’s why we haven’t won already.” He crosses his arms with a sniff.

“Bruma think of each meeting as a war, while we think of it as a battle,” I recite from my history books. “Each battle is merely a chip in the enemy’s armor. With enough weaknesses, the protection is destroyed and we

conquer.”

“What is that?” Jovan asks.

“A quote from the Tatum Ronsin, our great-great-grandfather. He was remembered for the most successful term of warfare against Glacium. Cassius is headstrong and inexperienced. Olandon’s right, he’ll stick to what he knows, too foolish and conceited to listen to others. And all he knows are Ronsin’s tactics,” I say in a daze. “I just don’t know which of Ronsin’s strategies he’ll use.”

Olandon stands next to me. “Ronsin’s battles number in the hundreds. He led for maybe fifteen revolutions.”

“Seventeen,” I say, with a frustrated wave. “What do we know? The army may be here, but hanging back. Three messengers have gone missing. And there is a valley that could conceal a small, handpicked force which would easily be able to evade the notice of the king’s army.” I stare at the map, tracing a finger down the valley. I walk alongside the table, following the trench down toward the middle of Glacium. My eyes continue the pathway in a straight trajectory after the valley smooths out into the normal uneven terrain of this world. My mouth dries. Dread pits in my stomach until nausea threatens to overwhelm me. I cover my mouth as Jovan grips my elbow.

“Tatum Ronsin wasn’t only remembered for his genius. He was also noted as one of the most ruthless leaders of our time.” I swallow and meet Jovan’s frantic gaze. “I shouldn’t be surprised such a plan would appeal to Cassius,” I whisper.

“What is it?” he demands.

“There was one particular battle,” I close my eyes and recite. “Twenty-four revolutions into the Great War. A small party of Ronsin’s finest warriors crept past Glacium’s army, and…”

“And slaughtered the women and children while the men battled,” Olandon finishes.

Jovan’s mouth is set in a grim line. We stay fixed on each other for a long moment. “Are you certain?” he asks.

I look helplessly up at him.

“How many would they have sent?” Jovan strides around the table, studying the map from different angles.

“Last time it was the Elite. The Tatum’s personal guard.” I look to my

brother.

“Twelve is traditional,” Olandon says.

“Osolis’ finest and most lethal warriors. They are not to be underestimated,” I repeat. I had firsthand knowledge of how skilled they were.

“Fuck.” Jovan turns away. He runs a hand through his hair.

“You need to turn some men around. Now,” I say.

“Hold on,” Drummond interrupts. “How do we even know the Tatum is right? We can’t turn men around. We need every single watchman here!”

Roscoe looks up from a stack of papers. “The same Sector is in position as it was in the 24th revolution of the Great War,” he says.

Each of us knows what that means.

“It’s too convenient.” Jovan voices our thoughts.

“Even if I’m wrong, the risk isn’t worth it. My uncle is depraved, a horrible monster. He’ll enjoy doing this. It will be his glory,” I say softly.

Shard steps up. “Time is our main disadvantage. The party we send must be small and quick. There’s no point turning half the army around. We’ll never get there in time.”

“We have knowledge of the terrain,” Jovan says, moving to the map. “That should help the force we send to catch them.”

“How many Bruma men hold the castle?” Olandon asks.

Jovan barks an order, and Malir arrives mere moments later. The king repeats Olandon’s question.

“Fifty-six, my King,” he answers.

“Skill level?” I interrupt.

“Low to moderate,” he decides.

“Not enough.” Olandon shakes his head.

“What are you thinking, brother?” I ask.

“How many of the Elite could you handle,” he asks. I quickly deliberate.

“Two if they didn’t attack at once. Then fatigue would make me easy pickings for a third.” I hear exclamations of surprise at my admission. These men know what Frost can do, but I don’t think they realize how good the Elite are. They train for hours every day. In many cases it’s not so much their skill as their endurance that wins them the fight.

“For me too,” Olandon says. “And these men,” he asks, gesturing at the barracks. I chew my lip.

“Five between them,” I say uncertainly.

“Eight in total,” Olandon mutters, turning to Ashawn. “Ashawn is very good. I believe he could take down an Elite.”

“Ashawn needs to be here in case Jovan falls,” I say, bile rising at the thought. “Rhone and Malir could match their skill, but then who would command the army?” I ask Jovan.

The king looks at the battle plan in front of him. “Their inferiors can take over. Not ideal, but it can be done.”

Olandon is still frowning. “Too even for my liking,” he mutters.

“Don’t forget the fifty-six men,” I remind him.

“They’ll be dead by the time we get there,” he says. “They’ll give us time, but won’t stop the Elite.”

“Of course,” I say impatiently. Someone exclaims behind me. “But killing fifty-six men still requires them to use energy. They’ll be tired.”

“You won’t be going, Olina,” Jovan says. “There are other men I can send.”

“My sister is their Tatuma,” Olandon says angrily. “Her presence and my support could cause the Elite to step down with a simple order.”

I doubt it, but I agree with him for show.

“I’ve been standing here listening to how she might take two of them. *If they don’t come at her at once!*” he roars into my brother’s face. He rounds on me. “You’re not fucking going!”

I feel my cheeks flush as I shout back. “Who else can go if not me?” I yank him down to my level. I’m so furious I don’t care I’m showing several degrees less respect for the leader of Glacium.

“If you don’t commit to this plan, *one hundred percent*, then everyone you see for fucking breakfast each morning is going to die,” I say tightly.

“This is bigger than you or I.”

Jovan breathes heavily and seems to recall where he is. He extracts himself from my clutches and stalks the tent in angry circles. He rounds on my brother.

“How many can the eight of you take?” he demands. Olandon straightens.

“I believe we have a solid chance at defeating the Elite. If Olina and I

fight together, we should be able to bring down near half of them.”

“I hadn’t taken that into account,” I grumble. I turn to where Shard, Ice, Blizzard, Malir, and Ashawn stand, trying to swallow my rage.

“Are you willing to do this?” I ask curtly. They look at me as though I’m insane for asking. I take their expressions as a yes.

“What if the numbers are higher than anticipated?” Drummond asks. I throw my hands in the air as the men discuss this new point of view.

“We’re wasting time,” I say.

“We are considering the consequences,” Jovan replies. “Because I know you bloody won’t.”

I clench my jaw to shutter my infuriated response as the men talk. I take up Jovan’s pacing of the tent, exchanging wordless glances with my brother. Halfway through their discussion I remember my Soar. My suggestion is quickly shot down. I’d just ruin our surprise advantage. I want to tell them surprise is useless if we don’t get there in time, but I hold myself back. Just.

It takes a while for me to realize the tent has fallen silent. Everyone is standing. They may as well be sitting. Jovan’s massive frame towers over them.

He watches me. I glare back at him.

“This really seems like the only way to cover both outcomes.” Yate swallows audibly as the king of Glacium looks at him.

The menace is vibrating off Jovan in droves. I hold his gaze. This isn’t just about me going, I realize. His past is staring him in the face. To let me go he has to accept I might end up like Kedrick, his mother, or his father. On the other hand, he knows I’m skilled enough to go, and have knowledge of the Elite. He knows that he needs to save and protect the women and children left behind. But there’s only so much a person should have to bear. And Jovan has already borne more than his fair share of grief. I won’t allow him to shoulder the guilt of deciding to send me, should I not return. Despite Olandon’s estimation, I know what the chances of our band of fighters winning against the Elite are. My true purpose in going is to give the women and children in the castle enough time to escape. I move to him, dimly aware there are others in the room. They’re part of the background, blurred together and insignificant.

“This is my choice.” I place a palm on his arm and hold his dangerous

gaze. Dangerous for everyone but me. He would never hurt me. It seems I'm going to be the one doing that. "We can't control each other's fate, Jovan. It's useless to try. And of all fates to control, I can't imagine any harder than yours and mine. You know we need to save those still at the castle." I give him a wry smile. The defeat in his eyes is terrible. An expression I didn't think possible for Jovan. I can't bear to see such sadness on an unbreakable man's face.

