

OLIVIA HELLING

*Snowmancer*

A movie poster for the film 'Snowmancer' featuring Olivia Helling. The central focus is a close-up portrait of a young woman with long, straight blonde hair and striking blue eyes. She is wearing a white, hooded garment that frames her face. The background is a fantastical winter landscape. In the upper left, a large, ornate castle or manor is perched on a snow-covered hillside, surrounded by dense evergreen trees. The sky is a deep, ethereal blue, filled with soft, glowing snowflakes. At the bottom of the poster, a wide, snowy mountain range is visible under a sunset or sunrise sky, with a lone figure standing on a ridge in the distance. The overall mood is magical and serene.

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## SNOWMANCER

**By Olivia Helling**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# SNOWMANCER

By Olivia Helling

## Photo Description

Photo 1: An ornate gold sarcophagus glints in the firelight.

Photo 2: In the midst of an eternal ice-land and at the edge of an ocean; two travellers hike towards a city made of ice.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*It's been seasons since I last saw this place. It feels good to be home, the crisp smell of frost and the vast expanse of ice still lonely, but familiar companions. I've been away for far too long, seeking a way to heal my people, a way to prove myself. When I was ready to give up, I finally found it, in that place where the earth scorches and the sun never sets. He rides beside me now, my kingdom's last hope, a prince from that land of fire. His posture is regal, proud, oblivious to the fact that he is a captive and his days are numbered. Something in me twists painfully at the thought, but I ignore it, stare determinedly ahead. My people's fate hangs in the balance and I must not falter. I cannot afford any weakness.*

Please no BDSM, D/s, menage, cheating or mpreg. And I'd love it if you could make it non-explicit.

Sincerely,

Filipa

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** mage/sorcerer, royalty, sweet/no sex, dark, enemies to lovers, homophobia, magic users, soulmates/bonded, tattoo, slave, captivity, tearjerker

**Content Warnings:** violence

**Word Count:** 43,049

# **SNOWMANCER**

**By Olivia Helling**

## Chapter One

*Jem*

Cresting the hill, under an empty, dead sky, the city exploded into view in a profusion of ice, the city hidden safely within. The ocean surf crashed violently against the ice walls, only to drip down the unbeaten surface like widow's tears.

I stopped, drinking the sight in like a man lost in the desert sighting water. My breath fogged in front of me, blowing into my eyes and turning my woollen scarf into a sodden, heavy, and frosting mess. I tugged it down, the frigid air caressing my cheeks, welcoming me back.

This would be the last time I would ever look upon my silent city like this.

*But the game...* Even so many miles back, the unfinished game of Go tugged at my mind. I'd been forced to abandon it when we'd arrived at port. I'd had the next move, and the countermove, and I had known before I started I may not have the time. I never should have started it—

The leash jerked in my hand. I tightened my grip, holding the impatient prince back. The prince stopped, hands bound behind his back by my leash and kept there by so much more, shoulders pulled back. As if he were walking into court, and not bound and captured.

I expected nothing less from the Prince Heir Ilyas of the formerly mythical Land of Fire, Nuriya.

But underneath the calm defiance, his shoulders shook. Back at the Sentei port, I'd bought him cloaks and scarves to wrap around his fragile body more used to languid heat than the dry cold. Enough so only his violet eyes showed with a glimpse of his dark skin, so very different from my own whiteness from hair to toes.

It had been the first time since his capture that Ilyas had spoken, a quick thank you suited more for one's slave than captor. Perhaps I should have felt honoured, but Ilyas had only said as much as he needed to remind me of my supposed station.

Weeks on my leash, and it was like he still didn't understand I had only played the part of a slave. I wasn't actually one.

But Ilyas didn't need to know that, and his silence made it easy. I didn't need to lie to him about his fate. If he knew what was really in store for him, he wouldn't be standing still on my leash.



Ilyas would suffer to save my kingdom, Lumi.

Suffer, because I knew no word strong enough, in either the trading language or Lumian. A proud shadow against the silent city, Ilyas lost his battle against his own shivers. No one deserved such a fate, but I had no choice.

Snow crunching loudly beneath my feet, I walked past him and descended the hill. Ilyas hurried behind me, making his strides longer and longer to hide his eagerness.

Ilyas slipped around on the ice-slicked path leading through the gate. I turned my eyes away, giving him the privacy of his gangly legs, as I glided along. It took time and skill to adjust to the paths in Lumi, and a foreigner who'd failed to hide his horror upon first seeing white snowflakes falling from the air couldn't be expected to know.

Unlike Lumi, where the snow remained year long, it never snowed in Nuriya. It never grew cold in Nuriya. It was absolutely disgusting.

We passed through the gates, two mountains of ice guarding the city. It was such a magnificent sight I even gawked after so many years, but Ilyas refused, keeping his face straight forwards, as if nothing Lumi could offer was enough to so much as turn his head.

He flicked his violet eyes around, though, marking the path for his escape. Some fight left in him, then. I'd chosen well.

The gates fell away to the city proper, and Ilyas stumbled, caught by surprise. The white ice gave way to a catacomb of iron buildings stacked upon each other, reaching for the sky but not quite rising over the ice walls. Black, snow-covered bridges connected the upper floors.

But the gaunt-faced people wandered on the ground like lost souls. They turned, whispering to each other, as they spotted the strangers. My fingers grasping my hood, I hesitated to remove the item, but it didn't matter. They'd know who I was anyway, when the guards came to question us. I lowered my hood, and the eyes turned away at once.

Ilyas seemed to take no notice, but paraded down the street. So proud, he never saw the truth around him, but stubbornly marched on.

He never noticed the choked whispers of the villagers, the heavy mixture of hope and despair. They knew exactly why Ilyas was here. Only Ilyas didn't care to know.

Up a steep slope, we reached the square. Cloaked villagers lined up for their daily rations at the storehouse, but all backed away as they caught sight of me.

The obsidian obelisk towered over the square, the only object in all of Lumi more frightening than I. Even the snow stayed away, leaving the point bare and a rut around its base.

Ilyas stopped in his tracks, scoffing and muttering in the trading language. Few of the villagers would understand, but I did. “Would it kill them to splash a little colour around?”

The tattoo on the back of my neck flared, and I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. I yanked on the leash, and Ilyas stumbled, dropping to his knees. Ilyas bit back his yelp, but it must have hurt. It might even have bruised him. I pressed my lips together, regret pooling like a black stone in my stomach. “Don’t stare. It’s not meant for staring.”

Ilyas snorted. “You built a statue to not stare at it?”

I knew what he really meant: the stupid slave can’t even get art right. “It’s meant for you to avert your eyes. It’s a reminder of the Dark God.”

I used the words in the trading language for Dark God. Unlike the soft gods of Nuriya, the Dark God wasn’t easily encapsulated in a single word, a single name. No one had that much power over him.

“Dark God?” Ilyas made a sound, like he couldn’t believe we were so bereft. So stupid we couldn’t adorn our god with names and flowers and incense like the Nuriyites did theirs.

Ilyas would learn. The Dark God would teach him.

“Come along.” My voice sounded barking even to my own ears.

Ilyas raised his eyebrows, the only feature visible beneath his swathes, as if he didn’t believe I dared to order him about. As if I hadn’t been for the past weeks.

I tugged on the leash, gently enough not to send him to the ground, but he refused to rise. The snow called to me, tugged at my boots, but I pushed it down with a thought. I glanced down at the shivering mass, my eyes softening. I was truly—

It wasn’t my home. I was just a visitor, like Ilyas. Necessary, but not...

The villagers watched without watching, voices silent, not even to castigate the foreigner for daring to disobey me. They knew. Only Ilyas didn’t.

The tattoo throbbed as cold as ice. It liked Ilyas' defiance. *He* liked it. I knew I'd chosen well. "Rise."

Ilyas cocked his head, as if I were the one on the leash.

"Rise," I said again, my voice cold. If he didn't...

The snow called to me eagerly, but again I pushed its call away.

Ilyas turned to look upon the crowd's hidden faces. Did his eyes take in their rough-hewn clothing? Their gaunt faces? Their empty baskets? From the way he wrenched his violet eyes away, he didn't. He only saw a pathetic people.

He took his time rising to his feet, tapping his heels on the ice to shake the snow from his limbs, and then knitted his brow together as it didn't bend to his will, but clung to his coat.

I didn't wait for his tantrum, but reminded him of the leash and continued through the square. Unlike the villagers, I didn't keep a careful distance from the obelisk, but kept my eyes averted. I cringed as the tattoo throbbed, cold and wet, sending tendrils down my back.

From there, it was only a short walk up the hill hauling Ilyas as his feet slipped on the ice. At the top was not only the tallest building in all of Lumi, but also the only one wrought of white stones, eerily like ice, hauled from the opposite end of the peninsula. A luxury Lumi could no longer afford, but had once been a simple demand during the Dark God's last stay. The Dark God had required a place befitting Him.

Ilyas' response was to sniff.

Ilyas stormed towards the main door with a surety his feet refused to countenance, sliding on the snow and ice, until I tugged on his leash and arm towards a small side door. Ilyas was mistaken if he thought he were a guest.

No, I had a much different place for him. He tensed when we entered, the door slamming closed and leaving us in darkness. The torches were unlit. Once upon a time, we could afford such luxuries. Now...

I didn't need the light to lead him down the stairs. I knew each dusty step down into the tomb. Ilyas followed, most likely thinking of escape, until we reached the cellar corridor. He breathed a sigh of relief. The air might have been stale, the dust a living creature, but light spilled towards us. One of the servants had left a lantern by the cellar door.

The heavy iron door creaked as I swung it open; having been so long since we had anything worth keeping in a cellar. The room beyond was dark and empty, even of mice. As if a single mouse still lived in Lumi.

With only a small prompt, Ilyas stepped inside. “So when should I expect it?”

I blinked at him. “It?”

“You know what I mean.”

But Ilyas didn't. I turned away, a smile tugging at my lips. “You're not to be castrated.”

“Oh? You're not taking me as your pleasure slave?” The words dripped from his mouth like poison.

He didn't really think that. Not him, the proud prince heir of Nuriya. How could anyone bend him so? Not like me, who he'd dismissed as a trophy slave, only speaking once to me of how he'd be the man his brother wasn't, how I'd be castrated forthwith, before he shoved me into a dark harem corner.

“Your brother would enjoy that.” I moved behind him. “Pardon me. I meant the new prince heir.”

As tense as a snow demon about to attack, Ilyas whirled to me. “I'll give him a taste when I return! I'll sell him to the highest bidder.”

I sighed for him. He was never going to return home. He would never have a chance to wreak his revenge upon his brother.

He should have tried to escape before now, even though it would have done him no good.

“I never expected he'd lower himself to plot with a slave, sure,” he said, mistaking my meaning. “But he won't fool me twice. He'll wish he'd just suffered his defeat in misery.”

“He'd always meant to lose,” I said. “He'd always meant to slip me into your harem.”

“You give my brother too much credit.”

“The prince heir,” I reminded him. And I gave him enough credit. The man had wanted his brother out of the way, no questions asked. And I'd needed Ilyas.

“A temporary situation.”

A permanent one.

“But in the meantime, if you think I’ll bend over for the likes of you—”

“I don’t think that at all.”

“Then why—”

*So he finally asked.* “Prince Regent Hemi has better uses for you.”

“Ha! A prince regent you say? Why would anyone bother to take over this pile of shit?”

My stomach clenched, and I forced myself to take a deep breath. Ilyas assumed prince regent meant usurper. It was the way of his people. Without worries of food shortages and warring neighbours, the Nuriyites had turned on themselves. But that didn’t mean anything to me. It had been to my benefit.

Still, I found myself snapping, “Prince Hemi will sell you to your *tawam rohi*.”

Ilyas bristled, his dark skin whitening, for the first time, truly angry. “You can’t sell a *tawam rohi*, you ignorant little—”

“Enough,” I snapped. “You’re nothing but a slave here.”

Lies, more lies, but Ilyas couldn’t know the truth.

