

THE  
PRINCESS



GAMES

CORDELIA K CASTEL

# THE PRINCESS GAMES

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## CHAPTER 1

*A*ppause thunders across the auditorium, making my ears ring. My eyes dart from side to side, and a sea of faces turn toward us from the lower seats. They're all waiting for me to rise and take my place with the girls standing on the stage.

Just when I thought my troubles were over, just when I thought I could return to Rugosa to my anonymous life as a Harvester apprentice, Queen Damascena brings me back into the Princess Trials.

About five thousand Nobles sit in front of us on curved tiers that descend toward a semicircular stage. Every member of the Chamber of Ministers sits along two rows of seats at the back of the stage except two: The Minister of Justice, who lounges in front of them on a wooden throne, and Montana, who stands at the edge of the stage beside the queen.

Prince Kevon's large hand squeezes mine. I don't know if this is out of dread or delight or if he's just lending me moral support, but I can't look at him right now.

On the auditorium's high wall, a giant screen broadcasts my shocked face. It cuts to Queen Damascena, the woman who won't let me leave the Oasis because I killed Berta Ridgeback. Because I discovered a secret that will end water rationing and end the Nobles' power over the Harvester Echelon.

"Zea Mays Calico," says Montana from the stage below. "Come down and rejoin the Princess Trials."

The cheers that fill the auditorium make me tremble to the marrow, and cold sweat forms on my brow. They're baying for my blood.

"Come with me," says Prince Kevon.

Where? I want to ask. With the surveillance around the country, there's nowhere for a girl whose face has been plastered all over Phangloria to hide. Not even the Barrens are safe because Nobles like Ingrid Strab use it as their hunting grounds.

The only way I will survive the next twenty-four hours is with the help of the young man at my side. I turn to Prince Kevon and meet his concerned, dark eyes. His brow furrows, and his full lips thin with concern. I have to trust that what he said about soon becoming the King of Phangloria is true. If he takes the throne, he will outrank his mother and protect me from her wrath.

“Come with me,” I say his words back to him.

“You’re rejoining the trials?” he whispers.

“Do I have any choice?”

With one hand holding mine and his strong arm around my back, Prince Kevon rises and helps me stand. “I’ll talk to her. Maybe she can keep you on as a commentator.”

The auditorium goes wild, and the people around us stand to applause. I still don’t understand why. Everything I’ve watched of myself on the Lifestyle Channel paints me as the bucking bronco, a brat who blows up at the slightest obstacle. As I’ve never seen Amstraad television, I still can’t grasp the importance of all these side-characters who provide entertainment for their games.

As we step down toward the stage, my legs won’t stop trembling, and my hands become slick with sweat. I press one palm on the fabric of my jumpsuit, letting the material soak up the moisture, but the other remains in Prince Kevon’s grip.

If it wasn’t for his steadying presence, I’d probably have collapsed the moment Queen Damascena called out my name.

Guards at the gate leading to the stage let us through, and a huge figure seated on the front-left stands. It’s Berta’s father, General Ridgeback, and the man whose accusing eyes seem to have penetrated the lies I told the Minister of Justice about what happened to Berta.

The twelve girls who made it to the palace round of the Trials gape as Prince Kevon and I approach. My last conversation with Berta explains why. Even the girl who spent the most time with me thinks I cheated, paraded myself naked, and seduced Prince Kevon into favoring me.

We haven’t even kissed. A few dumb words I uttered about someone else made Prince Kevon think I was serious about becoming his bride. Through some harrowing events like the murder of Rafaela Van Eyck, we sort-of became close.

Ingrid Strab, the Chamber of Ministers’ favorite, scowls at me as though I’ve cheated her out of her prize. Never mind that each time she’s spoken with Prince Kevon, her abrasive personality has made him bored or annoyed.

Queen Damascena steps toward us with her arms wide. The ivory gown she wears looks like a single piece of silk draped to shape her body. The fabric

gathers below her collarbones in a cowl neckline, and the only jewelry she wears is a delicate tiara that blends with the honey-blond locks flowing down her shoulders. To me, she looks like an angel of death.

“There she is.” The queen’s voice is as sweet as the borax and powdered sugar we use to trap killer ants.

She wraps her arms around my shoulders, engulfing my senses in a cloud of mandragon blossoms. It’s no coincidence that this flower is a cousin of oleander dirus—a plant so deadly that hunters who use it to tip their arrows and darts die from eating the meat.

Her fingers close around my shoulders, squeezing them so tight that there’s no mistaking the warning or the bitter hatred in her embrace. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

She’s saying this for the cameras, of course. What she really means is that I’m going to join Berta in death pretty soon, and she’s only sorry that I didn’t die the moment I discovered the dangerous secret.

My mind races for a clever response. Something that implies I’ve safeguarded my knowledge of the underground river and if I die, everyone will know of her secret water source, but the thought of her sending minions to my friends and family fills my veins with ice and traps the words in the back of my throat.

Queen Damascena releases me, and I can finally exhale. Prince Kevon stands at my side, his brows drawn. I guess he doesn’t know why his mother has recalled me to the trials—I didn’t tell him that I struck Berta with a paralyzing dart and left her to drown.

“Thank you.” My voice projects across the auditorium, and I turn to the audience rather than face the blonde viper at my side. “But I don’t deserve the honor.”

The queen shakes her head and beams. “Berta would want you to continue, and I insist on keeping you with us for a little longer.”

Anxiety ripples across the lining of my empty stomach, and I glance at Prince Kevon, who nods. Maybe I’m safer here, where he’s close. If I left the Oasis, the queen would likely have me assassinated before I even reached Rugosa.

Montana wishes us all good luck on this exciting, new round of the Princess Trials and gestures for us to leave through a door to the right of the ministers’ seats. The applause continues as Queen Damascena leads us out with her arm looped through mine. Prince Kevon walks at my side, and to anyone watching, it looks like they’ve already decided on who will become the next Queen of Phangloria.



I glance over my shoulder at the procession of girls following us, their glares sharp enough to slice twelve daggers through my back. Far behind them in the audience, General Ridgeback remains standing.

The door opens into a wide hallway lit by spotlights that run down the ceiling and around the corner. Dozens of assistants stand at the walls, clad in the same kinds of purple uniforms I've seen on palace staff and on those who wait tables in Oasis restaurants. They all bow low for the queen, who doesn't acknowledge their presence. The door behind us shuts, muffling the auditorium's applause.

Queen Damascena releases my arm and smooths down the cowl of her silk dress.

I turn to her and inject as much sincerity as I can into my voice. "Your Majesty, I don't know—"

"There will be plenty of time to pour out your heart during afternoon tea," she says.

"Pardon?" My voice trails off as I remember something I saw in the previous Princess Trials' palace round. The former queen and ladies-in-waiting would invite a girl to the queen's parlor for mentorship meetings.

I shudder at the thought of being alone with Queen Damascena because I don't think she'll reprimand me on my posture or my ability to get along with the other girls.

At the end of the hallway, we turn a corner into another corridor where four guards wearing black stand at a set of heavy doors. As soon as we approach, they open it into a sun-lit courtyard containing three black vehicles: Prince Kevon's electric car, a large bus, and a van that resembles an oversized limousine. Camerawomen stand around the courtyard, all dressed in black and shooting footage.

Byron Blake, Prunella Broadleaf's co-host, stands among them with his arms folded across his chest. He's a tall man with brown hair that sweeps off his forehead, sunken cheekbones, and a ridiculously deep dimple in his chin.

The smile playing on his lips tells me that he'll have a larger role in this round of the Princess Trials now that Prunella has confessed to murdering Rafaela. I still can't believe that Prunella threw Prince Kevon's friend out of the window and electrocuted her with an Amstraad ear cuff. The way Byron bounces on the balls of his feet and grins indicates he's not sorry for Prunella's plight.

Prince Kevon leans into my side. "Are you alright?"

I raise my brows in a what-do-you-think gesture, making him grimace.

Queen Damascena is the first to step out into the sun. She walks toward the

van, where a chauffeur opens its side door. Before stepping inside, she turns to us with a dazzling smile and waves. “I look forward to seeing you all soon.”

Byron Blake sweeps his arm toward the bus. “I’ll make the formal announcements in the palace, but for now, congratulations.”

Prince Kevon and I step out of the Chamber of Ministers building and walk across the courtyard to the bus. The doors hiss open, and Lady Circi steps out, still clad in the A-line combat tunic shaped by multiple holsters that each contain weapons.

She holds out her palm at Prince Kevon. “Ladies only.”

He places a hand on the small of my back and moves toward his car, when Byron Blake appears at his side with a wide grin of artificially white teeth.

“Your Highness,” he says with a chuckle. “As the only gentlemen in this procession of beauties, it looks like you and I will ride together. Perhaps you’ll tell the viewers at home about last night’s thrilling trial.”

I raise my shoulders and offer him a tight smile. With the camerawomen returned and Queen Damascena in a separate vehicle, what could possibly happen on the journey to the palace?

With a nod, Prince Kevon walks around the car with Byron Blake. Someone pushes past me to board the bus, a figure with short, indigo-black hair closely-related enough to Prince Kevon to have security clearance to use royal weapons. Ingrid Strab, the girl who promised Berta Ridgeback the position of lady-at-arms in exchange for my murder.

Constance Spryte boards next, with her blue-black ringlets bouncing as she moves. I clench my teeth, wishing I had hit the pair of murderous Nobles with two poisoned darts, which would have stopped their hearts.

One of the camerawomen taps me on the shoulder. She’s an annoying, mousy-haired woman, who once tried to film me tending to a dying Rafaela van Eyck.

“Zea, Zea...” she purrs. “We’re all dying to know if you spent the night with Prince Kevon again!”

My lips purse. Last night, Prince Kevon brought me to the palace infirmary with a bullet wound in the shoulder and a knife in my back. The only person tending to me was the royal physician, Dr. Palatine. I won’t dignify her question with a comment, even though she’ll probably insert footage of me talking about something else to make me sound like I spent a romantic night with the prince.

By the time I turn back to the bus, everyone else has boarded. Lady Circi stands at the top of the steps with her arms folded and her face twisted with annoyance. Let’s hope she remembers that Prince Kevon admitted to loving me and she doesn’t point her gun between my eyes.

I board the bus and walk down the aisle. Each of the twelve finalists raise their heads to stare. Some of their gazes are hard, some confused, and the two Harvester girls can't even look me in the eyes. I meet the hateful gazes with a glower. If they think I'll forget being dumped on the roadside, shot in the shoulder, and hunted like an animal, they're deluded.

The cameras are rolling, so I don't voice my declaration of war out loud. Instead, my hands curl into fists. If Prince Kevon can't extract me from the Princess Trials, they're going to meet a new Zea-Mays Calico.

Years of Red Runner training has prepared me for combat. This time, instead of running, I will stay and fight.

As I'm about to take a seat, someone places a hand on my shoulder. I spin with a right hook, but Lady Circi catches my fist.

"Nice move." She twists me into an arm lock that sends pain exploding through my shoulder joint. "You could work on your speed."

Bending over double, I clench my teeth. So much for kick-butt Calico. "Will you show me some moves?"

"If you survive the night, why not?" She marches me to the end of the bus, where the emergency exit hisses open.

Nervous giggles fill the bus. I want to snarl with anger, but anything that sounds pained will delight my enemies. A ring of fire burns through my shoulder, and sweat breaks out across my skin.

I hobble alongside Lady Circi because fighting back will dislocate my limb. "Where are we going?"

"Queen Damascena would like a friendly chat." As we step out into the sunlit courtyard, she leans into me and whispers, "Don't drink the champagne."

My throat spasms and I lope toward the van, still bent in that awkward angle. Was that a warning or a joke? After Prince Kevon gave Lady Circi that ultimatum—stand down or she'll become a lady-in-waiting to a dowager queen—she has backed off.

There's no sign of Kevon's solar car, but then my range of vision is limited. I can't help wondering if Lady Circi is on Prince Kevon's side, Queen Damascena's, or her own.

The pressure in my arm releases and Lady Circi bundles me into the van.

Spots dance before my eyes. I'm not sure if that's because of being held at an awkward angle or because the van's interior steals my breath. The only way I can describe it is a mobile dressing room. Seriously. It's about twice the size of an ambulance and lined on the right with shelves of shoes and rails of jackets atop ivory chests of drawers. Next to the jackets, a long rail stretches the rest of the vehicle, holding enough full-length dresses to clothe our entire street.

On the left is a row of tinted windows above a full-length bar stocked with trays of sliced fruit, fancy cheeses, and finger food arranged around a bucket of champagne and gold-topped glasses.

Two compact chandeliers dangle from above between a pair of light panels that stretch the entire ceiling. My mouth drops open. This is nearly as ostentatious as the fountains.

On the far-right, Queen Damascena sits on a leather armchair sipping a glass of champagne. Behind her stands a blonde-girl about my age, who looks strikingly similar to the queen. From her purple servant's uniform, I'm guessing she isn't a secret daughter. Queen Damascena indicates for me to sit on a leather stool by the bar, next to the champagne flutes.

Lady Circi steps in behind me and sits on the leather armchair on the queen's left. The driver or footman slams the door shut, encasing me with two of the most dangerous women in Phangloria.

"Help yourself to the champagne," says Queen Damascena.

"I..." My throat dries. "I don't drink alcohol, Your Majesty."

Her smile turns wintry. "I insist."

My gaze darts to Lady Circi, who rolls her eyes and picks up a glass of what appears to be sparkling water. If the champagne is poisoned, I'll just pretend to drink it.

The vehicle moves forward, and the girl in purple pulls a seam ripper from her apron. It's a small tool with a forked head that unpicks stitches without damaging the fabric. She works on a seam behind the queen's neck, and I gape at the waste. A talented seamstress could have installed a clasp or some other kind of fastening, but Queen Damascena needs people to sew her in and out of her clothing?

I give myself a mental snap and force myself to focus on my potential assassination. All thoughts of wasted silk drifts from my mind. I pick up the champagne flute and place the glass to my lips.

My heart pounds as the silence drags on, and the champagne cools in my clammy fingers. The queen and Lady Circi sip their drinks, and the only person in this mobile dressing room with an ounce of humanity is the girl in purple trying to work on the dress without snagging the queen's hair.

This feels like the chess matches old men play in the Rugosa dome, where they're stuck in a stalemate and pondering their next move, except no-one has informed me of the game, its rules, or how to forfeit.

The girl's busy hands pause, and the silk fabric slides down the queen's front. My cheeks turn hot, and I turn to Lady Circi, who pinches the bridge of her nose. When the queen rises from her seat, the entire dress slides to the

vehicle's floor in a puddle of ivory silk.

Queen Damascena hands her glass to the girl and stalks across the van, clad only in ElastoSculpt, which stretches from her ribcage to her hips. She braces her hand on the bar and leans over me. "Tell me exactly what happened the moment you stepped off the bus last night."

This is probably the most awkward situation of my life, and that includes all the recent murder attempts. The fine hairs on the back of my neck rise as her blossom scent fills my nostrils, and my head swims. Mandragon blossoms develop into poison berries, and I'm sure the scent is affecting my nervous system, but it's nothing compared to the encroaching queen.

I drop my gaze to the champagne glass, where the bubbles rise to the surface, pop, and release their fruity scent. A tight band of panic squeezes my lungs, and it takes all my strength to reply.

"Excuse me?" I ask.

Cool fingers slide under my chin and raise my head to meet the queen's even colder gaze. They're what Mom would call cerulean blue, with enough flecks of gray and pink to make them appear violet. The effect is unsettling, and I'm tempted to take a mouthful of potentially poisoned champagne to calm my nerves.

"It will take hours to comb the woods and reconstruct the events of last night, so you will tell me what happened," she says in a voice as sharp as a blade. Before I can splutter a denial, she adds, "The DNA of the blood found at the scene of Miss Ridgeback's death matches yours."

All feeling trickles from my face and gathers around my spasming heart. "What will you do?"

She draws back a few paces and stands with her arms folded over her chest. The pressure around my lungs eases, but not by much. "I could offer you to General Ridgeback as consolation for the loss of his daughter, but I think he prefers a more curvaceous woman, like your mother."

My mouth falls open. "What—"

She raises a finger to her lips. "Don't fret. If you cooperate with me, nothing will happen to your precious family. We're keeping them safe, aren't we, Circi?"

The queen's lady-at-arms inclines her head. "If you mean the four armed vehicles stationed around the Calico house, sure."

The queen's lips tighten. I'm not sure if that's because of Lady Circi's sarcasm or because she finds the sight of me distasteful. "As you see, your family is in safe hands."

They're not. Guards are notorious for their short tempers, and their quick fists, and their desire to subjugate Harvesters.

The girl in purple pulls out a powder-blue dress and holds it up to Queen Damascena, who shakes her head. The girl returns to the rail and selects a near-identical dress with a V neckline instead of a round one, and the queen nods.

Now that some of the attention is off me, I can finally exhale. “Your Majesty —”

“Tell me what happened,” she snaps.

The events of last night spill from my lips. She’s probably seen the footage from the armored personnel carrier of Berta and me taking out the hijackers and then Ingrid rallying the girls to hunt me to death.

Queen Damascena raises her hand. “What happened to the foundling’s weapon?”

I shake my head. “He was already dead by the time I reached him.”

Her body stills, and her eyes narrow. I’m locked in her gaze and can’t breathe. It’s like how I imagine a mouse might feel when caught in the sights of a cobra. It’s trapped and no amount of running will put enough distance between them when the snake strikes.

Moments pass in silence, and nobody around us moves. Not even the seamstress approaching the queen with the dress.

Heavy, rapid thuds of my frantic heart fill my ears, and ragged breaths fill my nostrils. She can’t know I’m lying about not killing Berta. By the time the girls decided to hunt me, we had already thrown off and discarded our Amstraad monitors.

“Do you know what the coroner found in Berta Ridgeback’s blood?” she asks.

“No,” I lie.

“Traces of the Foundling’s poison.”

Silence.

Carolina Wintergreen taught us that silence was a technique interrogators use to trick people into spilling their secrets. Sometimes, they drop devastating facts and sit back to watch their victims scramble around for answers. Other times, they ask a question then remain silent when you answer. It’s a prompt for people to blurt out anything to prove their innocence, including facts that betray their guilt.

I resent the woman for offering me this dangerous mission, but I’m grateful that something I’ve learned in the Red Runner cells is proving useful. Instead of letting anxiety run my mouth, I empty my mind and stare back at the queen.

Her nostrils flare. “Miss Ridgeback tried to kill you.”

I nod because Ingrid probably offered Berta the position of lady-at-arms in view of a hidden camera.

“Tell me how a Harvester weed picker escaped a combat-trained gorilla like Berta Ridgeback.”

My throat dries, and I tell her the truth. “I didn’t.”

“Explain.”

“She beat me up. I tried to escape, but she kept coming at me. Then she....”  
An idea slams into the back of my head.

Queen Damascena’s breath quickens. “What happened?”

“Berta slowed down and didn’t hit so hard or fast. I thought she got tired, so I stumbled away. She followed and tripped, then we both tumbled down the mountainside and fell into a cavern.”

Her lips thin, and she beckons for the girl to approach her with the dress. “You left your friend to die in an underground sewer?”

The girl holds the dress close to the ground, and Queen Damascena steps into the ring of fabric. As a relieved breath slips from my lungs, I place the glass back onto the bar. My heartbeat slows, and I feel the vehicle’s faint rumble against the soles of my shoes.

She doesn’t care about Berta’s life or her grieving parents. This supposed murder interrogation is all about the place where she died.

The cavern looked like a lake to me, but Prince Kevon said it was a river that stretched beyond the border of Phangloria. Now Queen Damascena wants me to believe it’s just a sewer.

My gaze skims bottles of Smoky Mountain water piled within a bucket, but I ignore my parched throat. If I’m going to escape this conversation alive, I’d better play along.

“Your Majesty?” The terror I inject into my voice is no pretense. “I passed out the moment I swam out of the sewer, and I didn’t even get a chance to rescue her.”

Either my answer satisfies her, or she’s biding her time until she finds a replacement for me in Prince Kevon’s affections. Who knows, but I certainly won’t flaunt my knowledge of the hidden water source, the dying king, or the underground passage that leads to the palace.

As the girl pulls the dress up the queen’s body, guides the older woman’s hands through the armholes, and fastens it at the back with deft stitches, the queen combs her fingers through her blonde mane.

Her eyes narrow. “My son will not be associated with a murderer.”

“I didn’t kill—”

“Do not interrupt your queen,” she roars.

I rear back, my heart slamming against my ribs. At this stage, even a ‘yes, Your Majesty’ might prompt her into making me finish the glass of potentially

compromised champagne.

Queen Damascena strides to a tall mirror and turns her body to the side. The lines of her dress are immaculate, without the usual bulges created by clasps and zippers.

A few paces behind her, the girl waits with her hands clasped. Her shallow breaths belie her nervousness, and I wonder what the queen would do to her if she didn't like the dress. A moment later, the queen nods and lowers herself into the armchair.

"Understand this," she says with a sneer. "I will not taint my son's good standing by associating him with a murderer, even if she's the wench who warms his bed while he decides upon a suitable bride."

Prickly heat rises to my face, and I wrap my arms around my middle. My gaze darts to Lady Circi, who tilts her head to the side and raises a questioning brow. I didn't... I've never... He wouldn't. My lips remain shut because there's no telling how this crazy woman will react if I denied her accusation.

The girl pulls out a trunk I haven't noticed until now and wheels it toward the queen. She flips its top open and pulls out a bundle of leather that unrolls into an apron containing more makeup brushes than I can count.

Nobody speaks as the girl paints the queen's lips a salmon pink, but after two coats, Queen Damascena stares into the trunk's open lid, which I assume contains a mirror.

"Kevon is a philanderer, just like his father." She turns her face from side to side, admiring her cruel beauty. "He dallied with Rafaela van Eyck and moved onto you the moment she died. In the end, he will do his duty."

"Please, let me go home," I whisper. "I'll never return to the Oasis."

She laughs and turns to the seamstress, whose shrill giggle sounds too hysterical to contain any mirth. Lady Circi shakes her head and smiles. I know what they're thinking. If I disappeared to Rugosa, Prince Kevon would come after me. If they kill me now, Prince Kevon would retaliate when he became the king. Now that he's about to come into his power, they're wary of upsetting him.

Annoyance ripples through my insides, but I force my features to remain neutral. "What do you want me to do?"

"Help my son choose a Noble bride," she says. "Do this and I will allow your family to live."

Frustration wells in my chest, building in intensity like a pressure cooker about to explode. How dare this woman threaten the lives of innocent people? How dare she interfere with the choices of her son?

I want to leap off this stool and fly at her with my fists and feet and teeth, to tear out those pretty blonde locks, pluck those pretty lashes, and expose the



ugliness behind the regal veneer. Judging by the way she handled herself last night, I doubt that I could take her in a fight. She and Lady Circi worked together like a pair of seasoned warriors, even though the hijacking was a fake.

My heart aches and hot tears gather in my eyes. It's bad enough that those in power keep us starved and dehydrated. Now they have to hold our families hostage?

Breathing hard, I press the heel of my hand into my sternum and try to keep the tremble out of my voice. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Queen Damascena nods. "Then there's no need to worry about the fate of your mother, father, and those delightful twins."

The vehicle stops, and the seamstress pulls off her apron and replaces the lid.

"Is that all, Your Majesty?" I say from between clenched teeth.

She stands and smoothes down the imaginary creases in her impeccable dress. "If you mention this conversation to my son or even hint at the threat hanging over your family, I'll devise the cruelest means for them to die. Is that understood?"

If the goddess Gaia existed and granted me the ability to control lightning, I would strike her down on the spot. "Yes."

Queen Damascena walks to the door and makes a lazy gesture with her hand. "Do something about the girl's appearance," she says to her maid. "I won't have her looking blotchy in front of the cameras and prompting my son to ask what's wrong."

She steps out of the vehicle, and the door slams shut, leaving me alone with Lady Circi and my thoughts.

## CHAPTER 2

A second after Queen Damascena's departure, all the rage and helplessness welling in my chest breaks through my tough exterior, and tears roll down my cheeks.

The last thing I want to do is cry in front of Lady Circi. I don't trust her not to say something cutting and report me to the queen. The maid wheels the makeup trunk over to my stool and wipes my tears, but they won't stop flowing.

"You're thinking of running to Prince Kevon," Lady Circi says from her armchair.

I shake my head.

"Good." She rises and stalks across the van's hard floor. "He won't be able to mobilize help quickly enough to counter the guards watching over your family."

My throat thickens. "How could you let her threaten innocent people?"

Lady Circi raises a brow and makes an incredulous snort through her nostrils. As the Queen's Lady at Arms, she's not the one who makes the heartless decisions, she just implements them. She places a hand on the shoulder that got shot and squeezes. I try not to wince with the remembered pain from the searing bullet.

"In this game, the Nobles always win." She leans close enough for her breath to puff against my ear. "Your role is to identify the key players and secure yourself a position of power."

My gaze slides toward the dark-skinned woman, and I meet her green eyes. I used to think they were as green as malachite, but up close, they're ringed with a blue as deep as Prince Kevon's that bleed into a turquoise with golden flecks. The color is startling against her flawless, mahogany skin with sienna-red undertones. When she's not pointing a gun at me, twisting my arm, or doing the bidding of Queen Damascena, she is exceptionally stunning.

"Secure yourself a position of power," I whisper. "Like you did?"

Resentment crosses her features. I don't know if it's because I brought up the subject that she was the favorite of King Arias during the last Trials. Or maybe because Lady Circi lost out on the chance to rule because she made a deal to help Queen Damascena win in exchange for becoming the Lady at Arms.

Without a word, Lady Circi draws back, opens the door, and walks out of the van. My gaze turns to the maid, who presses her lips together in a thin line. She probably knows Queen Damascena's secrets, but there's absolutely no way I will compromise this girl's safety for personal benefit.

I push my anguish into a tight ball and stuff it deep in the back of my mind. The lives of Mom, Dad, Flint, and Yoseph depend on my ability to mollify this mad queen. One day, it will be her begging for mercy while I decide her fate, but for now, I will play along.

The maid places a cooling gel on my skin, which removes the puffiness and red blotches, and I practice a mask of calm in the trunk's mirror. After applying a layer of makeup, she ushers me out of the van and into a courtyard somewhere around the back of the palace. Guards march the perimeter, holding automatic machine guns with thick magazines that could kill an entire group of rebels within minutes.

Lady Circi stands next to the bus's back door. She flicks her head for me to enter and doesn't reprimand me for speaking out of line. When I board, every face on that bus twists around to watch me take my seat, but nobody speaks. The journey around the palace is mercifully fast, and I keep my stoic mask in place when we step out into a crowd of baying reporters.

It's the same as when we entered the ball: a line of guards forming a tight barrier on both sides of the red carpet that leads to the palace's marble front steps.

The white building doesn't look as magical as it did during the day, but it's larger than I remember from last night. As instructed by a production assistant, we walk up the steps past the reporters and line up at the top for the cameras. I try not to squint at the lightning storm of flashes and instead cast my gaze to the long driveway, where fountains stand like sentinels on both sides, each spouting their arcs of water.

This time, my breath doesn't catch. I feel no disapproval, awe, or overwhelm. Everything pales into insignificance with the lives of my family at stake.

The palace doors open, and guards in purple let us into the marble-and-gold entrance hall. I didn't notice the staircase yesterday, but it's nearly identical to the one we saw in the concert hall, down to the Gaia statues. Instead of the Phangloria Tree, a marble Gaia statue holds a cornucopia that overflows with

fruit, and baskets of pink damascena roses line the stairwell.

Since the last Princess Trials, Rosa damascena grows like weeds in the fields and around Dad's micro-gardens. Their petals are smaller than the average rose, edible, and make a tea that smells as sharp as the queen. If Ingrid won the Princess Trials, would we see more of the dark-petalled Rosa Ingrid Bergman?

Six of Ambassador Pascale's girls are already waiting for us at the foot of the stairs. I recognize Sabre, the red-haired Amstraadi with the freckles who tried to goad me into saying words of sedition in front of Prince Kevon.

Ingrid grumbles out loud that these were probably our hijackers. I can't help but agree, even though being close to her makes my hackles rise. I'd like to tackle her to the ground and pound her into the marble. She murdered Firkin because he was a Foundling and looked different. Then, she tried to get me killed.

The doors behind us slam shut, muffling the shouts and scuffling of the reporters.

Production assistants usher us to gather around the Amstraadi girls at the foot of the stairs. About twenty steps up, there's a half landing, where the staircase splits. Bright lights shine down from two statues of a man who looks like the country's founder, Gabriel Phan. I stand at the far left of the row of girls furthest away from Ingrid. She's likely to incite me into attacking her on camera and getting me into even more trouble with the queen.

A gentle hand lands on the back of my arm. I turn to find Prince Kevon staring down at me with furrowed brows. He wears a naval jacket with a red slash. "What took you all so long?"

Lady Circi's warning rings in my ears. Right now, the balance of power doesn't skew in his favor, and he won't get to my parents before the queen's assassins.

I raise a shoulder and force a smile. "Who knows?"

He pulls me aside and places both hands on my shoulders. My gaze darts to the girls, who turn around to watch us with murder in their eyes.

"Zea," he whispers. "I know you already refused me once, but I can end these trials right now by proposing. We can have a long engagement while you —"

"Give the other girls a chance." The words hurt as they spew from my lips, and guilt clenches at my gut for uttering a lie.

He flinches as though struck, but it's nothing compared to the regret that winds around my heart. I sound like the world's most ungrateful wretch for refusing a more-than-generous offer. Confusion crosses Prince Kevon's features and his gaze unfocuses. He's probably working out what he did wrong or trying

to give me the benefit of the doubt.

I can't let him think I need more time. He needs to know right now before the palace round starts that we have no future.

"Kevon," I murmur.

His gaze fixes on mine, but pain still etches the corner of his eyes. "Yes?"

"I'll help you choose which girl is right for you, but it isn't going to be me."

Prince Kevon's hands slide off my shoulders and hang at his sides. He blanks his expression, steps back, and inclines his head. "I apologize for the unwanted persistence."

He walks around the crowd and up the stairs, where his mother stands on the half landing, wearing a completely different outfit—strapless white gown with a red sash.

As I return to the group of girls, Queen Damascena stares down at me with the barest of smiles. I want to wrap that sash around her neck for threatening Mom, Dad, and the twins. Instead, I nod back. If I can keep this up, I might escape these Trials alive and with my family intact.

"What were you talking about?" hisses Emmera Hull.

I glare into her vacuous, blonde face. Right now, she looks like an empty-headed doll with those huge, blue-gray eyes staring back at me expecting an answer. I hate myself for turning on another Harvester girl, especially one from my own town, but she sided with Ingrid last night and pointed out my fake hiding place to the girls with the guns.

"How are things going with you and Mistress Strab?" I mimic her whining voice. "I heard her call you brain dead and offer to give you a body to match."

Emmera's mouth opens and closes, and her cheeks turn red. I guess she wasn't expecting me to survive the other night's let's-hunt-Zea party.

"May I have your attention?" Byron Blake says from the half landing. He stands at the queen's right with a dazzling smile. "Over to you, Your Majesty."

"Welcome to the palace round of the Princess Trials." Queen Damascena sweeps out an arm. "Congratulations to all you wonderful young ladies for succeeding so far, and I wish you the very best of luck."

She recites the history of the Trials, sounding like she's embellished a Modern History textbook. According to her, a trial based on beauty and personality makes Phangloria the most inclusive society in the new world.

I tune out as she compares Phangloria to other countries in North America, who maintain closed borders, never allowing their citizens upward mobility. It's true that Phangloria allows Foundlings into their borders, but she skims over the part where they live in worse poverty than the Harvesters. Foundlings never get a place in society until their descendants are genetically perfect.

When she explains that every girl from every Echelon has an equal chance to become the Queen of Phangloria, I don't know if I want to laugh or cry at the blatant hypocrisy, especially now that she's demanded that I help Prince Kevon choose a Noble.

Eventually, Queen Damascena steps back to let Prince Kevon speak.

"Thank you for making it this far." I've never heard him sound so formal. "Good luck."

My heart sinks. I wish there was a way to communicate to him my reasons for turning cold, but the risk is too great. I trust Kevon with my life, but Lady Circi is right that his mother has the advantage in this game.

Queen Damascena wishes us luck and retreats up the stairs with Prince Kevon, leaving Byron Blake standing alone on the landing.

"A round of applause for our royal sponsors," he says.

We all clap, some louder than others. On my right, Emmera Hull raises her hands above her head and whoops. I exhale a long breath, wondering who she's trying to impress.

"Wonderful, wonderful," says Byron. "And another round of applause for my co-host, who wishes to address the nation with her thrilling news."

Silence falls across the entrance hall. I glance around the camerawomen and production assistants to see which one will join Byron Blake on the half landing, but none of them move. A door on the other side of the entrance hall creaks open, and a pair of armed guards in purple march out with Prunella Broadleaf.

She's clad in a shapeless dress made of brown sackcloth, and around her neck is a replica of the metal collar she wore in her trial. I suck in a breath through my teeth. Why on earth did they let her return to the Trials when she confessed to murdering Rafaela van Eyck?

Whispers fill the air, punctuated by a few giggles. Prunella walks stiffly toward us, the left side of her face twitching from what I'm guessing is electric shock.

As two cameras point at me, I iron the horror out of my features and hold my breath.

It takes an eternity for Prunella to stumble up the stairs. The baskets of roses get in the way of the handrail, so she has no support. By the time she reaches Byron, she's out of breath and can barely keep herself upright.

Byron wraps an arm around her back and props her up. His grin is so malicious that it makes my stomach flip. "Prunella, do you have a few words to share with the viewers at home?"

"Thank you," she slurs, her head lolling to the side. "I thank you all for voting to postpone my execution until the end of the trials."

Emmera leans into me and whispers, “What’s wrong with her?”

I shoot her my filthiest glower. Really? She’s going to pretend she didn’t join forces with the Nobles against me? When she continues to press against me, I jab my elbow into her side, making her yelp.

Prunella sways on her feet and tries to continue, but Byron speaks over her. “I think we’ve heard enough from you. Try not to drool on camera, dear. Removing digital saliva is murder for the editors”

The other girls break into nervous giggles. I clench my teeth. If this is a joke, this isn’t funny.

A troupe of young women wearing purple waistcoats with pencil skirts walks in from a side door.

“Just in time.” He lowers Prunella onto the landing and spreads his arms wide. “These make-up artists are here to camouflage your features for a twilight adventure in Gloria National Park.”

Gasps spread across the other candidates, and even the Amstraadi girls share nervous glances. I’m guessing that it won’t be an evening picnic.

A production assistant pulls the fallen Prunella out of the half landing, and another hands Byron a gold statuette. He balances it on the palm of his outstretched hand. It’s Gaia, sitting with her legs crossed and both hands over her pregnant belly. That’s all I can see from the bottom of the stairs.

With an exaggerated sigh, Byron says, “The girl who finds Gaia’s Treasure wins a wonderful evening with Prince Kevon. She also gets to choose an activity for her and the other candidates to enjoy.”

I can’t keep my eyes off Prunella’s twitching feet. They must have done something to her on the journey from the Chamber of Ministers. She didn’t seem quite this bad while she gave evidence.

Byron wishes us luck, and the makeup artists walk toward us. The one who makes eye contact with me looks a little familiar. Her dark-brown skin and black hair look like they belong to someone much paler. I think it’s the gray eyes, but I can’t place where I’ve seen her before.

Her face splits into a wide grin that makes the corners of her eyes crinkle. “My name is Georgette, and I’ll be your makeup artist for the duration of the trials.”

“Hello,” I say, still trying to puzzle where I’ve seen her before.

She sweeps her arm toward the grand staircase. “Would you like to come with me to your chambers? Food and drink await.”

My empty stomach clenches, and I give her an eager nod. Everyone ascends the stairs with their assigned artists. At the half landing, the other pairs take a left, but Emmera’s make up artist leads her to the right. Georgette also indicates

that this is where we should go. A boulder of dread drops into the pit of my stomach as I wonder if this is an ambush.

Vitelotte Solar, the other Harvester girl who reached the palace round, walks at my side and casts me several glances, but I stare straight ahead. With a sigh, her posture slumps, and she runs her fingers through her purple curls. To the cameras, it looks like I'm a haughty bronco who rejects friendly overtures. I'm not.

Last night, Berta turned against me and tried to end my life. Berta, who fought at my side when Prunella and her minions filled my room with cepa gas. Berta, who helped me fight off the hijackers. Berta, who only gatecrashed the trials to prove a point to her pushy mother.

She was rude and selfish at first, but I thought we'd become allies. I can't afford to befriend any of the contestants because there's no telling when they'll stick a knife in my back.

At the top of the right staircase, Georgette leads me down a hallway and opens a door to the most spectacular bedroom about the size of my entire house. At the far end is the largest bed I've ever seen, with ivory covers and more pillows than I can count. Eggshell-colored drapes sweep down the headboard from a golden pelmet on the wall, making it look fit for a princess. Short, mirrored cabinets stand at both sides of the bed, each supporting golden table lamps.

As Georgette guides me through the bedroom, my gaze sweeps past the cushioned stool at the foot of the bed to the room's right side, where there's a writing desk next to a balcony that overlooks the palace grounds. I'm not sure why, but they've even supplied a velvet sofa and two armchairs that match the decor.

We step into a walk-in closet that rivals Queen Damascena's mobile dressing room. It's already stocked with garments, including the Harvester uniform I brought to the trials. I recognize a stain on the apron that has never washed out, no matter what I try.

"You can come out, now," says Georgette.

A door opens, and I catch a glimpse of the bathroom before seeing Forelle. She wears the same purple waistcoat and pencil skirt with her red hair tied into a neat bun.

Warmth fills my heart, and tears fill my eyes at the sight of one person I can trust. "What are you doing here?"

She wraps her arms around my shoulders. Her tight embrace cuts off my air.

"Kevon sent Master Thymel and his sisters to escort me to the palace," she murmurs.



Master Thymel made the gorgeous gown I wore last night, and he was also responsible for handing me the tomato pendant that tracked my location and vital signs. He's an Artisan promoted to the rank of Noble for his fashion, but he and his family seemed to want me to win the Trials.

I turn around and give Georgette a second look, and suddenly, her features make sense. "Are you related to the Thymels?"

She nods. "I'm their cousin. His Highness thought you might appreciate a couple of allies during the palace round."

Pain lances through my insides at the way his features dropped at my cold response to his attempt to save me from the Trials. I can't think about him right now, can't think of what will happen if the queen thinks I'm disregarding her threat. Swallowing back those feelings, I force a smile.

"It's great to have you here." I hold them both by the hand.

Georgette places an arm around my shoulders and guides me to a dressing table the size of a desk. The mirror behind stretches to the ceiling and two foot-length strips of light provide illumination.

"Now for your makeover," she says.

Reality crashes back in full force, and I remember Byron Blake mentioning something about a trial. "What's going on tonight?"

She opens a drawer containing transparent jars of pigment. After selecting a dark green, she smears it on my face with a soft sponge. "I'm applying waterproof camouflage makeup over your skin. They told us you'll all be sneaking around at night, competing against the other girls to find an item."

Through the mirror, I watch Forelle pull out a leaf-patterned jumpsuit that looks too skinny for even my slender frame.

"This is a tactical outfit they want you all to wear," Forelle says.

Someone knocks on the door, and Forelle shouts at them to come in. I lean back and glance into the bedroom to find a male servant in purple pushing a trolley inside. He hands Forelle a covered tray and walks out, but he leaves behind the mouthwatering aroma of roasted chicken.

My groan reverberates deep into my cavernous belly. "How long will this camouflage makeup take?"

"You can eat while we get you dressed for the task." Forelle walks in with the tray and sets it on the dressing table.

She pulls off the cloche, revealing sandwiches that look too decadent to be real. Inside are slices of chicken breast as thick as my thumb nestled within a bed of green leaves. The bread looks buttered on both sides and pressed within a hot griddle. Melted cheese oozes out of the second sandwich, which contains slices of red onion, sun-dried tomato and cooked spinach.

Saliva floods my mouth, and a shuddering breath escapes my lips. If I don't get a bite right now, I think I'll faint.

Forelle produces a knife and fork, cuts the chicken sandwich, and places a piece to my lips. When I take a bite, it's an explosion of flavors. They've prepared the chicken with rosemary, lemon, and garlic, which mingles with a more delicious version of the creamy mayonnaise I ate with yesterday's burger.

I feel a little like Queen Damascena, sitting like a grand lady in a grand dressing room while one girl covers my face with dark makeup and the other places food in my mouth. Forelle tells me that Garrett wants to meet her family, but she's nervous about how her parents will react to hearing that she's spent the past few days in a guesthouse with a man.

Georgette gives her advice, but I can barely focus because the last time I ate was those burgers with Forelle. I murmur something about Mr. and Mrs. Pyrus getting worried about Forelle's whereabouts, and she promises to send them a letter to say she's working at the palace.

When the subject turns to Prince Kevon, my heart clenches. He doesn't know me well enough to tell that I'm acting under duress, and he's too kind to rage that I repaid his generosity with a cold declaration to be friends. He probably blames himself for being too pushy after I told him that I wasn't in love.

The girls' conversation fades into the background as I wallow in guilt. Guilt for Prince Kevon, for my family, and for all the Harvesters who remain thirsty because I couldn't get a message to Ryce or Carolina about the underground river.

I exhale a long breath and stare at my reflection. Sad eyes stare back from a green face smeared with black and brown streaks that travel down my neck and onto my chest. Even the tips of my ears are black.

My mind drifts back to Queen Damascena, who believes I think that I fell into a sewer, a repository for wastewater. If the river stretches beyond the Great Wall, it must pass under Harvester territory. Maybe Carolina can work out a way to siphon it through her network of underground tunnels?

Georgette holds my eyelids open. "Stay still."

"What—" Something cold and wet spritzes into my eyeball, making my eyes water. "What are you doing?"

"Camouflage," she says, sounding apologetic. "There's no point making your skin blend into the surroundings if your eyes reflect the moon."

I blink the tears out of my eyes and mutter, "Are you going to put it on my teeth, too?"

"When you've finished your sandwiches." Georgette tilts her head to the side and smiles.

Dread pushes down thoughts of Prince Kevon, thoughts of my family, and thoughts of thirsty harvesters as I wonder what on earth could be dangerous enough to warrant such a high level of camouflage.

“Do you know anything about Gloria National Park?” I ask.

Georgette frowns. “The game reserve?”

“What does that mean?” Forelle pops a bit of sandwich into her mouth.

“It’s an open zoo, where all the wild animals roam in their natural habitats. Like the Oasis Animal Sanctuary except Nobles go there to hunt.” Georgette’s gaze lands on the plate. “Are you going to eat that?”

My eyes bulge. Open zoo? Wild animals? Natural habitats? Hunting? I push the plate toward Georgette and try not to think of a multitude of man-eating beasts, creatures with deadly venom, and that’s not even including the Noble girls who are baying for my blood.

So far, none of the official Trials have gotten a girl killed, but I think that’s about to change.

About thirty minutes later, a bell chimes on my wrist cuff, and Emmera, Vitelotte, and I emerge from our rooms. They both wear the same camouflage, with leaf-patterned hoods covering their hair. Our jumpsuits fit as tight as ElastoSculpt with zippers down the front for ventilation and thick belts that cinch our waists.

I’m not sure what the black belt hooks are for, but I’m sure we’ll find out once Byron Blake gives us instructions on the trial.

Emmera scowls at me, and Vitelotte averts her eyes. We walk alongside our makeup artists in silence through the palace and find Byron waiting on the half landing and the rest of the camouflaged girls at the foot of the stairs.

From where I’m descending, it’s hard to tell the nobles, but the Amstraadi girls all stand to attention with straight postures and their arms behind their backs.

As we settle around the others, Byron welcomes us back with an apology that Prunella has returned to the Chamber of Ministers to assist them with further inquiries. He winks at the camera, and I wonder if she’s going to be tortured for the public’s amusement.

“There are six Amstraadi, five Nobles, three Guardians, two Artisans, and three Harvesters,” he says, holding up the golden statuette of Gaia. “It’s entirely your decision if you would like to form teams, but whoever returns with Gaia’s treasure will be the winner.”

I glance around at the girls. Ingrid, the Noble with pinched features, beckons the three Guardians closer. Sabre from Amstraad divides her group into two, while the Artisan pair stand alone. I drop my gaze to the marble floor, not daring

to ask if there's a penalty for non-participation.

"The cameras embedded into the seams of your jumpsuits will track your movements," he continues. "Scouts will retrieve you as soon as somebody finds the treasure."

"Which means we'll be out there forever if we don't find it," mutters Vitelotte.

I suppress a laugh. The worst part about her comment is that it's probably true.

Byron sends the Amstraadi first, then the combined team of Nobles and Guardians. The two Artisans, who don't make eye contact with us, huddle together. One of them is the pink-haired dancer who nodded from the armored personnel carrier and implied that it was safe for me to return to the vehicle.

A pair of camerawomen beckon us to follow and guides us through a side exit. Nobody speaks as we walk through the narrow hallways. Technically, this is a hidden passageway and I need to memorize this intel to pass onto the Red Runners, but I no longer care.

When I accepted this mission, I thought I would enter the palace, sneak about at night, and find a hidden entrance. Then I'd get eliminated, sent home, and inform the Red Runners of a secret route to revolution. I never thought I'd end up with guards outside our Rugosa home, waiting for Queen Damascena's order to shoot.

A door opens, and we step into a stairwell that leads to a basement, where a large jeep with blackened windows awaits. Two slimline backpacks sit in the front and three at the back. After settling in, we examine their contents. One bag contains a map and handheld computer, another contains Gaia's bible, the third contains cutting equipment such as penknives, a pocket chainsaw, and a small ax. There's even a gaslighter with a nifty belt hook. I hope these items are for cutting firewood.

"After last night, I should be in charge of the weapons." I glare at Emmera. "Any objections?"

Her camouflaged features twist. "So you can bury that ax into my back?"

Vitelotte places a hand on Emmera's shoulders. "It's alright," she says in even tones. "Zea-Mays wouldn't hurt a fellow Harvester."

"How would you know?" Emmera whispers.

I clutch the bag of weapons to my chest and wait for the purple-haired girl to reply.

"How could you forget that Zea-Mays got whipped twice for saving the virtue of Harvester girls?" says Vitelotte.

One of the Artisan girls in front twists around to gape. I don't meet her gaze,

and I don't blame her for resenting me. Over the past few days, Prunella Broadleaf and her media team have worked hard to make me look like I used underhanded methods to steal Prince Kevon. They were so convincing that even Berta believed them.

I twist the ring Carolina slipped on my finger and wonder if that's why I haven't heard from her or Ryce, then shake off the thought.

"Alright." Emmera bows her head and exhales a long breath. "But I'm taking the tablet computer."

Without a word, Vitelotte picks up Gaia's bible and reads.

My gaze drops down to the pack of knives, and I catalog them in my mind for future reference. If we meet killer birds like the one who attacked Gemini, we're going to need more than just one ax.

As the hours pass, our jeep traverses increasingly bumpy terrain and over a steep gradient. It looks like we're going to the mountains, which is technically the Barrens and beyond the wall that encloses the Echelons. The reverberations of my heart rattle my bones, and the only thing stopping me from a full-blown panic attack is the knowledge that Ingrid and her allies left before us and are probably fighting among themselves over who should claim the golden statuette.

Eventually, we stop and the production assistants allow us to step out of the jeep. I open the door, and the scent of pine fills my nostrils. We're parked a few feet from the edge of a mountain cliff that drops down to more rocky ground and then a forest that stretches out for miles. The setting sun is a ball of incandescent yellow that spreads an orange haze across the distant mountains.

"This isn't a simulation," Vitelotte mutters from my side.

I stare out into the horizon, wondering how we're supposed to find a statuette in this expanse of green. "This isn't the oasis, either."

"What the hell are we supposed to do with those?" says Emmera.

We both turn to find the assistants setting up five... skateboards? They're four-feet long, metallic with looped foot straps. The two Artisan girls squeal and clasp each other's hands, but the three of us share blank stares.

"What are those?" I ask.

"Air gliders." One of the Artisan girls stands crossways on the board.

I shake my head. "What do they do?"

She walks around the boards, finds the one with her name, and places her feet in the foot straps. As a motor roars to life, her companion mounts her board. They both lean their weight forward, and the boards rise a foot off the air.

My mouth drops open. I've seen planes fly and have no idea how they stay in the air, but I guessed that most of the vehicle consisted of engines, fuel, and physics. But a board as thin as a computer tablet?

With a whoop, the girls fly over the rocky ground and over the edge of the cliff. My stomach plummets, but they stay afloat.

“No.” Emmera shakes her head.

Despite our differences, I’m inclined to agree. My pulse pounds louder than the roar of the wind, and blood rushes through my ears, it’s nearly enough to muffle the sound of a door closing, but I turn to find the jeep reversing back down the mountain, leaving three gliders on the ground.

“We don’t have to do this,” I say.

Emmera, whose features are slack, nods and turns to Vitelotte.

Vitelotte glances at the girls disappearing toward the horizon. “We can wait here until someone comes to get us.”

We stand together in silence and watch the setting sun. I’m not sure how much time passes when Emmera stifles a yawn. She blinks three times then places her hand over her mouth and tilts her head back to yawn again.

A yawn builds in the back of my throat, and I cover my mouth to let it out. Then Vitelotte yawns. Soon, we’re standing together, yawning like it’s infectious.

“What’s that?” says Emmera with a yawn.

“Yawning is…” Vitelotte stops to yawn. “Contagious.”

“No,” Emmera says, sounding sleepy. “That rumbling sound.”

I turn around just as a pair of giant lions approach from further down the slope.

Adrenaline lances through my heart, forcing my limbs into action. I rush toward the glider labeled ‘CALICO.’

“Ligers!” Vitelotte jumps on her glider.

With a shriek, Emmera mounts. We mimic the Artisan girls’ rocking motions, and two sets of engines roar to life. Their gliders rise off the ground and head toward the cliff’s edge.

Mine won’t work.

The ligers continue toward us, giant sand-colored beasts whose heads reach my chest. I glance at the other girls, who move toward the edge of the cliff, and I make one last effort to activate my board.

Terror wraps around my neck like a noose. Queen Damascena lied. She never had any intention of letting me survive these trials. Now, I’ll die, and they’ll either blame a technical malfunction or add it to Prunella Broadleaf’s long list of crimes. Maybe that’s why they kept her alive.

None of these matters right now. If I don’t move, these ligers will maul me to death.

## CHAPTER 3

I wrench my feet free from the board's straps just as someone screams. My gaze darts to the two Harvesters floating toward the edge of the cliff.

Emmera waves her arms. "What are you doing? Fly!"

Vitelotte, who seems to understand what's happening, stretches out her hand. "Hurry!"

Blank terror distorts my perception of time and lengthens the space between heartbeats. With one beat of my heart, I turn to the ligers, the monstrously large cats with heads the size of a man's torso. Their whiskers glint like spun gold in the setting sun, and thick muscles ripple beneath their tawny fur. One snap of their jaws could tear off an entire limb.

There are several reasons why running would be a dumb idea. I'll never reach the girls before they pass the cliff's edge. Running will arouse the ligers' hunting instincts. They can pounce quicker than I can run.

After another heartbeat, the ligers' guttural growl makes the lining of my stomach tremble. Survival instinct blanks my mind, and my legs spring to action. I run with the swiftness of a gazelle, just as the girls' boards pass the cliff's edge by inches.

The distance between the girls and me widens. Emmera floats a foot away from Vitelotte, who is on her right and still holding out her arm. I can't hear what they're screaming—the roar of blood pumping past my eardrums deafens everything except my pulse.

A desperate cry tears from my lips and I leap off the cliff. I'm weightless, and for a moment, there's no pull of gravity. My arms and legs cycle through the air, my heart stops beating, the gap between the girls and me closes, but not fast enough.

One anguished roar from behind makes the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. A cold mix of relief and resignation washes through my insides. If

this is how I die, smashed into pieces from a high fall, it's better than a long, slow mauling.

Vitelotte grabs my right wrist, but my left foot lands on the back of Emmera's board. She screeches and swats at me, but I grab her hand. With Vitelotte's firm grip, I have enough leverage to secure my right foot on her board.

Emmera yanks at her arm. "You're going to sink us both!"

Time speeds up to normal, and my heartbeat doubles. I clench my teeth and grip Emmera's resisting fingers. All her struggling tilts her board and makes my leg slip. She shrieks and rights herself.

"Keep still," I yell over the billowing wind.

Another panicked scream rings through my left ear. "You're too heavy. We're going to die. We're going to crash!"

Vitelotte shouts at her to stay calm. I can barely make out the purple-haired girl's words because Emmera loses herself in a full-blown panic. I gulp mouthfuls of air and try to slow my frantic heart. At least she's stopped struggling.

Slicing sounds fill my ear. I glance up to find a pair of drones hovering above our heads, and I turn to Vitelotte. "We need to land."

She offers me a grim nod.

Nothingness surrounds us, and the sun setting over distant mountains acts as our sole landmark. Wind batters the exposed skin of my face and hands, carrying the faint scent of juniper and pine. I can't bear to look down. Down is an unfathomable drop that will send my consciousness spinning like an out-of-control sycamore seed. I don't want to turn back, either, because seeing those ligers once was enough.

If the production people met our silent resistance with wild animals, there's no telling what they will do if we defy them again. The only way out of this is down.

Sucking in a deep, calming breath through my nostrils, I try to block out Emmera's sobs. With no training in how to use these gliders, we can't afford for them to run out of fuel. And if they're solar powered with no battery, the imminent dusk will mean our deaths.

Now that the beat of my pulse no longer fills my ears, I can finally hear the wind blowing past the hood's fabric, and I finally understand why we needed these garments. What would happen if we pushed our weight to the front? Would we swoop down or would we plummet? It's better than waiting for the gliders to stop working.

"Has anyone ever used one of these devices before?" I shout over the wind.



Vitelotte shakes her head.

“Yes,” shouts Emmera, but it sounds more like a sob.

“When?” I shout back.

“One of...” she hiccups. “One of the guards brought a glider to the village. He wanted to teach me.”

I push back any speculations about the guard having ulterior motives and focus on the gliders. “What did he say?”

“I only rode behind him,” she says with another sob. “Never on my own.”

Impatience prickles across my skin as she’s just invalidated her claim that my extra weight would sink them. “Emmera, close your eyes and try to remember.”

She nods but remains silent.

I turn to Vitelotte. “What do you think would happen if we put our weight to the front?”

“A forward somersault?” she replies.

My stomach clenches with anxiety. I was afraid she would say that. For the next few minutes, Vitelotte shouts commands at the board, but it continues floating through the air and toward the setting sun. I glance at Emmera, whose features look too contorted with panic to indicate that she’s capable of remembering what the guard said about the glider.

With each passing moment, the pounding of my pulse intensifies until my head is filled with its reverberations.

“The strap,” shouts Emmera.

“What?” we both shout back.

Emmera’s breaths are so fast and frantic that her spine bows with every exhale. Now that she’s stopped struggling and trying to jostle me off her board, I can see she was acting out of panic.

“Raise the toes of your left foot to go down, she says. “Right to go up.”

“Alright,” shouts Vitelotte.

Two more drones join the pair above us, but one dives several feet out of sight. A fresh bout of panic lances through my chest, and a premonition flashes before my eyes. It’s of the girls dropping at different rates and me tumbling through the sky. That’s why the drone is positioning itself—to catch footage of my fall.

“Wait!” The word bursts from my lips.

Emmera yanks her arm free. “What?”

“Coordinate.” I snatch her wrist. “You two need to raise your feet at the same time.”

Vitelotte nods, but Emmera’s lack of movement tells me that my death isn’t

a huge factor in her decision-making. The gliders' engines rumble under both feet at differing speeds, sending tremors through my bones. If I can't get them to work together, I'm as good as dead.

"Right, then." I try to keep the tremble out of my voice. "Let's show the viewers at home some Harvester teamwork."

"On your count," says Vitelotte.

I tighten my grip on both wrists, inhale another deep breath, and clench my abdominal muscles. "Ready, steady, go."

A second later, both boards, along with my stomach, plummet. One of them is descending faster than the other, and they're moving further apart. I yelp, but the screams of the other two girls drown out the sound.

"Stop!" I yell over their screams.

When they stop, Emmera floats three feet from Vitelotte's left, and I'm bent forward at an angle with my arms feeling half-wrenched from their sockets. My left foot can barely feel Emmera's glider and all my weight balances on the muscles of my bent right leg. Spasms ripple through my heart, and cold sweat drenches my jumpsuit. This isn't going to work.

I turn to Vitelotte and instruct her to ease her board down. When she's level with Emmera, her stricken eyes meet mine. The only way I'll get through this alive is by riding behind one girl, but there's no telling if the production assistants have tampered with the gliders' ability to hold the weight of two.

Whirring from the drone pointing a camera at my face tells me it's taking a close-up. The other two draw back, presumably to get a comedic shot of my awkward angle. Now isn't the time for me to wonder how they'll present this footage on the Lifestyle Channel, but my mind can't help drifting to how I'm the new Gemini Pixel, set up for extraordinary punishments and a spectacular death.

Emmera is the first to speak. "You should have stayed with those ligers. What if they were androids?"

I purse my lips, exhale my anger in ragged breaths, and force myself not to snap.

Vitelotte lowers her glider a couple of feet and squeezes my wrist. "I'm the smallest, and you're thin. Ride with me."

Gratitude floods my heart. Emmera doesn't object to the implication that she's the largest, but I think she's too relieved at no longer needing to support my weight. It takes an eternity and several false starts for me to release Emmera's wrist, shift my left foot to Vitelotte's board, and wrap my arms around the smaller girl's waist.

The engine under our feet splutters, and the board wavers from left to right. One of Vitelotte's arms stretches out for balance, but the other is trapped within

my side-ways embrace.

We both freeze, waiting for the glider to give out under our combined weight. Even the wind stills and the only sounds are the rapid beat of my pulse combined with the drone's slicing blades.

Emmera disappears from our line of sight. She's probably halfway to the forest below, but I can't think of that right now. After what feels like an eternity, the engine beneath us restores to a steady rumble.

"What do you think?" asks Vitelotte.

I don't want an ounce of fear to affect the girl who will maneuver us to safety, so I say in the gentle tone I use on injured birds, "Let's see what happens when you raise your big toe."

Moments later, the board drifts down.

We both exhale identical breaths. Vitelotte says the mechanism must be sensitive, and slight movements are enough for it to understand our commands. It takes several minutes for me to gather the courage to look down. When I do, we're drifting a hundred feet over a fast-moving river.

Its banks are stretches of gray rock that give way to a thick forest of pines, their tips as sharp as umbrella points. I can't tell in the fading light if the river is deep, but the water flows around jagged rocks in its middle, which suggests that it is not.

"Vitelotte," I whisper into her ear.

"Lotte," she says.

"We need to move to the left."

"I don't know how to do that," she replies.

As we continue to drift down, the crashing of water against the rocks drowns out the drones' blades. I glance down and sport a dark mass swimming beneath us. It's long with a thick tail and stubby legs that jut out from each side of its rounded belly.

I don't know the difference between a crocodile and an alligator, but when it rises and opens its jaws, I shake Vitelotte.

"What?" she says.

"Rise." The pitch of my voice elevates. When the glider continues drifting down, I shout, "Go up."

"The right pedal doesn't work." She leans down and chokes. "What's in the water?"

Nausea ripples through my insides. Whoever deactivated the glider assigned to me is now tampering with Vitelotte's board. As we continue toward the river, more of the giant reptiles gather.

I say, "Just—"

Something hard hits my left arm. I flinch, and a breath hisses through my teeth.

“What now?” she says between ragged breaths.

My gaze darts toward the bank. I can’t see anyone hiding within the trees, but that’s the whole point of the camouflage. “I don’t—”

Another hard shot hits my temple, and pain radiates through my skull. “Ouch.”

Vitelotte flinches. “Ouch.”

“Someone’s shooting at us.” I tap her shoulder. “Go higher.”

As she rises, one of the missiles lands on the side of my legs, making me wince. It can’t be silk bullets, as those penetrate the skin, so maybe these shots are coming from an air rifle. I glance down and find dark figures running along the riverbank.

“They were trying to make us fall into the water,” I snarl.

“The Nobles and Guardians are teaming up to eliminate you.” Vitelotte explains that Ingrid has offered any girl who kills me the chance to become her lady-at-arms. It’s no surprise as she made that offer to Berta, who nearly killed me. “That Constance girl with the ringlets offered me a crate of vodka if I would push you out of a window.”

My heart sinks. “Oh.”

Vitelotte turns her head and meets my eye. “I refused, of course.”

“I know.” Our harrowing aerial adventure is proof that she has no intention to kill me or let me die.

“They’re all making alliances.” She shakes her head. “As if scheming could win them the heart of a prince.”

My gaze rises to the drone following our every move. Scheming worked for Queen Damascena and Lady Circi. Something bangs against the underside of our glider, and my heart leaps.

Vitelotte stiffens. “They’re trying to knock out its engine.”

Without being prompted, we rise further away from the river. It bends, and we drift away from the swimming reptiles, and over the forest.

“Let’s find somewhere safe,” I say. “If we split up, they’ll leave you alone, and—”

“No,” she says. “You’re safer with me watching your back.”

I shake my head. It’s not like Vitelotte and I were friends in Rugosa, and she knows how much risk she’s taking on by staying at my side. It’s madness for her to get hurt when everyone has overlooked her until now.

Silence stretches out between us. I don’t know how to ask why she would go so far to help a stranger when others like Emmerra would band against me for

personal gain.

Vitelotte exhales a long breath. “I’ve seen what your family does around Rugosa. The Calicos might be quiet, but you’re good people. When Mom died and left us with two newborns, your mother brought enough cactus fruit to keep us going until the Guardians approved the transfer of Grandma’s water rations. Consider this our thanks.”

A lump forms in my throat. “I didn’t know.”

“Your parents don’t like to brag about all the good they do, but some of us notice,” she says in a pointed tone.

The beginnings of tears sting my eyes. Her words have reached my heart, but the thought that my actions have put Mom, Dad, and the twins in danger makes it shatter.

Another pellet hits the underside of the glider but misses the engine. We’re floating over a clearing, and four attackers run through the trees. Three guardians joined forces with one Noble. They probably laid in wait for the only girl without a glider.

The shooting becomes frantic, and the girls take down two of the drones following us. A few of the shots hit the engine and make it sputter. We sink a few feet, but the attacks finally stop when we pass over a chasm. On the other side is a broadleaf forest of oaks and maples and birches. I twist around to see if the girls are mounting their gliders, but nobody rises from the trees.

“Do you want to find Gaia’s statuette?” I ask.

Vitelotte shakes her head. “There’s no point since Emmera has the map.”

After a few more minutes of peaceful drifting, the motor slows. Vitelotte lowers it to the ground, and we continue on foot through the woods. Golden light trickles through the forest’s thick canopy and illuminates our way over the uneven ground. Twigs and dry leaves crunch underfoot, and an earthy scent fills my nostrils.

We take turns carrying the glider in case we need to use it as a weapon or a means for escape, but our steps falter when the breeze carries smoke and the faint scent of cooking meat.

I grab Vitelotte’s arm. It’s probably one of the Amstraadi groups. They’re the only girls I can imagine being capable of hunting food and setting up camp. Guardians probably also have that skill, but they’re too busy hunting us.

Vitelotte places a finger on her lips, and we pause. The smoke comes from somewhere on the left, where we also hear the sounds of female laughter. She flicks her head toward a sprawling oak whose thick branches curl toward the ground. I give her a sharp nod, and we creep toward the tree.

When we reach its base, my foot catches on something soft. I trip and land

on my hands and knees.

Vitelotte kneels at my side and whispers, “Are you alright?”

“Fine.” I turn and peer down at the base of the tree for signs of a dead animal. The dim light obscures my view of the soft object that made me fall, but my eyes adjust. I find the outline of something that camouflages with the fallen leaves and roll it over with my foot.

A shock of blonde hair catches the light. It’s long and straight, just like Emmera’s.

Shock punches me in the gut, and I clap both hands over my mouth to muffle a scream.

Vitelotte doubles over and lets out several gasping breaths. “Who is that?”

I shake my head. With the face paint, there’s no telling if this is the girl from our village. I can’t see silver glider anywhere near the body, and I can’t tell if she died from the fall or if someone killed her.

Rapid footsteps approach from beyond the trees, and my stomach drops. I scramble away from the sprawling oak with Vitelotte at my side.

We run over fallen logs, through streams, and past a herd of animals whose eyes glow in the doom. Whoever is following is swift, determined, relentless. The forest slopes uphill, and our breaths become labored as we race away from our pursuers. They’re either the girls with the guns or whoever was responsible for what happened to the blonde girl.

Fatigue sets my lungs ablaze, and exhaustion weighs down my thighs, but I power through until there’s nowhere else to run. The slope ends with a thirty-foot drop. Somewhere between now and finding the girl’s body, we’ve lost the glider. I completely forgot who was supposed to be carrying it.

“Jump,” I whisper.

Vitelotte nods. “One, two, three.”

We both leap. A stomach-churning second later, I land in a crouch, and Vitelotte executes a perfect landing roll. My gaze catches the glowing eyes of a creature that might be a large fox. It darts to the left and disappears from sight. I grab Vitelotte’s arm and pull her in the direction of the vanishing animal.

Up ahead beyond a growth of saplings stands a thick tree that looks like several smaller trees woven together to form a hollow. We bolt toward it and duck inside.

The air is damp within the large plant, filled with the mingled scents of animal musk and rotting leaves. There isn’t much space to do more than crouch. I press my lips together and breathe hard through my nostrils. My limbs won’t stop trembling, and I think it’s because I’m dreading yet another fight.