"I will come back," I whisper for him alone. Then his face is in front of me.

"My King," a voice says. I frown through a haze. I can't quite seem to move.

"My King," the voice repeats. It's Rhone. Rhone is speaking. I blink into Jovan's blue eyes, which seem to be going through exactly the same murky thought patterns as I am.

"What," Jovan says softly, not moving an inch. His warm breath tickles my skin.

"The Solati are here," Rhone says.

Everyone is still. Not a sound is made. I search Jovan's eyes.

"Rhone," the king says softly. "You'll be escorting the Tatuma back to the castle. Malir, bring Rhone up to speed." My shoulders sag as the tension leaves them.

It was the wrong time to relax.

I'm dragged into his embrace and his lips crush down on my own, hard enough to bruise. It isn't enough for me. I reach up and grip his arms to balance and I strain up on my toes. He makes a low sound in his chest and wraps an arm around my waist to press me firmly against him. Will this be the last time I touch him? He lets me go, but not before bringing his lips against my ear, his light beard scraping my skin.

"You will come back," he commands.

"Yes." I studiously avoid my brother's eyes as I wrench away from the king.

"Well fuck," Drummond says.

"How's that gonna work?" Ice says in a loud whisper. "He's so big, and the girly's so small." A loud slap and sniggers follow.

I wonder if I can avoid the gaze of everyone in the room. Is it possible the advisors are more shocked by our kiss than the news that the Solati army

has been sighted?

“Here,” Jovan says. He moves into the back corner and retrieves two short swords. I take them gently, a lump in my throat.

“T-thank you,” I say lamely. This is one time I’m not going to try to resist the urge to run. I make to rush out of the tent. An arm rips me back.

“Your veil,” Olandon says. I look up at him and flinch at the judgment I see there. Now I’m a traitor and a whore. I hurriedly pull the material from my tunic and jam it, and the band, over my head before making my escape, leaving Jovan to the mercy of his blustering council.

The battlefield is in an uproar. The stench of fear is thick.

“What’s happening?” I ask in a calm voice. Shard answers.

“There’s maybe ... two hundred of them standing on the Great Stairway. They’re not moving, just watching. Like...” he trails off.

“Like they’re waiting for something?” I ask. The Solati army is giving the Elite time to slaughter all the people I’ve come to know over the last three sectors. Cassius is trying to distract the king of Glacium from the real game.

“So few?” someone remarks behind me. “They’ve got no chance.”

The person shows their inexperience with the comment. It will be a close battle.

“Maybe the others are hiding, or still to come,” another answers.

“Maybe they couldn’t feed everyone with the delay.”

Somewhere up there, Cassius stands sneering down at us. I hope he can see me. I hope he can *feel* how much I want to stay and disembowel him, slowly, bit by bit. But, to his immense luck, our meeting is to be delayed once more. “We need to go now,” I say over the clamor. I can’t speak to Jovan again, or I fear my resolve will break.

The seven chosen men crowd around me as I make for the edge of the campsite. I know Shard will have his eyes sharpened for signs of attack against me. I reach the tree line and remove my veil, taking a few precious moments to squint back at the battlefield. I gasp at the sight and take an involuntary step back. Being told is one thing. Seeing for myself is another.

My people are there. My mother’s army! They stand tall and straight, and in perfect formation, making the neat rows of tents between us look like a messy heap. The army is a formidable and impenetrable force.

Any sane ruler would be proud.

Why then, are all of my thoughts for the Glacium king and of the

goodbye I never gave him?

Chapter Twenty

We take an entirely different path back to the castle. Rhone leads the group, setting a punishing pace. Unlike the sluggish walk here with the cavalry, the eight of us race through Glacium's outmost wilderness, only stopping by the occasional stream for a drink of brain-freezing water.

My fury at Cassius's plan fuels my speed well beyond what I would usually be capable of. Why hadn't we discovered this sooner?

Hours pass, and we take turns signaling to slow the pace to a walk at intervals to catch our breath. I get used to the swing of the two short swords strapped at my hips. I realize it won't matter if the Elite are tired from killing the castle watch; we'll be just as tired from running all the way there. Sanjay and Blizzard hand food back down our single-file line in the moments we slow our pace. We eat a few bites, often, consuming for endurance.

Malir holds up an arm and we slow to a complete stop. I have no idea where we are, but I wholeheartedly trust Rhone to get us where we need to be as quickly as possible.

"We must rest." He glances at me.

I swallow back my initial refusal and survey the group. Blizzard and Sanjay look ready to drop. A chorus of complaints arise from the others, but I move forward. "Malir is right. We'll be of no use if we're exhausted when we arrive." I turn to Rhone. "Where are we?"

"On the edge of the First Sector," he responds instantly. We're so close to the Sixth! I suppress my groan at the delay with difficulty.

"We'll rest for an hour and then continue on," I order.

"Get as much rest as you can," Malir says. "We'll need it. I've seen those Elite fight. We need our wits about us. I'll keep watch with Rhone."

I obey him, selecting a tree to lean against. I focus on the rough, cold bark behind me until I'm lulled into an uneasy stupor.

I glance down at the little boy in front of me. It's Cameron, Tomi the delegate's young son. I smile, wondering what innocently rude question he will ask today. He doesn't smile back. I frown. His eyes are wide, terrified. I realize his mouth is open in a soundless scream. I try to get to him, but my feet are stuck. I look down at them and find I'm shackled to the ground! I meet the young boy's eyes as a red line appears on his throat. Icy horror

grips me as blood pours from the slit in his neck.

It's my turn to scream as Hare, the member of the Elite who broke my leg all those revolutions ago, steps out from behind Cam. The boy hits the ground, dead and glassy-eyed.

I start from my nightmare, gripping my neck where it must have fallen into a bad position.

“Tatuma.” A hand shakes me.

“What?” I croak into Sanjay’s face.

“Time to go.”

I look around at the tired faces, my terrible dream still haunting me. Doubt creeps under my skin. This band of weary fighters is planning to take down the best fighters of Osolis?

Shard crouches beside me. “Don’t let them catch that look on your face. They’ll get better once we get running again. You know you feel worse when you only get a couple of hours here and there.”

I smooth my expression and stand, wincing at the pain in my muscles. “Of course,” I say in a tight voice.

This time Ice sets the pace, starting slowly. My feet thud loudly on the ground behind him, but as the sky begins to lighten, my running steps skim over the cold, hard ground, and my heart begins to beat wildly in my chest. Soon, I recognize the main laneway between the First and Sixth sector and come up to run alongside Ice. The people of the Outer Rings scurry out of our way, identifying the seriousness on our faces. They must wonder why Frost is racing through the rings with a mixture of the barracks, the king’s men, and a Solati. I pick up my pace as we dash through the less-populated Middle Ring. Have the Elite already passed through here? Did they sneak through in the night? How did they do it? Did they steal clothing and impersonate the Bruma?

I lead the others, only leaving the main lane to dart through the occasional shortcut I’ve come to know in my time here. I grit my teeth and push my legs harder, all feeling of fatigue gone. I’m driven by pure determination.

I will get there in time.

I glance behind and see Shard and Olandon on either side of me, with the others a hundred paces back or more. I stop at the edge of the assembly lodgings to wait for them, striding in a jerky line.

Malir grabs my arm when I move to continue. “Plan first,” he gasps. I narrow my eyes at him. I wonder if Jovan told Malir planning wasn’t my style. Maybe it’s common knowledge I’m more of a see-what-happens kind of person.

“We need to get into the castle first,” Shard says. Well, obviously. I barely refrain from rolling my eyes.

“I doubt they’ll leave a guard with their limited numbers,” Olandon offers. “They will be searching and containing.”

“We need more information,” Shard says.

“Get in, gather information,” I snap. “Got it.” I turn on my heel and take off, not waiting to see if the others are behind me.

My feet skim over the cobbled path toward the castle. What if I’m wrong? What if I’ve left Jovan to fight my mother’s army alone? Arrows will rain down on the Bruma first, then the two armies will clash together and the bloodshed will truly begin. How many hundreds will die? What if I’ve misjudged Uncle Cassius’s strategy? My heart twists in my chest with all my misgivings. My knees buckle. Will I be able to bear life if Jovan dies?