“As if you could even comprehend a *tawam rohi*.” Ilyas moved as if to spit, before remembering the scarves and his bound hands, and instead made a disgusted sound. “You’re just a slave. Your little regent’s fuck toy. You would never know what it’s like to be *tawam rohi*, to be matched with the other half of your soul, bound by magic—”

“The Nuriyite have no magic,” I interrupted.

“You—”

“Enough.” I gestured at his bound hands. “Continue your rebellion after I release your ties.”

That was enough to stop him, to make him gawk at me.

“Turn.”

He glared at me suspiciously, like he thought it must be a trick.

“You will want to defend yourself when they come for your testicles,” I said.

He tensed, as if he would still disagree, but then released the tension, turning his back to me. I unlooped the ropes, and watched him warily, ready for an attack. But Ilyas simply held his wrists in front of him, rubbing the blood back into them.

I slipped out and barred the door behind me before he noticed he'd missed a chance to attempt escape. Through the gate, I told him, "But please, continue your rebellion. The Sentei monarchy will pay far more for the privilege of breaking you."

His head jerked up, then reared back as he noticed I'd locked him in. He tugged down the scarves. "Barbarian!"

"A rich barbarian, thanks to you."

He sputtered, his hands moving closer to his groin. I didn't correct him again. The lie was his one mercy.

\*\*\*\*

I left Ilyas to stew in the dungeon and climbed into the palace proper. I dropped off my overly warm coat and scarf the first chance I had, and only then did I feel the faint cold lingering in the air. Most of the fireplaces I passed were left empty, even in the throne room. Fuel was too expensive, and we couldn't pay the price.

The first fire I encountered came from the family room on the floor above, the light spilling out the open door. I stopped as I heard the royal children giggling inside.

Like the Nuriyite king, the previous Lumi king had been too fertile. Every year, new mouths to feed had sprouted up, and the villagers had watched in concern. Shouldn't the king take a male lover to prevent such a thing? But the king had always sworn he'd loved his queen, and that was the problem.

I backed away from the family room. My presence would only frighten them. I slipped down the stairs, finding an alternate route to the top corridor lined by the royal family's bedrooms. A wasted effort, as they would all sleep huddled in one bed. All except for the prince regent.

The fire was going in Prince Hemi's room, a waste, but nobody had asked me. I averted my eyes from the shrine to one side, slipping inside to stand, eyes downcast, waiting for Her Majesty to acknowledge me.

One flick of my eyes made me feel all the more the stranger. In Nuriya, I'd been slim and delicate, my white hair and skin prized as exotic by everyone but

Ilyas. But here, I appeared hale and hearty compared to Her Majesty, whose dress hung loosely over her bones.

An equally frail boy sat next to her, his sleek cheeks stealing the boyish charm from him. A boy of eight or nine, one of the royal children, but I couldn't remember the name. No one introduced me to the children, and I had to glean everything by eavesdropping.

The boy bubbled out of his seat as he retold a story about his and his friend Ari's adventures in a mine shaft, where after much blushing, he admitted this Ari had kissed him on the lips. I had to glance again, sucking in a breath. It had been so long, stuck in Nuriya and other more prosperous places. He wasn't a boy of eight or nine. That's how old he'd been when I'd last seen him. He had to be thirteen now.

Prince Hemi's younger brother who was now the prince heir, Prince Haori.

The prince heir noticed me first, his eyes screwing up in confusion as he stared at my white hair and my pale skin bleached of every bit of colour except for my eyes. I held my breath, folded my hands behind my back, and waited for him to scream.

He broke into a grin, and after I blinked, I found him suddenly in front of me. "You're back!"

I glanced at Her Majesty sitting stiffly, then nodded.

"Where did you go? What did you see? Ari said they have Oliphant in the southern continent, but I think they're just a myth, and is it true? Are they there? Did you see sand? Ooh, is it really made of glass? Is it?"

His mother shushed him. "Go back to the others."

"But Mother," he whined, his voice cracking. He jerked, as if shocked his voice had betrayed him.

She smiled at him in amusement. "Go watch your siblings."

Haori jumped up, stumbling a bit like Ilyas had on the ice. A recent growth spurt, then, although how was a mystery with the reducing rations, Haori bounced out of the room, stopping to flash me a smile, as if to prove he was an adult now, and an adult wouldn't be afraid.

A thousand villagers would beg to differ.

Her Majesty glanced at the shrine, an unknown emotion tugging at her lips. Sadness, I thought, perhaps despair. She had never been afraid of me, only...

“I’ve returned,” I said.

“It’s been five *years*.”

“There’s still time.” I cupped the back of my neck. “I found him. He’s absolutely perfect. None such as he has ever been offered before. He will save Lumi.”

She was silent, eyes trained on the shrine. Unafraid or not, she never looked at me, just like everyone else in Lumi. Everyone but Ilyas and Haori.

“How is Prince Haori?” I asked.

Her eyes flicked, but came nowhere near me.

“He’s grown so much. He’ll be taller than Prince Hemi soon.”

She choked, as if the prince’s name from my lips was too repugnant.

“My apologies.” I bowed low. I had no right to speak of the royal family.

She flicked her hand.

“I travelled all the way to the mythical Land of Fire,” I said. “Nuriya, they call it there. Nuriya is always hot, and there are fields upon fields of fertile grounds, and the harvest goes all year round.”

She pursed her lips, as if unable to imagine it. I hadn’t been able to, not until I’d seen for myself the fields stretching from horizon to horizon, and yet I’d barely believed even then. Sentei too had such large fields, but they only thawed for a few months in the summer.

“Prince Ilyas will satisfy Him,” I assured her.

Her attention flicked to me, even if her eyes didn’t, like a heavy force. “Prince?”

“Yes, the prince heir, to be exact.” Which was part of what made him so perfect.

“We can’t fight a war,” she said. “We haven’t the strength. And if this kingdom is as rich as you say it is...”

“They won’t,” I said. “You haven’t seen Nuriya—”

“Of course I haven’t,” she snapped. “I’ve been here, the only thing standing between our people and starvation.”

I bowed my head to prevent my confusion from showing. “My apologies. I only meant that in Nuriya, the princes are expendable. They have so many that they constantly fight amongst each other to become king.”



She made a disgusted sound.

“It’s true. Prince Ilyas is a gift, you could say, from his younger brother to keep him from reclaiming his position. They’re not like us. They’re barbarians.”

I almost smiled at the last word, the very word Ilyas used to describe Lumi. Lumi might lack in extensive and pointless rituals, it might lack the silks and spices and sweetmeats, but where civility was most important...

Ilyas would never know, though. He would never get to see it. I tilted my head away, as if that act of contrition would ease my heart. It was only the tattoo stretching coldly.

“Regardless, they’re too far away,” I said. “It will take them months to find Lumi. And by then...”

Her Majesty pressed her lips together, half in a frown, half in a smile. The queen was complicated that way. But then she undid it all with her next words, “The queen of Sentei has sent an ambassador.”

My eyes fixed on her even as I stiffened.

“Her younger sister, Dajana. A pretty thing.”

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for her pronouncement. Had she successfully seduced the girl? As much as Her Majesty had loved her husband in turn, it had been years since he’d died.

“She’s more clever than she looks, and she arrived shortly before you did.”

The Sentei knew what we were about to do, then. If only I really could trade Ilyas to the Sentei for their crops.

“Dajana argued it was because of our latest bid,” Her Majesty said. “A thousand tons of ore and another thousand of coal.”

It would bankrupt us.

“They had to refuse, she said. Spring is coming, and the temperatures will rise. They don’t even have the snow tubers to feed their own citizens after the long winter. As if the Sentei know anything about hunger. Did you know they had a bad harvest last year?”

“I didn’t know that.” But I’d guessed, from the villagers’ meagre baskets.

“Yes, and the year before that,” she said. “Or so they say, but I know for a fact they’re trading with Pyria.”

Pyria lay on the other side of the peninsula, on the other side of Sentei. They had been the first to secede themselves from the great empire the Dark God had built. Lumi had been one of the last, feeling only a little secure in our mining resources to trade for our lack, and needing to keep the other countries from pillaging our only resource without food in return.

“They simply have nothing to trade us.” She pursed her lips, looking pained. “They have nothing to trade us, and they’ve sent an ambassador.”

I rose, standing straight. “I’ll keep an eye on Ilyas.”

She nodded. She needn’t command me. I would make everything happen, so she wouldn’t have to give such an order.

I started to excuse myself when Her Majesty did the most inexplicable thing. She turned her eyes, meeting mine. I froze beneath her gaze, waiting for... something. Or nothing. Her features had construed into an emotion—which emotion, I couldn’t tell.

Her lips parted, as if she were to say something more. Something... while looking at me. Something while her eyes beheld me, and she wasn’t captivated by the shrine.

Then the moment passed. She rose and stalked out of the room without another word.

I turned away from the shrine, exhaling.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

*Ilyas*

This was intolerable treatment, whether for prince or slave. Hunched against the back wall of the cell, I glared at the plain brown clothes I'd been forced to wear, strewn over the floor. The lantern on the other side of the door sent fitful light skittering across the cloth and the stone floor, always stopping before it touched my toes.

Just who did Mehdi think he was? Having a pleasure slave abduct me, of all things. I'd beaten him fair and square when I'd humiliated him in court. His only duty then had been to bow down to me and take his licks. Not... not... Not collude behind my back! And certainly not successfully.

I'd brayed in front of the court how Mehdi lacked the ability to think past the next ten minutes, and then... He couldn't have planned this himself. Father had ordered him to pay reparations to me. Father had suggested that Mehdi hand his new pleasure slave, along with chests full of gold, over to me.

Had Father... I jerked my head, my ebony locks swishing around me. Father never involved himself in our squabbling. Never. He wouldn't possibly... Yet Mehdi couldn't have come up with this himself. Nor this slave. I snapped my fingers, trying to remember his name. Something silly, like most slave names were. Jen, Jan... Jem.

Jem.

One more reason to loathe Mehdi. Jem was, I admitted, a beautiful man, well deserving of pride of place in my harem. And yet, unlike the rest of the pleasure slaves, fawning and jostling for position, he'd stayed back, head bowed, awaiting his orders. He was there to serve, not gain favours and prestige. He wouldn't whisper secrets to a half dozen of my enemies...

No, apparently he would do worse. All because Mehdi had to have him first.

Even once he was mine, I had to shun Jem to the corner of my harem without so much as bothering with the castration ritual as one further humiliation for Mehdi. Even his most beautiful, most servile slave was not good enough for me. And Mehdi would have to suffer in knowing he'd never get to taste such fine flesh. Suffer knowing that the slave, with his pure white skin, hair untouched by the sun, and his intense blue eyes, was wasted in my harem. Just like Mehdi was a waste of a human being.

I gripped my bicep, digging my fingers in, giving myself a sharp pain to focus. I would escape—for whomever had orchestrated this surely couldn't have planned so far ahead—and then make my way back to Nuriya, leaving behind this godforsaken land. For gods' sake, it was miles and miles of snow and ice.

My stomach whined loudly. I hugged my knees to my chest. They hadn't even fed me yet. Completely intolerable treatment.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway along with the jingling of keys. I gathered the strewn clothes together, plumping them into a seat from which I could hold my head high. This slave would never see my head bowed.

The lock turned and the door opened inward revealing... Nothing. Just empty space. I sniffed, raising my chin.

The slave stepped into the space. He'd taken the opportunity to change into a robe which attempted half-heartedly to be blue, and his snow-white hair was neatly brushed. The robe suited him, but it made him blend into the whole damn tundra.

He carried a metal plate, and after stopping a few feet from me, he offered it to me. I deigned to lower my eyes, examining the contents before my upper lip twisted. He hadn't fed me all day, and this was what he brought me? A piece of hard bread, half the size of my fist, and a smaller rounder piece beside it. I fed better to my dogs. Even Jem, ignored and disdained, would have eaten far better in my harem.

I reached up as if to take it. Jem started to push it into my hands. I slapped the tray away, and it skittered across the stone, the bread smashing on the ground. Oh, so it was softer than it appeared.

Jem's expression didn't change, but his nostrils flared. He was angry, for once. Good.

I waited for him to strike me. To drag me out of the cell and whip me for my disobedience. As master, I wouldn't have waited so long. Discipline must be quick and fierce when dealing with slaves.

