

THE
PRIZED
BRIDES

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To my daughter Serene-
The sky is your limit ❤️

CHAPTER ONE

If anyone heard me say this was the best day of my life, they'd think I was crazy. It has been exactly a week since the Iudicium was announced and along with it came a pause on all future marriages in Cardinia. Girls from sixteen to nineteen are eligible to register for the chance to become the wife of a general; Rewards for the winners of the Iudicium. I've been begging father and mother to let me sign up since I saw the announcement in our Town Center. We have been standing in line for two hours already but it seems we've only moved forward a few inches. The sun is beating down on us and the heat is starting to take its toll.

"I don't have time for this", my father grunts. That's the first thing he has said all morning. He took off from an entire day of hunting to make sure we made it here on time.

"It shouldn't be much longer now," my mother says as she rubs his back gently.

They have their hesitations about me entering to be a Iudicium bride, but I'm not afraid at all. This is what I have been waiting my whole life for.

Every twenty years, the capital city of Lusea holds the Iudicium to pick the next military officers for the country. We have been entangled in war with Galway for decades now and having young generals leading our armies has been the key to keeping them at bay. Soldiers from all over the country will participate in four trials for a chance to succeed one of the current military generals. The winners of the Iudicium get to pick their brides from the chosen girls of each township. While the men are competing, young women enter into a training camp to be evaluated. To prove that they are worthy of the privilege of being a general's bride.

The brides are exalted by their townships if they get selected since they bring honor, prestige and most importantly extra rations from the city back home with them. I would make father and mother so proud.

I spot Issa from down the road as she approaches with her parents. They look petrified.

"Zenya!" she calls out to me. She starts barrelling down the road as people quickly dodge out of her way, her bare feet kicking up dust. Issa towers over most other girls with her long arms and legs and right now she looks like she might fall face-first into the dirt if she doesn't stop running so fast.

"I've been waiting for you for hours! Where have you been?" She is gasping for air when she reaches me.

"My parents... our cart wheel broke... and-"

“It’s fine Issa.”

I can't help but laugh, knowing she is just as excited as I am. We stand in line together waiting for our turn.

“NEXT,” the impatient officer screams from underneath a white canopy. He is dripping sweat and looks like he might burn a hole right through me as I approach his table.

“Name, age, township,” he says bleakly.

“Zenya Marku, seventeen years old, Forest 1”.

He tells me to wait in the next line where I present my birth certificate and township papers. The other girls in the line look so nervous.

“That’s it?” Issa says when we meet up afterward.

Our parents have gone to the big market, but we drift down Main Street looking for something to snack on. The smell of fried and stewed foods wafts through the air from every direction making my stomach burn. We finally settle on fried corn puffs. I hand the man one daria coin that father gave me this morning.

“I’m surprised too. I thought the inspectors would have at least taken a look at us to decide if we could make it to the next round,” I say between burning bites of the sweet snack.

At least we only have to wait a week for round two. Today is Sunday so the week at home should fly by with home-making lessons and everything. Still, my stomach clenches at the thought of having to wait. I just want to prove that I deserve to move to Lusea. This is the only way someone from a neighboring township could become a Lusean.

Ever since mother first started taking me with her to the market, I have been fascinated by this place. By their grand towering homes and their beautiful bright yellow clothing. That fascination has

evolved into a yearning to live in the city. I don't want to spend most of my life just trying to survive. I want to thrive. I've been learning to cook since I was eight, I can clean my entire tree house in only two hours (on a good day), and my embroidery skills are top of my class. I was made for this competition.

* * *

By the time my parents and I make it back to Forest 1, the sun has already set. I'm sore all over from the long cart ride out of the city. Forest 1 is two hours away by cart and only forty-five minutes away by train. We can't afford the train. We climb the wooden stairs to our small tree house in the canopy. The towering tree branches are brightly lit with hanging lanterns, casting the lush foliage in a golden glow.

I'm too tired from the day to do anything but lay my apron out for lessons in the morning and kiss mother goodnight. "I can't wait for next Sunday. I'm gonna be an amazing bridal candidate." My mother frowns and sighs deeply, rubbing her wrist.

"Zenya, I have to tell you this, before you get disappointed. This won't be as easy as you think. It's hard work, and other girls have had the best traini-"

"Mother, I *know* it won't be easy, but I can do this. I'm just as good as the others," I say confidently, turning to go to my room. She sighs deeply. Again.

CHAPTER TWO

I'm awoken by the sound of a giant bird screeching outside my window. I can't tell if it's a macaw or a condor, but it's ruined my sleep either way. The cool morning air blows in, forcing me out of bed. At least I'm one day closer to round two of the "bride trials" as I like to call them.

My bedroom is a small round area off the left side of our tree house. Plants are hung high on wooden shelves to make it feel more like outside, if the brown wooden walls didn't already do that. I make my bed with the plush green sheets mother wove for me for my last birthday. I may be good with needlework, but I'll never be as good as she is. I am practically bouncing as I get dressed for my lessons.

The girls all wear loose-fitting green dresses and an apron of our choice. Mine is embroidered with a cute little tree frog since we live in the rainforest and since I couldn't think of anything else at the time.

I can smell mother's fried plantains cooking as I make my way to the main room of the treehouse. Our house is pretty small, and this space is where we do everything but sleep.

"Good morning mother".

She hums a joyful tune as I sit cross-legged on the floor, sharpening the tip of my favorite hunting spear. It's a good way to pass the time. The staff is carved throughout with my favorite flowers and leaves. Made just for me by father.

"Good morning Zenya. Your father has already left for the morning hunt. He is working overtime to try and meet the deadline for taxes to the King. It's up to 300 daria now," she says as she cracks an egg into the sizzling frying pan.

Father and the other hunters have been trying to keep up with the increasing demands for animal hides from the city. We pay our taxes each month, and each month King Tau gets more and more greedy. If it were not for the rations we get from him, I'm sure there would be a riot. When I get chosen as a Iudicium bride, I'll invite my parents to live in the city with my husband and me so they can finally rest.

After breakfast, I climb down to the forest floor and start walking to lessons in the Town Center. On Mondays, it's cooking class and forest medicine. Issa and I love cooking class the most. I've been working on my recipe for Piranha stew and I want teacher Mensa to taste it today.

"Did you pick your outfit for round two yet?" I hear over my shoulder as Issa falls into stride with me.

"No, I haven't even thought about it. Does it matter what we wear?"

"It definitely matters. I've heard some inspectors won't even let you get through to the health inspection without a good outfit!" she

exclaims.

I'm sure it's just a rumor she heard, but I still run through outfit ideas in my head anyway. I don't have anything new or eye-catching. If my untamable dark brown curls and freckles don't already disqualify me, then I think my clothes should be fine.

We approach the Town Center, passing by merchants on their way to sell in the local market. Women carry various crops in baskets on their heads. Bananas, yams, meats... Others ride in carts, bringing their harvest to the big market in Lusea. The work never slows down.

Our small local Town Center building is just large enough to hold a few classes in, and the rest are held outside in fields throughout the forest.

I don't dare smile or make small talk with Issa as teacher Mensa hands out examples of poison plants native to Forest 1. Forest medicine class is only allowed for girls sixteen and older, as the danger of handling poisonous plants is too much for the younger girls. The most they are told is to stay away from anything unfamiliar.

I hold my gloved hand steady as the oleander plant is placed in my palm. I examine the shape and color of the leaves, and the canary yellow hue of the flowers before passing it along.

"Healing and harmful plants are peppered all throughout the canopy. Knowing the mechanisms of both will be of great help to you throughout your lives," the teacher says as she walks around the room.

I believe her. Just two weeks ago, one of the young boys was bitten by a coral snake and teacher Mensa saved his life with a paste of healing herbs. If she had not been there, he would be dead in minutes. I watched as his deformed arm deflated under her skilled hand.

* * *

Cooking lessons drag by as we learn about which seasonings work best with fish, birds, and hogs. It's a welcome reprieve from the long to-do list that Issa has put in my head since the day began. She says that if I stretch for twenty minutes every day then I'll look taller and be more likely to get picked. I disagree.

Teacher Mensa shows us how to preserve chunks of meat by salting it. The little that we get to keep after taxes is precious and families here try to make it last as long as possible.

As we walk home, I spot some of the boys finishing up their training for the day in one of the grassy fields. Over the hedges, I see Bomani shadow boxing with a tree as his partner. Tariq and Dayo are racing each other. Fabian is sitting on the ground binding some leather to a short, forked branch, making what looks like a sling-shot. None of the boys could hold a candle to me with my spear, though.

Temi runs to catch up with us as we walk along the dirt path. I make a point to shorten my stride so she can catch up. She gets teased that she may never get married if she stays looking like a twelve-year-old.

"I want Tariq to be my husband. We can build a tree house right next to my parents."

Her enthusiasm makes me think that her plan might work. All she has to do is wait for the marriage freeze to be over-and she has to actually speak to him at some point. Getting married before the conclusion of the Iudicium would have a 1,000 daria fine that none of us can afford to pay.

I have no interest in any of the boys here. I haven't come across one that's open-minded enough to care about anything more

than what's for dinner that night, or the repairs that are needed on the treehouse. I want to be with someone from the city. Someone with an open mind. If marriage is the only goal for a forest girl, I'm going to do it my way.

"I hope all of your dreams come true Temi," I say as I nudge Issa. Temi pouts all the way until we reach her family's tree house.

* * *

On Wednesdays, I get to go hunting with father. This is the only time we get to spend together, and I don't take it for granted. It's also the only time I get to practice using my spear. Father doesn't have a son to hunt with him like the other men do, so I am happy to fill that void. As we walk with the group towards the hunting grounds on the border between Forests 1 and 2, he says

"You should just stay here Zen. We can't afford to lose a valuable set of hands to the city. They already take enough from us as is. If you want to get married, just settle down here with one of the young men from the forest. I've spoken with Bomani's father about maybe making a match between you two."

I grip the handle of my spear tighter. That word makes my skin crawl.

Settle.

He doesn't understand. To him, a simple, safe life is the best kind. To me, that's no life at all. I've watched my parents struggle and work themselves ragged trying to make sure we had food and could meet our tax requirements. The thought of repeating that same pattern makes my heart sink. I want more.

"Father, I don't just want to get married, I want to move to

Lusea. I want to travel and see the country. Besides, if I win, everyone in Forest 1 gets extra rations for a year.”

My father grunts in response and says nothing else as we hunt into the afternoon.

* * *

I gut and clean one of the antelope that I caught while father takes care of the other. Squatting down on the forest floor, I curve my knife through the sinews and separate the fat from the meat. The humid air causes curls to plaster across my forehead.

The hide is worth way more when it comes off in one piece, so I’m sure to move my knife slowly. I stare into its eyes before discarding the leftover bits into the trash. Hunting is just one of the ways we make ends meet. It’s never been anything to me other than a way to survive, but the sight of an animal’s lifeless face always makes my stomach turn. I lay the washed skin over the clothesline to dry. This should make us enough daria for next month’s taxes.

As I open my eyes on Friday morning, I go through my to-do list for the competition. I practice my speech, for when they ask me why I want to participate in the bridal competition. I even prepare my outfit like Issa said. My best flowy green dress that ties at the waist.

On Fridays, I go with mother to the big market to sell what she harvested from our fields. We’ve done this since I was a baby, wrapped in a cloth against her back all day as she sold her harvest. Mother grows the biggest potatoes and yams so we always have a line of women waiting to get their share for dinner that night. I’m fidgeting the entire cart ride to the city and I’ve bitten my nails down to the skin, trying to keep my nerves at bay. This week all my lessons have blurred

together into one giant waste of time. I *already* know how to cook. I can mend clothes. *Yes*, the washing will be done every week. The Iudicium can't start soon enough.

I help mother set up her stall in a shady spot in the big market and we wait for customers. I stack the sweet potatoes neatly on one shelf, and the purple yams on another. Rows and rows of stalls are set up with wares on beautiful displays. Women come here from every township to sell their harvest or their crafts. Fish and seal meat from Arctic 1 and 2, stone beads, cactus fruit juice, and lizard meat from Desert 1, and fruits, vegetables, woven baskets, meat, and hides from Forest 1 and 2.

"Have you thought about what your husband might be like?" mother asks over the bartering of the market. She hands a large, purple-skinned yam to a beautiful Lusean woman, accepting two daria in return. Her large yellow hat is a boastful display of her wealth. My heart sinks into my stomach as I register that I haven't thought about that part. I realize that I haven't really been thinking about the other half of this ordeal at all. I've been dwelling on helping my family, fulfilling my responsibilities, and getting to do the things that I have always wanted to do, but I forgot about a husband.

"No, I... I haven't really thought about that part".

Just as I finish speaking a tall boy runs by the stall almost knocking me right into our display.

"Say excuse me, please!"

"Excuse me!"

He shouts as he darts to the left, barely missing an entire barrel of cactus juice. He has a big scar behind his ear and it fades into the distance right before a bunch of Lusean guards race after him. I roll my eyes. I wonder how he got that. The scent that trails behind

him is hard to ignore. He smelled absolutely divine. Like warm spiced apple wine from back home. I want my husband to smell like that.

CHAPTER THREE

It's finally Sunday and I almost break one of Issa's fingers from squeezing so tightly on our ride into the city. Our mothers decided to ride all together since father and Issa's dad are off hunting again. Also, it's harder for Wastelanders to steal from a cart with so many people on it.

"What do you think my husband will look like?" Issa asks.

"I hope he is at least as tall as me," she says while pouting and pulling on a strand of her pin-straight black hair.

"Well, I've been thinking about it since mother mentioned it on Friday and I want my husband to be the strongest of the contestants. If he's going to be a general, he has to be the best. I'm not interested in becoming a widow at eighteen. And I'd like it if he was handsome. And kind. And tall. And brown like me."

I guess I do have some feelings about my prospective husband. Having ideas about what he will be like makes me so much

more nervous. It makes him feel real. What if I find this perfect man and he doesn't want me? What if he does not choose me? What if I have to settle for a simple life of tending the fields and struggling to make ends meet back in Forest 1?

We get to the entrance of the Recreation Center early, so we are the first girls in line. Our mothers head to the market as they aren't allowed inside for this round.

"Name, please," says a tall lanky inspector.

He pushes his white cap out of his face as his eyes shuffle back and forth on his clipboard, looking for my name. It does look way too big for his head. I glance at Issa and catch her looking him up and down with a coy smirk on her lips.

"Focus".

I elbow her in the side. She shrugs her shoulders nonchalantly.

Once we step into the main auditorium, I realize that we weren't first in line at all. There are about 200 girls already waiting in a long spiraling line. Bright lights shine down from the high ceiling, illuminating the shiny black floor. Voices echo from every direction as girls are led through their inspections. There are four different areas with medical curtains around them. I start to have a shaky feeling in my stomach. Everything looks so impersonal. So sterile.

"Zenya Marku."

I walk up to one of the stations and Issa is sent in the opposite direction for her first inspection. I strip down behind a curtain and a female inspector looks me over. Everywhere. Her gloved hands are cold as she lifts each arm to check for scars and imperfections. My knees are covered in them from hunting and tending to the fields. She even counts my teeth before writing her findings on a notepad. I'm

almost certain I have all my teeth.

At the next stop, a nurse instructs me to sit down on a narrow bed and draws the curtains closed.

"This will be a bit tight," she says as she ties a long rubber string around my arm. She takes my blood for some sort of test.

When she comes back she says "When did you start your period?"

The question is one that I wasn't prepared for, and I pause for a moment before answering.

"When I was fourteen."

"Hmm," she says curtly.

My heart starts to pound loudly in my ears. Did I say something wrong? Should I have lied? I don't see why it even matters.

"Go stand in that line over there", she juts her chin out in the direction of a line with just a few girls waiting by a huge obsidian door.

As I walk, I scan the room for Issa, but I don't see her anywhere. Maybe she's already finished and waiting outside. I only know one of the girls in the line, and it's a relief to see a familiar face.

"Bia, have you seen Issa anywhere?" I whisper to her. She shakes her head, just as I hear my name called from behind the door.

A short, fat inspector walks me to a bright room with a table cutting through the center of it. Four people are sitting on one side. I take the only chair on the other side, the cold metal biting into my thighs. I scan their expressionless faces. Each one wears a uniform indicating some rank within King Tau's court.

"Zenia, do you have any siblings?" says the pale, blonde woman, her hands tightly clasped. Her skin is almost transparent.

"No, I don't. I had a younger brother, but he passed away a few days after he was born".

I don't like talking about my baby brother. It makes me feel numb all over. Five years have passed, but I can't forget how heartbroken mother was when he died in his sleep. She lay in bed crying for days and she refused to even eat.

Father hasn't mentioned him since, but I know he thinks about how things could have been if his son had lived. He did not even have a name yet.

"Your test results don't look good Zenya, and we are considering whether you should go through to the next round or not. Based on your low FSH levels, you may not be able to conceive children. If you have anything to say at this point, please do."

My heart drops into my stomach and my head starts to spin.

What?

I think I might vomit. How could they know if I can have children or not just from one test? I've never been sick, and I'm young and I exercise and-

"I'm not sure what the right thing to say is. I just want you to know that I deserve to be here. I've been preparing to be a bride for as long as I can remember. I have a passion for caring for a home and... for a husband. My parents have the most loving partnership, and I want the chance to have that with someone one day. To have a home where warmth and light spread throughout our community from it. To have joyful beautiful chil-". I hesitate, weighing the new information.

"Where no one can question the love and passion that keeps us together. I want to make my family proud. Please give me the chance."

Hot tears fill my eyes as I start to sob. I could never really put into words how I felt and why I wanted to be a wife so badly, but when

all of that is on the line, it finally comes pouring out. What I said is true, but I didn't dare mention the fact that living in the city would afford luxuries that I have no other way of getting.

I can't see the interviewers' faces through my tears but I hear papers shuffling. I wipe my eyes to see that one of them is crying as well. She rubs her forehead roughly, looking down at her papers for a long time before saying,

"If you can make it to the final round, then that means you're a worthy candidate. We will let the winners decide who they want from there, regardless of your possible...deficiency. Keep that quiet for now."

The other interviewers gawk at her, speechless. One of them covers his face with both hands. She must be the one in charge of making the final decision, as no one objects. I jump up from my chair as tears continue streaming down my face.

"Thank you! Thank you so much! I run out of the room before an inspector can tell me which way to go.

This is it. It's happening.

I've prayed every night since the announcement came for the Iudicium.

God, please grant me this chance. A chance for a better life.

He did just that. Finally, I have a chance to have a more meaningful life. I love my family and my home, but this is an opportunity to avoid spending the rest of my life doing back-breaking work. I clench my fist, picturing my parents' slumped bodies after a long day of labor. The news of not being able to have children floats through my mind, but I push it down. *I won't waste this.*

I step out into the bright sunshine, smiling so hard that my cheeks hurt. Mother, Issa's mother, and Issa are standing under the

shade of a nearby tree. Issa is staring at the ground with her arms folded. As I get closer, I see her eyes are swollen.

“Issa, what happened?”

“I didn’t make it,” she says curtly. “They said that I wasn’t healthy enough to make it through. I’m too thin.” She is scowling and still hasn’t met my eye. I reach for her hand, but she pulls away, turning into the embrace of her mother.

“It looks like you passed. Congrats, I hope you make it all the way.”

She turns and walks away without looking back even once, her mother trailing behind her.

I’m frozen in place as I contemplate how things have changed in an instant. I feel like jumping up and down with excitement, but my heart is broken for Issa. This is all we have talked about since we were young children; All we have worked for every day. She’s the only person I want to be celebrating with right now, the only person I want to go through this with.

The ride home has never been so quiet. My mind is racing thinking of what I’ll need to pack to enter training camp tomorrow: Toiletries, clothes, my aprons, my embroidery kit, my favorite pillow. But I look over and see my best friend staring up at the stars. She hasn’t said a word since we spoke outside of the Rec Center. I reach over and grab her hand. She looks down at me and we both start to cry.

“You should have made it. I don’t want to go through this without you,” I whisper.

“You deserved to make it Zenya. You deserve to win. I didn’t get through but I can still find love back home. I’m okay, I promise.”

I feel nauseous as her words remind me of the conversation I

had in that cold room. I didn't deserve to make it. I deserve to stay in Forest 1. I reach over and squeeze her tight. A bittersweet goodbye.

CHAPTER FOUR

“How do I look?” I ask mother as I press some homemade berry lip balm onto my lips.

“You look beautiful Zenya. You always do,” she says from the seat across from me. My parents managed to pay for a train ride into the city today. How they could afford it is beyond me, but they are seeing me off to training camp and said they want me to look my best. My hair is pulled into a loose bun on top of my head with curly tendrils framing my amber face and highlighting my bright green eyes. My father is reading the Lusean newspaper but even he looks up and says

“You look beautiful Zen.” His rare compliment makes me blush. I smile as I look at myself in the reflection of the train’s glass window. I couldn’t have pictured how extravagant it would be.

There are only two trains in Cardinia. One travels around the country to each region, bringing supplies and people into the city, and

the other brings waste into the Wasteland, where all of the country's garbage is processed in factories.

This train is lined with royal blue velvet upholstery. The wooden walls are bordered with golden strands of metal throughout and bright warm lights run down the middle of the ceiling. The air is cool and the seats are smooth and soft, unlike the rough wooden benches of my family's cart. The train sways gently, coming to a smooth halt at the Desert 1 station. Wind whisks clouds of sand past the windows. The train station is the only building I can see for miles.

From what I know, Desert 1 is the most unfortunate of the townships. Their food and water are scarce, so they depend heavily on the rations supplied by the city.

"Next stop, Arctic 2," a muffled voice says over the loudspeaker.

I watch as a train attendant walks down the aisle, passing out small pouches to each passenger. His black uniform is stitched together with shimmering golden thread. When he arrives at our seats, he places three packets of dried meat on the table.

"Welcome aboard," he says cheerfully.

Guilt fills my chest immediately. We can't afford this. Mother and Father already did the impossible by getting us train tickets.

"Excuse me."

The man turns, eyebrows raised.

"We won't be buying these."

I push the packets towards him and the smile returns to his face.

"They're complimentary, miss. Enjoy."

Knowing how much we have to give to the city, I'm surprised that anything is free. I reach for the packet, examining it closely. The

dark chunks of meat look like antelope for sure. The ones we hunt for back home. In tiny letters on the back, I find the answer to my silent question.

Made in Forest 1.

* * *

I can see the white mountain landscape of Arctic 2 passing outside of the window as we pick up more passengers. I plan to visit every single township when I'm a citizen of Lusea.

We are already pulling into City Station by the time I finish fixing my makeup. I wish I could afford to ride the train all the time. Maybe someday I will.

We walk through the cramped station and out onto Main Street. As we approach the Recreation Center, I see a colorful mass of people waiting out front. Those with large-brimmed brown hats and brick-red attire who must be from Desert 1. There are pale people with pink cheeks, dressed in ornate azure clothes and dark gray furs from Arctic 1 and 2. And of course, I see my people. People dressed in forest green from Forests 1 and 2.

Forest 1 has two of the biggest lakes in all of Cardinia. That is where most of the country's water is filtered from.

I'm excited to talk to the other girls. Even though we are competitors, I've barely ever spoken to someone my age from another township.

We are approaching the check-in line when my mother pulls me to the side.

"Zenya, I have to speak with you," she whispers.

Her sudden serious tone is unsettling. She's always been such

a soft-spoken and gentle woman.

"I don't want to ruin your excitement. I want you to have your own experience, but you must know. The people in the city do not have life that easy. The pressures placed on them by the King are more than you could imagine. Please don't trust anyone easily, or you could end up hurt."

She furrows her brow, pinning me with a stern look.

"If anyone is cruel to you, just know that you can leave the competition and come home. If you wait until the last round, you cannot leave. You will be forced to become a concubine of the King if you are not chosen as a bride."

I'm trying to understand mother's fear but she isn't making any sense. The Luseans are privileged. They get the best food, clothes, and homes, and they can afford whatever they please.

It is our turn in line now, but I reassure her.

"Mother, you taught me everything I know. Have some faith in me. If things get too hard, I'll come home." But, I have no intentions of going back to Forest 1. I love my family but I also want to live here. I want to have more. I hug both of my parents but mother refuses to let go, gripping me tightly.

She whispers, "Please be safe" in my ear and I feel her whole body shaking. I pull away and walk up to the check-in table with hesitation as Father waves goodbye. His jaw tenses as he pulls my mother close. For the first time, I'm wondering if this is the right choice. I've never been away from home for even one night.

Just as I finish checking in, I hear a soft voice behind me.

"Are you Zenya? Hi, Issa told me that you made it to this round. I'm Rain. I'm from Forest 2." A stunning girl with long wavy brown hair says, beaming at me. She has a narrow face with big hazel

eyes and freckles.

“Hi, yeah I'm Zenya. How do you know Issa?”

“I met her one day when I was working in the big market. She told me all about you! I'd love it if we could be friends.” Her smile broadens.

Her confidence only adds to the charm that she exudes. I'm not sure I want someone like her next to me in a marriage competition. Still, it's always good to have a friend to lean on. Especially one that Issa approves of. We have weeks of lessons and evaluations ahead of us.

“Sure, we should be friends. I'm sure we have a lot in common.”

She tells me her family lives in a house that floats along the Govi River. Her father is a fisherman, and she has three younger sisters. I wonder if they all look like her. She and her mother make bags from alligator skin and sell them at the big market. She has siblings to play with.

And she's pretty.

I try not to let envy cloud my mind while we walk through the Recreation Center to the dorm area. We are directed into a long room with rows of bunk beds on either side. Girls from every township are busy unpacking their things into drawers underneath their beds. There is a door at the other end that leads to the bathrooms. Rain and I walk down the long aisle and find two bottom bunks next to each other. I plop down on my bunk with a sigh and start unpacking my bag.