I dimly take in the passing of Sanjay and Fiona’s house. Fiona won’t be there. All of the defenseless assembly members are in the castle. I groan out loud as I recall my friend is pregnant. The sound draws a concerned look from Blizzard to my left. Poor Sanjay must be going out of his mind.

My eyes take in everything as we approach the portcullis. Nothing seems unusual, barring the fact the gate is opened, when it should be closed. Where are all the bodies?

“Brother,” I ask, trusting in his eyesight, even though my veil is off.

“The way is clear,” he answers, not even slightly out of breath. I push forward, keeping the pace steady, only slowing as I climb the giant stairs to the entranceway.

One of the heavy doors stands ajar.

“What about the kennels?” Blizzard whispers, suggesting the alternative route. Malir gestures to Ice and Rhone, who slip away to check this path.

They crouch next to me a couple of minutes later. Kaura and Leo trot behind them.

Kaura leaves Rhone and sits down beside me. I pet her absently with an impatient stare at the two men.

“The kennel door is open, but the doors up to the second floor and into the main hall are stuck. They must’ve put something on the other side of it,” Rhone reports curtly, looking down at Leo.

I place my back to the stone of the castle and lean forward to peer through the entrance. I signal to Ice, who darts halfway down the hall. The others quickly follow suit, with Malir taking the back.

The castle is eerily quiet.

“Something’s wrong,” Sanjay says, echoing my thoughts.

No children squeal; no women laugh. There are no clangs, yells, or shattering of broken plates and goblets. There’s none of the noise I’ve grown accustomed to over the last half-revolution.

“Food hall?” I ask Olandon.

He mulls it over. “Either there, or the training yard.”

“Only one entrance in the food hall,” I whisper. “Easier to secure and defend than the yard.” There is a meeting room which extends off near the throne table, but it doesn’t link to the rest of the castle. Not that I’m aware of, anyway.

We move toward the heart of the castle in increments, every man in the group tense and ready to do battle. I wince at the click of Kaura’s nails on the stone. Sanjay’s heavy footfall sounds like toppling bricks. But I forgive his distraction, seeing the tightness around his eyes.

The archway looms into view. Unguarded. Five watchmen lay unmoving, their postures unnatural and bent. The gaping wounds confirm their death. Malir checks them quickly for any signs of life. The commander looks straight at me with a grave shake of his head.

I look around the area for more bodies. By my count, there should be fifty-one other men.

I take careful steps toward the side of the archway. For some reason, I’m remembering when I first walked through here, feeling frustrated because the walls were too thick to glimpse the throne platform from the outside. Since then, I’d learned it was for defense. So an assassin couldn’t shoot the king from the hallway, but it meant I’d have to rely on my ears now. Something I was well used to. We hold our breath collectively as we all strain to hear something, *anything* to tell us our family is still alive.

A child whimpers.

I hold a shaking fist to my mouth and share a hopeful glance with

Sanjay. My mind races to think of some kind of plan. We need to know what we're going into, but the odds of being seen on the way to the roof to peer through the hawk's entrance are high. And who knows who will die while we waste time trying to get a good look?

I motion the others to retreat to a branching hallway.

"I'm going in first," I say. "We need to know more before engaging them. I'll enter alone. Listen carefully to what I say; I'll try and pass on any information I can without raising their suspicions. If there are too many, you'll need to think of another plan. Maybe the Elite can be lured to the training yard and shot."

Malir swallows. "The king will have my head if I let you go in by yourself."

I grin without humor. "Malir, you've seen me fight. You know Jovan trusts my judgment. And you'll be joining me soon. We keep the element of surprise." He recognizes this as an order and gives a short nod. I draw out my veil from beneath my tunic, shaking it out.

"You won't be able to see with your veil on," Olandon says.

"It won't be an issue," I reply. "I have to go in with the veil on or they'll kill me straightaway. Be ready. I have no doubt this will end in bloodshed." I peer into the eyes of the men, all of them loyal friends.

I look into my Olandon's last. "There's fire in your eyes, brother," I note with a grim smile.

"And there is ice in yours," he replies.

I nod to the others and place the veil over my head. I needed to stall the Elite to gather information from them. The sight of the Tatumas would make them pause.

"Wait for my word unless they kill me immediately," I instruct.

"Be careful, girly," Ice says.

I straighten, blinking until I can make out the corner of the hall we huddle in. Then, leaving the men behind me, I skim to the archway with soft steps. I think about what awaits me on the other side and my body begins to hum.

I am the Tatumas of Osolis and I'm going to protect my enemies against my own people.

I pass beneath the thick curved entrance into the food hall, shoulders straight and steps measured. My senses are focused. My ears pick up the

gasps and screams of a large group of people. The pitch is high. The sound of women or children. Relief settles in my bones. At least some still have their lives. The sounds are coming from the far back of the food hall in the area where the watch usually sit, farthest from the throne platform.

Most of my attention is on the remainder of the room. More specifically, the whir of a released arrow.

The whir doesn't come. But a voice does. One I've hated.

"This is indeed a surprise, Tatum Olina. I am glad you are faring well. We have feared you a prisoner or dead this last half-revolution." Hare's voice carries across the room. My torturer.

Jovan's deep tones ring in my ears saying, "Bullshit." If only that were the way the game was played on Osolis.

"Indeed, Hare," I say in a cool, detached way. "You will be pleased to deliver favorable news to my mother." I hide my snort of disgust and continue. "I know the Tatum's army lies in wait on the Oscala, but I did not expect the Elite here." I keep my head facing to his voice as I peek side to side. There are at least seven outlines. And I've heard the brush of feet on stone. I don't know if there are more Elite or if it's the women and children shuffling in fright.

"We came here to slaughter the king's assembly," he calls back. His honesty surprises me. I wonder what he expects my reaction to be. Keep him talking, Olina.

"Cassius was always fond of Tatum Ronsin's tactics. However, you're lucky I arrived before you had time to follow his orders," I say demurely. My measured stride through the hall continues. My heart sinks as I do. There are more than twelve here. Drummond was right. Either the Elite has grown, or they've brought reinforcements.

"Luck is an interesting choice of word, Tatum," he says, slighting me by omitting my name at the end of my title.

I chuckle. "You are brave to insult me, Elite. Or stupid. Either way, it tells me a great deal about your orders." The soldier stiffens, no doubt angry at giving himself away.

"How was my mother when you last saw her?" I gasp and cover my mouth as the man jerks. "Forgive me, Hare; I hope I have not offended your delicate sensibilities with a question. I've been too long on Glacium and my Solati mannerisms suffer from disuse." Questions were the height of bad

manners.

“Your mother thrives, as always. Strong and *beautiful*.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop from laughing. “No doubt you stress the word beautiful because of the veil I wear.” A child begins to cry behind me. I wave an arm in the air as I sidestep so my back is to the benches instead of the women and children. If they shoot me, I don’t want to dodge the arrow only to have it hit one of the terrified Bruma behind me instead.

One member of the Elite stands several meters to my right.

“It may interest you to know I’ve discovered the reason for my mother’s imprisonment inside this.” I wave the material slightly. My time is up. If we have any chance at beating the Elite we need to know how many there are, and we need them to be off-guard. What better way than to shock them?

“Maybe you’d like me to share her secret with you?” I ask.

I *feel* their interest more than I hear or see it.

“I cannot blame you for your curiosity. It is a mystery,” I say. “I myself was most disappointed when I discovered the evidence of my mother’s,” I pause dramatically while searching for the right word, “indiscretion.”

“To accuse the Tatum is to die,” another of the Elite spits out.

“Temper, temper,” I say. “He must be new, Hare.” I rest back against the food bench. “And I hardly think it matters whether you kill me because you already have the orders, or if you kill me for slandering my mother.