But this was a slave I dealt with, not a master. He turned and knelt beside the wall, picking up the rotten bread crumbs. Bits of dust stuck to them.

"Leave it," I ordered.

"Someone else might want to eat it."

Sass? From the slave? “I very much doubt it.”

Jem flicked his gaze back at me, his eyes as emotionless as ever. Perhaps there was another reason he was destined to be ignored. How was someone supposed to get off while looking at that perennial expression? I might as well jump into a snow bank.

“You know, just because you plan to sell me doesn’t mean you should treat me as a slave.”

That invoked an expression. His eyes widened, as if I’d surprised him, followed by a bark of laughter.

“I am Prince Heir Ilyas of Nuriya,” I said, “and I am due your respect and dignity. I will take a bath and a silk tick for the night. I’m sure somewhere in this hick town there must be something approaching appropriate. I will ‘slum’ if I must, but these are my minimum requirements.”

I readied myself for his inevitable comeback with my own, that this was only a temporary setback. For as long as I could remember, my brothers had been attempting to murder me and each other. They were a precocious lot, and I’d not only survived every attempt, but had thwarted them at every turn. This would prove no different.

“It’s too cold,” Jem said instead.

“Wh—” I sputtered before I caught myself. “Explain yourself.”

“It’s too cold for a bath. You would catch your death.”

“Don’t you dare lie to me. I can plainly see you’ve bathed.”

“You’re too delicate.” He glanced down at the ruined bread. “You shivered all the way from the Sentei port in this fine spring weather.”

“Spring?!” I blurted the word before I could stop myself. I straightened. “You may fall for something so cockamamie, but I—”

He tilted his head. “Cocka—cocka...”

“Cockamamie,” I repeated. Couldn’t he even properly speak the trade language? “It means utterly ridiculous, and you’re making my point. You might believe it, but I—”

“Weather is different in different parts of the world,” he said. “It’s ‘cockamamie’ to believe there’d be monsoons this far north.”

I glared at him, then turned away, fully intending to pretend he wasn’t here.

He set the metal plate next to me, and when I started to fling it away again, he said, “You will have nothing else to eat.”

My hand froze, my upper lip turning up to sneer at him. As if I would touch dirt-streaked bread...

He stood. “I will see about a bowl of hot water and a tick. It won’t be silk-covered, however. It’s too light for the cold.”

“Fine. Then your finest materials.” I waved him to leave with an imperious hand.

“Yes, Your Highness.” He gave me a bow, short and mocking. In the palace, I would have beaten his back bloody for such a mockery. But here, I let him remind himself of my far grander position than he.

He left, hopefully to find me a new, more sumptuous room, and something to eat that a gull wouldn’t turn its nose up at. The cell door closed heavily behind him, the lock sliding into place.

After his footsteps had left, I slumped against the wall again. If Mehdi knew how I was being treated... But I would get the last laugh in the end. And he would beg me to forgive him, tears streaking down his cheeks. Begging and begging and begging... And then finally, my brothers and cousins might leave me alone and just let me get on with the business of ruling.

It wasn’t very long before I heard more footsteps, and not footsteps carrying the weight of a mattress. Good, then he’d found me a room, a proper room, and I...

A flicker of light entered the cell, buzzing around the ceiling. No, not a flicker, some sort of flame. A tiny flame, barely the size of a star in the sky, but it bobbed and then flew down towards me, stopping to hover in front of my eyes.

The footsteps ended at the door, and with my eyes still pinned to the little light, I started to say, “Finally. It had better be a good room, with a view.”

“I doubt Prince Hemi will have you moved,” a new voice said. A female voice.

The little light dashed towards the grate in the door, where an incredibly beautiful woman stared down at me with doe-like brown eyes. Her skin was as fair as Jem’s, but dark-brown curls framed her gaunt face. She couldn’t have been much more than eighteen.

“And you are?” I demanded.

“The Sentei Ambassador Dajana.” She didn’t ask who I was.

Sentei... That seemed familiar. Jem had just mentioned the port we’d arrived in was Sentei, but also... I narrowed my eyes at her. “Come to check the goods?”

She fell out of view, as if she was so surprised. I rolled my eyes. After a moment, she reappeared, hovering as if she had to stand on her tiptoes to see through. A small, petite woman, exactly my type. Perhaps when I retook my title, I would declare war on this area. At the very least, they seemed to produce very good slave material.

“You can go now.” I waved my dismissal.

“You don’t even want to hear what I have to say?”

“What could my future purchasers possibly say I would care to hear?”

“Future purchasers?” Her brow knit together.

“Jem already told me his plans to sell me to the Sentei monarchy. I promise you, you will have one hell of a time attempting to train me.”

Her lips pursed together, before mouthing out the word, ‘slave’. Didn’t anyone speak properly around here?

“Slave,” I repeated. “It means a human that you own.”

“Why would we want to own you?”

I gaped at her. “Why wouldn’t you? I’m the prince heir of Nuriya. I’m more valuable as a hostage than as a slave.”

“Nuriya...” She fell out of view again, but not before I glimpsed her look of dread. She appeared momentarily again. “The mythical Land of Fire.”

“Sure.”

“You know, it would be much easier to hold this conversation if you stood right here.”

I made no move to rise. “And again, why should I care what you have to say?”

“Because you’re in grave danger.”

I laughed at her, openly and mockingly.

“My queen has no reason to buy you, as you say,” she said. “You’ll only be another mouth to feed, and if you’re a prince, probably not even a good labourer.”

I glowered at her.

“Well, actually, I think given the circumstances, we would buy you if we could afford it,” she said. “But the prince regent would never sell you. You’re too valuable.”

I arched an eyebrow. “So you think they lied so I’d be grateful to serve them instead of you?”

“Oh, you’re not going to serve.” Then she tilted her head. “Well, not them. You will serve. The Dark God is coming, and they need you to serve Him as His sacrifice.”

I clenched my jaw to prevent it from dropping. Sacrificing me to their stupidly named god? “Ha, pull the other one.”

She cocked her head, again confused.

“The gods don’t interfere with humans.” Everyone knew that. All right, everyone in *civilised* kingdoms knew that.

“The compassionate gods do not, for their absence is a kindness. The Dark God is not kind.”

I rolled my eyes.

“You have to believe me,” she said. “Your life is in danger.”

“I’m about to be sold as a slave,” I snapped back. “Of course my life is in danger.”

“We don’t keep slaves.” Her voice grew more shrill. “No one on this peninsula keeps slaves.”

Impossible. “Then why—”

“To keep you placid, apparently. Because if you knew—”

Tired of her, I turned my head away. Superstitious nonsense. I should have known. Civilisation hadn’t crept this far north. They probably ate their young too.

“Believe me, or don’t,” she said. “It’s your life. You must escape.”

Why wouldn’t she just leave? “Thank you for this thrilling recount of what I already know.”



“You had better. And soon. The ritual is approaching.”

She dipped out of view before I could snap at her again. The little light was gone as well.

Sacrifice me to a Dark God. It was a patently ridiculous notion. Cockamamie, even. And now Jem would know exactly the word to describe it.

Besides, it could all be a ploy on the Sentei side. Make me eager to escape with them, feel indebted to them, so I'd take to my new position easier. It wasn't a popular training method back home, but it was known.

And if this wasn't true... I still didn't know anything about the Sentei, or what this Dajana's agenda was. Trusting someone else's word had made me a fool once already. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

I would escape, but only on my terms.

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## Chapter Three

*Jem*

There wasn't much of a difference between Ilyas, Prince Heir standing before his harem, and captured Ilyas, on the verge of being sold into slavery. Even locked in a cellar, he felt he could order me around.

I carried a pair of thick quilts I'd found hidden in the corner of Prince Hemi's closet, smelling faintly of mould and dust from being left unused for so long. I'd hung them from my tower window to air them out, letting the ocean spray seep into the cloth, but the smell hadn't improved much. Ilyas wouldn't like it, but he was also welcome to sleep on the cold, hard stones, so long as it didn't wreck his beautiful exterior.

He had to be healthy. He had to be perfect. Or this would all be for nothing.

As I descended into the underground corridor, my footsteps announcing me like a Nuriyite chorus, I heard the metal plate sliding against rock.

I paused at the door. Ilyas had to eat. I couldn't allow him to starve himself, not when so many Lumians would lick the crumbs from the floor. Ilyas' rations might not be Nuriyite curry, a hodgepodge waste of hundreds of spices, but they were plentiful and healthy.

He'd better not have thrown them on the floor again.

The lock came undone at my bidding. I angled my body away, should he decide to attack. But no, attacking was beneath Ilyas' dignity. The door swung open, and I glanced inside.

I dropped the blankets. He wasn't sitting in his usual spot, and a cursory glance found neither him nor the plate. Was he waiting for me to step in to take a swing at me? It wouldn't do anything but leave a bruise. My expression blanked. Inexcusable.

I kicked the pile of blankets inside, and guessing he would take the right side of the door, stepped to the left of the pile. If he tried to attack, his feet would tangle in the cloth.

But no attack came. Instead, I heard an amused chuckle behind me. I turned to find Ilyas leaning against the wall, smirking at me with his hands stuck in his waistband. His arms framed his bare chest pocked with goose pimples.

His eyes met mine.

I stumbled back, my feet tangling in my own trap. It took a few curse words, but I managed to regain myself. I kept my eyes on his midriff so he mightn't startle me like that again.

Ilyas openly laughed at me, the sound of his voice light, as if amused at the silly mistake his pleasure slave had made.

Ah, that's where I'd seen that pose before. Ilyas slinking into the harem, leaning against the wall, eyeing his slaves as they tittered and fawned over him, waiting until one pleased him enough before taking that slave into his private bedchamber.

"Blankets?" Ilyas asked. "They will be hard on your knees."

I cocked my head. Had I misheard him? 'Your' referenced me, did it not? Or was this some less common meaning of the word? "Softer than the stone."

He eyed the blankets again, and I waited for his lip to curl up in disgust. He hadn't liked his travel cloak either, a dull brown. But then everything in Nuriya had been turquoises and reds and greens. Why make something practical when it could be ostentatious? "I'm not sure how to lay them out."

I tilted my head the other way. That was not expected.

"My servants did my bedroll back home."

"You mean your slaves," I said.

"Make the bed."

One day soon, he would learn. I motioned to the floor with my hands. "You lay them on the ground, and then you lie on top of them."

His brow arched, in the way it did before he punished an errant slave. But what whip did he have now? Instead of reprimanding me, he stepped forwards, picked up the first blanket like it was drenched in poison, and flopped it on the ground. "Like this?"

"If you like." I glanced towards the open door. Ilyas could dash through it at any moment. He wouldn't make it very far, but Ilyas didn't know that. When I turned my attention back to Ilyas, though, I found his violet gaze hadn't followed mine. He stared straight at me. I shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable under the weight of his gaze.

"Teach me," he beckoned, rolling the words almost like a purr.

I exhaled through my nose. If this game would keep Ilyas occupied... "Fold the blanket in half. It will provide more cushion for you."

And less aching, strained muscles that would prove bothersome later on.

Ilyas picked up the corner of the blanket between his thumb and forefinger, and flicked it so it was somewhat double. “Like this?”

Was he trying to bait me? Whatever for? As if I cared how well he made a bedroll. “That’s fine.”

“I just want you to be comfortable.” His eyes flicked up again, meeting mine, holding my gaze.

“You?” I finally asked, turning towards the door. “I thought that meant the person you’re talking to, not reference to one’s self.”

He laughed. “It does.”

All right. If that was part of his game. “I have no need to be comfortable.”

“Oh, so you like it rough?”

It didn’t matter to me. My own room, high in the tower, only possessed a tick and blanket, set on the ground in a Nuriyite-like manner. I slept sufficiently on the packed ground or on a soft bed.

Ilyas grinned at me. “I can do rough. You know I can.”

I lifted my brow. Ilyas might not have kept up a stream of complaint since he’d come into my possession, but I’d seen the looks. He did not do—

Ilyas was before me, my having barely registered his graceful strides across the floor. He stepped forwards, into me, a mere hair’s breadth away. I stepped back, and Ilyas followed me. I couldn’t escape any further, the wall trapping me.