As I fold my dresses, I startle when a voice comes over a loudspeaker.

“Attention bridal candidates. We will be calling you in groups

to receive your identification bands. Please listen for your name." The man starts listing off names in groups of five.

When it is my group's turn, we walk down a corridor and up to the next floor. The scent of the room hits my nose instantly, sending a burning pain up into my head. The overhead lights are almost blinding white. Inspectors are scattered about the room at small tables with one seat on either side. I am called to one of the seats and a male inspector tells me to put out my left arm. He pulls it into a metal cuff bolted to the table and closes a latch.

Shock overcomes me as I try to pull away. I feel a sharp burning pain on my wrist.

I look down and he is marking a series of lines on me. A *barcode*. As if we are considered property. I haven't seen the Luseans with barcodes on them, only things like vehicles and livestock. I groan and twist in my chair, trying to get away from the pain. The needle stabs into my skin over and over, piercing deep. Questioning how many lines a barcode can have; I begin counting the minutes silently. Thirty minutes later it finally ends.

The inspector releases me from the shackle in one swift movement. He motions for the next girl to be brought in without a single glance at me. I work to still myself as my entire body shakes. My wrist is pulsing and hot, and tears fill my eyes. I'm already starting to see that this competition will be brutal. It's not just about getting married; I have to make it through whatever comes before that. They've marked us like animals, like cattle. I look at the new addition to my skin.

"13285781."

Entering the dorm, I'm met with a cacophony of protests, screams, and whimpering voices. The room is humid from everyone's

tears. Rain is on her bed, cradling her swollen wrist as she sobs quietly.

We are all in pain and it is only the first day.

Sitting down next to her, I embrace her tightly and we stay like that until the lights are turned out.

CHAPTER FIVE

A smooth feminine voice comes over the loudspeaker, waking me from my feverish sleep as the overhead lights come on.

“Good Morning girls. Welcome to your first day of training. Please dress in your township uniforms and gather in a single file line in the hallway,” she muses.

I put on one of my green dresses and a white apron with lace trim on top; The one my mother made me for my first day of lessons years ago. Hopefully, it will bring me some good luck.

It is exciting to see all of our different colors mixed together. Girls from the Arctic townships are wearing varying shades of blue dresses, and the girls from Desert 1 wear the dark red color of their township. We each have different colored aprons of our choice. Everyone piles out of the room and into the hallway. Just then the clicking sound of shoes grabs my attention.

"Good Morning again, I am Baroness Rose. It is time for your orientation. Follow me," she says as she walks briskly past the group.

She wears a beautiful tea-length blue dress with white roses dancing down the back. Her silken black hair is tied in an elegant low bun. She is exactly what I think of when I imagine the city.

"Quickly!"

We all start to hurry after her.

She brings us to one of the stadiums in the Recreation Center and we sit crowded together in the seats closest to the grassy field.

"I want you to remember why you are here. Remember what your goal is. You may have been learning home-making all of your lives, but I am here to teach you how to be a GENERAL's wife. Being a wife in Lusea is hard work. That is why most of our own girls don't make it," she says from down on the field with one manicured hand shading her brow and the other holding a microphone.

I spot a slightly faded barcode on her wrist as well.

"What does she mean?" I whisper in Rain's ear.

An Arctic girl sitting behind us leans down to our row.

"Haven't you heard? Girls from the city don't usually make it through the bridal competition. They crack under the pressure of being wives and end up killing themselves. That, or they end up going crazy and get sent to the Wasteland to clean up our trash. Do you think we would be their first choice if they had their own people to pick from?" Her thick northern accent is almost too difficult to understand. She rolls her bright blue eyes as if what she said is common knowledge. What do they do to the girls here? I can't imagine cooking and sewing could be that taxing. As I look around, I realize how strange it is that there isn't *one* girl here representing the city. Whatever they go through had to be worse than death if they made

that choice.

* * *

Baroness Rose leads us on a tour of the Rec Center. We pass through various dorm rooms, empty meeting spaces, the gardens, and a gymnasium.

The gym is filled with different sporting equipment and weapons. I spot a rack of spears and staffs that piques my interest. I hope there is some free time to try out one of those spears. We end our tour at the dining hall.

After finishing our breakfast of fruit, milk, and bread, she approaches the podium posted in one corner of the room.

"Alright everyone, I will be conducting your orientation lesson here. We will loosely review all of the techniques you have learned over the years about how to maintain a house and home. Pay attention, I hate repeating myself." She spends the next six hours droning on about cooking, which soaps to use for getting stains out of clothes, disciplinary techniques for children, cleaning, and managing servants. We don't have servants in Forest 1, and I struggle to understand the concept of ordering another person to do your work for you. It doesn't sit right with me.

"Punishing servants for their mistakes is doing them a favor. The more punctual the correction, the better run your household will be and the happier your servants will be as well. It is good for them."

She can't be serious.

"Do not become close with the servants, as it will make it more difficult to dole out punishment. They may become too comfortable and even unruly. Heaven forbid they should step out of line when you are entertaining guests!" Baroness Rose sounds like a general herself.

The Arctic girl named Astrid who we met during orientation is nodding her head in agreement, but this is ridiculous. I won't have servants. I can manage my own house.

Suddenly, Baroness Rose steps down from the podium and slaps a desert girl who has fallen asleep. Hard. She yelps and rubs her head, cursing under her breath.

"If you fall behind or fail to follow the rules you will be punished! Either whipped, starved, or you may be disqualified. You will eat an early dinner here and return to the dorms for the night. Tomorrow is the beginning of your evaluations." As she turns to leave the dining hall she pauses. "And there will be a jar of salve on each of your beds. Apply it to your identification bands and stop all that disgusting itching!"

At dinner, there is so much chatter about the Lusean girls.

The girl who Baroness Rose slapped is sitting at my table.

"I can't believe she really slapped me. We'd been sitting here for hours! With no food! I couldn't even sleep last night because my wrist was in so much pain. It's only the first day, but I don't want to end up like one of them. I miss my Mama; I don't want to be here anymore." She begins to cry hysterically and another desert girl rubs her shoulder to comfort her.

All around me, girls look uncertain and are talking fervently with one another. Rain is sitting next to me and hasn't said a word this entire time. She hasn't eaten anything either. I decide to focus on my food. I can't start falling apart this early if I want to make it to the end. The past day and a half has been so unexpected, but I can't forget why I came here. I cut my chicken and carrots into small pieces to distract myself.

"Why would they just kill themselves? Can you imagine?"

Getting scolded, slapped, or not getting to eat is nothing compared to living in the Arctic. We barely even see the sun most of the year and the cold is just depressing. My parents never let me out of their sight. I never want to go back. I'm going to become a general's wife or a concubine. I don't really care which one," Agnes says with a smug tone, as she steals a sliver of chicken from my plate. Maybe she is right. We were raised in harsh conditions compared to the girls who live here. I'd bet a week's worth of house chores that we can handle a lot more than they can.

* * *

I lay in my bed staring up at the bunk above me. The lights went out twenty minutes ago, but I am overflowing with thoughts of what we might see tomorrow; what challenge they have in store for us.

Whatever it is, I'm sure I can handle it.

"Zenya, I'm scared," Rain says in a shaking voice.

I reach my hand out in the dark and find hers. I'm scared too. My entire future will be determined by this competition.

I can't screw this up.

CHAPTER SIX

I am swimming in a lake. The cold water seeps into my bones, causing my entire body to ache. A red light is growing brighter in the distance.

When I look around me, there are bodies floating, pin straight like soldiers. Girls dressed in golden yellow dresses from the city. Girls with barcodes on their wrists. Girls who probably dreamt of the life that I want.

I try to swim to the surface but the water is thick, like tar. The red light grows closer with each passing moment. Hotter. Someone grabs my wrist. She looks just like me. Staring straight into my soul, her brow is furrowed, her green eyes wide with panic. She opens her mouth to speak but water fills her mouth, choking her as the red light overtakes us both.

I shoot up out of my bed soaked in sweat. I try to catch my

breath, steadying myself against the bed frame. The girl on the bunk above me looks down over the edge with worry. It was just a bad dream.

Rain is walking back from the bathroom, a towel hanging from one shoulder and I tell her about my dream.

"That sounds like a warning," she says. "My mother always told me to listen to your dreams. It can't be a good sign, Zenya. What does the red light mean?"

"I don't know. I can't explain it but it feels like some kind of danger."

"Good morning girls," Baroness Rose sings as she enters the room. "It is time for your first evaluation. Get dressed and line up outside the door." She is wearing a dark green, ankle-length dress fitted at the waist. Her neck is adorned with pearls and her rosy cheeks match her red-stained lips. She looks like the epitome of femininity. Aside from her icy blue-gray eyes, that is.

We all dress and meet her in the hall. From there, she leads us down four flights of stairs to the lowest floor of the building. We go through a set of silver double doors and the room opens up into the most expansive kitchen I have ever seen. Two long black counters line each side of the room. The walls are bedecked with different shining pots and pans on shelves. There are all kinds of foods from every township stacked on a table in the center of the space. Fruits, vegetables, meats, grains, nuts, seeds, oils, seasonings, and spices. Baroness Rose stands in front of it.

"This is your first evaluation. A cooking competition. Each one of you will make a dish that you think represents you. They will be presented to the Iudicium challengers for dinner tonight at the welcome banquet. The twenty girls with the most challengers to select

their food will move on to the next round.”

Only twenty.

My stomach clenches.

“You will have 1 hour to prepare your dish. Afterward, we will attend the opening banquet and have a chance to meet the male challengers. The results of this test will be announced at the end of the banquet. Take a spot behind one of the counters.”

I walk over to one of the spots at the long black counter on the left. There are knives, spatulas, and all other kinds of utensils at my station. The stove looks so strange. We cook on an open fire stove at home, but I turn one of the knobs, and flames erupt from the circle on the left. I am still getting my bearings when Baroness Rose sets the timer.

“Ready. Begin!”

Girls start to rush to the table grabbing anything they can carry. Others are fighting over meats and spices, yelling as they shove one another out of the way. My mind is blank as I try to think about what to make. A dish that represents me. I have no idea. After standing in the same spot for at least five minutes, Rain elbows me in the side.

“Get going Zenya, there's no time to waste.”

I decide to get inspiration from the table as I hurry over to it.

Sifting through the mess of various items, I search desperately for enough ingredients to make a meal. There is a chunk of beef hiding underneath a pile of leafy greens and I grab it. There isn't much else left on the table besides some carrots, a few potatoes, and celery... I'll just have to make beef stew. Mother's beef stew is heavenly on a chilly night and father loves having a bowl of it after a long day of hunting. The challengers might feel the same way after

their first trial. They'll want something warm and comforting. I grab a big pot from the shelf to hold the other things that I'll need: Chili powder, onion powder, cumin, thyme, bay leaves, salt, pepper, tomato, garlic, onion, and oil. I don't know if I have enough time to let the beef get tender, but it's the best idea I've got.

I haul everything back to my station and start cutting up all of the vegetables. Next, I try to figure out how to control the heat on this stove.

First, the oil goes in. Once it is hot I add in the onions and garlic. I finish sautéing those, then my seasoned meat chunks go in. When they are cooked on the outside, I mash up some tomatoes and add them. Those cook down and then I add the other ingredients into the pot. I add water to cover everything. If all goes well, my stew will be finished by the end of the hour.

I look over at Rain's station and see her shredding an unripe papaya. On the other side of the room, I see all kinds of dishes being prepared. Fried fish, rice dishes, soups, various meats, and cakes. One girl from the desert is even stacking multiple cakes on top of one another.

After forty-five minutes, I taste my stew. It's pretty good but it needs more salt and something else. I stare into the dark liquid, hoping it will tell me what is missing.

"Two minutes left!"

I run over to the table of ingredients and spot a scotch bonnet pepper. I slice a small piece into my stew. Two minutes should be enough for it to add some flavor.

"Time is up! Step away from your dishes."

Looking at Rain's serving plate, I see a bright papaya salad blooming on a beautiful serving bowl. She's beaming with pride as

Baroness Rose walks around the room surveying the different foods each girl has made. She nods her head and smiles, impressed at our work.

“You will make wonderful wives. Some of you at least,” she says, sneering as she passes a girl from my township with a big burnt fish sitting on a banana leaf. She cradles a wounded hand to her chest. “When you are wives, you will instruct your servants to prepare meals based on your husband’s taste, and his mood. This might seem like a minuscule task, but the happiness of your home depends on you. All of you head back to the dorm and get dressed. You are attending a party after all.”

That was the most fun I’ve had in a while. The thrill of the timer counting down, and the mouth-watering aromas of different foods cooking. Getting to focus on something I am good at takes the edge off of competing. The only thing that would make it even better is if I pass.

We stroll back to the dorm together. I hear some of the girls ahead of me gasping and squealing. When I reach the door, I see why.

The room is filled with beautiful floor-length gowns of all different shades and colors, one hanging on each of our beds. Dresses with lace appliques, silk, organza, and tulle skirts. My dress is a beautiful forest green. It has a halter neckline, and it is fitted at the waist. Stepping into the dress and zipping up the back, I squirm against the rough fabric of the bodice. It accentuates my chest more than I am used to. The bottom billows out on every side in a sparkling ball gown skirt. Rain’s dress is a green strapless mermaid-style gown with pleated draping pinned at her waist.

“What did you end up making?” I ask her as I apply some of the makeup that was laid out for us to use.

"I made steamed fish with a papaya salad. It's something that we eat at home for dinner all the time. The salad is super refreshing, so I think they'll enjoy it after the long day they've had."

I smile at the irony. Just like me, she was thinking about what the challengers would want.

Once everyone is dressed, we wait in the hall for Baroness Rose. She saunters in, wearing a floor-length black gown. It has long sleeves and flares out at the bottom. A string of small white pearls adorns her neck.

"Follow me, everyone, we are running late. She sounds even more cold than usual. Quickly now, it is a long way to the Palace," she says as she hurries to the stairs.

The Palace.

I had no idea that the banquet would be at the Palace. We make our way out of the Rec Center and onto three long black buses. Everyone is chattering excitedly about what the Palace might look like.

"I bet their forks are made of solid gold," says Agnes.

"A woman in the market told me there are over one-hundred bedrooms!" exclaims Ayanna; a girl from the desert with beautiful fox-shaped eyes.

If the King and Queen are present at the banquet, I have to try and make a good impression. Mother always says first impressions are the most important.

It takes us one hour to reach the Palace and as we pull up, the sparkling golden gates open on a phantom wind. We drive up a marvelous road with green grass, lush trees, and lion statues lining each side. The entire property is encircled by a deep forest.

Baroness Rose leads us to the front door of the palace, where

our barcodes are scanned by a palace guard. A huge golden lion head with a door knocker in its mouth decorates the massive door. Its eyes are bright red rubies.

“Alright girls, prepare yourselves. We will be announced in a moment. Enter the ballroom quietly and take your seats on the right side,” the Baroness says confidently after fixing the collar of Agnes’ light blue gown.

A thunderous voice sounds as the door opens.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Announcing the Iudicium bridal candidates, escorted by the Baroness Marian Rose.” We make our way into the room and the clicking of heels grows louder. There are two golden thrones at the far end. I look around the ballroom and the cream walls are gilded in gold trim with colorful pastel paintings spread across the ceiling and walls. Red drapes hang beautifully down each window and a long table spans half of the room. The other half is the dance floor. We take our seats on the right side. On the opposite side of the room, seats are mirroring ours. The thunderous voice rings out again.

“Announcing the Iudicium challengers, escorted by General Lindor Rose.” The door opens and young men start to pour in. There are men from all over Cardinia. My eyes scan over each one, hoping for a sign to tell me who will be my husband. My stomach is in knots

at the thought. They all take their seats on the left side of the room, looking over at us. Smiling. Some ogling.

“Please rise for the King and Queen of Cardinia. King Tau and Queen Fara.”

Everyone stands as the King and Queen enter through a door behind the thrones. The five current generals enter the room and stand on either side of the thrones. The women curtsy and the men bow. Baroness Rose warned us that if anyone curtsies incorrectly, we would be punished for it.

It seems there is a punishment for every mistake made here.

“Welcome to the opening banquet of the Iudicium. Our challengers and our bridal candidates have spent the day competing to become the future of this country. I am proud to announce that my son Prince Aaron is also competing in the trials this year.”

The King gestures to his right and a tall young man with a dazzling smile slowly bows. He has light brown skin, shiny black hair, and eyes the color of wildflower honey. He is the picture of nobility, with his broad shoulders and long legs. There is whispering throughout the young women.

What about the King’s second son? It seems Prince Cayman is not participating. In fact, he isn’t present here at all.

“This evening, we will be dining on dishes prepared by our beautiful bridal candidates. The challengers will pick three dishes that they wish to enjoy. The women behind the top twenty dishes will continue to the next round of the competition,” the King continues.

They only get to pick three?

That seems unfair. There are almost one-hundred of us.

Before I can finish my thought, a man with white gloves and a waistcoat, signals for our dishes to be brought out. Various silver

plates, platters, bowls, and stands are placed around the table. The men line up and begin selecting their dishes. Some men go straight for the meat, others for the cake, and I see a number of challengers picking my stew. I smile widely as my heart swells.

The girl with the burnt fish is crying, as she is passed over by every challenger. I feel for her. She clearly wasn't cut out for this pressure. As the prince circles the table, I watch him closely. His muscled arms are visible through his dark blue jacket as he picks at the various dishes on the table. I notice a scar behind his left ear, and my mind snaps back to that day in the market.

I didn't get a good look at his face when he almost knocked our display over but that scar is hard to forget. A small smile pulls at the corner of my lips. What business would the prince of Cardinia have running through a common market? Surely, he wasn't there to buy anything. The guards that were chasing after him tell me he was up to no good.

The men begin to eat. All the while, Baroness Rose is keeping score of which dishes have been selected. Everyone who picked my stew seems to be enjoying it. Some are even going back for seconds. I am proud of myself, to say the least.

After they finish their meal, Baroness Rose and General Lindor approach the center of the room, hand in hand.

"Thank you for your participation in both challenges, everyone. The male challengers' efforts in the hand-to-hand combat trial was impressive to say the least. My wife and I are proud to lead you all into the future of Cardinia. "

General Lindor kisses Baroness Rose's hand.

"We will now announce the Iudicium challengers and the bridal candidates that will move on to the next round. Starting with

the women: Agnes Jonsdottir, Zenya Marku, Ayanna Akesh, Rain Wyman, Nichelle Adelson....”

The Baroness lists the names of the twenty girls who will be continuing. I look over to where Rain is sitting and blow her a kiss. She giggles at my ridiculous display.

General Lindor reads out the names of the twenty competitors moving on in the Iudicium:

“Prince Aaron, Ibrahim O'hare, Bomani Binto, Chi Oriwa, Lucas Jensen, Amit Andrews...” Of course, the Prince made it. Bomani from my township made it too. I'm proud that there are people representing Forest 1 here.

After we all finish eating, the losing candidates are escorted out of the ballroom, while the rest of us are allowed to mingle and dance. The only rule is that we cannot touch outside of dancing. I make my way to the King and Queen's thrones and curtsy as gracefully as I can manage. Then, I walk through the crowd. As I am approaching Rain, the smell of spiced apple wine floats past me. I turn to see the prince walking away.

“No guards chasing you today?” I ask with a smile. He stops abruptly. The prince turns on a heel and approaches me with his hands folded behind his back, eyes narrowed. An expression of mock seriousness lines his features.

“My excursions outside of the palace are no one's business.”

“Oh, it certainly was my business when you almost knocked me over.”

“My apologies...”

“Zenya.”

“Zenya. Well Zenya, I'll have to make it up to you somehow. In the meantime, my trip to the market should remain a secret between

the two of us. Nice dress," he says as he looks me up and down, pausing at my breasts. He smiles devilishly and walks away.

My skin feels like pins and needles. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears. He sounds so much more playful than I imagined. And that smell. He smells divine. He smells like home. Warmth. Safety. I wonder if it's too much to hope that he'll select me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The dorm room feels desolate. Just yesterday there were almost one-hundred girls living here. Now, just twenty of us are left. The bunk beds have been removed and twenty full-sized beds line the room, ten on each side. Everyone has woken up early and an uneasiness has settled over the room. With just twenty of us left, only fifteen need to be eliminated before we are selected as brides.

I go to the bathroom and wash my face to settle my nerves; sitting on the cold bathroom floor to clear my head. It is way less tense in here. I've been thinking about the prince since last night. He seems so much more relaxed than I thought a prince would be. As I run through my thoughts, something glimmering catches my eye.

Tied on the bottom side of the last sink, there is a gold signet ring. It has the same lion on it as the one on the palace door, with rubies for eyes. I untie the string, and the weight of the ring is shocking. *This has to be real gold.* Why would something like this be

here? I can hear the loud clicking of heels through the door, so I shove it into the pocket of my apron and quickly head back into the main room.

“Good morning girls!” Baroness Rose says in an enthusiastic voice. “We have another fine day ahead of us. Today we will be spectators for the second trial. We will get the chance to see what the challengers are made of. Get dressed. We leave for the arena in twenty minutes.” She turns to leave and I see a smear of black and blue on the back of her right arm. Did she get hurt at the banquet?

“Rain, did you see anything happen to Baroness Rose yesterday?” I ask as she lounges on her bed knitting a scarf.

“No, I didn’t see anything, I was talking with Ibrahim for most of the afternoon. Did you know that he and the prince have been best friends since they were four years old? And he looks so good in red. I’m knitting this scarf to give to him when he picks me as his wife,” she says jovially.

“I bet it was General Lindor,” Agnes remarks as she saunters over and sits on Rain’s bed. “I have heard stories of how cruel some of the generals can be. Beating their wives and children whenever they get angry. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

That can’t be true. He seemed so kind at the banquet. Why would he do something like that? The more I learn about the Luseans, the less I want to know.

* * *

We are brought to the trial arena by the same black bus, but only one this time. City people are lining both sides of the walkway leading up to the open gate, all wearing their representative bright yellow colors.

We exit the bus and the people fall completely silent. They watch as we walk up to the arena and some even bow their heads.

Our barcodes are scanned before a guard leads us inside.

Worry and confusion spread throughout the girls as we take our seats in one of the VIP viewing boxes overlooking the entire arena. I can barely see across to the other side where the King and Queen sit in a box of their own. Their younger son Cayman stands next to his mother, craning his head over the edge to see down into the arena. The second prince is only a year younger than his brother, but his demeanor is almost child-like.

Our seats offer the perfect view of the action to come, of the prize to be won. Baroness Rose takes her seat at the back of the viewing box, letting out a long sigh. Usually the picture of poise, she slouches in her seat. This is a rare moment of rest for her, away from prying eyes.

The crowd erupts into loud cheers as trumpets sound and the twenty competitors file out onto the grassy field below. Everyone in our viewing box is on their feet trying to get a better look.

Right away, I spot Prince Aaron. He wears a set of yellow training clothes with a black stripe down each side. The competitors spread out on the field and begin stretching. Well, most of them do. Ibrahim is doing backflips across the space, eliciting screams and cheers from the spectators, and a bellowing laugh from the prince. In the seat next to me, Rain fans herself with her hand and blows out a breath. I roll my eyes.

The King stands from his throne, resplendent in golden armor and the crowd falls silent.

“Citizens of Lusea, welcome to the second trial of the Iudicium. Greetings to those watching from the townships as well.”

My parents will likely be watching the event too, crowded around the television in the local Rec Center back home. I am both excited and nervous at the thought.

"Today these fine young men will show their strength and agility by completing an obstacle course. Not just any course, but the same one that my generation and that of my father before me conquered in their time."

The King snaps his fingers and the two sides of the field pull away, revealing a cruel-looking arrangement of obstacles. Pools of water, balance beams, swinging blades, ropes for climbing, and a race track at the end.

"Five competitors will be eliminated in this round. Unless, there are unexpected casualties, in which case there could be more." I could swear I heard him chuckle as he finished speaking.

The competitors are lining up shoulder to shoulder in preparation. Prince Aaron looks up towards our viewing box, smiling. He waves in our direction, causing me and I'm sure a few others to blush.

The King claps his hands together twice and flames erupt over the pool at the beginning of the course. Right above the surface of the water. *How*. At the same time, the balance beams begin to rotate and nails rise from the ground beneath them. This isn't a challenge, it is a death trap. My heartbeat accelerates and my palms start to sweat. There is no way-

"Woohoo!" Agnes screams from the front edge of the box. She is jumping up and down, clapping while she watches. Disgust coils in my stomach as I take a deep breath and look on.

These young men have been training for this since they were just children. At ten years old, they were entered either into merchant

work, field work, hunting, or the military by their parents. They know what they're doing. Still, I fear for them. There is no way they'll all make it through this brutal arena unscathed.

"Ready! Begin!"

The competitors dive into the pool all at once, flames licking at the surface of the water. I realize there is nowhere to come up for air and start to panic. I can see Prince Aaron's bright clothes through the water. He is spearing through quickly, closely followed by Bomani and everyone else trailing behind them. The surface of the water is still as they flow towards the end of the pool. After what feels like an eternity they start to surface on the other side. All but one.

A young man from Desert 1 doesn't come up at all. My eyes start to burn. His parents must be watching. My heart breaks for them having to watch their son die. Would they be proud of him for competing, or ashamed that he failed?

The rest of the contestants race for the second obstacle, the beams. Bomani mounts his first, almost losing his footing from the water dripping off of him. He balances himself as Ibrahim and the prince climb up onto their beams. They start to make their way across and the Prince slips, banging his face on the beam, while his competitors race ahead. He hugs it while it rotates, hanging on as he dangles over the nails below. I hold my breath the entire time. On the next rotation, he is back on his feet, running for the other end of the beam. The crowd roars with excitement. He is behind now, with blood streaming down his forehead. I feel my breakfast coming up. All of the remaining men make it through the beam, thank God.