“I would like you to see something before you execute me on behalf of my mother.” I reach for the veil, expecting to feel the paralyzing fear. It’s the first time I’ve shown a group of my own people, after all. Instead, I find a cold, calculating sort of vengeance there. Once the Elite have seen, it doesn’t matter if they kill everyone in this room. Because one of them will talk. Osolis is not like Glacium. If I die today, I’ve assured my mother’s ruin.

I ready myself for attack, but the soldiers are entirely still—more curious than I gave them credit for. Without fuss, I draw the veil from my head and watch as it falls to the ground. Then I glance up with a mocking smile at the gaping men I feared as a child.

I purse my lips. “Your reaction is more entertaining than anticipated.”

I hear gasps from the assembly to my side. The noise distracts me momentarily. I’d forgotten the Bruma were there.

“Frost?” someone says.

“It’s Frost!”

“Silence!” roars Hare. The Bruma instantly hush.

“My goodness, do find your decorum.” I look around with interest.

“Fifteen of you,” I call in a strong voice. “I see Cassius thought Tatum Ronsin’s previous numbers lacked the appropriate force.” I nod at several of the Elite. “The four by the archway seem a little fresh to be in the Elite, though,” I say, wrinkling my nose.

“You’re a filthy half-breed!” the man to Hare’s left snarls. Brovek, if I recall correctly.

“Oh, are we still back there,” I ask. “Let’s not forget who actually did the filthy in the first place.” I smile at the signs of their anger. A shift to the other foot; a tightening grip on their weapon of choice.

“You *dare*,” Hare says.

“Hare,” I say. “Shut the fuck up.” I doubt he knows what the term means, but by the way his face twists I can tell he’s guessed it’s offensive. I grin, taunting him.

“As much as I’d looked forward to hearing your screams again, we have a job to do. Once we deal with you, we will signal the Tatum’s army to attack,” he says. I follow his line of sight. One of the Elite, a new one, holds a torch. It seems Cassius has added his own unique twist to Tatum Rosin’s strategy. They’re going to light a fire, but where?

Hare circles me, hands clasped behind his back. Fine lines wrinkle his face. If I let his age fool me I’ll be dead in a second. “I imagine the bodies of the pitiful soldiers we killed will light on fire rather nicely,” he says. “I wonder if the Bruma villagers will be able to smell the burning flesh from here.” That he’s divulged their mission shows how completely confident he is that his Solati force will succeed.

I know now the fate of the remaining fifty-one watchmen. It’s another sick twist in the Solatis’ plan.

“The Bruma savages will buckle and we will slaughter every last one of them. But first...” He leans in. “I will kill you. Then the Bruma spawn behind you. A nice little message for the Animal King if he should survive the battle.”

I let my shoulders sag, making myself small. Aquin would applaud me. “You could let me live and give a false account to Mother,” I plead as he

takes a half-step forward. How many times have I waited for this moment? Simmering in fury, with my head bowed submissively in Mother's torture room.

He throws his head back in laughter. I strike. I go for something simple. It's more than he deserves.

Hare smacks to the ground, his head twisted so far around that his final view is of the beamed ceiling on the king's hall, though the rest of his body faces the opposite way.

"A broken neck for a broken leg." I shrug at the shocked faces of the Elite. I turn my attention to Brovek, the second in command.

"You—" he starts.

"Brother," I call toward the stone archway, cutting Brovek off. It has the desired effect. The Elite halt in their tracks. They may not take orders from me, but it's possible my brother may get through to them now that Hare is dead. Several in the back are still sharing stunned looks. I risk a quick glance at the women and children at the back. A few are in bad shape, but they're alive.

I grin at Olandon as he strolls in and steps over Hare's corpse to stand behind me and just to my right. A show of respect.

"Sister, you've been busy," he remarks.

"You know me, Landon." I tilt my head at the remaining Elite. "I'm just wondering how many more I'll have to kill for the message to sink in."

"How many *we'll* have to kill, Tatuma Olina," he corrects with a bow. "There are many here I've been looking forward to dealing with for quite some time."

"Well, I want Brovek," I say, crossing my arms.

"As my Tatuma commands," he says. I almost laugh at his display until I catch him casting a covert look at the group of women and children. Who is he searching for?

"Commander Olandon," Brovek says with a deep bow. "We have no orders concerning you. You are whole, not a half-breed. Stand aside and you will not come to harm."

"Your Tatuma is not whole," Olandon challenges. I watch as Brovek turns an unhealthy shade of purple.

"We may not have to kill him after all," I stage-whisper to my brother. We share a grin and there's no fear in his expression. Just as there is

none in mine. Anticipation shivers down my spine. It's been so long since I've had a good fight. If I'm going to go, I'm going to take as many with me as possible.

Brovek addresses the Elite. "Do not harm the Tatum's son. Take him alive. Kill the half-breed."

One of the Elite steps forward and I tense. His face is familiar and I try to recall his name. I stand ready for attack as the Solati kneels in front of me, head down.

"Tatuma Olina. There are those of us who do not agree with the Tatum's rule. Your heritage is less than nothing compared to your mother's crimes."

Rian. The man's name is Rian. He was merciful to me in the past. He let me escape the Torture Room when he could've barred my way.

He continues. "Allow me to fight by your side, to help right the wrongs I have done to you."

I lay a hand on his shoulder. "Rian, I remember you. You did what you could to ease my suffering." He tips his dark head back to peer at me.

"You may stand and fight by me and regain your honor," I declare.

He stands and moves to the other side of Olandon. There's no way he'll be fighting behind me.

One of the other younger Elite moves to join us. A sword appears through the front of her torso. The young woman looks down at the sword in horror before falling forward, sliding off the weapon. The soldier slits her throat to finish the job and steps back into line with a nod to Brovek.

"Anyone else?" Brovek asks the Elite. I feel the tension in the remaining Elite's muscular frames. This is it. There was perhaps one other who might have joined us, but they won't dare to after the death of their comrade. The Elite is now down to twelve. And with Rian, we number nine.

Olandon moves to my side. "Just like old times?" I ask.

"Just like it," he replies.

I turn my head to the archway as Brovek draws one of his legs back to push off into a charge.

I shift onto the balls of my toes, legs shoulder-width apart, fists formed tightly and held palm up next to my waist.

"Now!" I scream.

Chapter Twenty-One

My senses expand and contract at the same time, focusing on the Elite charging me, as the rest of my men explode through the doorway to join the fight.

The women and children push back against the wall down the far end of the food hall.

I crouch as the Elite near.

Malir's sword swings high as he boulders toward battle in true Bruma fashion. The Solati before me freeze momentarily, but quickly regain their movement. They are sleek where the Bruma are mighty, and no less deadly.

Without a word, the Elite slide into more advantageous positioning. Brovek and three other fighters circle Olandon and me, while two more rush at Rian several meters behind me. The remaining six Elite face a wall of my men, who also number six. It's a one-on-one battle for my friends. I think of what will happen if we don't succeed and realize we *have* to win this.

The dance begins.

Olandon crosses over the front while I spin to his left. It is the start of a pattern drilled into us since we first were capable of remembering the chain of actions. A type of fighting not taught by anyone except our ex-Elite trainer, Aquin. The technique is a completely random, unpredictable chain of movements—learned by rote, unseen and unheard of by any other than Aquin, Olandon and myself. The Elite will have no idea what we're doing.

I keep low and the air shifts mere finger-widths from my head as a blow whispers past. Brovek is one of the several Elite surrounding us. He recovers from my brother's kick, but isn't prepared for my upper-cut.

One step back. High kick.

I face one of the less-experienced Elite and risk a glance at my friends. They're all standing, though Sanjay has been struck already and is flagging.

"Cover Sanjay!" I yell to the others.

Olandon and I reverse the pattern for three moves. I grin evilly at the shock on my opponents' faces. I bet they've never experienced anything like this before. Aquin was one of the best Solati fighters ever seen. He is a genius.

I place my foot on Olandon's bent knee and push up against it, delivering a spinning kick to Brovek's face. Blizzard's yell of pain distracts me and I reel back from a hit, but my body continues the chain of movements. Olandon sniggers even as he head-butts a muscled woman in the face. No doubt he's remembering Aquin disciplining us until the sequence became automatic. My robes hid many of his bruises in my childhood. I've never been more thankful for the lessons as I glide from one form to the next.