What was his game?

Ilyas reached up, stroking his forefinger against my bare arm. The white hairs rose beneath his touch. Then his other hand found my chin, lifting it so I looked into his violet eyes.

His irises had a ring of black, clear even in the low light. How had I never noticed before?

His lips stretched into a grin, a grin I knew only from a distance. One he’d only granted others in his harem.

“I’m still a man,” I told him. And his jailer.

Ilyas didn’t snatch his hand away, but continued to stroke along my arm, his dark skin stark against my pale. “I know.”

“What would the prince heir think?”

“I think no one is around to see.”

“I meant the new prince heir.”

“As if he wasn’t waking up in a fouled bed after dreaming about you all night. You taking him, using your little cock in him... It must have been the reason he waited so long for the castration ritual. He wanted you to unman him.”

Nuriyites. So coddled they made silly rules about everything. “Insult him all you like, he’s still the prince heir. And you’re still here.”

“Yes, I’m here, and you’re here, and no one else.”

My chest tightened, my breath coming faster. “You’d choose to be unmanned?”

His finger was slow, sending ripples up my arm. No one, not even in the harem, had ever touched me like that. “I wouldn’t mind taking you.”

He was... he was trying to seduce me. For a favour. It was the only explanation, as bizarre as this explanation was. “What do you want?”

“You.”

Yes, he was definitely trying to seduce me. Stuck in the cellar, thinking he was about to be sold into slavery, and he was throwing himself at his captor? Well, as much as Ilyas’ dignity would allow him. “No.” My voice broke, like Haori’s earlier. I cleared my throat. “What do you really want?”

Ilyas’ tongue darted from his mouth, sliding over his red lips. He slowly offered me a smile, the one he granted to his lucky slave of the evening. The one who would return satisfied from sweetmeats and other gifts.

But Ilyas wasn’t in the position to offer me anything. Well, nothing he wouldn’t refuse to have done to himself. And I was supposed to be his captor. I needed to retain my control over him.

“You have bedding now.” Why did my voice crack? “That will do you for now.”

“Until the Sentei come?”

Was that his thought? If he seduced me, if he made me keep him by my side, he’d have a better chance at escape?

His fingers moved upward, and then down over my tunic-covered chest, stroking lower and lower and lower...

My breath caught. Ilyas wouldn't do it, no matter what he thought he would gain. He'd stop before he ever touched a man that way. A eunuch was fair game, but not an uncut man.

Ilyas leaned forwards, so close that his lips were about to brush against mine. "Real food."

I startled at the words. "What?"

"Bring me real food," he said. "And I'll take care of you."

I gawked at him. That was... he would... I tried to slip past him, but he stopped me when he slammed his arm against the wall, guarding my path.

"Well, Jem?"

I felt his breath on my cheek. My body was turning warm, almost as warm as anyone else. "Your rations are your rations. There is nothing else."

And someone—probably more than one—was already starving faster because their ration had been cut in favour of Ilyas. The biscuit I'd given him came from my own selfish horde. No one else, not even Her Majesty, had biscuits anymore.

They'd be starving because of me, too. I would have cut mine, but I needed to be hale when the Dark God arrived.

"I don't believe you." Ilyas leaned closer to my ear. I'd seen him do that too, in the harem courtyard, reaching around to nibble on his chosen slave's earlobe. "I'll make you tell the truth."

I froze for a moment, waiting for the contact, but then I placed my hands on his chest and shoved him back. He stumbled, and I held my breath, but he caught himself without falling and hurting himself.

Without waiting for his bluster, I hurried out of the cell, the grate closing behind me, without a click. Ilyas let me go in silence.

That had been close, too close. I had never expected him to even try to barter himself. Not to me. No one who knew about me wanted to be close to me.

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## Chapter Four

*Ilyas*

As soon as Jem's footsteps disappeared, I grinned. Oh, too, too easy. A pretty people indeed, but dim in the head. They would make the perfect slaves.

I quickly dressed. With my skin covered in the coat and scarves, I looked like any of the ratty peasants outside.

Then I stepped up to the door, and pushed it open with my forefinger. The hinges protested, as if it knew its prisoner was escaping, but the iron door swung open.

Silly, silly Jem. He'd been so befuddled when he'd fled, he hadn't shut it tight enough for the lock to slip into place.

Oh well, I should give him kudos for even getting this far, even though he didn't know what 'kudos' meant. Still, he should have at least left a guard or two.

I sauntered down the empty corridor towards the stairs we'd arrived through. Jem had fled the other way, probably further into this tomb. But I didn't want to go further inside. I wanted to get back to the port, and hire a ship to Nuriya for my triumphant return.

There must be someone in this godforsaken place—excuse me, Dark-Godforsaken place—with horses for hire. I was *not* walking all the way back to the port; that was for sure. Jem hadn't bothered with a horse or a cart, but then knowing the extent of Jem's capabilities...

The prince regent must have a few horses—a stable full, even if his citizens were too poor to keep any themselves. I'd steal one, buy some real food, and I'd be halfway back to the port before Jem even noticed I was missing.

I shoved open the door to the outside. Arctic air rushed over me, scraping at my skin despite the scarves and coat.

Dark-Godforsaken place indeed.

I gritted my teeth to keep them from chattering. Despite its initially befuddling appearance, the town was even laid out perfectly in a straight line, from the hovel they graciously called a castle, down to the sheer ice gates. Jem hadn't even bothered to cover my eyes and take me down a few unnecessary turns to confuse me.

Oh no, he'd let me see everything. He'd let me memorise the path to my salvation.

That was the difference between the two of us.

I entered the courtyard, my feet crunching on fresh snow. Banks of the wretched stuff were piled against the walls. I sneered at it. If this were my palace, I would have had all of it hauled outside the gates.

But then, not even the prince regent, Hami or Hemi or whatever, approached Nuriyite standards. He might have had an ounce of political savvy, convincing the peasants he saved the throne for the real heir instead of biding his time before strangling the brat heir outright, but that didn't prove much.

He didn't even have guards surrounding his palace. Look, I was about to leave the palace yard, and there was no one to stop me!

Oh Mehdi, Mehdi, Mehdi. He'd made an extremely unfortunate alliance. He must have been so desperate. Desperate enough to risk what I'd do to him when I returned. I had those happy thoughts to keep me while I made the long trek back.

Now where did the prince regent keep his stables...

A snow bank rumbled. I stopped, staring at it, but it remained still. Snow didn't rumble, did it? I'd seen acres and acres of it, more than I'd ever wanted to in an entire lifetime—in fifty lifetimes—and it had never rumbled.

I started to turn away, to start the search for the stables, but out of the corner of my eye, the snow shook, sending a dusting of it into the air.

“What the...”

Then *it* burst out of the snow bank. Or rather, from the bank.

My eyes widened, my heart clenched in my chest, as it landed. Big, long, powerful legs, beady little eyes, and ears as long as its legs. I'd seen such a creature once near the Sentei port, scurrying across the snowbanks as a gaggle of children and more than one adult chased after it.

A rabbit, Jem had called it.

But this was no tiny creature. When it raised its head, it stared me in the eye. Nor was it made of flesh and blood, but... but... Infernal. Fucking. Snow.

It leered at me. It leered! What in the seven infernos—

No time to ponder! It stepped towards me, teeth snapping.



I was not waiting to see if a rabbit made of snow was carnivorous or not. I bounded through the gate, and the thing bounded after me, still snapping its buck teeth. The stables were out of the question. If I didn't escape now...

I pummelled the snow, running and sliding along the ice as quickly as possible. The dirty peasants peeked out of their homes, but none offered to help me, none tried to quell the snow rabbit. Those on the street pulled each other to the side, watching me race by with the rabbit on my heels.

So not a wild animal they'd care to quell, then.

And me, without a weapon of any kind. Not even a dagger.

In the market square, I raced straight towards the black obelisk. The one that had raised Jem's ire for once when I'd openly looked at it. Well, Jem was in for a treat then.

My feet skidded on the ice. I felt the rabbit bunch its legs, ready to leap. Ready to bring me down before I touched the divine tombstone. I felt it behind me, flying through the air, aiming directly for my back.

And then I jumped to the side, out of the way, while the snow rabbit slammed into the monument. Not a single crack appeared on the monolith, but the rabbit broke into scattered chunks.

I laughed at it. Was that it? Was that the extent of these peasants' competency?

I surveyed them, the peasants, lined up around the square. A poor excuse for a market. There weren't even vendors. None of the peasants stared at me, like they had before, because then they'd be staring at their oh so precious obelisk.

In Nuriya, we knew better.

I almost jeered at them about astronomy and natural philosophy, the true mechanics of the world. But a prince, never mind prince heir, didn't mock people when they truly weren't capable of understanding solar eclipses or why tsunamis happened or why the snowbanks trembled—

Wait, snowbanks trembled? I sucked in a deep breath, as indeed, two snowbanks lining the street I had just raced down shook and trembled, just like the bank at the palace had.

The peasants were quiet, hushed. Shouldn't they be screaming? Shouldn't they be running into their houses and blocking the doors?

But the peasants didn't think them wild animals. They were afraid, but not afraid for their lives. The rabbits were... guards?

Two more rabbits burst from the snowbanks, their eyes gleaming red. How were their eyes gleaming red when they were made of nothing but white snow? How?

I scrambled to the side of the monument, pressing my back into it so they couldn't sneak up behind me. The rabbits bounded forwards, but stopped at the hollow their fellow snow creature had jumped from. They prowled, more predators than the prey animal Jem had indicated rabbits were, but came no closer to the monument.

So even snow rabbit monsters were afraid of the obelisk. They looked at it—I was pretty sure I caught the reflection of the obelisk in their red eyes—but they refused to approach any closer.

I glanced down at the remains of their brethren, and kicked at a particularly large chunk. It crumbled easily, just like it had when thrown against the obelisk. Fearsome they might appear, but they were actually as weak as the snow they were created from.

I smirked. All I needed was a weapon—not even a weapon, but a long implement. Even if I hadn't had much time for training in the past few weeks, my hands tied behind my back, I was a strong man, more than capable of rending these creatures into pieces.

Satisfied the creatures wouldn't come any closer while I had the obelisk, I glanced around at the people. Surely someone would—

Ah, there. An elderly man, white hair wisping out from under his hood and his back stooped, leaned heavily on a wooden staff as tall as I was. Plain, of course, without so much as a single carving for ornamentation, just like everything else around here.

I judged the rabbits, judged their mental capabilities. If they were anything like the people...

I fainted to the left. Both of the snow rabbits bounded to that side, while I skidded and took off running the other way.

The people started to scatter with pained cries as I raced towards them, but the old man only shuffled. He'd barely made it three feet before I was upon him, snatching the staff out of his grasp. He struggled to hold onto it, but his grip easily broke. With my free hand, I lowered him to the ground.

Yes, that part wasn't going to be included in my hero's song, but the snow rabbits weren't trying to eat *him*. He would survive without a staff.

The rabbits had recovered from the feint, and bounded towards me, their muscles, despite being comprised entirely of snow, seeming sleek. Like real muscle.

I darted forwards, to surprise the rabbits and keep them away from the old man. The first one leapt, and I cracked it soundly on the nose with the staff. Its face buckled, then cracks formed, and the rabbit broke into pieces.

The second one dodged around to my side. I whirled like I'd been taught all my life, my feet slipping only a little, and brought the staff cracking through the side of the rabbit. It, too, tumbled to the ground in pieces.

"Ha!" I yelled to the peasants. "Ha!"

All right, that wasn't going in the song either. I'd make up something far more clever to say on the way back, or have the poets do it.

Three more snowbanks started to tremble. No time to think about hero's songs. I ran towards the gates, and had managed to make it to the street before I heard the crunch of more snow rabbits dashing after me.

The more distance I added, the closer I got to the gates... They couldn't chase me the whole way, could they? Was this a magic local to this village? Would I be free once I made it past the gates, or would I have to fend them off all the way back to the port?

They were closing the distance. My breath came hard and cold in my chest, fog steaming in front of my eyes. I dragged down the scarf. There was no point in hiding my identity any longer, and the scarf and fog hampered my sight.

I was getting better at running on the ice.