Vitelotte’s makeup artist also darkened the whites of her eyes, and I can’t see

her in the dark. Unless whoever is chasing us is wearing heat-seeking goggles, they should run past.

A pair of dark figures jump down. They pause for a moment and look from side to side. One of them points left, the other points right, and they separate.

Neither of us speaks for several minutes. Me, because I'm afraid the girls might return, but Vitelotte rubs her chin as though deep in thought.

"They're from Amstraad," she whispers.

"I think they were hunting us," I whisper back.

"Hunting you," she says.

I can't disagree. Last night, when I thought the hijacking was real, I electrocuted one of them, set her on fire, and shot her friend. They're probably out for revenge. We sit within the den in silence, and I wonder what we should do next. I don't know if the girls were part of the camp and will return to their comrades, or a different group genuinely seeking Gaia's treasure.

A weary breath slips from my lips. If Queen Damascena isn't threatening the lives of my family, then the other contestants are trying to kill me. And now I've dragged Vitelotte into this mess.

"They want me." I pull off the backpack, ease its zipper open, pull out the ax, and attach the gaslighter to my belt. "If you change your mind about going it alone, I'll understand."

She shakes her head and clasps my shoulder. "Harvesters stick together."

I wrap my hand around hers and squeeze. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry about yesterday," she whispers.

"What?"

"I said nothing when they were calling you a murderer for saving us. When they kicked you off the bus, I should have joined you."

My mouth drops open. "I wasn't expecting—"

"I just sat there, safe and terrified." Her breaths become harsh and full of self-recrimination. "I did nothing while they plotted against a Harvester girl, and the same fat amount of nothing when they hunted you with guns."

"Well..." Words dry up in the back of my throat.

Back then, I had felt sick with betrayal. I'm still sore about how so many of the girls sat back and allowed Ingrid to rally others against me. Maybe they were scared, like Vitelotte.

Maybe some of them still remembered the doctored footage of Lady Circi dragging a naked girl away from Prince Kevon. I don't know. But I once did nothing while another Harvester girl needed my help, and that's a burden I'll carry for the rest of my life.

Vitelotte reaches into the pack and pulls out the chainsaw and a hunting

knife with a seven-inch blade. “If I can help, it might make up for failing you yesterday.”

I shake my head. It took a knife in the back and nearly dying to put things into perspective. Mom was right when she said one girl can’t save the world, just like she said years ago that a frightened nine-year-old wasn’t capable of stopping a guard from committing murder. Such intense, irrational guilt caused my obsession with Ryce Wintergreen, a man I only know from afar.

“It’s me who owes you,” I whisper. “Because of you, I didn’t fall to my death or get mauled by a pair of ligers.”

Her silence tells me she isn’t remotely convinced, and I exhale a weary breath. We’ve got bigger things to worry about right now, and we can’t crouch in a tree hollow all night. Neither of the girls who followed us show signs of returning, and I’m about to suggest we leave, but the sounds of two new sets of feet landing close by makes us both freeze.

By now, all traces of the sun have disappeared, and dark clouds cover the sky. Whoever is moving toward us also wears camouflage, and I see nothing but the glow of a tablet computer.

“Are you sure she’s not dead?” says an approaching voice. “It says here that she hasn’t moved in ages.”

“Shhh!”

Dread rolls through my belly. What on earth was on that tablet computer? My coordinates? My hand flies to the tiny bulge over my breastbone. They can’t be reading coordinates from the tomato pendant. Nobody knows about it except Prince Kevon and the Thymel siblings who made my ballgown. I wrap a hand around my Amstraad cuff and shake my head. This is a new monitor from the royal physician.

A tiny light flashes on the buckle of my belt, and I clench my teeth. If they’ve installed cameras in our clothing then it makes sense that they might also add a few trackers.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” I whisper.

Vitelotte shakes her head. “Too late.”

The footsteps are heavy, confident, and they crack twigs underfoot. Vitelotte gives me a nudge to get ready, and my hand closes around the ax. I don’t want to hurt anyone, but if they attack first, I’ll retaliate with full force.

“She’s probably injured.” The first voice sounds gleeful.

The other girl chuckles. “It makes our job easier.”

“Can you move around them and attack from the back?” I whisper to Vitelotte.

She nods and crawls out of the burrow. Within seconds, she disappears into



the dark, and all I can see is the glow of the tablet computer's screen.

"Did you hear anything?" the first voice whispers.

"What?"

"A rustling sound."

She chuckles. "It's her."

With a click, the beam of a flashlight illuminates the trees. "Zea-Mays Calico," says the gleeful voice. "Show yourself."

I make a loud whimper to distract them from Vitelotte, and the beam shines into the hollow.

"There you are," says one girl.

"Who are you?" I crawl out of the burrow, hoping I've given my new friend enough time. A tiny voice in the back of my mind asks what I will do if she has escaped into the woods, but I shake it off. "Are you contestants?"

"Not for the role of the next queen," she replies.

"Let me guess," I inject as much boredom as I can into my voice. "Someone offered you the role of lady-at-arms in exchange for my death?"

A tense silence stretches out for several heartbeats. I don't know if they're shocked that I've worked out their plan or disconcerted by my silence, but I can't let their attention waver from me for much longer, in case they find Vitelotte.

"Then you're from the Guardian Echelon." I rise to my feet with the ax. "Care to share your names so everyone in Phangloria knows who's trying to murder me?"

The girl's painted face splits into a grin of uncamouflaged teeth. "Minnie has jammed the camera's broadcasting signals, and we found a canister of QuickBurn in one of our packs. By the time the drones find your burned, broken body, all our forensics will be ash."

Bile rises to the back of my throat, and I grind my teeth. This is no treasure hunt. It's another of those multi-pronged murder attempts. If the ligers don't eat me, the malfunctioning board. If they fail, the crocodiles, and if that doesn't work, my fellow contestants.

"Thanks for letting me know." I swing the ax toward their heads. It's time to send a message that Zea-Mays Calico is no scapegoat, sitting duck, or sacrificial lamb.

## CHAPTER 4

The girl ducks, but my ax hits the side of her flashlight, sending it flying across the air. It lodges in the ground, creating a beam of light. My attacker points a gun at my face. I jump back and a pellet hits my breastbone. Pain explodes across my ribcage.

Crying out, I stagger back and clutch my chest, but with another crack of her gun, the pellet misses my eye by a finger-width and hits my brow. The shock of the blow steals my breath, and for the next second, I can only reel.

At my next inhale, blades of agony race across my skull. It's so bad I can't feel the pain in my breastbone. I duck and want to curl into a ball like an armadillo, but a third shot skims the side of my arm and galvanizes me into action.

With one eye clamped shut, and the other dazzled by the flashlight, I charge at the shooter and swing.

Another body slams into my middle and knocks me to the ground. I hit the back of my head on a rock, and the ax slips from my fingers. My last thought as the butt of a gun presses into my eye socket is of Vitelotte. Despite everything she has said about owing my family, I can't fault her for running.

The girl holding the gun slams her weight onto my ribs. I can't breathe, I can't shift her weight. My fingers grope around for the ax I dropped, but they close around a rock the size of my fist. I clench my teeth and aim for her face, but she jerks back.

She grins, her white teeth glowing in the light. "Thank you for making this so easy—"

Choking sounds cut off her words, and her weight rolls partway off my chest. Shoving her struggling body aside, I scramble to my feet and away from her and Vitelotte.

"Tulip," screams the girl holding the computer tablet.

With one eye still watering from the pellet, I squint around the clearing in the

direction of the other girl. She has stepped out of the light, and I can barely see her with the camouflage. She shoots blindly in the semi-darkness, and I stay low and out of the range of her pellets. A light flashes from her tablet computer, and I reach for my belt and unhook the gas-lighter.

Sending Vitelotte a silent word of thanks, I sneak through the cover of darkness and stand at the computer girl's side. Each shot of her gun lights the dark with tiny sparks of light, telling me exactly where to aim the gas-lighter. That's when I remember her name... Minnie.

A second later, the sleeve of her jumpsuit catches fire. Minnie screams and thrashes and drops her gun. I dive to the ground, retrieve the weapon, and point it at the struggling girl. Two shots later, she trips over something on the ground and falls onto her back. I leave her whimpering and rolling in the dirt.

"Zea-Mays?" Vitelotte shines the flashlight around the clearing and stops when it illuminates my face. "Are you hurt?"

The light stings my good eye, and I squint. "I'll live."

She dips the beam. "What did you do to her?"

Shame ripples through my insides at having set a girl alight. Again. "The gas-lighter."

"Oh."

By now, Minnie's screams turn to whimpers, and I chew my bottom lip. Vitelotte probably thinks I went too far with the fire. It was a similar action that turned the girls against me on the armored vehicle, and the more I think about it, the more I wonder if she wasn't so scared last night but disgusted.

With the threat of death no longer hanging over me, I could have found a less violent way to disable the other attacker, but I let rage cloud my senses, and now she's burned.

Vitelotte points the flashlight in Minnie's face. "Where are your teammates?"

The girl curls into a ball and cries.

"She's never going to answer," says Vitelotte. "We may have to carry out the threat you made with the ax."

My gaze drops to the metal glinting on the ground inches away from Vitelotte's feet. This is a great bluff.

Minnie raises her head. "You wouldn't dare."

Vitelotte walks a wide perimeter around the girl and presses the flashlight into my hands. "Hold this."

I shine it into Minnie's eyes, expecting Vitelotte to menace the girl with the ax. Instead, she places the ax on her belt and walks to the other Guardian girl who lies unconscious by a log. I side-step, twist the flashlight's lens so it can

cast a wider beam, and it illuminates the entire clearing.

Minnie sits up looking like she wants to bolt. I point the gas-lighter at her face and growl at her to stay down. She flinches and scoots back toward the trees.

Vitelotte drags the unconscious girl to Minnie and unzips the girl's jumpsuit.

"Tulip," Minnie claps both hands to her cheeks and screams.

I walk to the side to see what's so shocking about the unconscious girl. I can't see her features, except to know that they're slack, but the light reflects the liquid pouring from a gash across her neck.

A cold fist of shock hits me in the gut. The lighter slips from my fingers and clatters onto a rock.

Vitelotte cut the girl's neck with the chainsaw. She used it as a garrote to pull her off my chest and then twisted it to rupture her veins. What else can explain all that blood?

My breath comes in shallow pants, and the sensation of crawling centipedes covers my skin. There's no way this girl—I'm sure Minnie shouted out the name Tulip—there's no way Tulip could survive a wound like this so far from civilization.

Bile rises to the back of my throat, choking off my words. I sway on my feet and fight off the urge to scream. I've seen a border guard pummel a man's head with a rifle until it split, a girl executed with an ear cuff, and another girl blown into pieces, but those were atrocities executed by other Echelons.

This is the first time I've seen a Harvester act so ruthlessly.

"Now." Vitelotte points the ax at Minnie's throat. "Who sent you to attack my friend?"

The girl spews out a stream of pleas and jumbled sentences. Somewhere within the incoherent mess, she says she's working with Ingrid Strab.

My lips press together in a firm line, and I exhale a frustrated breath. The revelation is no surprise, but with the queen's threats, one more person wanting me dead is exhausting.

The worst part is that when Minnie returns to the palace, she'll probably tell everyone that I murdered Tulip just so I can get executed to fulfill her bargain with Ingrid. I'm also sure Queen Damascena will then kill my family out of spite.

"What made you think you could murder Zea-Mays in cold blood?" Vitelotte rubs the edge of the blade down Minnie's neck.

Through stuttering breaths, Minnie explains that the camera drones broadcast on a certain frequency, which she blocked using a passcode she got from Ingrid. The cameras attached to our clothes send footage to the storage devices on our

belts, and they were planning to burn those along with my body.

“Please.” Minnie raises a hand. “If you let me go, I’ll turn spy.” She gasps out a sob. “I’ll warn you about Ingrid’s plans.”

Vitelotte raises the ax and pretends she’s going to swing. “How do I know you’re not saying that to save yourself?”

Her eyes bulk. “I wouldn’t—”

The blade lodges into the side of Minnie’s neck.

Shock knocks all the air from my lungs. The flashlight slips from my fingers, and I fall to my knees.

Vitelotte rushes to my side and clutches my arms. “Zea!” Panic raises her voice several octaves. “Zea-Mays, what happened?”

The eye that isn’t throbbing in time with my panicked heart fills with tears. My insides feel hollow, my lungs won’t work, and I struggle for air.

Somehow, I manage to rasp, “You killed them both.”

“She pointed a gun into your eye.” Her fingers dig into the fabric of my jumpsuit, and she gives me a hard shake. “The other one admitted they were going to kill you. Didn’t you hear her confession?”

I did, but we had that girl on her knees, and... Possibilities stream through my mind. If we released her, she would report us for the murder of her friend. If we let her become our spy, she might turn double-agent and lead us into a trap. Maybe Vitelotte was right, and I’m being naive, but there had to be a better way than murdering a defenseless girl.

A little voice in the back of my mind reminds me that I’m no different from Vitelotte. I wanted to stop Ingrid’s heart with two jabs of a poisoned dart and I also killed Berta.

Raising my head, I give Vitelotte a nod. “You’re right.”

She releases my jumpsuit and straightens. The ax hangs in my line of sight, its blade still glistening with Minnie’s blood.

“I did this for you,” she says.

“Thanks,” I whisper. It’s an automatic response, and part of me still wishes there was a way out of the Trials that didn’t result in deaths.

“You don’t hear what the other girls say about you,” she murmurs. “Half of them want you dead.”

I make what I hope is a grunt of understanding, knowing that she’s only half-right. The group of people plotting my death doesn’t only extend to the girls.

Vitelotte walks to the Guardians’ backpacks, which are thicker than the ones we found in our jeep. The flashlight lies on its side, illuminating the unmoving bodies. I turn away from them to watch my murderous companion rifle through their contents and pull out a bottle of clear fluid.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Burning the forensic evidence, just like they planned for us.”

Us. My belly roils. I’m sure these girls shot at us and tried to make us both fall into a river of giant, man-eating reptiles. Even if Vitelotte had survived their attempt to kill me, they would have eliminated her to protect themselves.

It’s too late to feel squeamish. I could have broken away from Vitelotte but I didn’t. Now that she has protected me, it’s time for me to help protect her.

I reach into my pack, pull out a penknife, and kneel at Minnie’s side. The scent of burned plastic and singed hair stings my sinuses. I press my fingers into her pulse, and the warmth of her body seeps into my skin. When I feel no beat, I place my palm over her nose to check that she’s not breathing.

“What are you doing?” Vitelotte stands over me, holding the bottle of QuickBurn.

“We’re not burning them alive.” I shuffle a few steps to Tulip and roll her close to Minnie’s side.

After checking that she’s dead, I rise to my feet, step back, and let Vitelotte pour the liquid on the girls’ bodies.

What would they call my actions? An accessory to murder, or an accomplice? After emptying the bottle, she slides it into her backpack and guides me to stand away. I back toward the trees and watch her set a twig alight with the gas-lighter.

“Go on.” She hands me the burning twig, takes off her belt, and throws it onto the pile.

With one touch of the fire, Tulip’s chest is alight. Violet flames spread across her body and fill the air with the acrid scent of burning plastic. As the flames jump onto Minnie’s corpse, I unbuckle my belt and add it to the funeral pyre. Heat radiates over my skin. I step back, and something cracks beneath my feet. It’s Minnie’s tablet computer.

“We’d better burn all their things.” I throw the gadget onto the fire, which bursts into yellow flames and black smoke.

Vitelotte tosses something at me, which lands on my feet with a clink. “Not until we deal with Ingrid and the other Guardian.”

I pick up a gun and gulp. She’s right. Ingrid is out there somewhere, and we’re going to need every advantage to survive. As the tablet computer crackles and pops, I turn from the fire and pick up one of the Guardians’ backpacks.

“Let’s get out of here before someone comes to investigate,” she mutters.

As we leave the clearing and step under the branch of a sprawling oak, I cast the funeral pyre one last glance. Even though those Guardian girls tried to kill me, I can’t help but wonder about their families. The grief on General and

Doctor Ridgeback's faces still stings like a slap, and I can't forget the general's accusing eyes as I stood on the stage and rejoined the Princess Trials.

Dried leaves crack underfoot, and each time I step on a twig, my body flinches. Owls hoot, cicadas chirp, and clawed feet skitter over the branches, but nothing can erase the crackle and pop of those flames. Sights and smells of their burning bodies haunt me no matter how far we walk. When a fox darts across our path, I feel nothing.

We continue under the thick canopy, which blocks out all but the barest traces of moonlight. Vitelotte's calm breaths fill my ears, and I slide my gaze to her dark form and wonder about my new friend. Until the Trials, I had never noticed her around Rugosa, but she had noticed me. When we jumped off the ridge, she made a perfect landing, and she killed those girls with startling efficiency.

Nothing about the way she acted tells me she's a regular Harvester girl like Forelle. I wonder if she's a Red Runner, but that can't be right. Ryce is the leader of Rugosa's youth cell, and I know all its members. If she was one of us, I would have seen her in at least one meeting.

Who is Vitelotte Solar? An Amstraadi spy? I shake off that thought, even though it's more plausible than her being a Red Runner.

A high-pitched scream makes my heart jolt, and I grab Vitelotte's arm. "Did you hear—"

"It's coming from behind that hedgerow," she points straight ahead.

The screamer begs for mercy, and two other voices laugh. A rush of anger fills my belly. What if that's Ingrid torturing someone for fun?

I lean into Vitelotte and whisper, "Let's go."

She nods, and we continue toward the hedge. Up close, it's actually bitterthorn, a shrub that produces berries even more poisonous than mandragon. It grows like a weed along the edges of cornfields and if left unchecked, it can wipe out an entire crop.

From a distance, the plant resembles a giant tumbleweed, but each of its branches sprouts thorns that range from the size of my finger to as long as my hand.

We reach the edge of the bitterthorn, which stretches for several feet and on its right side climbs onto the edge of a vertical rock face. Several feet on the left stands a hawthorn tree with a trunk wide and sturdy enough to take the weight of two.

The voice at the other side of the shrub bursts into wracking sobs that remind me of Minnie's cries for mercy. My steps falter, but the mystery girl's scream forces me back into action. I grab Vitelotte's arm and point at the hawthorn.

She follows in silence. Whoops and laughter from the other girls make me remember last night's hunting party, and I speed ahead. Using the knots in the wood as footholds, I climb up to a thick branch that merges with the branch of a tree on the other side. It takes a little maneuvering to get a vantage point, but as I round the second tree, my gaze lands on light stakes surrounding the entrance of a cave.

Light stakes are temporary posts that embed into the earth with spikes. At the end of them is a powerful bulb that illuminates the fields at night during the harvest.

The stakes around the cave are about five feet tall and light up five girls standing within its threshold. They all wear hoods, save for the fifth girl who's hunched over because someone is gripping her blonde hair. From the girl's curvaceous figure, it can only be Emmera.

A pair of drones hover at the cave's entrance, meaning that the producers have overridden whatever Minnie did to block the camera signals.

"Mistresses, please," Emmera whines. "I can't."

One of the girls boots her in the back, making her stumble further into the cave. Emmera dashes out, only for another girl to give her a hard shove. She spins, gets punched by another of the girls, and falls onto her knees. She bows her head, and her body convulses with sobs.

As they surround her, fury simmers in my gut. What on earth do they think they're doing? Vitelotte mounts a nearby branch, and her angry breaths fill my ears. I dislike Emmera, but it's an affront to see a Harvester surrounded by bullying Nobles.

"Don't tell me you're loyal to Ingrid," says a mocking voice.

"No," Emmera cries.

"Then you'll do us the courtesy of retrieving the statuette from inside the cavern."

A breath catches in the back of my throat.

Vitelotte hisses through her teeth. "We've got to save her."

My lips form a tight line. Before Emmera sided with the Nobles and tried to hunt me, I might have rushed forward in a blaze of Harvester solidarity. Her betrayal still burns like a bullet wound, and every instinct screams at me to stay in that tree and keep quiet.

Despite this, my hands fumble in my stolen backpack's side-pocket for the gun. There are two reasons for this. One, if I don't help, Vitelotte will jump down and might get herself hurt, and two, I don't want any of those four to retrieve Gaia's treasure.

I aim my gun at the girl standing between me and Emmera. She's kicking the



fallen girl and laughing at her screams. My finger squeezes the trigger, and in the blink of an eye, the Noble screams and flinches.

“Darby,” one of them yells. “What’s wrong?”

She turns in the direction of the Bitterthorn. “Gunshot.”

The other girl growls. “Ingrid, call off your Guardian dogs.”

I hold my breath and consider the possibilities. If they think Ingrid is behind the attack and wants the treasure for herself, this might work to my advantage. With these guns, we could unite the Nobles against Ingrid, and maybe they’ll stop trying to target me.

Vitelotte makes several accurate shots at the girls surrounding Emmera, once again proving that she’s no ordinary Harvester. I shoot alongside her, hitting the fleeing Nobles and taking down the drones, which fall to the ground with an almighty crash. We don’t stop shooting until the last Noble runs away swearing vengeance against Ingrid.

We wait on our branches for several minutes and watch Emmera cower at the cave’s entrance. Vitelotte makes no move to help the girl to her feet, but eventually, Emmera stands and runs out of the cave.

“Do you want the treasure?” whispers Vitelotte.

“No,” I whisper back. “But I don’t want it falling into the hands of Ingrid Strab.”

She grunts her agreement. “There’s another bottle of Quickburn in my backpack. What do you say?”

I still owe the production assistants for tampering with my glider and arranging the ligers. It’s also time to turn Queen Damascena’s rage elsewhere.

A smile curls my lips. “Let’s see what they make of this failed challenge in the Lifestyle Channel.”

Vitelotte huffs a laugh.

When there’s no sign of the girls returning, Vitelotte rifles through her backpack and pulls out the full and empty bottles of QuickBurn.

Excitement ripples through my insides. She’s making a fire bottle. On one of the few Red Runner youth cell meetings Carolina ran, she taught us how to create these weapons in preparation for the revolution.

Vitelotte hands me both bottles then reaches into another pack and pulls out Gaia’s bible. Its pages are made of a thick parchment that won’t burn as quickly as paper or make the bottle explode before it reaches its target. I open the full QuickBurn bottle, pour half its contents in the empty one, and soak the parchment so that it forms a wick.

After placing the soaked parchment in the bottle, I hand it to Vitelotte, who wraps it in medical tape and places it between her knees. I prepare mine, ignite

its wick with the gas-lighter, and create a orange flame that flickers in the wind.

I turn the lighter to the bottle Vitelotte holds outstretched. "Ready?"

She nods.

"On my count." I raise the bottle, and Vitelotte mirrors the movement. "One... two... three!"

The bottles fly through the air, their burning making an arc of fire that lands in the cave's back wall. With an ear-splintering boom and a ball of fire, smoke and soot and splinters of stone force us back. My arms fly to my face, and my back slams into the trunk.

For the next few heartbeats, ringing fills my ears. I can't stop shaking. Maybe it's the QuickBurn. My lessons in the Red Runners never prepared me for the intensity of a fire bottle. I scrunch my face, clench my hands, and examine my body for lacerations. Fortunately, I'm not hurt.

I turn to Vitelotte. "Are you alright?"

She squeezes my shoulder. I think that means yes.

Seconds later, a rumbling sound makes my heart tremble. Vitlotte squeezes me hard, and I squeeze back. With the light stakes ruined in the explosion, I'm guessing the cave has collapsed.

I exhale several rapid breaths. If Gaia's statuette is still intact, whoever stumbles upon this cave next will need more than a glider to win this round. With any luck, those Nobles might point their manicured fingers of blame at Ingrid.

## CHAPTER 5

Once the ringing in my ears fades, I lower my arms from where they're protecting my face and peer at the cave. The scent of burning fuel lingers in the air. It fills my nostrils, permeates my sinuses, and sticks to my throat. My pulse won't stop racing, and my lungs heave with rapid breaths.

I peer down at the flames receding into the wreckage, guessing that the fire has consumed the liquid we used to fuel our explosives. Moonlight streams down into the debris of fallen rocks that was once the cave, illuminating a fallen tree we must have uprooted with our fire bottles. Even some of the chalk from the hill has broken off and lies in chunks over the debris.

Vitelotte releases my shoulder and exhales several panting breaths. I guess this was the first time she's thrown an explosive, too.

"We've got to get out of here," I whisper.

"As soon as my heart stops spasming," she replies with a tiny laugh. "That was unexpectedly destructive."

"It must be the QuickBurn." I grope around the branch, my fingertips checking for breaks. The explosion was forceful enough to knock me back, and I'm not sure if the branch will hold if I move. We're still perched above the largest bitterthorn shrubs I've ever seen, and I don't want to fall and impale myself with its spikes.

I've dealt with bitterthorn before, but we learned about it in Modern History and Agricultural Studies. It's a plant that was cultivated by the early Phanglorians to protect their domes. Nothing can get past bitterthorn's spikes, not wild men, not bears, not rabid wolves. Anything insane enough to charge through the shrub became lacerated as the barbs imprisoned their flesh. Later, scavengers picked them apart, and their bones tangled into the plant.

A convulsion seizes my throat, and I cough. Whatever happens, we needed to avoid that bitterthorn.

Bracing my back against the trunk, I ease myself up to standing. Its rough and uneven bark provides me the comfort of several places to hook my fingers in case the branch fails. We'd be safer if we withdrew to the tree on the other side of the bitterthorn, but I need to put as much distance between us and the dead girls.

With my arms outstretched for balance, I walk along the length of the branch using the diligence of a tightrope walker. My weight balances on my back foot, with the tiniest pressure on the front in case the wood beneath me cracks. The first dozen steps are steady, and the branch thick, but as it curves downward and twists, my heart quickens.

I glance over the edge, and the bitterthorn's wiry stems stretch to the underside of my branch. Vitelotte moves behind me, her weight lowering us toward the shrub.

"Stay back," I hiss. "We're too heavy for the branch."

The fabric of her backpacks rustles as she retreats toward the trunk. "Is that better?"

"Much," I reply. "If you wait for me to jump before moving, I think we'll reach the other side."

I edge farther across the branch, which sinks with every forward step. Sweat gathers around the edge of my hood, and a drop trickles down my forehead. I don't know if it's my impending fall or the stench of scorched QuickBurn, but my vision blurs. I glance down, hoping I've cleared the dangerous shrub.

With my next step, the wood creaks. Before I cause it to snap under my weight, I leap off the branch and land onto the rocky ground in a crouch.

"Zea-Mays?" hisses Vitelotte.

"I'm fine." A shuddering breath escapes my lungs as I rise. "Did you see where I jumped?"

"Yes."

"That's where the wood creaks." I glance at the shrub, which stands a foot away. "Don't jump before then and be careful as you're walking."

It takes Vitelotte a little longer to travel down the branch. She's confident but not as sure-footed as me. The branch's noisy creaks cause her breathing to quicken, and she asks at regular intervals if it's safe for her to jump. It hurts to ask her to continue down a branch that sounds like it's about to splinter, but it's the only way to avoid the bitterthorn.

As soon as she drops to the ground, I exhale a breath and clasp her hand. We stand together in the dark for several heartbeats before realization hits, and we continue away from yet another crime scene.

Jagged stones dig into the soles of my boots as we hurry around the site of

the pile of rocks and rubble that was once the cave. We scramble over the fallen tree and run side-by-side down a stone path around the hill. Our panting breaths and footsteps crunching the gravel echo across the hillside.

We should be quiet and take care sneaking toward the cover of the forest, but we can't afford that luxury. Descending the tree was time-consuming. Now that whoever was operating the drones knows that someone shot them down, I expect replacements to arrive in minutes.

We skid down a dusty slope, sending clouds of white around our feet, and then through a patch of forest where the only sound is our hurried footsteps and the pounding of my heart. Wisps of old man's beard lichen hang from every tree branch-like net curtains. In places, it's so thick that it winds around our arms and slows our escape.

By the time we reach the end of the woods, my thigh muscles burn, and my lungs cry out for oxygen. I lean against a birch tree and catch my breath. Vitelotte doubles over and braces her forearms on her thighs. Thick clouds cover the moon, casting the meadow ahead in semi-darkness.

Flat land stretches straight ahead for about half a mile with a forest of tall trees on its left that slope upward to the hills. The chalk hills continue along its right side, lighting up as the clouds drift away from the moon.

My breath slows, and the pounding in my ears fades to a steady beat. That's when I hear it—the snores and snuffles and snouts. I cast my gaze down to the meadow where moonlight illuminates the grass and more importantly, hundreds of dark lumps. They're elephant-sized, maybe larger, and they're asleep.

“What is that?” I whisper.

“Bison bumelia,” Vitelotte replies in a monotone.

My head whips around to meet the other girl's eyes, but she stares straight ahead at the field. “Bison?”

“Before my mother died, my father tried to transfer us to Bos.”

I nod. That's the town in the Harvester Region where they raise cows. I don't ask why he wanted to leave. The Harvester girls from that town looked better fed than us. Who wouldn't strive for the chance of extra milk and offal?

“We all studied for the entrance exams and had to learn about the bovidae family.” She dips her head. “Mom's water broke in the test hall. She couldn't complete her exam, and the family was disqualified.”

My heart aches at the tragedy. From what Vitelotte said earlier, it sounds like her mother might have died in childbirth, so the family would also have had to suffer a visit from the Midwives, the guardians who investigate abnormal births.

A loud snort jolts me out of my musings, and I place a hand on her arm. “We'd better take the long route around the bison. Maybe we'll find shelter on

the other side of the meadow.”

We head toward the chalk hill, using the trees as cover from any searching drones and as a barrier from the sleeping bison. Neither of us runs as we’ve put enough distance between us and the explosion, but we’re also not taking a leisurely stroll.

After what feels like three hours, something scuttles toward us from behind, making us both stop. My heart flutters in my chest, and I imagine a stray bison, a wild boar, or some other charging animal.

Hoping it was just the wind, I turn and stare into the forest. Moonlight illuminates the tips of the trees and casts their trunks in shadow. My heart pounds so hard that it makes my rib cage tremble.

We stand for several moments, looking for signs of movement, for a mass of darkness to dart between the trunks. When nothing emerges from behind the trees, we continue on our way.

We walk about four trees deep into the meadow with the bison on our left and the forest’s depths on our right. Straight ahead is another giant shrub, but this one doesn’t have thorns, but berries.

The small fruit is nearly an inch in diameter with hard crowns at one end. I roll one in my fingers, noting its powdery covering. My mouth waters and I place a berry on my tongue.

Vitelotte’s breath catches but she doesn’t speak.

I bite down, and an explosion of sweetness and acidity spreads across my tongue. As I suspected, it’s a blueberry.

Vitelotte plucks a berry and sniffs. “Are you sure they’re safe to eat?”

“From the size of them, they’ve been cultivated.” I snatch them off the plant, gather a small handful, and place them in my mouth.

“What do you mean?” She places the berry between her lips and chews. A moment later, she stills and gathers her own handful.

There are few blueberry bushes in the Harvester region. If the birds don’t pluck the shrubs clean, other Harvesters gather get a chance at the fruit. While we gorge ourselves, Vitelotte pulls out a large water bottle from the stolen pack, and we take turns sipping its contents.

I explain what I know about the mountains from the lessons Mom passed on that she learned from Mistress Melrose, the Noble who taught her Modern History in the Barrens.

Hundreds of years ago, Phangloria and its surroundings were mostly wasteland. Rising sea levels swallowed the east coast of our continent, and one side of the Great Smoky Mountains crumbled into the ocean. The erosion continued for decades until the ground cover and legume crops the early

Phanglorians planted fixed the soil with their extensive roots.

Afterward, they planted fruit trees and fruiting shrubs to create Gaia's Food Forest. It was supposed to be a second Eden, where food would grow on every tree and shrub and the ground would be covered in plants. When the wild men attacked the new country and its inhabitants, the Phanglorians switched their energies into constructing the Great Wall, and non-food-producing species took over the forest.

Vitelotte munches a handful of blueberries. "Somewhere along the centuries, those ideals twisted into Echelons."

I nod but don't comment. This is the Princess Trials, where anything can be twisted out of context.

After eating, we head toward the hill to find shelter. A breeze rustles through the overhead leaves, and the gentle chirp of cicadas fills the air. An owl hoots in the distance, and the melody reassures me that we're the only people traveling through this part of the forest.

The trees end at the hill, and we follow its vertical edge toward the other side of the meadow. With the bison lying hundreds of feet away and the forest at our backs, nobody can sneak up on us in the dark.

After several minutes, I find a dark spot about six feet off the ground. I nudge Vitelotte and motion that I'm going to climb up. She drops to her knees and holds out her laced fingers to create a step-up, but I shake my head and place my foot on a bulge. There are enough footholds in this landform to help me reach the hollow, and I've had years of climbing trees to train my feet to curl around nearly flat surfaces such as trunks.

I place my hands on the floor of a four-foot-high hollow with an area about the size of my bed. One leg rises to its surface and then another. Once I'm fully encased, I lie on my belly and poke out my head. Outside, a cloud covers the moon, casting Vitelotte in shadow, but I think she's looking up.

"Hey," I whisper.

"What did you find?"

"Enough space for two." I stretch out my hand. "Come up."

It takes my new friend several tries to scale high enough for our hands to meet, as she's not used to climbing. By the time I've helped her into our hideout, she's out of breath and falls straight onto her back with several huffing laughs.

"Thanks," she whispers.

"I should be thanking you for saving my life." I rest my head by her feet so we're lying top to tail.

Unease about the dead girls stirs in my chest. Before I can rationalize that it was self-defense and they would have killed me, fatigue sweeps over my senses.

As a yawn pushes its way out of my lungs, I murmur, “Let’s get some rest.”



Hours later, a distant voice pulls me out of slumber. Sunlight shines through my eyelids, and I raise my hand to my brow. It no longer throbs from the air rifle, and the pain in the back of my head from being shoved to the ground has gone.

I twist around and squint into the dawn. The sun rises above the trees, casting a haze of orange across the horizon and coloring the thin streaks of clouds candle-flame yellow.

Rolling grunts sound across the meadow, and I realize that our safe sleeping nook comes with a cost. How on earth are we going to get past hundreds of bison without creating a stampede?

The voice sounds again. I stick my head out of the hideout and peer into the sky.

A passenger drone hovers several feet above, its blaring what I hope is the end of this challenge. The wind and sounds of the bison mean that I can’t hear the message, but Guardians only ever send these vehicles in emergencies. I’m too drowsy to panic, but I wrap a hand around Vitelotte’s ankle and shake.

She raises her head and stares at me through bleary eyes. “Good morning.”

“Time to go,” I say.

A moan sounds in the back of her throat. “We’ve got to discard the guns and packs.”

Vitelotte doesn’t need to explain why. Even if the QuickBurn doesn’t reduce the girls’ bodies to ash, the fact that anyone burned them at all indicates foul play. If we arrive with their stolen backpacks, it won’t take a trial to work out their murderers.

A cool wind swirls into our nook, removing all remnants of warmth. Cold fear seeps through my jumpsuit and penetrates my bones. The muscles of my chest tighten around my lungs like a dozen hangman’s nooses. I bolt upright with a pained gasp.

“What’s wrong?” asks Vitelotte.

“What if the producers find the computer and work out that the girls were tracking me?” My words tumble over each other.

It was bad enough last night to see the blood seep from one girl’s throat and to watch Vitelotte bury the blade of her ax into another. It was self-defense. No, she was protecting me from Ingrid’s assassins. But in the harsh light of the day, nobody’s going to believe us. They’ll just see that two Harvesters killed two Guardians, and they’ll extract every punishment from our bodies before they let



us die.

Vitelotte doesn't answer at first. And as the silence stretches between us, the pressure squeezing my lungs tightens. We're both guilty. She may have killed those girls, she may have poured the QuickBurn over their corpses, but it was me who set them alight.

Finally, she exhales a long breath. "You threw the computer on the fire, remember?"

"But aren't all computers linked to a net—"

"No." Her word cuts through my sentence like an ax. "One of them said she blocked the camera frequency. That's the time they needed to find and kill you. Whatever those girls did to cover their attempt to murder you backfired because it's going to cover ours."

My tongue darts out to lick my dry lips. Networks, frequencies, channels... they all mean nothing to Harvesters like us. I hope Vitelotte is right. If she isn't, it won't just be General Ridgeback casting his accusing glare at me.

"Come on." She swings her legs over the edge of our hideout. "Let's make a move before they leave without us."

As she jumps down, I turn my gaze to the oversized drone, which now hovers above the distant trees. Now would be an excellent time to dump the Guardians' bags.

With the threat of discovery hovering over our heads, the bison herd no longer seems like our biggest threat. We keep to the edge of the field in single file and try not to make eye contact. The huge, brown bovines are larger than any creature I've ever seen. This particular breed stands ten-feet-tall. Eleven, if you count the huge humps behind their necks.

Guttural noises, a mix of growls and snorts, fill my ears. I quicken my steps, keeping my eyes front and fixed on the tall conifers a quarter-mile ahead.

As we reach the forest, a deep breath whooshes from my lungs, and the muscles of my shoulders finally relax. I turn my head up to the sky, where the drone broadcasts its message about a mile ahead.

Gentle splashing and the trickle of water reaches us from deeper into the woods. We follow the path of a shallow stream, looking from left to right for lurking contestants, cameras, or predators. Eventually, it leads to a beaver dam, a ten-foot-tall mass of twigs and branches that spans a thirty-foot stretch of water.

"This is it," says Vitelotte.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"If we continue further along this body of water, we'll find a deep spot where we can bury these packs." She points further upstream and explains that beavers burrow into the ground to make the water deeper. Nobody will think of

looking here when the girls' bodies are so far away.

We fill the bags with stones, hurl them into the water, and watch them sink. When we're satisfied that they won't rise to the surface, Vitelotte and I continue on our way and follow the passenger drone.

Later, as we continue along a narrow track, a blonde figure walks ahead of us in the distance. She limps with her head bowed and her shoulders slumped. Sunlight streaming from the gaps in the canopy makes her hair shine like spun gold. I nudge Vitelotte, who nods. This has to be Emmera.

Both of us break into a run. Emmera turns around and sprints.

"Hey!" I shout. "It's us."

She screams.

"Zea-Mays and Lotte," shouts Vitelotte.

Emmera slows, allowing us to catch up. But the closer we get, the more I realize she's been hurt. Her left eye is swollen shut and resembles two tomato quarters, but it's nothing compared to her bottom lip. The camouflage makeup only makes her look worse as it fades over the stretched skin.

My stomach drops. "What happened to you?"

She walks ahead and bends her neck to hide her fresh tears. Vitelotte and I walk on both sides of Emmera, waiting for her to speak. Last night, she didn't seem so beaten up but we had watched her from up a tree.

Emmera tells us that a group of Noble girls captured her shortly after she landed in the forest. They seized her glider, then forced her to become their pack-mule and gopher. She had to carry their bags, fetch their snacks, and play coal-mine canary by venturing into caves and hidden spots to look for the statuette.

Based on what she understood from the Nobles, the computer tablet pinpointed a number of possible locations for Gaia's treasure, but many of them contained traps such as snakes or nests of ants.

I lean back and exchange a nervous glance with Vitelotte, but we both remain silent. The hiding-spot we blew up might have just been another trap, which meant the game ended because someone retrieved the statuette.

Emmera hiccups. "They found a cave, but something inside it was growling. It sounded like one of the ligers."

"Maybe it was an android," says Vitelotte.

The taller girl stops walking and stiffens. Huge breaths huff in and out of her lungs, and she looks like she's building up into a rant. But her face crumples, and she wraps her arms around her middle. "I deserve it for flying away when I should have stuck with you. I'll never put my faith in a Noble again. Those girls were violent and ruthless."

I purse my lips and continue walking down the track. After helping them hunt me with automatic guns, she's only realizing this aspect of their personalities now?

The slicing of a drone's propellers reaches my ears, and its air currents blow against my hood.

"What happened to you two?" Emmera asks.

For the benefit of whoever's watching, we focus on the parts of our adventure captured on camera and distract Emmera with descriptions of giant crocodiles. The drone guides us in a winding route through the forest, and we avoid meeting any groups of animals. Eventually, we walk up a dirt track that leads to a wooden staircase where the drone hovers close to a bus that stands on massive wheels.

Every ounce of air in my lungs leaves in a relieved breath as the doors hiss open. A single row of double seats runs down its left with a kitchenette down the other side. Like most of the vehicles in the Princess Trials, its windows are blackened. Six girls sit like tin soldiers in the front seats. I check their hands for signs of the golden statuette, but it looks like none of them won this contest.

Behind the Amstraadi sits a group of four whose haughty voices and bitter complaints identify them as Nobles. As soon as we take our seats at the back, the bus leaves.

"Aren't we going to wait for the others?" I ask.

One of the Nobles twists around and sneers. "Ingrid won."

My jaw drops. "What?"

"You don't know that," her companion says.

"Why else would she and her Guardian dogs attack us with guns and blow up that cave?"

My heart somersaults, and all thoughts of raiding the kitchenette fade as I listen to the Nobles complain about Ingrid. The combined team of Nobles and Guardians received eight packs, each containing equipment vital for surviving and finding Gaia's statuette. Ingrid seized the first aid, air guns, computer tablet, and trail mix, which she shared with her Guardian allies.

I glance at Emmera, whose face is too swollen for meaningful expressions. The Nobles probably used her tablet computer to find the hiding-places.

When the subject turns to politics, I walk to the kitchenette and open the refrigerator. Most of the food packages require heating in an electromagnetic oven, so I take some yogurts and bananas for the Harvesters. Emmera refuses to eat, but throughout the journey, the Nobles are too busy griping about Ingrid and her cheating to even bother about me.

Triumph fills my chest. If I can remain inconspicuous and let all the attention

slide to Ingrid, that's one less group of people pointing a knife to my back.

Hours later, we reach the palace, and the production assistants guide us to an empty classroom with eight tables that each seat two students. As I take a seat with Vitelotte at the back, my gaze rises to the empty wall at the front of the room. I wonder if this is where Prince Kevon had his lessons.

"Where is the winner?" asks one of the Noble girls from the front seat.

The production assistant who gave me the doctored water before my audition hugs her computer tablet and can't look the Noble in the eye. "If you'll kindly wait, there will be an announcement."

I bite down on my lip. There's no sign of the two Artisans who traveled up to the National Park with us. One of them was blonde. My gaze flickers to the Amstraadi girls who sit in front of me on the left of the room. If they're all here, that means the dead girl I tripped over was an Artisan.

But what on earth happened to her friend?

The entire front wall flickers to life, and the production assistant scurries to the door. Prunella Broadleaf walks into the frame. Her long hair now hangs in uneven strands at her chin, looking like she's cut it herself with a knife. She wears the same sackcloth dress as before, but the cuff around her neck stretches from her collarbone to her throat.

None of the Nobles sitting on the right flinches at this new development. One of them leans into her companion and whispers something that makes the other girl snort. My experience with Gemini Pixel tells me this kind of punishment is not unusual.

"Ladies and gentlemen." Prunella's voice trembles and she lowers her lashes as though unable to look at the camera. "I regret to inform you that due to technical difficulties, we are unable to broadcast the completion of the task. Please enjoy these highlights."

Whispers fill the right side of the room, but they soon turn to angry mutterings. The production assistant opens the door and rushes out into the hallway.

I turn to Vitelotte. "Where are all the camerawomen?"

"I don't know," she mutters. "But something must have gone terribly wrong."

With a nod, I force my features into a neutral expression. Three dead girls and not a single one of them is me. I can see how some might consider that a catastrophe.

One of the Nobles shoots to her feet. "What's happening?"

Byron Blake steps into the room and pinches the bridge of his nose. All traces of the gleeful celebrity are gone, replaced by a man who looks like he's

spent the past few hours staring into the barrel of Lady Circi's gun.

"May I have your attention, please?" He raises his palms. "Six girls still haven't returned from the task. We have scoured the park and there are no signs of the missing contestants."

Nobody speaks, and the rapid thuds of my pulse echoes between my ears. At any minute, the footage will switch to something that incriminates Vitelotte and me. Silence stretches across the room until it takes the form of a pair of hands squeezing my neck.

"Our drones have captured footage of two charred bodies." His voice is muffled, and I have to lean forward to catch what he's saying. "One of the corpses is possibly Ingrid Strab."

## CHAPTER 6

A spasm of alarm shoots through my heart, but I force my features into a mask of neutrality. Neither of those burned corpses was Ingrid. I'm a hundred percent sure. But what if Ingrid disguised her voice? What if in my panicked state at having a gun pressed into my eye, I imagined that my potential killer was someone else?

Thoughts and possibilities whirl through my mind in a maelstrom of panic and paranoia. Cold shudders run across my skin, and it's just like that time the country got hit with an epidemic of capybara flu that wiped out over three-quarters of our aged population.

Prince Kevon appears on the screen, and Byron steps aside. The prince wears a naval officer's jacket with gold stripes on the shoulders. His hair is slicked back, which only emphasizes his furrowed brow. They've done something with the camera to bring out the color in his eyes, and they glow with an unusual shade of cobalt.

I hold my breath and wonder if he's about to announce that one of the dead girls was in fact Ingrid Strab.

Ingrid is the Chamber of Minister's favorite for winning the trials. Her father is the Minister of Integration. If she's dead, I doubt that her family will accept an apology and a few pithy words from Queen Damascena that she was a great girl.

Prince Kevon's lips move, but there's no sound. One of the Nobles yells to turn up the volume, and I lean forward in my seat.

"...And that is why I wish to put an end to the physical element of the contest," he says. "The death of Berta Ridgeback was a terrible tragedy. I hoped that those running the Princess Trials would learn to make it a safer contest for these special young ladies, but this last trial has proven my assumptions false."

I study his features for clues. His tense posture says repressed fury, but his eyes are more tired and just as sad as the morning after Rafaela died. The panicked thoughts in my head recede to the back of my mind, and I concentrate

on the rest of the interview.

The camera cuts to Montana, who looks like the makeup artists have performed a hasty job. He must have forgotten to take his rejuvenation tonics because dark circles ring his eyes and make him look like he hasn't slept for at least two days.

"We appreciate your candid words, Your Highness," he says without his usual enthusiasm.

"Two further young ladies have been confirmed dead and another four are missing," adds the prince.

Six images appear on the screen: Ingrid's, the three Guardians, and the two Artisans. My throat dries. I know for sure that the estimate is wrong. The number of dead girls is three.

The camera cuts to a wide shot of Prince Kevon sitting behind the mahogany desk in a formal-looking study with Montana. Behind them is a large shelf of leather-bound books that remind me of the naval office where Prunella Broadleaf allowed me to speak with Mom, Dad, and the twins.

They shoot Prince Kevon in profile. "From this moment, all Trials will test the qualities required for a successful queen, such as diplomacy, kindness, and love for Phangloria."

"Thank you, Your Highness, for your wise choice," says Montana. "Do you have any words for the missing contestants' families?"

The camera zooms into Prince Kevon's face for a closeup. His features harden, and his eyes burn with determination. "I will mobilize every resource at our disposal to find your missing daughters. For those whose loved-ones suffered unfortunate deaths, I will seek justice."

When the Phangloria insignia appears onscreen, a boulder of dread rolls around my stomach. Justice for Berta. What on earth will that mean when he discovers her killer was me?

"So, who won this Trial?" snaps a Noble in the front. She pulls off her hood and releases her blue-black ringlets.

I narrow my eyes at Constance Spryte, the girl who pointed a rifle at the decoy I hid up a tree. If Ingrid is dead, this girl will take over as my biggest threat among the contestants.

The door opens, and camerawomen stream into the room. Once they're in place, Byron positions himself in the front and makes a few cheery comments to the viewers at home about finding the missing girls. "And now for a thrilling twist in the Princess Trials!"

My muscles tighten in anticipation. I hope he won't flout everything Prince Kevon just announced and throw us back into danger. With Prunella Broadleaf

still alive, she makes the perfect scapegoat.

He sweeps his arm to the side. “The future Queen of Phangloria will be the patron of the arts and must have a deep appreciation for all things beautiful. Ladies, each of you will obtain an object of art that best represents the treasure of Gaia.”

Byron stops talking, and the camerawomen point their lenses at our faces. I stare straight ahead, too concerned about Prince Kevon’s comment about justice to care for art.

Constance raises her chin. “What happened to the gold statuette.”

Byron coughs into his hand. “It’s back where it belongs.”

One of the Amstraadi girls raises her hand. Byron nods at her to speak, his features relaxing.

“What are the rules?” she asks. “Will you provide a budget?”

Byron’s serene expression falters. “Another quality of a potential queen is the power of persuasion. Convince a friendly Artisan or a museum curator to lend you an item to showcase.” He winks. “Our assistants will help you to venture anywhere within Phangloria. You have until dinnertime to present your acquisition.”

Constance is the first to stand. She walks to Byron, who raises his forearms and flinches. The camerawoman filming my lack of reaction swings around to record their silent standoff.

I turn to Vitelotte, who sits as still as stone. Her eyes meet mine with a look that mirrors my confusion. This is no place for a conversation about what we did, and I doubt that a place as well guarded as the palace would allow for privacy.

My brows rise in question, hoping she will understand what I want to ask, but she frowns and shakes her head. Whether that’s a sign for me to never talk of what we did in the woods or confirmation that Ingrid wasn’t the one we killed, I don’t know.

Out of desperation, I place my hand on hers and rap her wrist with the side of my thumb in Vail code:

DID

WE

KILL

INGRID?

Vitelotte doesn’t react, and my shoulders droop. So much for the idea that she’s a Red Runner. I turn back to the front of the room, where the Nobles have already left and the Amstraadi girls rise to their feet and form a small group.

A trio of production assistants walks toward us down the aisle of the



classroom. Each of them wears oversized glasses with tiny camera lenses on their end pieces. I guess they'll be our guides.

"Zea." The dark-haired one in front raises a hand and directs her smile at me. Dimples appear in her warm, beige cheeks. "I'm Cassiope, and I'll take you anywhere you'd like to go."

I jerk back and blink. None of the production staff have ever introduced themselves.

"Is there an infirmary?" I point at Emmera, who sits at the back table with her head bowed. "We'd also like to get cleaned up."

Cassiope's brows draw together. "Don't you want to complete the trial?"

"We have until dinner, don't we?" Vitelotte stands. "Let's all go."

The three assistants exchange awkward glances, but I don't care if they're failing to capture sensational footage. I want to tell the viewers at home about my malfunctioning glider and how they forced us to escape off a cliff with ligers. But what's the point in complaining when they'll twist my rage into a scene of me playing the bucking bronco?

As they walk us out of the room, Vitelotte grabs my hand and taps on my knuckle in Vail code:

NO.

My gaze snaps to her, but she stares ahead and follows the production assistants out into the hallway and up a stairwell that leads to a white door. Cassiope knocks, waits for a male voice to call us inside, and lets us into a spacious, white room.

Doctor Palatine stands in front of a black screen that glows with blue charts and flashing numbers that monitor a set of vital signs. He shuts them off, crosses the room, and gestures for me to raise my wrist. Without indicating that we have ever met, he scans my Amstraad cuff and hands me an ointment for irritated skin. After examining Vitelotte, he hands her the same ointment and turns to Emmera, who bursts into tears.

The doctor guides her to a reclining chair with arm and footrests then injects her with something that makes her go limp. He tells us to return in two hours, so he can fix Emmera's fractured eye sockets.

As we leave, one of the production assistants remains to question Doctor Palatine on the extent of Emmera's injuries. The assistant assigned to Vitelotte descends the stairs ahead of us, and a light flickers on the plastic band of the glasses that wrap around her head.

I resist the urge to ask Vitelotte how she knows Vail code. If she's not a Red Runner, then she must be a supplier, a sympathizer, or a relative to a Runner who betrayed secrets about our resistance group.

She loops her arm through mine and taps BE CAREFUL on my forearm then suggests out loud that we should take a two-hour break to eat in our rooms and get cleaned up.

“Do you have any ideas for Gaia’s treasure?” Cassiope asks from behind, her voice perky.

I rub my temple and try to temper my irritation. She has never stuck a camera in my face, and as far as I’m aware, she didn’t doctor any footage to make me look like an idiot. It’s not fair to snap at Cassiope for doing her job.

“Perhaps I’ll be more productive after a glass of water and some food,” I mutter.

She pauses. “Whatever you say, Zea.”

After a silent walk to our side of the palace, Cassiope pushes my door open and lets me into my assigned room. Georgette and Forelle, who were sitting at the velvet sofa, scramble to their feet.

Forelle rushes at me with her arms outstretched. “Did you really jump off the side of a cliff?” She squeezes me tight. “Of course, you did.”

“Have you befriended your makeup artist and stylist already?” asks Cassiope.

While Forelle explains that passing the marquee round of the Princess Trials made her eligible to work in the Oasis, Georgette guides me through the walk-in closet and into the bathroom.

The floors are a pale gray with ivory mosaic tiles in the same shade as the rest of the suite. A screen behind the bath playing images of palm trees swaying in a pristine beach reminds me of the bathroom in Garrett’s guesthouse. There’s even the same walk-in shower with a giant head and multiple jets.

Georgette puts a finger to her lips and gestures with her outstretched palm for me to stay. She walks to the right of the room and turns on the taps, and lets the water flow at full blast. She then turns to the end of the room and runs the bath.

I bite down on my lip, wondering if she’s going to tell me something about Prince Kevon. Instead, she opens a drawer beside the sink and pulls out a huge tub of a cream that smells like QuickBurn.

“This is how the palace servants get to talk without the cameras picking up their sound.” Georgette pulls off my hood, dips a cloth into the cream, and rubs at my face.

“Is anything wrong?” I whisper.

“We’ve been switching between channels for most of the night.” She continues wiping off thick layers of pigment from my face and tells me the events of last night.

While Georgette watched the Chamber of Ministers Channel to learn how Prunella Broadleaf tried to explain how she murdered Rafaela van Eyck, Forelle watched live footage of me jumping off a cliff and trying to stay on the glider. Prince Kevon interrupted the Council with a demand to end the Princess Trials on the grounds that it was unsafe.

Montana refused to listen to his request as Queen Damascena wanted it to continue, but when the live camera feeds stopped, everybody took notice.

With hours of footage missing, the drones lost track of most of the girls, and the public became disgruntled about the running of the Trials. Reporters interviewed Dr. and General Ridgeback about Berta's drowning and tried to get them to denounce the production people for not taking better care of their daughter.

"It's all backfiring." Georgette's eyes sparkle, and she bounces up and down on her heels, the hands wiping off my face paint trembling with excitement. "My fiancé works for Vain Gloria. It's an online gossip rag that comments on what's really going on in Phangloria."

I gulp. "What did he say about last night?"

"The editor told everyone to put pressure on the ministers and the Lifestyle Channel to back Prince Kevon. It's part of the reason why the Ministers agreed to his demands for less danger."

"Is there anything else?" I ask.

"They're publishing footage of what the Lifestyle Network holds back." When I don't react, she adds. "The other group got to launch from a ten-foot drop, while the producers made the Harvesters and Artisans drop from hundreds of feet with one of the gliders malfunctioning."

"Right." I nod and wonder if journalists are Artisans offended by the mistreatment of their Echelon.

"And the new video clips show that you're Prince Kevon's favorite."

I clap a hand over my mouth. "No."

She flashes me a grin. "Isn't that wonderful? Next time there's a vote, they'll know who to choose and help His Highness find true love."

A wave of nausea crashes through my insides, and I step back. If Queen Damascena discovered I was in any way connected to this leaked information, her vengeance would strike where I was most vulnerable. Worst of all, I can't risk my family's lives on a second-hand assurance that no one can hear us through the sounds of running water.

I tell Georgette that I'm too hungry and tired to think about the gossip rags, and she offers to fetch me a snack.

"Are you alright?" she asks.

I shake my head. “It’s been ages since I last ate.”

Georgette places the cloth on the side and heads for the door. “I’ll order you something.”

I pick up the cloth and dip it into the cream. Each swipe of the cloth removes another layer of grime, but nothing can wash away the thoughts of the girls who will never get another chance to see their families.

One of them would have shot pellets into my eye, which would have gone straight to my brain and struck me dead. I can’t fault Vitelotte. She panicked, overcompensated for not siding with me against the Nobles, and was desperate to protect a fellow Harvester.

We might have avoided the second killing, but I didn’t believe that Minnie wouldn’t attack us the moment she got the opportunity.

I peel off my jumpsuit, step into the shower, and let the hot spray cleanse my mind of these roiling thoughts. If it wasn’t for Vitelotte, I would have died yesterday.

Ingrid and the Guardians hadn’t considered that anyone would come to my aid, so their assassination turned to my advantage. I should be celebrating my new ally, not wallowing in guilt and dread.

Colored water slides down my body, and the spray feels like tiny fists massaging my skin, tiny fists admonishing me to be grateful for my survival. Vitelotte won’t be like Berta, who saved me from being hung or thrown out of the window, only to try to kill me the following day. Red Runners or those who sympathize with our cause do not betray Harvesters.

As soon as the water runs clear, I dry off and change into a jumpsuit Georgette hung on the bathroom door. I squeeze my eyes shut and suck in several deep breaths. When I step out into my suite, I’ve got to look ready for a snack and for the next challenge of the Princess Trials.

But the suite is empty save for two covered dishes waiting on the table... and Prince Kevon. He wears the same navy jacket from his interview with Montana with matching pants. Instead of slicked back, tendrils of dark hair slide across his forehead, making him look heroic.

A tight fist clutches at my heart as he rises from his seat and strides across the room. What will Queen Damascena do when she discovers we’ve spent time alone?

“I wanted to apologize,” he says. “They told me you would go on a treasure hunt. By the time I saw the footage of you and the gliders—”

“It’s alright.” After hearing about how he tried to save us, interrupting him feels rude, but I couldn’t bear it if he repeated his offer to become engaged. “We saw you on the Lifestyle Channel, declaring that the trials become more about

diplomacy than dangerous challenges. Thank you.”

His eyes soften, and the corner of his full lips rise into a smile. “It took a lot of wrangling with the Chamber of Ministers. They’re loath to forfeit Ambassador Pascale’s Amstraad health monitors, but you come first.”

My heart stutters, sending heat to my cheeks. I lower my gaze to the marble floor and I tell myself that Prince Kevon wasn’t talking about me in particular but all the contestants. When he places his large hand on the small of my back, tingles shoot up and down my spine. It takes a lot of steady breathing and concentration to walk in a straight line to the dining table.

He pulls out my seat, pushes it in as I sit, and removes the dome. My nostrils fill with scent of saffron accompanied by the rich aroma of seafood. A plate heaped with golden rice, whole shrimp, lobster tails, and mussels and clams still in their shells.

A surprised breath hisses through my teeth. “Is that—”

“Paella,” he says with a smile. “Your mother told me it was your favorite.”

“You spoke to her?” my voice cracks.

“Only via a guard who contacted the mayor’s wife.” He settles into his seat and frowns. “Was this the correct choice?”

I give him an eager nod, even though a dish like paella is something a Harvester would never get the chance to eat. Firstly, rice grows in shallow water, something that’s in very short supply in our region. And cooking the grains requires large quantities of water no Harvester can afford.

Dad and I know a patch of land outside Rugosa where we can find a handful of saffron tulips growing at the base of a gnarled olive tree that no longer produces fruit.

In the years when we catch the plant early enough to capture its crimson stigmas, we can barter small quantities for enough food and necessities to last for months. At times like this, Dad can even afford seafood, but never in such quantities or variety on my plate.

“This is such a rare treat.” I pick up my fork and try not to dribble. “Thank you.”

“Enjoy.” He places a forkful in his mouth and smiles.

My next few mouthfuls are an explosion of flavors. The rice is infused with garlic, paprika, cilantro, and pepper with a hint of wine. Underneath the paella are thick slices of spicy sausage, which is one of my favorite meats. I’m supposed to make genteel conversation, but it’s impossible in the face of such a delicious feast.

“I thought your mother might enjoy the chef’s recipe,” he murmurs.

I meet his smiling eyes. “You sent her the instructions?”

“There’s a car on its way to Rugosa with a large pot.”

Warmth spreads across my chest. Gestures like this are why it’s so hard to shield my heart from Prince Kevon. “This is very thoughtful.” I meet his searching, dark eyes that seem to memorize my every expression. “I can’t stop thanking you.”

He shakes his head. “It’s me who should be thanking you.”

Unease settles over my shoulders like an itchy cloak, and I shift in my seat. Days ago, I might have dug further to understand why he lavishes me with so much attention, but I can’t afford the luxury of basking in Prince Kevon’s affection.

I push away thoughts of Queen Damascena’s guards stationed outside the family home, continue my meal, and try to forget he’s watching me eat.

When my stomach bulges, I make the mistake of raising my head and reaching across the table for my water glass.

Prince Kevon places his hand on mine. “Zea.”

“Yes?” I raise my eyes to his face.

He holds my gaze for several heartbeats longer than normal, making my breath quicken. “When I offered you a long engagement, it wasn’t to force a relationship before you were ready.”

Words shrivel in the back of my throat, and I can only respond with a nod. I should turn my head, pull my fingers from his gentle hold, but his touch feels like the only thing keeping me from splintering. I can’t tell if I’m thrilled with his attention or terrified of its consequences.

Queen Damascena is probably listening to us speak or she has handed the work to one of her henchmen. Either way, I’m failing her demands. She wants me to sway Prince Kevon, but she didn’t specify which of the Noble girls she prefers.

Prince Kevon tilts his head to the side, and his brows draw together with an unasked question. I can’t help thinking that he brought up his suggestion to get engaged because he wants me to reconsider his offer.

I’ve got to say something to derail this conversation so that I at least sound like I’m taking notice of the queen’s threat. “All the violence and attempts on my life started because of your special attention.”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down. “That’s true.”

“You need to give the other girls a chance.” The words burn my throat, and I drop my gaze to the half-eaten plate of paella.

Prince Kevon doesn’t reply for several moments. Maybe he’s waiting for me to look into his eyes, but I can’t. The pad of his thumb runs over my knuckle. It’s the gentlest of touches but he might as well scream his intentions into the hidden

camera.

“What if I’ve already made my decision?” he murmurs.

Jerking my hand away, I rise off my seat and head toward the door. “Nothing has changed since I said no.”

The wood of his chair leg slides against the marble floor, and his footsteps approach from behind. Prince Kevon stops me with a hand on my shoulder. “Is this too much pressure?”

My head turns to the side. While I can’t see his entire face, his warm, spicy scent fills my nostrils. “I’ve never wanted to be the Queen of Phangloria.”

He flinches. “But you said—”

“They were just words,” I say with a sigh.

When I opened my heart to Sergeant Silver, I imagined myself at the side of Ryce Wintergreen leading the new democracy. It was a fitting ending to our bittersweet story. A boy and girl united by a terrible injustice and then fell in love fighting their oppressors. A boy and girl who turned tragedy into triumph. They were the idealistic dreams of a girl who hadn’t experienced anything outside the life of a Harvester.

“If I had known you were the prince, I would never have said them.”

He releases my shoulder and steps back. “Can you ever see yourself opening your heart to me?”

A lump forms in my throat at the amounts of times I have lied. Lied about my intentions for joining the Princess Trials. Lied about not despising the Noble Echelon for holding all the wealth and water, lied about my heart. Prince Kevon occupies so much of my affection, there’s hardly space for anyone new. But to save the people I love, I’ve got to tell one more lie.

Fighting off the sting of oncoming tears, I turn around and face the prince.

My hand drifts to his chest, and he stiffens. I place my palm over a heart that accelerates under my touch, and my insides twist. There’s no way to have the love of Prince Kevon and keep my family alive. Whatever I say next needs to carry enough conviction to convince everyone listening.

“Your Highness.”

His lips tighten. We’ve had this conversation already, and he knows my use of his title is deliberate. “Tell me,” he says through clenched teeth. “Look me in the eye and tell me how you feel.”

“I’ve never met a kinder person or a more noble soul.” My gaze rises to his cheekbones. “I know you’ll be a wonderful king.”

His face hardens. It’s the expression people make when bracing themselves for something painful. Despite this, Prince Kevon manages to nod.

A cruel voice in the back of my head gives me the exact words to say that

will shatter his heart. It starts off as Carolina's voice but morphs into Queen Damascena's. If I start with a bold statement that I could never love him—ever, he would look elsewhere for his future partner. If I said that the words I'd once told him were about someone else, he would leave. I can't do either of those to Prince Kevon.

"I'm grateful for your kindness and generosity, and you'll always be my dearest friend."

"Friend?" he says this like it's his last breath.

"You're sure to make someone extremely happy, but that girl will never be me."

Prince Kevon lowers his thick lashes, steps away from my touch, and heads for the door. My heart pounds so hard that I think it's going to burst.

When he opens the door and is about to step out, a silent sob catches in the back of my throat. There's no turning back after words like that. I've lost him forever.

He closes the door and pauses. My hand covers my heart. Now it's my turn to brace myself to hear some cutting words.

"Thank you for being honest." His voice is thick with emotion, but his voice never wavers.

My throat convulses, and I hold my breath, hoping he won't try to change my mind.

"I will speak to my mother and tell her that under current circumstances, it's no longer appropriate for you to participate in the Trials."



## CHAPTER 7

*P* rince Kevon steps out of my room, leaving me with the gut-wrenching feeling that I've made a horrific mistake. My pulse flutters in my throat like a trapped butterfly, and my fingers won't stop trembling. I've never spoken so harshly to someone who occupies such a large space of my heart, and each word slices through my consciousness like tractor blades.

When the door clicks shut and all that lingers of him is his cologne, my leg muscles turn to water, and I collapse onto my knees.

Spasms of pain grip my lungs, forcing out harsh, wracking sobs. I didn't know it was possible to mourn a relationship that hadn't even started, but my insides feel as parched and as cracked as dry earth.