Please protect them from harm. Keep them safe. It feels like someone has my stomach in a vise.

The swinging blades are next. I see the contestants hesitate.

There is only enough room for one person to go through at a time. A test of bravery. Ibrahim dashes forward and the blades stop swinging. They completely halt as if held by invisible hands. As he steps in front of the first one they start to swing again. He pulls back, taking a deep breath before dashing straight through the blades to the other side. He makes it through completely unscathed and bows slowly to the crowd; a delighted grin on his face. One by one the rest of the competitors file through. Some hesitantly, some hurriedly, and some screaming the whole way across.

The second casualty of the event is Lucas. I remember him from the opening banquet. His blonde hair was almost white under the lights of the ballroom. His cheeks were bright pink as he spoke with Ayanna. He makes it only a few feet before missing the timing of the pause and being sliced clean in two by one of the blades. I scream as blood sprays everywhere, the pieces of him thudding to the ground. Even Agnes looks sick to her stomach. Rain isn't watching anymore. She is sitting in her seat staring straight ahead. Ayanna is pacing back and forth with her arms wrapped around herself. Whispering under my breath, I say a prayer of comfort for his family.

After the blades, it's up and over a wall. Nothing compared to the test of endurance that awaits the future generals at the end. A race.

The eighteen remaining contestants fall into their lanes, savoring the small chance to catch a breath.

"On your marks, get set, GO!" A loud boom sounds through the arena and they take off. Immediately, I see two men in green attire stumble down onto the track, fatigued from all that they just went through.

Get up! Please!

The last three to cross the finish line will be eliminated. I

watch as the contestants fight the fatigue, the fear, and desperately run towards the end of the track.

Just then, the King yells “release them,” and dogs, foaming at the mouth, emerge from the sides of the arena, heading right for the stragglers in the race.

No. This can't be real.

The dogs reach the contestants within seconds. I watch as a young man from Forest 2 is ripped to shreds by the mongrels. They keep tearing into him until he stops screaming. The other contestants run faster now.

Prince Aaron crosses the finish line first, landing on a soft mat at the end; the only mercy in this entire God-forsaken competition. His entire training shirt is soaked in his blood and sweat.

I count as the others cross the finish line. Bomani, Amit, Ibrahim...

Once number fifteen crosses, a metal wall suddenly ascends from the ground between the finish line and the last of the contestants. Leaving them completely exposed to the hungry dogs. I turn away as their screams are muffled by the barking, snarling, and gnashing coming from those *beasts*. I have never seen an animal look like that. So bloodthirsty and full of rage. Their eyes, the same blood-red color as the royal family's crest.

I cover my ears with both hands and when I look up, Baroness Rose is standing with her arms crossed. She looks almost bored, watching the massacre happening down on the field. Like this was a simple game of football.

The arena falls silent before a rolling applause starts from where the Royals sit. We join in, hesitantly. The rest is a blur.

Prince Aaron is crowned the winner, and there is no mention

of those who died today, the lives that ended. The competitors are led off the field and we are led back to that black bus. None of us utters a word, though Agnes of all people cries the entire way back. I guess she has a heart after all.

CHAPTER NINE

I vomit into the toilet for the fifth time. Rain rubs my back while I lean over the bowl begging for it to stop. My shoulders shake uncontrollably. The urge to run out the door and not stop until I am back home in my township overwhelms me.

My mother was right. The city is cruel and heartless. The King most of all. *He laughed. He enjoyed himself.* I can't handle seeing people die for sport. I can't handle the idea of building a life here with someone just to have it ripped away by petty conflict.

"We just watched people get slaughtered, Zenya. Innocent young people, and for what? To prove their loyalty? Their strength? What a waste. They could have let those men- boys really, return home to their families instead of being mauled to death."

She's right. They didn't have to die just to prove that they were worthy. It was for sport, for entertainment. I don't know if I want

to be a part of something like this.

"I'm going to check in on the others," Rain says as she exits the stall. I lean against the door, sliding down onto the cold bathroom floor. The temperature is a balm after being so sick to my stomach. I pull the signet ring back out of my apron pocket and stare into those crimson eyes. The color of those dogs' eyes. Of rage. Of blood.

* * *

"You won't get the privilege of witnessing the next two events, girls. Those will take place behind closed doors. A military strategy meeting and mock debate to showcase their political skills. Nothing we need to concern ourselves with," says Baroness Rose.

The current generals are trying to negotiate a peace treaty with Galway and they need all the help they can get. We aren't allowed to hear any classified information, so who knows when we will get to see the challengers again. When I'll get to see Prince Aaron again. Baroness Rose stabs into a cube of roasted potato before popping it into her mouth. I've found it hard to eat since the second trial three days ago. It's been quiet in the Rec Center; a much-needed break from the "hustle and bustle" according to Baroness Rose.

Hushed conversation fills the dining hall, and I push around my eggs and turkey bacon.

"You know those kinds of things will be a daily occurrence if you're a general's wife, right Zenya?" Agnes chides from the table next to mine. "You'll have to get used to events like that. This life isn't for those with weak hearts."

"I seem to remember you bawling your eyes out on the way home, Agnes." That remark earns me a pat on the back from the girls

at my table, and a scowl from Agnes. "Excuse me for not enjoying torture."

The Baroness slams her fork down, causing me to flinch. "Can I enjoy my meal without all of this whining? Those men participated by choice. Just like all of you. These trials have been happening for decades. If you have a problem with how things are done, then you can go home!" She smooths her napkin on her lap before finishing her breakfast in silence.

* * *

We have been tasked with making our own dinner, as punishment for complaining about the trials at breakfast. The black bus drops us off right at the entrance of the big market, where it intersects Main street. The heat of the mid-morning sun hits me as soon as I step off the bus.

"Be back here in an hour or be left behind," the driver grunts. He is already reclining his seat before we even walk away.

The market is bustling as usual and I look around for any trace of my mother, but it isn't Friday. How I wish it was, and I could see her smiling face. Her kind eyes. Feel her calming presence.

"I'm gonna go find a bathroom," I say to the group and walk off into the market.

Truth is, I just need a moment of quiet. A moment away from this competition and from the reminder of what I willingly signed myself up for.

I find a shady spot behind a building on the perimeter of the market. Sitting on a flat stone, I let out a sigh. I close my eyes and let the sounds of the market blend together around me. Women negotiating the price of goods, daria coins clanking in exchange,

rickety carts bumping down the cobblestone street, and young children laughing or crying while trailing after their mothers.

“Meeting someone here?” A deep playful voice cuts through the noise. “At the banquet, you didn’t seem like the type to break rules.”

I look up and the prince is towering over me. The midday sun shrouds his form in beautiful golden light. His common yellow clothes do little to hide his countenance and if the people in the market weren’t so busy with their own lives, I’m sure they’d notice him.

“You’re Highness. I was just taking a break. Besides, I could say the same for you. How often do these trips out of the palace happen?” I do my best to mask my nerves with sarcasm. His deep smile sends flutters through my stomach.

“Call me Aaron. And I like to get away from all the paperwork once in a while to spend some time around the people. At least once a week if I can manage.”

“Oh? And what exactly do you spend that time doing?”

“Walking, sampling the fare from around the country, but mostly watching. I’d like to be familiar with my people and their struggles. I don’t intend to be a distant ruler like my father.” At that comment, his eyes darken and I look away, sensing that I heard something I shouldn’t have. The prince chuckles; a deep, heavy sort of sound.

“Relax Zenya, it’s a joke. But really, what are you doing here? You shouldn’t be out unsupervised.”

I explain to him that the other girls and I are currently on punishment.

“Save some food for me, and I’ll stop by to pick it up.” A playful smirk spreads across his face.

“Baroness Rose would kill me if I got caught alone with a man. Even if he is the prince. I’ll have to decline.”

He grazes a finger against my hand, and my breath hitches.

“I mean it. I’d like to learn more about you. Please?” His suddenly serious tone makes butterflies bloom in my stomach and my breathing speeds up.

“But how? And where? There’s nowhere we could meet without getting caught.” The Rec Center doors are always guarded.

“I know a place. Meet me on the western edge of the Rec Center garden after curfew.”

“I-”

“This way!” A rough voice calls and I hear the pounding of feet approaching.

“Great,” the prince hisses, suddenly pressing us against the building, pinning me to it. He presses in harder, the contours of his chest pushing into mine.

A group of guards sprint past the alleyway, searching for him. My heart is beating so loudly that I’m sure he can hear it, feel it. But I won’t protest the closeness. That smell. His smell is just heavenly. Cinnamon, wine, and apples. I’m tempted to lean in and inhale his scent deeper when he suddenly pulls away.

“Time for me to head back. I’ll see you tonight?”

“I... okay.”

He smiles warmly at me before running off in the opposite direction of where the guards went. My face heats up, and it is an effort to slow my heartbeat.

I have no idea how much time has passed, so I make my way back to the group, picking up a few items for dinner on my way there.

“Where the heck have you been? I was just about to come

looking for you,” says Rain.

“I got stuck talking to one of the merchants. What did you find for dinner?”

She starts listing off ingredients she bought, but I can’t hear her over my own thoughts. *He wants to get to know me.* Those butterflies flutter through my stomach and up into my throat.

We make it back to the Rec Center in time to have a few hours before dinner. Everyone gets to work preparing the items they purchased. I picked up ingredients to make stewed chicken, with white rice and steamed vegetables. Now isn’t the time to try a new dish when the prince will be eating it. All I can think about is our meeting.

How will I get out of the dorms and all the way down to the gardens without a guard noticing?

I shovel down my food at dinner. It is an effort to avoid all of the small talk around me. The food sits heavy in my stomach as I walk through the halls looking for the best way to sneak into the gardens without notice. Thankfully there are no cameras at the door of the dorm, but there are guards at the outer doors of the building and the doors to the stadium. I have to pass by the stadium entrance on my way to the gardens.

Ugh, why did I agree to meet him? I’ll be starved for a week for this. Two, even. I try to convince myself that it’ll be worth it. I’d be a fool to deny that he is gorgeous. Spending time alone with him could be fun. Exciting. I finish my inspection of the route to the gardens before making my way back to the dorm.

* * *

After the lights go out I wait thirty more minutes for the other girls to fall asleep. My whole body is trembling as I slowly make my way out of the dorm, holding my breath. I run through my planned excuse for if I get caught.

I was just going for a glass of water from the kitchen when I got lost. I was half asleep and the halls just look so different at night.

At least, that's what I'll tell Baroness Rose.

I make my way down to the kitchen, gripping the hem of my dress to keep it from snagging on anything. Aaron's plate of food is exactly where I left it in the back of the fridge. Holding the sides of the plate entirely too hard, I tiptoe down another hallway towards the glass garden doors and the stadium. I peer around the corner and find the entrance to the stadium unmanned. *Where did they go?*

I rush past the doors and enter the gardens. The vast array of foliage seems to go on for acres. The edge of the gardens within the concrete walls are lined with tall evergreen trees and there are mazes of colorful flowers, beautifully arranged everywhere. Water fountains and carved wooden benches are peppered throughout, offering a gorgeous event space for the city to host in. I walk down the steps and onto the plush green grass. *West edge. West edge.*

"Psst."

My head swivels towards the sound, and I see Prince Aaron peering out from behind one of the evergreens. He motions for me to follow him and shrinks back into the shadows. When I reach the tree, he is gone.

"Down here," he says and a few feet away I see his head poking out from the ground. A hole in the ground. As I approach I realize it is a door, with a ladder leading down. *This is a terrible idea.* I hand him the plate I am holding and descend the ladder. This is a *very* terrible

idea.

The space is small and circular. No larger than my bedroom back home. It is laden with plush rugs, and colorful pillows strewn throughout. Beautiful golden lanterns hang on the walls, filling the room with warm soft light. The prince places the plate of food on a small side table before sinking onto a pile of pillows.

"Please, sit," he says, flashing a smile that doesn't meet his eyes. "I didn't think you would come."

I sit cross-legged on the carpet, resting a particularly large cushion on my lap.

"What is this place?" My voice is aloof but inside, my heart is pounding. The Prince of Cardinia is lounging two feet away from me, wearing a pair of black silk night clothes and a cap. I can feel the tension in the air between us, but it is a struggle not to assume that he brings a different girl here every night.

"An old disaster shelter. There are plenty of them all around Lusea. They haven't been used in decades, so I've repurposed some into-

"Hiding spots?"

"You could call them that. I like to think of it as having a place to get away from all of the political noise."

I nod my head slowly. I guess he feels the pressure of his position more than he lets on.

"So, where are you from?"

"Forest 1."

"And what do your parents do?"

"My father is a hunter and my mother tends a small field where she grows root vegetables."

"And why are you here?"

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you here? In this competition? Why did you leave your family to come here?” The prince leans forward, eyes wide.

“I just...I want to marry someone from Lusea.” He chuckles loudly enough that I startle.

“Why on earth would you want that? You were lucky enough to be born outside of Lusea. In a quiet, beautiful place.”

“Yes, but it’s... a simple life at best. I’ve always wanted to travel, enjoy free time, and not have to worry about possibly going hungry all the time.”

“What?” the prince blurts out. “What do you mean you’d go hungry? There is plenty of food all over the Forest townships. I saw it myself when I visited a few years ago. Not to mention the population of wild animals in the area.”

“Yes, but we give most of it to the city. What we have for ourselves is just enough to sustain us and to sell to buy necessities. At the end of the night, my parents are always thinking of what we will do to not fall behind.”

He sits silently for a long while. Contemplating.

“I didn’t know that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. *We* are fine, but I want to be more than fine. And, I want to give my parents more than that too.”

We talk for what feels like hours about his life in the palace, and my life back home. About how much he loves sword fighting and my love for the spear. We laugh endlessly as he tells me ridiculous stories about his travels around the country. He loves to travel.

I bite my lip to push down the envy. He has been all around the country and outside of it. He has already lived my dream at only nineteen. All the while I’m wondering how he would react to finding

out that I might not be able to bear children. He wouldn't look twice at me if he found out.

My eyes start to droop from exhaustion.

"What time is it?"

The prince glances at his watch and his whole body stiffens.

"It's two in the morning."

"What?" I start to collect my things, frantically slipping on my shoes, preparing to climb up the ladder and back out into the garden. He grabs my wrist before I can step onto the first rung.

"Thanks for coming, Zenya. Same time tomorrow?" He says with a tentative smile, the last word faltering.

Of course, I want to see him again. I love listening to him talk about his life here. It's good to have someone else to talk to.

"We'll see if I make it past breakfast first, but I had a great time." With that, I climb out of the hideaway and make my way back to the dorms.

I slip into my bed as quietly as I can and attempt to get some sleep. Thoughts of him swirl through my mind, making it hard to focus. Thoughts of his bright honey eyes, and his beautiful smile. Just when I start to drift off, I realize that Aaron didn't even touch the food I brought him. That thought has me giggling and squirming in my bed before sleep finally finds me.

CHAPTER TEN

In the morning, Baroness Rose informs us that the entire day will be spent on comprehensive lessons. Lessons introducing everything we have not been privy to as people born outside of the city.

As we sit in the dining hall, bracing for a long morning, a stout older woman trots in. I recognize her from my interview. She is the woman who let me pass, despite me possibly being...inadequate. My heart swells as she smiles warmly at all of us.

“Good morning. I am Juliette Storm. Senior counsel member and advisor to the King. I will conduct your lessons today, as these matters are of extreme importance.”

I had no idea she had such a high rank.

Baroness Rose passes out small black notebooks to each of us before excusing herself. The inky cover of the book is interrupted by

one word, written in gold block lettering.

“Obey.”

I grip the book in both hands and quickly thumb through the pages. It's empty.

“I expect you all to take meticulous notes. The information I present to you today will help you survive here in Lusea. It would be a terrible waste to lose one of you due to simple disobedience.” Counselor Storm says.

I swallow loudly. My brain can't begin to piece together what she might say to all of us. What will we be expected to do if we become Luseans?

“Rule number one: obey the law. This may seem obvious, but I still have to mention it. The laws are here to protect you and keep you from danger. I'm sure you are aware of most of these laws as they apply in your own townships. Do not steal, do not kill, do not lie to officials, do not leave your home after curfew. The one rule you may not have heard before is that attendance at the weekly city assembly is mandatory. King Tau himself hosts every assembly, and you are forbidden from missing it. Failure to attend will result in severe punishment.” The counselor lists off a few more minor laws that apply within Lusea and I quickly note down what she has said into my notebook.

“Rule number two: obey your husband. Those of you who are chosen to become wives of generals will be required to follow their every instruction. Your husband's orders supersede the laws of Lusea. Your main purpose is to serve him in all of his needs, to enable him to serve the King as best he can. If your husband requires you to lie, you will do so. If your husband requires you to steal, you will do so. Most of all, if your husband requires your sexual submission, you will oblige

him. Always.”

Rain half-raises her hand timidly. Counselor Storm points at her. “What do you mean by sexual submission? Do you mean our marital duties?” Rain asks, and I nod in agreement. Other girls around the room mirror the action as we stare at the Counselor for more information.

“Ah, I see. I’d almost forgotten.” She clears her throat before continuing. “Sexual submission is only one of your marital duties. It involves serving your husband in the bedroom. You will engage in sexual activity to bear children, but also to satisfy the needs of your husband. Moving on.”

The Counselor’s stern tone is warning enough not to ask any more questions, even though she has a smile plastered on her face.

“Rule number three: obey the King. King Tau is the sovereign leader of the entire country. His orders supersede those of your husband and Lusea. Whatever the King requires of you, you will obey him.”

I lock eyes with Agnes from across the room at that statement and her face is contorted in a sickening grin. I don’t want to know what she is imagining. Or maybe what she has experienced. I’ll have to ask Prince Aaron about it when I meet him tonight. If I meet him tonight. I was lucky not to get caught the first time.

Juliette Storm keeps that same rigid smile plastered on her face throughout the entire eight hours of lessons. She goes through a detailed history of Cardinia. Of how we were colonized by Galway hundreds of years ago and fought for independence. I’d say we are still fighting to keep that independence. She also goes through a list of every single official holiday, customs for hosting foreign dignitaries, and standard protocol for palace events.

My eyes are glued to the page of my black book as I write down what she says almost word for word. Another cramp is developing in my hand, but I have no intention of losing track of one of the rules and being “severely punished” for it. That phrase has come up more times than I can count, but she never elaborates on it, and I don’t intend to find out the details for myself. The daily lives of the Luseans leave little to be desired. That dream of traveling the country seems to be slipping through my fingers with every word out of the counselor’s mouth. I’ll have to ask the prince about that too.

* * *

My entire body runs cold at what I see when I walk into the dorm room. Baroness Rose is perched on my bed, rolling the signet ring between her fingers. The others stand around, staring.

“Zenya, what is this?” She asks, examining the heavy ring.

“It’s- I’m not sure. I found it.”

“Don’t lie.” Standing up from my bed, she walks towards me, stopping a few inches away. “This is the crest of the royal family. You cannot just find something like this. Did you steal it?”

“No. I didn’t. I found it in the bathroom. I-”

Her palm connects with my cheek and the force of it knocks me to the ground. She has a sneer on her face as she reaches for me again. I can see Agnes holding in a laugh behind her. She drags me to my feet and out into the hall.

“Baroness Rose, I did not steal it.” I struggle against her firm grip. We stop at a door at the end of the hallway. She opens it and yanks me inside of a small office. Her office.

"The punishment for lying to an authority figure without direct permission from a superseding authority is five lashes. Hands on the desk."

My eyes are wide with terror.

"I'm telling the truth. Please believe me. It was tied underneath one of the sinks."

"Hands on the desk." She doesn't care. Her face is stone cold as she stares at me, waiting. It's like I didn't say anything at all. There is no point in begging, I realize. I face the desk and brace my hands against the edge.

"I'll do it over your clothes this time."

When the whip connects with my skin, the scream that escapes me is uncontrollable. Gripping the desk takes some of the sting away. I hear her reel back for the second and on impact, my knees buckle. The pain is blinding and hot. Seering. The third lash has my vision blurring, swirling. Beads of sweat emerge all over my body.

* * *

Darkness is the only thing I see when I open my eyes. I lay face down on my bed. The warmth from Rain's hand seeps into mine, and she startles when I try to release it.

"Don't get up. You're really swollen, Zenya. Just lay down."

"What happened?"

"Baroness Rose had the guards bring you back here. I put some salve on the welts, but I couldn't help the bruises."

I release a sigh, laying my head back down on the pillow.

"Thank you."

"If you want to talk, I'm here."

I can't bring myself to talk about it. Not yet. Bending over a table to be beaten like an animal for something I didn't do is the most humiliating thing I've ever experienced. The shame, panic, and fear was too much. I felt naked. Vulnerable. Alone. Baroness Rose was merciless as the whip bit into my skin. I don't even know if she got through all five lashes before I passed out.

I close my eyes and drift back into a heavy sleep.

* * *

The wetness of a washcloth on my forehead wakes me and I shoot up out of bed this time. My arms and legs are heavy, weak. The room is empty and afternoon sunlight peeks in through the curtains. I force myself to stand, though flexing my back makes my head spin. Where are the others? Just as I slip my shoes on, the dorm room door opens. Baroness Rose walks in and stalks towards me.

"Sit."

She wears the same expression as last night. Lowering myself onto the bed is even harder than standing up, but I manage.

"I believe you."

What? I stare at her in disbelief.

"I believe that you didn't steal that ring, but you would be wise to exercise caution around the others. The ring was given to me by one of your peers."

I know exactly who would do something like that. Who would be watching me closely enough to know that I had it.

"Why did you punish me, then?" I don't have the strength to hide the venom in my tone.

"I could not ignore it. A royal signet ring was found in your

belongings, and it is my responsibility to keep you young ladies in check. I had to show the consequence of breaking one of the laws.”

I guess I'm supposed to understand her. I should accept what happened for the sake of her authority, for her to save face.

“You’ve missed an entire day of lessons. I expect you to make it up at some point.” She turns on a heel and leaves me there to think.

The number of people in this city that have been punished for things they didn’t do must be innumerable. She didn’t care that I was innocent, or that I would be suffering without cause. What others thought of her power and position was more important.

* * *

After the lights go out for bed, I make my way to the gardens. I don’t attempt to stay quiet or control my pace this time. I don’t care.

Again, there aren’t any guards at the stadium doors and I’m starting to think the prince has something to do with that.

Once I reach the glass doors, I head straight for the hideaway. The small black notebook is heavy in my apron pocket.

When I arrive at the entrance of the hideaway I knock on the small metal door. No response. I knock again and wait. Maybe he changed his mind? After another minute, I turn to walk away, but the door slides open. Aaron smiles up at me from the dimly lit space and beckons me in. Part of me was hoping he wouldn’t come. Part of me hoped that if I never spoke about the things I learned today, it would be like they never happened.

I climb down the ladder and gingerly sit on one of the many cushions. Keeping my eyes fixed on my hands, I wait for the prince to sit down as well. He must sense the difference in energy.

"Is everything good? How was your day?"

I'm not sure how to answer that.

On one hand, I got to learn more information about Lusea. On the other hand, all of those things were awful things that have me second-guessing my desire to live here. I feel like a foolish child for having such an ignorant dream.

"It was fine. We had lessons with Counselor Storm. She told us all about Lusea. The inner workings of it to be exact."

His smile falters as I pull the black book from my pocket. I open to the page about obeying your husband and read word for word what Counselor Storm told us. When I finish, he doesn't respond for a long while.

"I had no idea things would be like this here. Every other word out of her mouth was about punishment. How can anyone be happy?" I say, my voice barely more than a whisper.

If I were brave, I would tell him what happened to me. That I was beaten to the point of losing consciousness for something I didn't do, but I can't. The wounds on my body are still raw. Instead, I read aloud the section about the weekly assembly.

"My father uses the assemblies to inform the citizens of new developments. Either with the war or anything else."

I still don't meet his eyes. I know it's more than that. I know what happens to those who break the law. They don't get to leave the assembly the same way that they came.

"Zenya, listen to me."

The prince grips my shoulders, forcing me to look up at him. His eyes are filled with guilt and something else I can't quite place. "I know that things are awful. I hate it just as much as anyone else and... I plan to change things. Once I become King, I'll change the laws, so my

people don't have to suffer. That goes for all my people, not just the ones in Lusea."

He lets go of my shoulders and holds my hand in his.

"I promise things will be different, and I'm sorry I didn't know how bad things were in the townships. I'll do better."

He strokes the back of my hand with his thumb. The gesture is more comforting than he could possibly know. With tears forming in my eyes, I smile hesitantly at him. He draws me into him and hugs me gently.

The hours feel like minutes as the Prince and I talk. He tells me of his plans for the city, once he becomes King. How he will remove the curfew, and the assemblies will be reduced from once a week to once a month. Most importantly, the tradition of violent punishments will go away, to be replaced by fines for breaking the law.

I am taken aback by his openness and his willingness to share this with me. I'm also overjoyed about the progress he plans to make. As he speaks, his eyes light up. His enthusiasm for change is infectious and I find myself smiling as I listen. I realize I've found a friend in him, and the thought warms my whole body. That delusional dream I have is one that he shares. One that he hopes for too.

"What about the Iudicium?" I ask.

"What about it?" Aaron responds.

"What I mean is that there's no way something like that can keep happening. I saw five men die in one single trial. That kind of violence just isn't necessary."

The prince stares into my eyes, then looks away.

"The Iudicium is part of our culture. We participate willingly. That's not the same as the punishments that my father dishes out. I can't get rid of it. Besides, I'd sooner get the council members to open

the borders around the Wasteland than get rid of the Iudicium," he chuckles.