Then the houses gave way to the ice walls, more spikes erupting from the ground than any sort of man-made structure, but I'm sure it served its purpose. The gates were open and empty of all traffic. I'd have to do without the horse and the victuals, but there was an inn only six hours away. I could last until then. I had to.

The creatures snapped at my heels, but did nothing more to detain me. Were they trying to force me from the village? Were they not guards keeping me in, but some natural phenomenon protecting the village from outsiders?

I burst through the gates, sliding on the snow-covered ice. The distant sound of ocean waves lapping seemed to roar in my ears. How could it be this cold and the ocean hadn't frozen over?

Empty fields lay on either side of the road, filled with snow, but I knew my path, even if our footsteps from earlier had been wiped clean from a snowfall. I spotted a marker peeking over the hill, a tree with green needles instead of leaves.

I skidded, using the slip of the ice to let me turn without losing momentum, before stopping, my borrowed staff raised. The rabbits had reached the gates. They were coming—

The creatures skittered to a stop.

I stared at them, and they stared at me, pacing, before they lay down. Of all the... I'd been right. Natural protections.

Well, all right then. I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, even though they'd left me without any supplies whatsoever.

I turned, ready to run to the evergreen tree and gain even more distance, but then froze like the spears of the ice gate.

While I hadn't been looking, the snow had again trembled and taken shape. But this new creature was no snow rabbit.

It had a long, thick tail, covered in long spikes, and while it walked on four legs like the rabbits, its heavy maw was filled with sharp, pointy teeth. Unlike the rabbits, it wasn't made of snow, but glistening ice.

Despite lacking wings and being ice, it looked exactly like a woodcutting I'd seen in ancient scrolls. A dragon. I really hoped the fact it was comprised of ice meant it didn't breathe fire.

"You can't escape."

I whipped my head to the side. I was now surrounded, the snow rabbits behind me, the dragon before me, and Jem in only his robe and trousers guarded one side. I was trapped, except for...

"How have you not frozen to death?" I demanded. Even with the chase, with my body temperature having risen and sweat having formed on my chest, the frigid air stung me. And Jem just stood there, white hair brushing his shoulders, not even shivering. As if it was a pleasant day for him.

My comment seemed to amuse him, and he cracked the beginnings of a smile. “Whatever you try, how ever you flee, you will never escape.”

“Says you.” The idiot who’d left the cell door unlocked, who hadn’t even posted a guard. Unless... I waved at the snow creatures. “Yours, I presume?”

That seemed to amuse him more. “Yes, my demons.”

I gasped despite myself. “Demons? Demons don’t walk the earth.”

“I suppose a magicless nation like yours would never believe it.”

“We’re not magicless.” We weren’t. We had one magic to ourselves, more precious than anything...

“You disobey your gods.”

I sighed, exasperated. “We’re not superstitious idiots like you—”

“This,” he waved to the snow creatures waiting upon his command, “is a gift from the Dark God. Demon energies, plucked from the aether, given form through snow and ice to do my bidding.”

“Well, la-dee-dah,” I said.

He cocked his head, about to ask what that meant.

“It means I’m not impressed. So what? You live in shacks, and I’m supposed to be impressed with your little minions?”

He looked at me in shock, then actually considered my words. “You don’t need to be impressed. You only need to know they will stop you from ever leaving.”

I laughed. Nothing would stop me from leaving. I had a title to wrest back in Nuriya, and I couldn’t spend my time lollygagging about here, begging for table scraps.

“You’re trapped.” Jem held his hand out to me. It was bare, just like this whole infernal place. “Come back to the castle with me.”

I shook my head. “Oh no, I will not. You’re forgetting something very important.”

Jem scrunched his brow together.

I smirked at him and turned around. An ice dragon on my right, the snow rabbits on my left.

But a huge, empty field in front of me.

I dashed forwards. Behind me, Jem made a strangled sound. A sound of loss and desperation. Silly, silly slave. He wasn't even competent enough to surround me.

Nor did he send his snow creatures after me. They bounded forwards for a moment, but then Jem screamed at them to stop, for me to stop, and they did. The only sound was the distant crash of waves, and the crunch of snow as Jem chose to chase after me himself.

Silly, silly slave. As if he could take me on in a one-on-one fight.

I turned my head back to mock him, to make him understand how in over his head he was. His prince regent would rue the day he'd left Jem in charge. He would—

A crack split the air, then another, and another, and when my foot landed, the ground beneath me splintered—

Not ground. Ice. Ice covering water, frigid, frigid water. My body plunged into it. The ocean surrounding Nuriya had never been this cold, not even in the darkest of days, when the monsoons whipped the island.

“ILYAS!” I heard Jem scream before my head disappeared under the waves.

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## Chapter Five

*Jem*

The fire was too big for the tiny little hearth in the corner of my tower room. The coals tumbled onto the stone floor, shooting sparks, but I left it as they died on the bare stones.

The tower room hadn't been designed for habitation. Before, when I'd been a child, my father had brought me up to watch the *katara* flying over the ocean through the large glass window. Just him and me, as he explained how the world worked as his son was caught up in wonder.

But that had been before. Rightfully and mercifully banned from company, I'd made the small room mine, to rest in peace. The tiny fireplace had never bothered me before, but it wasn't I who needed it. The small room now seemed stifling hot for me, but for Ilyas...

Ilyas lay as still as the dead. I'd dried him the best I could, counting the seconds as the fire dried his black hair. I slipped on him a fur hat borrowed from the royal children. The blankets were carefully hiked up to his neck already.

And underneath, he was naked. My cheeks were hot, and not just from the fire. It was ridiculous to even consider it. I'd seen Ilyas nude in his own harem, striding around the mats like he was clothed in the finest silks. But now... I couldn't risk clothing him, though. I couldn't risk the cloth tugging too hard at his damaged skin, leaving scars.

I'd checked him over for signs of frostbite, frostnip, and chilblains. Her Majesty, well studied in medicine, had checked too, slipping in and out like a ghost. A single scar, a single nerve damaged, could ruin his perfect body. Could ruin him... That was far more important than his nudity.

When would he start shivering? He'd been unconscious ever since I'd fished him out of the water, after he'd sunk without a fight. Didn't he know—but he didn't. In Nuriya, there was no ice. No cold water. No reason to know he needed to fight as hard as he could, to freeze his arms to the ice to keep his head above water.

He didn't even know enough to recognise the inlet. To know that while the ice never disappeared, it was thin at this time of year. Every Lumian child knew better than to run across.

But he didn't know. Ilyas couldn't be so eager to escape that he'd risk himself like that. He couldn't... could he? No, he hadn't known. He'd just seen it as the only escape route left him, because I'd stupidly believed he'd know better.

Where did he think I found the ice for the dragon?

I shook my head, and knelt by his pillow. Ilyas was like a baby. He might have been clever in Nuriya, but here...

Carefully, I laid my fingers across his forehead, just under the cap. His skin felt warm, and at the rush of reassurance filling my chest, I scowled at myself. How would I know how warm a normal human should be?

He needed to get warm enough that he started shivering, warm enough so his body would start waking up instead of slowing down.

I glanced at the demon hovering outside the window, and it nodded its beak at me. It was not one of my usual snow forms, taken from the creatures local to this land, but a creature I'd seen in Nuriya flying over the ocean like a bird, if birds bore wings and feathers instead of the sleek, scaled form of *katara*. A snow form wouldn't survive the heat inside, so I needed something capable of lurking outside, to warn me should Ilyas take a turn for the worse.

As if I could do anything if it turned worse. This was as 'worse' as it could be, without him...

He wouldn't die. I wouldn't allow it. I hurried from the room and down the stairs until I reached the equally overly hot confines of the kitchen. Perhaps I should have brought him here, but no, the royal children were gathered around, as were all the staff, and they all cried in fright at my sudden appearance.

I turned my eyes away from all of them in favour of searching through the cupboard for a ceramic pig. Finding one, I held it out, keeping my eyes averted.

After a long moment, my temper simmering in my chest, tentative fingers took it. A few moments later, it was returned to me, filled with boiling water and wrapped in a heavy cloth to protect my fingers. I muttered my thanks, although I wasn't sure they heard me or even cared, and returned to my tower room.

I slipped the unwrapped pig between the blankets to sit on Ilyas' chest. A few moments later, I was rewarded with the blankets shaking, Ilyas shivering underneath. I collapsed against the wall in relief.



For hours, I half slept, half watched him, first shivering, and then after more long hours, he started to twitch his limbs, as if in a fever dream. When I touched his forehead, it was warmer than before. That was a good sign, yes?

A servant knocked at the door, and I waited for the footsteps to retreat. No one wanted to see the vile nest the snowmancer made. On the landing, I found a piece of the snow tuber bread and another pig to replace the cooling one.

After I did that, I sank against the wall again to watch him, chewing slowly on the bread. Ilyas might have been right about one thing. It wasn't 'bread', the light and delicate pastry I'd tasted in Nuriya, but hard and dense, needing to be soaked in saliva before it softened enough to eat. Perhaps Ilyas knew a more fitting word in the trading language, one that wasn't 'rubbish'.

But then again, even the meanest Nuriyite was assured a full belly. Ilyas needn't have food baked hard so it would last just a little bit longer, to fool the stomach into believing it was getting more than it really was.

The bread wouldn't do while Ilyas recovered. He wouldn't have the strength to chew it. Perhaps... perhaps if we only mixed the tuber flour with water. I wrote a note to leave for the servant retrieving the cold pig and tray.

Leaning against the wall, I dozed again, and dreamed of birds, their scales glistening as they swam through the air overhead.

Then the blankets hit me in the chest. I jerked away, just in time to hear the pig shattering on the floor. The bed was empty.

I rose to my knees. The wood on the glass pane shrieked in protest. Unmindful of his nudity, Ilyas had one knee on the ledge while he dragged the pane upward.

He wasn't... He knew we were too high up, didn't he? Only the ice wall loomed below, far, far below. He saw that, right?

The snow demon flew at the window, beating the pane with its wings to try to scare Ilyas off, or at least keep him from slipping out the window.

Ilyas muttered under his breath, too quiet and too stuttered for me to understand him. His cheeks reddened beneath his dark complexion.

The delusions. They came like a fever dream, urging their victim to strip their clothes and flee in circles in the cold, without realising they pushed themselves closer and closer to death.

I dashed up behind him, hooking my arms underneath him and hauling him back, his back and arse flush against my chest. Ilyas struggled against me, any

mixture between delusions and fear of being unmanned. I cursed under my breath, but while I wrestled with him, the snow demon managed to close the pane, at the cost of its own wing. It tumbled and smashed against the ground.

I'd make another one, after I wrestled Ilyas back into the bed. With his elbow slamming into my side, I managed to drag him back towards the bed and drop him onto it.

For a moment, I held my breath, ready for full on panic if in his delusions he thought I—or some other villain—attempted to deflower him. Limbs trembling, he attempted to rise onto his forearms again. His skin was red where my fingers had grasped him.

I hissed in a breath, before cursing myself again. I dropped down to my knees to examine his skin, to make sure that in my manhandling, I hadn't torn his delicate flesh. After falling through the ice, his skin was too fragile for anything but the gentlest touches. Any scar, no matter how small, ruined him.

Ilyas pushed himself into my hands, and carefully I pushed him back down. He dropped like a sack of snow tubers.

I glanced down at the shattered pig, and then back to Ilyas, who had started to shiver again. The fight had left him for now, but I couldn't take any chances. Leaning over him, I pulled the blankets back over him and myself. My arms, slow and careful, encircled his torso while I pressed my chest into his side.

I didn't feel warm enough to help, his body blazing against mine, but this way, I kept him in bed, at least. Even if I dozed off again.

Which I did, until I felt Ilyas tugging himself away from me. I woke in an instant, holding onto him harder, until I looked up into his expression.

The delusions had left, leaving a scared little boy who had woken up naked in the bed of his captor, with no memories of how he'd gotten there. I released him.

“How—how dare you!” He crawled away from me, away from the fire.

I glanced at the hearth, which had started to burn low, despite the plethora of coal. How long had it been? I'd have the next servant fetch more. I pointed at the fire. “Go, sit, there.”