Somewhere on the edge of my awareness, the door creaks open and footsteps hurry toward me. A gentle arm wraps around my shoulder and on the other side, a second arm slides around my waist. Forelle and Georgette walk me to the sofa and whisper words of comfort that barely penetrate my grief.

As I sink into the soft velvet, Cassiope appears and places a box of paper handkerchiefs in front of me on the table.

I raise my head and meet her wide, brown eyes. "Is this going on the Lifestyle Channel?"

"They only told me to record the task." She hooks her thumb toward the walk-in closet. "I'll just be in the bathroom for the next ten minutes."

I nod my thanks, and she leaves. Even though I'm fully aware that Cassiope has no power over what the producers broadcast, I appreciate that she's risking her job to guard my privacy.

"What happened?" Forelle smooths a lock of damp hair off my face. "Did you and Kevon fight?"

"I can't..." I shake my head.

Georgette rubs my back. "He's probably under pressure to spend more time

with the other contestants. Prince Kevon knows what he wants, and when he fulfills his duty to the Trials, he'll be back."

Guilt thickens my throat. They all think he did something to me when it's the opposite.

"Zea." Forelle squeezes my hand. "Garrett's meeting me tonight. I'm sure I can—"

"No." The word comes out like a panicked scream. I twist around and meet her gray eyes. "Please leave it alone. It's my fault."

Her lips form a perfect O. I'm sure she's thinking about the conversation we had in the guesthouse's bathroom, where Forelle accused me of pulling a face whenever she mentioned Prince Kevon.

Back then, Forelle sensed that I wasn't in the Princess Trials for a chance to become the queen. But now, I wonder if she suspects that I'm not even in the Trials for a break from the drudgery of being a Harvester.

She reminds me so much of Mom. When Forelle found Garrett charming, I disliked him for being an annoying guard. Forelle is falling for Prince Kevon's cousin, and I'm happy for her. But I'm so skeptical and twisted from past trauma that it took seeing Prince Kevon gunned down and then having him save me from a knife in the back to consider him as more than just his Echelon.

Before Forelle can admonish me for wasting an opportunity for love, I wrap my free hand over hers. "Don't interfere. This is for the best."

Forelle's nod is hesitant, but it's enough to console me that she won't play matchmaker and jeopardize my standing with Queen Damascena. Georgette pats my shoulder and rises, while Forelle encases me in a hug tight enough to expel half my misery.

Later, Georgette returns with a gel that will reduce my puffy eyes and remove the red blotches on my face. I close my eyes as she slides the cool substance onto my skin. The scent of cucumbers and chamomile fills my nostrils, and I take several calming breaths.

By the time Cassiope walks back into the room, I've made enough peace with my decision to quell my tears. Breaking ties with Prince Kevon is for the best. He would have rejected me later if he discovered that I joined the Princess Trials to remove him from power. Leaving now might preserve my secret, but I still have to negotiate the safety of my family with Queen Damascena or Lady Circi.

"It's nearly time." Cassiope stands at the other side of the low table. "Are you ready to start your next challenge?"

Georgette fixes my hair and makeup, then Cassiope and I step into the hallway. I'm sure the palace has assigned this part of the building to only the

Harvesters as I never see anyone else here. The stairwell door opens, and a fresh-faced and newly dressed Emmera steps out with the production assistant assigned to her.

I'm in no mood to venture out of the palace and face the reporters so we walk the palace grounds, looking for inspiration.

Vitelotte and her production assistant join us through winding corridors, passing servants clad in purple uniforms and the occasional armed guard. Carolina's plan to infiltrate the palace through its hidden passageways was sound, but it would require the rebels to murder all these innocent servants to reach anyone with real power.

When we exit into the gardens, a vast swathe of land stretches out with pathways that lead to smaller outdoor features, like a sunken garden of terraces that descend toward a pool. I move my head from side to side, not knowing which way to go until Cassiope suggests that we look at a statue of Gaia for inspiration.

She leads us through a series of tall hedges arranged in a maze, which a former king built in honor of his bride. In the middle of the arrangement is a round pool that takes up more floor space than my entire house and in the middle of that stands two statues back-to-back. The first is Uranus, the god of the sky, and the second is Gaia.

Emmera's assistant interviews her about what happened during the last challenge and asks if she saw Ingrid or the other Guardians. We don't learn anything new from what she says, so I place a foot to the edge of the pool and squint at the earth goddess' intricate stonework.

Water pours from the cornucopia she holds to her chest, which contains apples, grapes, ears of corn, squashes, and delicate blades of wheat. Vines curl around her flowing locks, which provide a setting for berries and leaves and flowers.

If I were serious about winning this challenge and not just passing time until I could leave the palace, I would choose this work of art. I tilt my head to the side. Maybe I can leave the Harvester girls with the next best thing.

"Can either of you weave baskets?" I ask.

Vitelotte raises a shoulder. "I wasn't the worst in Rural Craft classes."

"I can," says Emmera. When we both turn to the blonde girl, she raises a brow. "What? I come from a long line of hedge-layers."

It's rare to find a Harvester trained in anything except tending to plants and building soil, and I try to suppress my surprise at learning that Emmera maintains the borders that separate fields of different crops.

"Do you think you can make a cornucopia?" I ask.

She tilts her head to the side. “Out of what?”

I turn to Cassiope. “Can we use anything we find in the palace grounds for this challenge?”

“Within reason...” Her brows draw together. “What are you thinking?”

“The early Phanglorians focused on restoring the earth. They built this country out of destroyed grounds, and we’re still doing this with the soil builders and the expansion of the Great Wall.” Everyone gives me blank looks, but I continue. “How many statues of Gaia do you see where she’s holding a cornucopia?”

“About half of them,” replies Vitelotte.

“And in the other half, she’s pregnant with the earth,” adds Emmera.

I nod. “Her treasure isn’t a crown or a piece of art. It’s the land. And what do we do with that land?”

“We grow food.” Vitelotte turns to the assistant assigned to her. “Does the palace have an orchard or a vegetable garden?”

She nods. “It’s by the kitchens.”

I clap my hands together. “Emmera, can you find a willow tree and weave a cornucopia large enough to cradle in your arms?”

Emmera nods.

I turn to the other Harvester girl. “Lotte, can you collect as many different fruits and vegetables as you can find, including a pumpkin?”

“What will you do?” Emmera asks with a scowl.

“There’s another treasure we haven’t mentioned,” I say.

Her frown deepens. “What?”

“People,” I place a hand on my chest. If they broadcast this segment, someone out there will catch the significance in this movement. It won’t lead to better treatment for Harvesters, but maybe they’ll see the vital contribution we make to Phangloria. “Gaia created the earth, but she entrusted it to us to maintain her treasure. What better than one of her modern custodians to hold the cornucopia?”

Vitelotte steps back and lowers her head, but Emmera raises her hand. “Me.”

My lips spread into a wide grin. “I was hoping you’d volunteer.”

I spend the next few hours walking around the palace gardens with Cassiope, gathering flowers, vines, and decorative stems. While I’m no Tussah Thymel, I often make adjustments to the Harvester uniforms and repurpose old clothing into deep pockets, bags, and holsters to help Dad and me hunt.

With a few scraps of fabric, I can fashion a garment of flowers for Emmera to present herself as Gaia. And best of all, I have a member of the House of Thymel as a makeup artist who has an eye for beauty.

We return to my room and lay out our spoils on the dining table. Georgette pulls up Emmera's measurements from her tablet computer, and together, we create the structure of a dress from flesh-colored Elastoscult and scraps of fabric. Forelle acts as our live model. She's paler than Emmera, whose sun-kissed skin won't get washed out by brighter colors, but they're equally curvaceous.

Footage from the Lifestyle Channel plays on a wall screen. A few of the Noble girls borrow art from their family homes, which I recognize from our journey into the Oasis. They're not as grand as I imagined and one of them lives in a house only twice the size of a Harvester's.

Georgette explains that the Noble Echelon is more complex than the split between the Royals and everyone else. The first tier beneath the Royals is those closest related by blood to the current royal family. That includes Garrett, whose father is the brother of Prince Arias, and whoever else descended from the previous two kings. There are about fifty people in the first tier of the Noble Echelon.

Further down the hierarchy are those elected into power, such as the Chamber of Ministers and those related to the kings of previous generations. Ingrid Strab fits into that category because her mother descended from King Phallon and her father is the Minister of Integration. This level of the Echelon contains about a thousand people, and they are considered the second tier.

Georgette counts the third tier on her fingers. "That leaves four-thousand Nobles, who live in the Oasis. Not all of them get huge mansions, and some of them work within the Guardian Echelon or occupy themselves with art."

"Like the doctor who treated Emmera?" I stitch together white tufts of pampas grass to create a skirt. They're like dandelion seed heads, only flatter and eighteen inches in length.

"And Queen Damascena's family," Georgette replies. "Her father was the field marshal in charge of protecting the borders around Phangloria from invaders."

My brows rise. That explains why the queen is so ruthless and why she was tactical enough to team up with Lady Circi.

"Everyone is equal in the Harvester Echelon," I say.

"Are they?" she asks.

I raise my head and frown. We have the mayor and his wife. They live in one of the nicer houses close to Rugosa Square and distribute water rations to those who don't work under a supervisor. Some of the older supervisors who work the faraway fields get to ride pronghorns, and I suppose Deliverers like Ryce have a more varied workday, as do the people who work within the mayor's office, like

Carolina.

My gaze darts to Cassiope, who looks on with interest, so I say, “I’ve never noticed any divides in our Echelon.”

Someone knocks on the door, and my heart leaps into the back of my throat. An image flashes into my mind of Queen Damascena and Lady Circi sweeping in with a retinue of armed women. In this worst-case-scenario, they strip me of my last shred of dignity, then drag me by the hair through the palace and eject me from the gates in a spray of gunfire.

I gulp and hope that I’m wrong. If I’m lucky, they’ll let me exit quietly through a back door. “Come in?”

The door swings open, and Vitelotte walks in holding two huge baskets of fruit and vegetables. Behind her is Emmera, who clutches a willow cornucopia as large as her torso.

“Great work,” I say with a gasp.

Emmera smirks. “I had to make Gaia’s cornucopia large enough to hold a pumpkin.”

We spend the next hour dressing Emmera, fussing over the arrangement of the cornucopia, and weaving grapes and flowers into her hair. Vitelotte sits at the dining table with a notebook and a copy of Gaia’s bible. She takes notes, scribbles them out, and frowns. I’m not sure if she’s writing a story or making an inventory of the crops Gaia told Gabriel Phan to grow.

“Ten minutes, girls,” says Cassiope.

We’ve woven a wreath of white grapes and vine leaves into her flaxen locks and mixed them with white roses. Every inch of the ElastoSculpt encasing her torso is covered with flowers that climb to her right shoulder and create an asymmetric neckline. The skirt is a luxurious array of white grass fibers that sweep down to the floor.

Emmera wears the barest of cosmetics—only enough to darken her lashes, emphasize her brows, and bring out the cornflower blue of her eyes. Cassiope applies the finishing touches of gloss to her lips, and she looks like the epitome of natural, Harvester beauty.

It will take more than a heartfelt apology for me to forgive her role in hunting me after the ball, but I hope that this moment of glory will make up for the Lifestyle Channel broadcasting her humiliating treatment at the hands of those Nobles.

“How do I look?” she whispers.

“Like Gaia made flesh,” I say.

Her eyes sparkle, and she exhales a shuddering breath. “Alright, then. I’m ready.”

After thanking Georgette and Forelle for their help, Vitelotte and I hold Emmera's train, and we follow her production assistant through the hallway and down the grand staircase. At the half landing, a pair of camerawomen tell us to pause.

"You've helped to make Emmera irresistible," Cassiope says as we stand at the train of the other girl's dress. "Prince Kevon won't take his eyes off her. I'm sure the viewers at home are wondering how that makes you feel?"

Claws pierce my heart. Cassiope is only doing her job and asking the obvious, but I meet her gaze and inject my voice with cheer. "Every girl needs their moment to shine. I hope this will be Emmera's."

Emmera turns around and offers me a dazzling smile. I smile back. It's a pity that she finally came to terms with her resentment on what I hope will be my last day of the Princess Trials.

The assistant leads us through the palace's chandelier-lit entrance hall to a patio room of high ceilings and a wall of glass doors. Each girl stands behind tables or beside framed paintings on easels. It reminds me of Soil Science classes at school, where we would bring in weeds, dead insects, and soil samples from around Rugosa and talk about how they affected the development of crops.

Constance Spryte storms across the room from beside a green-skinned Gaia portrait who sits cross-legged with her arms wrapped around the planet. Her hands ball into fists and her ringlets bounce with every furious step.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snarls at Emmera. "You can't wear a piece of art and call it a commission."

I walk around Emmera and fold my arms across my chest. "If we made such a mess of our challenge, why are you so upset?"

Constance's mouth drops open. She glances over her shoulder, presumably for an imaginary Ingrid. When nobody backs her up, she bares her teeth and hisses, "You're making fools of us all."

"Mistress Spryte, is it?" Vitelotte walks around a cowering Emmera and stands at my side.

"Yes," Constance snaps.

"Wealth is found not in gold, but in the wisdom of words. Those who tend to the earth will survive the storm." She looks the Noble in the eye. "Gaia, chapter four, verse six."

I recognize that passage. It's part of Gaia's prayer our teachers would make us chant each morning at school. According to Carolina, Gaia's Bible indoctrinates Harvesters to think their toil and suffering makes them beloved to a goddess who doesn't exist.

From the mockery in her voice, Vitelotte just used the Nobles' propaganda to

prove Harvester superiority.

Constance steps back. “What?”

Vitelotte reaches under her arm and extracts the bible. “What a credit you must be to your parents. Did they not teach you the wisdom of Gaia?”

Constance flares her nostrils, and purple blotches appear on her cheeks. She raises her hand to deliver a slap, but Vitelotte mirrors the movement. She steps away, her face slack, and then hurries back to her borrowed portrait.

Before the Princess Trials, a flare of triumph would have filled my chest. Now, it flutters with trepidation for how the Nobles will retaliate. I can’t let my friend make herself a target, especially now that my time at the Trials will end and nobody will watch her back.

We walk to an empty space and wait.

“Where’s Byron?” one of the Nobles asks.

“Where’s Prince Kevon?” asks another.

Constance glowers at us from the other side of the room. I meet her gaze and glare back. She’s nothing but a loudmouth in a position of power. Someone like her would never survive a day in the Harvester Region.

Complaints along this vein fill the room. I glance at Vitelotte, who rolls her eyes. Right now, I would give anything to watch these spoiled brats toil the fields all day with a gourd of warm and metallic-tasting water rations.

One of the production assistants points a remote control to the wall screen, which displays the Lifestyle Channel. Prunella Broadleaf stands in front of the camera, her eyes half-lidded. Lights flicker along one side of the collar on her neck, and she sways on her feet. I press a hand to my chest and cringe at the cruelty of her punishment.

Behind her is footage of Gloria National Park. Dozens of drones fly above the forests, and more guards in black armor scour the land. I’ve never seen so many Guardians in one place, not even during raids. This must be for Ingrid because I didn’t see any amount of effort placed into investigating who really killed Rafaela.

Vitelotte leans into my side and mutters, “Who’s maintaining the Great Wall?”

A witty retort dries on my tongue as the screen shifts to highlights of the ball. There’s a clip of Prince Kevon dancing with Ingrid followed by footage of them nearly kissing under an arch of roses, next they show him carrying her through the tunnels.

“His Highness didn’t dance with Ingrid,” a Noble screeches.

In the corner of my eye, I spot someone pointing a camera at my face. I won’t react to false footage or events taken out of context.



Prunella steps aside to let the viewers see action sequences of Ingrid and Berta attacking the Amstraadi hijackers, and Ingrid pointing a gun at an unseen person at the entrance to the bus. Me.

“What are they doing?” Constance screeches. “These are all lies.”

I bite down on my lip and glance at the Amstraadi contestants. Sabre, the red-haired girl who once tried to goad me into sedition at the dinner table, meets my eye and nods. A series of slow knots tighten through my guts. Does that mean she understands that the footage is a sham or is the gesture a promise that she will get even for my crimes against her countrywomen?

“What a wonderful display,” booms a voice from the door.

We all turn to find Byron Blake walking into the room with Prince Kevon at his side. My breath catches in the back of my throat, and our eyes meet. I blink, and he glances away. A fist of regret reaches into my already knotted insides and twists, making me squirm.

“What’s wrong?” Vitelotte whispers.

Emmera scowls and tells us to hush. Even if we don’t care what Byron says to the cameras, she wants to listen.

I offer Vitelotte a tight smile and turn back to the front of the room where Byron asks Prince Kevon to browse the contestants’ choices. The prince pauses at each work of art and speaks to every girl for about five minutes. For some, this is the first chance they’ve gotten to speak to Prince Kevon when he isn’t disguising himself as Sergeant Silver.

This, plus Prunella Broadleaf’s attempts to make me look like I used nefarious methods to catch his attention, could explain why so many of the girls said nothing when Ingrid attacked me.

With every passing minute, with every approaching step, the lining of my stomach flutters as though it’s trying to take flight. Sweat beads on my brow and nausea churns through my insides. Someone should have escorted me out of the palace by now. Facing Prince Kevon after our last conversation will be excruciating, and I’m not looking forward to the camera picking up on our awkwardness.

“This is a unique display.” His voice jolts me out of my stupor. “Who is responsible for which aspect?”

Emmera dips into a pretty curtsy and beams. “I made the cornucopia from branches of the willow tree, Your Highness.”

Prince Kevon nods. His gaze skips over me, and he asks Vitelotte which parts she developed. She inclines her head and gives him a polite answer about the palace’s varied kitchen garden.

My heart sinks into my roiling stomach. I tell myself that I’m being

unreasonable. Of course, he would ignore me. From his point of view, I joined the Princess Trials, told him I would help ease the burden of his ruling and that I admired him from afar, and then refused to give him a chance. What else should I expect?

A tiny part of me that used to believe in Mom's fairytales wishes Prince Kevon would see behind my words and know that they were coerced. Carolina's harsh voice asks what I will do when he discovers my intentions for joining the Princess Trials, and I shove it aside.

"Zea," his voice is a caress. "Am I correct that you were responsible for creating the dress?"

I raise my gaze and meet his guarded eyes. "Yes, Your Highness."

He doesn't react to my formal method of address, but he's had all afternoon to get used to my change in attitude. Instead, he nods and continues to the next table, where one of the Amstraadi girls tells him the history of a bowl decorated with fruits that date back to before the nuclear bombs.

"We have seen paintings, sculptures, and even a living embodiment of our great goddess," Byron says with a wistful sigh. "The lucky winner will spend a romantic evening for two with our most eligible bachelor."

One of the Noble girls bursts into a round of applause, but nobody joins her.

Byron turns to Prince Kevon. "Tell me, Your Highness, who is your choice?"

I hold my breath and pray to Gaia that Prince Kevon doesn't choose me.

"It was a difficult decision." He turns and makes eye contact with each of the girls. "You all have such exquisite taste. However, I particularly enjoyed Miss Solar's reading from Gaia, chapter four, verse six."

Vitelotte stiffens at my side. With a gulp, I examine Prince Kevon's features. He isn't smiling, but he isn't scowling. He and Byron must have been in another room, watching footage of our confrontation with Constance.

"A round of applause for our winner, Vitelotte Solar. Congratulations!" Byron sweeps his arm in the direction of our table.

Seeming inches taller, Vitelotte steps forward. I force my features into a smile and clap, hoping that this won't be the day she becomes the target of the other girls' animosity.

Vitelotte walks to the front of the room, where Prince Kevon kisses her knuckles and congratulates her on winning. I can't fathom whether he chose her because she insulted the Noble echelon, because he was impressed by the fruit and vegetables she collected, or because he has decided to move on from me.

My face throbs from the fake smile and my palms sting from clapping so loudly, but it's nothing compared to the ache of my heart.

They look striking together with his blue-black hair complementing the purple undertones of her curls. Vitelotte is clever and witty and brave. I can think of no better girl to date Prince Kevon, but I doubt that Queen Damascena will allow any liaison between them to last.

“The winner also gets to choose tomorrow’s leisure activity,” says Byron. “Is there anything you would like to do in the Oasis? A visit to the Botanical Gardens, a dip in the Gloria Hot Springs?”

She nods. “My grandmother told me she used to sell spiced corn in a farmer’s market. Does it still exist?”

“Of course.” Byron turns to the camera. “Tune in tomorrow for an exciting visit to the Gnamma Market. Over to Prunella for the latest coverage on the search for the missing girls.”

Prince Kevon offers Vitelotte a kindly smile before leaving with Byron and an entourage of camerawomen. From their hurried steps, it looks like they’re going to the Gloria National Park to help.

The room empties, and no one tells us what to do next. It’s supposed to be dinnertime, but I can’t smell any food. The other girls exchange confused glances, and I wonder if there’s something else going on in Phangloria besides a tsunami on the other side of the mountains, missing girls, and a king who is dying in secret.

Constance steps out from beside her easel. “Who else thinks nobody cares about the Princess Trials?”

“Are you talking about the focus on Ingrid Strab?” Sabre asks, her voice more slippery than corn oil.

My eyes narrow. The six Amstraadi girls hardly speak, but when they do, it’s usually to goad others into saying something dangerous or foolish. I don’t trust them, their motives, or their ambassador, but at least this time, their attention is on someone I despise.

As Constance rants about Ingrid, Prince Kevon, the stupid girls from the Guardian and Artisan Echelons who managed to get themselves lost, I turn my gaze to the wall screen, where Prunella talks to the camera in front of a scene of guards carrying a body bag on a stretcher. My throat thickens. In all my stressing about the dead Guardian girls, I didn’t mention having found a dead Artisan.

Vitelotte returns to my side, her face grim.

My brows draw together. “Hey, congratulations.”

“What’s this?” Vitelotte points at the screen.

“They’ve found Jacqueline Bellini,” says Emmera, trying to mask the disappointment in her voice from not being chosen.

Vitelotte’s lips tighten, and she glances in the direction of the Amstraadi

girls. I follow her gaze, thinking the same thing. Sabre is too busy goading Constance into criticizing the Princess Trials, but the Amstraadi girl with ebony skin and bleached blonde curls turns to us and smirks.

A knot forms in my belly. I fold my arms across my chest and frown. Does that mean they're responsible for the disappearances of the girls we didn't kill? With a sick sort of logic, it would make sense. Ambassador Pascale told me specifically that the Chamber of Ministers favored Ingrid. He also said his girls hadn't charmed Prince Kevon. Now that Ingrid is missing, I wonder if he instructed them to eliminate the competition.

I turn to Vitelotte. "It looks like we're having dinner in our rooms tonight. Do you want to eat together?"

She shakes her head and heads toward the door. "Another time."



I'm beginning to think Constance is right. Either they've relegated the Princess Trials to a lesser priority or Prunella Broadleaf was the only person keeping it together.

According to Forelle and Georgette, who join me in the morning for breakfast, Ingrid's disappearance has caused a state of National Emergency. I don't comment because I think the search for the missing girls is covering up for something else.

When I join the much-reduced group of girls for a photoshoot on the red carpet, only twelve photographers stand behind the cordons. The morning sun shines bright enough to make us all squint, and the photographers snap a few pictures before turning to check their tablet computers.

We all trudge down the red carpet where a bus awaits. I had hoped by now that Prince Kevon would arrange my departure, but I didn't have the guts last night to ask him if I could leave.

"All the journalists who matter are at the National Park, waiting for pictures of Ingrid's mangled corpse," Constance's voice fills the bus's interior. "It was probably her who burned Minnie Werfer and Tulip Ironside so they wouldn't report her for murdering Jaqueline Bellini."

I glance over my shoulder at Vitelotte, who rolls her eyes.

The drive to the farmer's market is mercifully short. It's located in an opaque dome close to the Botanical Gardens and resembles the domes in the Harvester town squares. We step off the bus and onto a red carpet flanked by guards holding back crowds of regular people.

They scream out our names, flash their cameras, and hold up tablet computers. Byron isn't here to tell us what to do, but a group of production

assistants crowds the entrance. None of them hold cameras, so I guess they just want to observe us as we browse.

Gnamma Market's interior looks nothing like our dome. Instead of a long line of people stretching across the space to pick up their weekly rations, the market is made up of bell-shaped gazebos each manned by robust-looking Harvesters. Their uniforms are vibrant shades of brown that include hickory, cinnamon, and gingerbread, and they all wear pristine, white aprons.

My brows draw together. They look too stylish and individual to be from our Echelon, and the women sport cosmetics and hairstyles that require hours of preparation. I walk through the throng, scrutinizing the stall-holders. It's almost as if someone like Master Thymel created the uniforms and placed them on Artisans.

The customers are mostly blue-haired Nobles dressed in one-piece outfits in the style of Montana and Lady Circi, but mingling among them are uniformed officers, flamboyant Artisans, and a few people whose uniform I recognize from the hospital.

Some of the stalls only sell one type of food, such as the round man with ruddy cheeks, who displays every imaginable type of lettuce from purple to green to white.

On his left is a woman whose tomatoes range in size from peas to pumpkin-sized monstrosities. There are so many varieties that her produce occupies two gazebos. Some of them are yellow, some are black, some are purple.

My head shakes from side to side as I take in all the shapes. Perfect spheres, plums-shapes, carrot-shapes, gourd-shapes, some shaped so irregularly I can't even tell they're tomatoes.

"You're Zea-Mays Calico." The tomato seller's gold bangles jingle as she claps her hands together. Black hair curls around her ageless face, and her brown eyes sparkle with excitement. She grins, revealing whitened teeth. "What do you think of my selection?"

My mouth opens and closes, and words tumble through my brain. We don't grow any of these in Rugosa, which is the only Harvester town that cultivates tomatoes.

"She's speechless!" A man claps me hard on the shoulder, making me tumble forward. The slapper is a laughing, blue-haired Noble dressed in Harvester brown, who wraps his arm around the tomato seller. "Have you ever seen so many beautiful varieties?"

I glance at a pair of camerawomen filming my reaction with their thick glasses. "No. This is truly amazing."

"Did you hear that?" says the Noble man. "Trumpeter's Tomatoes are

approved by Zea-Mays Calico herself.”

A crowd of Nobles swarms us, and I stagger back against the influx. My pulse quivers in time with the fury quickening through my heart. This is madness.

More and more people crowd the tomato sellers, pushing me further back into the crowd. I can't see the camerawomen anymore, and I glance from side to side as more people arrive from all over the market, presumably in search of a spectacle.

A large hand wraps around my arm, and someone pulls me aside. I catch a glimpse of pale eyes, unsmiling lips, and a dimpled chin. My breath catches in the back of my throat.

It's Ryce Wintergreen.

## CHAPTER 8

Ryce pulls me through the crowd and down the gap between the tomato stall and its neighbor's, who sells pumpkins and squashes.

He wears a regulation white shirt that's either brand new or dipped in laundry bleach. His brown vest and matching pants look pressed, and there isn't a speck of dust in his uniform. I guess that's the only way a Harvester can blend in among these Nobles pretending to belong to our Echelon.

I glance from side to side to see if anyone has followed us, but he wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls me into his chest.

"Zea," he murmurs into my hair. "You look so good."

His earthy scent engulfs my senses. It's freshly-tilled soil, sugar beet... and something unusually floral. I try to pull back to look into his eyes, but he holds me tight and continues murmuring about being pleased to see me.

I relax into his embrace. Ryce reminds me of home, and that's one step away from Mom, Dad, Yoseph, and Flint. "Ryce," I say. "Have you seen—"

"Zea."

The way his deep voice curls around my name makes me pause. I hope this means he's about to tell me that the Red Runners took my family to safety so I can complete my mission without worrying about their fates.

He releases me, draws back, and cups my face with both hands. It's the tenderest of touches, and his pale eyes soften. A corner of his mouth curls into the barest of smiles.

My throat dries. He looks at me as though I'm precious.

"After seeing you on that glider, I've suffered nothing but sleepless nights," he says. "When you stopped answering my calls—"

"My family," I blurt. Ryce is talking about the watch he gave Sharqi to hide in her beak. The watch I left in my boot and haven't thought about for days. "Are they alright?"

His expression blanks, and the hands cupping my face stills. After a significant pause, he says. “Yes.”

“But I thought there were guards outside—”

“They visited that time when you spoke to them on camera.” He doesn’t allow me to complete my sentence, and there’s something in his assurance that doesn’t ring true. “Nobody’s watching your home, I promise.”

My muscles tense, my spine turns rigid, and my insides numb. Adrenaline courses through my veins, making my pulse thrash in my throat. I would sooner believe Queen Damascena’s menaces than Ryce Wintergreen’s promises. There’s no way she would ease up on her threat to murder my family just because everyone has lost interest in the Princess Trials.

“How do you know?” My voice sounds far away.

Ryce frowns. Then his face breaks into a wide smile. It’s the first I’ve ever seen anything but him looking grave. It’s a grotesque baring of both rows of teeth, the type of expression a person makes during the rare times we get to see a Guardian dentist.

“What are you talking about?” he says with a forced chuckle. “I should ask why you ran past me in the gardens when I called your name or why you never answer my attempts to call you on Netface.”

My nostrils flare. If he’s talking about the whisper I heard when I ran half-blind for my life to the guesthouse after being gassed, I’m not going to apologize. This whole conversation is a waste of my time. Ryce will say anything necessary to keep me spying for the Red Runners, even at the cost of my family’s life.

“Where’s Sharqi?” I snap.

He flinches. “Who?”

“My bird,” I say through clenched teeth. “The one you thought was a kakapo. The one you said you would take care of. The one you sent to the Oasis with a watch in her mouth.”

He lowers his lashes. “She flew home to spend time with her chicks.”

A tight fist of grief slams into my heart, making my eyes sting with tears. Sharqi probably got shot while trying to find her way back to Rugosa. I jerk away from his touch and turn to the side.

“Zea.” He tilts my head towards his and forces me to meet his hard eyes. “While you’ve luxuriated in palatial surroundings, over two-hundred-thousand Harvesters worked in back-breaking conditions. Our water rations are barely fit for humans. People are dying every day, Zea. Dying.”

That last word hits like a punch in the throat, and I can’t breathe. They’re dying... just like Mr. Wintergreen.



Ryce nods with confident satisfaction, as though he's found the exact sequence of words to manipulate my heart. "We're all depending on you to find a way into the palace and lead us to freedom," he murmurs. "What is your report?"

Burning hatred sears my veins and makes the blood surging through my ears roar. How could I have ever allowed Ryce and his mother to maneuver me into such a perilous mission with little training and no backup? Guilt. Guilt for having once been a nine-year-old girl too frightened to stop a brutal murder. Now Ryce is using that guilt with a hefty dose of feigned affection to make me sacrifice everything for the cause.

Now, when I stare into those eyes, they're glacial. White striations run through the frigid blue, revealing glimpses of a calculating, twisted soul.

Prince Kevon showed me how a man acts toward a woman he holds to his heart. He pays her attention, helps her when she's in trouble, and does his best to keep her happy and safe.

Ryce only stopped ignoring me when I poisoned a guard. Then, on the pretext of paving the way for a better world for our future, he convinced me to join the Princess Trials as a spy.

I'm not selfish. I care about the wellbeing of my Echelon more than my own happiness, but I can't, I won't, I refuse to sacrifice Mom, Dad, Yoseph, and Flint.

"What have you learned, soldier?" he said.

I want to tell him about the secret entrance that leads from the navy barracks into the palace, the secret underground river, or any of the other secret and poorly manned passageways I've seen in the palace, but not if that means hurting Prince Kevon.

My gaze drops to his shoulder, and I offer the only piece of information I feel is safe to share. "Something's wrong with King Arias."

Ryce's breath quickens. His fingers close around my arm, and he gives it a hard shake. "What?"

"He's dying." I pull out of his grip. "From the way Prince Kevon talks about things, it's only a matter of weeks before he takes the throne."

His eyes bulge, and he grabs my shoulder. "Is the king in the hospital?"

I shake my head. "They've put him in a secure room."

Ryce nods, his eyes turning vacant. "Can you—"

"What?" I snap. "You want me to murder a dying man?"

He flinches. It's the barest movement, and a look of realization sharpens his eyes. The hands around my shoulder tighten, and his fingers dig into my flesh. Wincing, I try to wriggle out of his grip, but it's too tight.

“Are your loyalties drifting toward the Nobles?” he snarls.

I shove against his chest. “You’re hurting me.”

“Answer my question,” he says from between clenched teeth.

“I’m loyal to my people.”

His fingers loosen so the grip no longer hurts, but he doesn’t release me. “You’re falling for the prince.”

I shake my head. “How will the Red Runners protect my family from the guards posted outside my house?”

“I’ll take care of it,” His hands slide over my shoulders and up my neck.

My skin tightens, and a tight band of alarm forces the air out of my lungs. Will he strangle me for failing to report the secret passageways?

When one of his hands cups the back of my head and he strokes my cheekbone with the other, some of the tension around my chest relaxes. Weeks ago, being held by Ryce Wintergreen was my most fervent dream, but his touch is unwanted and feels like yet another threat.

“Let go of me,” I say. “They’re going to notice I’m miss—”

His lips crash onto mine, and I open my mouth to scream, but he slips his tongue between my lips. The taste of tannin floods my mouth, along with the scent of bitter red wine. I’m choking. I can’t breathe. My fists pound on his chest with all my strength, but he’s too big, too strong, too determined to force this mockery of a kiss.

He draws back, breaking his assault. I strike out with my fist, but he catches my wrist before I can land a blow.

“I love you, Zea-Mays Calico,” he says. “You’re the bravest, most interesting girl I’ve ever met.”

The words hit a wall of shock. I can’t believe that Ryce Wintergreen, the future leader of the Red Runners, and the man I once thought would rule Phangloria, just forced himself on me.

He pulls my limp body into his chest, and it feels like torture. “Go back to the others,” he murmurs in my ear. “Before they notice you’re missing.”

My entire body trembles, and tears fill my eyes. All those times I watched Harvester girls get accosted by guards, I had been a bystander and never imagined myself one of their victims. It turns out that Harvester men are just as capable of such atrocities.

Something inside me cracks. Maybe it’s a sense of idealism that all Harvesters are good and all Nobles are bad. Maybe it’s my indecision about handing over the country to the Red Runners.

Ryce turns me around, swats me on the behind, and tells me to hurry back to the cameras. I rush out from behind the marquee and through the space between

the stalls on legs that feel like brittle saplings. If the Red Runners want a revolution, it won't be through me. Prince Kevon will be the king to smash through the inequalities in Phangloria.

The crowd around the tomato seller thins, and Nobles call my name. Some chuckle and others call me the bucking bronco. Maybe they're waiting for one of my famous tantrums. Instead, I offer them waves and weak smiles.

Vitelotte stands at the edge of the crowd between Cassiope and her production assistant. She sees me first and glances over my shoulder, not commenting until I reach their side.

"There she is," she says. "Chatting with fans as I told you."

I shoot her a grateful smile, answer a few questions about the tomatoes I weed, then a few people in the crowd ask me more tomato-related questions.

Afterward, we walk with the production assistants past fruit and vegetable stalls. The sweet, warm aroma drifts across the market, and somebody rings a bell. I raise my gaze to a triple-width marquee in the corner, where women dressed as Harvesters sell pastries and freshly-baked bread.

"Be careful," Vitelotte whispers in my ear.

"About what?"

"Ryce Wintergreen."

A spasm of shock squeezes my chest and ripples up my tightening throat. I glance at the assistants walking together at my side, but neither pays us any attention.

I croak, "What are you talking about?"

She flicks her head toward the marquee next to the bakery, where a tall girl clad in a scanty version of the Harvester uniform rises from a black cow and holds up a pitcher. Ryce stands beside her and drinks a glass of milk.

"If that guy over there tries to talk you into something, ignore him," she mutters.

"Huh?"

Vitelotte's sharp stare slices through my veneer of false innocence. "He's not a bad person, but he acts like he's going to bring about a revolution for the Harvester Echelon. He's just a pretty boy who talks big and can't even gain the respect of his mother."

"You know him?"

She nods. "His father used to run the cornfield my brother supervises." She raises a shoulder. "I don't know if Ryce sees him as a mentor or something, but he's always coming to our house crying about how his mother makes him take care of lost causes and ranting about becoming the president or something."

Lost causes. My stomach hardens. Like Ryce's Red Runners youth cell?

“Right.”

We continue past the bakery and past the milkmaid, who hands Ryce another glass of milk. He raises it to the crowd and grins. The crowd cheers back.

I snatch my gaze away and focus on Constance, who waves, blows kisses, and poses for photos with ageless Nobles. I don't know what to believe, but I don't think it matters. This will be the last I see of Ryce Wintergreen until Queen Damascena allows me to leave the Oasis, and by the time I return to Rugosa, I'll be done with the Red Runners.

I turn to ask Vitelotte about Carolina, but she's gone.

“Oh, look.” Cassiope points at a crowd of reporters by the door. “Ambassador Pascale is here. Let's see if he will offer his support in finding the missing girls.”



Vitelotte avoids me for the rest of the outing and sits with Emmera on the journey back. I'm not being paranoid, but she hasn't been the same since pointing out Ryce. Part of me wonders if that's because she spotted him dragging me behind the tomato seller's gazebo, but she didn't mention having seen us together.

When we reach the palace, there's no sign of Byron or Prunella, and when I reach my room, there's no sign of Forelle and Georgette. Instead, I find Lady Circi sitting on the velvet sofa, looking into the screen of her tablet computer. She wears a teal jumpsuit today and balances a gun on the sofa's arm.

I clap both hands to my mouth. “What are you doing here?”

She glances up then returns her gaze to the screen as though I'm not even a threat.

“Wrong question.” Queen Damascena steps out from my walk-in closet, clad in a carnation-pink one-piece with flared culottes that look like they belong to a gown rather than a jumpsuit. Her blonde hair falls in a cascade of curls, framing smoky eyes that glint with malice.

My pulse accelerates. All the moisture leaves my throat and gathers on my palms. I place a hand on the wall to steady myself, and my legs collapse into an awkward curtsy. “Your Majesty.”

“Breaking my son's heart wasn't part of the arrangement,” the queen snaps.

“What?” I whisper.

Lady Circi raises her head. “She told you to help him choose a suitable Noble, not to leave the trials.”

Just because they once made an arrangement over a man, it doesn't mean I could be as heartless. I force my expression into a mask of calm. “How can I

guide him to someone else when he asked me to get engaged?”

“Do we need to spell everything out to you?” asks Lady Circi.

“Yes,” I say from between clenched teeth.

“Tell Kevon you’ve changed your mind.” The queen strides toward me across the room, bringing with her the cloying scent of mandragon blossoms.

Resisting the urge to step back, I lick my dry lips. “But he won’t believe—”

“Convince him.” She hisses through bared teeth.

I gulp. “Alright, but there’s only so much I can do if he doesn’t come with us on excursions, and we eat alone in our rooms.”

Queen Damascena’s eyes harden. She’s trying to work out if I’ve been sarcastic, but a snort from Lady Circi seems to assure her that I’m merely stating a fact. I want to twist my fingers around her curls and yank the blonde out of her hair. What kind of monarch needs to go to such roundabout, underhanded methods to influence the lives of others?

The queen relaxes her features and places her hands on her hips. “From tomorrow, you will all share meals with Kevon, and tonight, you and he will dine in front of the cameras.”

“But Vitelotte—”

“Has kindly allowed the other girls from her village to share her date with the prince.”

She never mentioned that to Emmera or me on the journey to the farmer’s market. This means that their next stop after threatening me will be Vitelotte’s room. I hope she stays calm and doesn’t say something to make Queen Damascena lash out.

I exhale my frustration in an outward breath. There’s no point in asking if I can leave the Princess Trials, then. “So, you want me to make up with him, raise his hopes, and then suggest he marries some other girl?”

“I wouldn’t put it so bluntly,” she says with a smirk.

I stare into her cold eyes, not quite believing she’s serious. “Why?”

Her lips tighten. “Like most men, Kevon doesn’t think with his brain.” She lets her gaze linger down my body. “Using what you’ve learned from watching mating cattle, I’m sure you can whisper into his ear and guide him to make the right decisions.”

Bile rises to the back of my throat. Not about the animals, but she’s talking about manipulating her own son. “And if I can’t—”

“You will do as I say if you don’t want anything to happen to those charming twins.” Queen Damascena steps out into the hallway. “Circi, when does the Immunology Committee administer vaccinations?”

“In Rugosa?” Lady Circi steps out of the door. “The end of the month.”

Her words hit like a flying kick. Yoseph. Flint. The annual vaccinations protect us from a strain of the influenza virus that mutates every year. Without it, old people die and young children perish. There are a number of ways they could hurt the twins: withdrawing the vaccination, swapping the vaccine for water, or replacing it with a poison that will mimic a natural death.

Lady Circi closes the door, leaving me gasping for air. The imaginary noose around my neck is so tight that the fibers of the rope chafe against my skin—that’s how much it hurts. I can no longer afford to interpret Queen Damascena’s words—I must do exactly as she says until I can find a way to hide Mom, Dad, and the twins.



I sit alone for hours, staring at the wall and trying to work out a way to help my family. If I told Prince Kevon, he would help, but that help might come too late. What about Colonel Mouse, the man from the Amstraad Republic who tried to save me from the fake hijacking?

Shaking my head, I toss that thought aside. The Amstraadi might turn it into a game and get them killed just to place my reaction on their show.

My only way forward is to hope that Prince Kevon becomes the king before Queen Damascena carries out her threat. Then he will outrank his mother and overrule any of her orders.

Later, Forelle and Georgette step into the room and ask about my day. I give them snippets about the fake Harvesters I met in the market while they ready me for our group date. I barely notice the outfit, a silver, off-the-shoulder dress that reminds me of the blue ballgown.

They arrange my hair in a braided updo and weave strands in a mix of Oasis sophistication and Harvester charm.

I step out into the hallway, where Emmera and Vitelotte await. Emmera wears a form-fitting dress with a split up the side and has dyed her flaxen hair auburn. I guess she has worked out that Prince Kevon prefers girls with dark hair.

Vitelotte wears a fuchsia dress with a deep V that shows a little cleavage. The garment’s short sleeves and the way the fabric skims her figure reminds me of something Lady Circi would wear but without the pants.

As Emmera walks in front, I lean into Vitelotte and whisper, “Are you alright about us joining your date?”

She raises a shoulder. “I really don’t mind.”

“Thank you.” Emmera turns around and flashes the other girl a grin. “You’re so generous to share your time with His Highness.”

If I wasn't so preoccupied with the threat hanging over the twins, I would bristle at the implication that I should share Prince Kevon with her. My gaze flicks to Cassiope, who grins. I can't even smile back.

"Tonight's going to be fun," I murmur, thinking the opposite.

A limousine takes us to a Japanese restaurant called Peko Peko. We learned about Japan in Modern History. It was an archipelago of hundreds of islands but got swallowed by the Pacific Ocean. All that's left of the country are millions of people living on crowded mountaintops.

Carolina says it's a lie because Phangloria doesn't have aircraft, and its navy wouldn't waste resources traveling halfway across the world. According to her, they teach us about Japan to make us feel grateful for our lives in Phangloria.

I shake my head. Carolina says a lot of things, but she offers no guarantees for the safety of her Runners.

Peko Peko is in the middle of a block of seven-story buildings. Instead of the usual awning of solar tiles, the restaurant uses ceramic roof tiles illuminated by a hexagonal, white lantern with Japanese lettering. Long strips of curtains hang in front of the doors, and wooden shutters obscure the windows.

"This place looks very exclusive," Emmera says with a giggle.

My insides crochet themselves into tight knots. It's an unpleasant sensation that's mostly trepidation and mounting dread. Prince Kevon will never believe I've changed my mind, and he'll believe me even less if I steer him toward one of the Noble girls.

Our driver informs us to wait for the production assistants to shoot footage of us stepping out of the limousine. When they arrive with cameras and lighting equipment, Emmera shoots out first and poses by the camera. Vitelotte and I continue toward the restaurant and are the first to meet Prince Kevon.

Prince Kevon stands a few feet from the doorway, dressed in a velvet jacket the color of eggplants with a pale purple shirt. The shades complement his blue-black hair and olive skin, and the fabric skims his athletic frame.

His gaze meets mine, and the smile on his lips freezes. I hold my breath and wait for him to react. Apparently, nobody told him it would be a group date. Emmera bustles in behind us, breaking the tension, and he kisses Vitelotte's hand first, then Emmera's, and then mine.

The touch of his lips on my knuckles sets my skin on fire. My breath hitches, and my cheeks heat.

A frown crosses his features, but he smooths out the expression and turns to Vitelotte. "I must be the luckiest fellow in Phangloria to dine with three ladies. Was this your idea?"

"Yes, Your Highness," she lies.

He places a hand on the small of her back and guides her through the empty restaurant. Emmera and I walk behind the pair, and I can't help but stare at his large hand on her narrow waist.

As expected from watching Prince Kevon's date with Ingrid at the beginning of the Trials, the restaurant is empty. Paper lanterns illuminate dark wood floors that stretch out to walls that look like they're made of paper and matted straw.

All the dining tables are low, with crimson floor cushions that match a red-and-gold embroidered robe that hangs on the wall. I've never heard of people displaying clothing like art, and Prince Kevon assures us that the women of Japan used to wear such fine garments.

A man stands in front of a doorway at the far end of the restaurant, an auburn-haired chef, wearing a tall hat and white robes. He dips into a bow that bends his body in a ninety-degree angle and sweeps his arm toward a private dining room.

In the middle of the room is a U-shaped table set for four. Its interior consists of a flat griddle that's already smoking with heat. Raw ingredients sit in square bowls around the hotplate, and it looks like the chef will cook them as we watch.

Prince Kevon helps Vitelotte into the seat on the widest part of the U and places Emmera on the other side, next to Vitelotte. My stomach tightens as he holds out the seat perpendicular to his.

"Thank you." I fix my gaze on the place setting of little bowls and away from the handsome prince.

"It's my pleasure," he murmurs back.

The chef positions himself behind the hotplate and explains teppanyaki to Prince Kevon and the cameras positioned behind us. After encouraging us to try a clear soup that tastes of fermented soybeans, he pours oil on the hotplate, then another clear fluid. He points a lighter at the hotplate, which bursts into three-foot-tall flames.

Emmera shrieks, Prince Kevon laughs, and I clap a hand over my mouth to stifle my shock.

As soon as the flames ebb, the chef wipes the hot metal with a cloth and then juggles a pair of spatulas that look sharper than blades. They clank and click in a rhythm that would be entertaining if I had been forewarned about bursts of fire and sharp, flying instruments.

I bite down on my lip and turn to Prince Kevon. "Is this supposed to happen?"

"This is my first time in a teppanyaki." Prince Kevon turns to Vitelotte and smiles. "This will also be my first time trying this cuisine, so thank you for expanding my horizons."



A tight fist clenches my heart. That's the sort of thing he would say to me. I glance up to find two cameras pointed at my face.

It's only when the chef places a large fillet of beef on the hotplate that I can finally relax and enjoy the show, especially when he pours an oily sauce over it, and fills the air with the scent of spices and garlic.

Over the next several minutes, the chef performs an array of culinary feats with knives as large as short-swords, giant forks, and a selection of spatulas. He places shrimp, chicken, lamb, and lobster on our plates, and busies himself cooking vegetables.

We eat rice and drink miso soup in between courses, and Vitelotte picks up the chopsticks, arranges them in her fingers, and pops a scallop in her mouth.

Emmera gasps. "Where did you learn to eat with sticks?"

"My brother and I used to practice picking up stones with twigs," she replies with a shrug.

Prince Kevon chuckles and picks up his chopsticks. "Would you two like to learn?"

Emmera leans across her table. "Yes, please!"

He turns to me and smiles. "How about you, Zea?"

Heat rushes to my stupid cheeks. Doesn't my body realize I'm in the biggest trouble of my life?

We spend the next five minutes practicing with our chopsticks. When Prince Kevon turns around to help Emmera, I pick up the meat with my fingers, and Emmera does the same when he turns to help me. Vitelotte watches us both with narrowed eyes but doesn't mention our cheating.

As the chef sets down his knife and fries a mound of rice with vegetables and finely chopped meat, Emmera leans forward. "Have you been to the farmer's market, Your Highness?"

"Many times," he replies. "Did you enjoy your visit, Miss Hull?"

"Those people selling produce aren't even Harvesters," she said.

He tilts his head to the side. "Really? They wear the Harvester work uniform."

My brows draw together. Are they telling people that we get to wear such fine clothes, grow a wide array of beautiful produce, and get to visit the Oasis to sell our wares?

"Ask Zea." Emmera flicks her head at me.

The chef raises both brows and pours soy sauce over the rice.

My mouth drops open. Of all the times to bring up such a contentious subject, why did Emmera choose now, in front of the cameras?

As Prince Kevon turns to me to ask, Vitelotte plunges the chef's knife in his

chest.

The prince's body stiffens, his face freezes, his eyes lock onto mine, and blood bubbles from his lips.

## CHAPTER 9

Emmera's scream rings in my ears and pierces through my shock. My gaze snaps away from the prince's and down to the knife sticking out of his chest. Blood seeps through his pale shirt and spreads down to his pants. There's too much.

Just as Prince Kevon's body goes slack and slumps to the side, I lurch out of my seat and catch him.

His dead weight falls on me like a boulder, and I have to dig my heels into the floor to stop myself from toppling over and dislodging the knife in his chest. My biceps strain as I ease him to the floor.

"Zea," he croaks.

My knees drop to the floor's spongy surface. Blood covers the knife's bamboo hilt, pools beneath Prince Kevon, and soaks into the straw mats. He's losing too much, too quickly, and the light in his eyes is fading. I want to pull out the knife, but it might be the only thing staunching the flow.

A patch of white catches my gaze. It's his blood-splattered napkin. I remember how Prince Kevon saved me from a knife to the back by placing something on both sides of the blade.

Feet surround us. My attention bounces from the knife to Prince Kevon's paling face. Sweat beads across his brow, and his breath comes in ragged pants. With hands that won't stop trembling, I fold the napkin into quarters and apply it to the side of the wound, but it soaks with blood.

"Get me more napkins," I shout over Emmera's wails. When nobody moves in my peripheral vision, I scream, "Now, or he'll bleed to death."

The feet scatter, and I stare into Prince Kevon's eyes. He blinks over and over as though trying to make sense of what just happened. One minute, we were enjoying a fun dinner. The next, he had a knife in his chest.

"What did you do?" a voice screeches from the other side of the room.

It's probably someone attacking Vitelotte, but I don't care. Right now, it's

just me, Prince Kevon, and the wound that won't stop bleeding.

Loud footsteps fill the air, mingling with sobs and shouts and recriminations. White napkins tumble down from above. I gather them into thick wads and pack them on both sides of the wound.

"Zea," he whispers.

"Kevon." I lean forward to hear what might be his last words.

"Please don't be angry," he says.

"What are you talking about?"

"My mother said..." He swallows.

A surge of emotion thickens my throat, and my eyes fill with tears. Vitelotte just tried to assassinate Prince Kevon, and he's apologizing for Queen Damascena's machinations? I blink, and tears stream from my eyes, falling onto the soaked napkins.

"Don't think about that." My voice is hoarse with unvoiced screams. "Help is on the way."

His eyes flutter closed, and he lets out a long breath.

Alarm slices through my heart. Was that his last? "Kevon," I rasp. "Open your eyes."

Noise explodes around me, the thunder of heavy feet, a scream that cuts off. It fades as I urge Prince Kevon to give me a sign of life. A rough hand grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. The movement jostles the napkins away from the knife, sending a fountain of blood cascading from his wound.

"Stop," I yell.

The hand releases my arm. I drop to my knees and return to putting pressure on his chest wound. His ribs move a fraction under my hands, but that's the only sign that he's still alive. I raise my head and find us surrounded by guards in purple armor. One of them holds an electroshocker sparking with blue power. Where's Garrett? What were these men doing when Vitelotte reached for the knife?

"Where's the ambulance?" I rasp.

"On its way," says one of the men whose face is obscured by his helmet.

There's no sign of Vitelotte, Emmera, or the chef. I don't know why, but they've allowed the camerawomen to remain. I catch glimpses of them through the guards, who stand around watching like spectators at a lizard fight. One of these so-called royal protectors must have medical training, but nobody moves to help me stem the bleeding.

I drop my gaze to Prince Kevon, whose lips are parted. Blood spatters cover his cheeks and jaw, proving the amount of effort Vitelotte must have used to strike at his heart.

Blood seeps through the napkin and out from between my fingers. I don't know if what I'm doing is enough to keep him alive until the medics arrive, but if I let go, he'll bleed out.

A dark-skinned man appears at my side, clad in the hooded, white jumpsuit of a medic. He places a mask over Prince Kevon's nose and gives me a nod of acknowledgment. Relief floods my veins, and my muscles go weak.

"My name is Frederick," he says. "I'm an emergency heart technician from the Royal Hospital. Keep that pressure on the wound until I give you further instructions, alright?"

I give him a shaky nod.

While an older woman wearing a similar outfit cuts away Prince Kevon's jacket and shirt, Frederick sticks needles into specific points on Prince Kevon's face. Once the woman finishes, there's nothing left of the clothes in Prince Kevon's upper body but the patch of fabric around my hands. Blood coats his muscular chest, and it looks like he's stopped breathing.

Frederick sticks thick needles into the veins of the prince's arms, while a third man attaches clips to each of the needles. I have no idea what any of this means, but I stay in position even when the muscles in my arm cramp from remaining in the same position.

Tall barriers close around us. At first, they block out the restaurant's dim illumination, then blue light floods the space. I remember it from my humiliating medical examination.

"Why are you sterilizing the area?" My voice shakes. "I thought you'd take Prince Kevon to the hospital."

Frederic holds a metal bottle above my hands. "When I say so, please lift the finger on the blade's left while maintaining the pressure on the wound."

"What?"

He repeats himself and explains that he needs a little space to pour a saline solution containing nanobots that will seal the arteries until they can operate. Nanobots. I've heard that word before. It's something Prince Kevon demanded after Rafaela was assassinated. I nod and follow his instructions.

Frederick pours a silver solution where my fingers meet the knife and waits a few seconds before instructing me to raise my finger. I lift my ring finger, and blood rushes out.

"It's not working," I whisper.

He pours another bottle onto the wound, and the bleeding slows. Over the next few minutes, the medic drenches bottle after bottle of silver solution onto prince Kevon's chest. By the time he instructs me to move my left hand, the bleeding on the left is staunch.

As we repeat the process on the right side of the knife, Prince Kevon's skin turns ashen. It's not the pale white I expect from a corpse, but a rich gray that becomes bluer with each passing second.

"What's happening to his face?" I ask.

"Don't be alarmed." The female medic hooks Prince Kevon's needles to several tablet-sized machines. "They're just the nanobots."

Nausea floods my insides. Will Prince Kevon become dependent on Amstraad technology to keep him alive? Will he wither away and require electronic clothing like Ambassador Pascale? I can't think about that right now, and I focus on Frederick's instructions.

"Thank you," he says. "Your actions today saved the life of our prince."

"He'll live?" I whisper.

"There are no guarantees, but with an Amstraadi cardiac surgeon in the Oasis, he has the very best of chances."

My throat convulses. I don't trust the Amstraad Republic, but I can't deny that their technology keeps people like Montana looking young and healthy long after Harvesters his age have died.

Frederick rolls him to the side, and his colleague slides a stretcher underneath Kevon's unconscious body. A breath slides out from my lungs. It looks like they're finally moving him.

The barriers open, and the medics place the machines in special slots within the stretcher, then they nestle Prince Kevon between the devices keeping him alive. With a few clicks and whirrs, its metallic structure shifts into a wheeled gurney and raises him off the floor.

I follow Frederick through the empty room, my dress sticky with Prince Kevon's cooling blood. Silver coats my fingers. I try wiping the solution on the side of my dress, but it's already dried. Those nanobots had better not seep through my skin and clog my arteries.

A medic opens the door, and we step out into a restaurant crammed with people. Guards in purple and black form a gangway, and behind them are camerawomen, palace servants in purple, and even a few Nobles I recognize from the Chamber of Ministers.

Shock numbs my insides. This is just like with Rafaela, except Prince Kevon is on the receiving end of the attack.

"Zea!" Byron Blake runs behind the cordon of guards and onlookers, screaming questions.

I turn my gaze to the front. If he thinks I'm going to stop to give him an interview, he can think again. I need to be at Prince Kevon's side. I need to hold his hand and tell him everything will be alright.

The restaurant door opens, bringing with it a cacophony of shouts and screams. We step out to a lightning storm of camera flashes that are so bright I can barely see the guards holding back the crowds. The noise batters my eardrums, and every limb of my body trembles with the roar of the crowd.

Rough hands grab me from behind and secure my arms with cuffs.

“No,” I scream into the flashing lights.

A fist punches me in the back of the head, and pain spreads through my skull like wildfire. My limbs go limp, and two sets of hands hook underneath my arms and drag me through the walkway of shouts and flashing lights.

The guards follow Prince Kevon’s stretcher past the ambulance, where Queen Damascena awaits with her lady-at-arms. Lady Circi boards the vehicle with Prince Kevon, but the queen remains on the roadside. The hatred in her eyes promises vengeance.

“Eyes front.” He shoves the electroshocker into my side.

The sensation of a hundred stabbing needles penetrates me to the bone, and my muscles seize. Crushing, stabbing agony grips my chest. By the time his fist lands on my temple, I black out.



The throbbing of my head forces me awake, and bright lights shine through my eyelids. I squint to find myself lying on the floor of a six by six cage surrounded by metal bars. On my left, Emmera curls into a ball and sobs. Behind the bars on my right, Vitelotte stares down at me with concerned eyes.

Thoughts of Prince Kevon with a knife in his chest flood my mind, and tears flood my eyes.

“Why?” I whisper.

She closes her eyes and shakes her head.

Beyond our cages is a featureless, white room about thirty feet in width. Flat light panels run down the length of the ceiling, drenching the room with light. I have no idea if we’re in the palace or a dome or a Chamber of Ministers basement awaiting trial. I’m no longer wearing the silver dress but a canvas jumpsuit with metal loops around its reinforced seams.

A shiver runs down my spine as I imagine straps running through them and securing us to torture chairs.

Carolina once taught us that when imprisoned, Red Runner operatives must remain quiet or say they acted alone. Betraying their organization and their comrades will lead the Nobles to believe that every Harvester is a rebel, and that will mean sanctions for all.

Everything I’ve seen of Vitelotte leads me to believe she has been sent to the

palace by Carolina. She executes attacks with precision. When she warned me that Ryce didn't have the respect of his mother and led a group of no-hopers, I think she got that information directly from our leader.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. Why would Carolina only send one girl to the Princess Trials? Knowing that it was an opportunity to infiltrate the palace and knowing that the selection process was arbitrary, she should have sent every eligible girl within her organization.

My poisoning the guard who attacked Emmera only attracted the Wintergreens' attention, making me a last-minute addition to the number of girls sent.

I stumble to my feet and place a hand on the bar, but an electric shock races through my arm. When it reaches my heart, I scream.

Emmera raises her head and stares at me through bloodshot eyes. "Careful, those bars are electrified."

"Thanks," I mutter. "What's happening?"

"When you were helping His Highness, guards stormed the restaurant and brought us here." She breaks into a sob. "I think they killed the chef."

"What?" I whisper. That poor man only made the mistake of setting down a knife.

Emmera wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "They shot electroshockers at him, and bolts of electricity covered his body. How could she do this?"

I turn to Vitelotte, who pulls her gaze away.

My heart sinks. Vitelotte probably thinks she's making a sacrifice for the good of the Harvesters. All she has done is condemn us and our families. I can't voice any of this because it will make no difference to our plights. Someone is watching us on a screen to see what secrets we might divulge, and anything we say will be used to prove our guilt.

As the hours stretch out, my legs ache from standing between the bars on the floor. I can't lean against the wall bars for fear of being shocked, so I follow Emmera's example and sit. Vitelotte does the same on my right but all I can see is her back.

"Why did you do it?" Emmera stares into my eyes.

My brows draw together, and I wonder if she's referring to putting my hands on his chest. "What are you talking about?"

"You and Lotte," she says. "Why?"

I rear back with a shocked splutter. If this is an attempt to throw me under the tractor blades, it won't work. "Why did I save Prince Kevon's life? Why did you stand in the corner and scream when you could have helped?"



“I gave you a napkin,” she whispers.

“Why don’t you shut your mouth?” I snap.

Emmera lowers her head into her lap and sobs. I turn to Vitelotte, who rolls her eyes, acting as though we’re still friends. Right now, I want to charge through the bars and tear out her purple curls. What the hell gave her the right to stab an innocent man?

Nobody speaks after that, and the silence stretches out for hours. We sleep, we sit, we stare at the bars, the walls, at each other, but nothing changes except for the deepening of our hunger and thirst. Not knowing what’s happening on the outside is a cruel form of torture, and I ache to see Prince Kevon.

I lie on my back and think about the rebel’s dilemma, a revolution tactic Ryce once explained to our youth cell. If the guards arrest two accomplices, one can betray the other and go free, meaning execution for their comrade. If both betray each other, they each die and the guards might even find others in their cell. But if they both stay silent, they might each get a whipping and return to their families.

Carolina added that the rebels who went free for betraying their comrades might live, but they would suffer the wrath of the Red Runners. I wonder if this is why Vitelotte is remaining silent.

I lose track of time. We might have been here for seventy-two hours or a week. It’s hard to tell when the lights remain forever bright and we don’t mark the days. The throbbing of my skull turns into pounding blasts of pain, the rumbling of my stomach turns to spasms, and the membranes of my throat become so dry that they stick together. My heart aches for a sign that Prince Kevon survived.

Footsteps echo from afar, and I scramble to my feet. My heart beats a fast and irregular pace, and my hands won’t stop shaking.

The person who emerges from around the corner isn’t the royal torturer, but a tall man dressed in black Amstraadi armor that clashes with his blonde hair and crystal-blue eyes.

“Mouse,” I whisper.

“You three ladies of the harvest seem to be in a spot of bother,” he says with a smile.

My gaze lingers on the leather strap around his chest. I’ve seen guards use that type of holster to carry guns. A fist of dread clenches at my gut as I picture Ambassador Pascale bribing Montana for the opportunity to televise our executions.

“What do you want?” I ask.

He steps close to my cage. “Is that any way to speak to your savior?”

“I didn’t do anything.” Emmera clutches the bars and snatches her hand away with a scream.

Mouse wags a gloved finger and frowns. “Be careful. They’re electrified.”

My eyes narrow. Something tells me he’s been watching us this entire time or at least listening to our conversation while supposedly building a juvenation hospital.

“Would you like to hear some exciting news?” he asks.

I gulp. Based on my few interactions with Mouse, whatever he’s going to say will be part of a game. He’s probably the Amstraadi equivalent of Prunella Broadleaf, and here to make the Princess Trials more exciting for export.

Despite knowing his intentions aren’t entirely benevolent, I nod.

“Ingrid Strab returned from the wilderness.” He spreads his arms wide. After several beats, he asks, “Would you believe a Foundling captured her in the Gloria National Park, saying that he wanted to hurt the prince by stealing his beloved?”

“No,” I rasp.

His symmetrical features split into a grin. “Don’t worry, her purity is still intact.”

Mouse steps back to watch our reactions. I don’t know if any of this is a lie or why he’s sharing it. The buttons on his collar flick on and off, and two small discs gleam on the epaulets on each shoulder. I guess he has at least three cameras.

“Alright, then.” He reaches for the strap.

My heart flip-flops, and all three of us inhale sharp breaths. I take a step back, my pulse fluttering in my throat.

Instead of pulling out a rifle, he reveals a shoulder bag, reaches into its depths, and pulls out a bottle of Mountain Water. Droplets bead from its surface, making it look fresh from the refrigerator. He twists open the seal with a crack.

I gulp and rub my dry throat. Why on earth are they allowing this man to speak with us before we’re interrogated? Mouse drinks several long swallows and releases a loud exhale. It’s the long, refreshed sound people make when getting their first mouthful of water directly from the tap before the sun turns it lukewarm.

“Answer this question for a watery prize.” He holds up the three-quarters-full bottle. “Which of you have no feelings, good, bad or indifferent, toward the prince?”

“Me,” Emmera rasps.

I turn to the girl and frown, but her eyes are fixed on that water.

“Congratulations.” He steps toward Emmera’s cage and hands her the bottle.

Emmera opens it and takes tiny sips.

“And now for the next question.” He pulls out another bottle of water from his bag. “Who helped Miss Solar in this assassination?”

When nobody answers, Mouse opens his bottle and takes a long sip.

“I had no accomplices,” says Vitelotte.

“Wonderful.” He walks to her cage and hands her the bottle.

My tongue darts out to lick my dry lips. I don’t know if Vitelotte is trying to save us or just speaking up to receive a drink.

Mouse turns to me, his blue eyes twinkling like jewels. “How about you, Zea-Mays Calico?”

“What?” I whisper.

He steps in front of my cage, and his expression turns serious. “Do you love Prince Kevon, or have you been playing with his heart? Tell me it was all a game, and I’ll whisk you where no one will ever cause you harm.”

I drop my gaze. He wants me to denounce Prince Kevon in exchange for my freedom? This is just like the cryptic warning he gave me before the ball, only I know what will happen to me if I stay. A brutal interrogation, and if Prince Kevon doesn’t survive to get me out of this cage, I’m guaranteed a messy execution.

“How is he?” I ask.

“Your beloved?” The smile in his voice tells me he doesn’t believe I care for the prince.

I raise my chin and meet eerie blue eyes set within an unsettlingly perfect face. The first time I met Mouse, I thought he was a statue that had come to life, but now I’m thinking he’s an android or at least someone whose face was modeled by an artist obsessed with symmetry. He tilts his head to the side like an owl but somehow keeps his eyes fixed on mine.