I don't understand. If he wants things to improve, the Iudicium can't continue. It would be a lasting symbol of the city's violent past.

Rather than press the issue, I decide to leave.

"I should be getting back to the dorm before the sun rises." I stand and fix my apron. The prince's brow furrows, then he says

"Right. I'm sure we've been in here for too long. Can I see you again tomorrow?"

"I'm not so sure this is a good idea, Aaron."

"You don't have to come if you don't want to."

"That's not what I'm saying, I just can't afford to get caught."

And I can't bear to be hurt again.

"You won't get caught. I'll make sure of it. Please." His eyes seem to darken and he clenches his fists at his side. I hesitate, but for some reason I trust him.

"Okay-I'll see you tomorrow."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Baroness Rose doesn't come to meet us in the morning. Instead, one of the guards informs us that we are not to leave the dorms for the day. When I try to ask for more details, he stares straight ahead with no response.

Breakfast is brought in on carts and we all eat in silence. I scan the room and the faces of my competitors, to see if anyone has a clue what's happening. Where has she gone? It's very unlike the Baroness not to come and give us our instructions for the day.

Two guards are standing inside the door of the dorm instead of at their usual positions outside. Something has to be wrong. After breakfast there are no other instructions. Usually, I would be excited to have this much time on my hands, but the empty space leaves too much room to think. To think about all that has happened: Being

marked like a prized pig, learning of the abuse that is common in the city, finding out about the dead Lusean girls, witnessing five people die, being beaten, and meeting with Prince Aaron.

Rain is lying on her stomach, painting something. I sit on her bed and peer over her shoulder. On the canvas, there is a beautiful river flowing through an expanse of trees, with the sun setting overhead. Some of the trees hang low enough that their leaves graze the water's edge. It is the Govi River. It must be. Her home. The pinks and oranges bathe the entire image in a warmth that feels so familiar to me, though I've never seen it. You can't see the full sunset through the canopy of trees in Forest 1.

"Rain, this is beautiful."

My words are barely more than a breath. Her talent for art is like none I've ever seen before.

"I miss home, Zenya. I miss my sisters, my family, and having the river around me. I miss Abel."

At that, she slaps a hand over her mouth. Her eyes widen as she looks at me. In a second she is on her feet, dragging me by my wrist into the bathroom.

"You didn't hear what I said. You didn't hear anything."

"What's wrong? Was Abel your-"

She covers my mouth with her hand.

"Don't say his name. Please, Zenya. No one can know that I had anything to do with a Wastelander," she whispers.

A Wastelander. impossible. She is in love with a Wastelander.

"But Rain, Wastelanders are diseased. You shouldn't even be anywhere near one. How could you-"

"It's not true. None of it is true, Zenya. They are forced to work fourteen hour days. They are deprived of food. But, they are regular

people just like us. That wall keeps them trapped in. Caged. The King doesn't want people to know what's truly going on in there."

She grips me by the shoulders.

"What are you even saying?"

Agnes walks out from one of the stalls, arms folded. Rain is too stunned to speak.

"Keep your mouth shut before you get us all in trouble, Rain. I had someone back in my township too, but those days are behind us. Move on."

She purposely slams into Rain's shoulder and heads back out into the main room. My friend collapses on the floor and begins to cry.

"I paint to keep myself from thinking about him, but I can't help it. I love him."

I haven't seen a Wastelander up close, let alone spoken to one. We were always taught that they could spread disease. I'm not even sure how they get in and out of the Wasteland without being caught. The entire thing is encircled by a high concrete wall and none of them are allowed out once they go in. I've even heard that when people die there, they just throw the bodies into the furnaces along with the mounds of trash.

"I'm sorry Rain, but I don't know how that could have worked. Even if you didn't come to the city". She does not say another word. Neither do I.

"What the hell is your problem?" Standing in front of Agnes' bed, I ball my fists up to contain my rage. She looks up at me with disinterest.

"You really want to know?" Agnes stands, pressing her face close to mine. "You're delusional. You came here with a little fairytale in your head and you walk around like this competition will solve all

of your problems.”

“I’m not delusional. I’m just not hateful and miserable like you.” I step in closer, until our noses are almost touching. “I know you went through my stuff. You told Baroness Rose about the ring.”

“I did. You needed a wakeup call.”

I grab a fistful of her blonde hair and pull as hard as I can. With the other hand, I reel back, my fist closed. There is only enough time to hit her once before the guards separate us.

Satisfaction clouds my mind. If I had the chance, she would get to feel exactly how those lashes felt.

We aren’t even close to even.

* * *

The Baroness doesn’t show up at all today. Hours pass by and we are still forbidden to leave the dorms.

The desert girls occupy their time playing card games, while the arctic girls lounge on their beds. Rain, myself, and the other forest girls occupy our time with weaving baskets.

Lunch and dinner are also brought in on carts. The nervous energy is palpable in the room, even though everyone is acting like there is nothing wrong. I can’t handle sitting here not knowing. Stuck in this room. I look over to the opposite side of the room, where Agnes is filing her nails nonchalantly.

“Agnes,” I whisper.

I walk over to stand in front of her “Do you have any idea what’s going on? Where is Baroness Rose?”

The girls start to gather around us, and soon we are all crowded around Agnes’ bed. Trepidation hangs on our faces. She sneers at me,

contorting the bruise already forming on her cheek.

“How the hell should I know? I’ve been stuck in here the whole time with the rest of you.”

I pin her with a hard glare, waiting for a real answer. Agnes is always sneaking away from the group whenever we are together. Always trying to chat with the guards when no one is looking. I’m sure she has seen or at least heard something. We all stand in silence, staring at her. After a while, she says in a hushed tone,

“Fine. The other day while we were cooking dinner, I went for a walk and happened to see her talking with General Lindor. She’s been called away to some important meeting at the palace. That’s all I know.”

She holds up both of her hands in surrender. I let out a frustrated sigh as the girls disperse back to their respective beds. What kind of meeting would be so important that it pulled her away from her duties with us? Why wouldn’t she tell us anything before she left? And why are there guards *inside* the dorm? There’s no way I’ll be able to sneak out to see Aaron tonight.

After the news of Baroness Rose being gone, I am too anxious to focus on any task besides sleep. I pray that the Baroness is back by tomorrow. I can’t take another day stuck in here.

I doze off in bed. Suddenly, a horn blares over the loudspeaker. I startle awake, screaming as I sit up in bed. A red light blinks on and off, illuminating the room as the other girls are frantic. Some are running aimlessly around the room, while others start to dress. The guards seem shocked too, because they run out of the dorm, shutting the door behind them.

“What in heaven’s name is going on?” says Rain as she hurriedly throws on a robe.

Just as I go to fish out a dress from one of my drawers, popping sounds erupt from somewhere in the building.

"Bullets," says Agnes, and she runs to the door. "My father uses them to hunt back home. We need to get out of here, it's not safe."

"We can't just leave the room, we have nowhere to go," Ayanna says, pulling on her hair with both hands. Agnes pulls the door open anyway.

We all follow as she starts running towards the west staircase. Towards the exit of the Rec Center. There is no point in trying to be quiet, as the sound of the alarm echoes throughout the hallway, drowning out our footsteps. As we reach the staircase, more gunshots go off on the lower level.

"We can't go this way!" Rain says.

"I know where we can hide," I say, running towards the east stairs. We hurry down them and towards the gardens. The pounding of feet and the sounding of the alarm are so loud that my ears are ringing. More gunshots.

We pass by the gym and I quickly run in. I grab one of the spears from the rack of weapons. The familiar feeling of the staff in my hand stills me, making me feel less helpless. I tuck the spear in towards my body and race to catch up with the other girls.

Agnes is about to reach the steps that lead down to the garden when a masked figure steps into our path. I stop short, bumping into the girls in front of me.

"Where is it?" he asks in a grating voice. His clothing is barely a shred of brown tattered fabric covering his torso. His lower body is entirely bare. He holds a gun in one dirt-covered blistered hand and grips Agnes' collar with the other.

"Where is it?" He spits out the words in her face. He starts to scream

and raises his gun towards Agnes, pointing it at her temple.

He's going to kill her.

I push my way through the group, straining to get to him. His finger grazes the trigger, and before I can think twice I stab my spear straight through his left eye. I grip the end of the spear and pull back with as much force as I can muster. He releases Agnes, and his limp body thuds to the floor. Blood leaks out of his eye and pools onto the ground. Some of the girls are screaming, but I know we can't afford to just stand here.

"Let's go!" I say as I step over the strange man's body and run into the gardens.

It's quiet here. Only the sounds of trickling water can be heard from the fountains around the gardens. Muffled gunshots sound again from the Rec Center. Without another word, I run towards the west edge of the gardens. Towards the hideaway. Reaching the door, I kneel down to open it.

"What the hell is this?" Agnes asks as I pull the door open and descend the ladder.

"I don't have time to explain. Just get down here!" I say, pleading for them to follow.

Once everyone is inside the hideaway, I close the door and lock it from the inside. Twisting a steel wheel until it won't turn anymore.

"Zen, what is this place?" Rain rasps, her face is contorted in a mixture of fear and amazement.

"It's... It's a disaster shelter. I found it one day when I was walking through the gardens."

"Oh, that's bull. You expect us to believe you just stumbled

across a hidden shelter?" Asks Agnes.

I roll my eyes. Maybe it was a mistake to bring them here, but we couldn't risk staying in the Rec Center. Not when those people are running around with weapons. We can't hear anything from in here, but at least we are safe. I sit on one of the plush red pillows.

"Who were they?" Ayanna asks. She is shaking and Agnes of all people steadies her by wrapping an arm around her.

"Wastelanders," says Rain., looking down at her lap.

"Well what the hell are they doing here," another of the girls asks.

"Who cares? We just have to wait for someone to come save us," says Agnes. Who says anyone is coming to save us?

The room is silent. Some of the girls have fallen asleep, piled on top of one another. Others sit in shock at the sudden turn of events.

The adrenaline has worn off and it finally settles in that I just killed someone. I've killed animals before, of course. For food, hides, and other resources, but not a human. Never another human. It goes against the laws of all townships, but this is different. That man wasn't innocent by any means. He was going to kill Agnes and probably the rest of us afterward, but still. The image of the tip of the spear skewering his eye and the sound that it made when it pierced through his flesh is etched in my mind and I start to feel sick. My breath comes in heavy pants and I start to cry. I wrap my arms around my knees, trying to calm myself. I killed him. I killed another human being. The crying turns into sobbing, and the sobbing turns into screaming.

The entire room is watching me but I can't hide the guilt that rips through my chest. He probably had a family. My parents would be so ashamed of me. I'm no better than the people here in the city. I didn't even hesitate before I did it. Rain crawls over to where I sit and

strokes my hair gently, pulling me into her chest with the other hand.

“Shhhh. Shhhh. Shhhh,” she whispers. “Shhh. Shhh, Shhh.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The pounding of feet overhead wakes me. My eyes are swollen from crying for who knows how long, as I look around trying to orient myself. We are still in the hideaway. The other girls start to stir as well.

“Do you think someone is here to help us?” I move towards the door and turn the wheel.

“We can’t just open it, what if those people are still here?” Ayanna whispers.

“Well, I’m not going to stay in here forever.” I finish unlocking the door and push outwards. I climb up the ladder, looking around for any sign of Wastelanders through the barrier of trees.

“Girls! Girls!” A familiar voice rings out from somewhere in the garden. I increase my pace, clearing the ladder and pushing through the trees.

"Here!" I wave a hand above my head. The other girls start to pour out from the shelter.

"Oh thank goodness. We have been looking everywhere for you! You're all here. All twenty of you." She is on the verge of tears as she looks us over. She cups my face in her hands.

"Are you alright? Did they hurt you?"

"No, we are fine," I say but I can't meet her eyes. No one mentions the fact that I killed one of the intruders, and I'm glad for it.

"It is not safe to stay here any longer. Pack your belongings quickly, we will be leaving for the palace in twenty minutes." She doesn't offer any other explanation of what happened before turning to walk out of the gardens and towards the dorms with a group of guards trailing behind her.

I pack my clothes and other items into the knapsack I brought when I first arrived here. I fold each item neatly, to calm my nerves and keep from thinking about last night. A hand braces gently on my shoulder and I look up.

"Thank you, Zenya. Thank you for saving me." Agnes has tears forming in her eyes. "I would be dead if it weren't for you."

"Don't worry about it," I say, trying to get off the topic. I'd do anything not to revisit the events from last night. She smiles gently, squeezing my shoulder before heading back to her bed. Rain looks over at me with a wary gaze. She doesn't say what I'm sure she's thinking. That it wasn't my fault. That I did what was necessary. I know those things are true, but I still can't process the fact that it happened. That I ended someone's life.

The trip to the Palace is a quiet one. Whether it is from the shock of last night's events or of suddenly moving into the palace, I don't know. What were the Wastelanders looking for?

I stare out the window as we pass through the city streets. Each side is lined with large ivory houses surrounded by ornate flowers. Even the common people here live such lavish lives. I'm reminded of my family's small treehouse in the forest canopy, and my heart aches for home. The beauty here somehow still cannot compare to the beauty of my township. Not because of wealth or finery, but because of love, and community. That is something the city could never provide, I realize.

We reach the Palace gates soon enough, and they open for us. Only, this time the gates are marred with jagged markings. Looking more closely through the window, I see that they are completely crushed in some areas. Maybe the Wastelanders made it all the way here.

The bus continues up the winding road and lets us off at the side door. I don't see any more signs of conflict here. The guards open the doors to the ballroom from the opening banquet and a familiar face greets us.

"Is everyone alright?" Counselor Storm asks, her face contorted with worry. Baroness Rose steps forward.

"We are all just fine Juliette. Everyone is safe."

We? She's talking like she was there with us, but she hadn't been at the Rec Center all day.

"We've all had a long night. I'll be showing the girls to their rooms," the Baroness says. She walks past Counselor Storm and towards the door to the right of the dais.

We follow her into a foyer with a towering ceiling. Polished emerald green floors reflect the beams of light from an opulent crystal chandelier hanging above us. Two golden staircases curve up towards the sky, mirror images of each other. One on either side of the room.

Baroness Rose leads us up the left staircase to the third floor. To a drawing room decorated with tan upholstered couches, chairs, and tables.

"Sit," she says. "You are not to say a word about what happened yesterday. Do not mention that I was absent from the Rec Center and do not mention what happened with the intruders." I can't stop the words from pouring out.

"What were they looking for? One of the Wastelanders asked where something was. What-"

A sharp slap connects with my skin. Baroness Rose lifts her hand to hit me again when we hear a guard say

"Please rise, for King Tau." Baroness Rose stiffens, dropping her hand as she turns towards the door. We all stand for the King. As he saunters in, my skin prickles. Seeing the King from a distance is one thing, but when he is standing so close, I can almost feel the power dripping off of him. He towers over all of us in height. His tawny skin and golden brown eyes look just like Aarons. He looks young, but his gray beard and hair age him. I am shocked to see that he is wearing common clothes; a white button-down shirt, with the sleeves rolled up and brown pants. I lower my eyes as he walks past. He and Aaron may look alike, but they smell entirely different. The King stinks of alcohol, and based on the sway of his walk, I'm guessing that he is drunk.

"Welcome to my home. I heard that you all had a run-in with some uninvited guests. Not to worry. You are all safe now. I was glad to hear that the guards apprehended them before they could cause any trouble."

Is that what Baroness Rose told him? If she wasn't here in the palace yesterday, then where was she? Why do we have to keep what

happened a secret?

The King stops in front of Ayanna. He places a finger under her chin and lifts it, forcing her to look up at him. "You are such a beauty," he says before reaching his other hand down to cup her between her legs.

My heart sinks into my stomach. I cover my mouth to stop the gasp from escaping. Ayanna is frozen in place, eyes wide. She lowers her eyes, even though the King's hands are still on her. He releases her and continues walking. Her body is frozen in place as tears start to stream down her face. King Tau takes a turn about the room, grazing his pointer finger on each girl that he passes. The ring on that finger is a twin to the one I found in the dorm bathroom.

"Precious girls. I hope you enjoy your stay here. I surely will." His nonchalant tone just adds to the shock already building in the room. With that, he walks back out the door.

The silence is like a heavy weight over me. Tears are pouring down Ayanna's face and I look at the Baroness with shock, but she looks unfazed. Like, this isn't the first time something like this has happened. She clears her throat before speaking.

"I will show each of you to your rooms. Remember what I said. Now follow me."

She walks towards the door, but I walk towards Ayanna. Another Desert girl named Faiza reaches her first and envelopes her in a hug. Ayanna starts to sob. She drops to her knees, wrapping her arms around herself.

I can't believe he touched her like that, and Baroness Rose didn't say a word about it. She pretended like it didn't even happen. The little trust I had in her is washed away by Ayanna's tears. She stands with her back to us and one hand on the door.

“Hurry up!” she shouts without turning around. I reach down and lift Ayanna, staring into her red-rimmed eyes. There is nothing but fear behind those eyes. I put my arm around her shoulder and follow the Baroness out into the hall.

The Palace is even bigger than it looks on the outside. Every hallway is decorated just like the ballroom from the opening banquet. Every sky-high ceiling and wall is covered with beautiful pastel paintings. Ornate red rugs line the floors, and the gardens put the one at the Rec Center to shame, which is saying a lot. Here, there are swimming pools, stables, and even a hedge maze strewn through the various foreign plants within the garden.

As much as being in the palace is a privilege, it is also a burden. After what happened to Ayanna, I fear running into the King again. He was willing to violate one of us out in the open. I fear what he would do if he found one of us alone. Baroness Rose leads us down a hallway on the fourth floor. There are ornate golden doors on either side of the hallway.

“Here are your rooms. One for each of you. Take the rest of the day to study for your Citizen’s exam. You will be tested on the information that was presented to you by Counselor Storm. It should have been announced yesterday, but... you are aware of why that was not possible. Ten of you will be eliminated after this exam, so use this time wisely.

She continues down the hall, leaving us to find our rooms.

I approach the golden door with my name taped to it. Upon entering, I almost fall to my knees at the scene in front of me. The entire room is decorated like my township. Tall potted trees at every corner, dark brown walls with strips of gold strewn throughout, and forest green upholstered seating in front of a large fireplace. The only

thing that is different from my home is the bed. A huge wooden four-poster bed is positioned against one wall, covered in an olive-colored blanket.

Emotions wash over me in a wave as I fall onto the bed. It has been weeks since I've seen my parents. I was almost killed by a disease-covered Wastelander. The King of my country is an abuser in more ways than one. The one person who should have our best interest at heart, watched while the King hurt one of us. Worst of all, I chose to come here of my own free will. I bury my face into the blanket. I let it soak up my tears and muffle my sobs. I say a silent prayer that somehow I will open my eyes and find myself back home in Forest 1. With my mother cooking in the kitchen and my father out hunting. With Issa, laughing and us talking about our dreams together. I pray that I'll stop feeling so alone.

There is a soft knock at the door, and I lift my head to see Rain walking in.

"Do you mind if we study together?" She walks over to the bed and sits next to me. I almost forgot that we have an exam in the morning.

"Sure," I say, as I sit up and wipe away my tears. I pull out the black book I've stored in my apron pocket and start to review each page with Rain.

There is another knock on the door, and when it opens, every one of the other girls walks in one by one. They each take a seat on the bed, or the chairs by the fireplace, or on the floor.

"We figured it'd be a good idea if we all stick together after what happened," says Faiza. I realize that I've never heard her speak before.

"Is it okay if we stay here tonight?" I nod my head and smile

softly. These girls have been my roommates for weeks now, and I'm grateful that at least part of my prayer was answered.

We spend the entire night reviewing material for the exam, but I know that more than anything, the other girls share my wish of not being alone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I am awoken by a stern knock on the door. When I lift my head, Baroness Rose is standing in the doorway.

“What in heaven’s name are you all doing here? Get back to your rooms now! Your exam is in two hours. I expect you to be dressed and in the dining room in fifteen minutes!” Baroness Rose slams the door shut, and those of us who were not awake yet startle at the sound. I untangle myself from Rain and Faiza. Agnes jumps up from the couch, dragging Ayanna up with her. One by one, they make their way back to their rooms.

I make my way to the adjoined bathroom to wash. The bathroom is a spectacle all on its own. The entire room is awash in white marble. The walls, floors, sink, and bathtub. Gold finishings add a touch of color to the room. I run myself a quick bath, sinking all the

way into the tub.

“The punishment for missing a weekly assembly is five lashes. The punishment for being caught outside of your house past curfew is ten lashes, the punishment for...” I list off the different laws and punishments that I’ve studied, hoping that I can keep them in my brain for the next two hours. After the bath, I fish out a green linen dress from my belongings. I have no clean aprons left, so this will have to do.

Opening the door to the hallway, I see most of the other girls already crowded together by the stairs. As I approach, Rain reaches for my hand.

“Faiza says it’s a good idea if we each have a partner to go places with. She thinks it will keep us safe.” I grab onto her hand and smile. The reality is, if the King wanted to have his way with one of us, no one could stop him. Even the law is on his side in that aspect.

We make our way to the dining room and are greeted by a beautiful spread of foreign pastries, fruits, and meats. Baroness Rose is nowhere to be seen, and I’m glad for it. She was the one person who was supposed to look out for us. I couldn’t stand to be close to her so soon after what happened with the King.

I fill my plate with various treats, and as I go to take my seat a whistling sound catches my attention. I pause for a bit and there it is again. I turn to look at the door to the dining room and see the prince peeking his head in.

“I’m going to the restroom,” I say before hurrying to the door.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper.

“I live here.” The prince smirks, leaning against the wall.

The guards on either side of the door don’t even acknowledge our presence.

“How are you doing? I was on my way out of the Palace when

the front gates were attacked by rebels. I heard what happened at the Rec Center.”

“I’m doing fine,” I say, but I’m reminded again of what I did that night. “We all made it out safely. Did the Wastelanders get inside the palace?” The prince laughs.

“Of course not. None of them made it past the gates before the guards took them down. Something like that hasn’t happened in years, but we were still prepared.”

I’m glad to hear it. If they had gotten in, who knows what kind of damage they could have done.

“I can’t talk for too long, after breakfast we have our citizens exam.”

“I know you’ll do just fine,” he says, brushing his hand down my arm. “We should find some time to talk. Tonight. Remember the ballroom from the opening banquet? Meet me at the left door behind the dias.”

He walks off before I can say anything else. I wonder how much trouble I’d get into for getting caught with the prince here.

I make my way back to my seat and try to focus my mind on the exam. A few bites into a raisin croissant, I hear a gasp from across the table.

Ayanna has both hands covering her mouth, as though she might be sick. Following her line of sight, I find myself looking at the King standing in the doorway. He smiles brightly as if he is greeting an old friend. Slowly he saunters into the room, hands behind his back. I hold my breath, not knowing what to expect.

“Good morning to you all,” he says, taking the open seat at the head of the table. No one responds. He plucks a strawberry from a silver platter on the table and begins picking the leaves from the top.

"I hear you have an exam this morning. I wish you luck."

The King extends the strawberry to Ayanna, sitting to his right.

"Open," he says and she obeys.

He shoves the entire strawberry in Ayanna's mouth, along with two of his fingers. She starts to choke, pulling away from the King. She coughs, clutching her throat, and spits the strawberry out onto the table. I have to resist the urge to stand from my seat as I look on. He grabs a handful of her hair and yanks her back towards him.

"You dare to disobey me? I'll teach you what happens to girls who disobey me." The King raises his other hand and I don't think I can stand to watch. I don't know what I'll do, but I have to do something. As I stand from my seat, I hear Aaron's voice.

"Father. I've been looking for you. I wanted to discuss the recent rebel attack." The prince enters the dining room with a forced aloofness that sends a chill down my spine. He has a smile plastered on his face, ignoring the scene that is unfolding in front of him. The King releases Ayanna.

"Later. I'm reassuring our bridal candidates about their upcoming test."

"Oh, but it's very urgent father."

From where I sit, I can see Aaron's fist clench at his side. Knowing him, he is fuming inside at the King's actions.

"Fine!" the King says, before pushing himself up out of his seat and stalking from the room. There is a long silence before the prince speaks.

"I apologize for my father's behavior. I'll do my best to make your stay here as comfortable as possible." His tone is caring. Gentle. Apologetic. He turns and exits the room.

Ayanna is inconsolable as we crowd around her seat, trying to comfort her.

"Why me? Why does he want to torment me?" she says. My heart breaks for her. The King seems to have taken a liking to her. It took everything in me not to march right up to him and stab my fork through his raised hand.

"I'm so sorry." That is all I can say. If the prince had not come in when he did, things would have been much worse.

"I'm going home. I can't stay here any longer," she says, standing from her seat.

"Please, Yan. You cannot. You will be punished. Your Mama and Baba will be punished," Faiza says to her. "I will help you."

"We will all help however we can," Rain says. But there is no helping this. Not when your abuser is above the law. The hand that holds your entire world. Ayanna slumps down in her seat, resigned to stay.

"Exam time, girls," Baroness Rose says, as she hurries into the room. She snaps her fingers and servants pour into the room, clearing the food from the table.

She passes out thick stacks of paper to each of us.

"You will have one hour to complete the exam. The ten of you with the lowest scores will be excused from the competition."

I'm ready for this. I can picture the pages of my notebook in my mind, and I run a mental finger along each word. The Baroness moves to the head of the table, before taking a seat.

"You may begin."

I read the first question written on the page. *Who was the general that led the final battle against Galway that won Cardinia its freedom?* I smile, as I quickly scribble down the answer. And the next.

And the next.

Then, the realization washes over me that I could fail this test. If any of us were wise, we would do so, to get away from this competition. This would be my last opportunity to be eliminated and go home. If any of us is eliminated after this stage, we become concubines.