“No!” He scrambled to his feet. Anger shredded through his fear, and he backed up until his shoulder hit the window pane. He hissed at the cold, turning his head to glare at it.

I pointed again. “Sit next to the fire.”

He didn’t move. “Where are my clothes?”

“With the servants, to dry.” Honestly, he was being an idiot. If I had done anything to him—and I wouldn’t dare hurt him—he would feel it right now.

“How dare you—”

“How dare you!” I snapped back, standing. “If not for me, if not for what I can do, you would have died falling through the ice. Was it really worth it to escape me?”

“Falling...” His eyes glazed over, as if remembering. I very much doubted he did.

I strode up to him, while he was distracted by his lack of memories. “Yes, you would have *died*.” I punctuated the word with a jab at his chest.

His nostrils flared, his eyes narrowed, and he opened his mouth to retort, but I cut him off.

“So go. Sit. Next. To. The fire.”

He glared down at me, as if readying himself to demand who exactly I thought I was, giving him orders.

“Or is your life really worth so little you would throw it away to glare at me?”

His mouth worked, but I didn’t care. He wasn’t like me at all. His existence was crucial, not the other way around. He didn’t stare into oblivion, waiting and waiting for...

“Go sit down.” I snapped my fingers and pointed to the hearth again.

Ilyas sneered, but did as I asked, slipping by me and grabbing one of the blankets to cover his body with. Oh, how the worm had turned, that Prince Heir Ilyas felt he must hide his nudity from a simple slave.

Or he was clever enough to cover himself to keep warm. I cursed myself, and perched on the window ledge while he tiptoed past the broken pig. I should have cleaned that up, and I really should go and fetch Ilyas food and water, but he must not be left alone. He’d already proven himself incredibly stupid and foolhardy.

Ilyas muttered something under his breath, facing the fire.

I was ready to let it go, but I still asked, “What was that?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Yes, the cold *can* kill you.”

He turned back to give me a mutinous glare, his violet eyes shining. “I didn’t know the ice was there.”

I blinked. “I know.”

A question flittered across his expression before he squashed it down.

“It was an inlet,” I said. “From the ocean. Shallow enough for it to freeze over. Which is why you must avoid open spaces. Here, it’s most likely a frozen lake ready to crack.”

As if Ilyas needed to know. Ilyas realised it too and snorted.

“So you finally decided to give me better quarters.” Ilyas turned back to the fire. “I give it a two out of ten. Barely better than the prison cell.”

Cell? Oh, I saw where he’d gone wrong. He assumed that like in Nuriya, we kept criminals imprisoned. Oh no, we wouldn’t waste food like that. It kept crime very low. “It’s my room.”

His shoulders tensed, as if I’d surprised him.

“You required more care.”

Ilyas remained very still.

I turned to look out the window, to look over the ocean, still dark and mysterious and lifeless in the shadow of the city. In scrolls, I had seen illustrations of the icy banks teeming with sea lions or porpoises. Even in my childhood, I remembered the birds. But now, there was nothing. Just the water and the receding ice.

“You... took care of me.”

Did Ilyas really want to know? I glanced back at him, and his whole body was tense. It suited him, somehow, although his usual languid insouciance also suited him. “Of course.”

Ilyas moved as if to ask a question—a question the prince heir would never bother to ask outright—but I interrupted.

“On Prince Hemi’s orders,” I told him.

He scoffed, then glared into the flames.

“He can’t afford to lose you.”

He opened his mouth to hurl an insult at me, or Prince Hemi, then closed it. He stood, and turned back to me, wearing his blanket like an elegant silk robe. “You will keep me here from now on.”

I raised my eyebrows. Oh, would I?

“Unless you have better accommodations. I wouldn’t mind displacing your Hemi.” At my glare, he laughed. “I’ll wear you down, you’ll see.”

“You will go back to the cellar.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You can’t tell the difference between a field and an inlet. I don’t care what you think.”

“Oh, touché.” Before I asked, he added, “Touché; that means, you think you’re clever because I made one small mistake, but you’re clearly wrong, since that’s all you have to grasp.”

“You’re returning to the cellar.” Where I could keep him properly contained.

“I’ve already proven I can escape the cell,” he said. “As you’ve already proven that you can prevent me from leaving with your little rabbits, and even if I do, I’ll die once I pass the village gates.”

He did have a point. I would have my snow demons keeping a close eye on him. “Lumi.”

“Speak trade language,” Ilyas said, exasperated. “I don’t speak... whatever that grunting is.”

Only the shared language of the peninsula, handed down to us by the Dark God. “Lumi is where you are. The Kingdom of Lumi.”

“Oh.” But Ilyas wasn’t one to rest on his mistakes too long. I’m sure, somewhere in his mind, he’d automatically blamed me for the misunderstanding, if he cared at all. “Anyway, no matter how I treated you, you have to admit that your place in the harem was better than even this. As your intended slave to sell, I deserve at least this much, don’t you think?”

I waited for him to continue on about how he didn’t actually care what I thought, but he remained silent, waiting for my answer. I exhaled. It would keep Ilyas nice and close, and specifically out of Ambassador Dajana’s way. And Ilyas was correct. Even if he managed to escape, he wouldn’t survive two days in the wilderness.

“I’m sure Prince Hemi would agree,” he added.

Why would he add that? I cupped the tattoo on the back of my neck, then nodded my agreement and was thanked with a smirk.

“Now, bring my breakfast. A real breakfast, mind, not that rock you tried to pass off on me earlier. Oh, and more coal for the fire. It is freezing in here.”

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## Chapter Six

*Ilyas*

It may have been Jem's room, but that didn't mean he had to stay in it all the time. I actually started to think fondly upon the prison cell, because at least then, I had more than a few moments to myself.

Instead, Jem remained constantly in the room, sitting on the ledge and looking out the window at nothing. He only stepped outside the door for a moment, speaking to someone in a low voice.

Didn't Jem have any duties to attend to? Hemi seemed to let his servant waste the day away. If we were in Nuriya...

But we weren't. Very obviously. I shifted my shoulders, which ached with the lack of exercise. If we had been in Nuriya, with my room to myself, I would have been able to stretch in peace and solitude. But I refused to expose myself thus to Jem.

He'd returned my clothes, at least, and when I'd pretended to sleep hidden under the covers the night before, he had remained on the ledge. Watching me, but not taking advantage.

In fact, he acted as if my head would wind up on a pike should he turn his back for even a moment. As if somehow I was so stupid. It wasn't that. I never would have run through that inlet if not for Jem. He'd thoroughly trapped me, before I'd even noticed. If I'd had someone like Jem on my side...

Jem dropped down from the ledge. I straightened, my back leaving the edge of the wall. But he didn't leave. He knelt gracefully beside the tick and pulled out something hidden underneath.

It was below me to make a face, but I did as I was out of his sight. But he flicked his eyes up to me. He didn't say anything, just turned away holding a board and two small boxes.

"You know, you can leave me alone for more than a minute," I said. "Unless it's suddenly become summer."

"It hasn't."

I resisted rolling my eyes. "Then leave."

"I must protect you from yourself."

I nearly gagged on his words. He had to protect me? From myself? I was not a child wandering onto the ice. Not again, knowing full well what would happen. I sniffed. “Fine then. Entertain me.”

“No.”

No? Just no? “But I’m bored.”

I cringed mentally. I hadn’t meant to sound so whiney. Or even a little bit. It was something Mehdi would do, and proved how little he was ready for the great affairs of state the prince heir must handle.

Jem glanced again at me, amused. His thoughts were written on his face. *A bored Ilyas must be a safe Ilyas.* Jem dragged the board away from the window. “Look outside then.”

“But there’s nothing to see!”

He jerked, as if my words surprised him. As if he didn’t know full well there might as well not be a window at all, if the great expanse of water was worth seeing. We had oceans in Nuriya. Better oceans, turning turquoise in full light, and purple for that brief moment in twilight. And the ocean was surrounded by trees and ferns and decorations! And for that matter, my own quarters would be hung with brightly coloured silks and linens and paintings. Every glimpse was a wonder in itself.

But Jem did not agree. “There’s plenty to see. There’s nothing to block the view.”

I growled in frustration. “Like what? Ocean, ocean and more ocean?”

“Yes.”

Yes, just yes. If one could be crowned king of monosyllabic and useless answers... “You might like boring, but I’m used to better.”

Jem opened the boxes, revealing tiny round pieces carved from ebony and ivory. Or whatever useless and worthless stones the Lumians scraped from under the ice.

I folded my arms over my chest. “I’ll hang myself if necessary to escape this boredom.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I will,” I said. “Then where will you be? A complete failure, that’s where. I’m sure your Prince Hemi is itching to lay his leather into your backside—”



The box lid snapped closed, echoing through the bare room. Finally, I'd manage to pierce his equally boring monotony.

I waited for his next move. If I pressed him hard enough, would he rush from the room to escape me? Was that the way to get one moment to myself?

"There used to be... birds."

I arched a brow at him. "You think birds would—"

"Beautiful birds," he said. "Birds that would satisfy even you. As they swim in the moonlight, their scales flash a multitude of colours found nowhere else."

Swim? Scales? "You mean fish." I was trapped in a room with an idiot. "Fish is what we call the things that swim in the ocean. Even you should know that."

He gave me an odd look, as if I was the one who didn't know the difference between fish and birds. "Birds swim through the air."

"They *fly*."

"Like these birds, like the *katara*."

There was no teaching him. "So what happened? They finally realised what a wasteland this village—pardon, Lumi—is?"

"They were eaten."

I stared at him. "Eaten?"

He shrugged.

Barbarians. They couldn't even appreciate the finer things in life without thinking of ways to shove them in their mouths. But regardless of whether or not there had been something nice about this ice hole, it still left me in the same state I'd started in—bored. Bored, bored, bored!

I slammed my hands onto the tick, but it neither alleviated my boredom nor attracted Jem's attention, which was rather for the best.

Instead, while I heaved my exasperation with this whole state of affairs, a *snap* echoed through the room. And then the sound of wood scraping against stone, and then another *snap*. *Snap, scrape, snap, scrape, snap, scrape*.

I looked down at Jem, bent over the board. A grid had been burned into the surface, and Jem had set the ebony and ivory circles down onto a few intersections. He snapped another black piece down. Twisted the board to the other side. Then snapped a white piece, and then back.

A game, the one Jem had played on the ship, which I had ignored completely, except for the devastated look Jem had given the first mate upon his announcement we were due in port any moment. Neither had I missed the satisfaction of his looks of longing and regret to the half-filled board as he gathered up his scant possessions.

I crossed the room and sat across from him. It was a two-person game, I assumed.

Jem looked up, startled. He pursed his lips, as if he had trouble comprehending why I sat across from him. So I took a white stone and placed it onto a square.

“It’s black’s move,” Jem said.

“And when the prince heir of the Kingdom of Nuriya makes a move, it’s his move, whether others agree or not.” I crossed my arms, daring him to disagree.

Instead, he swiped the piece from the board and dropped it back into the box.

“Oi!” I took the piece back and dropped it onto the board.

“It’s not a valid move.”

I tilted my head back, crossed my arms again, and stared down at him imperiously. “Prince heirs don’t follow the rules. They make the rules.”

“It’s supposed to be on an intersection.”

I glanced down. All of Jem’s pieces were on intersections, while mine was in the centre of a square, as if we played chess, a Nuriyite game. Whoops. I returned my imperious glare back to Jem, daring him to disagree.

Jem removed the piece again, and before I snatched it up, snapped a black one down. He reached to move the board around, to play from white’s side, I presumed, but I was quick enough to take another piece and place it on the grid.

He looked up at me, and I grinned down at him. He furrowed his brow. “Do you... do you want to... play with me?”

The words sounded like he spoke a foreign language, which he was, the words twisting ungainly in his mouth. Like he had never asked before.

I shrugged. “There’s nothing better to do.”

He tilted his head, still confused, but started to remove pieces from the board. “Have you ever played before?”

“You can play it, so it must be easy.”

He pursed his lips again. “The goal of the game is to capture as much territory as possible, and, by the end of the game, have the most pieces remaining.”

“See? Easy.” I was prince heir of Nuriya. Sure we didn’t have warfare, but it must not be that difficult.