“When I left Prince Kevon, his skin turned silver. They said it was the nanobots,” I say. “What’s happened to him since?”

Mouse frowns. “Do you love the prince?”

Queen Damascena’s threat wraps like a pair of hands around my throat, and I choke on thin air. The white walls around my cage seem to close in on us, and the lights shine brighter. The last time I tried to break things off with Prince Kevon, she threatened to tamper with the twins’ vaccinations. Escaping with Mouse will only lead to their deaths.

I nod. It’s not just to save my little brothers, but because it’s the truth. Watching Prince Kevon gunned down after the ball was heart-breaking, but it was nothing compared to seeing him stabbed. I’ll never forget the pulse and flow of his warm blood through my fingers, I’ll never forget staunching his death with

my hands.

Mouse raises his brows with a nod meant to encourage me to say it out loud.

“Yes, I love Prince Kevon.”

“An unexpected response,” he murmurs. “I commend your loyalty to the prince.”

He stares at me with intense scrutiny. The calculation in his eyes tells me he’s no longer playing a game, and I don’t know if that’s a good thing or bad.

Mouse reaches into his bag. I lick my lips, hoping he’ll give me a bottle of water. Instead, he pulls out a bag of trail mix and slips it through the bars of Emmera’s cage.

Emmera tears it open and sprinkles a handful in her mouth, then Mouse walks to Vitelotte’s cage and hands her a pack of the same mix. She murmurs her thanks and rips it open.

My stomach clenches, and my shoulders droop. Pride dictates that I should remain silent and not beg, but I’m so hungry and thirsty that it hurts.

“May I have some water?” I ask.

“You may have a token of my esteem.” He sticks his arm through the bar and hands me a small box. “A girl who wants to be the queen should always look her best.”

Without a word, Mouse walks out of the room.

Vitelotte pushes her trail mix and water bottle through the bars. “Have some.”

Her voice grates on my nerves. How dare she be nice to me after what she’s done? I turn and meet her wide, brown eyes set within a pretty face framed by burgundy curls. She looks so innocent and incapable of murdering someone in cold blood, but all the signs were there. I just ignored them because the people she killed were my enemies.

“How could you?” My voice breaks.

She scowls. “Do you know why I did nothing when those Nobles were hunting you?”

“You said you were scared.” The words feel false on my lips. Vitelotte is fearless.

“Harvesters don’t belong with Nobles, let alone with Royals,” she said. “Prince Kevon sold you a dream, but at the end of the Princess Trials, he’ll choose one of his own. You needed to experience these Nobles first-hand.”

Bitterness coats my tongue. If she had bothered to ask about the naked footage, she might have gotten the chance to understand my friendship with Prince Kevon. I exhale a weary breath and tilt my head toward the ceiling.

“Why did you change your mind?” I ask.

“Prunella Broadleaf’s trial was telling. Maybe she kept trying to kill you because you were a threat.”

“Prince Kevon is the kindest, most noble person I’ve ever met. Because of you, Phangloria might lose a sympathetic king.”

“Zea,” whispers Emmera. “What did that man give you?”

I open the box and find a pair of iridescent pearl earrings with clip-on fastenings. Hope seeps through my insides, and I almost forget about my thirst. Mouse might act like a creep, but he’s always offering me help.

I place the earrings on and turn to Emmera. “How do I look?”

She pushes her water bottle through my bars. “Like you just spent ten days without food or water.”

“Thanks.” I open her bottle, take enough to wet my throat, and hand it back.

Over the next several minutes, Emmera shares her trail mix and water with me. My Red Runner instincts tell me that Vitelotte is my true ally. When Emmera wanted to ditch me, it was Vitelotte who let me ride on the back of her glider. Vitelotte also rescued me from those murderous Guardian girls when she could have walked away. I know all this, yet when I think about Prince Kevon bleeding to the brink of death, I can’t bear to look at her.

“I’m sorry for always trying to get you into trouble,” says Emmera.

I stare at the other Harvester girl. Her blue-gray eyes shine with unshed tears, and she forces a trembling smile through dry, cracked lips. Emmera’s hair hangs limp down both sides of her face, and the roots are darkened with grease.

“Why are you saying this?” I ask.

“We’re going to die,” she murmurs. “I hope Prince Kevon survives. He seemed like a nice man and didn’t deserve to be stabbed. I can understand why you spent so much time with him. I should have been more of a friend instead of allying myself with the Nobles.”

“At least you know better for next time,” I mutter.

It’s not much of a comfort because nobody in this society believes in reincarnation. Maybe it was an option in the cradle of civilization when humans built the pyramids, but there were thirty billion souls alive before the first of the bombs struck. Nobody knows how many million remained after the slew of natural disasters that decimated the world populations.

When we die, our bodies will burn to ash, and the ashes placed in recyclable containers. Most families bury those containers in the earth and plant a seed. Then the plant can feed on the earth and ashes, and the soul will become one with nature. I don’t know if that’s true, but it’s better than coming back as a Harvester.

The footsteps return. I sit up, thinking it might be Mouse with more food and

cryptic comments, but General Ridgeback walks in, followed by Lady Circi.

My mouth drops open. What's Berta's father doing here? "What's happening?" I rush to the bars. "Did Prince Kevon survive?"

The general's gaze locks with mine, and I stiffen under his scrutiny. He points a gun at Vitelotte and pulls the trigger. Emmera screams, and a shocked breath whistles between my teeth. Vitelotte drops her trail mix as she falls to the concrete floor.

They both ignore me and stand side-by-side in front of Vitelotte's cage. When they're sure she's unconscious, Lady Circi places her palm on a bar, and the front of the cage springs open.

General Ridgeback steps in, wraps a meaty hand around Vitelotte's ankle, and drags her out of the room. As they're leaving, Lady Circi turns around and fixes me with a glare. The look in her eyes says that I'm going to be next.

Fear plummets through my stomach like a lead weight. I wrap my arms around my middle and resist the overwhelming urge to join Emmera's whimpers.

But one of my earrings starts to hum.

## CHAPTER 10

I clap a hand over my ear and then disguise the movement by scratching my head. The humming sound in my ears smooths out, and I hear footsteps moving around a hard surface. My throat dries, and I lower myself to the floor, wondering if Mouse is going to send me a secret message.

“They executed her,” Emmera says between sobs.

“There’s no blood.” I turn to the crying girl.

She lies facing me on her side with her arms wrapped around her knees, and her long, auburn hair covers her face. “What did you say?”

“If that gun contained real bullets, she would have bled.” I point at the white space outside our cells. “Some of it would have spilled across the floor as they drag her.”

Emmera raises her head and stares at me as if I’ve sprouted lizard scales. “How can you keep a cool head at a time like this?”

A wave of nausea rushes through my insides. I don’t know if it’s the water, the trail mix, or the impending torture session I’ve just imagined they’re subjecting to Vitelotte. I clutch my middle and exhale a long breath.

“The Princess Trials has been one disaster after another. If I didn’t stay calm, I’d already be dead.”

She lowers her gaze, and her cheeks turn red. Maybe she’s thinking about directing armed Nobles to the eucalyptus tree where she thought I’d hidden.

“Subject Solar’s heart rate is within optimal ranges,” a female voice says in my ear. “The truth serum is in effect.”

A bolt of alarm slices through my veneer of calm, and I straighten from my slumped position. Emmera says something, but I tune her out. Mouse is letting me listen to Vitelotte’s interrogation.

Lady Circi asks Vitelotte a series of routine questions, such as her name, age, family, and work history. The responses come in a slow monotone. I chew on

the inside of my lip and stare at my fingers, waiting to see what she will say about Carolina and the Red Runners.

“What happened to Berta Ridgeback?” asks a male voice.

“She drowned,” says Vitelotte in that droning voice.

“Did you see her die?”

“No.”

Someone huffs. “You need to be more specific.” Lady Circi sounds impatient, making me wonder if this truth serum has a time limit. “What was Miss Ridgeback doing the last time you saw her?”

“She left the coach to chase after Zea-Mays Calico.”

“Why?” asks the male voice, who I’m sure is Berta’s father.

I hold my breath, hoping Vitelotte doesn’t implicate me in Berta’s death.

“Ingrid Strab said that anyone who killed Zea-Mays Calico would become her lady-at-arms when she married Prince Kevon.”

My stomach drops. She’s just given them my motive for killing Berta: self-defense.

“Hey, Zea?” Emmera shouts.

I raise my head and meet the other girl’s annoyed features. “What?”

“Are you sleeping?”

Lowering my upper body to the floor, I curl into a comfortable sleeping position and face the empty cell. “I’m trying.”

After that, Emmera leaves me alone, and the subject moves to the stabbing of Prince Kevon. Vitelotte answers a series of questions posed by Lady Circi and by a different male voice, and she reveals that she hadn’t joined the Princess Trials as an assassin but as a spy.

“What was your mission?” asks Lady Circi.

“To find a hidden entrance to the palace.”

I inhale a sharp breath through my nostrils. Earlier, when I speculated that Vitelotte was a Red Runner, I hadn’t completely believed it. My mind generated a scenario brought on by hunger, thirst, and abandonment. Deep down, I hoped Vitelotte hadn’t been telling the truth about Ryce being put in charge of a group of lost causes and that Carolina hadn’t asked me to join the Princess Trials as an afterthought.

The earring goes silent. I’m sure nobody is speaking because they realize the production assistants have transported us through numerous hallways. By now, Vitelotte would have found several ways to get into the palace.

“How were you supposed to communicate these hidden entrances?” Lady Circi asks.

“There’s an application on my Netphone,” Vitelotte replies.



Lady Circi orders someone in the interrogation room to scour Vitelotte's suite. My heart thunders. What happened to the watch Ryce delivered through Sharqi? I'm sure I put it in my boot, but I haven't seen any of the garments I wore in the previous round of the Trials.

I force deep, calming breaths in and out of my nostrils and try to focus on the rest of the interrogation.

"Who received this information?" Lady Circi.

Vitelotte doesn't reply, and my breaths go shallow. The rebel's dilemma doesn't work in a situation like this because she stabbed Prince Kevon in front of cameras and witnesses. However, Vitelotte can't be more than eighteen, and they might be lenient on her if she hands them information on the Red Runners.

Lady Circi repeats the question with more force.

"I gave the interview to Ryce Wintergreen," replies Vitelotte.

My eyes snap open, and I inhale a noisy gasp.

"And the name of your group?" asks Lady Circi.

Vitelotte pauses before replying, "There's just me and Ryce."

I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. The bright lights sting my retinas, and when I shift them away, floaters appear before my eyes. Vitelotte's confession makes no sense.

My brows draw together. What if Mouse put something in her water that allows her to conceal the truth? But I don't understand why Mouse would protect her when she's clearly guilty. If they're allies, why did she point out Ryce in the farmers market and suggest he was lower than a corn snake?

Over the next few minutes, Vitelotte explains a story similar to mine. She fell in love with a boy she met in Rugosa, who offered her a future in exchange for joining the Princess Trials and finding a route into the palace.

"What was the point of gaining access to the royal family?" asks Lady Circi.

"We wanted to take some souvenirs to sell," Vitelotte drones. "The money would help us leave the Harvester Region and become Artisans."

I bite down on my lip, wondering if anyone's going to believe such a ridiculous tale. They might if they're anything like Berta, who always called me a bumpkin and implied I was stupid. I might be upset that Carolina and Ryce aren't the heroes that I imagined, but I don't want the Red Runners hurt.

The earring's sound cuts out for a few seconds, and I clasp my hands over my roiling stomach. Mouse is either toying with me or trying to get me killed. That water bottle did contain an antidote, but he gave it to Vitelotte. The only reason she's not staying silent is that they will work out what's happened and give her another drug.

My throat spasms. Maybe Mouse thinks I'm as innocent as Emmera and

don't need any protection or maybe my confession will be a surprise twist in the show he'll import back to his republic?

I stare into Vitelotte's empty cell until my vision turns double. When they drag me in for my interrogation, the serum will make me betray the Red Runners and get everyone executed.

The sound returns and Vitelotte explains the details of the robbery she supposedly planned with Ryce. Lady Circi and the other interrogator's voices become less tense. It's as though they believe that Vitelotte is just a thief.

"Why did you stab the prince?" asks a voice.

Something sharp pierces my earlobe, making me curl into a ball. My pained hiss drowns out Vitelotte's response about proving her love for Ryce.

"Zea?" asks Emmera.

"Just... cramps," I say from between clenched teeth.

She offers me a sip of water, but I refuse. Liquid seeps out of the earrings, and my vision blurs. I hope to Gaia or whoever is listening that this is a last-minute antidote.

As soon as the needles retreat into the pearls, I sit up, reach underneath my disheveled braids, and rub my ears. Clear liquid gathers on my fingertips, but it evaporates and leaves no smell or taste.

I can no longer hear anything from the other room, so I focus my attention on Emmera's speculations on what she thinks happened to Vitelotte.

Several minutes later, Lady Circi returns with General Ridgeback. My heart rate trebles and my breaths become shallow. Emmera whimpers and cowers in the corner of her cell.

General Ridgeback points his gun at me, and a sharp pain pierces my chest. My mouth opens to let out a gasp, but I fall unconscious before my head hits the floor.



Bright lights shine in my face, and beeping sounds fill my ears. I awaken secured to a plastic chair. Thick straps wind through the loops of my canvas jumpsuit, and bands of plastic also secure my ankles and wrists. I can't see anything beyond the lights, and I can't tell if I'm alone in the room or surrounded by interrogators.

My gaze drops down to my exposed forearm, where an intravenous tube delivers clear fluid from a bag suspended on a metal pole. This has to be the truth serum.

I try to raise my arm, to break free of my bonds, but my limbs feel like lead. I should be panicked because I didn't drink an antidote and there's no telling if

the injection worked, but I can barely feel my pulse. Slow breaths ease in and out of my lungs, and it feels like I've just woken in the middle of the night.

Someone shines an even brighter light into my pupils and announces that I'm ready for questioning.

After some general questions, General Ridgeback asks about Berta, and I answer with a variation of what I said to the Chamber of Ministers. Berta chased after me, I ran, and we both tumbled down the mountainside.

"Where did you fall?" asks General Ridgeback.

"Into a sewer," I say for the benefit of Lady Circi. When the queen hears this recording, she'll think her secret underground river is safe.

"How did Berta die?" The General's voice is hoarse.

My heart clenches. At this rate, he'll never get the truth about what happened to his daughter. "I heard that she drowned."

General Ridgeback asks several more questions, such as if I saw Berta in the sewer, why Berta's blood had traces of the Foundling's poison, but I say that I don't know.

"So, it really was an accident." Lady Circi sounds apologetic. It's the most human thing she's said since she asked Prince Kevon if he loved me.

The General's heavy footsteps recede across the room and a lighter set approach. I stare ahead into the light, letting my vision blur. A male voice asks if I know Ryce Wintergreen, and I tell them about having witnessed the death of his father at the hands of a guard. Anyone who has checked my record is aware of our connection because of the witness statement I recorded years ago. Ryce was one of the last people to visit me before I left Rugosa.

"Did Ryce Wintergreen send you to the Princess Trials?" the male voice asks.

"No."

"Why did you volunteer for the Trials?" asks Lady Circi.

"I wanted a few days off work," I say in a monotone.

Someone in the back of the room snorts. A door opens, and a set of footsteps hurries out. I'm sure the person left to laugh. If I didn't feel so numb right now, I might have smiled that my lie was incriminating enough to sound true.

"Have you communicated with Ryce Wintergreen during your time in the Oasis?" asks Lady Circi.

Unease stirs in the back of my mind. This is a tricky question because I've spoken to him at least twice. If they catch me in a lie, they'll just wait for the antidote to wear off before resuming the interrogation, but if I tell the truth, it will mean my execution.

"At the farmer's market," I murmur.

“What did he want to know?” she asks.

“If Vitelotte was falling in love with Prince Kevon,” I reply.

I should feel guilty for giving Ryce an even bigger motive for wanting Prince Kevon dead, but the serum running through my veins suppresses my emotions. Or it could be an effect of the drug in Mouse’s earring.

“Did you know anything about a plot to murder members of the royal family?” asks the male voice.

“No.” It’s the first time I’ve told the truth in minutes.

The next few questions are about the murder I witnessed all those years ago, and they ask me if Ryce ever confided in me about wanting revenge against Phangloria for not finding his father’s killer. I tell them the truth. Ryce barely spoke to me over the following years because I watched his father die and was unable to provide the Guardians with a meaningful description of the murderer.

Eventually, one of the voices says that the serum is wearing off. The needle withdraws from my arm, and someone drags me through the hallways and into the back of a van. As the vehicle jostles and rolls me across its metallic floor, I send Mouse a silent word of thanks. He probably doesn’t know how much he saved me with the antidote and listening device, but I resolve to be nicer the next time I see him.

By the time the van’s doors swing open and a pair of female palace guards pull me to get out, I’m still drowsy and unable to walk. My vision blurs as they walk me through an underground parking lot, through a maze of passageways I recognize as the palace and into my room.

Light from the setting sun streams in through tall windows on the right side of the space. As soon as the door clicks shut, Relief loosens my chest muscles, and I exhale a long breath. I stumble past the velvet sofa and dining chairs to reach the bed, where I collapse face-down into a nest of pillows and groan.

If they’ve returned me to the palace, I’m no longer considered an immediate threat. I place my palms on the soft mattress, try to push myself up so I can turn on the Lifestyle Channel for an update on Prince Kevon, but exhaustion pulls me into a deep sleep.



Gentle hands turn me around, and soft voices whisper in my ear. Forelle’s floral scent fills my nostrils. All this time I spent in the cage, I hadn’t once wondered how my friend might be faring. She’s also from Rugosa and might have also come under suspicion along with Emmerra and me.

Someone hooks their hands under my arms and pulls me off the bed, while another set of hands takes my feet. I crack open an eye and see that it’s only

Georgette. She's wearing one of the white robes that hang on the bathroom door.

I drift off again and wake up to a warm bath and meet a pair of huge, gray eyes framed by a shock of red hair.

"Zea?" A familiar voice echoes in my ears.

"Forelle?" I murmur.

"We're getting you ready," she says.

I blink myself into awareness. Firm hands massage something cool and gloopy into my hair, and my nostrils fill with the scent of lemon balm. On my left, a large close up of Prunella Broadleaf murmurs something incomprehensible into a wall screen. On my right, is the rest of the bathroom.

"Ready?" I croak. "For what?"

"The Princess Trials is about to restart." Forelle scrubs a brush under my fingernails and scowls.

My breath catches. "What about Prince Kevon?"

She meets my gaze with a sad smile. "He's still in the Royal Hospital."

"He woke up this morning and gave an interview." Georgette's fingers withdraw from my hair. She walks around and stands beside Forelle. "He just wants life to go back to normal."

My shoulders slump, and I exhale my relief through my nostrils. "How's his skin?" When they exchange puzzled looks, I ask, "How long have I been gone?"

"Eight days." Georgette dips a washcloth into the bathwater and rubs at a spot beneath my ear. She places the cloth on the edge of the bath and heads toward the walk-in shower.

Forelle gulps. "When we saw all that blood on your skin and that silver paint on your hands, we thought the worst."

I shake my head. "It wasn't mine."

The fog over my mind clears, and heat rushes to my cheeks. "You undressed me?"

"Only down to your underwear." Forelle's brow wrinkles. "Sorry, but there isn't much time."

The wall switches from Prunella to footage of Ingrid Strab sitting by Prince Kevon's bedside. Something about her looks different. Prettier. The camera zooms into his paler-than-usual face. His eyes are closed, and his features are more chiseled than ever. He reminds me of a lot of Harvester men his age, who expend more energy than they consume. Someone has slicked his hair off his face, making it appear darker.

A gasp slips from my lips. He survived.

The camera swings to Ingrid, who reads from a leather-bound book. She's either wearing a wig or the producers have softened her pinched features and

added several inches to her hair. Instead of the usual jumpsuit, she wears a knee-length ivory dress with a matching jacket that looks like something from the wardrobe of Queen Damascena.

Georgette returns with a carton decorated with pictures of coconuts. She huffs an annoyed breath, stabs it with a plastic straw, and holds it in front of my face. “Ever since Ingrid returned from being held captive, she’s been sitting with the prince.”

“Why?” I nod my thanks and take the proffered drink.

The carton’s exterior is cool, and when I pull its contents from the straw the taste of coconut floods my mouth. It’s sweet and somehow more refreshing than Smoky Water. The cool liquid moistens my dry tongue and slides down my throat, making it feel less like parched earth.

Forelle tightens her lips. “Byron Blake is desperate to present them as a fated couple, separated by tragedy. That footage they kept playing while she was gone doesn’t help.”

My brows furrow. “Footage?”

Georgette waves her hand. “A montage of romantic moments she supposedly shared with Prince Kevon.”

I gulp my coconut water, remembering that pile of horse manure, which included Ingrid replacing me in our near kiss at the fountain and my fight with the hijackers. So much has happened since then that it fades into insignificance.

“Does Prince Kevon know she’s there?” I ask.

“They only let her in when he’s sleeping,” says Forelle. “Garrett spends most of his time in the hospital, making sure he’s well-guarded.”

“How are things going between you two?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I haven’t seen him in days, but we talk every night on Netface.”

The girls help me out of the bath. My head spins and I nearly lose my footing, but they hold me steady and walk me across the gray tile to the huge shower, where there’s a stool propped against the tiled wall.

Thick globs of conditioner-covered hair fall onto my face, but I’m past caring. A mix of fatigue, hunger, thirst, and the remnants of the drugs make my legs tremble with each step. When I finally reach the security of the seat, I rest my head against the wall and exhale ragged breaths.

Georgette rushes to the right of the bathroom and turns on the sink’s taps, then she runs the bath again before raising the volume and returning to us. The sound of running water and the Lifestyle Channel fill the room, and I remember the servants’ trick for fooling the hidden microphones.

I’m about to speak when Forelle turns on the shower and drenches us with

warm water.

She kneels at my side and places her hands on my lap. “Sorry for not letting you sleep, but this is important.”

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Georgette hands me another carton of coconut water. “People know what’s really happening, and they’re outraged.”

My stomach clenches and my fingers turn numb. There are so many hidden truths, I don’t dare to ask which they’ve uncovered. “What are you talking about?”

“Someone leaked footage of the stabbing on Netface,” says Georgette.

My mouth drops open, and the straw slips from my lips. “Who?”

She raises her shoulder and shakes her head. “They saw you help Prince Kevon when everyone else panicked. They also heard what the emergency technicians said. You saved his life.”

A lump forms in my throat, and I stare into my lap. All the weight I gained during my time in the Oasis is gone, leaving me with legs like a grasshopper. Even the fingers holding the carton appear thinner.

“The nation saw how the guard electrocuted and punched you unconscious on the street then dragged you into the back of a van,” Forelle adds with a sob. “What else happened? You look terrible.”

I mumble a few sentences about being held in a cage with Emmera and Vitelotte, but then remember that I stepped out of the restaurant covered in blood. “Did people think I tried to kill Kevon?”

Georgette wraps her hand around my wrist and brings the straw level to my lips in a silent cue to continue drinking. “The Lifestyle Channel said nothing for the first few days and just played Princess Trials reruns. By then, the rags reported the leaked footage, which made the Nobles scream for answers in the Chamber of Ministers.”

“Then Ingrid conveniently emerged from her ordeal,” adds Forelle.

I stare at my friend and frown. She was never this skeptical before. “You think she was faking?”

“Of course,” says Georgette. “They’re just trying to replicate what happened with you.”

I slump against the wall and try to take in all this new information. According to Georgette, whose family is addicted to the Lifestyle Channel, the production assistants came under pressure the evening of the ball when nobody could find Berta or me. With Prunella Broadleaf confessing to making an attempt on my life, they all thought I was dead until I entered the Chamber of Ministers with Prince Kevon.

My brows draw together. “That explains the huge round of applause.”

Georgette nods. “They made such a big deal about Ingrid going missing and they probably would have stretched out the suspense for longer, but they needed a distraction from Prince Kevon’s stabbing.”

I run a hand through my wet hair. “But there were so many guards searching the National Park...”

Georgette snorts. “I can point out six of these so-called guards from my theater school.”

“Actors?” I glance at Forelle.

She places a comforting hand on my shoulder and grimaces. “Sorry, but they’re trying really hard to make Ingrid look like she was meant to become the next queen.”

Bile rises to the back of my throat, and I clench my teeth. “Why did they even bother to keep me in the Trials when they could have just sent me home?”

Forelle turns her gaze to Georgette, who pulls her brows together in a look of contemplation. I gulp, and try to calm my breaths. What aren’t they telling me?

“Remember how I said that there’s footage of you saving Prince Kevon?” asks Georgette.

I nod.

“That’s not all someone has leaked on Netface,” she says.

“What’s there?” I whisper.

“Everything,” says Forelle. “Clips of you and Prince Kevon falling in love along with footage that could only have come from his Amstraad device. I don’t know how they got it, but anyone who searches Netface can see the truth.”

The carton of juice slips from my loose fingers and falls into my lap. Cool coconut water oozes out from the straw, and I lean forward with a groan. “Do they think it came from me?”

“Of course not.” Forelle rubs my back.

I bet she thinks I’ve gone crazy. Anyone else would celebrate that the whole of Phangloria knew about their budding romance with the future king, but these videos could mean my family’s death.

I raise my head and meet my friend’s worried eyes. “Have you heard anything from Rugosa?”

“A few journalists went to your house and tried to interview your parents, but they seemed confused because they only watch what’s available on OasisVision.”

Georgette walks around the bathroom and turns off the taps. I pick up the carton of coconut water and drain its contents in several long gulps. This isn’t as bad as I initially thought. Queen Damascena can’t blame me for actions that took



place while her security people held me in a cage, can she?

After giving me some energy pills, which taste like orange and fizz on my tongue, the girls leave me to finish bathing alone. I peel off my underwear and rinse the conditioner out of my hair. It doesn't matter if everyone in the Oasis knows the truth about Prince Kevon and me. As long as the queen outranks him, I have to obey her to protect my family.

When I step out into the walk-in wardrobe, Forelle and Georgette are ready with a hairdryer, makeup brushes, and an eggplant-colored jumpsuit they say will look wonderful on my skin. I sit in front of the dressing table and let them go to work, but as soon as they've done my hair and makeup, they step back for me to get changed.

Forelle says she'll order me some soup, and Georgette leaves with her. As soon as the door clicks shut, I examine the wardrobe. Two rails of clothes stand opposite each other from within the ivory cabinets. I rifle through an array of outfits that include short dresses, long gowns, more jumpsuits than a person could use in a year, and find my Harvester Uniform.

Tomato juice no longer stains the apron, and there's no sign of the small pocket I stitched into its side. The palace staff must have replaced it with a replica when they couldn't make it pristine.

Behind another door are shoes arranged in shelves that stretch up to the wall. There's no sign of the boots I wore during the previous round but then I give myself a mental slap upside the head. I didn't return to the navy barracks after Prunella gassed the room, and I changed at the guesthouse.

"Zea?" Forelle knocks on the door.

"Coming!" I hurry back to the clothes rail and pull on the jumpsuit.

When I step out into my room, Garrett rises from the sofa, looking grave. He wears an officer's jacket, but instead of navy blue, it's the same purple as the one worn by palace guards. With his blue-black hair and dark eyes, he looks more like a prince than the man I saw in the hospital bed.

I pause at the door and gape. This is the first time I've seen him since the ball.

"Zea, I'm glad you're well," he says. "Kevon wants to see you immediately."

## CHAPTER 11

*M*y heart flutters the entire journey to the Royal Hospital, and I can barely make conversation with Garrett as he drives me through the Oasis streets. We pass a district of wide, tree-lined streets of blue-haired patrons drinking and dining outside restaurants, oblivious to the girls who were starved and interrogated under truth serums.

When I ask about Emmera and Vitelotte, Garrett assures me that Emmera has been released. He urges me to eat the sandwich we took from the palace and piles me with syrupy juices that he promises will help regain my strength. I'm too tired and hungry to do anything but eat, drink, and yearn for Prince Kevon.

His hospital room is twice the size of our family kitchen, guarded by two uniformed men in purple, and smells as though recently cleaned with disinfectant. With its ivory walls and carpet, it looks more like my suite at the palace than a place of healing.

At the far left of the room is a lounge area with a writing desk and velvet sofas wide enough to seat twelve. Crystal floor lamps provide gentle illumination, making me wonder if Prince Kevon has been entertaining.

On the left of the room, a wider-than-average hospital bed stands on a long sheet of white polymer that stretches from beneath the bed, up the wall, and across the ceiling. Blue lights shine down, reminding me of the sterilization methods used by the emergency medical staff.

Prince Kevon's vital signs flash on the display, but there's no sign of the prince. I turn to Garrett and frown. "Where is he?"

He asks one of the guards, who tells us that the prince is on the roof terrace and points us toward a door that I hadn't noticed until now.

It leads to an empty white hallway with an elevator door. I wipe my damp palms on the fabric of my jumpsuit as we step inside. This is my first experience of riding such a device, but there's no time to fret about my safety when it lurches upward.

I grab Garrett's arm for balance, but before he can ask what I'm doing, the elevator doors open into an outdoor space. This must be what he meant by a roof garden.

The roof is sectioned into a fifty-foot space by tall walls covered in climbing roses. Garrett places a hand on the small of my back and guides me off the elevator.

This portion of the roof is tiled, save for the wooden flower beds that house shrubs of lavender and brightly-colored herbs such as red clover and orange calendula.

My gaze lands on a dark-haired figure sitting in a wicker chair that faces the edge of the roof.

Prince Kevon stands, looking as tall and as handsome as ever but not as steady on his feet. He wears loose pants and a white hospital gown that wraps around his chest like a kimono.

Garrett places a hand on my shoulder. "I'll stand at the elevator, so you can have your privacy."

"Thank you."

The smile Garrett gives me communicates a range of emotions. Gratitude for having saved Prince Kevon's life, affection, and a warm acceptance that I've never seen in anyone outside my family.

Garrett picked me out from the crowd in Rugosa and marched me to the marquee. He's known since the beginning that I was the one for Prince Kevon, and the approval in his eyes says he's delighted with his choice.

I smile back, understanding why Forelle has fallen for Garrett, and rush into Prince Kevon's arms. The sharp scent of antiseptic covers his warm, sensual scent, but he still feels like the man I've come to love.

"Zea," he whispers into my hair. "I'm so sorry they kept you in that detention center. Are you hurt?"

I tilt my head up and meet his eyes. His pupils are wide with a tiny ring of indigo-blue. Dark shadows circle his eyes, and the contours of his face are even more pronounced than I saw on the Lifestyle Channel.

Pain clutches at my chest, and I wonder how he can still stand after such an attack. "I'm fine, now."

He slides his fingertips down the side of my face, and his touch sends tingles down my spine and across my ribs. "I thought I would never see you again."

My stomach tightens, and I turn my gaze to the sky. The sun shines through white clouds and turns their thin edges an incandescent white. When I lay on that cold floor, hungry, thirsty, and mad with grief, I thought I would never see the outside of that cage, let alone my family or Prince Kevon.

I thought he hadn't survived the stabbing and a slow death in a cage was our punishment. I can't express myself as well as Prince Kevon, especially when it comes to my emotions, and the words won't form in my mind.

Instead, I say, "How are you feeling?"

"Better, now that I know you're safe." He guides me to a wicker sofa, which overlooks the city, and we sit.

The Royal Hospital feels twice as high as the navy barracks. From this vantage point, the Oasis looks like a giant park of lawns and small forests built around lakes and canals and rivers.

Each building is surrounded by water or a stretch of green, and even the highways are tree-lined boulevards. At the far edge of the city stand the massive domes that make up the Botanical Gardens. The muscles of my chest tighten, and resentment closes around my throat.

Some days, it's hard to believe that people who live in such wealth and beauty are capable of atrocities. Today, it is not.

Prince Kevon brings our interlaced fingers to his lips and kisses my knuckles. "I saw the footage of your arrest. That officer who hurt you is now serving the rest of his career in a military prison."

My mouth drops open, and I turn to meet his sad eyes. "You had him punished?"

He frowns and tilts his head. "He should never have put his hands on you, especially since you were the only reason I didn't bleed to death."

Prince Kevon wraps a strong arm around my shoulder, and the tightness in my chest loosens, allowing me to relax. This is the first time in my entire existence that I've heard of a guard being punished for the unfair treatment of a Harvester.

I wrap my left arm around prince Kevon's front. The muscles under his thin garment feel more pronounced, as though he has been starving for the entire week that I was gone. My other arm slides around his back and hits something hard. I trace the object with my fingertips. It feels like a centipede along his spine with metal legs running along his ribs.

"What's this?"

His brows draw together. "An Amstraad spine monitor for my autonomic nervous system."

A shudder of horror sweeps through my body, and I snatch my hand away from the device. "What?"

He draws back and offers me a tight smile. "It's temporary until the cardiologist deems my heart capable of beating on its own."

My throat thickens. I know nothing about medicine or surgery, but I've seen

how devices like these can malfunction. Even though Mouse helped me through that interrogation with his earrings, I still don't know anything about the Amstraad Republic's motives.

"What if someone accesses it through Netface?" My words sound stupid as soon as they leave my lips, but I don't have the correct terminology or comprehension of the subject to express my concerns.

Prince Kevon pats my shoulder. "These devices work on a separate network."

"Like the one that got Gemini Pixel executed?"

He winces. "I'm sorry about that. My mother assured me—"

"No." I place a hand on his broad chest. "I know you tried your best for Gemini, and I also know the limits of your power. But if someone would assassinate Rafaela via her Amstraad monitor, couldn't they do the same to you?"

His shoulders droop, and worry clenches at my heart. He nods. "Unfortunately, I don't have much of a choice. The blade damaged my heart, and my mother agreed to a synthetic muscle-tissue graft to maintain its capacity and function. Until that tissue learns to move in sync with the rest of my heart, I'm dependent on this monitor."

My mind goes blank. Why couldn't they just sew up the wound? Why introduce artificial material into his body when they could have just repaired it? I wish I knew more about medicine, computers, and everything outside of growing tomatoes and corn. My education is lacking, and I can't even ask the right questions without sounding like a superstitious yokel.

Prince Kevon places his hand over mine. "Please, don't worry. My medical team chose the best option to restore my health and ensure that I live a long life."

We sit in silence for a while with me resting my head in the crook of Prince Kevon's neck. I have to trust that Queen Damascena cares enough for her son to take the best medical advice.

Leaves rustle in the breeze, and the scent of roses overpowers the lavender. The sun emerges from behind the clouds and drenches us with warmth and light. It's so peaceful up here, surrounded by gorgeous plants and with the view of the lake in the distance.

Prince Kevon points out gigantic, tree-shaped structures that tower over a street of tall buildings. He explains that King Arias commissioned them when he turned eighteen, and they now provide enough solar power and rainwater to run the new juvenation hospital.

"I could stay up here forever with you," I murmur.

He kisses my hand. "When I awoke and didn't find you at my bedside, I

thought you had left the Trials.”

I draw back and meet his sad, dark eyes. “I wouldn’t leave at a time like this.”

“But you wanted to leave,” he says.

I shake my head, even though the thought of returning to Rugosa fills me with relief. “The only thing I wanted to leave was the threats and the violence of the Princess Trials. Never you.”

Silence stretches out between us, only broken by the quickening of my heart. I hate myself for accepting his kindness one minute and rejecting him the next. Even when others might call me cold and ungrateful, Prince Kevon has only been patient.

I exhale a sigh. Navigating his mother’s cruel whims is like walking along the edge of a well-disguised pit.

“When you said that you could never…” His words trail off, and the pain in his eyes tells me that what I said to him in my room hurt more than Vitelotte’s knife.

The urge to tell him everything burns through my insides. If he knew Queen Damascena had threatened my family, he would understand why I’d been so cold, but I must remain silent. Prince Kevon isn’t himself right now, and if I spent eight days in a cell, there’s absolutely no way he would be in a position to send help to Rugosa before the queen’s people attacked.

I exhale a weary breath and try to phrase my next sentence in a way that would satisfy Queen Damascena and explain a little of my predicament to Prince Kevon. “Maybe I wanted you to give the other girls a chance.”

“Traveling to the Oasis with every group of girls gave me the opportunity to see them,” he says.

I raise my brows. “You barely spoke to the other girls on my stagecoach.”

“Because I saw you,” he says with a smirk.

An exasperated breath huffs from my chest. I’m too worried about damaging the monitor on his spine to give him a shake. “Kevon.”

He chuckles. “If I make more of an effort with the other girls, will you give me another chance?”

I lower my gaze to my lap and bite down on my lip. It’s a terrible thought but if he doesn’t become the King of Phangloria soon, I’ll be forced to guide his attention toward one of the Noble girls.

“Zea, what’s wrong?” he asks.

“Your Highness?” asks a voice from behind.

We twist around on the sofa and find twelve Nobles standing by the elevator, each wearing burgundy robes with white trim. I recognize a few from the garden

party and the Chamber of Ministers, such as Montana and the Minister of Justice.

The Minister of Justice steps forward. She's a tall, thin woman whose tight skin stretches around prominent cheekbones. Her blue-black hair is styled into a thick braid that wraps around her head like a wreath. The only thing that indicates her age are ears too large for her face. She purses her lips and casts us a reproving glance. I narrow my eyes, wondering if it was her or the queen who arranged our week of starvation.

"Please come back later," says Prince Kevon. "I'm in the middle of important business."

The older woman inclines her head. "My apologies, Your Highness, but the matter is urgent."

"What is it?" Irritation hardens his voice.

"It's about Miss Solar," she replies.

My stomach clenches, and all the muscles in my body stiffen. Prince Kevon's arm tightens around my shoulders.

"What about her?" His voice is measured, hesitant.

I keep myself as still and quiet as possible in case someone decides this information is too confidential for my ears.

"I beg you to reconsider her punishment," says the minister. "Pardoning Miss Solar will only weaken the monarchy and cause the populace to make more attempts on your life."

I clench my teeth. By populace, she probably means other Harvesters and possibly the Industrials. Her dark eyes meet mine for the briefest moment, and I know she's referring to me. When the annoyance fades, warmth spreads through my heart. I long to ask why Prince Kevon would forgive Vitelotte for such a violent attack, but not in front of these vipers.

Another Noble steps forward, a shorter man with a stout build, who clasps his hands. "To maintain order, you must consent to a public execution."

"No," Prince Kevon replies.

The Nobles exchange glances, but none of them speak.

With a weary sigh, Prince Kevon says, "There has been unrest since the trials began. People are unsatisfied with the introduction of the Amstraadi candidates, the murder attempts, unexplained deaths, and the discrepancy between the footage broadcasted by the Lifestyle Channel and the real footage circulated on Netface."

Montana steps forward and wrings his hands. His posture is stooped and his quickened breath tells me that these videos are keeping him awake at night. "We are working hard to locate the perpetrators—"

“Broadcast the truth,” Prince Kevon snaps. “Stop falsifying events to suit your agenda, and people might stop turning to Netface and the rags for the truth.”

The older Noble frowns, but his skin is too tight for the expression to make any impact. “The issue at hand is Miss Solar, Your Highness.”

I swallow back a snarl but it’s not my place to reprimand Nobles. Montana is as slippery as a slug in the middle of the rainy season.

“My decision to banish her stands,” says the prince. “As the aggrieved party in the incident, I am within my rights to choose her punishment.”

Montana glances at the Minister of Justice, who encourages him with a nod. Then the man turns to the prince and says, “Please reconsider—”

Prince Kevon stands so quickly, his eyes unfocus, and he sways on his feet. Sweat beads on his brow, and he looks on the verge of collapse. The Nobles step back and flinch, as though none of them want to take responsibility for worsening the prince’s condition.

I scramble to my feet and wrap a supporting arm around his back. “Sit down.”

He steadies himself with an arm around my shoulder and raises a palm at Garrett, who has broken through the wall of Nobles to help his cousin.

“One moment,” Prince Kevon says in a gentle voice. “This needs to be said.”

The Nobles’ arrogant veneer is replaced with a mix of worry. I’m not sure if they’re concerned about Prince Kevon’s health or what Queen Damascena and Lady Circi will do to them for irritating the prince while he’s convalescing.

The sun disappears behind a cloud, along with its gentle warmth, and a cool breeze rattles the leaves of the climbing roses.

“How many girls have died under your protection?” asks Prince Kevon. “How many have almost lost their lives?”

Montana’s mouth falls open. “We have implemented your suggestions for a safer Princess Trials. I fail to see how Miss Solar’s situation—”

“If you and your team had vetted Miss Solar before letting her in the Princess Trials, then you would have uncovered her relationship with Wintergreen.”

I gulp. Something about Vitelotte tells me she made up that story about Ryce to cover up for the Red Runners, but Prince Kevon has a point. The Lifestyle Channel could have managed the selection process better instead of leaving the decision making until the last minute.

Prince Kevon releases me and walks around the wicker sofa. His shoulders broaden with each step he makes toward the cowering Nobles, and for a moment, I forget that he’s recovering from a knife in the chest. Even in a thin hospital robe and matching pants, he comports himself like a king.



I glance at Garret, who gives me an encouraging wink. He's close enough to the prince to catch him if he falls, but Prince Kevon looks ready for battle.

A short-haired Noble woman whose petite features remind me of the tomato-seller steps forward and holds up a twelve-inch-wide computer tablet. "Perhaps Her Majesty has a different opinion."

The queen sits in the leather chair of her mobile dressing room, and a pair of pale hands withdraw to the edge of the screen. "I commend your conviction, Kevon. Now, please sit down."

Prince Kevon lowers himself to a wooden bench the edge of a flowerbed and folds his arms.

"The Chamber of Ministers is correct," she says. "Pardoning Miss Solar will make you look weak and sends a precedent for future attacks."

"Mother, have you seen the footage of Miss Solar's brother and grandmother begging for mercy?" he asks.

"They should have begged her not to stab a prince," she snaps.

I bite down on my lip. As much as I despise Queen Damascena and owe Vitelotte my life, it still hurts that she would try to kill an unarmed man. Even though I hate what she's done, I wish these people would understand the desperation that drove her to such terrible violence.

Her story resonates through me—her family's desperation for a better life in Bos, her mother's avoidable death in childbirth, and the family's subsequent reduction in water rations—the injustice would drive anyone to despair.

"Enough girls have died because of the mismanagement of these trials. Rafaela, Gemini Pixel, Berta Ridgeback, Minnie Werfer, Tulip Ironside, and Jaqueline Bellini. I will not add another to the list of casualties."

My throat dies. I was present at each of those deaths. Caused one of them and helped with two. I glance at Prince Kevon, wondering what he will think if he discovers my secrets.

Queen Damascena glances at someone off-screen. I don't need a spy camera to know she's looking at Lady Circi. She then turns to me with what she probably thinks is a kind smile. "Zea-Mays Calico, you suffered because of the actions of your little friend. Talk sense into my son and tell him execution is the only choice."

"His Highness is right," I say.

Her features harden, and she leans forward, filling the screen with her face. A spasm of terror quickens my heart, and my breaths turn shallow. This is where she'll make a cryptic comment about vaccines or killing twins.

"You support the banishment of Vitelotte Solar?" she asks.

I turn to Prince Kevon, who is too busy scowling at his mother to notice me.

My stomach tightens with trepidation as I ask, “You’re going to push Vitelotte out of the Great Wall?”

“Of course not,” the queen snaps. “She’ll be ejected from her Echelon and spend the rest of her life in the Barrens.”

When Prince Kevon doesn’t protest, the roiling of my stomach calms, and I exhale a relieved breath. Mom survived the Barrens and so did Firkin, until Ingrid shot him in the chest. Sending Vitelotte through the minor wall is kinder than executing her and it sends a message to people about the consequences of attacking the Prince.

I nod. “That seems a fair punishment.”

“This is your last pardon.” Queen Damascena turns to Prince Kevon. “If anyone else tries to kill you, I will broadcast their messy deaths and those of their families. Is that understood?”

Prince Kevon scowls. “With the added security staff, there will be no more attacks.”

The screen goes blank, and the Noble holding the computer retreats toward her colleagues. All twelve of them murmur their excuses and cram themselves into the elevator. I can tell from their faces that they’re worried Prince Kevon will be different from King Arias.

As soon as the doors close, I rush out from the sofa to the wooden bench and wrap my arms around Prince Kevon’s middle. “You’re going to make a wise and merciful king.”

He sighs. “If the monarchy was wise and merciful, this assassination attempt might never have taken place.”

I jerk my head back and meet his eyes. That comment is unexpected but not unwelcome. In one of our earlier conversations, he warned me about Gemini Pixel and was unsympathetic to her plight. After I urged him to investigate her case, he agreed that Queen Damascena had placed Gemini’s father in an impossible position that should never have warranted a death sentence.

With recording devices everywhere, I don’t want to imply anything negative about the Royals or the Nobles. Instead, I ask, “What do you mean?”

Prince Kevon smooths a strand of hair off my face with his fingers. “Everything we see in the media about Harvesters suggests that they live uncomplicated, idyllic lives.”

“And the farmer’s market makes us look like we’re swimming in good food,” I mutter.

His brows rise, implying he believed that the well-fed people selling gourmet produce were from my Echelon. He smooths out his features and asks, “Do you remember I told you about the project my father started when he turned

eighteen?”

I nod.

“Instead of building something in the Oasis to honor Gaia, I asked the Minister of Harvester Resources to increase the water rations.”

All the air in my lungs escapes in a shocked breath. “What?”

“Having enough water to sustain lives is more important than the hanging gardens I originally planned,” he says with a shrug. “I came to your room to share the news, but—”

I wrap my arms around Prince Kevon’s neck and press a kiss on his cheek. “That’s going to make so much of a difference to Harvesters.”

“It’s just a six-month trial.”

My smile fades, and I draw back to meet his fading smile. “Why?”

“The Ministers claimed that it would result in widespread drought. It won’t, and they’re hoping for my father to overturn this reform.” His eyes gleam with confidence. “Did you know the water rations date back before the Great Wall extended into the mountains?”

I shake my head.

“The ecological scientists who calculated the rations didn’t factor the water we obtain from the mountain stores.”

“So, there’s enough water for everyone?” I whisper.

He nods. “In a few months, I’ll be able to commission an independent study on our water supply and override anything the Chamber of Ministers decide.”

My heart fills with warm gratitude. When Mom suggested I join the Princess Trials to make a difference, I laughed at the notion that someone so high up in our society would listen to the words of a Harvester girl. Now, Prince Kevon has done the unthinkable. With enough water flowing to each family, there’ll be plenty for us to thrive and to grow food at home. I won’t even need to tell Carolina about the underground river.

“Thank you for thinking about us.” My words seem insufficient in the light of the great gift he’s given the Harvesters. “You’re going to make a great king.”

Prince Kevon cups my cheeks and looks into my soul with an intensity that makes my heart flip. The pad of his thumb slides against my lip, and tingles spread across my skin.

“It’s your influence,” he murmurs. “Being with you makes me think anything is possible. Even returning from the brink of death.”

Heat rises to my cheeks, and I lower my lashes. “You saved me first, remember?”

“I’m aching to kiss you,” he murmurs.

Every bone in my body trembles with the force of my quickening heart, and

my palms become damp. An unnamed force pushes us closer together until we're pressed so tightly that our heartbeats fall into rapid sync.

Our gazes lock, and I slide my tongue over my dry lips. His dark eyes follow the movement. I want this just as much as Prince Kevon, but if I say yes, I might lose all sense of myself and forget the control his mother has over my family.

Prince Kevon's lips are dark and full with a deep cupid's bow. They turn up at the corners as though he's always smiling, and I long to feel them against mine. The queen didn't say I shouldn't kiss him.

"I heard what you said as you struggled to save my life." His voice resounds through my eardrums. "Those weren't the words of a girl who considers me just a friend."

The backs of my eyes sting with impending tears. It took nearly losing Prince Kevon to uncover the depth of my feelings.

I gulp. If he doesn't kiss me right now, I think my heart will explode.

"Zea." His voice curls around my senses and turns everything upside-down. His mouth is inches away from mine and his warm breath fans across my skin.

"Yes," I murmur.

He leans into me and our lips touch. At first, the kiss is tentative as though he's giving me the chance to draw back. But I curl my fingers around his bicep and pull him closer. With a moan, Prince Kevon wraps his arms around my back and deepens the kiss. A heartbeat later, the roof garden disappears, and it's just me and Prince Kevon and his toe-curling lips.

When we part, I'm out of breath and eager for another kiss, but his beautiful lips curl into a sad smile.

"I don't think it's possible to love anyone more than I love you," he whispers.

My breath hitches. My mind conjures up the image of identical blonde faces with identical missing teeth, and an ache spreads across my chest. I can't tell him how I feel. What if those words reached Queen Damascena?

Prince Kevon's hand drops to his side, and I raise my head, wondering if my refusal to admit my feelings has caused offense. His eyelids droop, and he offers me a tiny smile before falling into an exhausted sleep. I wrap my arms around his middle and stare past the edge of the roof.

Maybe there isn't any hope for us, but with Prince Kevon soon inheriting the throne, there might be hope for Phangloria.

## CHAPTER 12

Days pass and very little happens until early one morning, someone shakes me awake.

“Zea,” says Georgette. “They want everyone ready for the next challenge.”

I crack open an eye. Morning sunlight streams through the wall windows on the left. It’s so bright that it casts the other girl in shadow. I squint to focus on her features. “What’s happening?”

“The Royal Hospital just released Prince Kevon.”

The words hit like a jolt of caffeine, and I bolt upright. Cassiope stands at the foot of the bed, wearing a green jumpsuit and her usual camera glasses. I stretch out a palm, not wanting her to shoot me when I’m half-dead with my hair looking like corn silk left out in the sun.

On my right, Forelle sticks her head out of the walk-in wardrobe. “Your shower is ready, madam!”

With a groan, I swing my legs out of bed. My head still throbs from the time I spent in the detention center, and my muscles still ache. It’s been days since I last saw or heard from Prince Kevon, but Garrett tells me he was placed in a coma to remove the device that regulated the artificial tissues in his heart.

I shudder as I walk into the walk-in wardrobe. There’s nothing I can do but hope that this is the best course of treatment for Prince Kevon.

The lights over the dressing-table mirror make me squint, and my nostrils fill with the mingled scents of coffee and curling irons. I trudge past the display and step into the bathroom, where images from Rugosa’s cornfields play behind the bath on the back wall.

A pang of longing strikes my chest. I regret not asking Prince Kevon for help with my family and wonder if I could have turned to Garrett for intervention. After peeling off my nightgown, I step into the shower and let the hot jets of water massage away my tension. Sometimes the best way to deal with an

opponent who holds all the power is to wait.

I scrub at my skin with a loofah and wash away the remnants of the detention center. If Prince Kevon is arriving today, then his mother will most likely accompany him to the palace. I've got to be on alert and act like I'm carrying out her orders.

This will be the first time I've left my room since returning from the hospital, and my nerve endings tremble with trepidation. I've spent the past days coming to terms with everything from watching Prince Kevon nearly die, being imprisoned with his attacker, discovering the increased Harvester water rations, to that incredible kiss.

Someone raps on the bathroom door, pulling me out of my musings. "Zea," says Forelle. "We need you, now."

I shut off the water, slip on a robe, and join my friends. Most of the other girls have a stylist, a makeup artist, and a lady's maid, but Georgette carries out all those tasks with Forelle as her assistant. According to Forelle, Prince Kevon only wanted people around me he could trust.

Because Cassiope is recording this session for the Princess Trials, I sit in front of the mirror and keep the conversation light as Georgette dries my hair and arranges it into a high ponytail of long, mahogany waves. Cassiope asks if I'm excited to see Prince Kevon, happy the Trials are restarting, and I give her bland but enthusiastic answers.

The girls dress me in a khaki-colored jumpsuit with flapped pockets on the chest and at the hips. Each pocket is held down by a chocolate-brown button and belted just like the outfit Ambassador Pascale wore to the garden party. I stare at my thinner-than-usual reflection and frown. This is a peculiar choice for welcoming back the prince, but Georgette isn't allowed to share the instructions she received.

Cassiope escorts me through the hallway, and a blonde-haired figure walks several feet ahead. A knot of worry forms in my stomach. This is the first time I've seen Emmera since the interrogation. I tried to visit her room, but her lady's maid kept telling me Emmera was resting.

I give her space and continue down the hallway with Cassiope without calling after her. Now that Emmera has left her room, there'll be time to speak in private.

When we reach the top of the palace's grand staircase, the morning sun filters through arched windows and illuminates a set of chandeliers more elaborate than the ones that fell in the ballroom. I climb down, keeping my gaze on the light fitting, which consists of dagger-sharp tiers of crystal. Ten-inch-long prisms dangle from concentric rings of chrome, each layer descending until the

entire display reaches five feet.

My throat dries, and I glance at the pair of camerawomen at the foot of the stairs filming my descent. Then my eyes dart back to the heavy chandelier. It's been ages since someone made an attempt on my life.

Two rows of contestants stand at either side of the palace's double doors. Six Amstraadi girls wait on the right, each clad in identical Harvester-beige jumpsuits. On the left are five Noble girls and an Artisan. I gulp, wondering if that means Paris Kanone, the final unaccounted-for Guardian, is still missing in the National Park.

Constance steps out of formation and places her hands on her hips. She wears a strapped-top with pockets at the front that exposes her chest and arms and scandalously short culottes that show her knees. Her dark hair is slicked back, with a ponytail of ringlets.

"Look, everyone," she says. "It's the agricultural assassins."

I clench my teeth and curl my hands into fists. A hundred responses roll to the tip of my tongue, but I hold them back. The camerawomen are recording, and I won't let them make me seem unsympathetic.

Emmera pauses at the foot of the steps and clutches her chest. The production assistant at her side places a hand on her shoulder, urging her to continue. I'm not sure if anyone offered her support since her release from the detention center. Without my friends and my visit with the prince, I might have gone mad from the ordeal.

I continue down the steps and stand at Emmera's side. "Are you alright?"

She turns her wide, gray eyes to mine and blinks. "Zea?"

I lace my fingers through hers. "Let's welcome Prince Kevon."

"What if those people come back?" she asks.

"They wouldn't have let us go if they thought we did something wrong." I give her hand a gentle squeeze. "Come on."

Emmera inhales several ragged breaths before nodding, and we walk hand-in-hand down the stairs. I ignore the voice in the back of my head that whispers that she will turn on me. Berta did, even though we had twice fought side-by-side. I might not trust Emmera, but I can't leave her to fall apart in front of the cameras.

We cross the entrance hall, where a production assistant ushers Emmera to stand beside the Artisan girl on the left. Another guides me toward the Amstraadi girls. I purse my lips and wonder if this is a deliberate attempt to position me as an outsider.

My gaze turns to Ingrid, who stands at the end closest to the door. She is dressed in a fitted shirt and fitted pants with the same oversized, flap pockets.

The three Nobles to her right wear jumpsuits, but Constance is the only contestant revealing her bare legs.

Someone clears their throat on the left, and I turn to the half landing, where Byron stands in a sand-colored suit. My stomach roils with anxiety as memories of the Detroit Depression tumble through my mind. They're ignoring Prince Kevon's demand for a safer Princess Trials and taking us somewhere equally as horrific. And I'll be the one who suffers all the attacks.

"May I have your attention, ladies?" Byron waves and grins. "Thank you for your patience, and I hope you're ready for this next exciting round of the Princess Trials."

Constance stamps her foot. "Where's His Highness?"

Byron raises his palms. "We're just waiting for everyone to arrive before he makes his grand entrance."

I glance down the rows of girls, wondering who might be this late arrival. The palace round started with eighteen girls, and now there are thirteen. Two Guardian girls are confirmed dead and one missing. With one Artisan dead, and Vitelotte banished, only the Nobles and the Amstraadi teams are intact.

With a rumbling on my left, everyone turns for the opening of the palaces' double doors. Two guards in black helmets and armor escort Prunella Broadleaf past the cordon of girls and through the entrance hall. She wears a trouser suit made from brown sackcloth, and the collar around her neck is missing.

As the guards close the door, the girls opposite break into excited whispers. Maybe the viewers got sick of the lack of activities and petitioned for the return of Prunella, who at least organized dance classes and sessions at the gymnasium.

Prunella walks up the stairs and takes her place beside Byron. The guards who escorted her stand at the bottom of the stairs, and camerawomen point their lenses at the front door and toward specific girls such as Emmera, Constance, Ingrid, and me.

"Welcome back to the Princess Trials!" Prunella sweeps her arm to the side and curtseys. "I would like to thank the viewers at home for all your support during these difficult times—"

"And of course, the real purpose of today's show, the arrival of Prince Kevon," Byron drawls.

Prunella's shoulders sag, but she steps forward and beams. "We have an exciting challenge for our remaining hopefuls. One that will broaden their horizons and take them outside the Oasis."

My insides tighten, and this morning's coffee rises from my stomach to the back of my throat. They must be taking us into the desert.

"Careful, Pru," says Byron. "You're going to spoil the surprise for everyone



and upstage the prince!”

Prunella falls silent, and a pair of palace servants wearing white ruffles beneath their purple livery hurry to open the double doors and let in the morning breeze.

Prince Kevon stands on the doorstep with Garrett at his side. There’s no sign of Queen Damascena or Lady Circi, only a wall of guards in purple armor.

Sunlight shines through his dark hair, making its ends glow indigo. His skin looks vibrant against the pale green of his lightweight jacket, and excitement ripples up my spine and settles in my heart. He looks so much stronger than the convalescing prince I kissed on the hospital roof garden.

The epaulets on his jacket emphasize his broad shoulders, and the flap pockets over his muscular chest highlight his athletic frame. All the girls standing opposite let out wistful sighs.

On legs that won’t stop trembling, I dip into a low curtsy along with the other girls. This is the first time we’ve seen each other since that kiss. Remembering the feel of his lips on mine and the closeness we shared makes my head spin. It takes an effort to rise, and I have to splay my arms out for balance.

I’ve never had such an intense reaction to anyone, not even to Ryc Wintergreen, and I long to speak to Prince Kevon alone.

He greets each girl individually, starting on the Amstraad side with Sabre, the red-haired girl, before crossing to Ingrid, who laughs at something that probably wasn’t even a joke. The closer he progresses, the drier my throat becomes, and the more my limbs tremble. By the time Prince Kevon reaches me, I won’t be able to form words.

This movement across the lines continues, and Prince Kevon reaches the Amstraadi girl standing next to me called Tizona. She’s the ebony-skinned girl with bleached hair. Sweat pools on my palms and I dab them on the fabric of my jumpsuit. After Emmerra, he’s going to talk to me.

I expect Prince Kevon to exchange a few words with Emmerra, but he murmurs something to her that makes her burst into tears. My throat dries, and I strain my ears to listen. Prince Kevon wraps his arms around Emmerra and pulls her to his chest.

Tizona leans into my side. “Hey, Popcorn,” she whispers. “It looks like you have some competition.”

I turn to her and smile. If she thinks I’m going to throw a tantrum because Prince Kevon is being nice to a girl unfairly imprisoned, she clearly needs to stop watching the Lifestyle Channel’s fake footage.

Prince Kevon releases Emmerra and walks across to me. Affection shines in his eyes, making my heart flip. If he kisses me in front of the cameras, all that

animosity Ingrid built up will have gone to waste.

“Zea.” He offers me his hand and presses a kiss on my knuckles. “It’s wonderful to see you.

I bob into a curtsy. “You’re looking well.”

“Thanks to you.” The intensity of his gaze makes me wonder if he’s thanking me for something other than saving his life. Heat rises to my cheeks. I also can’t tell if he’s talking about the kiss or about giving him another chance.

“Your Highness,” Prunella gallops down the stairs. “Welcome back to the Princess Trials!”

Prince Kevon releases my hand and draws back, while Garrett steps forward and stands between Prunella and his cousin. I place a palm on my chest and glance at the prince who stares at her with such fierce loathing that my throat tightens.

As she reaches the bottom of the stairs, the guards in black step forward, making her freeze. Her eyes widen with alarm, and her mouth falls open. “Wait, I didn’t mean to—”

“Ladies and Gentlemen.” Byron descends the stairs with a satisfied grin. “No matter how much you campaign for the humane treatment of Prunella, she just can’t help overstepping.”

I place a hand on Prince Kevon’s arm. “What’s happening?”

He shakes his head as the guards jostle Prunella out through a side door. “Among other complaints, the viewers demanded that Miss Broadleaf rejoin the Princess Trials as a presenter rather than a prisoner.”

“I don’t understand why she’s not in prison.”

Prince Kevon’s lips tighten. “As the aggrieved party, Rafaela’s parents allowed Prunella to finish the Trials before her execution. Despite my protests, Montana agreed to this as long as she maintained a distance of fifty feet from me.”

I nod. For a corrupt Noble like Montana, allowing the wife he discarded to perform for the audience would be far easier than making his employees broadcast the truth. I still don’t know how much involvement Prunella really had in the murder of Rafaela and in the attempts made on me, but I would feel better with her back in the studio.

Byron positions himself at the foot of the stairs. Garrett claps Prince Kevon on the back and guides him to Byron, who apologizes to the viewers for Prunella’s misbehavior.

“On the subject of apologies, I wish to offer two more,” says Prince Kevon.

Byron leans back with an exaggerated frown. “Surely not, after everything you’ve suffered.”

“Imagine then, the anguish of discovering the unjust imprisonment of two innocent young ladies.” Prince Kevon turns to us. “Emmera Hull and Zea-Mays Calico, Phangloria’s justice system was based on Gaia’s wisdom, yet it failed when we punished you for being witnesses.”

I bite down on my lip, not wanting to smile in case Queen Damascena or the Minister of Justice blames me for Prince Kevon’s veiled attack.

“It is corrupt, unacceptable, and we will do better,” he says. “When I come into my power, I will dedicate my reign to making Phangloria a place where everyone can enjoy Gaia’s gifts, regardless of their circumstances of birth.”

Someone behind us gasps, and I imagine it’s Ingrid or one of the other Nobles. The unfair Echelon system benefits them the most, as does a justice system where nobody cares about a person’s murder unless they come from a position of power.

I dip into a curtsy and hope this footage will reach OasisVision. People need to know that our future monarch is serious about making Phangloria a fairer place.

Byron claps his hands and nods to the production assistants to also applaud the prince’s speech. Emmera and I clap first, then a smattering of applause comes from the girls behind.

“Thank you, Your Highness for such rousing words,” Byron says. “I’m sure we’ve kept these young ladies in suspense for long enough.”

A production assistant gestures for Emmera and me to retreat to our places. When we’re both standing in line with the other girls, and the applause dies down.

Prince Kevon clears his throat. “I spent some time guarding the Great Wall during my apprenticeship, which gave me an understanding of how Phangloria expanded over the centuries. People travel miles across the desert to reach us, and Phangloria welcomes them all.”

“Will the young ladies patrol the wall?” Byron asks with a nervous laugh.

“Not quite.” The prince tilts his head to the side and smiles. “Each of you will spend a day shadowing one of the dedicated professionals who work in the Barrens. Those whose performance falls in line with the principles of Gabriel Phan will progress to the next round.”

I glance at the scowling Nobles. It looks like Prince Kevon wants to weed out those anyone who balks at spending time with Foundlings. When he explains that his future queen must commit herself to all levels of society, I imagine Queen Damascena spitting with rage.

He, Garrett, and Byron walk past us and out of the double doors and stand at the palace steps and pose for photos. Instead of reporters, two of the production

assistants stand behind cameras on tripods. They arrange us around the trio and position me at the back with Emmera and the Amstraadi girls.

“Calico,” says Tizona. “Have you ever been to the Barrens?”

I shake my head. “Have you?”

She huffs a laugh. “Our republic is exactly like that wasteland, only without the heat.”

My brows draw together. Her words sound familiar. They’re related to what Ambassador Pascale told me in the garden party about not being able to grow the seeds in the food they imported from Phangloria.

Before I can ask what she meant, the production assistants usher us over the red carpet toward two vehicles: a large stagecoach and a smaller van that resembles Queen Damascena’s mobile dressing room. Prince Kevon boards the smaller one with Garret, while the rest of us board the stagecoach.

The interior contains only one row of seats on the left, and bunks on the right. The seats are widely spaced with some of them reclining completely flat. I pass Ingrid, who sits alone in the front and glares at me with a sour scowl. Behind her, the other Nobles sit in pairs with the Artisan girl behind them.

I stop at the next seat, where Emmera sits alone.

“May I join you?” I ask.

She glances up at me with sad eyes and nods.

I slide into the aisle seat and lean forward to catch her eye. “Are you alright?”

She shakes her head. “They won’t let me go home.”

“Why not?”

“It’s in the contract we signed. We can’t leave unless we’re eliminated.”

My lips form a thin line. We didn’t even sign a contract. The production assistants told us to press our thumbprints on a computer tablet. I want to assure her that Prince Kevon won’t let anything terrible happen to us, but even he can’t have eyes and people everywhere.

Byron stands at the front and claps his hands for our attention. “Ladies, the journey to the Great Wall will take several hours, so make yourselves comfortable. One of you will breakfast with Prince Kevon, and the rest will eat on the journey. After that, His Highness will invite you to share a cup of tea.”

“Who gets to eat with Prince Kevon?” asks Constance from the front.

Byron turns a dazzling smile to Ingrid, who shoots out of her seat. Groans fill the coach’s interior, and some of them even come from the Amstraadi in the back seats.

I reach beneath the armrest, ease open the refrigerator door, and pull out two bottles. “Drink?”

“Thanks.” Emmera takes the proffered bottle and drinks.

A screen comes down from the ceiling displaying Prince Kevon’s departure from the hospital. Even though it says that the footage is live, it looks like they’re an hour behind real time.