Not only were we holding the four Elite off, but we were gaining on them.

"Soon," Olandon grunts.

"Soon," I agree. Nearly time to draw weapons. One of Rian's fighters spins too close and I swing his legs out from under him. My eyes meet Rian's for part of a second before he shoves his sword in, underneath his opponent's arm.

I assess the state of our group as I fake left, feeling Olandon shift at exactly the same time.

"Now!" I order. I slide my two short swords free.

There's no sadness for the Solati surrounding me. It's me and my family, or them. They are hardened warriors, and they had a choice. They just made the wrong one. They're the face of my mother's poison and must be ripped from the heart of Osolis.

The woman soldier screams as I slice through the back of her knee. I grimace at the underhanded injury I've dealt. I suppose it doesn't matter. She'll be dead soon. Olandon groans behind me, hit, and loses the pattern. I wait and then whirl, plunging my sword into the opponent's right shoulder. If I'm lucky it's put a hole in his lungs. At worst, he'll be slowed.

We regain our sequence, one sword less.

A scream pierces the air. Not one of my men. Olandon finishes off the woman I disabled before. I quickly look around.

All six of my men face off against the remaining three Elite fighters. The other three are dead on the ground at their feet. Kaura and Leo stand in front of the huddled women and children, teeth bared and hackles raised.

I jerk back as Brovek nearly catches me with a crushing blow to the head which likely would've knocked me out. I assess what I just saw as I continue to move. Every one of my men is slowing down, but Blizzard and Sanjay are both injured. I come to a quick decision.

“Sanjay! Get the women and children out,” I order.

I can't see if he's heard me, but one of the barracks “yips” to let me know he's going. I smile anew, putting extra energy into my thrusts.

I barely feel a cut in my side. It could be small, but it could be large. My body dismisses it as being non-life threatening. Blood splashes over me as I drag my sword against the second, less-experienced Elite's throat. It's the one I'd hoped to offer amnesty to. The young man topples, clutching his gushing neck. I blink to rid myself of his expression. He knows he's about to die. He's afraid.

Aquin is in my mind, demanding I deliver a follow-up blow. I ignore the voice and move to the next one. Only two of our four opponents remain: Brovek and an unknown middle-aged Solati. There's a groan behind me. Another Elite has Rian in a chokehold. Rian claws uselessly at the man's arm.

“Break,” I say. Olandon alters his stance to hold off both of the remaining fighters. He'll use large, slashing movements. It's only a temporary measure.

I approach Rian's opponent from behind and slide my sword into the base of his skull. Instant death. Rian rolls to his knees and a quick glance assures me he'll be okay once he catches his breath.

I wait behind Olandon for his signal.

The smallest spark of hope flares within me. Five Elite left in total. Only two remain between Olandon, Rian, and myself. Three against the others. There are triumphant shouts as Rhone takes down another of the Elite. But he's exposed himself. His opponent sinks a dagger into his side. Shard leaps in with a feral roar and engages the single soldier in ferocious combat.

A glance behind them to the archway tells me Sanjay hasn't been able to take out the women and children. I quickly see his predicament: the other fight is too close to the archway. He stands ready, in case one of the enemy breaks away from their match and the way opens. The vulnerable Bruma are closer to the action than I'd like.

Olandon sees me and shifts into position. I slip back in, but my strike meets with thin air as Brovek, seeing their fate unraveling before him, spins out of the group, leaving his comrade alone to face the three of us.

I huff, painfully. “Rian, take my place here.”

Rian steps beside my brother as I move away. It's a risk leaving

Olandon with someone I don't trust, but I know Brovek's up to something and the pair will be able to deal with the lone Elite.

I run after Brovek as he heads toward the other fight. Is he hoping to join the two others and band together? My parched mouth dries further when he completely bypasses the area where two of his force still combat five of my men. Brovek leaps around the large fight near the arch, slashing his sword at the women and children who shriek in terror. My half-hearted jog turns into a sprint. Sanjay begins toward him, his own sword raised. But Brovek spins on his heel and disappears through the archway.

I rush into the hall, not far behind him, and look left to right. A flash of movement catches my attention. Brovek reaches up and lifts a flaming torch free from the wall, then disappears up the stairs to the second floor.

I feel sick as I realize what he's doing. He's going to light the signal! But where is he going?

Rhone told me the other stairway has been blocked, so Brovek isn't trying to lose me. He'll go to the place a signal fire will be most visible, where the bodies must be piled; the roof! Mother's men either had time to scope the layout, or have it memorized. But I've lived in this castle for a long time now. I know I'll catch him, especially without a torch to slow me.

Horror fills me though, as I round the corner and face the solid presence of a door. I shove my entire body weight against it to no avail. The door doesn't budge! I hear Brovek's laughter on the other side as I slam my shoulder against the door repeatedly. This can't be happening!

"Your mother's glory will continue on." The words are muffled, but every one of them strikes a chord deep in my soul.

A scream rips from me as I push both hands on the door. This stairway is the only way to the roof. Rhone said the other way was already blocked off. Brovek will already have lit the fire by the time we force our way through. And, of course, my Soar is back in the First Sector because it only would've slowed me on the run here.

My mind churns. People I loved were going to die. All the Bruma I left to fight in the First Sector; Jovan, the advisors, Adnan, and Sole. I place the back of my hand against my mouth as bile burns my insides. Once Cassius was finished with the Bruma, he'd turn the army's efforts to the Ire, eliminating the peaceful folk I'd developed a fierce desire to protect. I bet Cassius had already killed Jimmy.

The red-haired boy's name shifts the block in my mind.

Jimmy didn't use the stairs!

I fly back down the hall and dodge Blizzard's swinging sword. Only two Elite remain there.

"Olina, what?" someone yells. I don't answer, looking at the walls in panic. There are only a few tapestries which cover the entire distance from floor to ceiling beams. I hope Fiona was right when she told me how strongly they're attached to the stone of the wall. I guess I'll soon find out.

I try to bunch the coarse, heavy material in my hands, but it won't give me a firm enough hold to climb to the ceiling. If I die reaching the roof, the others won't have time to stop the signal being lit. Brovek must be half way there by now. I run to the outer edge of the carpet artwork. It will be easier to hold on to the edge. I begin my climb, scrambling up the wall, with only my tenuous hold on Jovan's mother's tapestry to save me from falling. The beamed ceilings of the food hall are high, five times the height of Avalanche.

I'm suddenly grateful for my smaller frame. Who knows how much weight the fabric could take before tearing off the rod holding it in place? But true to Fiona's word, the material stays secure against the stone, not budging at all. I'm nearly there. My arms burn with the effort of pulling my body weight upwards, no different to the burn of climbing a rope for hours in Aquin's training shed.

I can't get the thought of Jovan facing a deathly army of Solati by himself out of my mind. I can't let him down.

I reach the top and I look over my shoulder at the beam as I grip the tapestry with tight hands. The distance between the wall and the beam looks larger from up here. But I'm a meter or so above the beam's position. I've faced worse odds.

I push off the wall.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I almost sob with relief as I cling desperately to the wooden beam, but my fingers will only support me for so long. I dangle nearly fifteen paces above the food hall floor, hanging by one of the smallest limbs of my body.

My mind firms. This I can do.

I trust completely in my stronger right arm as I slap my left hand on the beam. My right follows. I swing side to side and shift. In no time, I've used momentum to get both forearms on the beam. From there it's simple. I have to trust Brovek isn't there yet, or everything I've done has been for nothing. I dash away thoughts of the fire taking hold as I scramble to my feet.

I refuse to believe this is over. The hawk's entrance is to my right. I run along the beam. I have no trouble with this. It's much sturdier and more reliable than the rooftops in the Outer Rings.