“You try to surround the other pieces—”

“I said, easy.” I set a white piece down.

“But you need to know—”

“Play.”

Jem watched me, his blue eyes considering. Then he seemed to give himself a mental shrug, and picked up a black piece and snapped it down with a satisfying click.

I picked up my next piece and considered it. Jem had held it between his forefinger and middle finger, before snapping it into place. It couldn’t be that hard...

I tried the motion. The stone slipped between my fingers and clattered onto the board. I felt Jem’s eyes on me, my cheeks heating, but the piece was close to an intersection. I straightened, pretending I’d meant to do that. “Your move.”

He started to protest, but I said, “So who is this Prince Hemi anyway?”

He glanced up at me, then snapped his piece into place, near his first piece. “He is the prince regent of Lumi.”

“So why haven’t I seen him? Doesn’t he wish to lord it over me?”

Quietly, he said, “Prince Hemi is not like that.”

“Oh, too timid? Is he scared to see what a real prince looks like?”

We continued to play, but my attention was more on Jem’s answers than the game. Jem said, “The prince knows you’re here, and that is enough for him. He has important affairs of state to attend to.”

“Hmm, if you like.” I shrugged, placing my piece down. “So how did he become prince regent? Why not king?”

“He is not the heir.” He only had eyes for the game. “His duty is to protect the prince heir.”

“So cloister the brat away until he tragically meets his end just after he gains his majority.”

The snap of his piece was far louder that time. “Prince Haori will make a wonderful king.”

“Hoary?” I couldn’t help myself, I laughed. “As in a hoary winter’s night?”

“It means something different in Lumian.”

“What else could it possibly mean? All you have is frost and snow. I bet your language is only five hundred words total, and half of them refer to snow.”

He paused after his next move. “It’s more than five hundred words.”

“Ha, but I’m right that—hey, what are you doing?” I slapped his hands, which had started to remove my pieces.

“I’ve surrounded you.” He indicated a wall of black around my patch of white. It looked damnably close to a snow field. “Thus I’ve captured your pieces.”

“How is that fair?”

“How else would there be a winner?” he countered. “War isn’t fair.”

I glowered at him. Fine, he wanted to play like that? I’d capture all his damn pieces... the real ones and the game ones.

We played a furious game, as I pushed him faster and faster while asking him probing questions about whatever passed as a Lumian court to break his concentration. Half of strategic games was dominating the man.

Yet, more and more of the board turned black.

I didn’t even learn anything else useful. Nothing about what Prince Hemi was like, only Jem’s unnaturally fierce loyalty towards him and the prince heir as well as his naivety, if he thought the prince regent would actually allow himself to lose power. In Nuriya, whenever such a situation had arose, the heirs would have long lost their lives before the age this Haori was now, which Jem had grudgingly informed me was thirteen.

Too soon, the board became overrun with black and great empty circles where my pieces had once been. Seeing no other strategic moves, I placed a piece in the middle of the circle.

Jem shook his head. “You can’t do that.”

“Watch me.”

“I’ve automatically captured it.”

“What—how—” I glanced around the board, looking for somewhere else I could turn the tide. But there was nowhere else. I shrugged, and started to get to my feet. “I’m bored, bored enough to even look at your ghastly landscape—”

A hand captured my wrist, hauling me down. “It’s your move,” Jem said.

“I don’t care. I’m bored.”

“You started a game,” he said. “You must finish it.”

“Later,” I lied, waving him off.

“‘Later’ doesn’t exist. I—you can’t leave things unfinished.”

I blinked at him. It was the most emotional I’d ever seen Jem, even when speaking about his precious prince. He practically growled at me, blue eyes glinting. “Of course, there’s a later. Well, not once you sell me off to the Sentei...”

I searched his face to see if there was a lie, if Dajana had been speaking the truth.

Jem touched the back of his own neck. “I mustn’t leave anything unfinished.”

“Well boohoo for you, since I’m done—hey!”

Jem had released me, and turned the board to play my side, snapping a stone into a place I knew would end up getting captured. I snatched the piece back, but Jem just replaced it with another.

He muttered, “No wonder your people don’t care if you become king.”

I sucked in a breath, the only thing that kept me from jumping on him. What did Jem know? Jem, who had just been a stupid, pretty slave handed over to me as the spoils of political battle. What could he possibly—

I tossed the board aside, white and black pieces flying everywhere, even into the hearth. I smirked down at him, as his face went even paler, as if that was possible. “How will you finish now?” I crowed.

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I’d won the last laugh. Jem had been struck dumb, staring down at the black and white pieces strewn across the stone floor as his shoulders trembled. All

while I gloated down at him. Not very princely, I know, but he deserved it, for...

Saving me from death. For caring for me. I shook my head. No, for thinking he could outwit me.

All at once, Jem had grown still. So still he didn't even breathe. Then he started to crawl around the floor, picking up the discarded pieces to return to their assorted boxes, except for the pieces in the fire, which he knelt in front of with such a look of longing I thought him likely to thrust his hand into the flames to retrieve them.

Then without a word, a look, or even a stern warning that his snow demons hungered for my blood outside the window, he charged out the door.

I waited a long moment for him to return. And then another moment. And another.

The side of my lip curled up. Finally, time to myself.

I rose and positioned myself facing the door, in case he decided to return early, and swept my arms over my head, staring up. My back sang in ecstasy. So long, so long, I'd been kept cramped and stiff, and now—now—I properly gave my body, my temple, its due.

My arms swept down, my back following, bending forwards, allowing the blood to rush into my head, and for my hamstrings to lengthen. I moaned. Too, too long. I was never going without this for more than a day again, even if I must kill Jem to do so.

My body swept through the rest of the positions of the familiar sun salutation. Lengthening, stretching, strengthening. All thoughts dropped mercifully away. No worries about my usurper, no irritation about Jem left over, nothing but the way my body moved. The way it cried for joy as I unleashed it.

I balanced on one foot, sending the other behind me, reaching for the impossible.

“My, you've grown comfortable.”

I jerked in shock at the words, falling onto my side. I growled, half due to the pains shooting up my side, and half in embarrassment for anyone glimpsing my private joy. I glared around me, ready to bite the head off whomever dared intrude upon me.

But the door remained shut, and outside the window was a sheer drop to one's death. I was... alone.

A tiny light—the same light that had intruded on me in the cell—flicked itself in front of me.

“Although your balance could use some work.” The voice was distant, as if speaking through a metal pipe.

I poked at the light, but it dodged my hand, fluttering upwards.

“Don't do that,” it said.

It sounded almost like... “Ambassador Dajana, I presume?”

“Of course.” She sounded miffed.

“Is this your light?”

“My firefly, yes. Why? Oh, that's right, there isn't magic in the Land of Fire.”

I clenched my jaw. Of course there was. Perhaps we didn't summon demons or create little flickering bugs, but our one magic was more precious than anything they could conjure. The only thing I ever ached for, but was forever out of my reach. But she didn't deserve to know that. Instead, I glanced around the room in disdain, and said, “Why wouldn't I be comfortable? I can sleep on a mat on a stone floor, shiver myself to sleep, and then wake up for a nice big piece of very bland, tough bread. Which I get to enjoy thrice a day.”

“You eat *three* times a day?”

I sighed. Backwater hick.

“As much as he pampers you, though, you should still remember why exactly you're here.”

“Because there are snow demons and ice water outside.”

Dajana stuttered, the firefly mimicking with rapid movement.

I crossed my arms. “Yes, did I forget to say that I nearly died trying to escape the first time? Why ever would I try it a second time?”

“There are worse things than death.”

“The bread does come close, but no. Death is death, and I would rather not bother with that.”

“Then... you don't know.”

I waved my hand, sighing again. “Yes, yes, your Prince Hemi is going to sacrifice me up to the Dark God.”

“He’s not my prince,” she said. “And yes, he is.”

I raised my brow.

“You should be very, very afraid.”

“Uh huh.”

The firefly twitched, as if in confusion.

I snorted. “Look, you haven’t told me anything I don’t know. Yes, I should escape. Even my toddler niece could inform me of that.”

“Then let me tell you something you don’t know.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

The firefly paused, then started fluttering in an agitated pattern. “Go to the door.”

“Why?” I drawled.

“You’ll see.”

Heaving a big sigh, I rose and crossed to the door, the firefly following me. A moment later, a pad of folded paper was pushed under the door. Taking my time, I leaned forwards and snatched it up.

“Open it.”

I rolled my eyes up to the heavens, then unfolded the paper. My blood froze colder than when I’d fallen through the ice. I blinked my eyes as they tried to escape focus, to hide what was on the paper. I swallowed, forcing myself to look, to take in the details. Whomever had drawn it hadn’t skimmed on the details.

My eyes picked up a detail here and there. An illustration, with a foot, and damnable ice, and... “Is... is that...”

I saw the image. I screamed.

“Shh!” the firefly warned me.

I glared at it, glad for the break, then turned back to flip through the papers. I didn’t scream at the next one, but my stomach churned. I flipped to the next one and the next, refusing to look away, but my stomach protested with each



new image until I had to run to the window. I felt around to throw the sash up, to open the window before I vomited all over the floor.

“STOP!” she yelled through the firefly.

I kept pulling at the window, bile threatening to explode out of my mouth.

“Do not open the window. You will only alert him to my presence!”

Then—goddamn her. I swallowed the bile down and took several deep breaths, none of them cleansing in the stale air of the room. Even the arctic blast sure to sweep into the room would be better.

But Dajana would not see me like that.

My stomach started to churn again, the images emblazoned in my mind. How could simple illustrations be so... lifelike? As if I already felt the knives and the needles and whatever that last machine had been carving up my flesh.

“What the Dark God will do to you.”

Why was she talking?

“It won’t be as quick as death. You’re His blood sacrifice, His amusement on this earth, His exotic trinket and toy. The price we must pay to have Him walk among us once more.”

Why wouldn’t she just shut up?

“I know there’s little reason to trust me—”

I thrust myself away from the ledge, turning upon her. “Why do you care?”

As superstitious as these people were, Dajana should be thrilled to have her god back.

“Look at the images,” she said. “Go ahead, look.”

I shook my head. She was not my better. I did not obey her whims.

“That is what the Dark God will do to you. And the reason I care is because that is what He’ll do to my family, and every other royal family on this peninsula except for that bloody brat Haori.”

“Some god you worship,” I muttered. “Why would you even bother?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

I turned away, the images on the paper detailing in my mind, and the answer came readily. Fear the Dark God would do worse if they didn’t.

“Several centuries ago, the Dark God ruled this entire peninsula. One empire under god, where everything was... united. Sentei grew the food, Lumi provided ore, and the myriad of other states had something to contribute to the whole.”

“In exchange for...” I waved at the paper.

“Sacrifices to our god? Yes. But then the Dark God’s vessel failed and the Dark God slumbered. With no one capable of ruling, we began to fracture, declaring our own independence. If you can call it independence, when each of us requires trade with the others to survive.”

Not like Nuriya, with its plentiful food and spices and clothes and dyes. The only thing we needed were metals, imported from across the ocean at a staggering price.

“But should one kingdom manage to summon the Dark God... The Dark God will return and forcibly reunite His fractured empire.”

“So Prince Hemi has grown so power hungry, he can’t even limit himself to one kingdom.” I laughed. Jem had tried to convince me otherwise, but here was the proof.

Dajana didn’t laugh with me, and when she spoke, her voice sounded uneasy. “You haven’t noticed yet?”

“Noticed what?” That people were all the same, no matter how far north one travelled?

“Never mind,” she said. “But the crux of the matter is that Prince Hemi requires an exotic and perfect sacrifice. You. There is no substitute for you. So if you escape...”

Or die trying. “So what’s your plan?”

“Plan?”

“Yes, how am I supposed to escape and leave Lumi without Jem stopping me? Or me dying?”

The firefly slowed, shifting from side to side.

I flicked a bang out of the way. “I would come up with a plan myself, but I’ve run out of options. I tried seducing Jem—”

Her surprised bark of laughter made the firefly vibrate. “You can’t—you can’t seduce him. He doesn’t have feelings or desires. I can’t believe you even tried.”