The coach’s doors hiss shut, and I read the bottle’s label. This one says CALM. I open it with a crack, take a sip, and let its cool contents wash away the bitterness of the coffee.

As we travel down the driveway, the windows darken until they’re completely black. Droplets of water rain down from the palace’s fountains, giving me a sense of peace. We watch the Lifestyle Channel, which now shows a montage of Ingrid’s visits to Prince Kevon’s hospital room.

Emmera frowns. “Don’t you care that Ingrid’s cheating? I’ve been watching the Princess Trials for days, and they keep repeating those scenes.”

I shake my head. “They can show whatever they want on the Lifestyle Channel. It’s not like Prince Kevon will decide which girl he wants on the popular vote.”

“Zea,” Emmera whispers.

“What?” I reply.

“They asked me if you were in love with someone else.”

I stare into her gray eyes, and it takes a few heartbeats for me to realize she’s talking about the interrogation. “What did you say?”

“They injected me with something, and I couldn’t say anything but the truth.”

The knots in my stomach tighten. If the bottle Mouse gave Emmera didn’t contain an antidote, what does that mean about Vitelotte’s answers? She’s far too level-headed to stab a prince just to prove her love to Ryce, but she might do it as a martyr to the revolution. And what on earth does Emmera know about me that she could reveal to Lady Circi? I lean close, waiting for her to answer my question.

She pulls on her collar. “I told them I didn’t know, but they kept asking if I thought you were in love with someone, or who you might be in love with.”

“What else did they ask?”

“Nothing about the person who actually stabbed the prince,” she whispers. “Only you.”

“Oh.” I’m not surprised they’re trying to dredge up things from my past to prove I already have a boyfriend. Let them try. The only men I spend time with in public are Dad and the twins.

Less than an hour later, the vehicle stops, and Ingrid steps in. All the conversations stop, and Ingrid casts us all a triumphant smirk before returning to

her seat. Byron calls Sabre to take her turn for tea with the prince. The Amstraadi girl walks out of the vehicle, and we continue along the road.

I glare at the screen, where they're playing footage of Ingrid dancing with an Amstraadi soldier alongside close-ups of Prince Kevon looking worried. I shake my head at the pathetic attempt to manufacture a romance and wish they would replay Ingrid's disastrous first date with the prince.

Prunella Broadleaf stands in front of a screen, wearing her neck collar. Behind her is a close up of border guards at what looks like the Great Wall. They're aiming guns at a crowd of naked people.

My heart sinks, and I exchange a frantic glance with Emmera. Is this how the producers of the Princess Trials will circumvent Prince Kevon's order to keep the contestants safe?

"Why are those Foundlings attacking?" she asks.

Sabre stands over us, her freckled face splitting into a grin. "Those aren't Foundlings, they're wild men. How much do you want to bet that our next task will involve those cannibals? "

## CHAPTER 13

The wild men's faces fill the screen. They look nothing like Firkin, the deformed Foundling I met in the woods or even like the Foundling who worked in Carolina's underground watch station. Their features are completely human, save for the madness in their eyes.

One of the men, a brute with a scraggly blond beard, bares perfect teeth at the camera and wags a black tongue. Horrified gasps fill the front of the coach. Dark red pigment colors the skin around his eyes, and the rest of his face is encrusted with dirt.

Emmera leans into me and whispers, "Are they actors?"

With a frown, I meet the other girl's worried eyes. This is actually a good question, considering what we saw in the farmer's market. Most of the people selling produce were either Artisans or Nobles, and that manhunt for a supposedly missing Ingrid consisted of people Georgette recognized from theater school.

Twenty-five thousand people make up the Artisan Echelon, but what do they actually do? Five-thousand Nobles can't need that many artists.

I chew the inside of my lip. "Maybe?"

Prunella steps in front of the footage and explains that the first round of nuclear attacks on America resulted in damaging amounts of radiation poisoning. Some unborn children suffered impaired brain development, which only worsened with subsequent generations and further nuclear attacks. In certain regions of America, humans regressed into a wild state akin to an advanced form of ape.

The camera cuts to a wide shot of hundreds of wild men gathered around a spot on the great wall. They draw back and then rush at a set of gates with loud roars. I place a hand over my mouth and lean forward as guards release a pronghorn through a gap in the wall.

All the wild men chase after the beast, which runs toward the horizon. When the group is out of range, an explosion brings up a huge cloud of dust. I shake my head. This has to be fake.

Each hour of the journey, the bus stops to allow one girl to board and another to spend time with Prince Kevon. It's a fair distribution as he alternates between Phanglorian and Amstraadi, and each Noble girl returns elated with her time spent with the prince.

The screen plays Prince Kevon's date with Sabre. They sit side-by-side on a leather sofa, looking into a computer tablet. Based on their conversation, she's showing him pictures of Phangloria-style growing domes set up within the Amstraad Republic. We can't see the images Sabre shares with the prince, but his furrowed brow tells me that their efforts don't match anything in the Botanical Gardens.

Later, one of the girls gets to eat lunch with Prince Kevon, and even later, Byron selects another Noble to share dinner with him.

Emmera and I exchange irritated glances over a meal of steak Diane served with mini roast potatoes cooked in rosemary and butter. Byron is not even trying to hide his bias toward the Nobles.

After the dinner date, a production assistant collects our trays, and I slip the steak knife in my pocket. A blonde-haired Amstraadi girl visits the prince next. When she returns, Byron stands at the front and claps his hands together for our attention.

"We're about to reach the Fort Meeman-Shelby, where Prince Kevon will stay overnight for health monitoring."

Worry clutches at my chest, and I clench my water bottle. Did he overexert himself?

"He's not coming to the Barrens with us?" asks Ingrid.

"His Highness also has a prior commitment in the Harvester Region," Byron replies.

I turn to Emmera, whose mouth drops open. This must be related to Vitelotte's banishment. Meeman-Shelby is on the border of Rugosa and Panicum.

"What could a prince possibly want in that backwater?" asks another Noble girl.

Byron turns his gaze from the girl and doesn't dignify the remark with an answer. Behind him, the screen displays a map of Phangloria that tracks the route we have taken from the Oasis. The Oasis is located at the foot of the Great Smoky Mountains in a place that used to be called Sweetwater, Tennessee.

The map shows the old landmarks along our route, such as Nashville and



Memphis, Tennessee, which are both within the Harvester Region. We're currently outside the minor wall that separates Phangloria from the Barrens and our final destination is Fort Worth. It's located in the place that used to be called Dallas.

"The next stretch of our journey is five-hundred miles," says Byron. "From now, it will be a non-stop drive to Fort Tyler for a shower and breakfast, then on to the Great Wall at Fort Worth. I suggest you all get some sleep."

As the Nobles all rush to the left of the vehicle to secure the bottom bunks, I turn to Emmera. "Are you going to take one of the beds?"

She shakes her head. "What's the point, when these seats recline all the way back?"

The Artisan girl sitting in front rises to take a top bunk, but none of the Amstraad girls leave their seats. I turn my gaze back to the screen, which still displays the Phangloria map. The minor wall runs along the dry beds of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers and ends at the Baltimore coast. Even though the Harvester Region takes up most of the land within the Echelons, the Barrens is the largest mass within Phangloria.

Only fifty-thousand people live in the Barrens. Mom says they're gathered close to the Forts, where there's a supply of food and water, but Firkin lived in the mountains. I don't understand why Phangloria keeps moving its borders across the desert when there is already so much unproductive and desolate land within the Harvester Region.

The screen turns off, and all the lights in the coach dim. I close my eyes and wrap my fingers around the steak knife I saved from dinner, just in case someone attacks in my sleep.



Hours later, a gentle hum pulls me out of a dreamless slumber. I open my eyes and push myself up from the reclined seat to find the vehicle's windows have turned transparent.

We're parked within the rock walls of a fortress with a circular courtyard the size of Rugosa Square. Its first level consists of twelve-foot-tall, arched walkways that lead into the main building, with small windows adorning the three levels above.

The doors open, and a gust of hot, dry air streams into the vehicle's interior. I have to squint as we follow the production assistants underneath the shaded arches and into the fort's cool, white interior.

Nobody speaks on the walk through the fort's curved hallway. When we step into a featureless, white dormitory containing eighteen bunks, the Noble girls

grumble. When we enter the communal showers, the Noble girls walk out.

Petra the Artisan, Emmera, and I take our showers first, while the Nobles screech about the barbaric conditions. None of the Amstraadi girls join us, and I wonder if that's because they don't want to damage their machine parts.

When we step out, our clothes have gone, replaced by outfits identical to the ones we wore the day before. We're the first to arrive in a formal dining room. Unlike the rest of the fort, which consists of stone floors and whitewashed walls, this room has a beige carpet, champagne-colored wallpaper, and portraits of Gaia and Uranus on the wall.

An elaborate table is set for sixteen with two armchairs at the far ends. It looks like whoever prepared this room was probably expecting Prince Kevon to accompany us.

We sit at one end of the table and serve ourselves from a platter of poached eggs, sausages, bacon, and grilled vegetables. Among the dishes are croissants and waffles. Jugs of syrup and chopped fruit surround a tall stack of pancakes, which I intend to have for dessert. There are also four types of fruit juice, silver pots of tea, coffee, chicory, and hot chocolate, along with boiling water for anyone who wants to make a herbal brew.

The old me would have griped that Guardians enjoyed such elaborate feasts, but Prince Kevon's water rationing reforms will change things for Harvesters. Dad will probably dig up half the cacti and grow enough food in the garden to support the family, and his micro-gardens will thrive with all that additional water.

When the Nobles arrive, they sit on the far side of the table, allowing me to enjoy this breakfast in peace. Once everyone has finished eating, we board two closed jeeps, which take us out of the fort.

Stones rumble under the wheels of the spacious vehicle. I lean forward in my seat and peer out of the window. It's hard to tell if the rough terrain is because the road's surface is gravel or because the winds have blown stones everywhere. For the first few miles, the landscape is a mix of beiges and browns and yellows. Swaths of flat desert stretch out into the horizon, broken up by the occasional rocky hill.

Our guide is a black-haired man with an ageless face who wears a khaki suit. He explains we're approaching what used to be the Dallas Gate of the Great Wall, but it has moved thirty miles in the past century, and now the Gate is in a place called Fort Worth.

As the jeep rounds a tall sand dune, dots of color appear on a distant hill. I lean forward and frown at shades of greens and blues and reds that don't appear in nature, let alone in the desert.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“One of the Foundling settlements,” says our guide. “After they pass the decontamination process, they’re free to live anywhere within the Barrens.”

As we approach, I can make out that the colors are the sides of the building. “How long does that take?”

Ingrid turns around and bares her teeth. “Why do you have to ask so many annoying questions?”

“It’s called having a conversation and being interested in something other than oneself,” I snap back.

She mutters something about having the guards decontaminate my mouth, but I turn to the first of the dwellings.

Their structures are slightly bigger than an outhouse made from cobbled-together planks, sheets of corrugated iron, and fabric. Some of them are wooden posts with sand-filled bottles and others are patchwork tents.

I bite my lip. Harvester homes are basic but at least our earth houses are strong and insulated enough to withstand the weather. What happens during the rainy season or if there’s a wind storm? It’s easy to understand why Mom talks like the life of a Harvester is one of unbridled luxury.

After another twenty minutes, the jeep veers off the road, rounds another dune, and enters a dome four times the size of the one in Rugosa. Spotlights fill the vehicle’s interior along with the screams and cheers of a crowd. I peer out of the right-side window and gape at the interior of an auditorium larger than the Gloria Concert Hall with tiered rows that reach the ceiling.

On the left, dozens of black vehicles stand parked by an elevated stage. At the back is a gigantic Phangloria insignia, along with a row of seats. Byron stands at the center with his arms outstretched. The girls in the jeep ahead of us step onto the stage, and as soon as our driver parks, we take our seats behind Byron.

“People of the Barrens, thank you for the warm welcome.” Byron’s voice echoes across the arena. “Let’s all give Prince Kevon a round of applause. He wanted to be here to meet you all, but he has been called away on matters of the state.”

My brows rise. I wonder how much of what happened to the prince reached people who don’t have access to Netface.

Byron walks across the stage. “Today’s challenge takes us into Phangloria’s most exciting territory, our future. One day, this land will be towns, crop fields, and freshwater lakes. Each Foundling will one day enjoy their own personal oasis.”

Everybody cheers. I gulp. What if those images of wild men were for the

benefit of the Foundlings? If I believed the Guardians were keeping me safe from the desert, I'd be too grateful to demand a home and an opportunity to work within the Minor Wall. I shake off these thoughts. Without all the facts, I could go mad with speculation.

"Let's welcome our mentors," Byron says. "They will each assign our plucky candidates a task related to life at the Barrens."

A car door closes on the left of the stage, and a huge guard in black armor approaches. Behind him walks a gray-haired woman wearing a canvas jumpsuit, and a man dressed in Harvester-style gray overalls. Byron introduces the first man, Colonel Victorine, who is in charge of patrolling the wall. The gray-haired woman introduces herself as Primavera Melrose and says she teaches Modern History.

I sit up and study her face. Mistress Melrose was Mom's teacher, who competed in the Princess Trials before Queen Damascena's. That still makes her younger than Montana, yet she has the lined features of a grandmother.

Before the third person can introduce themselves, a ringing sound blares through the speakers. Everybody clutches their ears. My heart jumps into my throat, and I turn to the exits at the dome's right and left.

"What's happening?" Byron shouts.

Colonel Victorine grabs the microphone from the third speaker. "Everybody, stay in the arena until we deal with the disturbance at the Great Wall."

"We'll give you a ride." Byron waves his arms at the production assistants, who usher us off the stage and pile us into the vehicles.

I shuffle across the seat, away from a camera lens pointed at its middle. My heartbeat races like an out-of-control pronghorn, even though I suspect this attack is something staged to make the Princess Trials more exciting.

Ingrid sits beside me and sneers. "They should throw you through one of the hatches and make the wild men chase you to the horizon."

"What's wrong?" I ask with an equally nasty sneer. "Are you still sore that your attempts to kill me failed?"

Her haughty expression fades, and she darts her gaze from the camera to the Noble girl sitting at her other side. Nobody gives Ingrid moral support, and she stares into her lap.

Raising my chin, I sit straighter in my seat. Without guns and girls to bolster her bullying, she's a puffed-up desert snake—all hiss and no venom.

I turn to the window at the endless landscape of desert, wondering if Byron's claims that this will one day become an oasis could ever come true in a century. The early Phanglorians transformed a wasteland into a beautiful, green city, but that required a lot of time and water. I can't see them doing anything with the

desert except develop it into farmland.

Moments later, we approach the Great Wall. Its metallic latticework structure reminds me of the Eiffel Tower, which was featured in a documentary about a country called France. Centuries ago, French farmworkers stopped tending to the land and overthrew their king because they wanted to eat cake. The crops failed, and a fungus took root, causing decades of famine. Later, an exiled royal arrived with seeds and soldiers to deliver the French from the brink of starvation.

Before I can remember Carolina's version of the French Revolution, the jeep arrives at the foot of the wall. It's tall and sturdy with a row of eight-foot-tall posts set close enough to trap a person's arm, linked by enough barbed wire to trap a mouse.

Another row stands twenty feet away, creating a gap within the wall wide enough to accommodate two jeeps. Metal joists linking the rows at the top form a walkway and the foundation for the next level of posts.

I lean against the window and cast my gaze along its width. Every hundred or so feet, there are watchtowers of varying sizes. This must be where the marksmen shoot down raptors that try to enter Phangloria.

The jeep stops, and I open the door. Hot, dusty air blasts into my face, making me wince. Ingrid screams at me to pull the door shut, but I step out and sink my feet into the sand. My eyes strain against the sunlight, and heat seeps through the leather of my boots.

Colonel Victorine steps out of his jeep and leads us along the wall. The desert on our side of Phangloria is no different from the landscape beyond the barrier. He stops at one of the larger towers with an elevator that reminds me of a cage.

"Half of you come with me to the viewing station." He points further down the wall. "The other half get to see the disturbance from the next tower."

I follow the colonel into the elevator with Ingrid, Constance, Emmera, Sabre, Tizona, and a black-haired Amstraadi girl called Katana. Just before the elevator doors close, Cassiope jumps in with another production assistant, and they exchange grins. The other contestants huff their annoyance and trudge away in the sun with the production assistants.

The viewing station is halfway up the tower in a climate-controlled room of white walls and panoramic windows. Four telescopes point out into the desert, each manned by guards, but I can't see anything from the window except the desert and a distant formation of orange rocks.

A border guard in khaki uniform sits before five monitors arranged hexagonally around his wide desk.

We line against the back wall, while Cassiope and her colleague set up

cameras around the room. As soon as they're done, the other production assistant raises her thumb.

Constance strides forward with her hands on her hips. "Where's this emergency?"

The guard sitting at the monitors rises and beckons at one of the guards at the telescope to bring another chair. "Mistress, would you like to see?"

Constance sticks her nose in the air and joins Ingrid at the seats. As the rest of us gather around them, the guards bring us bottles of Smoky Water and ask the Noble girls if they would prefer something more refreshing. They ask for a beverage called Oasis Palmtree.

Once the drinks arrive, the guard taps on the middle screen and pulls up the image of a vehicle appearing in the middle monitor. The Amstraadi girls and I lean forward, and I resist the urge to place my hands on the back of Constance's chair.

The only way I can tell it's a vehicle is because it's moving so fast and creating clouds of dust. It's hard to tell the size, but it's brown and looks larger than a jeep and smaller than a bus.

My mouth drops open, but it's Constance who speaks first. "Have the wild men evolved?"

"They're Foundlings, you idiot," Ingrid snaps.

"That's correct, Mistress Strab," says the guard. "Most Foundlings arrive on foot, but some reach us on the back of animals, and a few manage to cobble together vehicles."

Our Modern History teacher told us that no technology survived from the spate of disasters that destroyed the earth. I imagined Foundlings as nomads lucky enough to stumble across Phangloria. Where on earth would they get cars after all this time, and what would they use as fuel?

"How?" The question slips from my mouth.

Ingrid huffs, but the guard glances at Colonel Victorine, who nods.

The guard answers, "As the Great Wall stretches across the continent, it becomes more visible to survivors hiding in mountains and other geographical enclaves."

I turn my gaze back to the screen. A moving mass appears behind the vehicle.

Sabre leans forward. "Could you magnify the screen?"

Ingrid twists around in her seat and smirks. "Don't your eyes have a zoom function?"

"Isn't that the girl who faked her disappearance?" Sabre tilts her head to the side.

Katana shakes her head. “You’re mixing her up with the girl with visible stitch marks around her new nose.”

“You’re both wrong.” Tizona taps her chin. “That’s the girl who ducked out from the Princess Trials to fix her nose so it would be more to Prince Kevon’s liking.”

A laugh catches in the back of my throat, and I clap a hand over my mouth. My gaze darts to the side of the room, where Cassiope nods. Prince Kevon once implied that I was unadorned, but I thought it was a comment aimed at the Nobles in general. He was probably talking about Ingrid’s surgical enhancements.

Red blotches appear on Ingrid’s cheeks, and her hand rises to her nose, but she forces it down.

The guard clears his throat, taps a few commands on the screen, and brings up a group of people riding camels.

I swallow a mouthful of strawberry-flavored water to soothe my dry throat. “What happens when people approach the Great Wall?”

“That depends on if they’re homo sapiens or homo ferox,” the guard replies.

“Homo what?” I whisper

“Ferox means wild,” Ingrid snaps. “Don’t they teach you anything apart from how to pick corn?”

“Apparently not,” I mutter.

Colonel Victorine interrupts with a speech about the Foundling welcoming process, starting with a definition of wild men that’s similar to the one Prunella Broadleaf offered the night before.

While he tells us that some Foundlings arrive at the Great Wall incapable of speech, they have ways of testing if a new arrival requires education or extermination.

I drop my gaze to the screens, which display the approaching groups. The vehicle continues at its steady pace, but it’s hard to tell who is inside. On the next screen are the riders. They wear fabric head coverings and obscure the lower half of their faces with rags. Their clothes are dark but from this distance, it could be a uniform or caked-in dirt.

“What’s that behind the camels?” asks Sabre.

Colonel Victorine walks to the monitors. “Magnify the telescopic camera.”

The guard zooms into a mass of moving pixels that look to me like blobs racing through the desert. It looks like a crowd is chasing these newcomers.

He sighs and taps some commands into the monitor at the end. “This is the largest hoard of wild men we’ve had in months.”

“I expect you’ll activate short-range missiles,” says Ingrid. “If enough people

approach the Great Wall, they might damage its integrity and attack the Oasis.”

“But what about the people trying to reach the Great Wall?” I ask.

Ingrid sniffs. “I’m sure everybody will agree that the safety of Phanglorians takes priority over Foundlings.”

I glance at the Amstraadi girls, who don’t react, then I cast my gaze to the guards standing around the room. Either they agree with Ingrid, or they don’t care. “Those people running after the camels might not even be wild men.”

Colonel Victorine folds his arms across his chest. “If you’re so sure that rabble is a group of Foundlings, you may take an armored vehicle and escort them through the wall.”

My stomach drops. “What?”

His eyes harden. “Consider it a challenge for the Princess Trials.”



## CHAPTER 14

Colonel Victorine waves at one of his sergeants, a dark-skinned woman with a long braid. “Travis, take Miss Calico to the gate and allow her to choose a vehicle.”

An attack of vertigo seizes my perceptions, and the watchtower’s white walls bend at strange angles. I glance from the nodding sergeant to the colonel. “What’s happening?”

He folds his arms across his broad chest and fixes me with eyes as cold and pale as Ryce Wintergreen’s. “Since you so rightfully pointed out our obligation to help all those who approach the Great Wall for refuge, you’re going to lead the team to ensure that those on camelback reach the wall.”

“Sir?” I ask, my mind going blank.

He holds up a thick finger. “But they must discard their animals before they reach the gates. We won’t risk the contamination of our breeds.”

My throat dries. “But I don’t have any experience.”

“I see.” Colonel Victorine turns a knowing look to the camerawoman. “Calico wants me to risk my staff to hold off the wild men for her foundlings, while she and her Echelon rest easy behind secure walls?”

I turn my gaze back to the monitor, which displays the men on camelback. The hoard remains several feet behind them and shows no signs of slowing.

“How typical.” Ingrid shakes her head.

Constance nods. “It’s easy to run your mouth when your entire life centers around picking sweetcorn.”

Sabre, who stands at my side, leans into Katana and whispers something that makes the other girl snort.

Annoyance prickles across my skin. These people seem to care more about keeping their wall nice and clean than for the approaching Foundlings. “I wasn’t saying anyone should go out there and risk their lives, but can’t you fire a few shots to scare away the wild men?”

We've seen this scenario a hundred times." The colonel stifles a yawn. "Wild men might be human-looking animals, but they're not stupid. They're herding people to the Great Wall, hoping that one of their number can sneak inside."

"There might even be a few of them hiding in that car," Travis dusts off an imaginary speck of dirt from her lapel.

My lips form a tight line. If wild men are sophisticated enough to drive, maybe they deserve a place in Phangloria. I can't say that in front of the camera in case someone twists my words.

Colonel Victorine looms so close that the heat of his body radiates against my skin, and my nostrils fill with his cheesy body odor. "Are you going to save those Foundlings?" he snarls. "Or will you stay quiet while we go to the bastion and launch those missiles?"

Rage burns through my chest. I step backward and clench my jaw. These people trekked through the desert, and now they're minutes away from safety. I can't let their journey end in death. If it wasn't for someone letting in Mom's parents, I might never have even been born.

Swallowing back a bellyful of bitterness, I tamp down my animosity and meet the colonel's hard gaze. "I'll do it but with the help of a driver."

"Us." Sabre hooks a thumb at the other two Amstraadi girls. "If you can lend us a vehicle with weapons, Katana and Tizona can operate the guns."

Colonel Victorine flicks his head at Sergeant Travis.

"This way, ladies." Travis walks to the door.

The trio of Amstraadi girls perform an about-turn and march behind the sergeant. I walk behind them, not daring to ask Sabre why she volunteered.

"You're leaving us out." Behind us, Constance shoots out of her seat.

Dread fills my insides like a pile of boulders. The Nobles are more likely to sabotage this mission than help it. I pause at the door, with the others standing in the small hallway between the watchtower control room and the elevator, waiting to see if the colonel will allow them to join us.

Colonel Victorine inclines his head and gives the Nobles an oily smile. "You and Mistress Strab can join me at the bastion, where you can fire on the wild men when they approach."

My nostrils flare. This was exactly what I was suggesting for the people on camelback, but I didn't know how to describe it. Now that I've agreed to rescue the riders from the approaching wild men, it's too late to back out. I join Sergeant Travis and the three Amstraadi girls in the elevator. Cassiope steps in after me, and the other assistant stays behind with the Nobles.

When we reach the bottom, the doors open and let out a blast of light and heat and grainy wind. It's overwhelming, even with four other women standing

in front of me. I raise a hand and squint as I step out into the desert. The production assistants stand around a white sun shelter positioned twenty feet away from the Great Wall, where Byron Blake holds a finger to his ear and narrates the challenge I accepted.

As I pass, he waves his hands and shouts for me to come for an interview, but I pretend not to hear him and stare straight ahead at a large, white marquee.

Tizona glances at me over her shoulder and grins. “This is going to be more fun than that Detroit Depression challenge.”

I raise a shoulder. “At least I have a vehicle this time.”

She snickers. “I saw the footage with you and the goats. What a pity Berta Ridgeback drowned. She was such a fun underdog.”

My muscles tighten at the mention of her name, and I turn my gaze to the left and catch glimpses of the desert through the gaps in the fence posts.

“What are you talking about?” Katana nudges the dark-skinned Amstraadi. “She was an ugly duckling.”

Tizona shakes her head. “I would agree if this was the Extreme Surgical Show, but no amount of corsets and contouring could ever transform that dog into a swan.”

“Quiet,” Sabre snaps from the front. “Have some respect for Popcorn’s best friend.”

My shoulders relax. Right now, I don’t care if they want to call me popcorn as long as they change the subject. I’m about to exhale a relieved breath when Sabre turns around and winks. I clench my teeth. How could she possibly know I killed Berta?

Sergeant Travis opens the marquee door and steps inside. Cold air blasts us from all directions as we follow her, and my eyes adjust from the dimmer light. The space is about thirty feet wide, with a ceiling high enough to accommodate the tallest of trucks.

On the far left, a pair of guards in black armor stand to attention at both sides of a ten-foot-wide gate, and on the right are six solar quad bikes lined up in pairs. The vehicles parked behind them become increasingly larger, from an open jeep with two periscope guns at the top, to vans, and a massive truck with monstrously large wheels at the end.

I chew on the inside of my lip, hoping the girls don’t change their minds and choose the bikes.

“That one.” Sabre points at an armored van in the middle. It’s sand-colored with three-foot-tall wheels and an extra-large truck with two rows of seats and a pair of huge machine guns on its roof.

Sergeant Travis steps back and tilts her head to the side. “The Desert

Destroyer requires advanced driving skills. May I suggest—”

“Colonel Victorine told you to offer us any vehicle,” says Sabre from between clenched teeth. “We also need four sets of handguns.”

I gulp and glance at the less intimidating jeep at the front. Shouldn’t she listen to the sergeant’s suggestion? I doubt that the Amstraad Republic has many sandy deserts so far up north.

Tizona claps me on the shoulder. “Hey, Popcorn. Worry about how you’re going to rescue those Foundlings from the flesh-eating wild men.”

I gaze into her smiling face. She’s the friendliest of the Amstraadi girls and always says what she means.

The sergeant walks across the marquee, opens the door to the driver’s seat and taps a few commands in the steering-wheel screen. The vehicle’s dashboard lights up, and she steps aside. “In situations like this, it’s customary to give a team ten minutes to retrieve the foundlings before the gunfire starts.”

Before we step in, a pair of camerawomen rush forward and attach recording equipment to the vehicle’s interior and exterior. Trying not to roll my eyes, I remind myself that they’re only doing their job.

I clasp my hands. “We need to get going before the wild men catch up with the camels.”

Sabre takes the driver’s seat, and I slip into the front. The other two sit in the back and press their faces to eyepieces that I guess operate the guns.

Sergeant Travis taps on the passenger window, which slides down. “Here are the guns.”

“Thanks.” I keep one for myself and hand the others to the Amstraadi girls, hoping we won’t have to use them.

Sabre presses a button in the middle of the steering wheel, and the vehicle’s engine roars to life. “This is your mission. You’ll be out in the sand, helping those people board.”

“Sure,” I say.

Blinding light floods the marquee’s interior. Up ahead on the left, the gate rises, and Sabre pulls out and drives the van out into the desert. My heart thunders like lightning is about to strike, and I stare out into the endless sand. This is the first time I’ve left Phangloria. I turn to the rearview mirror and watch the gates fall into place. What if they never let us return?

Nobody speaks, and the truck’s noisy engine fills the silence. Katana and Tizona swing their periscopes and fire a few practice shots. I lean forward in my seat and look out for the approaching vehicle. About three miles ahead stands a massive formation of orange rocks. I swallow several times in quick succession, wishing that I had asked Colonel Victorine for an approximate time of arrival.

Moments later, a cloud of dust forms between the rocks. At first, it's difficult to see its cause, but the air settles and the approaching vehicle emerges from the haze. I hold my breath, waiting for the camels to appear, but the vehicle travels toward us alone.

"Tizona." I turn to the two gunwomen sitting behind us. "Can you see the others through your periscope?"

"Don't worry," she mutters. "Your camels are safe."

"But those wild men are fast," adds Katana.

When I turn around, I still can't see any sign of camels or riders, but the vehicle is a few hundred feet away. It's dark brown, about the size of our truck, and with an exoskeleton that seems to be made of pipes.

Dread rumbles through my stomach, and I clutch the armrest. Sabre accelerates and whoops as a spray of sand hits the side windows

Up close, it's not much of a vehicle and looks on the verge of falling apart—half-tractor at the back, half-pick-up at the front, and all rust. It slows and flashes its lights. I press the button at the window and squint against the onslaught of light and hot air.

The driver is a man with skin even darker than Tizona's and a huge, salt-and-pepper beard. Crammed in the seat next to him are about four women and behind him, rows of countless children sitting on each other's laps.

"Is this the Oasis that we heard about on the TV?" he asks in a drawling accent.

My brows furrow. "Television?"

"Yeah," he said. "We drove all the way from Red Rock. Is this the place?"

Sabre leans across the passenger seat and shouts, "They'll let you in at the gate. Hurry."

"Thanks," he says. "Could you radio in and tell them to keep the doors open a bit longer? There's eleven more of us on camels being chased by psychos."

As soon as he continues toward the Great Wall, I twist around in my seat and glower at Sabre. "Why did you lie?"

"Don't blame us," Katana replies from behind. "We're not the ones using false advertising to lure people into my country,"

I swallow back a retort and close the window. She's absolutely right. There's no telling how long that vehicle will last, and it's too late for them to turn around if I tell them the truth.

"It's not exactly a lie." Tizona muses. "If they're lucky enough to birth genetically perfect offspring, those children might get a chance to become Harvesters or be taken away at birth and trained to become servants or spare parts for the Noble elites."

A huff of air leaves my throat. “What?”

“Focus,” Sabre hisses. “I’ve just spotted the camels.”

Nobody gets eye tests in the Harvester District, so it’s hard to tell if those shapes moving up and down the camels are people or baggage. I gulp several lungfuls of air. A quick glance at the rearview mirror tells me that the Foundlings’ vehicle is now following our tire tracks toward the hatch.

I exhale a long breath, clear out thoughts of the Nobles broadcasting lies to attract people to the Oasis, and focus on the mission ahead.

As we approach the camels, I turn to Sabre. “Stop in front of them, and I’ll get their riders to board the back.”

“Make it fast,” she says. “I want to put as much distance between us and those wild men as possible.”

The dust clears, giving me a better look at the galloping camels. Each beast carries at least two men, and the rider at the back hits the camel with some kind of whip. My chest aches for the beast that was forced to run such long distances.

Riderless camels run behind the ones in front, each piled with bags. I hope they didn’t lose their riders.

Sabre stops the vehicle and twists around in her seat. “Katana and Tizona will provide cover. You’ve got three minutes before the watchtower opens fire.”

I open the door, grit my teeth at the blast of hot air, and jump out of the van. The heat of the sand seeps through my boots, and the scent of dust and dried earth fills my nostrils. Katana, who sits behind the drivers’ seat, opens her door, and I sprint toward the approaching riders.

“Hey,” I shout.

They exchange glances and continue toward me.

I cup both hands around my mouth and shout, “I’m here to escort you into Phangloria. Board our vehicle, and we’ll take you through the gates.”

“Is this the Oasis?” a man shouts from the distance.

My throat dries. Whatever these people watched on their televisions was promising enough to make them leave their shelters and travel across the desert. They will never see the Oasis in their lifetimes and most likely won’t even pass the minor wall and become Harvesters.

A howl echoes from the distance. I turn to the rock and find a hoard of naked people racing toward us. Red and black pigment cover their skin, with white accents to resemble bones.

Terror seizes my windpipe and all notions of the wild men being actors evaporate in the desert heat. In less than a minute, they’ll arrive, and I won’t be around to suffer their attack.

“Hurry.” I wave my arms at the men. “The wild men are coming.”

“We’re not leaving our animals,” shouts the one in front.

I shake my head. “Phangloria won’t let you in with those camels.”

The man rears back. “Why not?”

“Look behind you.” I clench my teeth and step back toward the vehicle. The wild men are picking up their pace and gaining on the riders. “You’ll be stuck at the gates, and those wild men are already catching up with us.”

One of the men at the back jumps down from the camel and lands in a crouch. He rushes to the camel behind and yanks off the saddlebags. As he gathers his possessions, a few others dismount and follow his lead.

What was at first a distant howl now sounds like dozens of voices, some male, some female. The riders run past me and dive into the van, leaving only two camels still carrying riders.

Sabre sounds the horn, but the noise only mingles with the yowling. They’re less than a quarter of a mile away and closing the distance. Clicks and clatters accompany their howls, and the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

My feet shuffle toward the truck, and I turn pleading eyes to the first man, who hasn’t dismounted. “If you won’t come alone, we’ll have to leave you to get eaten.”

Two more men jump down, snatch their bags from the camels behind, and race past me. Their spokesman now sits alone.

“Ten seconds, and we’re closing the door” yells a voice from the van’s interior.

The man shakes his head. “We’ve been breeding these camels for generations. They’re all we have left.”

“What’s your name?” I ask.

He frowns. “Thomas.”

“Thomas, you traveled for miles through the desert for somewhere safe. The women and children are waiting for you behind the wall. Please don’t die for a herd of camels.”

A door slams. Then gunshots from behind tell me that the ten seconds are up.

Panic lances through my chest. I could tell him that the Oasis has all the camels he could ever need along with rivers of water and feasts beyond imagination, but I can’t bring myself to lie.

“If you’re not coming, you’d better run.” I turn toward the van’s open door.

“What?” he shouts.

I scramble up to the passenger seat and wrap my fingers around the handle. “Don’t come to the gates because they won’t open. You’ll be surrounded by wild men, and they’ll drag you—.”

My breath catches from a surge of emotion. “They’ll drag you off the camel

and eat you. If you can lose them, come back to the gates later, but you can't come in with your herd."

"They're here," Sabre snarls. "Close that wretched door!"

I yank on the handle, slam the door shut, and glance out of the windscreen to find the wild men less than a thousand feet away. A pair of tethered camels dash to the left, but a group of wild men break away and chase the animals.

Sabre turns the vehicle around, and I peer at the wild men through the rearview mirror. They're naked, wear bones as ornaments, and seem to leap through the air. Long, flowing locks fly like strands of silk as they move. A shudder runs down my spine. How could a few centuries change the course of human development?

According to Prunella's commentary, their nervous systems are different from ours. They can process pain, but while a regular human flinches from it, the wild men will endure lethal amounts of torture to catch their prey.

My gaze tracks the escaping camels. One of the wild men takes an inhumanly long leap, wraps his arm around the front camel, and wrestles it to the ground.

"Ha," says Sabre. "That guy has changed his mind."

"What?"

"The camel lover is running toward us."

I lean across the dashboard and gaze into the monitor. Thomas didn't follow my advice, and I can guess why. Berta once told me that wild men had more stamina than even the fastest animals. They can run for hours or sometimes days, not stopping until their prey collapses with exhaustion. He's probably seen what happened to those camels and decided he won't make it without our help.

A spasm of pity squeezes my heart. I know what it's like to cherish what little I have, but I also know with no kernel of a doubt that Thomas won't outrun the wild men.

"Uh-oh," says Tizona.

"What?" I say.

"He thinks he can sneak in through the gates at the same time as us."

"That won't happen," Katana mutters. "They'll just leave us outside until the wild men will tire of the armored vehicle and leave."

"Stop the van," I say.

"Why?" Sabre taps the screen on the dashboard, giving us a close-up of Thomas and his camel. "So that idiot can stuff his animal into the back?"

Foam flies from its mouth, and Thomas beats the creature with the desperation of a man about to die. The camel looks on the verge of collapse and sprints behind us with erratic, jerky movements.



My throat thickens. “We can’t leave him out there.”

Sabre ignores me and continues driving.

Angry heat floods my body, and blood roars through my veins. I’ve lost count of how many people I’ve seen die or almost die. It’s not too late to save Thomas, and I couldn’t live with myself if he got torn apart by wild men.

“Colonel Victorine put me in charge,” I bark. “Stop the van, now.”

Sabre slams her foot on the brake. The movement of the van lurches me forward, and my head hits the dashboard. Pain radiates through my skull, making me cry out. Katana’s angry shouts drown out the moans echoing from the back.

“Why?” I raise my head, swing my fist at Sabre’s smirking face, but she blocks.

“Just following orders,” she says. “Ma’am.”

Someone outside screams, and I tear my attention away from the Amstraadi girl. Thomas jumps down from his camel and lands on his hands and knees. The wild men are less than five-hundred feet behind. The cloth over his face slips as he scrambles to his feet and races toward us.

I push the van door open and rear back at the rush of desert heat. “Hurry.”

“Why don’t you jump down and carry him?” Sabre starts the van and creeps toward the Great Wall.

Ignoring her, I wrap one hand around a wall grip, brace my legs on the vehicle’s interior, and lean my body out of the cab. With one arm stretched toward Thomas, I scream at him to keep running.

Thomas’ eyes bulge, and his open mouth twists with terror. He’s a lot younger than I imagined and doesn’t have a beard like the others. A few of the wild men tackle his camels to the ground, but most of them continue running toward him.

“He won’t make it,” Tizona shouts. “Get back inside.”

“Shoot over their heads,” I scream.

Gunfire rings through my ears. Some of the hoard scatter, but those at the front continue their relentless pursuit. Thomas’ nostrils flare with a newfound determination, and he runs faster. Our fingers brush.

“More!” I shout.

My gaze fixes on the man’s hand, but on the edge of my vision, I see a wild man drop to the ground. His comrades trip over his fallen body, and the others run around the writhing mass.

I stretch toward Thomas so far that my muscles ache.

He grabs my hand. His weight yanks my arm out of its socket, and a scream tears from my lips.

Sabre slows the truck, bullets sound from a distance, and the wild men fall. Thomas grabs the passenger door with his free hand and hurls us both inside. I fall onto Sabre, who shoves me back into the passenger seat.

“Close the damn door,” she snarls.

The triumphant cry of a wild man fills the cab. He hangs off the door and swings toward us. His red hair blows in the wind like a flag. Thomas kicks at him with all his strength, but he won’t let go.

“Get back!” Sabre points a handgun and shoots the wild man between the eyes. His body goes limp, and he falls into the sand.

Thomas slams the door. “Sorry.”

“What changed your mind?” Sabre sneers.

I shake my head and try to catch my breath. “Leave it.”

“You’re an idiot,” says Sabre.

I’m about to yell at the girl, when Tizona adds, “Popcorn isn’t just a regular idiot, she’s a brave idiot.”

“I was going to say selfless, but brave also works.” Sabre laughs. “At least I know why some people say you’re the favorite to win the Trials.”

My tongue darts out to lick my dry lips, and all I taste is salt. She’s probably talking about Mouse and Ambassador Pascale. If I can ally with the Amstraadi and arrange protection for my family, maybe I will survive these Trials long enough to win.

## CHAPTER 15

With all the people on camelback safe, Sabre stops the truck a few hundred meters away from the gates to allow whoever is shooting at us to get rid of the wild men. The sand around the truck turns red with their blood. I swallow back my bile, wishing there was a better way to deal with these people.

I force my gaze away from a wild man slashing through the entrails of a female comrade and wonder if any other species eats its own dead. My insides have gone numb, the way they're starting to become when someone who threatens my life dies.

Thomas whimpers beside me and flinches each time a wild man drops from the vehicle. Some of his camels have disappeared into the distance, but others lie dead on the ground, their broken and bloody carcasses dragged across the sand by the horde.

"Do you have wild men in the north?" I ask no one in particular.

"If we did, they probably froze to death," says Tizona.

"Some think they traveled south to escape the nuclear winter," says Katana.

I rub my temples. Until now, I hadn't given these strange humans much thought. Bullets spray across the land, hitting a group of wild men who stopped to feast on a dead camel. When a pronghorn bolts out from the Great Wall, I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for the explosion.

Moments later, a blast sounds from far away, and I remember Gemini's explosive death and Berta's cheerful description of bunny bombs. Despair washes through my veins like sour milk, only broken by the roar of the engine as Sabre starts the truck and moves toward the opening gates.

The marquee is empty, save for a row of helmeted guards pointing automatic guns at the van. My insides deflate. What have we done, now?

"What's happening?" Thomas' voice shakes.

"I'm not sure," I reply.

“But you’re the border guards.” His voice rises in pitch. “How could you not know?”

“It’s probably decontamination,” says Sabre.

“What?” he asks.

“They do this when people come in from the desert,” I reply, remembering everything I’ve learned today about the Foundling welcoming process. “It’s to make sure you’re free of radiation and diseases.”

Thomas relaxes, but one of the guards opens the door and asks him to step out. The truck’s back door opens, and the men we saved exit the van. There are eleven of them, and their faces are obscured by kerchiefs. One of them points at the van, presumably to ask about his bags, but the guard shakes his head and guides them through a door on the left.

Somehow, I don’t think these people will be allowed to keep their possessions, but that will be the least of their problems.

Sergeant Travis steps forward and guides us through the door on the right. Instead of a blast of light and heat, there’s a shaded walkway that leads to our coach.

Byron stands by the driver’s seat and flashes his whitened teeth. The beds on the left sides are folded into the wall, their space now occupied by about thirty production assistants wearing sand-colored jumpsuits.

“Let’s have a round of applause for the brave team of rescuers.” Byron grabs my wrist and raises it into the air.

Ingrid and Constance, who are already seated, rise from their seats and stand in the aisle, blocking the camera’s view of our faces. They grin and wave at the applauding contestants and camerawomen.

Tizona leans into my side and mutters, “What’s so brave about shooting people from a tower?”

I snort. Before the Trials, I would have quipped that someone else did the shooting for Ingrid and Constance, but at least one of them has proven herself adept at killing humans.

When the applause dies down, Byron releases my wrist and lets us walk back to our seats. Emmera stares up at me with a smile and hands me a bottle of Smoky Mountain water. I flop down on the seat, so thirsty that I forget to check its label. She opens up a large packet of chipped vegetables and holds them under my nose.

Byron claps his hands together for our attention. “Those of you who completed this challenge will progress to the next level of the Princess Trials, and the rest of you will return to the palace for a farewell dinner before going home.”

Sucking in a sharp breath between my teeth, I turn to Emmera, whose eyes bulge.

A noble girl with a thick braid around her hair shoots out of her seat. “What bearing does rescuing Foundlings have on the suitability for becoming the next queen?”

Byron pulls at his collar. “I was clear about the rules—”

“When our guide asked if we wanted to help Calico and a bunch of Amstraad drones save some Foundlings, he didn’t say the consequences for refusing was elimination.”

“Villosa is right,” says another Noble. “This is completely unfair.”

Ingrid stands and places her hands on her hips. “Don’t complain because the rules won’t bend for you.”

“You’re one to talk,” Villosa spits. “Everyone knows they’ve rigged the Trials in your favor.”

The two other Noble girls rise from their seats and join the argument, but there’s no sign of Constance Spryte, who has taken up the role of Noble spokeswoman since Ingrid fell out of favor with her peers. They talk over each other and hurl accusations—some of them dating back from when they were children.

Byron tries to get them to return to their seats, but they ignore his pleas to remain calm. The back door hisses open, and the production assistants not holding cameras stream out and hurry toward a large van. I can’t tell if they’re trying to escape or desperate to edit footage of what’s shaping up to become a one-sided catfight.

I turn to Emmera, who takes several long gulps of her water. “Are you looking forward to going back to Rugosa?”

She licks the moisture from her lips and exhales a long sigh. “Actually, I am.”

“Really?” I reach into the bag of chipped vegetables and take what looks like a dried piece of kale. It’s crunchy and tastes like bacon. My brows draw together. The sun-dried tomato slice I eat next also has the same delicious taste.

“The Oasis people might have all the food and water they can drink, but they’re miserable.” She flicks her head at the squabbling Nobles. “They’re not capable of loyalty or love. What’s the point of being rich if everybody wants to stab you in the back.”

I stare at my lap and ponder her words. She’s right to an extent. I think Prince Kevon’s apprenticeship in the Barrens made him so different from those power-hungry harpies. Being born into ultimate power also meant he never needed to seek more.

A pang of sadness touches my heart. Emmera is the last Harvester girl in the Trials. Now, it will be two Nobles, three Amstraadi, and me.

She meets my eyes. "What will you do?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Even a scarecrow with buttons for eyes can see how much they're trying to push Ingrid and Prince Kevon together." Emmera takes another sip of her water. "Will you step back and let him go, or will you fight for the prince?"

My gaze darts to the light flashing overhead. I think I have an ally in the Amstraad Republic. Both Mouse and Ambassador Pascale have made enough cryptic comments to suggest that they want me to win the Trials, and I've got to see if there's a way to neutralize the threat of Queen Damascena. There's no way I'll broadcast any of these intentions to my enemies, but I also don't want my words twisted at a later date.

"You know what?" I pluck a long piece of chipped carrot from the packet. "I want Prince Kevon to end up with the girl who's both right for him and for Phangloria."

Emmera tilts her head up and smiles. I think she's caught sight of the camera, but she seems satisfied with my answer.

"Miss Calico." Byron stands at my side.

I draw back. Apart from grabbing me ten minutes ago, he has barely acknowledged me since he interviewed Forelle before our auditions. "Yes?"

"The coach will make a detour in Rugosa."

Emmera leans forward. "Can I go home?"

Byron's gaze doesn't waver from mine. "A representative from the court of Queen Damascena will meet you in Fort Meeman-Shelby with instructions."

Sweat breaks out across my palms. That's where Prince Kevon stayed last night, but he would hardly refer to himself as part of his mother's court. "What's this about?"

Byron shakes his head. "They didn't specify." His gaze wanders to the squabble taking place at the front of the coach. "Excuse me, I have more important things to do than relay messages."

"Miss Hull asked you a question," I say.

He frowns, not seeming to understand my words. "Pardon?"

"Can I get off the coach in Rugosa?" Emmera asks.

Byron waves his hand. "If she's prepared to find her own transportation home, she's free to go wherever she wants."

As he walks back to the screeching Nobles, Emmera leans close and whispers, "He was better as Prunella's assistant."

I raise a shoulder. Byron might be incompetent, but there's only been one

attempt on my life since he has taken charge of the Princess Trials. “He must be here to make sure Ingrid wins.”

Villosa shoves Ingrid in the chest. Ingrid grabs onto the braid wrapped around the other girl’s head, making her screech. Another Noble tackles Ingrid to the ground, allowing Villosa to stomp on her head. The other girls join the attack, and the Amstraadi girls rush down the aisle to cheer.

My head pounds, and questions swirl around my mind. What if there’s a firing squad waiting for me in Fort Meeman-Shelby? What if I disappear? What if that’s where they’re holding Mom and Dad hostage? I can’t think of what I might have done to incite the queen’s wrath apart from my hospital visit with Prince Kevon.

Byron orders the driver to open the coach door. Any satisfaction I might have gotten from seeing Ingrid get her comeuppance pales with the gut-churning worry of what Queen Damascena plans to do to me in Rugosa.

A pair of camerawomen set down their equipment and escort Ingrid out. Emmera taps at me to let her watch Ingrid leave the coach, and I swing my legs to the aisle. From what I can hear between the girls’ hooting laughter, Ingrid is having difficulty walking. I tune out the voices and focus on the challenge ahead.



An hour later, the coach stops at Fort Tyler, where Byron joins us for a late lunch in the dining room. I pick at my food and tune out the other girls’ grumbles about how Ingrid probably got an even better room of her own.

We drive through the day and most of the night, only stopping for the production assistants to bring dinner. The Lifestyle Channel broadcasts highlights from the dates with Prince Kevon. While the Nobles flirt with the prince, the Amstraad girls tell him about their struggles to grow food in an Arctic landscape.

Their reporting of the last challenge centers on Ingrid’s prowess with the gun, with commentary on her valiant effort to protect me from my own stupidity at confronting a hoard of hungry wild men. I close my eyes and stop paying attention.

Sometime after three in the morning, we reach Fort Meeman-Shelby, and a production assistant guides me off the coach. It’s cool outside, and the moon shines down within an indigo sky that reminds me of Prince Kevon’s eyes.

An ache forms in my heart as I walk through the darkened courtyard. It’s hexagonal and covered mostly with lawn, unlike the sandy courtyard of Fort Tyler. The assistant guides me to a private room, where a scandalously low-cut

dress lies on the bed.

Alarm seizes my heart. I spin around and gape at the production assistant, who is already backing out of the room and wishing me good luck. As I rush to the door, a key turns in the lock, but I try the handle anyway.

“Hey.” I pound on the door. “What’s going on? Let me out.”

I run to the window, but its fastenings won’t budge. So much for a stealthy escape.

With a snarl, I turn back and glare at the outfit. The two strips of sheer fabric that make up its front are cut so low that it would expose the wearer from shoulder to waistband. My stomach churns at the minuscule skirt. On legs as gangly as mine, it would land at mid-thigh.

With an outfit like that, Queen Damascena has got to be setting me up for something scandalous. I lean against the wall and fold my arms across my chest. If there’s a lecherous lieutenant waiting outside the door, I won’t go down without a fight.

Moments later, a knock on the door causes my heart to somersault into my throat. I glance around the room for a weapon, snatch the chair, and hold it in front of me like a shield.

The lock turns, the door opens, and I charge on my would-be attacker. In an instant, the chair flies across the room and the back of my head hits the hard floor. Pain explodes across my skull. I kick out at my attacker but he’s not hovering over me.

I struggle to my feet and find Lady Circi standing on the other side of the room. She wears a black catsuit with a hip holster and carries only one gun.

“Why aren’t you dressed?” she says.

“What are you doing here?”

She pinches her nose. “You agreed to be present at the banishment of Vitelotte Solar.”

I pause, not remembering having agreed to anything of the sort. Somehow, I don’t think calling her a liar will help my predicament. “In that dress?”

Lady Circi raises a shoulder. “If you wanted to choose your own outfit, you should have negotiated that with Her Majesty.” She snaps her fingers. “Hurry up and get dressed before someone puts a bullet through your friend’s skull.”

“May I have some privacy?”

“Sixty seconds.” She crosses the room, picks up the dress, and flings it into my arms.

I clench my teeth. Sometimes, it’s hard to work out which of them I dislike the most: the queen or her lady-at-arms. I shake my head and change into the dress. Lady Circi is gruff and occasionally unpleasant. Queen Damascena is just



plain evil.

After I change into the dress, Lady Circi makes me slip on a pair of high-heeled shoes, then marches me through the fort's angular hallways. Seeing as she's a general, the few guards we pass salute, but their gazes linger on my barely-covered chest. For once in my meager life, I'm glad my figure is nothing like Emmera's or Forelle's. This outfit is obscene.

I smooth out the fabric. "Why do I have to wear this dress?"

"A girl stops Prince Kevon's heart with a knife, and you're complaining about what to wear for her pardoning?" Her brows draw together. "You must admit that it was generous of Prince Kevon to spare your friend's life."

Prickly shame rises to my cheeks, and anger flushes through my veins. I grind my teeth and snarl, "That still doesn't explain this awful outfit."

Ignoring me, Lady Circi places a hand on the small of my back and ushers me out of the building's double doors. It's still dark with no sign of sunrise, and only four jeeps are present in an asphalt forecourt that could accommodate hundreds.

A black car waits at the bottom of the steps, its headlights illuminating the space. The driver, a pale-skinned woman wearing a similar black outfit to Lady Circi, opens the door.

She motions for me to get inside. With no means of escape, in a hideously revealing dress, and under the threat of something terrible happening to Vitelotte, I have little option but to obey. I slide into an interior that smells of polish and settle into the leather seat.

Lady Circi enters and hands me a computer tablet. "You're giving a speech. Her Majesty has ordered marksmen to shoot Miss Solar if you don't read exactly what you see."

"What?"

She turns to me, her green eyes as hard as malachite. "Do as you're told, read what's on the tablet, and you'll get to rejoin the Princess Trials. Mess this up, and your regicidal little friend gets shot along with whoever stands with her."

My throat convulses, and I tap the screen of the tablet.

The speech doesn't seem too atrocious. It's mostly innuendo about how I convinced Prince Kevon to increase the water rations, along with a warning against attempting to murder the royal family.

"Prince Kevon believes in making Phangloria a better place for all," I say. "That includes making sure everyone has enough water for drinking and growing food."

Lady Circi snorts. "What is it about men and naive farm girls?"

Irritation tightens my skin, and a barrage of retorts gather on the tip of my

tongue. If she wasn't the lady-at-arms, wasn't carrying a gun, and wasn't in the position to beat me to within an inch of my life, I would tell her exactly what I thought of her cynical view of life.

I clutch the tablet so hard that my knuckles turn white. "Maybe Kevon wants to rule Phangloria with compassion instead of cruelty. Maybe he wants to fall in love instead of making an arrangement. Maybe—"

"Do be quiet," Lady Circi snaps.

My mouth clicks shut, and we speed through the lamplit highways in silence. Lady Circi reaches into a pocket behind the front passenger seat and pulls out another computer tablet. I let my gaze wander around the vehicle. It's similar to the car Prince Kevon drives, except there are four seats instead of just two. The driver must be important because she wears the same Amstraadi monitor in her ear as Lady Circi.

I turn to the window and watch the cornfields rush past. The moon illuminates the tassels swaying in the breeze, and my heart aches for home. As the car turns down the road that leads into Rugosa, I twist around to Lady Circi and pluck up the courage to interrupt her reading.

"What's happening to my family?" I murmur.

"Nothing apart from the inconvenience of guards around their home," she mutters without glancing up. "Your father, on the other hand..."

My breath catches. "What?"

The car stops at one of the streets that leads to Rugosa Square, and Lady Circi steps out. I scramble out after her with a question on my lips, but the sight of the square steals my breath.

All the floodlights are on at full force, lighting up the giant geodesic dome and the paved expanse that make up the square. Along three sides of the space are more black trucks than I can count, as well as a marquee similar to the one used in the first round of the Princess Trials. It's also the same structure the guards use whenever performing mass raids.

An invisible rope wraps around my neck and tightens into a noose.

Lady Circi walks ahead of me with rapid strides.

I wrap my forearm around my chest and jog after the woman. "What were you going to say about my dad?"

"He's another one who doesn't know his place." She turns to me with a raised brow, and her lips tighten with what might be a suppressed smile. "He's wearing the guards' patience with his endless questions, but they won't harm your family unless you displease Her Majesty."

Blood drains from my face, and my feet freeze into place.

Sirens blare across the square and over the streets beyond. I glance at the

dark sky and back at Lady Circi. It isn't even four o'clock and people are still sleeping. What on earth is happening?

Lady Circi continues toward the dome without looking back. She knows I won't run away when the guards outside my home are itching to hurt Dad or when not saying the words on the tablet exactly as Queen Damascena demands will result in Vitelotte's death.

I follow her across the square, past guards in black saluting by their vehicles, and we step into the Rugosa Dome. Two people stand on the stage across the wide, empty expanse. Mayor Shoepeg, a stout, little man with a bald head and Carolina Wintergreen who stands as tall and as unsteadily as a cornstalk.

Ropes of resentment tighten around my chest until I can barely breathe. Despite Vitelotte's confession, I still think it was Carolina's idea to murder Prince Kevon.

The mayor rushes down the side of the stage and across the dome's expanse. "Zea-Mays, thank you for taking a break from the Princess Trials to introduce the new water rationing." His gaze lines on the exposed skin that stretches down to my waist. "I appreciate the efforts you made to influence Prince Kevon."

Heat flares across my cheeks and travels to my ears and down my chest. My gaze darts to Carolina, whose glare is sharp enough to cut me in half.

"Welcome back, Zea-Mays." She offers me a cold smile. "I trust that you are progressing within the Trials."

Lady Circi waves them away. "Miss Calico needs to practice her speech."

The two Harvesters return to the stage, just as the first sleepy people shuffle into the dome. I dip my head and follow Lady Circi up the stage steps and to leather seats occupied by high-ranking guards in black armor.

I cast the senior Harvesters a wistful glance. That's where I belong, not with these Guardians.

Over the next twenty minutes, the dome fills with bleary-eyed Harvesters. It's about four-thirty, at least an hour before most people awaken, and everybody looks confused at the early roll-call.

As thousands of people fill the dome, the screen behind us broadcasts the floodlit square now crammed full of Harvesters. The pulse between my ears muffles the blare of the Phangloria national anthem, and I place my damp palms on my lap to soak up the excess moisture.

The mayor introduces me, and the crowd roars with applause. I gulp, not knowing what on earth Montana has shown them on OasisVision. I'm shaking so hard that Lady Circi helps me up and walks me to a wooden lectern. If she wasn't part of the duo holding the lives of my family hostage, I would have described her gentle support as an act of kindness.

I keep my gaze fixed to the screen that projects from the dome's ceiling and away from the faces a mere ten feet away and read the first lines of the speech. It contains a light-hearted greeting, an apology for the early start, and assurances that they will make up for lost time on the fields with a shortened lunch break and an hour added to their workday.

A stony silence spreads across the dome, and a shudder runs across my stomach. Of course, they're not going to cheer at the prospect of longer hours. Whoever created this speech made it sound like the directive is coming straight from me.

When I tell them that each Harvester will receive double their usual water rations, the air fills with gasps, but the sound does nothing to quell my anxiety. I glance down at the screen, where words appear that weren't in the version of the speech Lady Circi showed me before.

"In exchange for this generous boon, we require more. More hours, more output, and more reporting of those who contravene our laws."

My throat dries. This isn't what Prince Kevon wanted. That water was freely given without requirements. I want to shout this out to the masses, but the lives of Vitelotte and my family are dependent on delivering this exact speech.

I glance down at the tablet and read the next words. "Phangloria accepted your ancestors through the Great Wall on the condition that they contributed to our society. They readily agreed to our stipulations in exchange for sustenance and shelter. Most Harvesters have performed their duties, and we have punished the exceptions."

Every cord in my voice box quavers. Queen Damascena is making me sound like I aspire to become a Noble. New words pop up on the screen.

"A Harvester who was welcomed to the Princess Trials planned a heinous attack on the royal family."

Whispers spread through the crowds, indicating that news of Prince Kevon's stabbing didn't reach OasisVision.

"Bring forward Vitelotte Solar," I rasp into the microphone.

Marching feet sound on my left, where a cordon of guards create a walkway from the stage to a side door. Huge guards walk toward us, dragging Vitelotte to the stage. She's barefoot, covered in ashes, and wearing a sack with holes for her neck and arms. A silver collar stretches from her chin to her collarbones, and bruises mar her face.

I clap a hand over my mouth to stifle a cry.

They release her arms and step back, letting her fall onto her hands and knees.

Closeups of Vitelotte fill the screen, making people in the crowd cry out.

They're the same sounds of anguish that rang through my ears each time I received a whipping for attacking a guard.

Despair turns my insides to chalk, and my heart crumbles into dust. They've twisted Prince Kevon's mercy into prolonged torture. The computer tablet's screen flashes, indicating for me to continue reading—or else.

I clear my throat. “This young woman nearly condemned her entire town when she committed a heinous act of violence against Prince Kevon. Such an act would have gotten the entirety of Rugosa sent out to the desert from whence you came.”

Shouts fill the air. There are so many voices, I can't tell if they're in support for Vitelotte or for her condemnation. My chest tightens, and my breath quickens until only the barest amount of air grazes the tops of my lungs. I want to stop reading, but new words appear on the screen.

“I pleaded for the traitor's life and explained to his Highness that Harvesters have forgotten the promises of their ancestors.”

My mind stutters with a new thought. What if those who came to Phangloria seeking refuge did so after having seen the broadcasted images of the Oasis? Why do the border guards tell Foundlings to leave their possessions behind? Tizona implied that genetically perfect Foundling children went to the Oasis to become servants. What if she was right?

Thoughts spin through my head, and I have to hold onto the lectern for balance. Foundlings come here under false pretenses. The lucky ones get to grow food for the Nobles, and those whose offspring reach a certain level of perfection lose their children—also to the Nobles.

Spots fill my vision, and clouds fill my head. My fingers curl around the lantern, and I force every ounce of my concentration into not joining Vitelotte on the floor.

A slender hand wraps around my arm. I don't need to glance over my shoulder to know it belongs to Lady Circi. “Keep reading.”

“Bring the Solar family,” I murmur into the microphone.

The guards drag a dark-haired man about the same age as Dad, an old lady with wrinkled skin and gray hair, and a young man clutching two infants to his chest. The children don't even look like they've reached their first year.

“Vitelotte Solar.” My voice cracks. “For the crime of attempted regicide, I banish you and your family into the Barrens, where you will all serve out life sentences for three generations.”

She raises her head, her face twisting with anguish.

The old lady collapses onto the stage, and the guards leave her where she lies. Vitelotte crawls to her grandmother and cries for her to wake, but she won't

move.

Rumbling shouts reach us from beyond the dome, and the distant sound of machine-gun fire fills the air. The crowd surges forward, and a sea of angry faces snarl my name. This is just like Montana's daily quota reports, where he pits Harvester against Harvester by making us compete for the prize of extra rations. Except nobody can see that I'm not the person banishing the Solar family.

I want to scream my innocence, but Lady Circi's warning rings through my ears. If I say anything other than the words written on this tablet, the guards will shoot Vitelotte and whoever stands with her.

They'll kill the grandmother, if she isn't already dead. They'll kill Mr. Solar and Vitelotte's older brother. And they'll kill the babies in his arms. I've got to keep reading because they'll also kill Dad.

"While we watch the repercussions of one selfish young Harvester on her father, grandmother and siblings, consider your actions. Those of you who spurn our hospitality and flout our laws will no longer face punishment as individuals, but as entire families."

I gulp at the next sentences that appear on the screen. "Hours ago, the following Harvesters condemned their entire households to the Barrens. Cole Taylor for the crime of brewing alcohol, William Packham for the crime of gambling, and..." My breath catches. "Ryce Wintergreen for conspiracy to commit regicide."

Carolina shoots out of her seat. A guard drags her across the stage and throws her face-down onto its floor. She falls beside Vitelotte and the old lady.

Roars of anguish spread across the crowd. Harvesters surge forward, their faces twisted with rage. The guards spray bullets into the air, but people continue onward.

Nausea swirls through my insides, and the muscles of my stomach spasm. It doesn't matter how many guards they post in Rugosa. There are enough weapons underground to arm every Red Runner, and I'm guessing there are plenty of us in the crowd.

Queen Damascena has just made a fatal mistake.

## CHAPTER 16

*M*y leg muscles tremble so much that I clutch the edges of the lectern to keep from falling. The crowd roars loud enough to make my ears ring, their volume punctuated by gunshots.

Tears sting my eyes, and I can't stop blinking. My sinuses tingle with a familiar but unpleasant sensation. Feet below us, wisps of white smoke seep through gaps between the people, who stop surging. I inhale a sharp breath and fill my nostrils with the scent of onions. This has to be cepa gas that Prunella Broadleaf streamed into the room I shared with Gemini and Berta.

"Zea-Mays." Carolina raises her head and meets my eyes, her face twisted with anguish. "Don't let them—"

One of the guards kicks her in the back of her head, and she drops face-first onto the stage. Shock hits me in the gut. I rear back and clutch at my face. I can't defy Queen Damascena by helping them. Vitelotte crawls over to Carolina's fallen body. The guard aims an electroshocker at her, but she catches his foot, and drags him to the ground.

Her father stomps on the fallen guard's ribcage, making him scream. Another guard rushes at him with a raised fist. Mr. Solar charges at his attacker and knocks him into the crowd.

With a triumphant cheer, they swallow him up in a rain of kicks, and the crowd bellows for blood.

Spasms squeeze my heart, and I can barely focus on the words flashing across the screen. A guard on my left shoots at the Harvesters storming up the stage's steps, and I swallow back a cry. No matter what, I must complete this speech.

Before I can read the words on the screen, a guard grabs my wrist and flips me over his shoulder.

My stomach lurches, and a scream tears from my lips. He sprints across the stage like a maniac, securing my leg to his chest with a muscular arm. With the

last of my strength, I thrash my legs, pull on his gas mask, and pound my fists against his armor, but he only tightens his grip. Cold sweat breaks out across my skin. If I don't get back on that stage, it will mean death for Vitelotte, Carolina, her father, her brother, and those babies.

Hisses sound from beneath us, and I turn back to the crowd. The wisps of white smoke become opaque clouds that engulf the mass of rioters, who stop shouting to cough and choke. Smoke fills my mouth and burns the back of my throat. Tears blur my eyes, and I can't even rub away the sting. Even if I wriggled free, there's no way I could stand onstage, let alone see the monitor.