I stop writing and put my pen down. Staring blankly at the exam, I weigh my options. I could be home by this time tomorrow. Back in Forest 1 with my family, friends, and my freedom. I could have a chance at a normal life away from the restraints of the city. I could settle down with someone from my township and live a simple life. There would be no time or money for travel. There would be no great adventures, but at least I would be safe. I might even be happy.

I would also be leaving Aaron behind.

My heart sinks. If I choose to fail the exam, I'll probably never see him again. I won't get to be with him or see firsthand the great changes he will make to this Kingdom. Most of all, I'll lose the amazing friend that I've made in him.

Slowly, I pick up my pen, my hand shaking. If there is even a small chance that I could have a life with him. I'll take it. I steel myself, before reading the next question. With Aaron, the smoldering fire of my dream came to light again. Knowing that I still might have a chance at that life I so desperately wanted is enough. That alone is worth it to me. I will deal with whatever consequences come.

I breeze through the rest of the exam and set my pen down on the table. Though my breakfast is starting to churn in my stomach, there is no going back now. I've made my choice, and I plan to follow through with it, come what may.

I take the time to look around the room at my fellow

competitors. My friends. We've been through so much together in such a short time. In Forest 1 we say that hardships bring us together. I feel the weight of that statement now, as I gaze at the people I experienced trauma with. The ones that I escaped death with, knowing that ten of them will be gone by tomorrow morning.

Ayanna looks up at me just then, and her eyes tell the same story that mine do. The one of whether to accept the opportunity to leave, or to take a leap of faith, hoping to land softly on a bed of happiness and security. Tears well up in my eyes. If anyone has the right to leave, it's Ayanna. She was always the most sensitive of us, and with everything she has been through... I can't imagine the pain.

I look over at Rain, my newfound friend. Gratefulness isn't enough to describe how I feel about having met her. When Issa failed her evaluation, I thought I'd have to endure all of these trials alone, but she sent me a great friend in her place. I'll always be thankful for that.

I stretch my gaze to Agnes, sitting at the other end of the table. Saying that she is harsh, crude, and arrogant would not be an exaggeration, but I have respect for Agnes. She has clearly seen a lot of things in her eighteen years of life that have made her the way she is. If I had to save her life again, I would do it in a heartbeat.

Then, I look around at the girls I haven't had a chance to get close with. Faiza, Simran, Johanna, Maya...

"Your time is up. Pens down."

The Baroness rises from her seat and collects everyone's papers.

"The results of the exam will be announced at tonight's dinner. We will be dining with the Iudicium challengers. There will be gowns laid out for you in your rooms."

She looks like she might say something else, but instead, she turns on one pointed heel and exits the dining room.

"How do you think you did?" Rain says walking over to my seat.

"Honestly, really well. I memorized everything that Counselor Storm told us."

"Stop bragging, Zenya," Chides Agnes from where she sits, rolling her eyes.

I turn my attention to Ayanna. Staring down at the table, where her exam paper was, she is crying again. Her shoulders look so deflated that she might collapse in on herself. I don't know how much more of this she can handle before she does fall apart.

"I told you. I told you this place wasn't for the weak. It'll break you down to nothing," says Agnes. "My mother was a servant here at the palace when she was young. She's told me stories about all the things she experienced. All the things she saw. Someone like her isn't built for life in the city." She points her chin in Ayanna's direction.

"I didn't have a choice," a whisper of a voice comes from the end of the table. "My family is on the verge of starvation. For the past year, we have been struggling to meet our tax requirements. Most days, we do not even have enough to eat. Coming here is my only chance to make things better for my family. I am useless back in Desert 1."

Ayanna's words hit home for me. We may not have been starving, but my family certainly wasn't prospering. She probably felt powerless to do anything to help; Except to come here.

"I won't go back home empty handed." She wipes her tears on the edge of her apron, before standing. "Would anyone like to go for a walk?"

"I'll join," Faiza says, jumping up from her seat. I nod my head in agreement, along with a few others.

The sun has just reached its highest point in the sky when we descend the palace stairs into the garden. I link arms with Rain and pull her off towards a grove of tropical fruit trees. There hasn't been a quiet moment to tell her about Aaron.

There is a gorgeous pavilion in the center of the grove, carved out of dark mahogany wood. We sit together on the stairs, and I hesitate for a moment. No matter how close we have gotten, Rain is still my competitor. Telling her about the prince might put me at a disadvantage.

"Zen, is something wrong? Did the King get to you too?" The look of concern on her face softens my reservations. I tell her all about my relationship with Aaron, from our first meeting in the big market to the secret ones underneath the Rec Center gardens.

When I finish, her eyes are wide with shock.

"I don't trust him. He might be a prince but there is no way you can have a father like that and be normal."

I'm jarred by her unexpected reproach for him.

"Rain, I trust him. When we talked, I could tell he was nothing like his father. He wants to change things." I believe in him. There is no way to fake that sincerity on his face when he talked about reforming the city. "I want to help him accomplish that goal, Rain."

"Just be careful, please. Being a general's wife is one thing, but being the wife of the future King? That would be another level of difficulty."

Although I haven't thought of it, Rain is right. Aaron is going to be the King at some point and I think- I know that he will choose me if I make it to the end. We've spent so much time together and there is

no question that he cares for me. I care for him too.

If we get married, that would make me the future queen. *That's more than I bargained for.* Queens don't get to spend their time freely. They don't get to go on sporadic adventures; they have obligations. I shake the thought from my head. I'm getting ahead of myself.

"How do you think you did on the test," I ask Rain.

"I think I did okay, but I feel a lot like how Ayanna does. If it was up to me, I would have already run away with Abel to start a new life. My father caught me with him a month before the competition. He forced me to sign up so that we couldn't be together."

I unhook my arm from hers and turn to face her.

"Why would you want to be with someone from the Wasteland? I just can't understand it."

She sighs deeply.

"Abel was born in the Wasteland, but his mother was from here. She was a maid who became pregnant by one of the generals. His wife had Abel's mother banished to the Wasteland. Zen, that's how a lot of people end up there. They aren't wild animals or diseased beasts as everyone says."

"But what about the man that we saw in the Rec Center? His skin was covered in boils and he barely had any clothes on."

"Of course, there are some people like him. People who succumb to the conditions there after some time. Abel told me that some of the families that have been in the Wasteland for generations have health problems from being exposed to toxic waste. It isn't their fault."

She wrings her hands together, and her voice drops to a whisper.

"I hate the King. I hate him even more now that I've seen firsthand who he is."

I hate him too. I hate what the city is, because of him. I hate that people around this country have to starve to feed his selfish expectations. I don't know how to comfort her, and don't fully understand, but I hug Rain anyway.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The stairs down to the dining room feel particularly long tonight. Each step I take brings me one step closer to either going home or one step closer to my dream.

The velvet green gown that was chosen for me is skin-tight. The strapless bodice hugs my curves down to my knees before fanning out onto the ground. The dress came with a pair of silk elbow-length gloves that glide smoothly along the railing as I walk. I have pinned my hair into a high bun, with a few curly tendrils framing my face.

I reach the landing, but before I can enter the dining room, the King steps into my path.

“Oh, my dear, you look absolutely divine.” He takes my gloved hand in his, and raises it to his lips, pausing before making contact. Instead of kissing my hand, he bites onto the fabric covering my

middle finger, pulling the entire glove off. His warm breath on my hand makes goosebumps rise on my skin, and bile rise in my throat. He kisses my bare hand, slowly making his way up the length of my arm.

The fear of what might happen if I resist keeps me pinned in place when all I want to do is gouge his eyes out. My glare must say as much and he tightens his grip on my hand, almost crushing it between his fingers.

“Careful dear. Do not forget that you belong to me. You all belong to me.”

He drops my hand and turns, entering the dining room with that same sickening ease.

The queen is present there, and he plants a gentle kiss on her cheek before taking his seat at the other end of the table. I wonder how the Queen fits into all of this. Is she aware that her husband is a monster? Does she know about him abusing women? Is she also a victim? Or is she complicit in his abuse?

“Why are you just standing out here?” Agnes knocks into my shoulder on her way into the dining room.

I gather myself and walk in behind her.

Determined to get the answer to at least one of my questions tonight, I take a seat on one side of the Queen. The opportunity to be this close to her doesn’t come very often. I bow gracefully before sitting on the intricately embroidered dining chair.

Queen Farah looks so much younger up close. Being from the Desert 2 township, her fox-shaped eyes and freckled skin are striking. Her silken black hair is braided and pinned around her head, creating the perfect spot for her ruby-encrusted crown to sit. She wears a red velvet ball gown, with sleeves that are draped across her too-thin

arms.

“Hello Queen Farah, how has your evening been so far?”

She doesn’t respond to my question but lifts her dark brown eyes to mine and smiles softly before returning her focus to the food on her plate. Maybe she doesn’t want to talk, but she is still the picture of poise and politeness. It didn’t hurt to try.

The food is delightful. At least ten times better than what we have been eating since we arrived here. There is even a string ensemble playing music from the far corner of the room. I stuff myself with roast chicken, honey-roasted carrots, jasmine rice, and some leafy green vegetables I haven’t seen before. Before I can raise my glass of water to my lips Baroness Rose stands from where she is seated. She taps a fork on the edge of her glass.

“Good evening everyone, and a special thank you to the King and Queen for joining us tonight. I’d like to take this opportunity to thank you all for your participation. I know this process has not been easy for you. We have had to cut the female contestants’ program short due to the attack on the Recreation Center.”

I look over at the male candidates seated on the opposite side of the table, and the prince is missing. There is an empty seat next to the King. Missing an event in the Iudicium like this is no small matter. Surely, he hasn’t gone on another trip outside of the palace. I have to wonder if he will still meet me later on tonight.

“I will be announcing the top ten girls who have made it through to the final round of the bridal competition. Receiving the highest score on the citizens exam is Zenya Marku, with a near-perfect score.”

A subdued applause cycles throughout the room before dying out. My feelings are torn between pride and fear, but I smile anyway.

“The runner-up was Agnes Jonsdottir, then Ayanna Akesh in third place.”

I can't help the expression that comes over my face. It is an effort to keep my mouth shut. Even with her mental state at the time, and the pressure of what it would mean for her family if she failed out of this competition, she still managed to get third place.

“The 7 other candidates that have made it through are Faiza Dukai, Rain Wyman, Simran Marikesh, Johanna Armannsson...”

She lists the last few candidates before closing her book.

“For those of you who will not advance, please exit the dining hall and gather your belongings. You will be brought home tonight. Congratulations to our girls who are moving on and my condolences to those who did not make it.”

But, her tone sounds like anything but condolence. You'd think that we were all strangers to Baroness Rose from the detachment in her tone. I lower my chin to hide my disgust and disappointment, as she bows to the King and Queen before exiting the dining hall.

General Lindor enters the room swiftly, passing by his wife without so much as a look in her direction. He offers the King a half bow before whispering something into his ear. The King's expression does not give away whether the message is good news or bad, but he nods his head in understanding. General Lindor takes the same position as Baroness Rose.

“This morning was the Iudicium mock debate. Our challengers went up against the King and the current generals to prove their skills in persuasion. These skills will serve them well in battle and in conversation with foreign dignitaries.”

I hold my breath as if that will soften the blow of possibly not hearing Aaron's name. He was my main reason for wanting to stay

here in the city.

“Bomani Binto, Chi Oriwa, Ibrahim O'hare, Prince Aaron Leodius...”

The other finalists are named and another round of applause makes its way around the room. I release my breath and say a silent prayer of thanks that he made it.

The General doesn't offer any congratulations or condolences, for which I'm grateful. I'd prefer indifference over insincerity. He turns on his heel and marches right out of the hall. A chill goes down my spine as he clears the doorway. Something is definitely wrong. The King rises from his seat, prompting the entire room to stand as well. He lets out a hearty laugh, surveying the room.

“My apologies for the absence of my son this evening. He has taken ill and requires rest. Take this opportunity to get to know each other.”

He quickly walks out of the room. I probably won't get another chance to speak with the Queen anytime soon, so before she follows the King out I say,

“I hope that Prince Aaron is alright. He has been doing so well in the Iudicium”.

She slowly turns to face me. Placing one perfectly manicured hand on my shoulder, she offers another gentle smile before gathering her skirts and making her exit. I don't know what to make of her silence.

“Stop being such a kiss up. It won't make the prince pick you,” Agnes whispers into my ear. All I can do is smile, knowing she has no idea what has gone on between us.

Stepping away, I approach Rain to congratulate her, but Ibrahim reaches her first. He leans down to whisper something into

her ear, and they make their way to the dance floor.

An unexpected tap on my shoulder has me swiveling around to find Bomani standing before me.

"Would you like to dance, Zenya?" He asks me, in his too-serious tone of voice.

Bomani and I grew up together back home. He has been a stoic person for as long as I can remember, and I've never found myself interested in him. He is a familiar face and an acquaintance at best. Still, there is no reason to decline.

I take his outstretched hand and let him lead me to the dance floor. The musicians start playing a classical version of Cardinia's national anthem and we sway back and forth to the tune.

"My father told me about a potential match between the two of us," he says.

"Yes, my father mentioned it to me as well." I don't have much to say on the topic. I have no interest in spending the rest of my life with Bomani.

Back home, he was considered the most eligible bachelor. He stands a good ten inches taller than me, with skin the color of cocoa, emerald green eyes, and a slim but muscular build. From what I have heard, he is also a good hunter, but I couldn't spend the rest of my days listening to that monotone voice. Or living a monotone life.

"I would like to choose you to be my wife."

I lock eyes with him and stop my swaying.

"Bomani, that's no way to propose to someone."

"I can provide for you and your family. You will be safe with me, Zenya."

When I don't respond he scrunches his brows together, as if he is dumbfounded that I wouldn't accept such an amazing offer.

"I'll think about it," I say as the musicians' song fades out.
"Thank you for the dance," I say and I turn to leave the ballroom.

"Wait!"

I hear as I cross into the entryway. Rain hooks arms with me.

"What did he say?" she asks. I assume she means Bomani.

"He wants to pick me as his bride at the end of the Iudicium."

She slaps her hand over her mouth.

"What about the prince?"

He has never actually said he would choose me. I just thought that since we had grown so close, I would be his obvious choice. I didn't consider that he might not want to be more than friends.

"I don't know."

"Well, you should ask. If Bomani places higher than the Prince in the final event, he will get to pick his bride first. Ibrahim said he plans to pick me."

"I'm so happy for you, Rain", and I truly am, but that's all I can manage to say. I don't know where I'll find the courage to ask Aaron if he plans to select me.

"I'm going to get some sleep," I say, unhooking my arm from hers. I say my goodbyes before entering my room.

I change back into my simple green dress and sit in front of the lit fireplace, warming my hands by it to pass the time until I can meet with Aaron. I don't even know if he'll be there. The warmth isn't enough to keep the suspense away.

I waged my entire future on the assumption that he would want to be with me. I may have damned myself to a life of being the King's plaything or being stuck with Bomani for the rest of my life. I'm so stupid. I dug my own grave.

Panic starts to take over my thoughts when, out of the corner

of my eye, I see a broom perched on the far wall of my room. I approach it without thinking. It may not be a spear, but it will have to do. I need something to clear my mind. I unscrew the head of the broom from the shaft then I spend the next two hours going through maneuvers I've taught myself over the years. Back when there were no real threats to my life, and this was just for fun. The thought that I may have to use these skills against a human being never crossed my mind.

I twist the staff behind my back, passing it into my other hand and mirroring the movement. I lunge forward, thrusting the broomstick out in front of me, before spinning and thrusting it in the opposite direction. When the clock finally strikes eleven o'clock, my palms are slick with sweat. My heart is pounding, and adrenaline fills my body. As much as I probably look terrible, I can't lose this feeling of bravery in my chest.

I enter the ballroom and cross the echoing floor. It is almost impossible to keep quiet in such a large room. I knock gently on the door, then open it without waiting for an answer. Nothing could prepare me for what I would see.

The prince is sitting behind a desk, with one black eye and a swollen lip. His shoulders slump down in his chair as he offers me a crooked smile.

"What the hell happened to you?!" I ask, rushing over to his side. I reach my hand towards his eye and he pulls back.

"My father. He wasn't happy that I interrupted his...enjoyment during breakfast."

"This is so wrong Aaron. He can't get away with this! I-"

"Shhh, lower your voice. I knew this would happen when I stepped in, but I couldn't ignore what he was doing."

I burst into tears and collapse into his arms.

"I'm so sorry, Aaron. I'm sorry he did this to you."

"Don't worry, Zenya, I'll be fine. I'm used to it. He's been like this all my life."

"Is that why your mother doesn't speak? Is she afraid of him too?"

I stand and wipe my tears, wondering what things must have been like for her. He pauses, staring up at me from his chair.

"Has no one told you? She can't speak, because the bastard had her tongue cut out after she spoke out of turn in a council meeting. It happened over ten years ago."

I clench my fists and my body starts to shake. Well, there is my answer. She is a victim too. How could the King do that to his wife? To the mother of his children? Spit starts to collect in my mouth and I run to the trash can. I vomit into it utterly disgusted by this place and its awful laws. It's awful people. This is all so ridiculous that I have to laugh.

"To think that I was worried about whether you'd pick me as your wife. You have way more important things to think about," I say, sitting down on the floor to settle my stomach.

Aaron sits on the floor next to me. He embraces me, and his touch settles my racing heart.

"Of course, I plan to pick you. How could you think otherwise?" He pulls back and I get a good look at the damage that's been done to his face. I almost throw up again.

"We've never talked about that. I couldn't know for sure unless I asked you. I'm sorry if it sounds selfish." I place my hand on his cheek, careful not to cause any more pain. Aaron leans into my hand and closes his eyes.

"You have no idea how lonely it is here. My mother cannot speak, my father is a brute, and then there's Cayman. Well, he has some mental difficulties and he is non-verbal because of it."

Another thing I had no idea about. That must be why the younger prince is never present at public events.

Aaron always smiles so brightly, I had no idea he was hurting so much.

"It's impossible to be heard in this place, and even harder to be understood. That's one reason why I have to get out every once in a while. I'd lose my mind otherwise. Zenya, meeting you and getting to share so much of myself with you has been the best thing to happen to me. It's been so freeing."

I stare into his honey-colored eyes, as tears form in them.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

It's not pity that I feel for him, but grief. I took for granted the love and support I have received all of my life. My parents have always been kind to me. They have always been patient and supportive. Every night, we would sit around a low table in the common room for dinner, chatting about what happened that day. In the dim lantern light, mother would be folding laundry. I could talk to them about anything. I took those moments for granted.

Who would have thought that the prince of Cardinia was so lonely? I can only imagine the cruelties he has experienced at the hands of his father.

He only stares into my eyes, before placing a hand under my chin and kissing me gently. The softness and intention in his kiss melts me even more. I lean into it, savoring every sensation, savoring the taste of him. Where I doubted myself before, now I know for certain that I made the right choice.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The golden walls are too high for me to see over. A bright red sun shines low overhead, heating the metal around me. As I walk through the empty maze, I call out for anyone. My too-loud voice echoes back at me and reverberates throughout my whole body. No one is coming to save me. I start to run, kicking up sand as I go. I turn one corner, two, three, but there is no exit in sight. Collapsing to my knees from exhaustion, I whisper a prayer. *Please let this end.*

When I open my eyes, the maze walls are closing in around me. I push against one, entreating it not to come in any further, but it doesn't relent. The burning sun above heats the metal walls, burning my skin as they grow closer. I flatten myself against one side, gritting my teeth against the pain. Trying to buy myself some time to think of a way out, but the air is becoming too hot. Too hot to think in. Too hot

to survive in. I let out a pained scream as the wall at my back presses into me.

Suddenly, the air is still. I sit up in my bed covered in sweat. Grasping at my chest, I try to settle my heartbeat. No maze. No burning sun. The only source of heat in my room is the smoldering embers in the fireplace.

There are only two days left until the selection ceremony and my dreams have been getting out of hand. Last night, it was a red-eyed wolf chasing me, down on the forest floor back home. The night before, it was a fire in the palace. I was stuck here in my bed with flames licking at the door, as smoke filled the entire room. I shake my head to clear the memories, before bathing and dressing. As much as I believe the idea that dreams must have a meaning, I can't let them distract me.

I gather the skirts of my teal dress and I make my way down towards the palace library for lessons. More lessons. It's been three days since I last saw Aaron, and they have been filled with lessons from Counselor Storm on customs, traditions, and whatever other forms of obligation we will have when we move to Lusea permanently.

There has been so much preparation going on in the palace for the last Iudicium trial. I can barely leave my room without almost knocking into a servant on their way to deliver supplies. Others carry around various weapons to the training areas.

The final trial will be a battle. A fake one, but the danger will be just as real. The event takes place tonight at the city arena and a chill travels down my spine remembering what happened the last time I was there.

As I enter the library, I am greeted by Leo, the giant cat that lives here. He rubs his long orange fur against my leg when I take my

seat around the long wooden table for lessons. I lean down to scratch his chin, and he purrs into my hand.

I pluck an apple from the bowl in the center of the table and take a bite.

"Morning Zenya, how did you sleep?" Rain saunters in and takes the seat next to mine. She has been glowing since the night that the finalists were announced. I can only assume it's because of the security of Ibrahim's intentions towards her. I'm sure some of the other girls have received similar proposals.

"I slept alright." A lie. "What about you?"

"I'm worried about the Iudicium. Ibrahim has proven himself already, but I'm scared he might get hurt in the last trial. Or worse."

She bites at her fingernail, which isn't like her. I know she is still torn up about having to leave Abel behind, but she is making the best of it.

"Try not to stress about it, Rain. There's not much you can do to help," I say, but I feel the same. Even just the thought of returning to the arena has my head hurting. If anything were to happen to Aaron-

I push the thought from my head, taking another bite of the apple.

With the ten of us seated around the table, Counselor Storm starts her lesson. She passes a sheet of paper to each girl before speaking.

"Alright then. Today's lesson will prove difficult to endure for some of you, but I ask for your cooperation and maturity." She clears her throat. "Who here knows how a child is created?" She looks in my direction, but I can't say that I know the details, only what she already taught us about submission.

Johanna's hand shoots up and for the first time, I notice the beauty of her copper hair and pale skin. Counselor Storm slaps her hand down, causing Johanna to shrink back.

"You should not have been privy to that information. I will explain the process to you."

I can feel my cheeks heating up and I try to avoid eye contact with any of the other girls. I sneak glances at the intricate diagram posted on the chalk board.

The Counselor explains the process of coupling, how to time your cycle to ensure conception, and how to keep our bodies healthy throughout pregnancy. I look up from my lap to see Agnes' entire neck turn red, and I have to bite down on my lip to keep from laughing. My smile falters when I remember the obstacle I still have in front of me.

I have to tell Aaron about the possibility that I can't have children.

* * *

My steps are slow and cautious on the way back to my room. I have to find the right time to tell him. He has the right to know before being bound to me forever, but what if he doesn't want me anymore? If he is going to be the King someday, he'll need heirs. He'll need a wife that can fulfill that responsibility. I wouldn't fault him if he changed his mind, but I can't say that I'm not afraid. Ending up as a concubine to King Tau would be worse than death.

I pause in front of my door, gripping the handle. Even if Aaron doesn't want to be with me after finding out, I'll never let that wicked bastard have me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The arena feels larger than before. This time we are led in through a hidden side entrance that leads straight to the VIP boxes. Our change in status can be felt in the way we are treated.

Our viewing box is right next to the King and Queen's, and staff offer us drinks and small snacks almost immediately. I decline all of it, dreading the idea of eating anything at all when I know what is about to happen.

Baroness Rose is nowhere to be seen. I have to think that maybe her role in our training is complete, or maybe the guilt from how she has been acting is eating away at her. The former makes more sense.

Beside me, Johanna seems to be whispering a prayer with her eyes closed. I lay my hand on top of hers and she halts her prayer,

looking up at me. The steel behind her hazel eyes is almost uncomfortable to look at.

“Are you alright?”

“Magnus and I came here together. I have known him since he was just a small boy. His father says he must become a general, so if we wished to marry, I had to enter the bridal competition.”

The resolve in her stare convinces me that it will happen. It has to, or she’ll be stuck here without Magnus. Just like I’ll be stuck here if Aaron doesn’t make it out alive. She holds my hand and squeezes tightly. I return the gesture, willing myself to be as sure as she is that everything will work out.

Looking over at the Royals’ box to my right, I find that the King is already looking this way. I follow the path of his gaze to Ayanna, stiffening when I see that she has noticed as well.

Her usually warm skin has taken on a green hue and she lowers her eyes. He holds the Queen’s hand in his, stroking the back of it with his thumb without breaking focus. How she allows that kind of touch from him is beyond me when I know that if I were in her place, I would have smothered him in his sleep years ago.

Prince Cayman sits in a seat behind his parents. Seeing him up close, he looks just like a younger version of Aaron, with longer hair. His focus is on a leather-bound book. He follows the lines of text with a finger, pausing to contemplate the words every once in a while. He must feel me staring because he looks up from his book, and to my surprise, his eyes are nothing like his father’s or brother’s. He has his mother’s deep brown eyes. I offer a soft smile and he hesitates before mirroring the gesture, then returning to his book.

The sound of a horn pulls my attention down to the arena below. A door on the left side of the sandy pit opens and the Iudicium

challengers make their way out.

Aaron stands at the front of the group, wearing a set of simple armor over his training clothes.

“Dearest citizens of Cardinia, thank you for being here to witness the final trial of the Iudicium.”

The applause from the spectators is almost deafening in response to the King's welcome. Lusea's citizens must be craving violence, to display this much excitement.