I assess the hawk's entrance as I near. The entrance is a trapdoor that usually opens with the hawk's downwards weight, but it can be pulled open from below. I climb up a diagonal truss and wrench the large ceiling door toward me with the thick rope attached to it. I wince at the noise the door generates as it's opened. Brovek will hear that if he's already there.

I know from my time spent on the roof that the hawk's entrance is surrounded with metal railing to protect the castle roof sentries from accidentally falling through. I'd leant against them while waiting for the Ire's report not long ago. Now, I'll use these vertical bars to pull myself up.

I strain to reach the railing through the door while maintaining a stable footing on the beam. This isn't working. I hold on to the trapdoor's rope with one hand, and raise on tiptoes. My feet are still on the truss, though my body is slanting precariously over empty space. My fingers fumble on the cool surface of the railing.

I stretch further, rising onto a single leg on the beam.

My right hand finally closes around the bar. It's enough. I let go of the rope in my left hand and swing into empty space, relying completely on my right arm on the roof rail to support me. I outstretch my left arm and quickly locate a neighboring bar.

Devoid of any weight to draw it down, the trapdoor pushes up under my feet, helping me as I shimmy my hands up the railing, my body swaying

beneath me.

The roof slowly comes into view as I struggle upward. I swing my legs up onto the solid stone roof and take a moment to absorb what I'm seeing.

I'm glad Hare accidentally warned me, because the sight of over fifty slaughtered men, piled in a heap, disturbs me on some deep, unspeakable level. The bodies are strewn between chairs, tables and sticks. Bunches of clothing have been thrown on top of them too. Anything that will light on fire to form a massive signal. This fire will be seen for miles—just as the Elite intended.

That's when I see Brovek on the other side, busy lighting torches. I slither soundlessly over the barrier and sweep low toward him. If I can catch him unawares, this could all be over in seconds. I just want this nightmare to end.

I don't know what alerts him. Probably the excellent instincts that elevated him to his station in the first place. Either way, he turns to me. His face turns from shock to focus in seconds. In the next few moments he looks from my sprinting approach, down to the few lit torches at his disposal. I understand his brief deliberation as if I *were* him. And a part of me congratulates him on his choice when he picks up a single blazing torch, while the other part hates him for it. He's decided to set the fire before he fights.

But he's too slow. With no finesse and no plan I throw myself at him, hitting the ground with a thud. I fight against the loss of breath as Brovek rolls to his feet and reaches for the torches once again.

I free myself and lunge his way. He abandons his reach for the torches and delivers a cruel kick to my stomach instead. I roll away until I hit the stone balustrade of the roof. *Veni*, I can't be caught against the wall with a man of Brovek's size.

I push to kneeling, but fall away from his fist as it cuts in front of me.

"Not so confident without your brother here to do most of the work," he snarls.

I push my legs over my head, curling backwards, and regain my feet, startling the panting man. Both of us are recovering from our race here. My arms are still burning from the climb.

"You won't be lighting that signal," I say. "Step down and I will

allow you to live.”

He laughs snidely. “I’d rather die.”

He follows up on his words, darting in. I twist to the side and we engage in a flurry of activity. I lose myself to the automatic movements of my body. Nothing matters except stopping him.

He punches my side. The pain cuts through me, reminding me of the slash there. I return the favor with a crossing blow to an already swollen eye. There’s no hope in me. I won’t allow it because the Elite leader and I are exactly matched as we dance across the rooftop. I lick at his left leg and watch it buckle. He clips the side of my chin with an upper-cut.

I dart in and pick up his fallen dagger, kicking the lit torches farther away from the heaped bodies behind me. Brovek snarls in fury as I sink down, weight on my toes.

“You giving up?” I ask. He lets out an outraged bellow and charges me. I switch my footing in response to his dodging.

I shouldn’t have bothered. I watch in shock as Brovek slips on an unlit torch bracket, going down in a crashing heap of corded muscle straight on top of the blazing fire of another torch. His clothing alights and the burning orange spreads rapidly as he rolls side to side, struggling to free himself from the flames. He screams in pain, shouting obscenities as he throws his legs and arms around erratically.

It’s every Solati’s worst fear: burning to death.

I stand between Brovek and the signal fire and simply watch as he frantically pats down the flames licking his body, tearing off what clothing he can. He succeeds in taming the fire after a time, but I can see from here that much of his body is blistered.

Brovek falls to the ground in an exhausted heap. It’s not good enough for me. I leap astride his smoking frame, pinning his arms to his side with my legs, dagger in hand.

“Get off, filthy whore,” he wheezes. I don’t submit to my vanity by voicing words.

I plunge the dagger into his stomach and jerk it out again. The acids and leaking bile should start working immediately. One of the slowest and most agonizing ways to die. Fire is agonizing, too, but it’s quick.

I consider that as Brovek writhes beneath me. Twenty minutes is too long for him to remain alive. I stand slightly and open a gaping line between

his hips, from left to right, making sure to sever an artery.

“Your mother should have ... killed you,” he gasps.

I allow myself a few words now that he’s incapacitated.

“I could say the same about yours,” I say.

“I should have crushed you when you were—” He breaks off as I open the arteries in both thighs and stand on top of his stomach wound, pressing. His eyes roll up with the pain. I kick him roughly until he regains consciousness and then crouch down by his head.

“Your decisions today killed the Elite.” I watch his face for remorse. There is none.

“Your actions during my childhood helped me become the person who is killing you today.” A flicker of fear flashes in his eyes as he acknowledges his fate.

I draw myself close and whisper, “In your last moment I want you to know, every thing you’ve ever worked for, everything you’ve tried to uphold. The *horror* you’ve inflicted on the innocent.” He stills at my words. “It was all for nothing. Osolis will be restored.”

I slit his throat and watch as his blood soaks onto the stone of the castle roof. His head drops to one side as his last breath leaves him.

I hesitate before moving to him and feeling for life. He’s truly dead. I limp to the scattered torches and smother them, before throwing them over the side of the parapet. I don’t have the time or strength to shift all the bodies and furniture, but I can’t leave the torches so close while I make sure my friends are safe. I peer over to the First Sector, but there’s no way I’ll be able to see the Oscala from here. The Solati couldn’t have seen the flame from a single torch, could they?

* * *

One hand pressed to my slashed side, I walk under the stone arch, favoring my left leg. At some point someone must have landed a blow to my thigh. Malir and Olandon meet me at the base of the second set of stairs, flanking me on either side. Relief staggers through me as I pick out my remaining five companions from the throng of crying and white-faced women and children. Rhone is pale. He got stabbed and definitely shouldn’t be standing. I doubt anyone will dare to point that out to him. Rian stands off

to one side, the assembly Bruma giving him a wide berth. I don't blame them.

I gesture Olandon and Malir ahead, and they leave my side to help with the injured. My brother aids Greta, who has been badly beaten, to lay on a bench. Malir grabs a bawling Sadra in a tender hug.

We did it. Tears well in my own eyes. We saved them.

There is a sound.

I frown at first. Puzzling over the noise as I'm forced forward by a pressure behind me.

Still confused, I glance up and see Olandon racing toward me. Malir whips his head around and his eyes widen in ... anguish? Some of the women cover their mouths, while others have them wide open like Cameron did in my nightmare.

Why can't I hear the screaming? I peer down at my body, dumbly registering there's something there which shouldn't be.

The pointed edge of a sword. A Solati sword.

A voice whispers in my ear. "Mission accomplished."

The surrounding noise returns. My brother roars as I slide forward onto my knees, finally understanding I've been stabbed. Blood throbs in my head and black creeps on the edges of my vision. Weapons clang behind me. Olandon is fighting someone. Who did we miss? What if there are others?

The roof!

I put one hand down on the ground and look up blearily into Shard's panicked eyes.

I need to tell him something. The signal fire. It can't be lit.

"Make sure," I get out, but something wet comes out of my mouth. The rusty taste tells me it is blood.

"No one gets to roof," I gasp. Hands lower me to the ground; my head rolls around on my shoulders, no longer under my control.

"Don't talk, Olina," a soft voice says. Blizzard?

"Roof," I blurt again.

A large hand strokes my hair. Malir's face blurs above me.