My abductor leaps down the stairs, and dashes through the cordon of guards into a side-door. It slams shut, muffling the crowd. My eyes don't hurt as much as they did last time, but they won't stop streaming. I've failed, but maybe this smokescreen will give some of the captives onstage a chance to escape.

The guard rushes through a maze of hallways. We pass the medical center, where we get our annual vaccines, and the mayor's office, where Carolina once worked. At the end of the walkway, he presses his palm on a wall panel. Another door opens, letting out a gust of warm air. As soon as he steps inside, the guard loosens his grip.

"Let go!" I raise a fist and punch him hard in the chest.

He pulls off his gas mask and groans. "Zea."

My muscles stiffen. "Kevon?"

"Please, stop fighting me."

We're moving through one of the pockets at the back of the dome that contains folded-up tables for rations day, cardboard boxes containing canned food, and crates of vodka. A hum fills the air, and I turn to find the curved wall lined with a row of solar generators. Prince Kevon heads toward the back door, showing no sign of setting me to my feet.

"What are you doing?" I hiss.

"Saving you from becoming the most hated girl in the Harvester Region," he replies, still carrying me through the cramped space. "I woke up in the middle of the night to find that someone leaked this footage onto Netface, and I got to Rugosa as quickly as I could."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. The ministers must have released that awful speech for those who mistrust the Lifestyle Channel. This is their retaliation to whoever's showing the truth on NetFace. Those wretched Nobles are desperate to discredit me.

At the end of the walkway, he sets me on my feet, where a pile of black armor lies on the floor.

"Put this on." Prince Kevon turns his back. "How on earth did Lady Circi



convince you to put on such an outfit and say those terrible things?”

My mind blanks and all the moisture shrivels in my throat. If Queen Damascena discovers I told him the truth, her people would probably kill Mom and Dad before we reach them. Everyone is either in the dome or on the square.

I move the boots aside and shoulder on the jacket. It’s a little big but anything is better than this awful dress. After slipping a pair of oversized pants, I kick off my heels, put my feet in the boots, and tuck the skirt of the dress into my jacket.

“How much of my speech did you hear?” I ask.

“Everything,” he replies. “What’s happening?”

“This place isn’t safe,” I mutter.

He raises his head toward the blinking light of a ceiling camera. “Outside, then.”

We walk along an uncovered patch of wall, where Prince Kevon places his gas mask over my head, encasing me in the scent of rubber. After tightening my mask and putting on a mask of his own, he presses his thumb on a panel within one of the nine-foot-tall hexagons that make up the dome. The half-hexagon next to it clicks open, letting in smoke and screams.

Bending, I peer out into Rugosa Square. Floodlights illuminate thick clouds of smoke billowing from the parked vehicles. It’s so thick that I can barely see the Harvesters fleeing into the streets.

Gasps and hacking coughs fill the air. Our gas masks filter out the smoke, but the effects of being exposed onstage still hurt my eyes.

We step out together into the chaos, and my heart rate trebles. Prince Kevon apologizes for not giving me a mask earlier. He hadn’t expected the guards to use ceta gas in an enclosed dome.

He reattaches the panel and secures it in place. It’s probably some secret escape route just for Nobles, but I’m too worried about Mom and Dad to ask. We live too far from the square to reach roll-calls before the dome fills, so they’ve probably escaped into the streets by now.

The smoke clears enough to reveal that most of the Harvesters have gone. We hurry through the square, passing guards helping limping colleagues to safety, and others carrying their fallen comrades to their vehicles. Less than half of them wear masks.

Prince Kevon grabs my hand. “Now will you tell me what’s happening?”

I shake my head and hold up my Amstraad wrist cuff. We’ve had conversations about the technology being used as a spying device. It’s the reason why Leonidas Pixel is imprisoned somewhere and poor Gemini died in his place. I can’t afford to speak freely. Queen Damascena is probably forcing the man to

broadcast from one or both of our monitors.

He mimes writing with a pen. "Later, then?"

We continue across the emptying square, and noise blasts us from behind. I turn to find hundreds of Harvesters streaming out through the dome's multiple doors. They're screaming and coughing and panting. Prince Kevon scoops me up and through the smoke sprints across the square.

A sob tears from my throat. They must have gassed those people in the dome while the square emptied. Prince Kevon carries me through the space between two Guardian trucks. Across the road, the lights of a four-seater car flash.

He flings open the door, bundles me into its interior and scrambles in after me. The driver already wears a gas mask, and Prince Kevon reaches into a side-pocket for a notepad and pencil.

As the car pulls out from the road, he scribbles down: WHAT IS WRONG?

I take his pencil. YOUR MOTHER HAS STATIONED GUARDS OUTSIDE MY HOUSE.

Prince Kevon points in the direction of my street, as though asking if we should go there. I raise both hands and shake my head, making him tilt his head to the side. Since we're both wearing masks, and my eyes still water from the gas, I can't see his expression.

I write down on the notepad: SHE ALSO THREATENED TO TAMPER WITH MY BROTHERS' VACCINATIONS IF I DISOBEY HER.

Prince Kevon rears back, and his entire body goes still. I chew on the inside of my lip, hoping he believes me. Sometimes, it's hard to tell that Queen Damascena is related to Prince Kevon by blood.

WHAT DOES SHE WANT? He writes.

Her ugly words ring through my ears. She referred to me as a bed warmer and a murderer, even if the last one is partly true. I dip my head. Prince Kevon's about to discover the reason why I encouraged him to spend time with the other girls.

He places a hand on my shoulder, urging me to write my answer.

It takes ages for me to form the right words, but I write: I HAVE TO CONVINCING YOU TO CHOOSE A NOBLE. THEY ALSO MADE ME READ FROM A TABLET COMPUTER TODAY.

"Vitelotte's entire family is banished," I say out loud as I scribble over the words. The queen can't see that I've disobeyed her order to be silent.

His face tightens. "You must believe me, that wasn't my intention."

"I know." My throat thickens. I want to ask him to save them, but what if that backfires?

"Unfortunately, the Chamber of Ministers will do whatever they can to

circumvent my attempts to make Phangloria a just place for all Echelons.” He picks up the pencil and writes, **THEY DON’T ACT WITHOUT THE MONARCH’S CONSENT.**

I nod and exhale a long breath. At least he believes me.

“There is something I’m desperate to know,” he says.

“What?”

“How your family enjoyed the paella.”

My brows draw together as he leans forward and instructs the driver to take me to my address. Harvesters have been gassed and entire families are facing bleak life sentences for crimes they didn’t even commit. Why is Prince Kevon bothering about something so trivial?

As the car turns a corner, Prince Kevon pulls off his mask and gives me an encouraging nod, and realization sinks through my thick skull. He’s making an excuse to check up on my family.

Warm gratitude floods my chest. “There were ingredients in that dish we’ve never eaten in our lives.”

He takes my hands. “One day, wide varieties of food will be available to everyone in Phangloria.”

“Do you think that’s possible?” I whisper.

Prince Kevon unstraps my gas mask and raises it off my head. “I had some very interesting conversations with the young ladies from the Amstraad Republic. If we focus less on their juvenation technology and import their agricultural devices, we should increase our yields and free up Harvesters for other matters.”

He smooths a strand of hair off my face and tucks it behind my ears. “Your eyes are red.”

I don’t know how he can tell with only the dashboard lights illuminating the back of the car, but he reaches into the space between the front seats and pulls out a plastic box. Inside lies an array of items in sterile packaging. Prince Kevon picks up a four-inch foil package and tears its wrapper.

“Close your eyes,” he murmurs in a deep voice.

I let my eyelids flutter shut, and he wipes them with a cool, wet cloth that removes the sting from my skin.

“Is that better?” he asks.

I open my eyes and meet Prince Kevon’s dark gaze. He’s so close that I feel the warmth of his breath. My heart stutters and I bite down on my lip. This would be a perfect moment if I hadn’t just helped condemn so many innocent people to a life of hardship.

Cornfields whizz past in the window behind him, and my mind drifts to

something Ambassador Pascale once said about Phangloria wasting human resources on manual labor that could be mechanized.

It seems so odd that I'm alone with the prince and thinking about the reforms he's going to make to the country, but it's always been like that between us. One of the reasons I can't help loving him is because he's always thinking of others.

The car turns a corner, and we enter the unlit stretch of land between the cornfields and our home. We bump up and down as the wheels navigate the potholes and uneven surfaces. Prince Kevon's vehicle is clearly made for traveling through finished roads and not the rough terrain of Rugosa.

We stop outside the house. Only one van is stationed outside, and all the lights are off. I hold my breath. When I rode back to the palace in the queen's mobile dressing room, Lady Circi said there were four.

A heavy fist pounds on the car window, and someone barks at us to open the door.

Prince Kevon pulls away. "Wait here."

"What are you doing?"

"I won't have you hurt again by hostile guards." He opens the door on his side, steps out, and walks around the back of the car.

The guard who shouted at us falls to his knees. "Your Highness, we were not expecting you."

Prince Kevon asks, "Why are you stationed outside the Calico home?"

The guard raises his head, his face twisted with indecision. "Sir," he says. "Patrolling this street is part of my duties—"

"Yet your colleague over there has just stepped out from the front door," Prince Kevon snarls. "What is the meaning of this?"

I open the car door and step out to find a guard standing under the verandah, and my breath catches. Prince Kevon demands to know if my family left for the roll-call, and the guard tells him that they were moved last night.

As Prince Kevon forces the guard to call his superior, I rush past the man stationed at the door and step into the house. Moonlight shines through the glass above the front door, illuminating the hallway. On my left is the living room. It's pristine, with two little desks made of packaging crates arranged in front of the window, where Mom teaches the twins.

Next, I dash into the kitchen. It's tidy and there are no signs of a struggle. Fresh chard leaves lie within the coolbox, along with an untouched block of soy protein, indicating that Mom recently collected the food rations. I scratch my head. It looks like the guard told the truth that they were only recently moved.

Upstairs is the same. Most of Mom and Dad's clothes are still in place, as are the patchwork quilts, making me think they weren't allowed to gather their

things.

When I return downstairs and step out into the street, two more vehicles park outside, and people stream into their houses from the direction of the square. They're either accustomed to seeing this many guards outside our house or tonight's show of force rendered them too frightened to look.

"They're gone," I whisper.

Prince Kevon wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls me into his broad chest. "They're in Fort Meeman-Shelby."

I draw back. "Why?"

"Lady Circi had them moved for their protection."

My mouth falls open. "I don't understand."

He offers me a tight smile. "I just spoke to her. She didn't want your family to suffer any repercussions from the arrests."

"That was awfully conscientious of the lady-at-arms." My voice sounds like it's coming from afar. Sometimes, it's hard to tell what Lady Circi is thinking. Is she concerned about their safety or worried about losing Queen Damacena's leverage over me?

"What's going to happen to them?" I ask.

He pauses. "We can bring them back, but some of the other Harvesters might take out their anger on your family for the recent reforms."

I gulp. "May I see them?"

"Of course." Prince Kevon places a hand on the small of my back and guides me into the car.

The journey back to the fort is silent, with me staring into my hands, wondering how on earth Queen Damascena will react. Prince Kevon stares into the notepad and sighs. I guess he's just uncovered the monstrous side of his mother's personality she reserves for others.



Later, Prince Kevon wraps an arm around my waist as we walk through the courtyard. The first traces of sunlight emerge from the distant hills, but the sky is a dark indigo, still illuminated by the moon. There's no sign of the production vehicles, and I assume they've already left for the Oasis. I wonder if Emmera found a way back to Rugosa or returned to the palace.

A stout, male guard in black uniform waits for us at the door. When we approach, he bends into a low bow. "Your Highness, Colonel Snath requires your attention immediately."

"That can wait," Prince Kevon snaps. "Where are you holding the Calico family?"

The guard straightens and draws his brows together. “I’m unaware of new prisoners.”

“Did Lady Circi visit earlier this morning?”

The guard’s gaze darts at me and back at the prince. “To pick up Miss Calico.”

“And to deposit her family,” Prince Kevon snarls, impatience lacing his voice. “Do not for one minute presume that the authority of the lady-at-arms exceeds that of the crown prince.”

The guard steps aside and lets us into a hallway, where a female guard rushes toward us. “Your Highness,” her voice shakes. “Colonel—”

“Where are you holding the Calico family?” asks the prince.

“But Colonel Snath ordered me to bring you—”

“I will not ask you again,” he barks.

My heart somersaults, and the guard clutches her chest. I’ve never heard him sound so fierce, and it’s a testament to how much he cares. I only hope that they haven’t moved my family to another location.

Prince Kevon presses his lips together and exhales a slow breath through his nostrils. “Whatever the colonel wants can wait. Please lead us to where you’re keeping Loam, Oria, Yoseph, and Flint Calico.”

I shake off my confusion. Of course, he knows their names. He was the guard who let visitors in and out of my room when I passed the marquee round of the Princess Trials.

Fear flashes across the guard’s eyes. It’s the conflicted look I’ve seen on people torn between following orders and doing the right thing.

I place a hand on Prince Kevon’s arm. “Maybe we should see what this colonel wants.”

“After ensuring the safety of your family.” He laces his fingers through mine.

“Of course, Your Highness.” The guard inclines her head. “Follow me.”

She leads us through the hexagonal hallway. Parts of it branch off into smaller corridors that lead into dormitories, and one side passage is crammed with guards lining up for the infirmary. I’m too preoccupied with the wellbeing of Mom, Dad, and the twins to concern myself with the ironic justice of the guards falling to their own chemical weapons.

The guard reaches a white door and presses her palm to a wall panel, making a screen appear on its surface. It’s a bedroom similar to the one from earlier. Mom and Dad sit on a bed beside each other, clad in their nightclothes with a twin on each lap. Nobody moves for several moments.

Guilt squeezes at my chest. They look so small, unworldly, and frightened.

This is probably their first time in a Guardian fortress, and I can't imagine what they're thinking. I'm about to ask if this is a still picture when one of the twins shifts on Mom's lap and wraps his arms around her neck.

"Did anyone explain what's happening?" asks Prince Kevon. "Have they been offered food or drink?"

She grimaces. "I'm not sure, Your Highness."

Prince Kevon brings our interlaced hands to his lips and presses a kiss on my knuckles. "I will leave you alone with your family. Please explain that they have the option to return home." He turns to the female guard. "Let's see what your colonel wants."

The guard taps a command into the screen, which turns white again. A mechanism within the door clicks, and I inhale a deep breath.

Prince Kevon places a hand on my shoulder. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

As he follows the guard down the hallway, I push the door open and step inside. Mom and Dad stare at me with their mouths agape, and the twins slide off their laps and rush at me.

"Zea." Yoseph wraps his arms around my hips and cries.

"Those bad men took us away."

I can barely hear Flint through his sobs.

The ache in my heart spreads across my chest and up my throat. I stare down at the little, blond heads pressed into my body, and tears fill my eyes. If they knew I was the cause of their troubles, they wouldn't turn to me for comfort. My gaze rises to Mom and Dad, who stare at me through haunted eyes.

"I'm sorry." My voice cracks.

Mom is the first to rise. The rims of her eyes are as red as blood, and her lips tremble from holding back her emotions. "What is happening in the Oasis?"

A dozen answers surge to the back of my throat. When I was young, I could tell Mom and Dad everything. Dad was the first person I ran to when I saw that guard smash the butt of his rifle into Mr. Wintergreen's head. Mom was the person who held me through my nightmares, even years after the event, when twin babies kept her awake.

I shake my head. "There's so much I can't tell you."

"One of the guards showed us that footage," says Dad.

I gulp. Now they'll hate me for condemning so many innocent Harvesters to life in the Barrens. "Those things I said—"

"You and the prince in the hospital." He glances away.

Shock hits my gut like a fist. Dad is talking about the video someone made of my head on the body of a naked girl. How can I tell them it was fake when even the Noble girls believed it to be true? I part my lips to speak, but anything I

say would sound like a lie.

“Zea.” Mom places her hand on her chest. “We’ve been so worried.”

“And they showed us the speech you made in the dome,” Dad adds.

My chest tightens. They’re poisoning Mom and Dad against me. Now, they’re going to think I’ve forgotten my Harvester roots and become the worst kind of elite.

“Is the prince threatening our lives?” he asks. “Is that why you’re ...” Dad’s face tightens as though completing his sentence would hurt.

His words shatter my heart into pieces, and I draw the twins closer. Dad thinks Prince Kevon is forcing me to become his royal mistress when it’s the opposite.

“It’s the queen,” I rasp, hoping she isn’t listening. “She’s sending people to harass you because she doesn’t want Prince Kevon to choose a Harvester. That footage from the hospital isn’t even me. We’ve fallen in love, and he’s been nothing but a gentleman.”

Mom’s brows draw together. I can tell she doesn’t understand, but she nods anyway and glances at Dad, who mirrors the expression. She turns back to me. “Did he send that rice?”

“Did you eat it?” I ask.

“We thought it might be poisoned,” says Dad.

My shoulders sag. “Who knows what might have happened to it on the journey.”

They exchange another glance and don’t look at all reassured. It’s because I haven’t told them why they’re in Fort Meeman-Shelby. “Lady Circi brought you here for your protection.”

“Supposedly,” Dad mutters. “I don’t know anyone who ever returned after being snatched from their beds.”

“Do you want to go back home?”

“Of course,” says Mom.

“But there was nearly a riot—”

Dad crosses the room and places a large hand on my shoulder. The warmth of his touch melts my tense muscles. After everything I’ve endured these past weeks. I’ve forgotten how much I miss his comfort. “Whatever they say and whatever images they show us, you are still our daughter. I won’t hear anyone disparage you. Even when we believed our eyes, we knew there had to be a reason for your strange behavior.”

“We brought you up better than that,” Mom murmurs.

All the tension escapes me in a long exhale, and I collapse against Dad’s shoulders. Yoseph protests about being crushed, and Dad hoists him into his



arms. Flint grabs my jacket sleeves, climbs me like a monkey, and clings to my neck. When Mom joins the hug, I finally feel like we're complete.

We stand together in a tight embrace for several heartbeats. I inhale the mingled scents of my family. It's baking and cornsilk and home.

"What should I do?" I whisper.

Dad squeezes me extra tight. "If Prince Kevon makes you happy, you should follow your heart."

Mom draws back and nods. "Don't worry about us."

My lips part. How could they say this after I told them about Queen Damascena? "But—"

"Those guards want to intimidate you into dropping out of the Princess Trials," says Dad.

"You told me I should make a deal, like Lady Circi," I said.

Dad shakes his head. "She was the favorite, but I don't think the king had fallen in love with Lady Circi around the time she paired up with Queen Damascena."

"This is more than the love between two people, Zea." Mom squeezes my hand. "You could become the Queen of Phangloria. Think about the reforms you and Prince Kevon will make and don't listen to idle threats."

"She's serious," I mutter. "The last time we spoke, she hinted at swapping the twins' vaccinations for poison."

Mom shakes her head. "It makes no sense to act against the future queen. Not when you can so easily retaliate when you come into her power."

My arms drop to my sides. I thought they would discourage me and demand that I returned with them to Rugosa, but even Dad wants me to continue. A knock on the door makes us break away from our family hug. I hand Flint back to Mom, and usher everybody to the back of the room.

I smooth down my borrowed jacket and pull back my shoulders. "Come in."

The door opens, and Prince Kevon walks inside, his features slack.

Mom and Dad bow and curtsy, the twins offer him enthusiastic waves, but Prince Kevon returns their greetings with practiced politeness.

I place a hand on his arm. "What's wrong?"

"It's my father," Prince Kevon whispers. "He's dead."

## CHAPTER 17

*A*fter arranging transportation to return my family home, Garrett, Prince Kevon, and I head for the Oasis. I don't know much about King Arias except that he was one of many monarchs that supported the unfair Echelon system and that he married Queen Damascena, even when he preferred Lady Circi.

I lace my fingers through Prince Kevon's as we leave the fort and pause on its front steps. The sun hovers above the horizon, a ball of incandescent white that bleeds yellow and then red when the light touches the indigo sky.

In this part of Phangloria, months before the rainy season, there are no clouds, and a cool breeze swirls through the full parking lot. Black jeeps stand in neat rows, and behind them are vans. Behind those are trucks large enough to hold dozens of guardians. How many towns in the Harvester District also had early roll-calls?

We wait for his van to arrive. Prince Kevon stands on my right and on his right is Garrett, who places a supporting hand on the prince's shoulder. My insides feel like an apron scrubbed against the washboard until its threads come loose and wrung dry.

"Are you ready?" asks Garrett.

"No," replies Prince Kevon.

"Ready for what?" I ask.

Prince Kevon turns to me and swallows. His chest rises and falls with rapid breaths, making me worry about the artificial tissues in his heart. This has been the most intense few weeks of his life, and I can't imagine what could be worse than facing the death of a parent.

"After the funeral, I will become the Prince Regent until my official coronation."

I knew it was only a matter of weeks before he would become the king, but this is so sudden. "Will you rule the country?"

He closes his eyes and nods. “There will be no Phanglorian higher in rank than me.”

A black van pulls up at the steps, and the driver opens its doors. As we step into an interior about the size of Queen Damascena’s mobile dressing room, I inhale the warm scent of leather and polish and Prince Kevon’s cologne.

A sofa runs down the vehicle’s left and next to it is an armchair. Along the wall that separates the back from the driver’s cab is the shelf of leather-bound tomes I saw in the clips of Prince Kevon’s dates. On the right is a writing desk with a leather surface, and next to it, a small dining table with two chairs.

Prince Kevon guides me to the sofa and flops down. My heart clenches with concern, and I’m so glad when Garrett joins us and sits at his other side. The driver closes the door and pulls out.

“I’m so sorry about the king.” I rest my head on Prince Kevon’s shoulder. “Were you close?”

Prince Kevon rubs his chest over the black guard’s jacket. “My father never spent enough time for us to foster a relationship.”

“Uncle Arias liked to wander outside the Oasis,” Garrett adds. “He always said there was more to Phangloria than Nobles.”

“But you must have spent some time with him.” I squeeze Prince Kevon’s hand.

He turns to me with a sad smile. “Apart from portraits and official events, I barely saw my father.”

I gulp. Queen Damascena doesn’t seem the maternal type, either. I can’t imagine what it would be like to grow up without a real Mom and Dad. “I’m sorry.”

“Perhaps it was for the best,” Prince Kevon squeezes back. “Because my father was absent, I spent a lot of time with the Devotees of Gaia, teachers, and nannies who gave me a rounded view of our world. I also had wonderful cousins who are more like siblings.”

“Like Garrett,” I say.

“When Forelle tells me about her childhood, it seems like another world,” says Garrett, his voice breathy with awe.

I wrap my arms around Prince Kevon’s middle and hold him tight. When he was still disguised as Sergeant Silver, he talked about the beauty and peace of our region. Harvesters are usually too busy struggling to survive. We don’t occupy ourselves with petty ambitions like the people at the Oasis.

If I had to choose, I would rather live with people I love than with riches. It’s terrible that Prince Kevon has lost a father, but I’m glad the country has gained a kind and compassionate regent.

Garrett and Prince Kevon reminisce about the little contact they had with King Arias. They don't exactly say the words, but the king sounds like he spent his time with various mistresses in different Echelons of Phangloria and particularly enjoyed spending time with the milkmaids of Bos.

I shake away suspicions about that town getting extra rations because the king favored their women. Even if it's true, it's not charitable to speak such scandalous thoughts about the dead.

Garrett's watch chimes, and he excuses himself to walk to the bookcase. He pulls a lever and steps into the driver's cab, leaving us alone. My mouth dries, and the surface of my skin prickles with apprehension. Part of me knows Prince Kevon won't retreat into himself as Ryce did after Mr. Wintergreen's death, but those years I spent pining over Ryce have created an expectation that's difficult to shake.

With a sigh, Prince Kevon wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me further into his side. The muscles around my torso relax as I sink into his warm embrace. Then I remember that I'm the one who should be giving him comfort.

I tilt my head up and meet his sad eyes. "How are you feeling, really?"

"Bereft," he says in a monotone.

"What do you mean?" My hand slides over his jacket and settles on the space between his pectoral muscles. There's no knife in his chest, but I can't resist the urge to keep my hand there to hold back a torrent of grief.

Prince Kevon bends his neck and kisses the tip of my ring finger. "He said he would guide me through the Princess Trials, but the tsunami happened, and he supposedly left with the navy..."

I nod, understanding what he leaves unsaid. King Arias lied about his whereabouts, and Prince Kevon found him dying in a hospital room. "You were looking forward to spending time with him."

"The moments I had with my father was precious," he murmurs. "Believe it or not, the king was a very warm and charming man."

"He produced you, so he must have had some good points."

Prince Kevon chuckles and places a kiss on my brow. I tilt my head up and meet his eyes. The longing in his gaze twists my heart. It's as though he thinks I'll one day slip beyond his reach. Maybe it's because of my earlier rejections. Maybe he thinks I'm staying with him because he got stabbed and now because his father is dead, but it's not.

"I'll be here for you as long as you need me," I say.

The corner of his lips curls into a smile. "What if that's forever?"

My fingers curl around the fabric of his jacket. "How about forever and a day?"

Prince Kevon draws back a few inches. My breath catches. Doesn't he believe me? He lowers thick, dark lashes, cups my jaw with his warm hand, brushes the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. The touch traces a line of pleasure that makes my eyelids flutter closed.

"May I kiss you?" His deep voice echoes through my senses and makes my nerves thrum.

My heart skips several beats as though not knowing if it wants to rejoice or escape.

I lick my lips in anticipation. "You never need to ask."

He leans close, engulfing me in his vanilla and nutmeg scent. The warmth of his breath against my skin feels like a hot caress, and my lips part for the kiss. After several frantic heartbeats, nothing happens.

"What are you doing?" I peer at him through my lashes.

"Drinking you in." Prince Kevon's eyes are mostly black with a tiny ring of denim-blue. "Even covered in an oversized man's jacket, it's impossible to suppress your beauty." He trails his fingers over my jawline and down my neck with an intensity in his eyes that tells me he means every word.

Swallowing, I glance away and fix my gaze to the leather tomes on the bookshelf. When I look in the mirror, I don't see this... what did he call me at the ball? The radiance of Gaia, untainted by surgical enhancements.

My throat dries. Even if Prince Kevon prefers dark-haired, willowy girls like me, I can't match a beauty like Rafaela van Eyck. The silence between us continues, making my pulse race. Aren't people supposed to say something eloquent at moments like this?

Berta's words return to haunt me like a vengeful wraith. Girls like me, unadorned Harvester girls who don't know poetry or politics or what to say in the throes of passion, never get the handsome prince.

"Zea?" Concern laces his voice. "Did I say something—"

"Just kiss me," I murmur.

He turns my face towards his and descends his lips on mine with a touch that sends sparks racing along my nerve endings. His tongue swipes against the seam of my mouth, and I part my lips and yield.

The kiss is exploring, devouring, as though he's both consuming and committing me to memory. It's nothing like the gentle, sweet embrace we shared in the hospital's roof garden, and there's an urgency to the kiss like he thinks it will be his last.

Each caress of his lips, each nip of his teeth, each swipe of his tongue lights a fire within me that melts away my doubts and burns the events of the morning to ashes. I cling onto his broad shoulders, not thinking of anything but Prince

Kevon and how I never want this kiss to end.

His hands grip my waist and pull me onto his lap. It's just like that time in my hospital room, but there's no Lady Circi to interrupt us. He slides his fingers over my neck, threads them into my hair, and secures me in place.

My head spins, and I'm glad he's holding onto me because I'd collapse under the onslaught of pleasure. How could I have ever doubted Prince Kevon? I dig my fingers into the hard muscles of his back, but when one of his hands skims the top button of my jacket, my body goes rigid.

Prince Kevon draws back. "Forgive me."

"It's..." I place a palm over the jacket's opening. "I couldn't stand for you to see me in this dress."

His brow rises a fraction, and the strangest expression crosses his handsome features. Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I slide off his lap.

"Sorry." I dip my head and stare into my hands. "Everyone in Rugosa saw me dressed like this, and so did the people watching me on NetFace, but I had no choice then, and it's not proper—"

"Zea." He takes a hand and places gentle kisses on each knuckle. "I understand."

Forelle would probably remind me that Prince Kevon would see me in less than a skimpy dress soon enough, but Queen Damascena would taunt me about keeping the prince amused until he decided which Noble to marry. I push those thoughts aside and grab his hand.

Each kiss I place on his knuckles makes him laugh, and the awkwardness that clings to my skin recedes to the back of my mind.

We sit together on the sofa for the next few hours, sleeping, talking, drinking, and picking at breakfast. Prince Kevon shares stories about King Arias and tells me that it had been the king's suggestion that he disguise himself as a guard to escort the girls to the Princess Trials.

From these anecdotes, it sounds like King Arias was deeply unsatisfied with life at court, or at least with his choice of wife. I wonder if Prince Kevon realizes this and has decided not to repeat his father's mistake.

Eventually, the van stops, and the doors open. The dim lights of an underground parking lot illuminate a row of vehicles, including Prince Kevon's two-seater solar car. Lady Circi, still clad in her black catsuit but with four times as many guns, steps into view.

Her brows rise when she sees me behind the prince, but there's no disapproval on her features. "Move faster next time I send you an alarm."

A breath catches in the back of my throat as we step out of the van. Did Lady Circi just admit to telling Prince Kevon that I was at the Rugosa Square?

Prince Kevon releases my hand and wraps his arms around Lady Circi. “Thank you.” He draws back and kisses her on the cheek before engulfing her in another embrace. “And I’m sorry.”

She endures the hug and glares at me with an intensity that warns me not to delve into whatever’s going on between her and the prince. I glance away, giving them their privacy. Lady Circi might be the queen’s lady-at-arms, but she has known Prince Kevon since he was born. Something about the way they interact speaks of more than a grudging affection.

When Prince Kevon finally releases Lady Circi, she strides around the van and talks to Garrett.

“I’ll walk you to your room.” The prince places a hand on the small of my back.

“Tonight’s the full moon,” says Lady Circi from behind the van.

Prince Kevon’s steps falter for a moment, but we walk past a fleet of cars and vans to a security door. It scans the prince’s retina and handprint before allowing us to enter a darkened stairwell.

As soon as the door shuts, bright lights flare to life. I walk up the stairs with the prince and ask, “What happens on the full moon?”

“Royal funerals take place when the moon’s light is at its maximum.” He places a hand on the rail as he guides me up the steps. “According to Gaia’s Bible, this is when the goddess Selene’s power is at its fullest.”

Prince Kevon explains that Selene requires a full moon to carry the royal spirit across the sky to Gaia. If they don’t bury King Arias tonight, they’ll have to wait another month. During that time, Queen Damascena will reign over Phangloria and will have the power to decide his bride.

A shudder runs down my spine at the thought of that woman ruling anything. She already abuses enough of her power and doesn’t need any more.

When we reach the top of the stairs, Prince Kevon is breathing hard. I pause to ask if he’s alright, but he shakes his head and says it’s just nerves.

As we continue through the hallways, the palace servants we pass wear white, which Prince Kevon explains is in celebration for King Arias ascending to the realm of Gaia. I want to ask what the Devotees of Gaia believe happens to the souls of those who aren’t royal but now is not the time.

Prince Kevon stops outside my door and places a hand on my arm. “Will you come to the funeral?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.” He leans down and presses a soft kiss on my lips. “I’ll make sure that the ushers seat you accordingly.”

I lean my back against the wall and watch him stride down the hallway,

already looking to me like the King of Phangloria. Apart from my promise to stay at his side forever, he hasn't discussed the possibility of marriage. Maybe that's because he doesn't want to scare me away, but seeing Mom and Dad this morning has strengthened my resolve. If he still wants me as his wife, I'm going to say yes.

He pauses at the corner, turns back and waves.

I raise a hand, hoping things won't be different between us when he takes the throne. At the end of the Princess Trials, he'll probably work full time on matters of the state. I hope that this isn't the start of a new distance between us.



The intensity of the sun shining through the tall windows of my room tells me it's between two and three in the afternoon. Georgette sits on the velvet sofa with a computer tablet, the ends of her mahogany hair turning red in the light. Her usual waistcoat and pencil skirt is white.

As soon as our gazes meet, she tosses the tablet on the low table and rises to her feet.

"Have you heard?" Georgette rounds the table, rushes across the room, and grabs me by the hands.

"About the king?" I ask.

"The funeral is tonight." She sweeps her gaze down my borrowed uniform and purses her lips. "I'm going to dress you in something so dignified that they'll forget about that hideous outfit that's streaming all over NetFace."

"This one?" I unbutton my jacket.

Georgette winces. "Where did you get something so anti-Harvester?"

My cheeks flush. I'm about to tell her it wasn't my choice of outfit when the door behind us slams open with a bang. My heart leapfrogs out of its resting-place, and I spin around.

The queen wears an ivory jumpsuit with a fitted, one-button jacket. Her golden hair does nothing to hide the hatred seething under those pretty features.

"I thought the outfit was appropriate payment for her temporary dalliance with my son," she says.

The memory of Mom and Dad huddled together in their nightclothes, each clutching a twin, races to the front of my mind. Anger simmers in my belly, dissolving all notions of fear. There are no words to describe the depth of my hatred of this woman.

Georgette dips into a low curtsy. "Your Majesty, I am sorry for—"

"Leave us," the queen snaps.

Georgette walks a wide circle around the monster in white, scurries out of



the room, and closes the door.

Queen Damascena advances toward me with her hands clenched into fists. “I ought to beat you bloody for not completing your speech.”

“It’s hard to read with cepa gas in my eyes.” I mirror her movement.

“It’s hard to believe that you can read at all,” she drawls.

“What do you want?” I snap.

She rears back. “Is this the way you speak to the Queen Regent of Phangloria? I could have you executed for treason.”

Her bluff drifts over me like a dandelion seed in the breeze, and I glance at my imaginary watch. “Do you think you could organize my trial and sentencing before moonrise?”

She bares her perfect teeth and flares her nostrils. Queen Damascena might have intimidated me before, but her reign of threats and terror ends the moment Prince Kevon becomes the regent. She steps forward until the heat of her anger warms my skin and the scent of her mandragon perfume stings my nostrils.

“Tell Kevon he must announce his Noble of choice during the eulogy.” Her face tightens. “Anyone but Ingrid Strab.”

“But the Chamber of Ministers—”

“That group of fossils will not control the throne,” she snaps. “Choose another Noble girl or—”

“What if Prince Kevon chooses me?” I raise my chin and meet her hateful eyes. They’re bloodshot, more magenta than violet, and probably as fake as her perfect nose.

“Then you’ll be Phangloria’s shortest-lived orphan.” She prods my shoulder with a sharp finger. “I know Harvester girls are only good for picking produce, but even you know I could have your entire family exterminated before Kevon slips a ring on that scrawny finger.”

The fury in my belly roils. It fizzles and crackles and pops until it burns the back of my throat with its bitterness. How I long to shove my knowledge in her arrogant face. If Prince Kevon chooses me tonight, I will become the second-highest-ranking person in Phangloria with the power to squash her like a ripe tomato.

Her eyes narrow. “You don’t believe me?”

“Why do you think I can persuade Prince Kevon into choosing a girl he doesn’t want?”

“Your father should be supervising cornfield nineteen around this time.” Queen Damascena walks across to the low table and picks up the tablet Georgette discarded. With a few commands, she makes it ring, and a voice on the other side greets her.

“Bring the father,” she says.

My stomach drops. “What are you doing?”

“Demonstrating on your father what I will do to your mother if you don’t fall in line.”

Panic explodes across my chest. I rush across the room to the door and fling it open. Prince Kevon couldn’t have gotten far—his mother won’t give the order if I’m not there to watch. I escape into the hallway. Two hard-faced women in black jumpsuits step out from the wall into my path.

“Move aside.” I dart to the left.

Fingers thread into my hair. They pull back with a ferocity that burns my scalp. The cloying scent of mandragon fills my nostrils.

“You’re going nowhere.” Queen Damascena drags me back into the room.

“Let go of me!” I thrash at her with my fists and hit her nose. The queen’s head snaps back, and she clutches her face.

One of the women’s arms encircles my neck. My head jerks back into her chest. Before I can twist away, she grabs her other bicep and pushes my head forward. My throat closes. I can’t breathe. I elbow, throw back my head, and kick at the woman, but she grunts and bears the force of my attacks.

“How dare you?” Queen Damascena’s violet eyes bulge, her face turns scarlet, and her features twist into a rictus of rage. “I should execute you right now!”

The woman holding me tightens her grip, turning the edges of my vision black.

My insides are a lightning storm of thundering heartbeats and white-hot fear. Loud, rasping breaths struggle through my collapsed throat. I’ve got to stay calm. I’ve got to endure this to get her attention on me and off Dad.

Queen Damascena only threatens me because she thinks I can influence Prince Kevon. She might order her henchmen to beat me up, but she won’t let me die. Not until he has agreed to take a Noble bride.

I kick out at her shin. “Dowager queen,” I rasp. “You’ll go out to pasture with the other cows.”

The queen throws the tablet down on the table and unbuckles her belt. “Lie her flat on the bed.”

As the woman holding me loosens her choke-hold, I sneer, “Why, because you can’t fight me like a woman? You’re nothing without your guards.”

Her second henchwoman, a round-faced woman with a brown ponytail, punches me hard in the gut. She knocks the air out of my lungs, and it gets trapped in my throat. The one holding me retightens her grip until I see stars.

I leap up, hit the second woman in the gut, use our downward momentum to

flip her to the side. My former captor hits her head, but her larger body breaks the fall.

As I scramble to my feet, Queen Damascena kicks me in the belly.

I grab her by the calves and pull her off her feet. She falls onto her back with a satisfying shriek. A little voice in the back of my head tells me to stop, to run for help. I've done enough. I've proven my point, but the fury roaring in my veins urges me to smash my fist in her arrogant little face.

Before I can land a blow, a large hand grabs my hair and pulls me off the queen.

"Filthy mongrel." Queen Damascena picks up a vase and hurls it at my head.

I twist, letting it smash against the marble floor.

"Stop this at once!" bellows a voice.

Everybody freezes. Heavy, angry footsteps crush the broken glass, and someone slaps the woman's hand out of my hair. I raise my head and stare into the stricken eyes of Prince Kevon.

"Kevon," the queen says from between panting breaths. "Your Harvester harlot tried to—"

"Silence," he roars.

Everyone, including me, flinches.

Prince Kevon helps me to my feet, his gaze flicking down my form. He cups my face and stares into my eyes with an urgency I haven't seen since our last kiss. "Are you alright?"

Adrenaline courses through my veins, making my limbs tremble. He might not have been so sympathetic if he had caught me pummeling the queen's face.

"I think so."

He places a hand under my elbow. "Do you need to see Doctor Palatine?"

"For a pregnancy test?" snaps the queen.

Prince Kevon turns to her, his face a mask of hatred. "I will deal with you after the funeral."

The queen's eyes widen, and her face blanches. She steps back and claps a hand over her chest.

He wraps his arm around my waist and guides me out of the room, but I grab his arm. "Please, call off the guards around my father."

His eyes soften. "Of course. After tonight, you will never fear for the safety of your family."

I exhale but relief doesn't come to me immediately. My family won't be safe any time between now and the time Prince Kevon appoints me as his consort.

"Your Majesty?" asks a tinny voice at the end of the tablet computer.

Prince Kevon walks around the low table and picks up the device. "King

Arias has died, and I will soon become his regent.”

“Your Highness,” the male voice says. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. Escort Mr. Calico home to his family and ensure they come to no harm. I have already spoken to Colonel Snath about the protection of this household but I will ensure that anyone who so much as harms that family will face execution.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Kevon,” Queen Damascena rasps.

The prince’s eyes turn cold. “After the funeral, you will retire from the royal court and live out your days with General Provins.”

Her face slackens. “But my father—”

“Made you heartless and unfit to rule,” Prince Kevon snaps. “It is a fitting ending for the woman who caused my father and me so much misery.”

Queen Damascena inclines her head and walks to the door with her shoulders slumped. Her henchwomen drop into low curtses and follow her out of the room.

As soon as it shuts, the prince pulls me into his chest. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs into my hair. “I should have guessed she would threaten you on the eve that I become the regent.”

I shake my head. “This isn’t your fault. I should have told you earlier.”

He slips his knuckles against the side of my face. “Do you need to see the doctor?”

“No.” I gaze into his glistening eyes.

“I must leave immediately to mobilize people to protect your family.”

My throat dries as the queen’s mocking voice reminds me that she is still the regent and can move against my home faster than Prince Kevon can protect it. “Alright.”

He presses a kiss on my forehead and strides out of the room, leaving me wondering if standing up to Queen Damascena will lead to their salvation or their deaths.

## CHAPTER 18

I drop to my knees on the floor and place my palms on the sun-warmed marble. What on earth just happened? In all my time in Rugosa, I've never gotten into a fight, not even those times I shot guards attacking Harvester girls. I've been in the Oasis less than three weeks, and I've been involved in countless brawls and murder attempts.

The door opens, and my head snaps up. A frantic Georgette scurries inside with a pair of servants. Behind them are two female guards dressed in white armor. She helps me off the floor, murmuring words of comfort, while the servants clear up the broken glass.

Together, we cross the bedroom, then into the walk-in wardrobe. The mirror lights are too bright, the closet doors seem to close in on us, and I feel trapped like a corn snake in a snare.

"Where's Forelle?" I whisper.

"She stayed overnight with Garrett's family." Georgette pulls out a padded seat and guides me down with a firm hand on my shoulder. "I guess when they heard the news about King Arias, she must have gotten caught up in funeral arrangements."

"Right."

I brace my forearms on the white counter and stare at my reflection. Red blotches still mar my cheeks, my left eye socket swells, and my hair looks like I'm caught in a sandstorm. Behind me hangs a garment bag that reminds me of what the Toxic Disposal Guardians used to wrap up Rafaela's body.

"Are you hurt?" she asks.

"I..." I have to pause to answer that question because adrenaline still courses through my veins and numbs everything except for my stinging eyes.

My throat feels like I've swallowed mouthfuls of grit. As I force deep breaths in and out of my lungs, the burning of my scalp intensifies, along with a sharp ache in my gut. "I've had worse."

“Let's get you out of that uniform,” Georgette says.

I nod and fumble with the buttons of my borrowed shirt. What's going to happen to Mom and Dad? My mind races at how I allowed the situation with the queen to escalate. What on earth was I thinking to get into a fight with three women?

Queen Damascena asked for the impossible. There's no way I could tell Prince Kevon to marry someone else and have him listen. It was hard enough to dissuade him from pursuing me. She must have been frustrated about her impending loss of power and came to my room to work out her resentment.

As Georgette eases my hands away from the buttons and unfastens the jacket, she explains that she called Prince Kevon to return to my room the moment Queen Damascena arrived. I squeeze her hand and croak my thanks.

Someone knocks on the door, making us both stiffen.

“Let the guards answer.” Georgette throws me a bathrobe and walks ahead of me through the bedroom and to the door. “But let's be prepared in case she returns.”

I let the jacket fall away and shoulder on the robe. The toweling fabric feels like clouds against my irritated skin, and I creep past the closets and poke my head out into the room.

The servants have already straightened up and left. One of the guards in white uniform stands at the far wall facing the door, while the other speaks to whoever knocked.

“What's happening?” I whisper.

“It's another girl from the Trials, Ma'am,” replies the guard.

“Oh.” I tie the front of my robe and walk across the room, wondering if Emmera ever made it to Rugosa.

The guard at the door moves aside, revealing Ingrid Strab, still wearing her khaki shirt and pants from the Barrens. One side of her face is still a little swollen from when she got stomped on her head, but there's no sign of the bruising. For once, she has lost the haughty self-assurance and stands with her hands clasped.

“Zea-Mays?” Ingrid steps forward. “May I come in?”

“No. I'm busy.”

She bows her head. “I came to apologize.”

Distrust quivers through my gut. I clench my fists and get ready to jump aside when she finally reveals what she's hiding in her hands.

“For what?” I ask.

“Everything.” Ingrid raises her head and fixes her eyes on mine. They're as green as a pickle with brown centers that remind me of an avocado left out in the

sun. She exhales a long sigh. “The other girls have hated me since I returned from captivity, and it’s made me realize how you must have felt this entire time in the Princess Trials.”

I want to roll my eyes and remind her that she led the worst of the animosity, but two skirmishes a day are my absolute limit, and I still don’t know if Mom and Dad are safe.

“You’re comparing petty backbiting with your attempts to hunt me with guns?” I glance at Georgette, who beckons me toward the walk-in wardrobe. “If that’s all you came to say—”

“Please, don’t go.” Ingrid raises both palms.

I place my hands on my hips. “What is it, now?”

“Since Prince Kevon will choose you to be his queen, I want to give you some advice.”

My brows rise, but I don’t encourage or discourage her to continue.

Ingrid gulps. “Be careful when you set up your royal court. Everybody from the Chamber of Ministers to your ladies-in-waiting will want you dead and replaced by a Noble.”

I suppress a ripple of anxiety. This isn’t exactly anything new, and I don’t want Ingrid thinking that she’s breached my defenses. “And I expect you’re about to tell me how to circumvent this?”

She shakes her head. “There’s a reason why girls from other Echelons never rule Phangloria. At least not for long enough to make the history books unless they ally with a Noble.”

It sounds like a threat, but there’s a truth in her words that twists my insides into painful knots. I smooth out my features, turn around, and walk back to the mirror. Whatever game Ingrid is playing, I’m not interested.

“Think about it,” Ingrid says to my back. “If you let me marry the prince, you can have him as much as you want. I’ll even grant you the honor of birthing the royal heir.”

A scuffle breaks out behind me. I don’t flinch, I don’t turn. The door slams, followed by Ingrid’s outraged squeak. The corner of my lips curl into a smile. Even Ingrid recognizes me as a person of influence.

I continue to the bathroom and take a long, hot shower. It washes away the salt and sand and sweat still clinging to my skin from the previous challenge. The apricot-scented soap fills my nostrils and relaxes my muscles.

Maybe now that Prince Kevon has threatened to banish her from court, Queen Damascena won’t strike out against Mom and Dad. Besides, none of those guards would want to be executed for following the orders of a soon-to-be dowager queen.

After washing my hair with a peach shampoo and honeysuckle rinse, I dry off and return to the walk-in wardrobe, where Forelle leans against a closet, chatting with Georgette. She wears an emerald-green jumpsuit that shimmers like silk and compliments her red hair.

“Zea!” Forelle rushes forward and wraps me in a tight hug. “I’m so sorry. Georgette just told me what happened with the queen.”

I’m still feeling unsteady from the choke-hold, and I tap Forelle’s arm for her to draw back. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m escorting you to the funeral.” She raises her hand and flashes a thin bracelet set with colorless crystals and blinking lights.

My mouth falls open. “Is that the latest Amstraadi technology?”

“Garrett proposed.” Forelle flashes me a grin. “He just returned from visiting my Mom and Dad to ask for permission.”

A boulder of dread rolls in my stomach. I’m happy for Forelle—Garrett is a great guy who will offer her a happy and less complicated life, but if asking the family is the tradition for Nobles, it means that Prince Kevon doesn’t have any plans to marry me soon.

“Congratulations.” I wrap my arms around Forelle and give her a hug. “When are you getting married?”

She draws back and raises a shoulder. “We’re waiting until after the funeral and coronation.”

I nod, noting that Forelle didn’t mention a royal wedding. My heart shrinks until there’s an empty cavity between my lungs, and I smile so hard that the muscles in my face tremble. Any decent young man would balk at a girl who kicked his mother, let alone a prince, and I haven’t forgotten the odd look he gave me when I freaked out about unbuttoning my jacket.

As my expression collapses, I turn to Georgette. “Is Master Thymel making the dress?”

The other girl smiles back and raves about her cousin’s selection of wedding gowns, which makes the pair dance around the walk-in wardrobe like we’ve just completed a massive harvest.

Ingrid’s words roll to the forefront of my mind like tumbleweed. *Royal brides outside the Noble Echelon don’t live long enough to make the history books.*

I push away those thoughts and turn to the garment bag. Ingrid just tossed me a handful of paranoia seeds with the spores of self-doubt. The next time I see her, she’ll water them and sit back while they sprout.

Georgette unzips the garment bag and reveals a full-length silver dress with the silhouette of a Harvester Uniform, only it’s made of one huge piece of silk



with a white sash around the waist. Its long arms are as thin as spider webs and look like they would cover my wrists.

She explains that Master Thymel based it on the gowns worn by medieval queens and he wanted to reflect the virtue, generosity, and integrity of being a Harvester. As Georgette helps me into the outfit, Forelle brings her own garment bag and changes into a similar gown the color of the stars.

After a light supper of lobster soup, the guards walk Forelle and me through the hallways, down the stairs, and into an underground parking lot, to a fleet of white limousines. Our driver takes us out of the palace grounds and into the Oasis streets.

I lean forward in the back seat and peer out of the window. The streetlights are off, with the storefronts and full moon providing illumination. Nobles and the people who serve them stand on the streets, raising white flags. White ribbons stretch from the trees and lampposts and shimmer in the moonlight, presumably representing the king's ascension to Gaia. It's a beautiful display, but I can't stop thinking about the Harvesters who got gassed.

Five years ago, we had to gather in Rugosa Square to watch Princess Briar get married. The guards provided Phangloria flags, and there were even extra rations of water and seasoned corn nuts. Would the guards wait a few days to announce the king's death or force everyone from their homes to watch the funeral without enough water to wash the cepa gas from their eyes?

Forelle wraps her fingers around mine. "Are you nervous?"

"I never want to see another camera," I say with a groan.

She hums her agreement. "Eden says they don't allow reporters into Hesiod Hill."

I lean back in the leather seat and exhale a relieved breath. Eden is Garrett's sister, who has given her a warm welcome to the family. Now that I know a little more about the cousins' upbringing, it makes sense that they're not like other Nobles.

Our car travels through a boulevard that stretches across a lawned area and then slows to join a procession of white vehicles moving down a long road that leads to a hill. Vertical road markings reflect the moonlight and spotlights illuminate the silver bark of olive trees that line our path.

The wheels rumble beneath us, reminding me of the uncovered roads of Rugosa. I press my face against the window. Unlike the other parts of the Oasis, there are no buildings, no greenery, and no other plants, save for these olive trees. It seems strange that a temple would occupy such humble surroundings.

The building up ahead is a silver dome that shines even brighter than the palace. Moonlight catches its metallic roof, and the tall columns supporting the

structure glow with an internal light.

“Is this where the princess got married?” I ask.

Forelle opens her hand, and light streams from her new bracelet. She taps a few commands onto the images on her palm, explaining that this new health monitor also contains NetFace.

“This is the original Temple of Gaia,” she says. “The Hierophant lives inside the hill.”

My brows draw together. “How do you know so much about this technology?”

“When I’m not spending time with you or Garrett, Eden shows me around the Oasis.”

Forelle wiggles her thumb, and more text appears on her hand. “The Hierophant and his devotees commit their lives to the service of Gaia. Their duties include presiding over royal weddings, funerals, and coronations. In modern times they reserve a life of peaceful existence within the olive groves that surround their home, but they once protected the temple from encroaching predators and wild men.”

By the time Forelle finishes reading the article, our vehicle reaches the top of the hill and stops at the temple’s steps. A tall devotee wearing a hooded, white robe opens the door, letting in the scent of burning resin.

As we step out into the night, we meet another man in white, who sweeps his arms toward the stone steps, where other guests wearing white ascend toward the entrance.

Forelle climbs the steps at my side. “We’re sitting together, no matter what.”

“Thanks for returning to the palace for me.” I bump her on the shoulder.

“You and I are going to have a long, happy life as cousins-in-law.” Forelle loops her arm through mine.

The muscles in my face twitch, and I rub the high collar of my dress. “He hasn’t proposed.”

“That’s because he’s waiting for the right moment.”

I want to ask if Garrett told her this, but we reach the top of the stairs, where another devotee in the same white robes as before bows. He holds up a piece of parchment that welcomes us to the funeral of King Arias II and asks us to give our names to the usher, who will guide us to an assigned seat.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He inclines his head, and we walk through the pillars into a candle-lit interior of carved, stone walls and vaulted ceilings. Our footsteps echo on the hallway hard floors, adding to the voices of the group of girls standing at the side of tall, wooden doors.

Ingrid stands aside from them and glares into Constance's eyes. An elderly devotee whose white hood has fallen down holds them apart, as though he's just separated them from fighting.

"The other Noble girls attacked Ingrid on the coach," I whisper to Forelle.

"We saw it on Netface," she whispers back. "None of those awful girls are fit to rule anything except a lizard fight."

I press my lips together and hold back a laugh. It's so unlike Forelle to speak badly of anyone. We reach the end of the line, which mostly consists of girls I recognize from the Princess Trials. All six of the Nobles stand at the front, along with the Guardians and Artisans who got eliminated at the Chamber of Ministers. There are also a few girls I don't recognize, whose blue-black hair indicates that they are Nobles.

"Has anyone claimed responsibility for all that leaked footage?" I whisper.

She shakes her head. "Nobody believes the official statement that it came from Prunella Broadleaf."

A huff of disbelief escapes my nostrils. I'm about to tell her my Amstraad Republic theory, when a group of Nobles in identical white robes stride past. The Minister of Justice walks among them and glowers at me from the corner of her eye. Montana strides behind her but stares straight ahead.

The devotee at the double doors lets the Ministers inside a moon-lit chamber. Forelle gasps at its interior, but I'm too busy watching a short-haired Minister pull Ingrid aside.

He's about five-ten, with a hooked nose a little too large for his pinched features, and thick brows twisted in a similar scowl to Ingrid's. He wraps a hand around her bicep and hisses at her through bared teeth.

"That's the Minister of Integration," whispers Forelle.

My brows furrow. If she's right, then that's Ingrid's father. "How do you know?"

"He's the one Prince Kevon argued with the most when he approached the Chamber of Ministers to stop that dangerous trial."

I would ask which one she means, as most of the challenges were perilous, but I'm sure she's talking about the one in the Gloria National Park.

Minister Strab jerks Ingrid's arm and says something that makes her face crumple. I bite down on my lip. At least I know where she learned to be so nasty.

"He looks like a bully," Forelle whispers.

I cup my hand around her ear. "His daughter hunts Foundlings who stray from their camps."

She rears back, her face slack.

I nod. "Ingrid boasted about it before trying to shoot me."

The Minister of Integration releases Ingrid's arm with a force that knocks her into a Noble girl, who shoves her aside. Her father straightens his robes as though he didn't just hurt and humiliate his daughter in front of her peers, then strides through the double doors.

A few other people walk past, including the Amstraad Ambassador and Princess Briar, both clad in silver. Following them are a quartet of soldiers in white dress uniform, including Mouse, who turns to me and winks. I smile back in silent thanks for helping me through the truth serum.

Just as the devotee at the door opens it to let us into the temple, Ingrid walks in the opposite direction with her lips pressed into a tight line.

"Where's she going?" whispers Forelle.

I shake my head. "Let's forget about her and go inside."

The temple's interior is circular, about twice the size of my suite, and seats about three-hundred. Around its edges are more pillars than a ballroom, and the entire space is lit by the moon. At the far end, a set of stone steps leads to a marble elevation carved with statues of Gaia, Uranus, and the other gods and goddesses the Nobles revere.

"Is that an altar or a mausoleum?" I whisper to Forelle

She shakes her head but doesn't make a move to look it up on NetFace.

As the devotees guide the girls in front to the seats at the back, it soon becomes our turn to find our places. Forelle and I introduce ourselves, then an elderly man in white robes steps forward and guides us around the back of the pillars through a darkened walkway.

My heartbeat echoes through my ears, and I grab Forelle's hand. Our usher walks past where his colleague seats the other girls, past the Chamber of Ministers who sit in the rows closest to the front, and stops at the first row to the three empty seats next to Garrett.

I gulp and peer at the people sitting next to him, a Noble girl about his age, Lady Circi, a Noble who looks like an older version of Garrett, and Queen Damascena. On the queen's other side is an empty space I guess is for Prince Kevon, then Princess Briar sits with Ambassador Pascale.

Garrett stands and motions for us to sit beside him. I want to ask if he's sure that we're allowed at the front, but Forelle lowers herself into the seat.

He leans forward and meets my eyes with a frown. "Zea, I heard about what happened. Are you alright?"

I'm too nervous to do anything but nod. Garrett's gaze flicks somewhere over my shoulder, and I turn around to see who will occupy the seat next to mine.

Two figures stand in the gap between the nearest column. An usher, and

Prince Kevon, who wears a white naval jacket with silver buttons and trim that contrast with his dark skin and hair. My breath catches as he walks toward me, but when he lowers himself in the seat next to mine, the tight bands of tension around my chest loosen.

I clutch his hand and resist the urge to kiss him.

“Thank you for coming.” His eyes soften, and a wistful smile curls his lips that melts away all my doubts. “It means so much to me, considering everything my mother has done to sabotage us.”

I want to tell him that I would stay at his side forever, when a chorus of male voices echoes through the chamber. The sounds are so deep and resonant that my bones vibrate. I glance around to find figures in white standing in the spaces between the pillars.

Prince Kevon explains that the Devotees of Gaia are also direct descendants of Gabriel Phan, the man who founded Phangloria. He gestures at an older man at the top of the stairs wearing a silver robe that shimmers in the moonlight and says he is the Hierophant, who will preside over the funeral.

When the voices fade into whispered echoes, the Hierophant tells us not to weep for King Arias because Gaia will welcome him into her celestial garden and reward him for restoring the earth.

A lump forms in the back of my throat. Even though I don’t believe in an earth goddess, these words are more comforting than the urn of ashes bereaved Harvesters receive on their doorsteps.

Next, the Hierophant invites those in the front row to climb the steps and pay their last respects to the king. He walks through what appears to be a passageway that extends to the left beyond the stone stairs, and everybody, including Forelle, rises.

Prince Kevon takes my hand. “I want my father to meet you.”

My insides twist into knots. Garrett brought Forelle to the front row because he’s going to marry her. There’s no doubt how everyone in the temple will interpret my presence.

“Alright.” I rise to my feet, and whispers spread across the seats behind us.

Queen Damascena pauses at the foot of the stairs and stares straight into my eyes with a gaze that burns with determination. She nods as though to say I might have won her son today, but she will never allow me to become the queen.

Clenching my jaw, I match her stare with equal heat. Once the Hierophant lays King Arias to rest, the power she holds over Phangloria will wane.

Prince Kevon’s hand slides down my back. “Are you alright?”

I turn to him with a tiny smile. “Let’s meet your father.”

The queen ascends the stairs and glances at something with pitiless eyes

before turning to the Hierophant. Whatever he says to her makes her lips tighten, and she walks past him and down another set of back stairs. Next is Lady Circi, who says a few words to King Arias before speaking to the Hierophant, and after that is the man I assume is Garrett's father, who steps up with the Noble girl.

"Doesn't Garrett have a mother?" I whisper.

Prince Kevon's features still. "It's complicated."

I nod as we ascend the steps. It's common for women to die in childbirth, although I thought medical technology would help Noble women to survive. My chest tightens as I think about Vitelotte and her family. I've also been so busy with recent events that I haven't even asked anyone what happened to the Wintergreens.

Garrett and Forelle speak to King Arias next. His arm is firmly around her waist, and Forelle's eyes unfocus as though she's about to faint. She bobs into a curtsy, and Garrett steers her toward the Hierophant.

My pulse pounds a rapid beat in my ears, and the sensation of crawling centipedes seizes my stomach. This is worse than standing between two gliders above an unfathomable drop. I glance over my shoulder at hundreds of people whose gazes fix on my back.

At any moment, one of the spectators could aim a weapon at me and shoot. I've amassed more enemies than I can count, and those who might have once supported me now think I've convinced Prince Kevon to imprison families for the merest infraction.

Clenching my stomach muscles, I inhale the chamber's resin-scented air and try not to think that they're using it to mask the smell of a corpse. Garrett and Forelle finish with the Hierophant, and it's our turn.

I lace my fingers with Prince Kevon's and force myself to stand strong at his side as an equal, someone who will support him through the difficult times ahead, and not a weak farm girl who constantly needs rescuing.

"Are you ready?" I murmur.

He turns to me with a tight smile and nods.

"Let's go." I take the next step up the stairs.

At the top, we turn left and continue down a short walkway toward the Hierophant, a short man in his sixties, who smiles at us with compassionate eyes. He might have descended from Gabriel Phan, but the deep lines around his eyes remind me of old, retired Harvester men.

The Hierophant steps aside, giving us space to approach the body, which lies in an alcove.

King Arias looks nothing like the dying man I saw in the hidden room. Whoever prepared him has removed the dark capillaries, evened out his sunken

cheeks, and added back the beard. White disks, painted to look like the moon, lie on his eyes. I know nothing about juvenation surgery or embalming, but he now looks exactly like the man I saw on OasisVision the day I signed up for the Princess Trials.

I glance at Prince Kevon, wanting to ask if this is his father, but the unshed tears in his eyes tells me he recognizes this person as the king.

“Father,” he says. “I followed your advice and found a girl I love and who cares more for our people than she does for herself. Her name is Zea-Mays Calico, from Rugosa.”

My throat dries, and I bend my legs into an awkward curtsy. “Your Majesty, I wish we met under different circumstances.”

Prince Kevon swallows, and I squeeze his hand to offer my support. “Farewell, Father. I hope you find peace with Gaia.”

“Kevon.” The Hierophant steps toward us. “Is this young woman your choice of bride?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The older man beckons me forward.

I glance at Prince Kevon, whose head bobs with an encouraging nod.

“Zea-Mays Calico, is it?” asks the Hierophant.

My heart spasms. How does someone holy know my name unless he watches the Princess Trials? Should I nod, should I bow, should I curtsy or kiss his ring? Prince Kevon addressed him by his title, which means he’s probably higher in rank.

I clear my throat. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Then the videos on NetFace are true.” The Hierophant’s face breaks into a smile. “Thank you for your valiant rescue of our future king.”

Heat rises to my cheeks, and my words dry up on my tongue. If I said I would do the same for anyone, it would diminish the depth of my feelings for Prince Kevon.

The Hierophant chuckles, and the moonlight streaming down on us brings out the silver highlights in his blue eyes. “I’m delighted with your choice,” he says to Prince Kevon. “You have my blessing to proceed.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” the prince replies.

A thrill of happiness shoots through my insides as Prince Kevon turns to me with a smile. “I’m giving a eulogy the top of the stairs. Could you wait for me with Forelle?”

“Of course.” I incline my head at the two men and continue alone down the walkway and down another set of stairs.

When I reach the bottom, the only face turned to mine is Forelle’s, as

everyone stares up at the main stairs. I take my seat, and all the tension leaves my muscles in a relieved breath.

“People of Phangloria, we gather in this temple and in our domes to celebrate the life of—”

The chamber goes dark, and my ears fill with the sound of an explosion.



## CHAPTER 19

I suck in a breath through my teeth, grab Forelle's hand, and push us both to the ground. Shrieks erupt through the temple, their echoes mingling with the sounds of explosions and gunshots. Keeping my best friend close, I glance from left to right, but I can't see any of the flashes of light I would expect from gunfire.

"Kevon," Garrett yells, but his voice is lost in the chaos of shouts and screams and cries for help.

Forelle whimpers at my side.

I wrap my arm around her back and pull her through the dark in the direction of the pillars. "Stay calm. It's not real—"

Someone hooks an arm around my middle, lifts me off my knees, and tears me away from Forelle. He's as big as Dad with a grip like steel and smells of chlorine.

A scream tears from my lips, but my captor clamps a hand over my mouth and carries me at a sprint.

Harsh, rapid breaths wheeze through my nostrils, and my entire consciousness centers on the large body encasing mine, the man's mechanical movements, and the rapid beat of my heart. This has to be the work of Queen Damascena. I should have known from the way she looked at me earlier that she planned something terrible.

His arms pin mine to my sides, and all I can do is thrash with my legs and hope it's enough to trip us over. He takes us through doorways, down stairs, and around corners, each passing second separating me further from Forelle and Prince Kevon.

Then as suddenly as he scooped me up, the man deposits me on the hard floor and releases my mouth.

"Who is this?" I swing my fists around in the dark.

Somebody's muffled laugh turns my fear into fury. I charge in the direction

of the sound and manage to land a hit on hard flesh.

“Why have you taken me?” I snarl.

“I apologize for the alarm, Miss Calico,” says a familiar voice.

My brows draw together. He sounds like...

A thin light flares, illuminating the collar and face of Ambassador Pascale.

“We don’t have much time. Assassins are approaching the outskirts of Rugosa.”

“My family?” I say with a gasp.

He nods. “An hour ago Queen Damascena gave the order to slaughter your father and hold your mother and brothers hostage until you agree to her demands.”

“How do you know this?” I whisper.

“How indeed?” drawls another familiar voice.

“Mouse?”

“As I implied earlier, Miss Calico, we have mere minutes before the Devotees of Gaia work out how we have sabotaged their lighting and acoustics. Your family, however, do not have the luxury of time.”

Lights from the men’s collars flash on and off, and their excited breaths rattle through my ears. This has to be part of the larger game show he wants to export to the Amstraad Republic, but do I believe the ambassador?

My pulse quickens, and sweat forms on my brow. Mouse has never steered me wrong, and he probably works for Ambassador Pascale. I don’t think it matters if I believe him or not because an attack on my family is exactly what I would expect from Queen Damascena.

“What do you want from me?” I whisper.

The lights on Mouse’s collar shift, as though he’s adjusting his jacket, but Ambassador Pascale’s face remains patient and still. The expression doesn’t match the supposed urgency of the situation, making me doubt their claims.

“We have agents stationed in Rugosa, ready to slaughter Queen Damascena’s assassins,” says the ambassador.