“Today, our challengers will face off against the most lethal and brutal of our country's prisoners. To encourage an interesting fight, those prisoners who survive will receive their freedom. The trial will end when all the prisoners are dead, or when only five competitors are left.”

He stretches his arm out towards another door in the arena and ten of the most frightening-looking men emerge onto the sandy floor. From where I am sitting, the look on their faces says it all. They will kill anyone and anything to be free.

A short stocky prisoner with a shaved head, spits onto the ground, yelling slurs at the challengers. Then, a tall chain-link fence is wheeled out into the center of the arena. It has to be at least three times as tall as the men on the field. Strapped to it with leather cords are various weapons. Crossbows, axes, swords, daggers, and spears.

“Ready! Begin!”

Before the King has even finished speaking, the prisoners dash towards the weapons. I stand to my feet, peering down into the pit. Both the prisoners and the challengers are at the fence, clawing for something to wield in the fight.

My focus lands on Aaron as he reaches the fence. He starts to climb up the length of it, before removing an ax.

No, he should have chosen a spear, or at least a sword.

With one hand he grips onto the fence, swinging the ax around the other side of the fence and taking one of the prisoners' heads clean off.

Never mind.

My eyes widen with horror, but I can't bring myself to look away. He drops down from the fence, using the leather cord to tie the ax to his hand.

Ibrahim has chosen a bow and arrow as his weapon. He slings the quiver over one shoulder and starts sending arrows directly through the fence. One of them finds its mark in the throat of a tall lanky prisoner.

They must be panicking now because all of the prisoners rush around the fence.

The bald man charges straight into Amit's stomach with his spear. He places his foot on Amit's stomach and pulls the spear back out. Amit collapses to the ground and the man shoves his spear straight down into his head.

That same prisoner screams something in the direction of the others and they all charge towards the challengers. Head-to-head combat ensues, with swords and arrows flying back and forth. three more of the challengers are killed in the skirmish, in what feels like mere minutes. Veeral, Chi, and Andrew. Their bodies are trampled over as the fight continues. I shut my eyes, unable to watch them be crushed underfoot.

Then, a guttural scream erupts from behind me. I turn to see Johanna in tears. Looking back down into the arena, Magnus is on his knees. Blood is pouring out from the back of his ankle, as he struggles to swing his sword. His balance wavers and he collapses to the ground.

I grip the edge of the banister, digging my nails into it.

Suddenly, Aaron makes a sprint for the chain-link fence. He makes quick work of climbing up to the top and starts to wave his hand in different directions. He points his hand out to the left and Bomani darts from his position to exactly where the prince instructed. He yells something and waves his hand to the right. Ibrahim pushes a lanky prisoner to the ground before running to the right side.

He's creating a formation.

A few moments later the remaining challengers have created a triangle around an injured Magnus. The prince jumps back down from the fence, swinging his ax as he runs towards the rear of the prisoners. He picks up a discarded spear and stabs it straight through the back of a prisoner's head. The sound he lets out can be heard from all the way up here.

"Now!"

The challengers advance, slicing their way through the prisoners from the front, while the prince works from the back. Their moves are calm and calculated. It almost looks like a dance.

The bald prisoner notices what is happening and turns around, to face the prince. He tackles him to the ground, raining punches down onto Aaron's face. I let out a scream. My insides start to twist together. I lean as far over the edge of the banister as I can.

"No! No Please!"

But the man doesn't stop. He beats into Aaron's face until blood starts to spray out after every blow. I am nearly throwing myself over the banister's edge when the prince throws a handful of sand into the man's face. Then, he reaches up and wraps a leather cord around the man's neck. Aaron bends one knee and pushes up, flipping them both. Now straddling the man, he twists it even further, yelling as he

does so. The prisoner fights back, clawing into Aaron's hands, but it's no use. Aaron gathers both ends of the cord in one hand before reaching down to grab the ax at his feet. With one clean swing, he beheads the prisoner. The head rolls towards the rest of the chaos and I turn my attention there.

All four of the other challengers are still alive, standing over the dead bodies of the prisoners. Magnus loses consciousness and falls to the ground, eliciting another scream from Johanna. The prince walks over to the head of the first prisoner that he killed and lifts it high into the air. The crowd erupts with cheers and applause at the triumph. Tears fill my eyes and overflow. I sob loudly, still leaning over the edge of the viewing box, relieved that it is over. It's finally over.

A few months ago, I would have been overjoyed to make it to this moment. Instead, there is a bittersweet mix of relief and anguish. My joy would be at the expense of the challengers that died today.

We stand by the black bus, waiting for the challengers to emerge from the arena. I have to get a good look at him, or I'll be up all night. *I have to know that he is okay.*

One by one they exit toward their transportation. Magnus is carried on the shoulders of Bomani and Ibrahim, and besides his ankle being sliced open, he doesn't look too bad. The challengers are covered in scratches, bruises, and other small injuries, but nothing too worrisome. Aaron exits the arena last and I almost collapse to the ground at the sight of him. His face is an unrecognizable mosaic of reds and purples. Although his eyes are almost swollen shut, he holds his head high. He led the challengers to victory, just like a skilled general would.

"Aaron," I call out to him.

He turns his head in my direction, offering me as much of a smile as he can muster before boarding the challengers' bus back to the palace.

* * *

I didn't think about how I would get past Aaron's guards when I made my way to his room. I also didn't think about wearing something more covering than my nightgown. I didn't think about anything except seeing him.

"Return to the guest wing of the palace."

The guard on the left holds his arm out, covering the door to Aaron's room.

"Please, let me just ask him if he's okay."

I take a step towards the door when the guard on the right side grabs onto my wrist. I yelp in response to the merciless grip. He holds the pommel of his sword with the other hand.

"Return to the guest wing, or you will be brought there by force!"

I open my mouth to beg for them to let me in when Aaron's door opens, just a crack.

"Let her in," he says and immediately the guard releases my hand.

They both take one step away from the door and I walk in, not knowing what to expect inside.

Even in the dim candlelight, I can see Aaron's room is dripping in royal blue. From the fabric of his couch to the heavy silk curtains at his windows. His desk is overflowing with books on every inch. He sits on the edge of his bed at the far wall, his head hanging down. As I approach, the astringent smell of healing herbs wafts towards me.

I reach my hand out, lifting his chin to get a better look. The herbs are doing their job well, and the swelling is already subsiding after only a few hours. But, that familiar light behind his golden eyes is missing. Replaced by it are two empty amber pools.

“Are...are you alright?” I whisper.

He pulls his chin from my hand and stands. His bare torso is on full display and I fight to keep my eyes focused on his face.

“Talk to me, Aaron.”

“I hate the killing. It makes me feel so hollow. It makes my entire body feel numb.” He runs a hand through his already disheveled hair. “Even so, I’ll do whatever I must to protect this country. To protect you.”

He takes my hand and brings it to his lips, placing a kiss in the center of my palm. The heat of his breath sends a tingle down my body, stopping between my legs. I let out a sigh. He places another kiss on the inside of my wrist, and another on my arm. I work to control the pace of my breathing as I watch.

“Aaron,” I whisper. He doesn’t respond. He wraps his hand around my waist, pulling me closer to him and I place a hand on his chest. I try to keep some distance between us, knowing it is frowned upon to have so much contact with a man before marriage. My resolve is broken almost immediately by the feeling of his chest beneath my hand. My breath hitches at the firmness there. I run my fingers down his chest and over the smooth plane of his stomach. That tingling between my legs transforms into heat and I pull back at the intensity, but he pulls me into his chest again, spinning our bodies around and dropping us onto the bed. He kisses me deeply, pressing his lips into mine until it hurts. He pulls back to look at me.

“I need to feel something. Anything,” he says between breaths.

His plea weakens something in me and I pull his lips back onto mine, kissing him, tasting him, taking in his sweet scent mixed with the scent of herbs. He hitches my leg over his hip and presses his weight down on me. I feel his hardness pressing against my center and that heat between my legs blazes. I whimper.

“Aaron.”

“Should I stop?” He asks and places a kiss right below my ear. Then, another at the base of my neck. I lose myself, grinding up into him, wanting to feel more. Wanting to feel him against me. He returns the gesture, grinding himself against me. Then, I feel his hand at my chest, undoing the first button of my nightgown, and the second. He kisses the top of my chest, licking at the spot as he grinds even harder. I moan, throwing my head back and pulling at his hair. I interlock my legs around his waist, trying to pull him closer.

There is a knock at the door and one of the guards stumbles over his words.

“Announcing King Tau.”

My eyes widen, and in one movement I unwrap my legs and push Aaron off of me.

“Under the bed,” he whispers with a look of terror on his face, and I quickly crawl underneath.

Not a moment after I pull my legs under the bed skirt does the door open. The King walks in slowly, and I can picture that permanent look of nonchalance on his face.

“You did well today.”

The slur of his words tells me all I need to know about how much he has had to drink.

“You took control of that situation like a general. Like a King.” I can’t help but smile, pride filling my chest at the compliment.

"Thank you, fath-".

A loud slap rings through the air.

"You think you can do a better job than me? Hmm?"

His words are so drawn out that I can barely understand them. I hear more footsteps getting close to the bed, and shut my eyes, expecting to be found.

"Listen to me, boy. You will never be as good a King as I am."

Then, there is a loud sound that I can't quite place. The King doesn't say another word. I hear more footsteps, the door opening, then Aaron's voice.

"Make sure the King gets to his bed safely."

The guards enter the room and are gone a few minutes later. I wait another minute before crawling out from my hiding place.

"What just happened," I ask.

"He was drunk. He's like that every night."

"Did he hurt you?" I ask, but I already know the answer.

"That was nothing compared to what I went through today."

He won't look at me.

"He's wrong. You'll be ten times the King he is."

I mean it. The way Aaron speaks about Cardinia and the people in it gives me so much hope for a better future.

"Thank you. You should get to bed, Zenya."

I stare at him for a moment, before turning to leave. He grabs my hand as I reach for the door handle.

"Thank you for coming to check on me."

"I'll always be here for you if you need me. You know that, right?"

He nods in response, at last looking up at me, and the look in his eyes turns my blood cold.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

To keep from losing focus, I bite down on the inside of my cheek. Counselor Storm's lips are moving, but my mind is occupied with the thought of Aaron's.

The adrenaline from almost getting caught by the King made it close to impossible to sleep and the thought of Aaron's tongue along the column of my neck had me squeezing my thighs together to quell the desire growing there.

More than anything though, that look on his face before I left his room haunts me. It was a look of murderous determination. I fear for how that look will play out in the future. The challenge from the King seems to have awoken something in Aaron. Maybe it's a desire to prove his father wrong or something more than that.

Leo sits in my lap and I stroke his luxurious fur as we watch a

historical film about the creation of the Wasteland. Before the Great War, waste was processed in the city's landfill. After our liberation from Galway, the monarchy decided to outsource the waste management to an undeveloped area on the western side of Cardinia.

A wall was built to create a clear separation between the Wasteland and the rest of the country, but over the years, it has turned into a prison of sorts. The most murderous of the country's criminals are banished to the Wasteland to spend the rest of their lives burning trash in furnaces. The thought of being exposed to toxic fumes and sewage every day makes my throat tighten.

The train into the Wasteland runs once per day, and no one who leaves on it is ever allowed back outside of that wall.

An image of the man who attacked us in the Rec Center flashes in my mind. His skin looked like it was rotting. The grating sound of his voice plays over in my head.

"Where is it?" He asked.

At the end of the lesson, I stand to make my way back to my room, when I hear a familiar whistle. Instinctively, the corner of my mouth turns up. I turn my head in the direction of the bookshelves, trying not to draw too much attention to myself. I spend a few minutes flipping through the pages in my black book to wait for the others to disperse. Then, I make my way between the shelves.

The rows of books seem to go on forever, and this is only the first floor. There are four more that I have never been to. Just when I think I might have lost him, Aaron wraps his arm around my waist.

"How did you sleep?" He whispers into my ear.

I turn to face him and to my relief, his face is almost back to normal. I haven't seen herbs work so quickly back home, but whatever they have here in the city must be stronger. I note the mischievous

smile on his face and seize the opportunity.

“I slept like a baby.”

He narrows his eyes.

“Oh?” he says as he grazes his finger along my cheek.

“I didn’t get a moment of sleep. The scent of you is still lingering in my room.”

My cheeks heat up as I remember just how close we were.

“Come, I’d like to show you something.”

The training ring is even more elaborate than I imagined it would be. I’m unable to contain my awe as we exit the stairwell and emerge onto the rooftop of the palace, my jaw hanging open.

Rays of sunshine bounce off of the golden rotunda above us. Beautiful marble arches encircle the large training area, letting the afternoon breeze through. Weapons of every kind line the left side of the space, and my eye catches on a shimmering spear. The staff looks like it has been dipped in molten gold and the silver head glints in the afternoon sun. Aaron notices what has caught my attention, and smiles.

“I knew you’d like it. How about a little sparring practice?”

“You sure you want to be back in a fight so soon? You’re just starting to look a bit better.”

“I feel fine, Zenya. Let’s just have some fun.”

I shrug my shoulders in response. I don’t think he knows just how good I am with a spear. My father taught me how to hunt, but I taught myself how to fight. Any free time that I had outside of lessons was spent in my room with that carved spear father made me. That little hobby of mine has already served me well since arriving here in the city.

I approach the rack of spears and grab the golden one. Its

weight is unfamiliar in my hands and I take a moment to orient myself. I twirl the spear around my body, switching hands as it comes around the other side. I go through a quick combination of three moves, ending in a lunge forward.

Aaron watches me with his eyebrows raised. Then, he removes his shirt in one swift motion. He grabs an obsidian-tipped spear and tosses it back and forth between his hands.

“Let’s see what you’ve got, Miss Marku.”

“My pleasure Mr. Leodius.”

My focus is already waning as I stare at the columns of muscle lining his stomach.

We begin a dance in the center of the training area. Circling the space and never taking our eyes off of each other. Aaron lunges forward with his spear and I dodge out of the way, just before it connects with my head. My eyes widen, and he answers with a playful smirk. Bending my knees, I settle into a fighting stance. I run towards him and spin the staff. I twist my body, hitting him in the stomach with the back end of my weapon. He lets out a breathless grunt.

“Not bad.”

I smile at him, knowing I caught him off guard, again.

The next few hours are spent sparring with each other with various weapons. Aaron’s skills with a sword are immaculate, and he executes fighting combinations with such grace that I have to stand back and watch. He teaches me a couple of combinations as well.

He stands behind me, adjusting my grip on the hilt of the sword. His hard muscles press into my back as his hands overlap mine. The heat of his skin seeps into me, relaxing me.

I want him. Now.

I lay my head back against him, taking in his scent.

"Focus, Zen. I want you to get this."

"Fine." I pout

By the end of our session, my legs are so sore that they shake uncontrollably. My arms feel like mush too, but the post-exercise high is a welcome change of pace from the past few weeks.

"You have no idea how happy I am that you can defend yourself. You're such a quick learner too", he says.

I fan my hand in his direction.

"It's just something I used to do for fun."

"I'm serious, Zenya," he says, coming over to where I stand, dabbing my forehead with a towel. "You've already seen that life here can be dangerous. I want you to feel comfortable protecting yourself if you have to. Hopefully, you never have to."

He looks at the ground, seeming to contemplate for a while.

"If my father ever tries to take advantage of you, don't hesitate to fight back."

His tone is solemn.

So that's who he is worried about.

His father is the most dangerous person in the entire country. Even his own family isn't immune to his abuse. I try my best to quell his worry.

"You don't have to worry about that, Aaron. I won't let-"

He grabs my hand with a force that startles me.

"Don't think that I don't know how he is. Promise me you will, Zenya. Promise."

He stares into my eyes with a pleading look and I can't help but to agree.

"I promise."

Someone clears their throat at the entrance of the rooftop and I turn to see Bomani and Ibrahim entering.

“Are we interrupting something?”

Ibrahim strolls up to us, greeting me with a smile and Aaron with a rough hug. Aaron tousles his mousy brown hair.

“We were heading out. It’s all yours,” Aaron responds.

Bomani bows to Aaron and without looking at either of us, he makes his way to the bows and arrows. The prince releases my hand.

“I’ll walk you back to your room.”

When we reach the guest wing, Aaron says,

“What was that about?”

“What do you mean?”

“Bo and I aren’t that close, but we always exchange pleasantries when we see each other. He didn’t even look at me back in the training arena.”

The fact that Bomani made his intentions towards me clear isn’t something I’m eager to mention. I have no interest in him in that way and I don’t intend to entertain his interest.

“I’m not sure what you mean. He and I were always cordial with each other back home.”

I avoid his questioning stare and reach for the doorknob.

“If something is going on between you two, I need to know,” he says with an icy tone.

I look up then and see his jaw clenched. His furrowed brow creates harsh lines on his forehead that make him look even more like his father. I let out a sigh.

“If you really want to know, my father was considering an arranged marriage between Bomani and me, but that was before the Iudicium even started. And... he might have mentioned that he would

choose me at the selection ceremony.”

“You didn’t think that was something I should know about?”

“I didn’t think it was important.”

“It was important enough for you to hide it from me, though.”

“I wasn’t hiding it, I just didn’t think it was that big of a deal.”

“Well, you were wrong. Some other man being interested in you is definitely something I need to know about. Especially when the selection ceremony is tomorrow.”

His glare is heavy and I step back to get away from the weight of his anger. He notices my discomfort and visibly softens.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t want any surprises, okay?”

“There won’t be any surprises, Aaron. I’m not interested in him. I’m not interested in anyone but you.”

My reassurance is enough to make him smile, and I offer a hesitant one in return.

“Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow, Zen. Goodnight.”

After dinner, I sit by the fire in my room. As I stare into the flames, fear and hesitation bubble up in my chest. The look on Aaron’s face lingers in my mind. It was the same look he had when his father came to his room that night. I hate that look. It reminds me too much of the King. My skin crawls at the thought of it.

Tomorrow, I will become his betrothed. Tomorrow, I will attach myself to him forever. For the first time since the start of the Iudicium, I wonder if it is too soon. I came to the city looking for a chance at a new life, but I’ve been met with one unexpected turn after another. Aaron is amazing, but we’ve known each other for just a few weeks. And... that look. I haven’t seen him angry like that before.

The only thing that keeps my mind calm is the thought of getting to see my parents again.

The parents of all the competitors have been invited to the selection ceremony, and I've been so removed from my life back home that I don't quite know what to expect when I see them. It feels like it has been a year since I set foot in our treehouse. Since I've seen Issa. I've missed my mother's soft, inviting smile, and my father's quiet comfort. I miss the morning scent of the canopy after a night of heavy rain.

So much has happened in such a short time and I hope I get the chance to speak with them before the ceremony begins. I want to get their blessing. I want to tell my mother about all the things that have happened and that she was right. Most of all, I want to reassure her that I am well and that my future with Aaron looks bright.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

From the moment my eyes opened this morning, there hasn't been a second of rest.

I awoke to a knock at the door and a second later there were five servants in my room holding different arrays of items.

"We are here to prepare you for the ceremony, miss," says one of the women.

I'm still uncomfortable with the idea of them. Servants.

"You don't have to do that, I can dress myself," I say as I stand from the bed and move towards the bathroom.

A tall servant with cropped black hair and dark skin steps into my path.

"We have to prepare you for the ceremony. It is required."

She nods her head to another woman, who hurries to the

bathroom and I hear the bathtub faucet turn on.

"There will be esteemed guests visiting the palace for the selection ceremony and you have to look your best. Take this off."

She gestures to my nightgown, and I step back towards the bed.

"We don't have all day, miss."

"I don't even know you. At least tell me your names before I have to undress in front of you."

"You can call me Nina. This is Constance, Ann, Joy, and that's Erin." She points to each of the servants in turn. "Now, remove your gown so we can begin."

The servant who ran my bath, Erin, sprinkles in various flowers and oils. By the time I sink down into the water, it has been stained a purplish hue. Scents of jasmine and vanilla swirl around me and I close my eyes, savoring the calming aroma. They've allowed me the privilege of bathing alone and I am grateful for it.

I spent most of the night tossing and turning in my bed. Thoughts of Aaron, the King, my family, and the Wastelanders swirled through my mind. I thought about what it might be like to be married to Aaron, and of what would happen if the Wastelanders attacked again. What if he was called away to war? What if my parents disapprove of our union? I submerge myself below the water to try and clear my head. When I emerge, Nina is standing over me. Her green eyes and high cheekbones remind me of so many women back home.

"We need to move on to the next step, miss," she says, handing me a towel.

"Are you from the forest townships?"

"Yes."

“Which one?”

“The second.” Her clipped answers deter me from asking anything else, and I make my way back to the bedroom.

Ann covers my entire body in vanilla-scented oils while Constance grooms my fingernails and Joy paints layers of makeup onto my skin. After they are finished, Nina piles my hair tightly onto the top of my head and secures it there with a ribbon. She places a gold flower hair comb into the side.

“Okay, now for your gown. Ann?”

Ann hurries out of the room and returns a few minutes later with a large box along with layers and layers of fabric. She hands a box to Nina before draping the fabric over one of the couches. It is not just a pile of fabric but an elaborate circle skirt.

Nina places the box on the bed and removes a solid gold corset from it. I can see my reflection on the smooth polished surface. When she presses the sweetheart neckline up to my chest, I shiver at the coolness of the metal against my skin.

“Lift your arms,” Nina says and she secures the back of the corset with golden ribbons. The metal sits perfectly against my torso, stopping just above my navel. It fits as if it was created just for me.

“What did you think the measurements were for during the evaluation?” Nina asks, reading my mind.

She brings over the draped satin skirt and I step into it. I gasp at the sheer weight of it hanging on my waist, but when I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, it takes my breath away. My eyelids are painted with shimmering golden eyeshadow and my lips are the most subtle nude color. The gown accentuates my curves perfectly.

“Wow. Thank you.”

It is all I can manage to say, pulling my eyes away from the

mirror. The servants bow in return; all but Nina.

“I told you. You needed our help.”

She laughs softly, and I can see her age in her smile. She can't be more than a few years older than I am.

“You are to make your way down to the ballroom in fifteen minutes.”

She turns to leave with the other servants, and I can't stop myself from asking.

“Nina, how old are you?”

“I am twenty-two years old,” she responds curtly.

The smile has disappeared from her face and is replaced by a stern glare.

“How did you end up working in the palace?”

“Do not ask too many questions, miss. It will only cause trouble for you.”

She leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

* * *

“You young ladies are the picture of perfection.”

Counselor Storm fawns over us while we wait to be announced into the ballroom. Each girl wears a slightly different version of the same dress. Golden corsets with various necklines and the same large satin skirt.

The fact that Baroness Rose isn't here is no longer a comfort to me. Although her behavior since we arrived at the palace has been cruel at best, her absence is a clear indication that something's not right. She has been with us since the beginning of this competition.

“Will Baroness Rose be attending?”

I keep my voice casual. The counselor pauses for a moment. In a hushed voice, she says

“Baroness Rose was removed from her position. It has been a few weeks.”

The group of us all gasp, as if we were one person.

“Is she alright?” Rain asks.

“What did she do wrong?” Agnes follows.

“Please don't mention her in front of the King,” is her only response as she turns to face the entrance of the ballroom.

“Presenting the Iudicium bridal candidates.”

I take a deep breath as we walk single file into the ballroom. We walk through an aisle in the center of what looks like over one hundred seats, most of which are filled with the families of the challengers. We take our seats in the first row. I can feel their eyes on me. A stage has been erected next to the dais where the king and queen are seated.

“Presenting the winners of the Iudicium.”

I turn towards the back of the room and see the men making their way down the center aisle. They are wearing the dark blue dress uniforms of our country's military. My smile widens when I catch a glimpse of Aaron at the back of the line. The pride and joy on his face have butterflies fluttering in my stomach. The men take their seats in the first row on the other side of the aisle.

I scan the room, looking for my parents. I haven't spoken to them since I left home, but invitations were sent out to every family, so they must be here. Before I can find them though, General Lindor approaches the podium atop the stage.

“Good afternoon, everyone. Parents, family, friends, and honored guests, thank you for being here with us to celebrate the

ending of this year's Iudicium."

He pauses for the applause to die down before continuing.

"Along with the celebration of our challengers' success, they will be selecting their brides tonight."

He looks at his feet for a moment, then takes a deep breath.

"I will explain the procession of events for those of you visiting from Galway."

The three men seated below the dais bow their heads in quick succession. They wear the gray ashen color of Galway, and just the sight of their bleak uniforms tells me enough about their country.

"In order of points received in the Iudicium, the male candidates will each get a chance to say a few words about their potential partner before announcing her name. The selected female candidate will approach the podium and state whether she accepts the proposal or not. If she declines, the male candidate will get another opportunity to put forth a proposal once all of the other candidates have made a selection."

The room falls silent. He left out the part where the women who aren't selected become the King's personal playthings. Saying no to a proposal, in hopes of another, would be like signing your life away.

I look over at the King to see that he has his eyes fixed on the male candidates. He is almost scowling.

I take a series of deep breaths, steadying myself against the nerves and uncertainty that are stirring inside me. I know Aaron said he would choose me, but what if Bomani gets called first? I don't want to embarrass him. What if I decline his offer and Aaron changes his mind?

A servant brings out a stack of sealed envelopes and places

them on the table beside the podium. General Lindor reaches for the one atop the stack and opens it. I hold my breath as he reads the first name.

“Magnus Johnson.”

Scattered applause echoes throughout the room and Magnus makes his way to the podium. His dark brown hair is slicked back against his head. He smooths his uniform before speaking.

“I have been dreaming of this moment for my entire life. I have brought honor to the Arctic townships and honor to my family. My choice is the one and only love of my life. Miss Johanna.”

He reaches out his hand towards her and Johanna doesn't hesitate as she makes her way to the podium. She takes his hand and leans over to the microphone.