"Someone's going right now. Shh, now."

I relax and the dark dots begin to connect. I've heard the pain from such wounds is excruciating. And I know what it means that I can't feel a thing. I should tell my friends how much I love them, but my mouth doesn't work. I should try to hug Olandon—maybe ask him to tell the twins how

sorry I am.

Jovan will never know how I feel. I've waited too long to admit to myself that I love the king of Glacium. My attention focuses on a lone tear tracking down my temple. He'll never know that I'd die ten times more to make sure he was safe.

That thought is worse than all the others put together.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Something cool brushes my skin.

“You are the strongest person I know.”

Soft voices whisper against my hair, murmuring worried words. Why are they worried? I wish I could reassure them.

“What’s wrong with her?”

Someone needs to help me. The bed is on fire. I writhe side to side, trying to get out, but someone has laid stone brick on me to pin me down. I can’t move. I scream for help.

“Fever, my King.”

Someone cries heartbroken sobs. A feminine sound. It’s my mother. My mind is so hazy and weak I did not recognize her.

“It has been a long time,” I whisper.

The crying stops. My mouth twists for a moment before that too becomes exhausting.

“Are you crying for me?” I croak. Does my mother love me after all? I finally see that she didn’t want to do it; she had to.

“Frost, it’s me. Are you awake?”

Frost? The word is familiar. Who speaks? I can’t place the familiar word before I sink into darkness once more.

The coolness is back. There are regular strokes of a cloth on my skin. My body is not my own. Repeated attempts to open my eyes go unanswered.

“Please come back to me, Lina,” he says. A trembling kiss presses against my forehead. Or maybe I’m shaking. The warmth of his breath is nice in contrast to the cold water. I sigh, tilting my head toward the person. I love this man. I only wish I could remember his name.

“Did you see that?” The man’s voice breaks. “She moved!”

“I saw it, brother,” a younger voice affirms.

I’m glad this man has someone who cares for him.

It’s always dark.

I come to realize it is because my eyes are closed. Such a simple movement, but it is beyond me. I can't remember if I've tried this before, but the frustration is familiar, like it has happened several times.

"Why she hasn't woken?" a voice asks.

"Shh, love. You've done everything you can. She has to want to come back."

I frown at that. Of course I want to come back. There's someone ... a man.

Jovan.

My lips twitch in a smile. That's the man's name. I want to say it aloud, to remember how it feels.

"Jo—" I say.

"Hush, Malir. She's trying to speak."

I can't summon enough wetness in my mouth to clear the parched dryness in my throat. I need to say the name.

I rip the name through cracked lips. "Jovan."

Chapter Twenty-Four

I lift a hand and rub my encrusted eyelids. Where am I? My arm trembles and I lower it to my side to focus on fully opening my eyes. It takes a long time. My surroundings are blurred together in a grey and black mess.

Something shifts beside me, startling me enough to bring the room into focus. I jerk in the bed and clamp down on a surprised scream as pain shoots from my back through to the front of my ribs.

The pain takes precedence over whatever woke me. My hands clumsily open my nightgown. I blink down at the bandaging wrapped beneath my breasts. With clumsy movements I feel for the source of my pain. Judging by the itching in my back I have a wound there too. Did someone run me through? My mind throbs as I strain to remember the details.

I breathe deeply as my head spins. Trying to remember is obviously a bad idea.

I let my gaze fall to my right and my breath catches in my throat. Jovan. I lift a hand, tracing the dark shadows under his eyes. He's fast asleep. Tears build in my eyes, and an exhausted sob escapes me. I bite my sore lip so I don't make a sound as I draw my fingers over his face. My shoulders shake as tears fall unrestrained over my cheeks and into my hair. I thought I'd never see him again. That desperate thought, I remember without effort. I wonder how long he's been here. Long enough to succumb to his bone-deep fatigue. He looks worried. Though I've never watched him sleeping, so there's no way to know if there's usually a small frown between his brows.

My crying eventually wakes him. I watch as his eyes blink open. He smiles sleepily at me, the frown disappearing for an instant. But reality soon kicks in.

"Lina?" He's on his knees in a flash. I grimace at the jolt it causes through the bed. Definitely a matching wound in the back.

"Lina?" he repeats.

I lick my lips, trying to talk. This time, I can't force his name out.

"Don't try to talk, just rest," he says, one hand hovering above my head, while the other is held immobile above my stomach. "You're really awake?" he says in disbelief. He darts furtive looks around the room. "What do I do? What do you need?"

If I had anything left I'd smile at his panic. But I just want him to come closer and never leave. I feel like I've been dreaming of this for an eternity.

"Water," he decides, backing away from the bed. I let my eyes close as he searches for the water.

He rushes back to my other side.

"No! Lina, come back," he whispers. My eyes are closed now, though, and they can't seem to open. A head rests against my own. A kiss presses against my temple.

"I need you to come back." His plea forces my lids open and I shift my head to blink at him.

"Stay awake," he commands. He tips a trickle of water down my throat and it's like scratching an itch with one finger. He must see it on my face.

I almost cry as he takes the cool liquid away.

"Shh, baby. It's okay. I don't want to give you too much. You've been so sick." I forgive him. But only because he's given me what I want. His arms around me.

Sobs wrack my pain-filled body. I'm not sad. It's that I'm so happy; so *grateful* to be here with him. That, and the utter weariness, which is like a blanket so heavy I can't lift it. "Jovan," I whisper.

"I'm here." He rocks me gently. "I'm not leaving." His voice is hoarse, thick with emotion. "I'll never leave you." He wipes my tears away.

* * *

I wake. It's easier to open my eyes this time. I blink over at Sadra, who decorates a tunic from a rocking chair. She smiles at me and hurries to the door to speak to someone just outside before returning to the bed.

"Tatuma," she says softly, stroking my hair back. "Welcome back."

Unlike Jovan, she gives me water immediately. And more. I gulp it down greedily, that and some broth.

I'm sorry for it afterward.

The door slams open just as I lower my head to a bucket provided by the gentle woman.

"What's wrong?" the king barks.

“She’s unused to the food,” Sadra frets. “The broth was too much.”

I turn from swilling water in my mouth and large hands press me back against the pillows. I clutch my stomach until the pain recedes.

“We’ll try again in a few hours,” Sadra whispers. The sound of her closing the door echoes through the room.

“How do you feel?” Jovan asks, stroking my hair with his thumb. I summon the driest look I possess and level it at him until the ghost of a smile graces his mouth. He leans forward and places a kiss, whisper-soft, on my forehead.

“I’ll leave you to rest,” he says, beginning to untangle himself. The hand resting on his forearm tightens, stopping him. He searches my face for a time.

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Don’t go.”

Tension leaves him like he’s shaking snow off his clothing. He smiles and walks to the door, speaking quickly to the person, or likely several persons, outside. I frown as the conversation keeps him away for too long.

He returns, and instead of settling into his former position, he surprises me by removing his boots and lifting the furs by my side to slip in beside me. He lifts my head gently and places it on top of his hard arm. He pulls me slightly toward him, wrapping his free arm low over my abdomen.

“Tell me if I’m hurting you,” he demands. My eyes are heavy, but I succeed in rolling them.

* * *

A tickling on my cheek draws me from the depths of sleep. I convince my eyes to open and look with blurry eyes into Jovan’s chest. I’ve studied the smooth firmness enough times to recognize it immediately. I tilt my head back and peek into his eyes. The expression there warms me from the inside out.

He rolls away to get water. This time I keep it down. The same expression is still there once I’m done. He returns to bed and tucks me into his side once more. Jovan licks his lips as he draws his fingers over my skin. My cheeks, my nose, my eyes. My shoulders relax back.

“What happened?” I ask.

His gaze darkens. “There was another soldier. Malir said you fought

fifteen, but there were sixteen of them, one scouting the castle. You were stabbed in the back.”

“I let my guard down,” I say, annoyed by my lapse.

“You’d fought several skilled fighters, and from several accounts, climbed up a tapestry in the food hall. You were exhausted,” he says simply. “The man is dead. Killed by your brother.”