My hands curl into fists. I want to grab that glowing collar and shake the answers out of the little man, but fold my arms across my chest. I’m trapped in a room with two or more Amstraadi soldiers. Even more Amstraadi soldiers are within reach of my family. I’m in no position to make demands.

“Alright,” I say.

“Once they have secured the area, my people will escort your family to the Amstraad Embassy, where your mother, your father, and your twin brothers will remain in comfort and safety until the coronation of Prince Kevon.”

“And then what?” I ask.

The ambassador makes a dry chuckle that sends disgust rippling across my

skin. “As soon as the new king disbands Queen Damascena’s royal court, she will be powerless to act against your family.”

Mouse steps forward, holding a computer tablet. “See for yourself.”

My throat dries as I stare at the tablet’s screen. Two dots—one white, and the other red—appear on a map of Phangloria in the location that was once Memphis, Tennessee. He taps again, and the map expands into the Harvester Region. Then with another tap, Rugosa, and another brings up the long stretch of land between the cornfields and Rugosa’s residential area.

“That white dot is my house?” I croak.

Mouse’s finger hovers over the red dot, which races across the screen toward the white. “As you can see, the assassins are close.”

My insides quiver with anxiety, and I clap a hand over my mouth, trying not to hurl half-digested lobster soup over the computer tablet. I wish I wasn’t trapped in this room with two men whose motives I barely trust, wish I could call Mom and Dad to check that they’re alright, but I can’t. I can’t afford to gamble the lives of those I love.

I clear my throat. “You haven’t told me what you want in exchange.”

“The opportunity to grow crops in the Amstraad Republic,” the older man replies.

My gaze lifts from the computer screen, and I meet the ambassador’s watery eyes. “That’s it?”

His lips form a tight smile. “That is all. Agree to do your utmost to convince Prince Kevon to allow us to extract viable seeds from the produce we import, and I will save your parents.”

I nod. “Alright.”

His brows rise, and he twists his thin lips into an amused smile. “How can I trust you will carry out your promise when you ask for so little?”

The red dots separate, implying that there are two vehicles. Each stops in front of the white dot. Mouse taps the tablet, bringing up a screen split into four images. Footage of my house’s exterior, footage of a small car and a large van, the kitchen, and the view from the top of the stairs.

On the top-left quarter, dark figures step out of a black car, each holding guns that glint in the moonlight.

A dagger of white panic sears through my heart. “Please, save them.”

“Do you know what the Amstraad republic sends to Phangloria in exchange for crops?” asks the ambassador.

The figures move toward my house, and I glance at the screen on the top-right. This footage has to be live because the distant cornfields only glow this brightly during full moons.

A pair of guards appear from the direction of the house next door and approach the assassins. From the height difference, it's obvious that they're men and the assassins are women. The women raise their guns and shoot. Both guards fall to the ground.

I stifle a cry.

"Fifty percent of the Amstraad Republic's medical staff work in the Oasis," says the ambassador in the calm voice he used in the garden party. "They serve Phangloria in rejuvenation hospitals that help Nobles to add decades to their lives. Do you know what that means?"

I shake my head, barely listening to his words. The women stand back-to-back, looking out for more guards to arrive.

Ambassador Pascale's illuminated head glides toward me like a specter. "They use our nanotechnology, take the organs of healthy donors to transplant into their aging bodies, transfuse their blood, undergo cosmetic procedures, all to live an undeservedly long life."

The horror in his words barely registers, even though a voice in the back of my mind screams at me to pay attention. I can't. Not when assassins step into the house, holding their guns aloft.

"I..." My voice breaks. "I already agreed to ask Prince Kevon to let you grow crops. Please, don't let my family die."

A large hand squeezes my shoulder. It could only belong to Mouse, but I can't tear my gaze from that terrible screen. On the bottom-left, the assassins walk through the hallway and reach the bottom rung of the stairs.

"Now, we want to know what you want from us in exchange," says Mouse.

"What?" I whisper.

"Within three years of receiving untainted crops from Phangloria, we aim to make the Amstraad Republic self-sufficient," says the ambassador.

My mouth drops open. "I said yes. Yes. I'll do it."

"A country that no longer needs to import food also no longer needs to export its medically trained staff or its technology." The ambassador's voice trails off.

Realization soaks through my skull. Phangloria probably kept the Amstraad Republic dependent on them because it needed this advanced technology. Advanced technology I know nothing about. I rub my dry throat. This isn't a decision I can make on behalf of a country, but I'll do or say anything to keep my family alive.

The assassins turn around. One of them races to the front door and flings it open, while the other pauses halfway up the stairs.

My heart thunders. My mind races. My mouth opens and closes with rapid

breaths. Ambassador Pascale wouldn't have approached me if he didn't need a specific answer. What did he say to me when we spoke at the garden party?

Wiping my brow, I clench my teeth to stop them from chattering. Ambassador Pascale said his country would never waste its people on menial work that could be replaced by machines. And the Amstraadi girls used their dates with Prince Kevon to show him their growing domes and agricultural machinery. Tools like this would mean that Harvesters wouldn't have to work so hard and for long hours.

As the assassin at the door turns to her companion, my thoughts coalesce. "I promise to convince Prince Kevon to exchange untainted staple crops in exchange for the equipment you use to mechanize your agriculture."

The ambassador nods.

My tongue darts out to lick my dry lips. "We can also discuss what you need from Phangloria in exchange for maintaining life-saving medical technology and..." I gulp, trying to stop my voice from trembling. "And the networks that support our country."

"Very well." The ambassador offers a thin hand.

We shake on the agreement, not caring that it's soaked with my sweat. He feels like bones encased in soft flesh, but I can't think about that until he stops those assassins from reaching the top of the stairs.

I tighten my fingers around his hand. "Please, save them."

Mouse taps a command on the tablet. An explosion fills the bottom-two screens. On the top-right, balls of fire smash through the window.

Cold shock barrels through my insides with the force of a truck, and I drop onto my hands and knees. The noose around my neck tightens, and I can no longer breathe. My vision turns black, and it feels like my insides have disintegrated with the explosion. After agreeing to their demands, the Amstraadi tricked me into ordering everybody's deaths.

"Easy, now," Mouse says with a chuckle.

Mouse wraps an arm around my back and helps me to my feet. My limbs are so heavy that I can barely support my weight, and tears blur my vision. They're gone. Destroyed by people who murder each other not for ambition but for entertainment.

Maybe I should have walked out, maybe I should never have played along, but it seems like they've toyed with me since the moment I threw a tomato at Prunella Broadleaf's face. I blink, letting hot tears roll down my cheeks, only to find Ambassador Pascale staring at me with a maniacal grin.

"We evacuated them the moment Queen Damascena gave the order to seize your parents." His watery eyes widen expectantly through his glasses.

My mind blanks. “What?”

Mouse taps another command on the screen, bringing up an image of Mom and Dad huddled together in the back of a van. The twins sleep within contraptions that strap their little bodies to the seats next to Mom.

A hand claps over my mouth, its fingers trembling like leaves in a breeze.

“Your family didn’t die in the explosion,” says Mouse. “We’re transporting them to the Amstraad embassy, where they will enjoy a stay in our luxury apartments.”

My gaze darts from the ambassador’s twinkling eyes to Mouse’s symmetrical grin of perfect teeth that glow in the light of the computer screen. I turn my eyes back to the ambassador, who winks.

Mouse squeezes my shoulder. “We’re using this segment to advertise the Princess Trials on our most popular show. If you would like to speak to your mother and father, just repeat the words, ‘My name is Zea-Mays Calico, and I’m an April fool.’”

“What?” I shake my head from side to side. “They’re alive?”

“Just say your name, followed by a statement that you’re an April fool.”

I stagger back a few steps. “Why did you let me think they were dead?”

Both men erupt into laughter, and the ambassador rocks forward.

“April fool, Miss Calico,” he says between wheezing chortles. “I haven’t seen a reaction like yours in years!”

I swallow several times in quick succession as the words sink in. This was a trick so that people could laugh and tune into the Princess Trials for more. “But...”

“Would you like to speak to your parents?” asks Mouse.

Adrenaline surges through my veins, and every muscle in my body tenses with the urge to lash out with feet and fists. How dare they toy with my emotions? How dare they use Mom and Dad like pawns? How dare they record such a moment to broadcast to an entire country?

Ambassador Pascale makes a sympathetic noise in the back of his throat, and my jaw tightens with contempt. “Everyone has their weaknesses, Miss Calico,” he says. “Your family is yours.”

“And yours?” I ask through clenched teeth.

The older man chuckles. “My country, I suppose. Now, say the words, and you may speak with your parents.”

I suppress the urge to rage at these sadistic monsters and force calming breaths in and out of my nostrils. “My name is Zea-Mays Calico, and I’m an April fool.”

Mouse taps the screen. “Mr. and Mrs. Calico, can you hear me?”

Dad turns his head from side to side. “Who is this?”

My heart leaps. “Dad?”

“Zea?” says Mom. “What’s happening? Some guards grabbed your father in his cornfield and then brought him home. Now another group of people is saying we’re in danger.”

“They’re taking you to a safe place.” I inject as much false cheer into my voice as I can muster and try not to cause them alarm. “I’ll see you soon.”

The lights turn on, and Mouse taps the screen, making it go blank. Ambassador Pascale sweeps his arm toward a door. “Let’s join the others on Hesiod Hill.”

I shake my head. “But my parents—”

“We will safeguard the future queen’s parents.” Mouse slips the tablet into the inside pocket of his military jacket and places a hand on the small of my back. “Everyone has evacuated the building, and they’ll soon know you’re missing. Hurry.”

We rush through darkened hallways leaving the Ambassador trailing behind. Mouse’s jacket emits a faint light that illuminates stone walls that look like they’ve been excavated with one of those pickaxes Soil Builders use to break through hard ground.

My mind whirls with what I’ve just seen. The explosion of my house and those assassins, Mom, Dad, and the twins once again held captive. Mouse and Ambassador Pascale must have known I would agree to their demands, otherwise they wouldn’t have stolen my family and installed explosives in the house before the assassins arrived.

The corridors wind and twist and split, but Mouse navigates them with ease. We run through an archway, and Mouse pushes open a door. A cool breeze carries the scent of fragrant shrubs, and we step outside into the night. Dried soil crunches underfoot, and rows of olive trees stretch out in the distance. The temple behind us illuminates our patch of the hill, as does the full moon.

“It’s this way.” Mouse beckons for me to turn left.

I follow him around the hillside and resist the urge to shake my head. “Why go to such lengths for a fair trade of your technology?”

“Would you believe that we have petitioned successive monarchs to allow us to grow our own food?”

“And they all said no?” I jog to keep up with his long strides.

Mouse slows his pace, allowing me to walk at his side. “Their agreements always came with unreasonable requests, such as training their Guardians in our techniques.”

“So that Phangloria wouldn’t depend on the Amstraad Republic for

technology.” I chew on my lip, now understanding why the Nobles were so reluctant to execute Leonidas Pixel.

We fall silent and continue around the hill. Thin clouds cover the moon and diffuse its light across a wide expanse. Devotees clad in their white robes incline their heads as we pass, and the sounds of voices reach my ears. I spot the funeral guests gathering around the stairs and hurry toward the crowd.

A guest standing among devotees on the stairs breaks away from the group and races toward me. I pause, but it’s only Garrett.

“Where were you?” He asks.

I hook my thumb toward the temple. “Where’s Kevon?”

“He and a few others went inside to look for you.” Garrett grabs my hand and leads me around the crowd, reminding me of when he pulled me toward the marquee at the start of the Trials. “Kevon asked me to search the perimeter in case you got lost.”

Garrett taps on his watch to inform Prince Kevon of my location, and I glance over my shoulder for signs of Mouse, but he disappears into a group of devotees. My brows furrow. I understand the Amstraad Republic’s desperation to grow crops like we do in Phangloria, but did they have to be so cruel?

I scratch my head. Maybe their experiences with other potential queens ended in betrayal, and they figured they could make me a fun spectacle in case I reneged on our agreement.

We reach the foot of the stairs, where Forelle stands with Garrett’s family. As soon as our eyes meet, she rushes toward me. I brace myself for a tight hug, but she grabs my arms.

“You’ve got to see this.” Forelle turns me toward a group of people on the stone stairs.

Queen Damascena stands with Byron Blake. Two camerawomen stand on the steps below and on the hillside, while a quartet of production assistants illuminate their subjects with boxes of soft light. Byron introduces himself and promises the viewers a thrilling update on the Princess Trials.

Somehow in the chaos, Queen Damascena has changed into a white gown with a plunging neckline dotted with silver sequins. Wispy feathers line its shoulders and long sleeves. A swathe of feathers fall in layers to form a full skirt with a long train, making me wonder if she's celebrating her husband’s demise.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, the queen faces the camera. “It’s heartbreaking.” She injects her voice with sadness. “My beloved husband and king must now remain on the earthly plane. In his honor, I will do my utmost to serve Phangloria as its regent.”

My stomach drops, and I exchange a stricken glance with Forelle. A lot can



happen between now and the next full moon. More trials, more threats, and more attempts to engineer my death.

Forelle glances over our shoulder and nudges my arm. “Garrett says she’s officially in control of Phangloria and can delay the king’s funeral for as long as she wishes.”

“Or cremate his body so nobody finds it.” I sweep my gaze up the stairs, where Queen Damascena dazzles Byron with a radiant smile.

Was she planning to sabotage the funeral all along, or has she just taken advantage of the Amstraadi’s diversion? I gulp. In the last round of the Trials, they staged a fake attack on the palace, followed by a fake hijacking that I thought had killed the queen and Prince Kevon.

I shake off my paranoid thoughts. Almost every Amstraadi I’ve met has dropped hints about their agricultural requirements. This has to be what they want from us.

“Your Majesty.” Byron’s voice slithers through my musings. “Who is your favorite to win the Princess Trials?” asks Byron. “With only six girls remaining, you must have gotten a chance to know the contestants.”

The queen pauses, and everyone around us stops talking to take in her words. Blood roars through my ears. If she remains the regent, what would that mean for my deal with the Amstraad Republic to save my family?

I clutch at my chest, trying to think of a way to save myself, save my family, save Phangloria from falling under the rule of this mad queen, but my mind goes blank.

I’m a pawn in this game, just like my parents, and I’m completely dependent on the protection of Prince Kevon.

Queen Damascena places her hands on her hips. “Unfortunately, the selection of a suitable bride has been mismanaged from the start. Prunella Broadleaf allowed a host of terrible candidates, including a young woman who tried to assassinate my son.”

Byron gives her a sage nod. “I have tried my utmost, Your Majesty, but it’s nearly impossible to counter Prunella’s sabotage.”

My lips form a tight line. Now that Gemini Pixel is dead, I guess Prunella is the scapegoat. I hold my breath, waiting for the queen to speak. She’ll either announce Constance Spryte the winner or name a random Noble of her choice.

“And that is why I would like to reopen the Princess Trials,” she says. “Every girl found medically fit to compete but didn’t get a chance for an audition will present herself at the Gloria Concert Hall for another opportunity.”

“Oh, no.” Forelle claps both hands to her mouth.

My lip curls and I grind my teeth.

Angry chatter spreads across the crowd. I turn to find the Ministers exchanging disgruntled words. The group of girls I didn't recognize clap. I guess the queen invited them to the funeral for a chance to meet the prince.

Prince Kevon hurries down the steps and places an arm around Queen Damascena's shoulders. "Mother, I appreciate your efforts."

Everyone falls silent.

The queen places a palm over his heart. "I just want you to have the perfect girl."

"Any comments from you, my prince?" asks Byron.

Prince Kevon steps aside. "Let's hear from the Hierophant."

A whimper reverberates in my dry throat, and I have to lean on Forelle for support. She places her arm around my middle and lets me rest my head on her shoulder. Even if the Hierophant tells the cameras he already gave his blessing, it's not the same as a marriage or an engagement.

Queen Damascena will restart the Princess Trials and eject me from the Oasis. She won't even have to worry about repercussions from Prince Kevon because she'll hold onto the throne forever by extending her life with Amstraadi rejuvenation technology.

"Thank you, my prince." The Hierophant pulls down the hood of his cloak, revealing his face to the camera. "Royal funerals are fraught with mishaps. What if clouds cover the moon at the wrong moment, what if I say the wrong word during the blessing and the monarch loses his or her chance to be one with Gaia?"

"We've heard enough from you," the queen snaps.

"Please allow him to finish," says Prince Kevon. "His Grace doesn't often appear on camera."

Queen Damascena purses her lips.

"This is why my predecessor advised me to conduct the final blessing before the guests' arrival," says the Hierophant. "If anything goes wrong during the official funeral, it won't matter, because the monarch will already have ridden Selene's chariot and reached the garden of Gaia."

Byron rears back and casts the queen a glance. "What does that mean, Your Grace?"

The Hierophant steps aside to let Prince Kevon speak to the camera.

"My father is no longer the King of Phangloria. I will serve as its regent until my coronation in three days."

As applause fills the hillside, relief floods my system, making my muscles go weak. I collapse further into Forelle's side. I can't believe we've triumphed. The queen is now powerless, my parents are safe with the ambassador's people, and

Prince Kevon will be the king.

Queen Damascena hangs her head, and the feathers on her shoulders droop. I turn my gaze to the top of the stairs, where Lady Circi watches with her hands folded over her chest.

Byron clears his throat. “What will that mean for the Princess Trials, Your Highness?”

“I have already chosen the young woman to become my bride,” replies Prince Kevon.

A breath hisses through my teeth, and I clutch at Forelle. This can’t be happening.

Queen Damascena’s head snaps up. Her gaze rakes the crowd and settles on me. If she was still the regent, I would probably collapse under the cold hatred sharpening her eyes. But she’s not.

Tonight, Queen Damascena will leave the palace and spend the rest of her days in her father’s home. After everything she has done to threaten my family, I can’t even feel bad.

“Please don’t keep us in suspense, Your Highness,” says Byron. “Who is your final choice for the Princess Trials?”

Prince Kevon turns his gaze to the crowd. “She’s a special young woman who taught me that the smallest changes can make huge differences to the lives of Phanglorians. Without her, I might never have appreciated the inequalities in our society and would also have lost my life.”

Warmth surges from my heart. It fills my chest, thickens my throat, and lines my eyes with tears. A few weeks ago, I joined the Princess Trials to destroy the monarchy and tear down the Echelon system, and now, I will ascend to a position where I can help others. Inhaling a deep, steadying breath, I release my grip on Forelle and straighten.

Mom was right. Why lose innocent lives in a revolution when we can have peaceful reforms?

Prince Kevon’s eyes meet mine. “Zea-Mays Calico, please step forward.”

My entire body quivers with elation, and I drift forward on legs as weightless as clouds. Byron steps aside and directs his assistants to train the cameras on me.

Prince Kevon descends the stairs, his features tense. His Adam’s apple bobs up and down, and his movements are unnaturally stiff.

I know what he’s thinking. I’ve rejected him multiple times, and he’s taking a massive risk. The whole of Phangloria will watch whatever happens next, whether it’s on the Lifestyle Channel or via whoever is leaking footage on Netface. He thinks I might say no.

After slipping his hand into his pocket and extracting a small box, he reaches

my side and lowers himself onto one knee.

My breath catches.

“Zea-Mays Calico, will you consent to becoming my wife?”

Prince Kevon flips open the box, revealing a diamond ring, but I don't see it because I'm gazing down into his dark eyes. Dark eyes that sought mine for approval when he doubled our water rations. Dark eyes that stared up at me when I stemmed his lacerated heart's blood with my palms. Dark eyes that smoldered with desire before we shared those toe-curling kisses.

“Yes,” I whisper.

He slips the ring onto my finger, which buzzes and adjusts around my digit. Lights sparkle beneath the diamonds, indicating that it contains some sort of tracking device. No matter what, he will always find me.

Prince Kevon rises, his face radiant with happiness. “Thank you.”

I rock forward onto my tiptoes and move in for a kiss, but he leans into me and reaches my lips first.

A handful of people applaud the kiss. Even when nobody joins them, they continue clapping. I turn to find Garrett, Forelle, and the rest of his family beaming down at us from the bottom of the stairs.

I don't look at the Chamber of Ministers behind them, and let my gaze skip over the group of girls I assume Queen Damascena invited for part three of the Princess Trials. I also don't pay attention to Ingrid's voice in my head reminding me that queens outside the Noble Echelon don't live long enough for the history books.

The crowd parts as Prince Kevon guides me down the steps toward a black limousine, which has a black interior identical to the one I rode with Garrett to the ball.

As I sink into the leather seats, my gaze lands on a bouquet of cornflowers, daisies, forget-me-nots, and other plants that grow wild in Rugosa. The sight of such commonplace flower tickles my insides, and I burst into a delighted giggle.

Prince Kevon hands me a glass. “Master Thymel will visit tomorrow to help you choose your dress.” He takes a long sip of his champagne. “Once the royal guard has dispatched my mother, I would like you to bring whoever you wish to join us for the wedding.”

The champagne chills my fingers. Its bubbles rise to the surface and pop, releasing the scent of alcohol and fruit.

“Is my choice of drink not to your liking?” He raises his glass. “I have nonalcoholic grape—”

“Champagne is perfect.” I place my hand on Prince Kevon's lap and place the glass to my lips. The cool liquid slides and fizzes on my tongue.

“Garrett commissioned Master Thymel to dress Forelle for her wedding.”  
Prince Kevon takes another sip of his drink. “I’m sure she won’t mind you...”

The glass slips from his fingers, spilling champagne over his white pants.

I set my glass aside and cup his cheeks. “Kevon?”

His head lolls to the side.

I dash toward the divider that separates the back of the limousine to the driver’s side and bang my fist on the window. The car continues speeding through the Oasis streets, oblivious of Prince Kevon’s plight.

My eyes droop, and I think of Lady Circi’s warning when I boarded Queen Damascena’s mobile dressing room. Several days later, it echoes through my skull.

Don’t drink the champagne.

## CHAPTER 20

*M*y ears ring, muffling the sounds of urgent voices. Rough hands lift me off the floor and bundle me onto a hard chair. A needle pierces my bicep, and I try to raise a hand to strike out, but I can't move. Whatever my captor has injected in me makes him or her confident that I'm immobilized. Nobody has secured me to the chair with straps.

Or maybe that's because I'm back in that cage, and there's no escape.

I push away the speculations and focus on regaining control of my body. With a deep inhale, I fill my lungs and let the air slide out. This is one of the breathing exercises Ryce taught us in our youth cell. It's supposed to increase the metabolism and help the body burn through foreign substances.

My heart sinks. He probably made it up, just as Carolina did by implying I was important to the Red Runners when she sent me to the Princess Trials as an afterthought.

Where's Prince Kevon?

A breath catches in the back of my throat, and I slow my breathing to focus on the voices. I can't hear him, but I suspect that the queen ordered someone to tamper with his champagne.

Worry roils through my stomach, and my mind conjures up images of Prince Kevon lying on the ground with a dagger in his heart, with bullets in his chest, with slices of the moon over his eyes. Nobody would kill their own son just to become the regent.

Would they?

My chest tightens and rapid breaths heave in and out of my lungs. My head spins, and my limbs turn to lead. If anyone touches me, I'll roll off this chair and hit the floor.

"She's waking up," says an unfamiliar female voice.

"Shall we begin?" Queen Damascena's impatient voice slices through my panic.

Hatred soars through my chest. What is she going to do now, torture me?

“At least wait for the girl to open her eyes,” says a voice I think belongs to Montana.

With a loud slap, stinging pain spreads across my left cheek. My eyes snap open, and I stare into the malicious, violet eyes of the queen.

“There,” she says through clenched teeth. “Now, she’s awake and ready for her trial.”

In front of me is a high-backed chair that looks similar to the one supporting my back, and to my right are tiered rows of six leather seats, occupied by Nobles wearing identical white robes. There could be twenty-four or thirty of them. I don’t stop to count because an entire wall on my left displays the words, ‘TRIAL OF ZEA-MAYS CALICO.’

“What is this about?” asks the Minister of Justice.

She sits between Montana and Ingrid’s father with her arms folded over her chest. The woman’s words give me hope, as it looks like the Chamber of Ministers no longer consider me the same powerless Harvester Girl she electrocuted in her witness box.

“Poisoning the regent’s betrothed and holding her against her will is treason,” adds Ingrid’s father. “Nobody will argue your case if Prince Kevin demands your execution.”

Heels click on the stone floor behind me, and Queen Damascena stands in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips. In the time she’s engineered her son’s poisoning and my abduction, she has changed into an ivory pantsuit with a ruffled shirt.

She turns to her audience. “As the former queen consort, it is my duty to inform the Ministers of the Chamber of the regent’s unstable mental state.”

“You’ll have to dig deeper than his poor choice in women,” Ingrid’s father drawls. “I doubt that lying slumped in the back of a limousine, suffering the effects of your poison counts as instability.”

The other ministers chuckle.

I slow my breaths and force myself to focus. We’re probably in a room within the Chamber of Ministers Building, but more importantly, these people aren’t taking Queen Damascena seriously. I sag even further in my seat as the injection turns my muscles slack. The ministers are also not demanding my release.

The queen purses her lips. “I will prove to you that Zea-Mays Calico is the most dangerous young woman in Phangloria. When you’ve finished listening to my evidence, you will not only agree with my conclusion but demand her execution.”

All sounds of mirth fade, and silence spreads across the room. My stomach clenches, and a band of tension forms around my lungs. Which of my secrets has she uncovered? I force myself to breathe deeply, to work through the drug coursing through my veins, but I can't muster the motor skills.

"Your Majesty." Ingrid's father places his hands on the armrest and leans forward in the front seat. "We're all aware of Miss Calico's subversive influence over the prince. However, nothing in the Princess Trials regulations says she cannot use seduction."

Heat rushes to my cheeks. I glance at Montana for him to admit that his employees created that naked video, but the man just stares ahead at the queen.

Queen Damascena paces between my chair and the one positioned opposite. "She's guilty of two crimes that warrant a death penalty. And I have witnesses and evidence to prove her treasonous acts."

A door creaks open, and my gaze rises to the wall behind the other chair, where General Ridgeback steps into the room, holding a metallic leash. Behind him is Ryce.

My heart jumps into my throat, and all the blood drains from my face. If Ryce knows I accepted Prince Kevon's proposal of marriage, he will strike out with the truth.

The queen steps in the space between our chairs as the general secures Ryce to the seat. "This is the fugitive Vitelotte Solar implicated in her confession, Ryce Wintergreen."

Chatter spreads across the room, and a smirk of triumph spreads across the queen's face.

I gulp. What's Berta's father doing here? I thought he worked in the aerodrome.

As Queen Damascena tells the ministers that we became childhood sweethearts when I witnessed a guard killing Ryce's father, footage of my nine-year-old self plays on the wall screen on our right. It's from the day after the murder when Dad took me to Fort Meeman-Shelby to give my witness statement.

A lump forms in my throat, and shallow breaths slip in and out of my lungs. I can't believe I used to be so small and thin. My skin looks pallid in contrast to my mahogany pigtails, and dark circles ring my eyes.

Ryce stares at the screen, his eyes glossy with unshed tears. They must have starved him, too, because his cheekbones protrude more than usual, and the neck of his yellowing Harvester shirt hangs at an awkward angle.

My heart aches for Mr. Wintergreen, who lost his life for protecting an innocent young woman, for the nine-year-old girl who saw too much at a tender



age, for the younger version of Ryce, who lost his father, but I feel nothing for the man Ryce has become.

“Together, they formed a group called the Red Runners.” Queen Damascena turns to Ryce. “Isn’t that correct?”

“Yes,” he says through clenched teeth.

“What is the purpose of this group?” she asks.

Ryce’s jaw tenses, and his chest rises and falls with rapid breaths. Beads of sweat form on his brow. He’s fighting something internal, but the general punches the back of his head and the answer spills from Ryce’s lips.

“To destroy the Echelon system,” he says with a groan. “To overthrow the Nobles and share Phangloria’s resources equally among its citizens.”

Queen Damascena cups a hand behind her ear. “Does that sound familiar?”

Our spectators nod and mutter their agreement. They’re probably thinking about how Prince Kevon abandoned his hanging gardens project to increase Harvester water rations.

“Your Majesty.” The Minister of Justice leans forward and steeples her fingers. “Are you suggesting that Miss Calico joined the Princess Trials to corrupt Prince Kevon?”

The queen pulls her shoulders back and stands taller. They’re finally taking her seriously. “Why don’t you ask Mr. Wintergreen why Miss Calico joined the Princess Trials?”

Boulders of dread grind through my belly like stones. I plead for Ryce to lie, to agree with the Minister of Justice and tell everyone that I came to influence the prince because the truth will be disastrous for both of us.

When the Minister of Justice poses the question to Ryce, he answers, “Zea was supposed to infiltrate the palace and find hidden entrances.”

“To what end?” asks the minister.

“So Red Runners could storm the palace and kill the Royals.”

Disgruntled mutters spread across the room, and my heart plummets. I glance around the rows of seats, trying to force my mouth to open to scream a denial, but I still can’t move. Finding the entrances might have been my original intention, but then I fell in love with Prince Kevon.

The ministers fire question after question about the Red Runners. They want to know their names, numbers, strength, allies. They speak over each other, overwhelming Ryce until he squeezes his eyes shut and screams.

Nausea ripples through my insides. They’ve done something to him, but what?

Queen Damascena doesn’t give Ryce the opportunity to reply. She stands in front of him and holds up her palms in a motion to stop. I’m guessing she

doesn't want to distract the ministers from condemning me.

"Mr. Wintergreen's truth serum won't last much longer," she shouts. "We've already dosed him with enough to rupture his aorta. General Ridgeback was generous enough to record his earlier interrogations, which we will make available to you after you have found Miss Calico guilty."

My gaze slides back to Ryce, whose eyes seem to plead for understanding. I glance away. Nobody could blame him for blurting the truth under the influence of multiple doses of serum.

It rankles that he and his mother sent me on a dangerous mission on a whim, but I despise him for being no better than the guards who harass Harvester girls. How much further would he have gone at the farmer's market without the fear of getting caught?

Queen Damascena turns to Ryce. "Describe Miss Calico's feelings toward you."

I glare at her back, wishing I could kick her to the floor.

"She's been obsessed with me for years," he replies.

"What does that mean?" asks one of the ministers.

"She used to stare at me from across the dome, and everywhere else I went," Ryce answers. "She even joined the Red Runners to be close to me."

"I take it you didn't share her feelings?" asks Montana.

"Not at first." Ryce dips his head. "But she's so brave and beautiful and committed to our cause. It's hard not to fall for a girl like Zea."

Despair washes through my veins like sour vinegar. I make a noise of protest in the back of my throat, which everyone ignores. He makes me sound like I'm still carrying out my mission. I want to scream my innocence, but my muscles won't move.

The queen glances at me over her shoulder and smirks. Part of her must know that I changed my mind. If she interrogated Ryce under truth serum, she would have discovered that I didn't report the location of the underground river or anything that would compromise the palace's security.

New images appear on the screen. Ryce and I run hand-in-hand through the Rugosa Streets on the evening I was selected to go to the Princess Trials. Next is another one of us standing within the crowd, but it's hard to tell that it's us.

The door on the far left of the chamber slams open, and Prince Kevon stumbles inside. His eyes are wild, his hair disheveled and his white-and-silver jacket undone.

My breath quickens. I don't know if I'm happy to see him or horrified. He's my only chance of escaping, but if he hesitates for a moment, Queen Damascena will spill her poison into his ear.

A guard at the door touches the prince's shoulder, but Garrett appears behind the man and punches the guard to the ground.

Prince Kevon bares his teeth. "What is the meaning of—"

He freezes at something on the screen.

It's me with Ryce at the farmer's market. He cups my face with his hands and smiles. We're so close that it looks like we're lovers. The camera closes in as he strokes my cheekbone and moves in for the kiss.

Queen Damascena points a remote at the screen. "You should be resting."

Prince Kevon's gaze flicks from me, to Ryce, to the footage of us frozen on screen with our lips pressed together. "Mother, what are you doing?"

"I didn't want to hurt you, son." She shakes her head and sighs. "Miss Calico only sees you as a means for benefitting her Echelon. She's really in love with Ryce Wintergreen."

His features turn slack. Garrett grips his arm and whispers something, but Prince Kevon doesn't react.

"Zea?" The prince's gaze sweeps down my form.

I can't even shake my head to deny the accusations.

"What's wrong with her?" Prince Kevon continues down the steps, past the gaping ministers, and stops at my side. "Why can't she speak? Why did you drug us?"

Tears roll down my cheek, and the tension around my chest compresses my lungs to the size of my fist. Queen Damascena has enough evidence to turn his concern to contempt.

"Zea." He hooks an arm beneath my leg and another around my back. "I keep failing to protect you. Now my mother is attempting to slander you with salacious lies."

"I love you, Zea-Mays Calico," says onscreen Ryce as he holds me to his chest. "You're the bravest, most interesting girl I've ever met."

Prince Kevon's head snaps to the screen, and I squeeze my eyes shut. This is the most damning evidence of all.

"You'll have to try better than that, Mother," says the prince. "You were probably also behind the other digital fabrication to discredit Zea."

"This one is real," the queen says.

I open my eyes, wishing I could twist around to see Prince Kevon's expression. He sighs and carries me up the steps. Garrett offers to take me, but the prince refuses. My heart fills with gratitude within a chest tightening with guilt. For once, the allegations Queen Damascena hurls at me are true.

As we progress up the stairs toward the back door, Ministers stare at us with varying degrees of disapproval. Even if they don't believe in the footage shown

on the screen, they can't deny that I have changed Prince Kevon.

The young man I met had been reluctant to wield the power he held in our society and had believed in the half-truths its leaders told to maintain order. Now, he wants to act against the inequalities, and that makes him dangerous.

"Kevon," the queen snaps. "The girl you're whisking away is the leader of a rebel group called the Red Runners."

He pauses at the door and addresses a pair of guards. "Arrest my mother and confine her to my study."

The guard's face drops, but Prince Kevon adds, "I promise you, with the Chamber of Ministers as my witnesses, that no repercussions will fall upon you or your colleagues for following my order."

With a nod, the guard progresses down the stairs.

"Wait," the queen screeches. "You can't marry a girl who came to the palace to destroy it."

I lean into Prince Kevon's side, silently urging him to leave before somebody in that room changes his mind. Instead, he turns toward his mother and sighs again.

"Zea saved my life and wants the best for the country," he replies. "I love her."

A crack forms in my heart. Prince Kevon didn't tell his mother that I loved him back because I never said the words.

"She's taking advantage of you," the queen snaps.

A recording of Prince Kevon's voice fills the room. He turns to face the screen. We're sitting in the front seats of his car, and I'm saying that I don't love him. The next is a clip from my room, where I'm telling Prince Kevon we can only be friends.

My throat thickens. He can't deny these events ever happened.

"You threatened her parents' lives," he says. "Of course, Zea would say these words under duress."

The guards reach the bottom of the stairs. Queen Damascena raises her palms and backs toward General Ridgeback, who steps in front of her.

"Is this true?" asks the Minister of Justice.

Queen Damascena shakes her head. "He's in denial—"

"Tell the truth," Prince Kevon barks.

The room falls silent, but some of the ministers exchange nervous glances. Prince Kevon steps back into the room, holding me to his chest. "I apologize for the outburst, ministers. My mother is clearly distraught and clinging onto her dwindling power. I found Mr. and Mrs. Calico, along with their twin sons, detained in Fort Meeman-Shelby."

That was on Lady Circi's orders, as she was trying to keep them safe from any uprising following the awful things Queen Damascena ordered me to say to Rugosa.

The guards attempt to walk around the general, but he pulls out a baton that glows with blue power.

"I can prove that Zea-Mays Calico killed your father." Queen Damascena backs toward the door.

Everybody stiffens, including Prince Kevon. A breath catches in the back of my throat. I've only seen the king alive once, and that was in the hospital infirmary with Prince Kevon when the older man was already on the brink of death.

"Mother." Prince Kevon's voice is breathy with exasperation. "Of all the outrageous accusations—"

"Arias liked to disguise himself as a guard to roam Phangloria." The words spill from her lips faster than I have ever heard her speak. "He was the guard who slew the father of Ryce Wintergreen. Miss Calico was the witness."

The guards march Queen Damascena toward a side exit, but General Ridgeback blocks the doorway.

"Wait." The Minister of Justice rises from her seat. "I wish to hear this theory."

"As you wish, but our future queen seeks medical attention." Prince Kevon continues out of the room into a vast entrance hall.

Morning sunlight streams in through glass windows located close to the ceiling of a four-stories-tall lobby that takes up more floor space than four Harvester homes and their gardens.

On our left, marble floors and stone walls lead to a huge archway where guards in black armor man the entrances and hold scanners to the Nobles' Amstraad ear cuffs.

The Nobles passing us bow to Prince Kevon, and a few furrow their brows.

"Your Highness." A woman wearing the white coat of a doctor appears from our right, holding a remote. "Please return to the observation room."

Prince Kevon walks past her without a word, so I don't get to see her face. Garrett walks at his side, and I let my eyelids flutter closed. I'm safe for now, but Prince Kevon will discover the truth, and I don't know how he will react.

His pulse calms, making me also relax. The worst outcome would be a life in the Barrens, just as he banished Vitelotte for stabbing him through the heart, but I've hurt him so many times that he might not show me mercy.

"I'm sorry, Zea." Prince Kevon gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze. "If you can persevere for three more days, the Hierophant will perform the wedding and

elevate you above—”

His body goes rigid, and the arm hooked under my hamstrings goes slack, and my feet hit the hard floor. He bends over double and groans, balancing my upper body on his arm.

My breath quickens, and I swallow several times in quick succession. What’s happening?

“Your Majesty.” The doctor lowers herself to eye level and stares at us through gray-blue eyes set within delicate features. It’s Berta’s mother, Dr. Ridgeback, and she has the same ash-blonde hair as her daughter. “Please return to the observation room at once.”

He raises his head. “Take Zea away.”

Garrett pulls me into his arms.

My gaze darts to the doctor, who keeps a hand in the deep pocket of her white coat. Her fingers move, making Prince Kevon groan even louder and fall to the marble floor. She’s doing this. I want to scream at Garrett, at the guards to go after Dr. Ridgeback, to notice what she’s doing and snatch the remote from her fingers, but they gather around Prince Kevon.

Bullets ring through the air, and each of the guards surrounding the prince fall. Garrett spins around. A group of masked women in black rush toward us, each pointing machine guns. They drag Prince Kevon back into the room.

My stomach heaves. They look just like the assassins that visited my home.

One of them points her gun at Garrett. “Get inside and bring the girl.”

“Sorry, Zea,” Garrett mutters and walks back into the room.

Someone else slumps in my former seat, but his head is bowed and I only catch a glimpse of his features as one of the women forces Garrett to sit at a seat in the back row next to Prince Kevon.

“Welcome back,” says Queen Damascena. “You’re in time to hear from our next witness. This is Tauric Krim, Miss Calico’s supervisor in the tomato fields.”

My heart races. I don’t know if Krim is a Red Runner, but he knows all about that guard I attacked.

The queen turns to the ministers and beams. “The second time Miss Calico met King Arias, he visited her tomato field and tried to abduct her friend.”

A breath hisses through my teeth. She’s lying. That guard I poisoned couldn’t have been the king. Krim would have noticed. Forelle would have mentioned something. The guards would never have wasted time on arresting illegal brewers of alcohol if a Harvester had hurt King Arias. Queen Damascena is patching together snippets of truth to create a lie because she can’t prove I leaked information about palace security.

Prince Kevon groans, and Garrett shifts in his seat to check on his cousin. I finally get to see the prince, who slumps on a chair, still clutching his chest. Huge beads of sweat cling to his brow, and his breaths quicken.

“Prince Kevon needs help,” Garrett shouts.

A few of the ministers sitting in the seats in front glare at Garrett over their shoulders, but they don’t raise the alarm. My heart shatters. Maybe they think he’s better off dead. At least I now understand why Queen Damascena permitted the surgeon to graft synthetic fibers into his heart. They’re a means for controlling him.

The queen turns to Krim and asks a series of questions about what happened on the day he was arrested. At first, he doesn’t answer, but General Ridgeback grabs his black hair and yanks up his head, revealing a face swollen with bruises.

Pain lances through my chest. Did they torture him this entire time? Krim answers the questions in a monotone and gives an accurate account of what happened on the day that changed my life. The guard tried to drag another apprentice into his pickup truck, I left my weeding to climb the persimmon tree, then I shot the guard with a poisoned dart.

“Can you identify this guard?” Queen Damascena asks.

“King Arias.”

Shouts erupt around the room. Ryce jerks his head in my direction and stares at me with wide eyes, while Garrett spins toward Prince Kevon. The noose around my neck tightens. They must have tortured Krim for ages to make him identify the guard I attacked as the king.

Queen Damascena raises her hands. “Please be silent.” Glee fills her voice, making her sound like a child who just received an undeserved treat. “It took a team of forensic scientists weeks to sift through the footage of Zea-Mays using my naive, besotted son to sabotage our way of life, but I have more evidence that proves her guilty of regicide.”

Everyone falls silent as Dr. Ridgeback strides across the room.

“My name is Bernice Ridgeback, and I am the mother of a young woman who died under mysterious circumstances in the Princess Trials.” Her hard gaze meets mine, making me flinch. She holds me responsible, even though her husband questioned me while I was supposedly under the influence of the truth serum.

“I performed the autopsy on the body of King Arias and discovered a high concentration of atropine in the king’s blood. Atropine is the active compound in mandragon berries.”

General Ridgeback walks to his wife, holding a black box. “The doctor analyzed the toxins in His Majesty’s blood and compared them with poison we

found on these darts.”

He reaches into the box, extracts a Harvester uniform, and pulls out a quiver.

Prince Kevon rises and rests his weight on the seats in front. “Stop,” he says through clenched teeth. “Zea. Did. Not—”

He slumps to the floor with a hand clutched to his chest.

“Kevon!” Garrett leaps to his feet and rests me on the seat.

I slump forward, staring straight ahead as panic spreads across the room. Montana and Ingrid’s father rise from their seats and jostle each other to reach Prince Kevon first. The women in black rush to the prince’s aid with an oxygen mask.

Impotent rage surges through my veins. I still can’t move. Didn’t these people believe Garrett the first time he said Prince Kevon needed medical help?

Everyone is too busy looking at Prince Kevon and Garrett to notice Dr. Ridgeback’s fingers moving over something in her pocket. She stares at Queen Damascena, who gives her an encouraging nod.

“His Highness needs a doctor,” cries the Minister of Justice.

“One more thing,” Queen Damascena shouts over the chaos. “My husband’s last moments.”

Everybody stops to look at the screen. Prince Kevon carries me into a room, and we pause at the foot of King Arias’ sickbed. Cold seeps through my insides. This is the palace infirmary on the morning after the ball.

In the next scene, a dark-haired girl creeps back into the room with the quiver, extracts a dart, and stabs his prone figure in the heart. King Arias doesn’t move, and she takes out another dart and stabs him again and again and again.

Every single face turns to me.

“Please, take my son to the hospital,” says Queen Damascena. “He’s suffering a breakdown. The girl he trusted enough to marry has turned out to be an assassin.”



## CHAPTER 21

*M*y insides twist and turn as I struggle to break free of the drug. Loud chatter and hurried footsteps rush toward the observation room's back row. Everything is a jumble and muffled by the pounding between my ears.

From the angle my head points, I can't tell if the voices belong to the ministers, to the guards outside, or the henchwomen who held us at gunpoint. Deep breaths heave in and out of my lungs, but I can't even twitch a finger.

Prince Kevon lies at my feet and groans, as Garrett tries to roll him onto his back. All I can do is slump forward against the seat in front, unable to speak, unable to warn anyone to check Dr. Ridgeback's pocket.

The blonde medic races up the stairs in time to join Queen Damascena's henchwomen in dragging Prince Kevon out of the room. Rage burns through my veins, and tears blur my vision. They want him helpless, just like me.

Garrett scoops me into his arms. "We're going with Kevon to the hospital."

He hurries through the aisle after the procession, but the thud of a heavy object hitting flesh makes him flinch. My stomach lurches as he tumbles onto the stairs. Garrett's larger body breaks our fall, but he's no longer moving.

One of the women in black pulls me from Garrett's arms. She hooks a hand around the back of my collar and drags me down the stairs. "Your Majesty, what should we do about the girl?"

My spine bumps against the hard tread, sending sharp bursts of pain across my lungs with every step.

The ministers sitting in the seats talk among themselves, but nobody comments about Garrett or me. My insides feel as hollow as their souls. Isn't someone going to speak up for us? Or were they so convinced by Queen Damascena's presentation that they've ceded authority to her?

"Take the girl to the stadium," says the queen.

A larger figure picks me up and slings me over his shoulder. I'm guessing

it's General Ridgeback, who is taller and broader than Prince Kevon. He walks through the side door, down several winding hallways, not saying a word about why he's helping Queen Damascena, and not uttering anything about Berta.

He opens another door that leads to what feels like a stairwell from the way his footsteps echo. After descending several steps and exiting through another door, General Ridgeback steps into another space filled with the sound of a motor.

"When you meet my daughter, tell her she was a disappointment." He tosses me head-first into a hard surface, and my vision goes black.



The ringing in my ears pulls me out of unconsciousness, and a sharp pain lances through my skull from hitting my head. My mouth feels like a lizard's nest, and I can't muster a drop of saliva to ease my dry, cracked throat.

I'm lying on my right side on a smooth surface warmed by my body heat, and sweat forms on my brow. It's hard to tell if the room is hot or if I have a fever. Even the shallowest of breaths hurt as though something or someone has struck my ribs hard enough to shatter.

With an agonized moan, I roll onto my back, only for sunlight to shine through my eyelids.

On the plus side, I've regained the ability to move.

"Hello?" I croak through cracked lips.

When my eyes adjust to the light, I open them to find myself staring at a ceiling made of inch-square ventilation holes that let in vertical streams of light. From their angle, I think it's midday. The question I want to ask is how much time has passed since the funeral, and what on earth has happened to Prince Kevon?

He's completely at the mercy of whoever controls his heart. Right now, it's Dr. Ridgeback, who seems to be working for Queen Damascena. Grief tightens around my throat, and I trace the pad of my thumb over the crystal-encrusted band on my finger. My ring is supposed to be a tracking device, but if Prince Kevon hasn't come looking for me, it means they're still torturing him.

Faint sniffles reach my ears. I drag myself across the cramped space and press my ear against the bricks.

"Is anybody there?" I whisper.

The sniffling stops.

"Hello?"

Whoever is in the other room doesn't want to communicate, so it can't be Emmera, who wouldn't stop talking during our imprisonment. My mind drifts to

the only other person who might be able to identify the guard I poisoned.

“Forelle?” I whisper.

Still no answer.

My brows draw together. The sounds were feminine and couldn’t have been Prince Kevon. “Are you a prisoner? Tap once for yes and two for no.”

Three heavy knocks shake on my door. “Popcorn,” says a female voice. “You have a visitor.”

Placing a hand on the wall for support, I pull myself up. Lightning bolts of pain shoot across my skull and ribcage, and I sway on my feet. I prop myself in the corner and hold both palms against the walls. The light catches my ring, which continues to blink on and off.

If this visitor is the queen, I won’t let her to see me grovel.

“Come in,” I rasp.

The door swings open, and Ambassador Pascale walks into the space. He wears a green jacket with a high collar that for once, doesn’t flash with lights. However, the buttons on his jacket shine like tiny camera lenses. He holds in his small, withered hands a box the size of a thick encyclopedia.

Light catches his glasses and obscures his eyes, so I can’t see what kind of expression he makes when the corners of his lips curl into a smile. “Miss Calico, this is indeed an unfortunate situation.”

I rub my dry throat.

“Forgive me.” He reaches into his box and extracts a water bottle. “I expect you’re thirsty from recent events?”

“How long have I been here?” I rasp. “Where’s Prince Kevon?”

“He is safe.” Ambassador Pascale twists open the cap and offers me the bottle. “Dr. Ridgeback informs me that the muscle relaxant she injected into you lasts forty-eight hours. It’s why I waited until now to see you.”

Out of habit, I peer at the label, which says SMOKY MOUNTAIN ENERGY. Hope fills my chest as I take long gulps of fruit-flavored water. I’ll endure anything if he helps me escape.

“Thank you.” My gaze drops to his box.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

At my nod, the ambassador returns my empty bottle to his box and pulls out a paper carton about the size of my hand. “I thought you might need something a little closer to home than trail mix.”

I stretch out my arm, and he drops the cool package in my palm. It’s heavier than a pair of earrings but lighter than a weapon.

Ambassador Pascale gives me an encouraging nod, but the sunlight still reflects on the lens of his glasses and hides his full expression. Inside are six

perfectly round corn fritters, each an inch thick. I take a bite out of the first, and an avalanche of flavors floods my mouth.

The ambassador chuckles as though I'm a pet that has just learned a new trick, but I ignore him and continue eating the fritters. One contains pieces of chicken, another beef, and another prawn. That's not all it contains because the pains shooting around my lungs ebb to a dull ache.

"Do you feel better?" he asks.

I'm about to nod, but the fog in my mind clears. The last time we spoke, Mom, Dad, and the twins were in the back of a vehicle headed for the Amstraad Embassy. Ambassador Pascale and I might be alone, but someone is probably watching our interaction. I can't let them know who is keeping my family safe.

"Is..." I pause and give him a meaningful look. "Everything alright?" I ask.

His brows rise. "Please finish your corn cake. They're your only chance of regaining your strength and facing the upcoming challenges."

My breath catches. "What's happening?"

"I visited Prince Kevon this morning." He motions for me with his fingers to continue eating.

I bite into a fritter containing lumps of cheese. "How is he?"

"Heartbroken in both respects." Ambassador Pascale dips his hand into the box and produces another bottle of water. "The synthetic heart muscles torment his body throughout the night, and evidence of your plot to murder him and destroy the monarchy torment his mind through the day."

Guilt lances through my stomach, and I stop eating. Carolina once described sleep deprivation and brainwashing, the mind-altering techniques Nobles used for interrogation and control.

"I need to see him."

The ambassador rocks forward on his feet. "To tell him what he already knows, Miss Calico? You joined the Princess Trials to find a means for the Red Runners to enter the palace and slaughter the royal family."

My mouth clamps shut, and I lower my gaze to the stone floor. I thought the ambassador wanted me to become the Queen of Phangloria so the Amstraad Republic wouldn't be so dependent on us for food.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"To say goodbye," he replies.

My head snaps up. "Is this a joke? Where's Mouse?"

Ambassador Pascale places a full bottle on the floor and steps backward. "It's unfortunate for you and your loved ones that Prince Kevon discovered the truth. You would have made a terrific queen."

The door opens, and the Ambassador walks out.

What about Mom, Dad, and the twins? I can't ask out loud, but he's implying that our deal is off. I lurch after him, knocking the water bottle aside. "Wait—"

"Sorry, Miss Calico," he says from the hallway. "Please understand that I need to do what's best for the Amstraad Republic."

"What does that mean?" I rasp as the door closes and its locking mechanism whirrs. The cuff on my wrist vibrates and drops to the floor, but I can't focus on that right now.

"Confess to whatever they want," says the ambassador from the hallway. "And pray to your Gaia that Queen Damascena will be merciful enough to put a bullet through your head."

"Ambassador Pascale?" My voice shakes.

When he doesn't answer, I turn my gaze to the fritters and replay our conversation in my mind. Prince Kevon knows the truth but Queen Damascena is embellishing it with unrelated facts. The ambassador says he has given up on me but still came with a last meal and a message of goodbye.

I inhale my first deep breath since waking and feel no more aches. No wonder he urged me to continue eating. The food contained a painkiller. Maybe he wants me to save myself and meet him at the embassy to collect my family. After eating the cheese fritter, I bite into one that contains soybeans, a Harvester's main form of protein.

Ignoring the nervousness roiling through my stomach, I finish eating the fritters and bite the final one, which contains some sort of fish. I place the carton on the floor, pick up the full water bottle, and twist its lid.

The strong scent of menthol fills my nostrils. I flinch and replace its lid. The label says, 'DRINK ME.'

My gaze freezes on the words until their edges blur. I should trust the ambassador but he specifically came to say he could no longer help me. Anything that smells so strongly must be masking a drug even more powerful than the painkiller. The only thing I can trust is that he wants an exciting finale for his Princess Trials show.

Another locking mechanism whirrs, and I rush toward the door. "Ambassador Pascale?"

"He's not coming," rasps a female voice from the next cell.

"Who's that?"

"Who do you think?" she snaps.

"Prunella?" I whisper.

She doesn't answer.

"What's happening?"

“We’re in the Deimos Stadium.” Her voice is so thick with rage and bitterness that it’s hard to understand her. “The Nobles will make a spectacle of us before we die.”

“A...” I gulp. “What?”

Prunella huffs an impatient breath, and I can imagine her rolling her eyes at my ignorance. “This is what they do to criminals of interest. The first and second tier-Nobles sit in a viewing theater and enjoy watching their enemies get torn apart by wild creatures and sometimes wild men.”

“Like gladiators?”

Prunella bursts into tears. “Except that there’s no chance of getting out alive.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and exhale a long, weary breath. Prunella has just confirmed my suspicions about the ambassador. He wants me to last as long as possible in the stadium for his people’s viewing pleasure. Nobody’s coming to save me, and the ambassador probably dumped my family on the roadside.

Scenarios whizz through my mind. The most prominent is of me standing in the middle of an amphitheater, my only protection a net and a short sword. To tie up the storylines, I’ll probably have to face the cassowary that attacked Gemini and the two ligers I escaped in the Gloria National Park. Worse. It will be wild men riding ligers.

“I never hated you,” says Prunella. “At least not at first.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to tune out what will probably be a rant about my shortcomings. I’m no longer weak with pain or hunger or thirst, my heart thrums a steady beat, and whatever was in the fritters has invigorated my body. If we’re in a stadium as Prunella says, I might have enough energy to scale a wall and escape.

Prunella snuffles. “The queen told me to do whatever was necessary to guarantee Prince Kevon a Noble bride who wasn’t Rafaela. That’s why I organized all those murder attempts, including yours and Gemini’s. She said she would make me a member of the royal court.”

I shake my head. Now I feel an idiot for casting doubt on Prunella’s guilt. “Why didn’t you tell the Chamber of Ministers you were working for Queen Damascena?”

“She promised to send me to the stadium if I did.”

“And she sent you there anyway,” I snap.

Prunella sobs, and I drop my gaze to my bare feet. I’m a fine one to talk, seeing as I killed Berta and burned those Guardian girls’ bodies. Now, I’ve just added to her misery.

A door creaks open, and Prunella screams. Her shouts and pleas for mercy

form an incoherent mess that mingles with the sound of scuffling and dragging.

I clutch the water bottle to my chest and press my ear against the door.

Someone pounds against it from the other side. "You're next, popcorn."

I tear off the bottle's label, looking for instructions, a message, anything, but its underside is blank. Maybe Ambassador Pascale really meant it when he said he wasn't going to give me any help.

Prunella's distant screams drift through the door of my cell, but I could be mistaking the sound with birdcalls. I lower myself onto the floor and take a sip of minty water that traces a freezing path from my tongue down to my stomach. Its lining stops fluttering, and calm washes through my veins.

My gaze drops to the label I discarded on the floor. I moisten my finger with the water and rub it on its front and back. There's a message:

*We tried our best to put you on the throne, but even we could never have predicted that the man you shot from the tree was King Arias.*

*If it's any consolation, your death will change the course of history.*

*Even the minor nobles will balk at the brutal death of a beloved public figure.*

*Please take the strength enhancers. Fight bravely. You will be remembered.*

Whatever was in that water has numbed my reaction, but it looks like even the Amstraad Republic believed in Queen Damascena's lies. They probably also leaked all that footage of me to NetFace.

I exhale a long breath and take a few more swallows of mint water, which calms my nerves and clears away the remnants of my fear.

If I must die, everyone will know the machinations of Queen Damascena. I moisten my finger again and pick up the paper carton. It fizzes against my fingertip, making me flinch.

Strength enhancers. The fritters were pain-killers, the water has given me a calmness and clarity I haven't felt since the day I supposedly shot the king from the persimmon tree. Ambassador Pascale took the first bottle away but left the carton on purpose.

I tear a strip off the thick paper and place it between my lips. It melts and fizzes on my tongue, releasing a mass of bitter bubbles. A rush of adrenaline surges through my veins, and I rise off the floor, chewing mouthful after mouthful of the carton. It bubbles and expands in my mouth, and foam escapes my lips.

For the next several minutes, I eat the paper, wash its chemical taste away with the minty water, and my confidence soars. My mind rolls back to the time I stood at Gemini's side and watched the Amstraadi girls' practicing their drills in the garden. Will this enhancer make me move like them? If the answer is yes, I might just survive this stadium.

The bottle cap lies at my feet. I reach down and hold it between my fingers. Beneath the opaque seal above the metal are letters I can't read. I peel it off to find a paper disc that says: SUICIDE.

Shock loosens my fingers, and the cap and the suicide disc falls to the floor. The lock mechanism whirrs, and the door swings open. I drop down to the floor and place a palm over what could be my only means of escape.

"Your turn, Popcorn," says the same female voice from before.

Rough hands hook under my arms and drag me out of my cell. I curl my fingers around the disc and scramble to my feet. My captors are two women in black who cover their heads in masks that only reveal their eyes. I scan their bodies for holsters, guns, or tell-tale bulges, but they're unarmed.

"Let me walk," I say.

"Suit yourself." The woman pulls me upright and marches me through a short hallway of white doors and matching, polymer walls illuminated by more of those ceiling-holes.

We reach a metal door, and the woman on my left steps forward and taps a code into a keypad on the wall. The door clicks open, revealing another woman standing inside a white room the size of my cell.

"What's happening?" I ask the new woman.

"I'll be your wardrobe mistress for the day." She holds up a jumpsuit made of sackcloth in one hand and a gown made of the same material in the other. "Prunella is wavering on her feet already, and you're needed in the stadium. Take your pick."

I tighten my lips, wondering what kind of sick game they're playing. All three women close in on me, making my muscles quiver with anticipation. With one punch I could—

"If you're thinking of escaping, don't," says the wardrobe mistress. "Fail to cooperate, and they'll flood this room with a sleeping agent and drag your unconscious carcass into the stadium."

"Jumpsuit," I snap.

As the other women unfasten my silver dress, I glance around the room for a weapon. The woman at the door points her remote at the wall and brings up an image of Prunella in a short dress made of sackcloth. Blood flows from gashes in her arms and legs, and from a cut on her shaved head.



“What have they done to her?” I whisper.

“Short hair was a good choice.” The first woman sets aside the gown and holds the jumpsuit open at my feet. “It helped her escape Scorpio more than once.”

I gulp. “Scorpio?”

Another woman places a cup of water to my lips. “Drink this. We can’t have you croaking your way through the execution. The crowd wants big, lusty screams.”

I jerk back, and the woman huffs as though I’m the one being unreasonable.

Someone grabs my hair, holding me in place. “It’s only water. Now, drink.”

Throwing my weight back, I swing a high kick up at the huffing woman’s wrist and kick the water out of her hand. It arcs through the air and lands on the wall screen.

Her companion laughs and claps me on the back. “I guess you don’t need any help. Good luck with Scorpio.”

I step into the jumpsuit’s legs, wondering if they were only just trying to help but shake off that feeling as the wardrobe mistress pulls the garment over my hips and slides my arms through its openings at the top. They’re getting people ready for their deaths. The only people they’re helping are their Noble overlords.

“Scorpio is the name of the exoskeleton.” The wardrobe mistress rubs ashes on my bare arms while her colleague slips boots onto my feet. “Only the strongest of guardians can wield black zirconium.”

“What’s that?” I slip the suicide disc into the pocket of my jumpsuit.

“A form of metal.”

My eyes narrow. “It’s heavy, then?”

She chuckles and dusts gray powder on my face. “No spoilers.”

I turn my gaze to the screen where Prunella still stands at the foot of the tree holding out her palms. There’s no sound, but her face is twisted with anguish, and she seems to be screaming at someone on the other side of the camera. I purse my lips. What kind of people would watch someone’s last moments for entertainment?

The wardrobe mistress tells me to raise my head, so she can dust me with ashes. Sackcloth and ashes are supposed to be signs of repentance, but my only regret is the pain I caused Prince Kevon. I wait for the surge of guilt, for my heart to clench with misery, but whatever was in the effervescent paper and mint water has tamped my emotions.

Even as a hulking man in shining, black armor walks into the scene and the women around me gasp, I feel nothing except for determination that I will not fall at the hands of Scorpio.

The camera cuts to Scorpio's broad back, where the armor takes the shape of a carapace of blinking lights that I suppose are cameras. He spread out his thick arms that end in pincers the size of Prunella's head.

Shiny bands of black metal stretch across his rib cage and around to the front, imitating scorpion legs, and the armor notches into segments down the base of his spine, which ends in a segmented tail.

He runs with mechanical steps over a landscape of dense roots that tangle and stretch over turquoise water. The trees attached to them grow at odd angles, and there isn't a scrap of land apart from what's created by the roots.

"He's going to end Prunella." The wardrobe mistress clasps her hands to her face and dirties her mask with gray powder.

"No." One of the women hides her face with her hands and peeps at the screen through parted fingers. "I can't watch."

I turn my gaze to the camera. Prunella was no friend. She killed an innocent girl, injured eight contestants, and executed Gemini Pixel, but even she deserves a witness who isn't watching out of some sick sense of entertainment.

A side shot of them appears on the screen. Scorpio wraps a claw around her neck and raises her to eye level. His tail lengthens and curls into a stinger the size of a large gourd. With one twist of his wrist, Prunella becomes limp.

The trio of women exchange dissatisfied glances.

"That's it?" says the one who hid behind her hands. "I thought Scorpio would pull off her head or... I don't know, do something spectacularly explosive."

The third woman's eyes slide toward me, and the apples of her cheeks rise beneath her black mask. "Maybe they're saving his best moves for the next victim."

I shoot her a venomous look, and she darts her gaze toward the wall.

A close-up of Prunella's face replays on the screen. She leans back, her eyes bulging, and her nostrils flared. The corners of her lips curl down in a scream that exposes her top row of teeth, and her wide face curls into a mask of horror.

She moves slower than usual, making me think that the producers want people to savor her death. I turn my gaze away and clench my teeth. One day, I hope Queen Damascena will know what it is to feel such terror.

After a few repeats of Prunella's death, the camera cuts to a full-body shot of Byron Blake standing at the edge of a pool underneath another of those trees whose roots snake across the water. He wears green overalls that ride up to his chest with a lightweight jacket underneath and a hat in the same fabric.

The wardrobe mistress bounces up and down on the balls of her feet. "They're about to announce the next victim."

Facing the door at the other end of the dressing room, I pull back my shoulders, straighten my spine, and curl my hands into fists.

It's time.

One of the women rears back. "Who on earth is that?"

I turn to the screen. A pair of women in black masks drag a short blonde toward Byron. She struggles against their grip, keeping her head down. This new victim doesn't wear sackcloth like Prunella did or me, but a Harvester uniform with a full apron.

One of the women in black forces the Harvester's head up, and aquamarine eyes stare into the camera within a face twisted with terror.

It's Mom.

## CHAPTER 22

Shock barrels my gut. I stagger back and clutch myself around the middle. “Mom.”

All three women turn from the screen and stare at me with wide eyes. “That’s your mother?” asks the wardrobe mistress. “I thought she was just a Harvester nobody sent in to get Scorpio in the mood.”

Byron addresses the camera, and the screen splits into halves. Mom’s identification photo and personal details appear on the left. The volume is off, so I can’t hear what he’s saying.

My heart pumps adrenaline and hatred through my veins. Mom has done nothing wrong. She won’t last ten minutes with Scorpio. “I’ve got to leave.” My hands curl into fists. “Now.”

“We can’t control the external door,” says the woman closest to the screen.

The wardrobe mistress shrugs. “Sorry.”

My rage mounts until blood pounds in my ears and the edges of my vision blur. I won’t allow this. I won’t stand and watch Mom die at the hands of these monsters. I won’t amuse them with my anguish at watching Scorpio run Mom ragged and beat her to death.

An idea jumps into my head. Earlier, the women warned me not to attempt an escape or they would fill the room with a gas that would make me sleep. What if something the ambassador gave me contained an antidote to the drug?

“Sorry,” I say to the wardrobe mistress.

She tilts her head to the side. “For what?”

I swing at her masked face with my left. She jumps back, but I surge forward with an uppercut to the cheekbone. It knocks her harder than expected. She stumbles toward the wall and crashes against the mirror.

The next closest woman grabs my arm. Pivoting, I slam my fist into her ribs. Something cracks beneath my knuckles. She doubles over and screams. The third woman races at me with a four-inch-long electroshocker crackling with

power. I shove her colleague into her path. They both stiffen and hit the floor, just as a hissing sound fills the room.

The wardrobe mistress groans and picks herself off the floor. “What are you doing?”

I turn to the screen to find Byron addressing the camera. Mom drifts away in a boat in the background. The next shot is of Scorpio, who stands at the waterside, raising his pincers.

The wardrobe mistress staggers toward me through the gas. “You can’t beat us into setting you free.”

Her steps falter, reminding me that I need to pretend to appear unconscious for my plan to work, even though strength courses through my veins. The whole point of attacking them was for someone to open that door. The wardrobe mistress’ posture droops, her eyelids flutter, and she looks seconds away from falling asleep.

Faking a yawn, I sway from side to side. “You’re lying.” I slur my words. “One of you must have a key.”

I fall to my knees and make a show of patting the pockets of the closest woman. Footsteps rush toward us from the direction of the external door. I fall toward the other two women, palm the electroshocker, and hope whoever is watching me believes the gas has rendered me unconscious.