“I accept.”

The two gaze into each other's eyes with such adoration and love. They descend from the stage and take seats in the second row.

“Caleb Washington.”

Caleb is tall and thin with a boyish charm to his dark features.

“I have been watching her since our first interaction at the opening banquet. Her quiet beauty is so calming to me, and I hope we can be happy together. Miss Ayanna.”

A cry escapes Ayanna's lips and she brings a hand to her chest. She stands and almost runs onto the stage. Taking his hand, she speaks clearly into the microphone.

“I accept.”

I stand and clap as loudly as I possibly can. Rain, Faiza, and Agnes do the same. Ayanna has been through so much, and it's a relief to see her get selected. Otherwise, she would have to spend the rest of her life entertaining King Tau, and I don't think her gentle spirit could

survive it.

“Prince Aaron Leodius.”

Breathe.

Aaron walks onto the stage with his head held high, bracing his hands on either side of the podium.

Breathe, Zenya.

“Thank you all for being here. My selection is one based on hope for the future. For my future and the future of Cardinia. She is beautiful, strong, and most of all she is my friend. Zenya Marku.”

I let out a sigh of relief. The weight of this entire competition slides from my shoulders in an instant and the feeling overwhelms me. I fight to hold back tears.

Reaching the podium, I hold Aaron's hand to find that it is trembling. I look up into his eyes and tears are forming there. I squeeze his hand in reassurance and look out into the crowd, finally catching sight of my parents on the left side. My mother waves her hand in greeting and just that small gesture is enough to calm me.

“I accept.”

Relief washes over me and in this moment everything feels right. The hope and anticipation that drove me to enter this competition is finally coming to fruition. Aaron and I join the other pairs in their seats. He brings my hand to his mouth and kisses it. I lean my head on his shoulder, savoring this moment.

We made it.

The fact that Bomani still has to make his selection slipped my mind until this very moment and I am quickly brought back to reality. As his name is called I try my best to remain composed with Aaron sitting beside me. I don't want any more conflict between the two of us.

“My selection is one of safety and security. Miss Faiza Dhukai.”

His words are clipped and his face doesn't give any hint to how he is feeling. I've schooled my expression into a look of neutrality, but inside I am shocked. I didn't know that Bomani was interested in Faiza at all. Still, I am happy that I don't have to worry about his proposal anymore.

Ibrahim is the last to make his selection by default. The prince's best friend is all charm and charisma on his way up to the podium. I glance at Rain in the row before me and she is bouncing her leg frantically. She has been smitten by Ibrahim since the opening banquet and I'm glad to know he feels the same. I can already imagine the grand dinner parties we will have together. We will get to raise our children together. Ibrahim leans down to the mic.

“I am lucky to be able to select the most beautiful woman I have ever seen as my bride.”

He winks towards the remaining bridal candidates.

“Miss Agnes, will you be mine?”

My head snaps towards Rain and she is as still as stone. There is no indication of her shock other than her shoulders being pulled up towards her ears. Silent tears fall from my eyes. I watch as Agnes saunters up to the stage.

“Of course, I accept.”

I am going to be sick. Rain said that Ibrahim told her he would propose to her. She was so certain of his intentions that she never pursued any of the other candidates. This doesn't make any sense. Once Agnes and Ibrahim have taken their seats, General Lindor gives his closing statement and the celebration begins.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I weave through the crowd looking for my parents. The chairs have all been cleared from the ballroom and replaced by tables lining the perimeter with various finger foods and fizzy drinks. I see mother's curly brown hair at the ballroom entrance.

“Mother! Father!”

I run to them, embracing them both at once.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” I say with tears flowing down my cheeks.

My mother cups my face in her small hands.

“Zenya, you look so beautiful. How have you been?”

I hesitate, not knowing exactly how to answer that question without telling her every detail of my time in the city.

“I’m doing fine,” I say with a forced smile.

"Congratulations, Zen," father says, placing a calloused hand on my shoulder.

"I was hoping to get a chance to talk with you before-"

"Mr. and Mrs. Marku? I'm Aaron."

Aaron comes up to us with two drinks in hand and passes one to me. He extends a hand to my father in greeting.

"It's nice to finally meet you. Zenya has told me wonderful things about you."

My father shakes his hand firmly.

"Nice to meet you, young man. I expect you to take great care of my daughter."

I shoot my father a glare.

"Of course, sir. I plan to take good care of her."

He wraps one arm around my waist and pulls me into him.

"Zenya, let's go and greet my parents. I'd like to go together."

"Oh, I was just about to take some time to talk-"

Suddenly, Aaron squeezes the flesh underneath my arm so hard that I'm sure it has drawn blood. I pull away from him in shock.

"Are you alright? Come, let's go give our greetings to the King and Queen so you can get a chance to rest. It's been a long day."

He grabs my hand and pulls me away before I can say another word.

Aaron leads us to the far corner of the ballroom.

"What the hell, Aaron?"

I examine the underside of my arm, rubbing at the spot where he pinched me.

"Why would you try to embarrass me in front of your parents like that? Greeting my mother and father should have been the first thing we did. It makes us look bad in front of the ambassadors from

Galway. Is that what you want?"

I stare up at him in disbelief. He's wearing that look again.

"How is it embarrassing to want some time with my parents who I haven't seen in weeks?"

I clench my fists to quell the anger building in my chest.

"Don't you ever put your hands on me like that again!"

His jaw is set and he stares at me for a moment before letting out an exasperated sigh.

"I'm sorry. Can we please greet my parents? Then I'll let you get back to yours. I promise."

"Fine."

I turn and walk in the direction of the dais.

We bow to the King and Queen before climbing the dais. I approach the King and can't get a word out before he grabs my hand between both of his.

"Congratulations my dear. We are looking forward to having you as part of the family."

He caresses my hand with his thumb and I try to pull away. He squeezes my hand before planting a kiss on it. Then, I approach the Queen. I smile warmly and she holds onto my hand. Then I feel something smooth slip from her palm into mine. She smiles at me, holding an uncomfortable amount of eye contact. I grip the small object tightly.

"I'm going to the restroom," I say to Aaron.

I don't wait for his reply.

The moment that I clear the ballroom doors, my shoulders sag. The quiet cool air is a balm and I can finally take a breath and process all that has happened. Aaron's behavior tonight has shaken me up so much that I don't want to be anywhere near him right now.

"Zenya. Dear, are you alright?"

I turned to see my mother coming out from the ballroom, her face contorted with worry.

"Mother, I need to talk to you."

I lead her to the nearest restroom and lock the door behind us.

"What is going on? Did the King and Queen say something to you?"

"Everything is going wrong, mother. The city is nothing like I expected. You were right."

I bury my face in the folds of her scarf and cry. She strokes my back in slow heavy movements.

"I didn't want to crush your spirit, but this place is not where you want to be."

I lean against the bathroom sink, my shoulders sagging immediately, and tell her everything. Everything that has happened since the moment I stepped foot in the Rec Center. A heavy sigh escapes me, and I let relief wash over me. I've wanted to tell her these things for so long.

"You need to come home. Your father and I will speak with the King and Queen."

She reaches for the doorknob, but I step in front of the door before she can open it.

"No, please. Let me have some more time to figure things out. I chose to come here and I want to be the one to fix this."

She sighs, her features darkening.

"I was part of the ludicium when the King participated. I know who he is and I know what he is capable of, dear. I don't know much

about Prince Aaron, but if he's anything like his father, you need to leave here before you lose the chance."

What?

She's never told me that before. How could she keep that information from me, knowing what I would be going through.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's something that still haunts me, Zenya. So much so that I cut the identification band out of my skin."

She holds up her trembling wrist to show me the wide scar left there. I understand. If her time in the competition was anything like mine, I wouldn't speak of it either.

She stares at me with a pleading look and I almost break, almost agree to go back to Forest 1 with them. I hate seeing my mother upset.

"Okay, but please let me be the one to break the news to him."

She nods hesitantly but embraces me tightly.

"I'm going to check on your father."

When the door shuts, I unravel the piece of paper I've been gripping in my palm. Sweat has smeared the message a bit, but I can still make out the words that the Queen wrote to me:

"YOU ARE NOT THE FIRST."

My heart sinks. *Not the first, what?* I stare at the note, hoping its meaning will be revealed to me if I look long enough, but after a few minutes, I give up. I tuck the note down into my corset for later and return to the party.

I have to find Rain. I've been so caught up that I haven't gotten to speak to her or ask her how she is doing. After three turns about the room, there is still no sight of her. None of the other girls have seen her either.

I'll check her room.

As I make my way towards the stairwell to the guest wing of the palace, I hear Rain's voice coming from the gardens. Reaching the doors I see her sprawled out on the garden stairs, staring up at the sky.

"Rain?"

She doesn't respond.

"Rain, I'm so sorry."

I sit down next to her, and now I can see that she is in tears.

"He said he had to pick her. Agnes' father is a powerful figure in the Arctic townships and Ibrahim's father wants an alliance with hers. He said...that he didn't have a choice."

"So, what happens now?"

She sits up, wiping her tears away before she faces me.

"I can't stay here. I'd rather die than be a sex slave for King Tau."

"Where will you go?"

"I'll go back to Forest 2. I'll find a way to reach Abel and we can run away and start our own life together. I should have done that when my parents caught us."

"Rain, the King won't just let you go like that. He'll try to find you."

"I don't care. I can't stay here. I have to at least try, Zen. Will you help me?"

I may not be able to give Rain the future that she hoped for, but I can at least help her get away from this one.

"Alright. Just let me know what I can do."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The hallways of the palace twist and turn in an endless maze. Making my way through unfamiliar floors and rooms has my head spinning, and I can barely keep track of the way back to my room. There is no way out of here except through the main doors. There is no way for Rain to get out without being seen. Aaron once told me that there are disaster shelters scattered throughout the city. That must mean the palace as well, and if there are hidden shelters, there must be hidden exits.

I've been up since before dawn trying to find a way to help her. As the sounds of the palace starting to stir alert me to the morning hours, I resign to pick up my search later on.

Rounding the corner that leads to the guest wing, I come to a

full stop. Aaron stands in front of my door holding a bouquet of bright red roses. He wears a simple white tunic, brown trousers, and a look of pure remorse on his face. I approach the door and reach for the handle, not acknowledging him at all.

“Zenya, can we talk?”

“What is there to talk about?”

He hurt me last night. The spot where he pinched my skin has turned a purplish tinge, and I won’t soon forget the way he looked at me or the way he spoke.

“Please, just give me the chance to explain.”

I look up at him and the look in his eyes softens the wall I’ve started to build between us. I’m curious to hear what he could possibly have to say about what he did. I’ll at least hear what he has to say before I tell him I’m leaving.

“You have five minutes.”

I plop down on one of the couches by the fireplace. Picking at a grape on the low table in front of me, I wait for him to say something; Anything to convince me that he isn’t just like his father. Aaron sits on the couch opposite me, laying the flowers down beside him.

“I apologize for the way I acted last night. I don’t expect you to forgive me.”

“Why? Why did you think that you needed to hurt me to get your way? You could have let me speak with my parents and then we could give our greetings to yours.”

I focus on taking deep breaths to control my anger.

“My father came to see me again before the ceremony.”

I sit up straight in my seat at the mention of the King. The memory of the sound it made when King Tau slapped Aaron that night plays over in my mind.

"He was sober this time, but that didn't stop him from being a cruel bastard. He told me that I had to make a good impression on the ambassadors from Galway. He said that if I screwed up, he would hurt you too."

He squeezes his eyes shut, turning his head away from me.

"How would he hurt me?"

He doesn't respond.

YOU ARE NOT THE FIRST.

That's what the Queen's note said. Maybe I'm not the first woman that Aaron has been with.

"Have you been married before?"

His head snaps towards me.

"No. Goodness no, but I was engaged.

It was two years ago. I loved her. A few weeks before our wedding, my father decided that he wanted her for himself; That I didn't deserve her. He raped her. He raped Ava."

I can feel my heartbeat pulsing through my whole body. My hands start to shake and I grip the edge of my seat to still them.

"She couldn't stand the thought of being plagued by him for the rest of her life, so she killed herself. I was so afraid of something going wrong last night. I didn't want him to hurt you too."

I dig my nails into the seat, biting back angry tears.

"I didn't know."

"You couldn't have known. Zenya, I'm so sorry I hurt you. I promise it will never happen again."

The King has caused so much pain. He did something like that to his son's future wife. He threatened to hurt me, to keep Aaron in line. My heart aches for Aaron. He lost the person he loved to the man who was supposed to protect him. I'm sure he's lost so much more at

the hands of King Tau. He deserves better.

“Hey. Look at me,” I say, coming over to sit beside him.

“I forgive you, but Aaron, you need to communicate with me. If you told me what was going on I could have helped.”

I place my hand on his chest.

“When we get married, we’re going to be a team. Don’t try to bear all these burdens alone.”

He nods silently and takes my hand in his.

“I’ll try. I’ve been dealing with things on my own for so long.”

I’m here now, and I’ll be damned if I let him go through anything alone again.

“I have something for you,” he says.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a small velvet box.

“I had this made.”

He opens the box revealing a dazzling red diamond set in a yellow gold band. The square stone is surrounded by smaller diamonds, only adding to its brilliance.

“It’s beautiful.”

The words come out in a whisper. My hands are still shaking when he takes one into his. He places the ring on my finger.

“I’m going to protect you. I won’t let him hurt you.”

I won’t let him hurt you either.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I knock on Rain's door around noon. I didn't see her at breakfast and I'm worried something has happened to her. Either that or she's already made her escape. When there is no answer I knock again before opening the door. The air in the room is thick and humid like she's been crying since last night.

"Rain?"

I approach the bed, where she lies under the blanket. I peel back the edge of the comforter to see Rain's face, contorted with pain.

"Are you okay?"

"He came here after the party."

She doesn't have to say anything else for me to know who she's talking about. I clench my fists. If it weren't for the guards, I

would take a spear straight through the back of King Tau's head. To hell with the consequences.

I crawl into the bed next to her, wrapping my arm around her curled form.

"We're getting you out. Tonight."

This can't happen again. I won't let it.

She sits up and her entire body is painted in bruises. I cover my mouth to muffle the sound of my surprise.

"He's a monster. He wouldn't stop until he collapsed on top of me."

She wraps her arms around herself and sobs. My heart breaks at the sound of my friend's cry. I couldn't save her. I throw my arms around her and return the comfort she showed me when I was at my lowest.

"Shhh, Shhh, Shhh."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Aaron is my only hope of finding Rain a way out of here tonight. I pace back and forth in front of his door.

“Can’t I just wait inside?”

The guards look at each other, questioning. Being engaged to the Prince has its perks since they haven’t already asked me to go back to my room. I decide to use it to my advantage. I tuck a curl behind my ear, making sure to show the ring adorning my finger.

“I was really hoping to surprise him when he got back. I won’t have time to set it up if you don’t let me in now.”

They take another long look at each other before stepping out of the way.

Once I’m inside, I let out a sigh of relief. My original plan was to find a subtle way to ask him about another exit out of the palace, but his

absence presents an opportunity to look for the answer myself.

I rush over to the long mahogany desk and begin sifting through the papers there. Various letters, meeting notes, and scribbles of random ideas are layered in the pile of papers, but nothing of use to me. I open the first drawer and to my surprise, it is filled with jewelry. Pocket watches, necklaces, rings, but what catches my eye is a large silver key. The head of it is encrusted with black gems, and the dark metal gives off an odd opalescent shimmer.

I open the next drawer and reach for the only thing inside, a folded piece of paper. I unfold the paper on top of the desk and my knees buckle. It is a blueprint of the palace. I run my hands along the various lines, noting hidden pathways behind every wall. My eyes scan frantically over the document, searching for my answer and committing as much of it to memory as possible.

I stop over an arch-shaped opening, sketched onto the side of the building.

There.

An exit leading out into the forest behind the palace. I trace the line upwards trying to find the entrance; the place where the path starts. It's somewhere along the east facing wall in the residential wing.

Just when I think I may have found it I hear a voice outside the door. I fold the paper up, placing it back into the drawer. There is no time to do anything besides duck underneath the desk. Tucking myself into the space there, I pull the chair close, praying he doesn't notice anything askew.

The door opens and heavy footsteps trudge in. Aaron sighs deeply before tossing something heavy onto the desk, and I flinch in response. I work to slow my breathing and stay calm. The room is

silent for a while, before the heavy footsteps move towards me.

Please don't come over here.

The sharp high pitched sound of metal rings through the air. It sounds like a knife, or a sword, maybe a dagger? Aaron grunts and stabs it down into the desk, short quick jabs over and over. I curl myself into a ball, squeezing my arms together to steady myself. After a few minutes he stops, panting loudly. He lets out a frustrated scream and I hear the sound of metal connecting with the wall; A heavy thunk followed by the reverberation of the dagger.

His footsteps recede towards the door before he opens it and slams it shut behind him. I exhale, sagging onto the ground. My hands are shaking and I count to one-hundred before crawling out from underneath the desk. If he had caught me...

When I look at the dark wood surface, jagged marks pepper every inch not covered by papers. Running my fingers across it, I scan the room for any other damage. That is when I spot the dagger firmly planted in the opposite wall, it's red hilt sticking out. A chill runs down my spine. I need to leave. Whatever angered Aaron must have been catastrophic to cause this kind of reaction. This kind of rage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Do you have everything you need?”

I keep my voice low, though no one can hear me from inside my room.

“I don’t really need much. I have what I need to make it back home, I think,” Rain says.

At dinner, I slipped as many pieces of bread and cheese into the pockets of my dress as I could manage without being noticed.

The disqualified girls are no longer allowed to dine with us, and they have been moved to private rooms directly underneath the King’s. Their absence was sorely felt. The only sound at the table was that of forks and knives scraping across plates. Either the nerves from our upcoming nuptials or something I can’t put words to, caused the unspoken tension.

I help Rain secure the small knapsack to her back, and braid her hair into a crown around her head. Anything to make it easier for her to escape unnoticed. The hour hand on the clock is close to reaching twelve.

"I'm going to miss you so much. I couldn't have asked for a better friend."

I embrace her, savoring every moment I have left with my friend.

"I'll miss you too, Zen. I wish I could stay."

I know she can't, and I wouldn't want that for her. It's just hard to say goodbye. After Issa didn't make it into the competition, I felt like I was floating down a stream with nothing to hold onto. Rain became my anchor. I look up at the clock and realize it's time. We can't be even a minute too late.

"Let's go," I say and we make our way out into the hall.

Our hallway will only be unguarded for the next five minutes for shift change, so I lead us along the path with the least chance of us getting caught, based on my memory of the map. The palace is silent, only adding to the difficulty of the task at hand. We stop at the corner just before the entrance to the residential wing of the palace. Peering around it, I can see the night guards at the far end. They both lounge lazily in their seats.

"How are we going to get past them?"

"Shh."

I look up at the clock on the opposite wall, waiting. Waiting for the right time.

As the clock strikes 12:10, an ear-splitting scream comes from the other end of the hall, followed by a loud crashing sound. The guards startle from their resting positions, gather their weapons, and

race down the stairs toward the noise.

"Let's go," I whisper, grabbing Rain's hand.

I run my free hand along the wall as we make our way down the hall.

Please, God. Please, let me find it.

Feeling for anything that would indicate a door, I press in at various spots. It should be this wall. It has to be. Unless I read the map wrong.

When we've almost reached the other end, I feel it. A slight give underneath my palm. I press in gently, and the wall begrudgingly gives way to a dark staircase. To say that Rain's face is the picture of horror would be an understatement. Tugging her into the stairwell, I close the door behind us.

The space is cold and damp. It reeks of mildew and decaying leaves.

"Who the hell was that?" Rain whispers.

I can't help but smile.

"I asked Ayanna for some help. I figured if anyone would understand your need to get out of here, it would be her."

Ayanna was more than willing to help when I approached her after dinner. She would have wanted someone to do the same thing for her if she wasn't chosen, though she didn't say as much.

I can't see her face in the pitch darkness, but I can tell Rain is smiling too. I feel my way along the wall and we make our way down the stairs. The sheer number of spiderwebs I encounter is enough to have me itching to reach the bottom. Before long, the dim light of the moon emerges through a small window in a wooden door, illuminating both of us.

"If you can't make it in one go, there are a few underground

shelters along the train tracks that lead out of the city. Look for a metal hatch like the one at the Rec Center.”

Running my hand down the length of the door, I start to unlock the series of bolts there, when I feel her hand on mine.

“I hope I make it. I hope we can see each other again.”

Both her voice and her hand are shaking.

“You will-And we will.” I twist the last lock and push the door open.

The backwoods press directly up against the palace. Wildflowers and vines have grown right up to the door. Sounds of the forest immediately surround us, as does the scent of pine on the chill breeze. It's too cold, but it doesn't matter. There is no other option.

I squeeze my friend's hand one last time before she runs off into the thicket of trees, into an uncertain future. The darkness seems to swallow her up in a matter of seconds.

I contemplate following behind her. Going back home to my family, to my normal life, but that's not an option anymore. I've promised myself to Aaron, and today I made another promise to myself. That I would rid this country of its wretched King if it's the last thing I do. I allow myself one more look into the trees before closing the door behind me. *We will see each other again.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Two months. There are two months until my wedding day. I lay in bed, staring up at the silk canopy above me. Intricate embroidered details swirl throughout the luxurious fabric. If I get up from this bed, I know I'll have to face the rest of the palace. I'll have to face the burden of this secret.

It's been exactly one week since Rain escaped and the hole in my heart that she left, has only widened. Pretending that I have no idea she is gone has been harder than I thought and if anyone else has noticed, they do not let on.

The days have been filled with fittings, meetings, consultations, and tastings. I'm grateful for the distraction. The

Queen's presence at all of my wedding-related activities is also a welcome distraction.

Since I'll be marrying into the royal family, my wedding preparations have been separate from Ayanna, Agnes, and the others. I didn't expect to feel so lonely, but each day that passes has me feeling more and more isolated. More empty. Is this what life in the palace will be like?

When I joined the Iudicium, I didn't expect that I would be marrying a prince. This way, I won't have a household to run, I won't get the option not to have servants, and the weight of running a country one day is not one that I would have chosen for myself -But Aaron. Being by his side makes it bearable. I close my eyes and imagine the smell of the sea, though I've never seen it. I imagine the strong breeze whipping through my hair and the ship that will take us to foreign lands. My heart swells with hope. I can do this.

* * *

I enter the drawing room after breakfast. The sun pours in through the large bay windows, filling the room with brilliant morning light. The Queen is poised on one of the many sofas, sipping tea from a porcelain cup. I bow as I approach her and she answers with a subtle nod.

"What do we have planned for today, Your Highness?"

I never know what is happening until I meet with her that day. It makes me feel like a passenger in my own life. She gracefully sets her cup down and picks up a writing pad. After a few moments, she turns it in my direction.

"The second wedding dress fitting."

Right.

I lower my eyes, and it is an effort to hide my disappointment. I cannot remember the last time I had a walk outside. I'd do anything for a walk in the big market or a hunting trip with father. My frustration must be apparent, as the queen extends the writing pad to me.

"What is wrong, dear?"

For just a moment, I consider telling her the truth.

I have no one else to talk to. Her kind eyes pull me in. The Queen has been the only person I've gotten to spend time with in the last week, as Aaron is busy with his own wedding preparations and various meetings. My resolve is weak, but I can't let my guard down. Not when I have so much I need to do.

"Nothing is wrong; I'm just a bit nervous about the wedding."

"When do you plan to tell him?" The point at the end of the question mark leaves a deep imprint on the page.

"Tell who?"

"Tell Aaron that he may not have any heirs if he marries you."

I gasp, and my eyes shoot up to hers. A smirk plays on her lips. I was a fool to think Counselor Storm would keep something like that a secret forever.

"I don't-"

Her hand raises, a gesture I've come to know means silence. She scribbles something quickly.

"Don't worry. I do not plan to tell him, or anyone else for that matter."

I don't understand. If anything, she should have kicked me out of the palace already if she knew. The King's heir is the most important thing after the King himself.

“Why? If Counselor Storm told you, then you know I have no right to be here.”

“For starters, Counselor Storm did not tell me. Second, I have no confidence in that evaluation. I had a similar result before I married Tau, and as you can see, I have two sons.”

She laughs at the awestruck expression on my face. I didn’t expect to hear such a joyful sound from her.

“I did everything in my power for Aaron and Cayman to be born. I will expect the same from you. Besides, we all need a bit of entertainment to boost our spirits now and then.”

She takes another sip of tea and writes another message.

“Wipe your tears, child. You’ll need to be much stronger if you are to survive here.”

I touch my cheek and pull away my wet hand. I didn’t even realize I was crying, but she is right. She rips the page from her notepad and tosses it into the drawing room fireplace.

* * *

My hips are definitely bruised. Almost two hours into the wedding dress fitting and I am still standing on this pedestal. The bright white gown is more extravagant than any garment I've ever seen. It is also heavier than anything I've ever worn. The intricately beaded corset digs into my skin at every angle, and I squirm.

“Please be still, miss,” the dainty seamstress says through the pins she holds in her mouth.

I'm trying.

I watch my reflection in the floor-length mirror. The layers of my skirt are so large that I can't place my hands down by my sides.

Another pang of loneliness rolls through my gut. I wish my mother were here. Being away from my family makes the wedding preparations feel so...wrong. It doesn't feel like it's *mine*.

The seamstress tugs on the back of the corset, making it even tighter before pinning the fabric. I haven't said a word this entire session, afraid that my disinterest would show if I did. Instead, I focus on my breathing and on what Aaron's face will look like when I walk down the aisle.

This past week, I have looked for any opportunity to get close to King Tau. Finding his weak points is the first step to ending him, but he has not been in the palace.