I half sit up. “Is Landon okay?”

“He is.” Jovan pushes me back down. “Rhone, Sanjay, and Ice were all injured, but will live.”

Tears prickle the corners of my eyes. My brother. My friends. They’re safe.

Jovan strokes my hair back. “I ... need to tell you something.”

I smile half-heartedly at him, too relaxed by his movements.

“When Shard came to report your injury,” he starts. I watch as his eyes dim. “I’ve never been struck through with a weapon, as you have, but I think I felt the same pain as Shard spoke.” He looks away. “His words brought me to my knees.”

“The battle was over. The Solati gone,” he adds, resting his head on the cushion behind him. “I left Roscoe in charge and ran through the night to get to you.”

I want to know more about the battle, but I’m reluctant to interrupt. His arm underneath my head curls around my shoulder, drawing me to him more tightly. My wound twitches, but I don’t have the heart to tell him I’m in pain. Not when he’s looking at me like that.

“You were still alive,” he breathes, eyes shining. His words begin to rush.

“They told me you didn’t have long. The sword went all the way through.” He clenches his jaw. “You’re small, but you lay there on the bed, so tiny and breakable. The blankets looked like they could have crushed you. I thought you were dead at first. Everyone seems to die. And I didn’t dare to hope when you lived to the next day, and the next after that; unmoving, but somehow still breathing.” Tears drip over my face to soak into Jovan’s tunic. He rolls towards me to kiss them away with gentle lips. “I didn’t hope yesterday, I don’t dare to hope now.”

“I was furious with myself,” he says softly against my temple. I pull back to study him.

“I told you—,” I start.

“It’s not that,” he interjects. “I should have trusted my instincts and kept you by my side. Not because I doubt you,” he says quickly. “Something was wrong. A part of me knew your mother and uncle would try to harm you. What if I’d forced you to stay at the castle? The women and children would be dead ... *you* would be dead.”

“But that isn’t why I’ve hated myself.” He moves right in front of me so I have no choice but to look into his eyes. Something churns in my stomach at his concentrated resolve.

He runs his thumb along the side of my chin. “I waited too long to tell you. I’ve known how I feel for a long time. Perhaps even when Rhone came to inform me of your decision to learn the sleds.” He frowns. “Of course, I didn’t recognize it immediately. And then denied it until I was told you’d escaped the castle. Then I thought it was too late.”

I shake my head. “Jovan, what are you—”

“I love you.”

I freeze, fixing the king of Glacium with an unblinking stare. “W-what?”

“You were struggling to come to terms with your feelings for me. And I didn’t know what you still felt for Kedrick. You have no idea how that’s tormented me—being jealous of my brother. I didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

I close my mouth as I realize he’s rambling. He snaps his mouth shut.

“You hated yourself because you loved me and didn’t tell me?” I ask, not daring to rejoice just yet. He slowly dips his head.

Warmth spreads through me. Something indescribable and joyful. It doesn’t matter that I can barely lift a finger because I am lit from the inside. It’s liquid courage. Better than any brew I’ve tasted. He has bared himself to me. I recall the final moments before I lost consciousness and clear my throat painfully.

“The blood was leaving my body, but there wasn’t any pain. I knew then that I was dying. I had no control over what I was thinking. I remember my brothers were there in my thoughts, among others.” I look just below his eyes, then force myself to look straight at him. It’s almost painful to do so. He’s here, right in front of me. With everything that’s happened, I still somehow feel like the luckiest person alive.

“But I remember my last thought was regret. That I would never see you and would never touch you again,” I say. I run my fingers through his shoulder-length hair. How many times have I wanted to do this? Why did I waste so much time? “That you would never know what I felt ... I’ve never experienced such despair.”

“And what do you feel, Lina?” he presses, tightening his hold.

I turn my eyes to my lap. “I’ve learned I shouldn’t take another moment for granted.” I take a deep breath and let my mask slip. I let him see everything.

“I feel the same, Jovan. I ... love you too.”

I glance up shyly, hearing his sharp intake. His beaming grin is boyish—it’s radiant. He feels that same weightlessness as I do. His face is a reflection on my own.

He leans in to kiss me, stealing all thought and air from me. I take just as much as I give and it’s not enough. Never enough. We kiss as if we will never see each other again, or maybe it’s because we gained another moment when all seemed lost. Maybe Jovan knows our days are numbered. I need him, and he needs me.

A pained squeak escapes me as my lips crack. Jovan releases me, pressing his forehead on top on my head with a groan.

“I’m sorry. I forgot myself,” he pants. “That kiss was...”

I lick my lips, numbed to the pain. “Yes,” I whisper. “It was.” I bump his head off mine to gain access to his lips once more.

Eventually he pulls back.

“Do not tempt me, my love. Sadra will kill me with her bare hands if I tax your strength,” he jokes, but I see true concern in his eyes. My stomach flips at his casual use of ‘my love.’ If I had the power to hold on to this moment forever, to stay in his arms and forget the worlds around me, I would. Right now I can pretend we have a future together.

“What are you thinking?” he asks. I rub my ear against his chest to rid myself of the tickle of his breath.

“That we should run away,” I say honestly. “But it wouldn’t work.”

He laughs. “Why?”

I blink up at him through heavy eyes. “You’re too big to hide,” I say around a yawn. His chuckle sends pleasant vibrations through my body.

I swallow obediently as he extracts himself and tilts a trickle of water

down my throat once more. I wave the broth away. The smell causes my stomach to rise. I finally give in and just keep my eyes closed. He kisses my forehead and my eyes, then my mouth when I tilt my head back to demand one. No one has ever made me react the way he does. *This* is love.

“I must return to my council, though every part of me wishes to stay here.” He speaks into my hair. It’s probably all over the place. I want to be clean again.

“My people need their king.”

“How many did you lose?” I ask softly.

“56 men here, who were guarding the castle, three Inner Ring women who attempted escape from the Elite, and none at the Great Stairway.”

My eyes fly open. “None? What happened?” I blurt. I wonder who the three women were. If only they’d waited a little longer! And I knew about the men here, having seen their piled bodies on the roof.

“They just stood there, for a day and two nights. Now we know they were waiting for the signal from the Elite.” He rubs his jaw.

“They came all this way from Osolis, then turned around because a fire wasn’t started?” I ask slowly.

Jovan shrugs. “The Ire showed up too. The Solati may still have engaged my army despite the unlit signal, but I believe the Ire was too much of an unknown factor, and tipped the odds too strongly in our favor. I never got a chance to sever your Uncle’s limbs from his body. The Solati began retreating through the Oscala during the third day.”

I brainstorm out loud. “I wonder if it’s a ploy so we’ll follow them to Osolis. Solati have always won battles on our home ground.”

“I don’t want you thinking about those things yet,” he says, locking his jaw. “You’ll be happy to know Jimmy is alive and well.”

A happy smile spreads across my face. Thank Solis. “Thank you,” I say.

Jovan stretches to his full height. I stare with blurry eyes at the taut muscle he reveals in doing so. He kisses me and makes for the door and I wish I could ask him to stay. But this is how it will always be. The desires of my heart will always come second to what I know I should do; second to what I know is right. It’s no different for Jovan.

But, with all of that, he still loves me. I’ll hold on to that forever.

“King Jovan,” I call as he places a hand on the door.

“Tatuma Olina,” he says with a half-smile.

I grip the furs on my lap, unsure of how to form the words and set the next stage of my life into motion. It’s been my ambition to rule my whole life, but in recent months I’ve danced around the thought, knowing it would come to this, just uncertain exactly when the timing would be right. My people were *starving*. The Tatum has committed too many crimes.

Jovan still waits for me to speak. I decide to call a stone a stone. Bruma value bluntness.

“I need to kill my mother,” I say.

My comment would make a normal man wonder at my sanity, or edge away, but Jovan’s half-smile grows. There’s no humor in it, only a detached calculation. It’s the look of a man who has been pushed too far.

My whole body stands on end as he replies, one eyebrow raised.

“We do.”

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