A mechanism turns in the door, letting in humid air along with the sound of hurried footsteps. My pulse races, and I force every ounce of self-control into not charging.

“Report,” says a distant voice.

“They appear unhurt, Your Majesty.”

“And the girl?” asks the queen.

“We’re moving her to the waterfront. Byron can interview her while she waits her turn.”

“Restrain her if you must.” The queen chuckles. “I’d love to watch her commentary of Scorpio tearing apart her family.”

I clench my teeth at the implication that Dad and the twins are also waiting somewhere in a cell like mine. As soon as I disable Scorpio and save Mom, I’ll use this newfound strength on the queen.

The two newcomers walk to my sides and each grab an arm. They drag me over their fallen colleagues and out into a mossy landscape that reminds me of compost before it gets a chance to rot. The sound of running water is close, and I’m moving over soft, muddy ground.

Deep, deliberate breaths fill my lungs, and I use every mental technique I learned from the Red Runners to counter the adrenaline seething through my

veins. I can't attack these women until they take me to Byron Blake.

After what feels like an eternity, I hear Byron's excited voice telling the audience in the viewing theater that Scorpio's armor won't allow him to float in water. "But will Mrs. Calico's boat stay afloat for long enough to reach safety?" he says with a chuckle. "Let's find out after we hear from her daughter."

I take that as my cue to act. Using the momentum of the woman on the right, I kick at the feet of her colleague. She releases my left arm and stumbles into the moss.

The second woman reaches for her baton, but I jam the electroshocker under her neck and press the button. Blue lightning erupts from its tip. She goes rigid and falls like a log.

"Zea-Mays." Byron stands at the waterfront with his palms raised. "Whatever you think you're doing, this isn't the answer."

I advance on him with the shocker outstretched. "Where's my mother?"

His gaze darts to my left.

I spin around to find the first woman pulling herself off the ground. With one swift kick in the head, she falls onto her front and stops moving.

The camerawomen scramble out of my way. I ignore them and continue toward Byron, who stumbles backward toward the water.

"Zea." He moves his forearms up and down in a motion that's more aggravating than calming. "Please, don't do this."

"Take me to my mother."

Byron's mouth drops open. "But the rules state—"

I punch him hard in the face, and the sensation of cracking bones explodes under my knuckles. Byron's head snaps back. He falls onto his behind and clutches his nose.

"What would happen to your brain if I kept electrocuting you with this?"

He raises a palm. "There's no need for violence." Byron's voice is thick with agony. "I'll take you to her, but you'll need to use a glider."

This is probably a trick. They'll give me a glider and cut its power while I'm moving over the water, but I nod anyway. Byron beckons one of the production assistants, who rushes behind the pop-up studio and pulls out an air glider thicker and longer than the one they gave us in the Gloria National Park.

She scurries forward, places it at my feet, and backs toward the studio.

"There." Byron gestures at the stream. "Follow the water around the stadium, and you'll find your mother drifting away on a boat."

I flick my head toward the board. "Stand in front of the foot straps."

His lips part, and all the color leaches from his face. "What?"

My eyes narrow. He probably expected me to step on first, and one of the

production assistants would program it to do something dangerous. I squeeze the trigger, and sparks of blue lightning erupt from the shocker's tip.

Byron flinches. When I shake the electroshocker, a resigned look crosses his features, and he steps onto the glider's front half. I step behind him and slide my feet into the straps. It rises a foot off the ground and drifts four feet above the water.

Emmera's instructions floats to the top of my mind. Rising toes on the left foot makes the board descend, and the right makes it ascend. I finally get a chance to absorb my surroundings. We're in some kind of artificial swamp of trees that look like they're standing on multiple tangled stilts. Their leafy canopies form an arch over the water and tiny lights on their trunks and branches blink on and off, which I guess are cameras.

The trees also form pathways for water that runs more like a stream than a swamp. Birds sing, frogs croak, and cicadas chirp, but there's no sign of wildlife except for Byron, who won't stop talking.

"This is one of four stadiums built on the technology of the Botanical Gardens. It's my first time in the mangrove swamp, and also the first time I've been abducted by such a charming young lady," he says with a chuckle.

"Byron," I snarl.

"Yes, Miss Calico?"

"If I don't see my mother in the next thirty seconds, I'll kill you."

His shoulders stiffen and he points at something on the far left. "She's over there."

"Where?" I press the electroshocker into his jaw.

Byron shudders. "Please, don't hurt me. If you rise over the trees, we'll cut across the maze. They programmed her boat to sink around the time she reaches Scorpio."

I raise the toes of my right foot, and the board soars through the canopy, scratching us as we pass the branches. It takes a bit of tilting from side to side to turn the glider where Byron directs, and I nearly lose him twice.

Deep growling reverberates from somewhere down and to the left.

"Over there beneath that tree." Byron points at the waterfront.

Scorpio is even bigger in real life than he appears on camera, and twice as monstrous. With his silver-crested helmet, Scorpio stands about six-and-a-half-foot tall, with artificially inflated shoulders broader than General Ridgeback's.

He tilts his head up to a tree where Mom clings to a thick branch like a frightened kitten. The black armor on his back gleams in the artificial sunlight, and the fabric between its metallic plates ripples as he shakes the trunk.

Byron's heart beats so hard that I feel its reverberations on my chest. "Don't

attract his attention,” he whispers. “Your mother is perfectly safe up that tree.”

“We’re going to get her.” I shift my weight to the left and turn the board in a wide circle over the water.

“You can’t,” Byron hisses. “This glider can only support the weight of two adults. Add another, and the motor will fail.”

“Right, then.” I stretch out my arms for balance and tilt the board to the side.

Byron screams and drops into the water with a massive splash. I glide up and around the tree and steel myself against Byron’s screams for Scorpio to stay away.

Roots crack beneath us, accompanied by the frantic gasps and the wet smacks of hands slapping a hard surface. Scorpio growls, something else cracks, and Byron falls silent.

I focus my gaze on Mom. Wet, blonde hair clings to her pale face, and her mouth is twisted with terror. Byron is another lost life on my conscience, but I can’t think about that until my family is safe.

Scorpio grunts, and his heavy, cracking footsteps approach us from below. Mom squeezes her eyes shut and whimpers.

I drift close to the trunk. “Mom.”

Her eyes bulge. “What are you doing here?”

“Can you take my hand?” I stretch out an arm.

She shakes her head. “You’re not strong enough to hold my weight. If you can get away on that thing, save yourself.”

“It’s alright.” I drift as close to the tree as possible and hope its leaves and branches don’t catch on the glider’s motor. “They fed us well in the palace, and I’ve built up my strength. Trust me. I won’t let you fall.”

Mom peers down at my board, nods, but doesn’t release her branch. For the next few seconds, I coax her into stretching out an arm. Even when Scorpio’s shaking and crashing against the tree shifts it back and forth by several feet.

I finally get Mom to move her foot toward the board, when Scorpio uproots the tree.

“Zea!” Mom flies out of the branch in an arc and crashes into another tree. Her arms thrash at the branches, but she lands on her back into a tangle of roots.

“Mom!”

I shift my weight to the right and charge toward her. Several feet below, Scorpio stomps over the roots, cracking them with each step. His panting breaths fill the air as we race to reach her first.

Buzzing reaches my ears, and my muscles stiffen. It sounds like jimson wasps. Something white creeps into the edge of my vision, and metallic talons scratch at my back.



I twist around. A drone swipes at my face with robotic arms and nearly catches my eye. I swing a punch at the contraption and knock it out of the sky. The drone swoops down over the water, but another rises up through the trees.

Scorpio reaches Mom first. His massive body covers hers, and I can't tell what he's doing to her.

I charge down and thrash at the drones clawing and swiping at my arms and legs and back. They're a distraction. Mom can't get hurt. She can't die.

Scorpio raises Mom off the roots with his pincer and throws her back onto the roots. She rolls into the water, drifts downstream, but gets caught up in more undergrowth. I glower at his broad back, where colored lights flash on and off at the seam between his arachnid exoskeleton and silver helmet.

"Get away from my mother!" I scream.

The monster ignores me and lumbers toward Mom. I charge down on the glider with the electroshocker outstretched. Blue lightning sparks from its tip, and I point it at the metal crest of Scorpio's helmet.

His roar rings through my eardrums and makes the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Scorpio lashes out and elbows me on the side of my head, turning my vision white. I surge upward, not knowing if I've made his armor malfunction. I don't care. I don't wait around to see if he'll fall or regroup.

Scorpio's armor whirrs and clicks. He stands so still that I wonder if he's also some kind of drone. Now that I've disabled him, I can search for Mom.

She isn't in the roots where I last saw her. My gaze sweeps upstream, where the water turns a sharp bend. She's not there, either. My pulse thunders in my ears, and I glance from left to right and along the roots. Some resemble cages of tall stilts and others are so thick and tangled that they make a walkway.

"Where are you?" I try to keep the tremble out of my voice. If she's hiding behind the tree, she would answer. "Mom!"

The current could have dragged her into the undergrowth of any one of those plants. With her beige Harvester uniform darkened with the water, I'm not sure I'll find her.

Scorpio grunts and stomps away from the water and into the thick growth of mangroves. I bite down on my lip and soar over the canopy. Someone probably told him Mom's location, and he's taking a shortcut. I've got to get there before him.

"Mom?"

She doesn't reply.

Anxiety twists my stomach into knots. Whatever Ambassador Pascale gave me is either wearing off or he didn't account for the horror of losing one's mother. A drone swoops overhead and swipes at my face, and another slashes

me across the back with a metallic claw.

With a scream, I arch my spine and snatch one of them out of the air. I glide from side to side, but the second drone continues attacking from the rear. No matter how many times I swing at the thing, it always ducks out of reach. This is another distraction. They want Scorpio to reach Mom first.

When I glance down through the canopy, Scorpio is gone.

Mom's shriek pierces the air, and my heart soars. I command the board to rise, fly over the trees, and cut across the bend. A figure floats with her upper body slumped on a thick log that's racing down toward a waterfall.

"Mom!"

As I cross the canopy, I find Scorpio running ahead along the bed of roots. I swoop down toward him.

"Hey," I shout.

Without breaking a stride, he turns his head. The visor covering the upper part of his face is too dark for anyone to see his eyes or machinery, confirming my suspicion that he's a drone.

I hurl the drone at his helmet. "Eat this."

Scorpio snatches it out of the air and growls. I dart to the left and hover inches above the water. He grabs the second drone and smashes them together.

The thunder of the waterfall fills my ears, and my heart thrashes against my ribcage. Mom's log speeds toward the precipice. She breaks away from it and swims against the current, but the water accelerates and carries her away.

As I surge twelve inches above the water, her head disappears beneath the surface. Mom stretches out her arm. I crouch on the glider, plunge my hand into the freezing water, and pull her up by the wrist.

Our combined weight tilts the board to the left. Once I position her at my front, the glider steadies, and I turn us back toward the trees. Scorpio stands on a bed of roots with his head tilted toward us.

Mom shivers, and I wrap my arms around her shoulders.

"I'm so sorry," I murmur into her hair.

"It's them, not you." Mom finally raises her head.

My throat dries. This is the first she's ever spoken out against anyone. Even after Mr. Wintergreen's death, she said that systems couldn't always stamp out evil and that bad people existed in every society.

"They're listening," I whisper.

"They've already taken us from our homes, threatened our lives, and thrown me at the mercy of that monster," she says. "I used to think if a person kept to the laws and contributed to the society, they could live peacefully in Phangloria, but that's not true."

I hum my agreement.

“The Princess Trials are only meant for one Echelon.” Bitterness laces Mom’s voice. “All the recruitment and challenges you all faced was Montana giving the nation false hope.”

“Not just Montana,” I mutter.

We drift over the water and away from Scorpio. Even if I had been a regular Harvester girl like Emmera or Forelle, the queen would have unearthed a reason why I couldn’t marry Prince Kevon.

Another drone rises from within the trees but doesn’t attack, making my muscles tense in anticipation. They’ve had enough time to bring in reinforcements, so why are they just watching us? In the Detroit Depression challenge, they came at us with a cassowary, locusts, and acid rain.

Scorpio follows us along the roots at a steady jog. Where they become too thin to support his weight, he disappears into the undergrowth.

When we cross a patch of roots that sprawl over the water, he doesn’t reappear, but the hum of machinery beneath our feet sputters.

Mom stiffens. “What’s that?”

I drift down toward the water’s surface. “The glider’s going to fail.”

“What if that man returns?”

I press the electroshocker into Mom’s palm and arrange her fingers around the trigger. “Protect yourself with this.”

“Zea, no—”

“I have an idea.”

We drift closer to the roots, and the engine continues to make gentle explosions. “Let’s find the exit.”

Mom turns her head from side to side, seeming to take in the scenery. The trees are a lush green we don’t get to see outside the crop fields. Where the artificial light hits the canopy, its leaves appear golden. The water, which has now calmed, is a transparent turquoise that reflects the tall roots.

“Are we in the Botanical Gardens?” she asks.

“Somewhere far more sinister,” I reply.

There’s no sign of Scorpio between the trees. He has either run out of power or has been recalled. I steer the glider to a carpet of roots, help Mom off the board, and step down. The glider’s engine stills, but I tuck the board under my arm anyway. It’s long and thick enough to serve as a shield or a weapon against whatever decides to attack.

As we continue on foot through this endless forest of mangroves, Mom peers up at me through her lashes but doesn’t speak. A dull ache forms in my ribs, along with the ghost of a pounding headache. If I don’t find a way out of this

stadium soon, the drugs will wear off and render me as helpless as Prunella Broadleaf.

Dappled light streams down through the thick canopy of green leaves, and the cameras embedded in the trunk blink on and off. My throat spasms. Nothing has attacked us for several moments, which means they're either going to leave us here to starve or drown, or they're working up to something big.

When I spot Mom glancing at me for what feels like the tenth time, I ask, "What's wrong?"

"Are you sure the prince loves you?" she murmurs.

"Why do you ask?"

"How could he let something like this happen?" Her brow wrinkles into a frown. "First, the guards and then the abductions, and now this. What kind of leader can't protect the woman he supposedly loves?"

"It's complicated," I say with a sigh.

"Your father—"

"It was different for you when you were marrying Dad. Grandma didn't wield one percent of Queen Damascena's power, and she was actually sane."

Mom purses her lips, but I ignore the disapproval. Some habits are hard to break, but even she can't deny that this is the most deranged method of rejecting a daughter-in-law.

The lights turn off, encasing us in the dark. My senses become alert. I knew they would do something

"Zea." Mom grabs my arm. "Stay behind me."

A tight fist clenches at my chest. She can't protect me from what's coming.

"We've got to get in the water," I whisper.

"Why?"

"If Scorpio has heat-seeking goggles, we can escape him by lowering our body temperatures." Mom inhales a sharp breath, presumably to ask how I would know this, but I speak first. "We don't have time."

She grabs my hand, and I grope my way down through the trees and to the water's edge. It's cold, but this could be our only means of escape. We link arms and cling onto the roots. I keep the board tucked under one shoulder, and Mom accidentally grazes the shocker's trigger and sets off a tiny spark. It's not enough to attract anyone's attention... I hope.

Leaves rustle overhead, along with the whirr of drone propellers. I slow my breathing and focus. Focus on the sounds beyond the drone and the trees and the stream. Focus on the cold seeping into my heart. Focus on the approaching snap, snap, snap of distant roots.

"He's coming," Mom whispers.

I gulp. Scorpio sounds less than twenty feet away.

His growl rolls through my ears, making my heart rate spike, but an idea shoots into my brain. I remove the board from under my arm and hold it inches above the water.

“Put the electroshocker in your mouth and grab my wrist,” I whisper to Mom.

“What?”

“My glider can float.” I inject my voice with confidence. If I’m wrong, we’ll drift for a few feet and get tangled in the roots.

“Zea,” Mom says from between chattering teeth.

Scorpio growls again, only this time, he sounds like an arm’s-length away. I raise my head and meet the flashing lights of his collar.

Mom grabs my wrist, just as Scorpio’s arm smashes the roots. I wrap my fingers around Mom’s arm and launch myself away from the roots and into the current.

Scorpio roars and enters the water with a huge splash. I move our joined hands to the board, Mom releases me, grasps the board, and we both float forward. Our frantic breaths drown out everything except the pulse hammering in my eardrums.

Cold water pummels us from both sides, jerks us up and down, but nothing can stop us.

“I can’t hear him.” Mom’s voice mingles with her gasps.

“His armor is made of some kind of metal,” I say between gasping breaths. “He must have sunk.”

Several minutes pass. We continue through the cold water, around the streams bends and twists until I’ve worked through the painkillers, the strength enhancers, and the mind-altering drugs. Now, I’m just as wretched and wracked with pain as I felt when I awoke. Worse, because Mom’s silent sobs tear through the fibers of my soul.

I’ve never seen or heard her cry, and I want to lash out at everyone, starting with myself. What on earth was I thinking when I agreed to this mission? What on earth possessed me to believe that there would be no repercussions on my family?

Dim lights shine from the distance, making it look like the first rays of sunlight peeking out from the horizon. We drift through a narrow stretch of water flanked by spindly trees with trunks that grow straight out of the water and create no walkways of roots. They’re so densely packed and form an impenetrable canopy over the water that we have no choice but to drift through them.

Whoever is viewing us is probably bored by now, and something else is about to happen.

“Has the challenge finished?” Mom whispers.

My brows furrow, and words dwindle in my throat. They probably didn’t show her Prunella’s execution. My legs drift uselessly in the water as I focus on a less alarming way of presenting the truth.

“I think they’re escalating.”

“Oh.” The resignation in her voice is like a blunt knife to the heart.

As we travel around another bend, a dark figure stands at the edge of the water, backlit by the dim light. A dark figure with a scorpion tail.

“Is that him?” Mom’s voice shakes.

The current pushes us to the left, giving me an inkling of hope. “If we stay in the middle of the water, the stream will bend again, and he won’t reach us.”

“But we’re headed straight for him,” she replies.

Before I can explain, a motor roars into life, and Scorpio rushes toward us.

Mom makes a whimpering sound in the back of her throat.

“He’s on a glider,” I snarl. They’ve evened things out, and now he can follow us anywhere.

The current changes direction and pushes us toward Scorpio, who swoops down and plucks us both out of the water with his claws. I pull at his fingers, punch at his arms, but it’s like trying to fight a vehicle.

Scorpio floats to the bank and throws me aside. I roll over a mass of hard roots and crash face-first into a tree. Pain explodes across my skull, my pulse thrashes in my ears, and white spots appear before my eyes. I push myself off the trunk and scramble on my hands and knees toward Mom.

His low, satisfied hum rumbles through my eardrums. Scorpio kneels over Mom and traps her forearms in his pincers. The artificial sunrise illuminates the exoskeleton of his broad back, making him appear monstrous. Mom clicks the shocker over and over, sending out bursts of blue sparks, but the power doesn’t reach his armor.

I stumble to my feet and stagger toward Scorpio, whose tail lengthens and curls toward Mom. Droplets of liquid glisten off the tip of his stinger, looking like he’s going to kill her with poison.

Panic lances through my chest. I leap onto Scorpio’s back, snatch the stinger and plunge it into the gaps between his exoskeleton.

He throws his head back and roars.

Scorpio falls onto Mom and convulses. Mom screams and thrashes underneath him. I roll onto the roots, snatch the electroshocker from Mom’s fingers and shove it into Scorpio’s neck. Power erupts from its tip, and Scorpio

stiffens.

With a final, pained breath, he falls onto Mom.

“Zea?” she whispers.

“Are you alright?” I drop to my knees, wrap my hands around his pincers, and heave them out of the ground.

Mom makes a pained moan and wriggles underneath the monster’s weight. My muscles strain as I roll Scorpio onto his side, and she pulls herself free.

The lights turn on, and Scorpio makes a whirring sound, followed by clinks and clanks. I scramble to my feet, and pull Mom to my chest.

“Is it over?” she sobs.

“I...” The answer is no. There will be another Scorpio, another stadium, another way to torture my family and me. “Please, don’t ask.”

Mom turns around and screams.

I grab her shoulders. “Are you hurt?”

She bursts into wracking sobs and falls onto her knees. Dread fills my belly, and I turn to see if someone has entered the stadium, but all I find are pieces of Scorpio’s dismantled helmet.

Scorpio isn’t a drone.

Scorpio is Dad.

## CHAPTER 23

*I* drop down to my knees, a scream tearing from my lips. Dad stares lifelessly at the artificial lights.

“Loam.” Mom places her hands on his chest and repeats his name over and over.

A wave of cold shock spreads numbness across my chest, and my ears ring with accusation. I killed Dad. I killed Dad, thinking he was Scorpio. I killed Dad, even though I should have remembered Queen Damascena had promised my family a messy death.

I slump, and my gaze tunnels to the scene of Mom cupping Dad's head in her small hands and sobbing like someone is plunging sword after sword into her gut. This doesn't feel real. It's just like the fake montage of Ingrid fighting the hijackers at Berta's side or the footage of Lady Circi dragging the naked girl from the hospital room.

At any moment, Mouse and Ambassador Pascale will step out from behind the trees and offer me Dad's life in exchange for telling their cameras that I'm an April Fool. Then they'll double up and laugh at my reactions and promise that everyone will love my performance in the Amstraad Republic.

But nobody comes. Nobody moves. Not Dad, who I just killed. Not Mom, who now sobs on his chest, and not the guards, who have just appeared on the edges of my vision.

Dad isn't coming back to life because I killed him.

Mocking applause echoes through the empty chambers of my mind, a slow hand-clapping that increases in volume with each approaching step.

“Well done,” her voice is cold and distant.

It must be Queen Damascena coming to gloat. It's not enough for her to make me kill my own father, she has to explain in excruciating detail how my acts of defiance have led to this very moment. Whatever she says next bounces off my wall of numbness. I can't keep my eyes off Mom and Dad.



Rough hands pull me to my feet, and a large, gloved hand turns my head toward the queen. My gaze rotates to Mom, who clings onto Dad's abnormally broad shoulders. I can't stop looking, not even when the queen slaps me hard across the face, not even when her fist slams into my gut. Nothing can reach me. Not even when Mom turns around and screams at them to stop.

A needle pierces my neck, and everything goes black.



I'm lying on my side on a smooth surface that won't stop vibrating. It feels like the faint rumbling of an electric motor. I groan in the back of my throat. They're moving me somewhere else.

A booted foot turns me on my back and gives me a sharp kick in the ribs. Flinching, I open my eyes and stare not at light streaming through ventilation holes, but at chandeliers.

Memories rush to my consciousness like a sandstorm. I suck in a breath, waiting for the deluge of grief. Nothing happens. I exhale, push myself up to my elbows, and stare at the metal back doors of Queen Damascena's mobile dressing room.

"Accurate as ever," the queen says from behind. "She awoke just in time."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," a female voice simpers.

I scramble onto my hands and knees, and back toward the door. Queen Damascena and Dr. Ridgeback sit on adjacent leather armchairs, each holding a glass of champagne.

On the left, the doctor wears her usual white coat with her ash-blonde hair tied back. Apart from her coloring, I can't see anything of Berta in her cold features. The queen wears a pink jacket with a high collar that zips up at the front and matching pants that flare out at the knees. Her blonde hair lies flat against the sides of her cruel face and curls inward at the ends. I can't imagine how she finds time to stay elegant in between acts of unimaginable inhumanity.

"What have you done?" I place a hand over the needle mark on my neck.

"The first shot was a sedative and the second, a suppressant for those who need to persevere through times of stress," says the doctor. "It will wear off in three hours."

"Why?" I rasp.

Queen Damascena places her champagne glass on the side table and picks up another. "So you can make a coherent confession."

My gaze darts around the mobile dressing room. It's just closets down the right side and on the left, a vast table of uneaten snacks. Lady Circi isn't here and neither is the blonde servant from before.

What did they do with Mom and the twins? “Where’s my—”

The queen stamps her foot and sharpens my focus back onto her. “Listen to me, Zea-Mays Calico. The life of your mother and twin brothers are in my hands. If you wish to save them, you will listen to me.”

My throat spasms, but I think it’s some sort of muscle memory reaction to a threat. A comment like this should generate a wave of fear or fury, but I feel absolutely nothing. It’s not the same numb shock as before or the determination I felt from the ambassador’s drugs. This is an emotionless void.

For the next few moments, Queen Damascena stares down at me with rapt attention, her fingers steepled in front of her mouth. It’s as though she’s savoring the sight of me cowering on the floor of her van, having lost my home, my father, my fiancé, my freedom, and possibly my family.

I hold her gaze and wonder why the queen needs to go to such despicable lengths when she has everything.

But she doesn’t. King Arias preferred someone else and likely only married her as a bargain to stay close to Lady Circi. Her son wants to confine her to the home of a father she loathes, and the Chamber of Ministers treated her like a joke the moment she lost her power.

Queen Damascena can’t command any respect without threats and murder. I know it. She knows it, and everyone in power knows it.

She exhales a satisfied breath and relaxes into her seat. “Your entire family is back in the stadium, waiting for a technician to repair Scorpio’s extensive damage.”

A breath catches in the back of my throat. “Dad’s alive?”

Queen Damascena raises a brow but doesn’t reply. The wretched woman is trying to draw out the suspense.

I hold her gaze, not reacting until her superior expression fades.

“Scorpio is the name of the machinery,” she says. “How many fathers have you killed now?”

Dr. Ridgeback forces a laugh. “Three.”

The third is Mr. Wintergreen. Somewhere, deep within the recesses of my mind, my heart sinks. While Mom wouldn’t hold a nine-year-old responsible for failing to rescue an adult, these two supposed mothers use that event as a weapon.

The queen smirks. “By the way, your mother cries like a constipated cow.”

My jaw clenches and I curl my fists, but there’s no surge of anger. At least Mom has emotions. Mom never had to bargain for a husband, and she actually loves her children, unlike this monster.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“Your confession.” She draws her head back and stares at me through narrowed eyes. “I want you to appear on camera and tell Phangloria how you joined the Princess Trials to stage a revolution, seduced my son into wasting precious water on your greedy Echelon, poisoned King Arias, and ordered your Red Runner comrade to assassinate my son.”

“What?”

“It’s the truth.” Queen Damascena sips her champagne and smirks. “If you don’t, the next Scorpio will kill the rest of your family.”

My shoulders slump. I can’t let Mom and the twins go through any more torment. “What happens to them if I say those things you want?”

“They’ll live a life of obscurity in the Barrens, where they belong,” replies the queen.

“How do I know you won’t kill them?” I ask.

Her smile widens. “You don’t.”

I clench my teeth and fill my lungs with air. She won’t even let me feel the unfairness of my predicament. This is what the Nobles have wanted all along—an army of uncomplaining Harvesters slaving on the barest of rations for their benefit. We’re not even human to these monsters, and Queen Damascena resents me for capturing the heart of her son.

“Alright,” I croak.

“Splendid.” The queen claps her hands together. “Lady-at-arms, help Miss Calico into her old Harvester uniform.”

Dr. Ridgeback rises, her cold, gray eyes promising a lifetime of torment. “When the suppressant wears off, you’ll feel a fraction of the anguish you caused me when you killed my daughter.”

Is there any point in denying what these women know to be true? Queen Damascena has footage of Ingrid promising Berta the position of Lady-at-arms in exchange for my death. Berta left the vehicle and drowned in the very chamber where I bled from the dagger she plunged into my back. The only reason I’m not in trouble for Berta’s death is because Queen Damascena has already framed me for regicide.

“Berta tried to kill me.” I say.

“That one is full of excuses.” The queen reaches for a side-table, picks up her computer tablet, and taps the screen. “She acts as though the life of a Harvester is of equal value to that of poor Alberta.”

I can’t even feel the sting of her words. “Where’s Lady Circi?”

Queen Damascena gazes at her outstretched fingers and yawns. “Her services are no longer required.”

“You killed her too?”

She snorts.

I wait for her to elaborate, but she continues drinking her champagne. Dr. Ridgeback shoves a box in my hands that contains my Harvester uniform, complete with the tomato-stained apron. Unfortunately, they've taken away my poisoned darts.

The doctor walks around to my back, pulls down the zip of my jumpsuit, and channels her resentment into yanking the fabric off my shoulders.

I step away from her and clutch the box to my chest. "I can dress myself."

Dr. Ridgeback glances at Queen Damascena for approval before returning to the leather armchair and picking up the champagne.

I lean my back against a closet door and ease my arms out of the jumpsuit. Both women watch me in silence as though there's nothing to entertain them on NetFace. Something hums on the table next to the queen. It's a printer spitting out card after card of words.

Holding the edges of the jumpsuit to my underarms, I pull out my Harvester tunic and ease it over my head and shoulders without revealing an inch of my underwear. The entire process of dressing takes three times longer than usual. When I've finished, the queen orders me to braid my hair into pigtails.

Later, she throws the cards across the floor and leans back into her seat. "Memorize these phrases."

"What are they for?" I pick them up.

"Your confession will be live. You only have one chance to get the words right." She leans forward, catches a card coming out of a printer, and flings it across the van.

The card lands on my chest, and I grimace at its contents. "Do I have to say these things about Prince Kevon to the whole of Phangloria?"

"My son needs to understand that Harvesters are trained coyotes that always bite their masters." She waves a dismissive hand. "Sure, they'll lick your fingers, perform their duties, and sleep at the foot of your bed, but one moment of inaction, and they'll attack like wolves."

"Is that what you believe?" I ask.

Queen Damascena rolls her eyes and holds up her tablet. "Do you need a demonstration?"

"No." She probably has a band of coyotes in that stadium, ready to prove her point at the expense of my family. I shuffle the cards, reading their hateful contents. "I'll say exactly what you want."

The van stops, and the queen makes me practice my confession until she's satisfied with my words. I now understand why she ordered Dr. Ridgeback to inject me with an emotion suppressant. There's enough truth in my claims to

convince Prince Kevon that I really did set out to murder him and take his throne and enough dangerous lies to make me crumple to the floor and weep.

Queen Damascena flicks her wrist, ordering Dr. Ridgeback to stand. The other woman walks to the van's door and turns the handle, letting in the morning sun.

I squint into the light, not knowing how much time has passed since I killed Dad, if the rest of my family is still alive, or if my words will turn them into the most despised people in Phangloria.

The queen shoos me out of the van, and I step out into the front of the Royal Hospital.

A breath catches in the back of my throat, and I turn to the excited queen. "Why am I making my confession here?"

"My son is convalescing from his heart attack brought on by the shock of your betrayal." She loops her arm through mine. "You're going to convince him that everything I uncovered was true."

Queen Damascena marches me through the hospital's automatic doors and into a cool, vast lobby shaped like a dome sliced in half. Thirty feet from the entrance, climbing plants grow from tall flower beds that surround the reception area, and escalators on both sides of the reception carry hospital staff up to a mezzanine. The top of the half-dome consists of transparent, triangular windows that let in the sun but not the heat.

The area beneath the mezzanine is sectioned into large booths, where Nobles sit with white-coated professionals for hair styling, nail maintenance, and electrically charged facial treatments I can't even begin to describe.

As we pass the escalators, Nobles incline their heads and murmur greetings to the queen, but nobody stops to crowd her. I wonder if that's because the hospital only caters for the top tiers of their Echelon.

That suppressant must be wearing off, but the thought of saying those terrible things to Prince Kevon makes my stomach clench and churn.

Queen Damascena glances down at my rumbling belly and sniffs. "If you're hungry, you should have eaten in the van."

There's no answer to a comment like that. Instead, I stare straight ahead at Dr. Ridgeback, who stops at an elevator manned by guards in white. They bow and step aside to let us in.

As soon as the elevator doors shut, Queen Damascena releases me with a hard shove and brushes imaginary dust off her arm.

Sweat gathers on my brow. My stomach clenches in time with the palpitations of my heart, making sharp pains shoot through my insides. Sweat beads on my brow, and my fingers tremble.

I lean forward and clutch my belly. “Why can’t I say these things to the camera?”

“What difference does it make? In an hour, you’ll never see him again.” Her violet eyes rove my face with a moue of disgust, then she turns to the doctor. “What’s wrong with her? I thought you said this suppressant would stop the crocodile tears.”

The doctor frowns. “I gave her the maximum tolerated dose, Your Majesty.”

The queen’s mouth goes slack, and she stares at her new lady-at-arms as though she can’t believe anyone could be so merciful.

Dr. Ridgeback reaches into her bag and pulls out a hypodermic needle.

Forcing myself to straighten, I raise both hands. “Please. I’ll say what you want. Just don’t give me any more of that drug.”

The doctor glances at the queen for permission, who smiles and waves her away.

When the elevator doors open, Queen Damascena steps out into a hallway lined with armed guards. I wait for Dr. Ridgeback to exit, not wanting her and her hypodermic needle at my back.

I should press the button on the steel wall and command the elevator to return me to the ground floor, but Dad’s unseeing eyes fill my mind. I’ve already learned the painful lesson of disobeying the queen.

Instead, I walk through the cordon of guards and wonder if this hospital room will become Prince Kevon’s prison. With the Chamber of Ministers believing that he has proposed marriage to a rebel and an assassin, I can’t see anyone coming to his rescue.

Two female guards at the front wearing black masks underneath their helmets step aside to let us into his room.

I take two steps inside and gape. The room isn’t as spacious as the one Prince Kevon occupied after Vitelotte stabbed him, but floor-to-ceiling windows on the left offer a far-reaching view of the Oasis, including King Arias’ giant solar trees.

Eight Noble girls sit in silence at his bedside. I don’t recognize any of them except for the short-haired girl whose chair is next to the footboard. I look away from Ingrid and rest my gaze to the top of the bed, where a paler-than-usual Prince Kevon reclines on propped-up pillows with long needles stuck into his chest. I swallow hard, wondering if this is his treatment or his torture.

“Leave us,” says Queen Damascena.

They rise and walk out into the hallway, each curtsying as they pass the queen. As Ingrid pauses at our sides, she shoots me a look that says everything. I should have listened to her. I should have accepted her offer. I should have

known my place.

I turn my gaze back to Prince Kevon, whose chest barely rises and falls with his breaths. If I had formed an alliance with Ingrid, Mom, Dad, and the twins would be safe, but I would have opened up Phangloria to the control of her father and the Chamber of Ministers.

Dr. Ridgeback walks around his bed, extracts a syringe from a cabinet recessed into the wall, and injects its contents into Prince Kevon's neck. "He'll be awake in a few moments, Your Majesty."

The queen turns to the open door. "Prepare the room."

The women in black step inside and move all but one of the chairs to the walls. One of them forces me to sit at Prince Kevon's bedside, and another stands at the foot of the bed and taps on a computer.

"Cameras are in place, Your Highness," she says.

I don't bother to look around for hidden cameras. Instead, I focus on the vital signs flashing on the wall screen.

"He's waking." Dr. Ridgeback walks around the bed and scurries toward the exit.

Queen Damascena and her henchwomen stream out of the room, leaving me alone with Prince Kevon, whose eyes remain closed. I drop my gaze to his hand and resist the urge to touch him. After saying the words I memorized on those cards, I doubt he'll want to see me again.

Shallow breaths ease in and out of my nostrils, barely filling my lungs. Dad is because I delivered the lethal blow. Mom and the twins are still in the stadium, awaiting their turn with the new Scorpio. Prince Kevon is in this medical prison with artificial fibers in his heart that can cause him pain or death at the click of a button.

I lick my lips. The only way to save everyone is to destroy what's left of Prince Kevon's love.

"Zea?" he croaks.

My gaze snaps up to his face. "You're awake."

He reaches out his hand. I fold my arms across my chest and turn my gaze at his increasing vital signs.

"What happened?" he asks. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"I'm returning to Rugosa."

"If it's because of my mother—"

"It's not her." I exhale the tightness in my chest in a long breath. "All those things she said about me are true. I told Vitelotte to find a way to kill you. When that didn't work, I decided I could try again after the birth of our first child, so I could become the regent."

Prince Kevon draws his brows together and stares at me as though I've just said the words in another language and he's trying to translate them before responding. I drop my gaze to the needles sticking out from under his collarbones, only noticing now the tiny threads that stretch up to a headboard that extends across the ceiling.

Silence draws out, and I realize that I've only mentioned two of the items on the queen's list. She will use any deviations from her orders as an excuse for punishment.

I'm about to speak, when he says, "You're saying that because I couldn't keep you safe."

"It's the truth," I reply. "My reason for joining the Princess Trials was to infiltrate the palace and find a way for rebels to slaughter the royals. When I talked about wanting to help someone lead the country, I was referring to Ryce Wintergreen."

"What?" he whispers.

"I've wanted to be close to him ever since your father killed his father."

Prince Kevon winces.

The tightness in my chest returns, as do the cramping pains in my stomach. If this continues for much longer, it will be me who needs the hospital bed. I'm sure Queen Damascena wanted me to weave these sentences into a conversation, but I blurt them out in a list.

"I'm grateful for our extra water rations, but I can't continue this lie. You're clingy, and you never listen. You bought my affection with wealth, but even that wasn't enough to tolerate you. You weren't enough."

Prince Kevon's face turns as hard as stone. "Why are you saying these things?"

I glance down at my clasped hands. "The queen has finally given me permission to leave the Princess Trials."

"She'll hurt you and your family if you leave my protection."

"I'm giving her what she wants." I recite even more of the queen's words. "The chance for a happy life with a girl who doesn't resent you."

"You..." He pauses. "You resented me?"

The tightness around my chest loosens. I can't tell if it's because I'm nearly at the end of my list and he's finally accepting my words or because my heart has shriveled and there's nothing left to squeeze.

"I grew up never having enough to eat or drink. How do you think I would feel to see people living like gods in the Oasis?"

"Zea." He leans toward me, lighting up the threads that link his needles to the ceiling, and flops back onto the pillows.



I draw in a sharp breath through my nostrils, suppress my shock, and raise a palm. “Will you stop being so persistent and needy?”

Prince Kevon flinches. The pain in his eyes tells me he has heard these words before, most likely from Queen Damascena. A muscle in his jaw clenches. “It would seem I’m doomed to love women incapable of loving me back.”

That’s not true. A sharp pain lances through my insides, but I clamp my lips shut. Queen Damascena should be satisfied that I have said everything she wanted. All that’s left are my parting words.

I break the tomato necklace off my neck, slide the ring off my finger, and place them onto his lap. “Goodbye, Prince Kevon. Spending time with you was harder than working the fields on a hot day. I hope you don’t take back the water rations I worked so hard to attain.”

“Get out,” he snarls.

My legs shake as I rise from my seat. Prince Kevon bows his head and closes his eyes. It’s better this way because he won’t see me waver.

Without me at his side, the Chamber of Ministers might treat him with more respect when he takes the throne.

Clutching my insides as though they might fall out, I walk across the hospital room to the exit. The only thing keeping me from falling on the floor and begging for his forgiveness is the drug suppressing my emotions. I’ve never been so cruel.

Just as I reach for the door, it flies open, making me stagger back.

General Ridgeback’s huge body fills the doorway. “Zea-Mays Calico, you are under arrest for treason.”

## CHAPTER 24

I stagger back into Prince Kevon's hospital room, my breaths turning shallow. General Ridgeback grabs my tunic and yanks me into the hallway. Queen Damascena and Dr. Ridgeback stand behind him, each staring at me with satisfied smirks.

"Stop," Prince Kevon shouts from his bed.

At his words, the queen's face splits into a wide grin. Of course, she relishes the power she wields over her son. It was her who decided on the implant that now controls Prince Kevon's heart.

The general clamps a massive arm around my bicep and marches me down the hallway, where the guards stand at the walls and sneer. Behind us, a body thuds to the floor, and overhead speakers ring with an alarm. Every single guard stops looking at me and rushes into Prince Kevon's room.

Worry ties my stomach into knots. I twist around, only to see the backs of the guards. What if he's injured? What if he's ruptured his heart?

I slap at the general's padded arm. "Prince Kevon—"

"Will be fine, now that you're no longer trying to kill him," he growls.

"No." I stiffen my legs, throw my weight back, dig my heels into the smooth floor—anything to stay and check that Prince Kevon is alright—but the general drags me down the hallway and stops at the elevator.

"Let go," I snarl through clenched teeth. "I'm innocent."

"Everyone heard your confession." He jams a thick finger at the call button.

The effort of struggling against him makes sweat break out across my brow. I curse Carolina and Ryce for not teaching me how to defend myself against a larger opponent. I can't let him take me away. Without Prince Kevon's pendant and ring, I would be lost within the Oasis or beyond.

With my free hand, I reach up at the general's Amstraad ear cuff and pull. It's not like an earring as I originally thought, but seems to connect with the skull.

General Ridgeback releases me with a roar and backhands me across the face. The blow hits like a stagecoach and spins me down the hallway until my head smacks into the wall.

I crumple to my hands and knees and crawl toward the hospital room. The alarm stops, and guards stream out through Prince Kevon's door.

"Scum." The general hooks his hand under the neckband of my tunic, hauls me to my feet, and shoves me toward the open elevator door. "My daughter was a disappointment but she was still worth ten of you."

One foot stumbles over the other, but I right myself before I fall and slam my elbow into his gut. It knocks him back a tiny step, but he wraps a hand around my neck and shoves me into the wall.

All the air leaves my lungs in a pained cry.

"Wait." Queen Damascena's voice rings through the hallway.

General Ridgeback drops his free hand and stands to attention. "Your Majesty?"

I claw at the hand around my neck still pinning me to the wall. As much as I despise the queen and want to plunge an electroshocker in her face, my shoulders sag with relief. Breathing hard to calm my senses, I snap my gaze back to the general's ear cuff, the exposed skin of his neck, his groin. The next time he attacks, I'm fighting dirty.

Queen Damascena stalks toward us, a grinning apparition in watermelon pink. The hallway's fluorescent lights make the ends of her blonde hair shine like the sun reflecting off cornsilk, but it's nothing compared to her radiant smile.

I tighten my muscles, school my expression, and brace myself for the worst.

"Zea-Mays Calico," she purrs. "Ambassador Pascale was wrong to call you the bucking bronco. You're a cat with nine lives."

Cramps of anxiety ripple through my insides, and I swallow back a groan. I've lost count of the number of assassination attempts, and I have no idea what the queen is planning.

"Release her, General."

He tightens his grip around my neck. "Your Majesty?"

"Miss Calico is free to go back to her Region."

I turn completely still, and my mouth drops open. If this is another trick...

"But she confessed to treason and regicide," says the general.

Queen Damascena's violet eyes sparkle with delight. "My son absolved her with his first and final pardon as Phangloria's regent."

"Final?" I whisper.

She tips her head back and chuckles. It's a throaty sound that makes me want

to hurl. Her hand falls onto her chest, and the laugh deepens. At any moment, I feel she's going to plunge a knife in my pounding heart. Out of the corner of my eye, I see every face turned to us, but I can't stop watching this woman revel in madness.

Eventually, Queen Damascena pulls her head back and exhales a long sigh. "Kevon abdicated, and now I'm the regent." She leans toward me and whispers, "You have twenty-four hours to leave the Oasis before I grant General Ridgeback a sabbatical."

The general releases my neck, stamps his foot on the ground, and bows. "Thank you Your Majesty!"

Implications hit me with a hard slap. Prince Kevon traded his throne for my freedom. Queen Damascena is now the absolute ruler of Phangloria. I have less than a day left to escape before General Ridgeback hunts me down in revenge for killing Berta.

I hurry back toward the hospital room, but the guards around the wall step into my path.

"He doesn't want to see you." The glee in Queen Damascena's voice grates on my nerves. "In fact, he's eager to restart the Princess Trials with candidates vetted for quality and good breeding."

I turn back to find the General standing in my path and staring at me as though I'm a fresh slice of steak.

"What about my family?" I ask.

"You're all free to return to your hovel." She smirks. "What's left of it."

Keeping my gaze on the queen, I edge around the general's body toward the elevator and grope at the wall panel until my finger presses the call button. Jagged pains stab through my belly, and the first signs of panic bleed through the emotion suppressant's wall of calm. I've got to find the stadium, retrieve my family, and leave the Oasis before the general can start his hunt.

The elevator doors open. I step inside. General Ridgeback moves forward, and I hold my breath. He plans on following me around until the end of the twenty-four hours.

Queen Damascena places a hand on his arm. "Any serving officer violating the royal pardon will face execution."

As the elevator doors close, the general inclines his head. Now I understand why the queen gave him a sabbatical instead of a vacation. By the time General Ridgeback catches up with me, he'll no longer be a serving officer.

The elevator makes its slow descent, and I lean against its wall, breathing hard. Will Prince Kevon's abdication mean the end of his torture? I wish I had hinted something to him about the remote control. It's too late unless I find a

way to send a message.

There's no point in trying to find the palace, because I'm no longer welcome, and I don't have a chance of sneaking back into Prince Kevon's hospital room. Maybe if I reach Rugosa, I'll tell Mr. and Mrs. Pyrus, then they'll tell Forelle, who will tell Garrett.

The elevator stops, the doors open, and the guards in white armor move aside. I step out into the half-dome, feeling exposed as an unescorted Harvester in uniform. The Nobles, who once inclined their heads, now glare at me as though they want to join General Ridgeback on his hunt.

Swallowing hard, I hurry toward the exit and keep my eyes away from the glowering faces. A large hand lands on my shoulder. My heart somersaults. I spin around to meet the unsmiling face of Garrett.

"You need a ride out of the Oasis," he says.

Pressing a palm to my heart, I sag with relief. "Thank you."

"This isn't a favor for you." He turns on his heel. "Follow me."

The fabric of my Harvester uniform makes my skin itch, even though it's the same outfit I've worn since turning fifteen. I hurry after Garrett and hunch my shoulders. He had been present in the Chamber of Ministers and saw the footage of Ryce kissing me, heard the queen uncover the truth about my reason for joining the Princess Trials, and heard what she said about me killing King Arias.

Garrett pauses at an elevator positioned next to a booth where a man in white sticks needles into Nobles' faces and makes their muscles twitch.

"How much of what you said to Kevon was true?" he asks.

I gulp. "You heard?"

"I came as soon as the Lifestyle Channel broadcasted you arriving at my cousin's bedside. Apparently, we've been looking for you in all the wrong places."

Garrett steps into the elevator, where two Noble boys my age who were about to step out remain to gape. When the doors slide closed, neither boy presses a button. Instead, they nudge each other and whisper as though plucking up the courage to say something.

I stare at the numbers on the display, which take us to the fifth-level basement. As soon as the elevator doors open and we step out into a dimly lit parking space filled with solar vehicles, one of the boys shouts something obscene. I turn, but the elevator door closes.

"My family is in the stadium," I say to Garrett.

He walks around a two-seater solar car and opens the driver-side door. "Where?"

I clench my teeth. Of course, they would keep such a vile place quiet. The

passenger door swings open, and I slide into the leather seat. As I try to describe the stadium, Garrett's Amstraad ear cuff beeps. He pulls a tablet from his inside pocket.

"A friend just spotted a Harvester woman and two little boys outside the Ministry of the Environment experimentation laboratories." He taps a command on his tablet. "I'll have someone pick them up."

Warm gratitude fills my chest. I squeeze my eyes shut and exhale my relief. My mind is still a jumble from everything that's happened since the king's funeral. I still can't believe that Prince Kevon would give up his throne to save me even after I convinced him of all those terrible things.

If only I had known his heart before I agreed to this stupid mission. Phangloria would have had a merciful king, but I ruined everything. I rub my dry throat and lick my lips.

Garrett maneuvers the car himself instead of programming it to drive and demands to know where I've been.

I tell him how Queen Damascena brought Mom to the stadium to slaughter someone I believed to be a stranger in a Scorpio suit. His face tightens as I describe charging into the stadium to rescue Mom and poisoning then electrocuting our attacker, only to discover that he had been Dad all along.

He turns to me. "If this is what the queen does to her enemies, it's no wonder you became a rebel."

"She also made me memorize those phrases I said to Prince Kevon," I murmur.

Garrett's eyes soften. "On some level, Kevon must suspect you were coerced."

I gulp. Prince Kevon is merciful but not naive. At least half of what I was supposed to have done was true.

At the end of the parking space, Garrett turns right, and we enter a long tunnel that slopes upward. "It sounds like they controlled your father with a rehabilitation suit."

"Pardon?"

He rubs his chin. "People who damage their spinal cords have to wear versions of these to control their movements. Kinesiotherapists program the suits to keep the muscles active while the nervous system heals. Someone likely perverted it to make the wearer attack their family."

I slump back in my seat. We continue in silence toward an exit that leads to a tall bridge that passes over a wide river. The sun shines down from a cloudless sky, illuminating the water's surface like droplets of gold. I still don't have a plan for what we'll do when we reach Rugosa or how we'll get there, but at least

I know the secret entrance to the Red Runner headquarters.

“Forelle postponed our engagement,” Garrett says.

“Why?”

“She believes that the Nobles will attack her and her family next.”

“Will they?” I ask.

“My father is the next in line to the throne, and then it’s me.” He clenches his jaw. “There’s Briar, but the Chamber of Ministers would never let her take the throne because that would create an Amstraadi king.”

Garrett tells me that Forelle has gone into hiding and that her parents are making their way out of Rugosa with the help of his friends. From the tone of his voice, it sounds as though he and his allies are preparing to strike out against Queen Damascena.

I don’t know enough about Garrett’s father to determine if he has a chance against the queen and her supporters, but there’s little point when she holds the most devastating leverage.

“Queen Damascena’s new lady-at-arms has a remote control that affects Kevon’s heart.”

Garrett turns to me and gapes. “She told you this?”

I shake my head. “Dr. Ridgeback had the remote in her hand back when we were trying to escape the Chamber of Ministers. Each time she pressed it, Kevon clutched his heart.” My voice becomes hoarse, and I can barely say the next words. “If he doesn’t find someone to remove that synthetic tissue, he’ll never be free.”

“Leave it with me,” he replies.

At the end of the bridge, the road splits into three lanes. Two overground and another that leads into a tunnel illuminated with amber lights. He taps a command on the dashboard, and the tunnel turns dark. I swallow hard, not knowing what’s happening.

A moment later, he stops the car and presses a button that opens the door.

Warm air from the tunnel’s dark exterior fans against my skin. I turn to Garrett and ask, “Where are we going?”

“This is as far as I can take you.” He taps the cuff on his ear. “Someone else is arriving in a minute. Good luck, Zea.”

His words sound more like a farewell. If it wasn’t for the drug suppressing my emotions, my eyes would probably fill with tears.

“Who’s coming?” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “It’s best that I don’t say.”

I nod. Because Queen Damascena also controls Leonidas Pixel, the man who can access any Amstraad device.

“Thank you.” I step out of the car, and the door pulls itself shut.

Without another word, Garrett continues down the tunnel. I step back, rest a shoulder against its wall, and rub my wrist. The skin there feels strange and tender since the ambassador removed the cuff. I inhale even breaths and stare into the dark for signs of this approaching ally.

Less than half an hour has passed since I last saw Prince Kevon, and I don’t know if the ringing of the alarm meant he tried to break free of the needles keeping him in place or something terrible happened to his heart. If Queen Damascena wasn’t such a psychopath, I might have guessed from her happiness that he was fine.

A sigh slips from my lips. Sometimes, a person acts a certain way during a stressful event and later, the impact sinks into their consciousness. What will Prince Kevon decide to become when he finally recovers? And what does Queen Damascena’s rule mean for the people of Phangloria?

As the hum of an electric vehicle approaches, I swallow around my parched throat and position myself to run. Garrett is one of the few people in the Oasis I can trust, but he still believes I betrayed Prince Kevon and broke his heart.

Dim headlights illuminate a vehicle the size and shape of Queen Damascena’s dressing van. I turn around and sprint.

“Zea,” shouts a female voice.

I glance over my shoulder to find two identical white-haired young women standing in the headlights. They both wear black-and-white-striped jumpsuits. They’re the sisters of Master Thymel, the man who designed the blue ballgown and my palace wardrobe.

A breath catches in the back of my throat. They’re also the cousins of Georgette.

“We’re friends,” says the twin on the left.

The twin on the right beckons. “Hurry.”

My heart soars, and I break into a run.



The back of Master Thymel’s van contains the trunk of vacuum-packed dresses he brought into Garrett’s guesthouse, along with a sewing table with inset cupboards containing an array of threads, shears, and electrical equipment.

We sit together on a folded-out seat, and the girls give me a thick drink consisting of yogurt and pulped fruit, which settles my stomach.

The twin with platinum hair rises. “We live in Claypan, which means the guards check our van each time we enter and leave the Oasis.”

“I need to hide, then?” I ask.



Her sister takes my empty carton and places it under the seat. “We’re going to disguise you as a mannequin.”

They make me remove my Harvester uniform and encase me in a latex bodysuit that covers me from toe to hair. After rubbing a cool putty on my face, they coat my body in a white paste that hardens like stone.

I can’t see a thing, but I feel them attach a garment around my form. Weeks ago, I would say it was the strangest experience of my life. Now, I could collapse with gratitude for the Thymel family.

One of the twins pats me on the shoulder. “The search doesn’t take long, but we can’t afford to let them know we have you.”

Right now, I would endure any amount of discomfort for the chance to escape General Ridgeback. When the girls finish, they draw back, and I hear them settling into their seats and turning on their tablets.

“Those revelations had me reeling with shock.” Mouse’s voice fills my ears. “How are you feeling, Your Highness?”

“It’s disappointing, of course,” says Prince Kevon’s voice. “I was fond of Miss Calico, but that’s the nature of the Princess Trials. Now that she has revealed her true intentions, I can move on and find true love.”

Each word feels like a needle to the heart, but relief washes through my veins. If he’s speaking to Mouse about me, then it means he survived.

“Sorry,” says one of the twins. “We didn’t think His Highness would return to the royal court so soon.”

I make a sound in the back of my throat that I hope they’ll interpret as understanding. The only thing wrong with Prince Kevon’s physical state is his interfering, power-hungry mother.

Moments later, the vehicle stops, and the girls turn on music that consists of a woman yelling over a drum beat. The doors creak open, and heavy footsteps approach. I hold my breath and stay as still as I can within the mold.

“You two usually ride in front,” says a male voice. “Why are you back here?”

“We altered this gown for a customer, and now she’s pretending it doesn’t fit.” A twin places a hand on my covered shoulder.

“We told her teal would clash with her hair,” adds the other. “Would you believe she wants us to return her deposit?”

“Nobles,” he mutters to himself. I imagine him shaking his head. “See you tomorrow, girls.”

As the twins chorus their goodbyes, the guard jumps down from the van and slams the door.

I exhale my relief in a long breath.



Over the next hour, the twins free me from my disguise and update me on everything that has happened since the funeral of King Arias. Queen Damascena told everyone that Prince Kevon suffered complications due to being stabbed, and would spend time in the hospital with heart specialists.

“We saw the leaked footage of you in the stadium,” says Charmeuse, the platinum-blonde twin. “Most Artisans are disgusted at how they tricked you into murdering your own father.”

My throat thickens. “Do you know what they did with his body?”

Charmeuse glances at Chiffon, the silver-haired twin. They share identical, stricken expressions that remind me of how people look when they’ve accidentally shared bad news.

“They might return his ashes to Rugosa,” Chiffon says in halting words.

My heart sinks, and grief seeps through the wall of emotion-suppressant drugs that’s holding me together.

We fall silent for the rest of the journey. The twins sit close together and share Charmeuse’s computer tablet, while Chiffon lets me use hers. I stare at the black screen, not bothering to ask for help. I won’t be able to focus on anything until I know the fate of Mom and the twins.

The van pauses, and a breath catches in the back of my throat. Chiffon tells me we’re entering the gates of Master Thymel’s estate. King Arias gifted the land to the designer after elevating him to the Noble Echelon. It’s close to the Smoky Mountains, which means tall, electric fences surround their home to keep out predators.

When the van eventually stops, the back door opens, and Master Thymel stands inside a white room with his arms outstretched for a hug. He’s still the most peculiar person I’ve seen, with his young features, white hair, and buffalo-horn mustache.

I step out of the van into his embrace. Master Thymel wraps his arms around my shoulders and murmurs into my ear, “Everyone knows the truth about you, Zea. Prince Kevon wouldn’t have given up his throne for you if he wasn’t deeply in love.”

My face tightens, and I try to smile. They probably don’t know that Prince Kevon also forgave Vitelotte. Even without Queen Damascena and her threats, he knows the truth, and it has cut Prince Kevon deeper than any knife.

Master Thymel draws back from the embrace and gazes down at me with sparkling, brown eyes. “I received a message thirty minutes ago. Your mother and brothers are safe in the home of an associate who lives close to the Botanical

Gardens. We need to work out a way to transport them without alarming the children.”

“Thank you.” I wrap my arms around his middle.

As Master Thymel leads us out of his storage room I blurt, “Is there anything you can do to protect Prince Kevon? Queen Damascena is using a remote control to affect the synthetic muscle fibers in his heart.”

He glances over his shoulder at the twins. “Do we have any of that faraday silk?”

They disappear around the back of the vehicle, and Master Thymel explains that it’s a fabric designed to block electromagnetic signals but won’t affect anything internal to the body like pacemakers. If Prince Kevon wore a faraday silk vest underneath his clothes, the remote control’s infrared and radio signals wouldn’t reach his heart.

We step through an electronically protected doorway that leads to a wide hall with a glass ceiling that drenches the space with orange light from the setting sun. With each step, the emotional impact of past events weighs heavier in my chest until I can barely breathe.

The suppressant’s effects ebb into the background, and cold reality cuts like a blade.

I’ve lost everything, including Prince Kevon and Dad.

“Can you sew?” Master Thymel’s voice cuts through my despair.

He steers me to the left, into a huge workshop that would take up the entire floor space of our house and backyard. The walls are white and all but one are covered in garment rails and in the spaces between them are colored sketches of men and women’s clothing. Above them are high shelves that hold dozens of differently-sized tailor’s dummies.

My mouth drops open as I take in the sight of eight people dressed in white coats, pinning fabric to dummies. In the far corner, three women sit at sewing machines, and a man with long, white hair stands at a cutting table slicing around a sewing pattern with a blade. A black-haired woman stands next to him with her gaze fixed on a wall screen where the Noble girls from earlier speak with an unseen interviewer.

I turn away from the Lifestyle Channel. “Are we making the vest right away?”

“Yes, and I want them ready before he goes to bed,” he replies. “If we create a batch in the next few hours, I can deliver them to the palace and pick up the rest of your family on the journey back.”

The weight in my chest lightens. I inhale a calming breath and give him my first genuine smile. “May I help?”

A few of the people around the room turn to look at us, and most offer sympathetic smiles. They don't seem to be surprised at the sight of me in my Harvester uniform, and I guess Master Thymel told them I was coming. Chiffon and Charmeuse appear behind us, holding a bolt of white fabric. They lay it on an unoccupied cutting table.

While I follow the girls to cut the fabric, Master Thymel walks to the other end of the room and pushes the back of a muscular tailor's dummy about the size of Prince Kevon.

Charmeuse huffs an annoyed breath. "Not him again."

I glance up to find her looking at the wall screen. Before I can see who she's talking about, the camera cuts to a view of the palace servants standing in a line at the grand entrance's double doors. Then it cuts back to Mouse.

Chiffon snorts. "Someone has to take over from Byron, after..."

An awkward silence spreads across the room at what Chiffon leaves unsaid. I stare down at the floor, aware of the staring faces looking at me. If the Thymels saw me stab Dad with the Scorpio tail, they also saw how I abducted Byron Blake, forced him to take me to Mom, and then discarded him as soon as he was no longer useful.

"After I killed him." The words taste like ashes on my tongue. "After I shoved him into Scorpio's path and let him get beaten to death."

"Zea?" says a new voice.

Georgette stands at the door, wearing a white jumpsuit and her black hair held in a high ponytail. The last of my tension melts away from my muscles at the familiar face, and we rush toward each other. We hug nearly as tight as Forelle and hold it for several moments.

"You're all over the gossip rags," she murmurs. "Even if it doesn't seem like it, people care what happens to you."

I nod and think about Garrett, the Thymels, Forelle, their friends, and all the others who have helped me throughout the Princess Trials. Even Lady Circi, who in her own strange way, did what she could to help. She's probably dead now that King Arias isn't around to offer her protection.

"It's Prince Kevon," someone says with a gasp.

All the activity in the room ceases, and I turn to the screen. Someone increases the volume, and Mouse's voice fills the room.

"Your Highness," he says. "How does it feel to be back home?"

Prince Kevon's smile is tight. "I'm thankful to the team of medical professionals responsible for my fast recovery."

"Twenty-four stunning beauties are eager to meet you."

"Let's not keep them waiting, then."

Nothing in Prince Kevon's voice suggests he's in the mood for socializing, and it's not just my wishful thinking. The camera cuts to a narrow chamber that looks about fifty feet long. Up on a high dais, Queen Damascena sits alone on a golden throne, holding a scepter. She wears a one-shouldered, ivory dress that reminds me of something worn by the Statue of Liberty before it was destroyed by an atomic bomb.

Standing at her left are Garrett and his father, whose stiff postures and blank expressions display their discomfort. Dr. Ridgeback stands on the right of the throne in a green, floor-length gown with the general at her side wearing a tuxedo.

I gulp. If he's not wearing a dress uniform, it means that his sabbatical has started early.

A red carpet stretches down from the throne and toward the door, and the twenty-four girls stand on both sides, each clad in long evening dresses and sparkling jewelry. While most of them have the blue-black hair of Nobles, some are blonde, and there's also Tizona, whose skin is darker than Lady Circi's.

"They're all Nobles," mutters Charmeuse.

I point out the trio who came with me to escort the Foundlings through the gates. They stand closest to the dias. "Those three are Amstraadi."

Chiffon waves a hand. "They're only there to keep their ambassador happy."

"And they probably made another deal to get that sadistic clown to present the show."

Before I can ask how they know Mouse, he appears back onscreen. "What a wonderful selection and each personally vetted by Queen Damascena."

A wide shot of the throne room appears onscreen, and Prince Kevon steps through the double doors. All but the Amstraadi girls burst into excited applause. Dread rolls around my belly, and I try not to grimace. If only they knew he doesn't appreciate sycophants. He'll probably end up choosing Tizona, the sanest of the three Amstraadi.

He takes two steps into the throne room before crumpling onto the red carpet.

A tight fist of grief clutches at my heart. I rush forward to the screen. "What are they doing to him?"

The girls break formation and gather around the prince. Garrett sprints down the steps with his father. Queen Damascena rises from her throne and turns to Dr. Ridgeback, who shakes her head. If they're not hurting him, then who's responsible?

Georgette appears at my side. "I'm sure the palace physician—"

One of the girls falls on top of Prince Kevon, followed by another, and

another, and another. Garrett's father falls. Then Garrett. Then General Ridgeback. Then the doctor.

Master Thymel stands on Georgette's other side with his hand on his chest. "Poisoned gas?"

"I..." My voice cracks. What's happening to them? "I don't know."

Guards in black rush forward, some stepping over the girls to reach Queen Damascena. She clutches a handkerchief to her nose and rushes down the steps but tumbles into the arms of a guard. I shake my head from side to side as even the guards fall.

Then the screen goes black.

"What. Was. That?" Chiffon turns to Georgette and me.

My mouth opens and closes, but I make no sound.

"Welcome to the New Phangloria," says a female voice I've heard a hundred times. Carolina's face appears on the wall screen. "If you are still watching this, it means we have not yet judged you as a person of oppression."

Master Thymel drops to the floor.

All the air leaves my lungs in a shocked breath. Georgette and the twins kneel at his side, and sounds of anguish fill the workshop. I glance from Master Thymel to the screen, where Carolina warns the other Echelons to fall in line or face the wilderness.

Behind her stand Ryce, Vitelotte, her brother, and a few Harvesters I recognize from Rugosa.

Shards of information that didn't make sense come together like pieces of a broken plate. The Red Runner's cache of advanced weapons. The underground control room in Rugosa. The communication and surveillance devices.

I wondered how Harvesters would get such items when we didn't have enough water, but when I asked, Carolina brushed aside my question.

"Is he alright?" I kneel beside Georgette.

Chiffon raises her head and stares at me through tear-stained eyes. "He's breathing, but for how long?"

Back on the wall screen, people wearing Harvester uniforms march into the throne room and drag the girls through a back door. They move with the precision and efficiency I've never seen on anybody from my Echelon, not even from Carolina or Vitelotte.

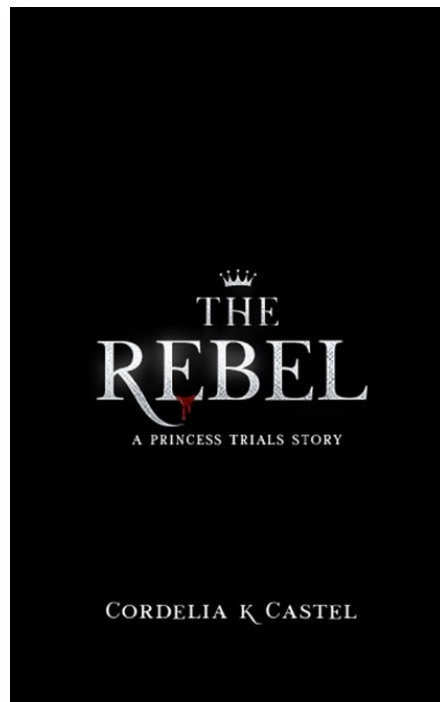
Now I know why Ambassador Pascale selected me to join the Princess Trials. It wasn't because I made him laugh. He knew I was a Red Runner and wanted to help me complete my mission. Then when Prince Kevon and I fell in love, he wanted me to be the queen.

The Amstraad Republic has been backing the Red Runners.

Determination thrums through my veins, and I tighten my hands into fists. With the Red Runners in charge, I might just be able to infiltrate the palace and rescue Prince Kevon.

END OF BOOK TWO  
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