"Will His Majesty be at dinner tonight, Your Highness?"

I toy with my skirt, not meeting her eye in the mirror. A servant passes her message to me.

"He will be present, yes."

My mind begins to race too quickly for me to craft a response to her. I have to get close to him, but I am afraid of what that could mean for me.

Two hours later, the fitting is finished. I step down from the pedestal, wrapping a thin robe around myself.

"Have you heard any news from your friend?"

My heart nearly stops before I finish reading the Queen's writing.

She knows.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Please, do not lie. I hate liars. I am aware of everything that happens in this palace. I know you helped your friend escape."

"Please don't tell the King. Please."

My voice comes out in a cracked cry.

I'll be punished for this, maybe even executed.

"I won't. It serves him right. What man needs that many women at his disposal? He throws them away like used napkins."

I furrow my brow and bite down on my lip to keep from responding. Her apathy towards his behavior is unsettling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The library is the only place where I feel calm these days. The constant streams of light pouring in from the windows cast the dark brown room in a comforting warmth that reminds me of home. Here, I don't have to hear the constant noise of the palace, only the subtle echoes of books being re-shelved, and the scent of worn leather seats and dusty ancient book pages.

While walking up and down the various rows, I stop at one that is filled with books on herbal medicine. I pull one book called "Toxic Roots and Leaves" and another called "One-hundred Herbs for Fertility."

If I'm going to find a way to get rid of King Tau, I need to do it without being caught and without losing my life. I recall from forest medicine class, that there are plants that can kill you in an instant if

you ingest them. Maybe I can find one of them on the palace grounds for the King. I decide to sit in one of the private sitting areas in the back of the library, and as I approach one, I see someone out of the corner of my eye.

Prince Cayman is cross-legged in one of the seats with a book in his lap. He looks up at me, with hesitation filling his eyes.

I offer a smile as I approach. This is the first chance I've gotten to speak with him, since the younger prince is never present at meal times. That is so strange. This is his home.

"What are you reading?"

He holds up the book. "Amorthia: The Lost City," it says on the brightly illustrated cover.

"Sounds like a good book."

Every time I've seen him, he has been reading. He smiles, a boyish excited gesture, before returning to the pages.

* * *

Hesitantly, I thumb through the book, looking for a plant that is native to Lusea's climate. I wouldn't be able to find any black nightshade or castor beans here.

I turn the page and a vivid purple flower piques my interest.

"Devil's Helmet."

The passage underneath the picture is lengthy.

"Devil's helmet: also known as Monkshood, wolfsbane, and Queen of poisons. Identified by its dark blue-purple helmeted flowers and dark green erect stem, the plant is extremely poisonous to humans. Touching the plant will transfer the aconitine neurotoxin

onto the skin. This toxin can cause respiratory paralysis and heart failure. The roots of the plant are up to ten times as toxic, causing death almost instantaneously upon ingestion.”

Sighing deeply, I lean over the book. I’ve seen this plant before. I’m sure of it.

I’d be a fool to check this book out of the library, so I place it back on the shelf and bring the other back to my room with me.

I lounge lazily on my bed. Unlike the book about toxic plants, this one has my head spinning. The number of herbs and roots used to increase a woman’s fertility is endless. Chaste berry tea, black cohosh tincture, ashwagandha powder... I wouldn’t know where to start. I don’t even know what the cause of my issue is, and these treatments could be completely useless to me. I shut the book with a loud thud and bury my head in the pillows. Aaron can never find out about this.

The Queen might be able to help me narrow things down. I slip on my shoes, hoping to go and find her. She said she did everything in her power to have the princes. I wonder exactly what those things were.

I open my door to find Aaron standing on the other side. He is dressed in common clothing and wears his usual mischievous smile. That can only mean one thing.

“Care to go on a trip to the market?”

I smile so hard that it makes my cheeks hurt. This side of him is my favorite.

“I’d love to. It’s been weeks since I’ve left the palace.”

I toss the book back onto the bed and close the door behind us.

* * *

“Close your mouth before a fly gets in.”

Not very funny.

“How do you keep getting away with leaving the palace without permission?”

We walk down the cobblestone road that leads to the market. Tall white mansions decorate either side of the street and I admire each one as we walk past. I can’t imagine ever getting used to this.

“I switch up my route every time. It’s usually a few hours before they notice I’m gone and come looking for me. I’m lucky that the guards are too afraid to say anything to my father.”

I shake my head in disbelief.

“I don’t agree with your methods, but I’ll admit, the city looks gorgeous when you have the time to take it in.”

Aaron interlaces his fingers with mine as we walk. He leads us down a narrow side street.

“I thought we were going to the market.” “I have a surprise for you. Something better than the market.” He winks at me.

The houses seem to go on forever until the street opens up into an empty field.

Acres of grass dance in the breeze like waves in the ocean and wildflowers pepper the ground.

“What is this place?”

“Just some undeveloped land. I’m sure houses will be built here soon.”

Aaron plops down on the grass, splaying his arms out beside him. I follow suit and lay my head on his chest. I look up at the blue-gray evening sky above. If I didn’t know any better, I would think I was back in Forest 1. I would never guess that a place like this could exist

in the city.

Closing my eyes, I savor the breeze on my skin, the scent of Aaron swirling around me.

"It's so peaceful."

"I knew you'd like it. I want you to like it here, Zenya. I don't want you to feel trapped."

"Pushing up onto my elbow, I face him.

"I don't feel trapped."

Not entirely true.

"You should be happy. I want you to be happy."

I can't be happy until his father is no longer causing any of us pain.

I stare into his eyes as the sun starts to graze the horizon. I don't know how I got so lucky. I feel like I'm right on the edge of everything I've ever wanted.

"I love you."

The words leave my mouth before I can think about what I'm truly saying. Heat starts to rise in my cheeks.

"I love you too," he says and pulls me down to him.

He plants a passionate kiss on my lips.

"Look up, Zen."

When I do, the breath is stolen from my lungs. The sun sets over the field, painting us in pastel hues of pink and orange. An overwhelming sense of peace washes over my entire body and it's all I can do not to cry at this moment. I look down into Aaron's golden eyes, but it's not him that I see. I see my future. A future filled with hope and love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“How was your trip, your majesty?”

The words come out with as much interest as I can muster. Both the Queen and Aaron look in my direction. So does the King. His eyes widen and he chews on a bite of steak before responding.

“It went as well as it could have.”

He has been away on a trip to Galway for the past few days.

I turn my attention to the Queen, whose eyebrows are raised. If she could speak, I'm sure she would ask what I was up to.

Aaron's face is the exact opposite. His brow is furrowed, and I see his chest rising and falling rapidly. A warning. I intend to get King Tau to give up some sort of personal information about himself. What he's interested in, his worries, his deepest fears.

“The Queen and I have been pretty busy preparing for the wedding.”

Surely, I could have thought of a better conversation starter than that. I turn my attention to my plate and push around a few carrots.

“And are you looking forward to the wedding?”

His response is so unexpected that I remain silent. The King laughs with his whole chest.

“I’m only joking. Of course, you are. You’ll be marrying the future King of Cardinia. You’ll be a Queen one day.”

I chuckle nervously.

“I’m mostly excited to spend the rest of my life with Aaron.”

I smile at him across the table and his shoulders visibly relax.

“Oh? Have you two already grown close? You barely know each other.”

He has no idea.

The King doesn’t know about our meeting at the market. Or the hideaway. Or the wildflower field. Or Aaron’s bedroom.

“I can just tell that we’ll get along really well.”

Aaron’s eyes are pinned to me as if he’s undressing me in his mind. I smile back. When I look back at the King, his expression is perplexing. Is it concern? Fear?

“Well, I’m happy for you,” he manages.

His tone is strained, but firm.

“Tha-”

“Thank you, father. Did you happen to speak with King Ormond about withdrawing some of their troops from our coast?”

Aaron cuts me off and passes another warning glance. I can hear the words in the look on his face. *Stop talking.*

I don’t get another chance to speak with King Tau. He and Aaron excuse themselves from the dinner table. The conversation

about Galway got serious and they decided it was better to talk in the King's study.

I sit quietly, too nervous from so much interaction with him to eat anything. I take a sip of my water to assuage the dryness forming in my mouth.

I can hear the Queen scribbling on the notepad that she carries with her, and I wonder if she is upset. Rising from her seat, she walks over to me. She throws the note into my lap and trudges out of the dining room.

"You have no idea what you're getting yourself into. Be warned."

Fear fills my body, my hands shaking as I hold the note. She's right. I don't know what will happen, but it's worth it to try. It's worth it if no one ever has to endure the King again.

* * *

The bouquet of flowers is heavier than I thought it would be. I grip the wrapped stems tightly. The last thing I'd want is to make a fool of myself in front of all these people watching me. Step by step, I make my way down the aisle, as a string quartet plays the wedding march. I focus on Aaron's back. He is the only thing that matters. It stills the nerves roiling in my stomach.

Then, he turns and I drop my bouquet of roses on the church floor. His face is the one I've come to know and love, but his eyes. His honey-colored eyes are replaced by two empty black holes.

Staggering back, I fall to the ground in a tangle of white fabric. I struggle to get to my feet as Aaron stalks towards me. He grabs my arm to help me up, but his skin is ice cold against mine. I scream,

yanking my arm away.

My eyes snap open. Instead of being tangled in my wedding gown, I am tangled in the sheets of my bed. I wipe away the wet tendrils of hair stuck to my sweat-slick face and sit up. It's too hot in here.

"You know, you talk in your sleep."

I startle, turning towards the voice. His gray hair is illuminated by the fire's glow in the hearth.

"You said Aaron's name."

He stands, a glass of dark brown liquid swirling in one hand. Dread washes over me like an ocean wave, removing any sleepiness that was left. I try to say something. To ask him why he is here, but the words are stuck in my throat.

"Do you love him? My son?"

He staggers towards me, with that same arrogance that he always wears. I press myself against the headboard of the bed.

Stay away.

"I do."

The words are strained, but true. The sinister sound of his laugh sends my heart into a frenzy. Why is he here? What should I do?

"I saw how you looked at me at dinner. I know you want me."

"I don't. I love Aaron."

I spit the words out harshly and he laughs again.

"That's not what it looked like. You'll be marrying my son, but I'll at least have to have the first taste of you."

He places the glass down on the ground and grips my ankles. Before I can grab onto anything, he yanks me down toward the foot of the bed. I scream.

Someone, anyone help me.

The King climbs on top of me and grips my chin in his hand. He squeezes, digging his nails in. I try to wiggle away, to scream again but he covers my mouth with his. The sickly sweet taste of dark liquor is overwhelming. He pushes my legs apart with his and lays his full weight on me. I start to scream, but the sound is swallowed up by his mouth. He shoves his tongue into my mouth forcefully. I grasp for anything. My hand lands in his hair and I yank as hard as I can. He barely acknowledges the action. The King grabs my hand, pinning it to the bed. I try to push him off with the other, but he doesn't move an inch. His weight on me is suffocating.

No.

He grinds his hardness into me, moaning along with the movement. I start to panic. Eyes wild, I push against his body, but I can't manage to move him at all.

Stop.

I can't take this. My breathing speeds up, my heart racing alongside it. My mouth starts to water, and I think I'm going to be sick. I am.

I try to turn my head and vomit all over the King, the bed, and myself. He reels back, falling from the bed.

"You disgusting little bitch!"

He scrambles to his feet, collecting himself before storming out of my room.

The entire space reeks of my sickness. I lay in my bed covered in it, with the realization becoming clear in my mind. I couldn't fight him off. Aaron said he was glad I could protect myself if something like this were to ever happen. I couldn't. I can't. He could have killed me if he wanted to. Or worse. I curl in on myself and cry- until the world fades to darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

When the blinding rays of the morning sun start to peek through my curtains, I shut my eyes against them.

When the servants come in asking to clean my room, I don't respond. They enter anyway.

They convince me to move to the couch as they change the bed sheets. I let them wash and dress me. I watch as they change the bed sheets. Not one of them asks a single question, though I wish they would. I'd tell them exactly what happened. The King tried to rape me. No one would be surprised, I'm sure of it. There's no telling how many of them have experienced a similar thing at his hands.

Nina stops in front of the couch, kneeling down to eye level. The look on her face speaks directly to my heart. She knows what

happened.

“He is the reason I keep my hair short.”

I stare into her eyes, and I can see the pain behind them. Behind that strong barrier. The image of the King gripping Ayanna by her hair to control her flashes in my mind.

I don't leave my room for the entire day.

“I know you want me,” he said.

I cringe, replaying the events of last night's dinner. He thinks I invited him to my bed. The weight of him on me was incapacitating. I was helpless under him. I clasp my hands to stop them from shaking. Both the Queen and Aaron tried to warn me. They knew what might happen if I showed too much interest. I shouldn't have pushed so hard. I should have waited for the right time. I should have been patient.

I ruminate on everything, causing bile to rise in my throat just like it did last night.

“I know you helped our friend escape.”

Suddenly, it clicks. I sit up in bed, pushing away the blankets. I shove on my shoes in a hurry and look around to gather the supplies I might need. How did I not think of it before? I know exactly where I've seen the devil's helmet.

* * *

The path is much colder than I remember it, a sign that winter is coming soon. I brace one hand against the wall to guide me in the darkness of the stairwell. Rain must have made it by now, If she made it at all. When I reach the bottom, I don two pairs of silk elbow-length gloves and tie a scarf from my closet around my nose, in a makeshift mask. Slowly, I unlatch each lock one by one.

When I did this last time, it was to give Rain her chance at happiness. This time, it's to give me mine.

This has to be it. I have no other option. If the King comes looking for me again, I'm not sure I'll be able to get away without-

That won't happen.

I unlatch the last of the locks and ease the door open.

Please, God. Please. Please.

The dim moonlight illuminates the backwoods in various shadows. I scan the area around the door, praying my memory was right. There are wildflowers scattered amongst the weeds. Milkweed, poppies, asters –

There.

I hold my breath when I see it. Such a lethal plant, nestled between harmless blooms. The dark purple flowers look just like the picture. I reach for one, aiming close to the ground, to the roots. I'll need the roots too. I shake the plant back and forth, unearthing the entire thing. Carefully I wrap it in a handkerchief and remove one glove. This is it.

The sound of my pulse drums loudly in my ears on the way back to my room. I place the wrapped flower inside the book on fertility and onto the fireplace mantle. It's a surprise that such a dangerous plant took root near the palace. One that I'm glad for.

After scrubbing my skin almost raw, to be sure that no traces of the devil's helmet linger, I settle into bed. Of all the nights I've resided in the palace, this one is the most peaceful so far.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“What makes you think I have the time for a tea party, Zenya?”

Despite all that has happened, Agnes hasn't changed one bit.

“Relax, Agnes. I invited you all here, so we'd have a chance to catch up before our weddings.”

Magnus and Johanna are getting married next week, followed by Ayanna and Caleb, Agnes and Ibrahim, Faiza and Bomani...and Aaron and I. Agnes rolls her eyes as she sips her tea. The long wooden table in the library has been replaced by a round one, at my request. The cooks also prepared an expansive afternoon tea menu for us, all tied together by a fancy tablecloth and silverware.

“Remember when we all used to sleep together in the same room? I miss it,” Ayanna says.

Being out of the palace and away from the King has done her

good. She looks happy.

“How are wedding preparations going for you guys?”

I take a bite out of my cucumber sandwich and turn towards Johanna. Her calm collected demeanor speaks for her.

“It’s as can be expected. There are many details to organize, but our wedding will not be too much fuss.”

I smile at her. She may appear stoic, but I can tell she is over the moon about getting to marry her childhood love.

“Mine will be all the fuss,” says Agnes. “You only get one, if you’re lucky. My father is paying for three ice sculptures to be brought from home and fresh flowers for the entire hall.”

“Those won’t last twenty minutes in the city, that’s a waste of money.”

“Who are you to talk about wasting money? Your wedding will probably cost a hundred times more than mine. You’re marrying royalty,” she retorts.

Yes, but I don’t have a choice in how much it costs. I don’t have a choice in much of anything, really. My wedding isn’t about me. It’s about making a statement for the entire country to see the strength and status of the monarchy.

We spend some time chatting over tea until the sky outside the windows of the library darken.

“I’m going home, Ibrahim, and I have a cake tasting tomorrow morning and I need my sleep.”

Agnes rises, pulling Johanna along with her. The others start to disperse as well, and I say my goodbyes.

“Ayanna, wait.”

She turns, an inquisitive look on her face.

“I have a wedding gift for you, but I left it in my room. Do you

mind following me to go get it?"

"A gift? Really? I'm sure you could have come up with something better," she whispers.

I nudge her with my elbow.

"I know, I couldn't think of anything else."

Once my bedroom door is closed, I let out an exasperated sigh.

"What's up?"

"I need your help again."

I tell her about the King's visit to my room and my plan for getting rid of him.

"I need you to lure him to one of the guest rooms tonight. There are too many people watching the residential wing, and they can't see either of us. We'll be caught if they do."

She paces back and forth, a nod to her old anxious self.

"Zenya, I don't know. I don't think I can stand to be alone with him again. I still have nightmares about being here, about him touching me."

I know it's a lot to ask. It would mean pulling her back into the worst events of her life, but I have to ask anyway.

"Please, Ayanna. If you help me, you won't ever have to see him again. No one will. He won't come if I ask. Not after what happened."

After I threw up in his mouth.

She makes eye contact with me and holds my stare. I can see the tears forming.

"I'm sorry. I can't. I'm so sorry."

She storms out of the room.

I'm screwed.

* * *

The water comes to a rolling boil over the fire in my room. A small pot taken from the kitchen is all I needed to complete my task.

Opening the book on fertility, I remove the poison flower with a gloved hand. With careful movements, I lower the plant into the pot. I'll let it boil for as long as I can. It has to be strong. I can't fail.

After thirty minutes, I remove the pot containing the amber-colored tea and allow it to cool. The stench of it seeps through my makeshift mask a bit, and I cover it with a cloth to quell the aroma. Mixing this with a bit of brandy should do the trick. The King has never turned down a drink in his life. Even without help, I have to do this. It will only take one sip.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The peach-colored comforter on the bed is the only difference between this room and mine. This room used to belong to Ayanna, and the colors match her bright gentle spirit.

I hope that the note I left in King Tau's study made its way to him and that he'll be here soon. I stand facing the door, pacing, waiting. Waiting for him to come in and realize that I am not her. For him to realize that I tricked him. I just have to keep him here long enough to drink the tea.

Teetering back and forth on my feet, thoughts of what tomorrow will be like fill my head. Someone will notice when he doesn't show up to his meetings. They'll find the King here, after searching for a while. I'll have to look surprised, shaken. I didn't hear

anything from my room. After the funeral, Aaron and I will get married and live out the rest of our lives without his father's influence pressing down on us.

The doorknob turns slightly and I jump, grabbing the two glasses from the coffee table. A moment later, he walks in. The delighted look on his face turns to surprise, then disgust in a matter of seconds.

“What are you doing here?”

The bite to his words is almost lethal.

“I wanted to apologize, for the other day.”

“Where is she?”

“She went home. I knew you wouldn’t come if I signed the letter myself.”

I saunter towards him. Slowly. Swaying my hips as I go. Leaning in, I press a kiss to his cheek. I hold my breath against the smell of alcohol, knowing that I might just throw up again if I have to smell him.

“Will you forgive me?”

I pose the question in a sultry sing-song voice. A low laugh echoes through his chest.

“How will you make it up to me?”

“I can show you better than I can tell you. Just don’t tell Aaron.”

He smiles a broad, stupid smile, eyes halfway lowered as he gazes at me. One mention of his son and he is ready to give in. The betrayal excites him.

I extend my hand with the poisoned drink in it. An identical glass to my own.

“To loosen you up a bit.”

Slowly, his smile fades.

“What is this?”

“Brandy. I know it’s your favorite.”

He accepts the drink, bringing it to his nose to take a long drag of the aroma.

Drink it.

His eyes are locked on mine. I pray he doesn’t see through the alcohol to the earthy smell of the devil’s helmet.

I smile seductively, downing the contents of my glass in one gulp.

Drink it.

“Not in the mood for a drink? How about something else?”

I lower the sleeve of my nightgown, draping it over one shoulder. He sucks in a sharp breath through his teeth. Hoping to hurry him along, I lower the other one as well. His smile returns, as he throws his head back, and drinks the shot.

The King only makes it three steps in my direction before he collapses to the floor, glass tumbling from his hand. His breathing turns heavy.

“What did you-”

He pants, struggling to take in air, and I watch, never taking my eyes off of him. I watch and think about all of the people he has hurt. The Queen, Aaron, Rain, Ayanna, Nina, me, and countless others whose names I will never know. He clutches his chest desperately, eyes wide, red and bulging. I almost feel bad for him as his face turns a deep plum color. Almost. I smile as the purple fades to blue, then gray. His body stills and a moment later his arms sag to the ground.

A sigh of relief escapes my lips and I slump forward, resting my hands on my knees for a moment.

It’s done.

Then, I spring into action. I grab the King's glass from the ground as well as my own, and throw them both into the fireplace. They shatter over the logs stacked there. I step over his limp body, not daring to look back. I might lose my nerve if I do.

Slowly, I twist the doorknob and slide out into the hallway. I freeze. His brown eyes stare vacantly into mine. He gazes to the still open door and clutches the stack of books in his hands, the only sign that he knows what has happened. My knees begin to shake, and I open my mouth to say something, to come up with an excuse.

"Go."

The single word out of Cayman's mouth is as heavy as a thousand.

"Go. Now."

My mind is blank. I don't know what force strengthens my legs, but I steady them and sprint for my bedroom door.

He spoke. Aaron said he was non-verbal but he *spoke* to me. I stand at the door in disbelief. He let me go after seeing me leave that room. After I killed his father. I thought I would feel at least a bit of remorse, but all I feel is relief.

I take a step towards my bed before a hand wraps around my waist from behind. Another covers my mouth. An astringent burning fills my nose, spreading through my entire head. I struggle against the stranger's grip, clawing at strong calloused hands with all of my strength, but only for a moment. Losing my grip, my arms go limp as my vision fades into blackness.

CHAPTER THIRTY

His mask is carved from dark red wood. My body is rocked back and forth, and I swallow hard to keep from throwing up. Strips of light flicker through a crack in the door. Taking a deep breath, I try to sit up. The masked figure pushes my shoulder back down.

“Where am I ?”

“The train,” he grunts.

The stench filling the dark space tells me it’s not the train I rode into the city. My stomach clenches. I pull away from his touch and a chill runs down my spine. I’m going to the Wasteland.

The Lost Brides

CHAPTER ONE: Aaron

The stench of blood is nauseating. I wince and grit my teeth as a nurse wraps a bandage around my arm, covering the gash seated there.

The palace infirmary is overflowing with guards and servants, all in different states of injury. We fought as hard as we could to protect this place and everyone in it. To keep the dozens of wastelanders from slaughtering everyone here.

I woke to screams from down the hall only to find them razing through servants and anyone else they crossed paths with.

"What did you find?" I ask, as Ibrahim approaches my cot.
"Not much. Some broken glass and a few chairs out of place."

"Well, how did he get there?" I snap at him.

How did he end up dead?

I rub my forehead as a line starts to form behind my best friend. More guards looking for direction. It's only been a day since I discovered my father dead in a guest room, but the weight of his position is already pressing down on me like a boulder on my back.

My position.

When I pictured the crown being passed to me, I imagined my father dying in his sleep from old age. Dying with some honor. Maybe it'd happen in a battle against the Galwians. I imagined that I'd have more time before everything went to shit, but in the blink of an eye, it's all on me.

After hours of searching, I found him in the guest wing, with blood leaking from his nose and mouth. For the first time in my life, I wasn't afraid of him. The mixture of shock, sadness, and relief I felt caused me to fall to my knees beside him.

What happened?

"Your highness," says Counselor Storm, standing at the entrance to my fathers old office.

I walk past her.

"What is it?"

"How are you doing?" She asks, closing the door behind her.

I slump down into the dark leather chair, releasing a sigh.

"I don't know."

I squeeze my eyes shut. I need a moment alone. Just a second where someone isn't asking me questions.

"Just breathe."

She places a warm hand on my shoulder. I look up into her gray eyes and my shoulders deflate a bit.

"You're not alone. Myself and the other counsel members will help you navigate the crown."

Right. The counsel.

I should call an emergency meeting. Soon. The attack on the palace signals a shift in our relationship with the wasteland. They crossed a line and we have to retaliate.

I place my hand over hers. Counselor Storm has been here since before I was born. She practically raised me.

"Thank you," I sigh.

She leaves the room and I relish in the silence. The small moment of peace. I'm tempted to hide in here, away from the mess outside.

Running my hands through my hair, I remember that we still haven't found Zenya. My heart tightens at the thought. The image of her being frightened and alone before being cut down by a rabid animal makes my blood boil. Finding her cold body in some corner of the palace is the last thing I want. I let out a scream, slamming my fists into the desk.

If they hurt her, I'll set the entire wasteland ablaze.

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God - thank you for blessing me with the desire to dream big. I won't waste it.

When I first came up with the idea for the story, I doubted myself. I hesitated thinking there was no way I could complete it. Then, I found out that there are plenty of writers who don't have a degree in literature. I want to let everyone know not to doubt yourself no matter what.

About The Author



Christina Daveiga is a twenty-eight year old wife and mother of one daughter. She is a fresh face in the world of New Adult and Young Adult fiction.

Christina isn't just an author. She's a laboratory scientist by profession, a lover of books, and a singer. After years of hearing from teachers, mentors, and friends that she had a talent for writing, in 2023 she picked up her pen and decided to start creating her own stories.

If you'd like to follow along on her journey, and receive updates about upcoming publications, go to ChristinaDaveiga.com