Except he did feel something for Prince Hemi. Jem had proved loyal to him and the little princeling. Perhaps he even possessed illicit feelings towards the regent. That might prove useful. Dajana was wrong, after all. No one possessed the intensity Jem had if they didn't have emotions.

“So how are you going to help me?” I asked. “Fight Jem with your magics?”

“Oh, no. No, no, no. I couldn't do that.”

“Because that would prove too useful?”

“Because Jem is the snowmancer, the most powerful magic user in centuries. The rest of us must settle for our little magics.”

I shrugged. “Fine. Then what else can you do? What is your plan?”

Besides barging into my room and demanding I make my escape, which wasn't very helpful at all, being both irritating and useless.

“You don't have the luxury of waiting for the perfect plan,” she said. “If you wait too long, you'll... Well, just look at the papers.”

Which was her arrogant way of saying without admitting that she didn't know, and I was on my own. Exactly the way it should be.

Dajana had started to mumble something else when the firefly jumped and dashed away. I merely raised my brow. No need for her to waste my time, I supposed.

Alone again, but unable to trust it, I tossed the papers into the fire. They burned around the edges first, revealing the focus of the illustrations... revealing my fate.

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## Chapter Seven

*Jem*

I had to walk twice around the castle before I returned to my—or rather, Ilyas’ room. I almost walked by the tower, my feet feeling the urge to take another lap, but no matter how secure he was, I still couldn’t trust him. He was like an infant in a new world, and as likely to kill himself as to keep himself hale and healthy.

When I stepped into the room, keeping my breath even and calm, Ilyas had perched himself on the ledge, the game board and pieces next to him. I only just kept myself from stepping back, from taking that extra lap. He took his time in drawing his attention my way, enough time for me to calm my emotions again.

How did he manage in a mere moment to draw such powerful emotion from me? I, and everyone else, had thought I’d lost any long ago in the ritual. I touched the back of my neck under the pale grey scarf I’d wrapped around it.

I’d checked the tattoo just a few moments ago in a borrowed mirror. The black lines edged my neck and covered my back now. Soon it would creep along my jaw.

Ilyas gestured at the board, cocking a grin as he met my eyes. The only person to do so. I fidgeted, and then turned my attention away, sitting across from the bed and closing my eyes.

He would not gain the upper hand. It didn’t matter how angry he made me, I would not fall for his bait.

A long moment followed in which I reined in the turmoil in my belly. His bare feet whispered against the stones. I felt him staring at me, his eyes like a brand. Ilyas didn’t know. If he did, he would act like all the others. It was better he didn’t, but still...

My eyes blinked open. Ilyas knelt in front of me with the same smug grin.

“Play with me?” He grinned wider at his suggestion, as if he’d made a joke.

I let my eyelids drift down to hood my eyes, giving him my blankest, most unimpressed look.

“Oh come on, don’t be that way.” Ilyas shuffled forwards, making the movement elegant, until he was almost between my knees. He might have

proceeded forwards if I had spread my bent legs a little farther... “It’s just you, and me, and this room—”

“And your boredom.” That’s all this was. Ilyas’ game. His echo of the Dark God.

“Exactly,” he said, as if pleased his pet was clever enough to figure it out.

I turned my face away, closing my eyes again, willing him to leave me be, but in the next moment, I felt him hovering over me. I blinked my eyes open as he pressed forwards. If he lost his balance, he would tumble down onto my chest.

“Now, there’s you, and there’s me. I’m sure I can think of something two adults can partake in to while away the winter nights...”

My abdomen clenched, my mind summoning image after image I’d glanced of adults partaking in just that, keeping each other warm and distracted from their hungry and aching bodies. What would it be like to touch Ilyas like—

But Ilyas didn’t mean it. He was a proud man—a proud prince, and he would never suffer an indignity such as sleeping with an uncut man. For even using a eunuch for more than a bauble. Which was exactly what Ilyas was suggesting.

If I just pushed him a little farther...

No. I recoiled, although my body remained as still as possible. Ilyas didn’t know better, and even so, he would never follow through. It was a trick, like the last time, distracting me so I wouldn’t notice the cellar door hadn’t clicked as the lock slid back into place.

“What do you want?” My voice was gruff, unusually so, as if Ilyas’ offer remained stuck in my throat.

Ilyas slid forwards, close enough to grind his chest against mine. “Just the pleasure of—”

I cut him off by shoving him away. I met his eyes, although it made me wish I could crawl under a rock, and waited for him to speak his piece.

He shrugged, giving me an ‘oh well’ sort of grin. “I want to leave the room.”

I raised my brow, as he knew exactly what I’d say. I couldn’t trust him to protect himself beyond my reach.

“I want a tour of the city.”

Ilyas wanted to... He was volunteering to head into the cold to see my Lumi? As if Lumi was worth his time?

“That’s what I want,” he said, daring me to disagree.

I looked to the window, where I caught the flutter of my snow demon’s wing as it checked the perimeter. The sky was still blue, although soon it would darken into crimsons and violets the shade of Ilyas’ eyes, as he still stared deeply into mine. I coughed.

“Or we could remain here, enjoying each other’s company—”

“Fine,” I said.

He blinked. “Fine to what?”

“Fine, I will show you around the city.”

He broke into a grin. He was planning something, and it required knowledge of the city.

Well, I could indulge him in that.

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## Chapter Eight

*Ilyas*

How did anyone stand to live in Lumi? Even walking from building to building required me to bundle up in a long coat, scarves, and a fur hat. The scarf blocked out everything below eye level, but whenever I adjusted the scarf down, the wind bit at my cheeks and I hurried to cover myself.

And Jem... I glared at his back. He wore a similar coat, but only added a scarf coiled around his neck. Even the village people, almost as swaddled as I was, glared at him.

Well, not really at him. I slowed, taking a moment to observe them huddled against the snowbanks instead of doing something sane like going inside. Ahead of us, the peasants strolled through the streets, until they caught sight of Jem and me. Then they ducked their heads and drew to the side.

They looked, but they didn't look. Or rather, they were so aware of his presence they needn't look, as if Jem was the ridiculous obelisk in the middle of the square.

Jem stopped suddenly, and I nearly ploughed into his back, only avoiding the collision by a less than graceful hop to the side. I glared at him, but he didn't seem to notice as he pointed to the ice wall.

I bit my lower lip to keep from snapping, "Yes, it's a door." Well, a door through the ice, with the same iron Lumi used throughout the city strengthening its walls, descending down into a black tomb. Several black iron scythes were piled up against the side.

"The entrance to our mine," Jem said.

Right, Dajana had mentioned something about how ore was the only thing useful about Lumi. "You only have one mine?"

"Yes. The tunnels stretch for miles below, but we aren't producing much these days."

I sneered. "Your tunnel run dry?"

"Our warehouse is full," he said. "The Sentei ships haven't come in months. There's no point making everyone work if there is no trade."

“Besides making money.” I waved flippantly at him, then picked up one of the strange scythes. No, not a scythe, although it possessed roughly the same shape, but some kind of mining pick. “I’m sure your villagers appreciate starving to death because they haven’t their wages.”

Jem cocked his head, confused, but then seemed to grasp my point. He really was slow. “We don’t pay anyone. The mines are operated by the crown.”

“You don’t even pay them?” I snorted. And Dajana would have me believe they didn’t practice slavery in this god forsaken peninsula.

“Come with me.” Without waiting, he started back towards the castle. I rolled my eyes, and then followed, pickaxe on my shoulder, until we reached the market square. I felt like giving the obelisk a rude gesture, but Jem pulled me in front of the one building in the square actually open.

Well of course nothing was open if no one had money to pay for things.

“This is the storehouse,” he said. “The crown is responsible for trading with Sentei and other countries for necessities. And then each villager is given their ration. We don’t pay the villagers because we give them everything they need. Prince Hemi wished for you to see this.”

I sputtered. Everything they needed? So they needed stale, tasteless breads and drab brown cloth? “But Sentei hasn’t traded with you in months. They should get their money back.”

“The Sentei had a poor harvest. The frosts came too early for them. They’re uninterested in trade while their own people go hungry.”

Jem sounded bitter, but I looked at the drab storehouse building with a newfound appreciation.

All the city’s food was here? And they were not likely to receive more from Sentei?

Oh, this was too perfect. And so, so typical of the Lumians.

Instead of pressing, I turned back to the obelisk. A single stone that represented the bastard who was going to tear me to pieces.

I lowered the pickaxe, intending to drop it, but then settled it across both hands. How lucky I had picked up this thing. The gaunt-faced people stared at me, half awe, half fright, as if they knew exactly what I should be.

I strode towards the obelisk, Jem and everyone else’s eyes glued to my back.



Well, let them watch this.

I raised the pickaxe, and the crowd became instantly quiet, frozen in disbelief. With all my strength, I brought the sharp end of the axe into the obelisk.

The tip bounced off the edge. I growled. Behind me, people muttered and cried out. I raised the axe again, and again, bashing the stupid, feckless obelisk as if it were the Dark God.

Each time the tip bounced, I snarled louder, and thrust at it harder. Harder and harder and harder—I was going to destroy that thing, if it was the last thing I did.

An arm wrapped around my stomach, yanking me away. I whirled, holding the pickaxe in front of me like a sword.

Jem's blue eyes flashed. "Why would you do such a thing?"

The snowbanks behind him shivered. The snow demons hadn't approached the obelisk before, but... *No, no, do not let yourself be ruled by anger*, I told myself. I shrugged, and dropped the pickaxe. "Why should I care? The Dark God will do worse to me, and you're delivering me into his hands."

Jem stopped, his eyes widening and shoulders dropping. His white hair shifted in the breeze. He grasped the back of his neck, and winced, as if in pain. He turned and started to walk away.

Was he... was he really in pain? He must be, if he would leave me by his precious obelisk. I started to call out to him, then pressed my lips together. It didn't matter—it shouldn't matter. He was my enemy after all.

I waited in the shadow of the obelisk, like it was a metaphor for something, but Jem didn't turn back to drag me away. The sun was dipping below the horizon, and I shivered as it grew colder. With one last glare at the obelisk, I ran after him.

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I must have really ticked Jem off, because instead of stalking me like an angry shadow, he only checked that I had returned to his room before disappearing. That was fine by me. I had a plan to enact.

He hadn't even locked the door, but then again, we both understood I couldn't escape. This, on the other hand...

I descended into the castle, attempting to follow the path Jem had brought me through. The Lumians were basic in their city planning. While Nuriya was a

maze of alleys in which even long-time citizens lost themselves, Lumi was all straight streets. The bridges added intricacy, but only on a superficial level.

But when it came to building palaces, the word was incompetent. Well, unless one wanted shifting and counter-intuitive add-ons all over the place, where even the same floors didn't line up properly. I had to backtrack down several different corridors. The path Jem had taken was so twisted... Although for all I knew, Jem had done it on purpose in order to keep me trapped in the castle. I shook my head. No, that was far too clever for him.

The corridor I currently stalked seemed familiar, but then all of the corridors looked the same. Bare stone walls and floors, with iron doors. Sometimes I saw cloth, browns and greys and other boring colours, hanging from the walls to trap in heat. Proof that at least one person in the entire history of Lumi had realised they lived in a freaking cold wasteland.

But apparently not too many. Nor did they seem to possess the imagination necessary to create art, not even basic stick figure murals or stripes to add a little variety. But really, what did I expect from a backwater town that didn't encourage commerce or creative endeavours but instead simply shoved villagers into a pit thinking they should be grateful for the vague hope of being tossed a piece of hard bread?

I almost pitied them for what I was about to do. Maybe I would have before the illustration Dajana had shown me. Maybe.

I glanced up and down, then grimaced. Not the right corridor after all, I was pretty sure. Of course, I had very little way to prove it either way, except to listen to my gut feeling.

The bare floors had one advantage, however. As I turned back, I heard the distinct ringing sound of footsteps. I swore quietly and let myself into the nearest door to wait for them to pass.

I should count myself lucky. In the palace back home, I couldn't make it three steps without encountering a slave.

Turning into the room, I paused and stepped back, surprised to see a fire flickering in the fireplace, unlike many of the other rooms I'd glimpsed. It seemed like if the room wasn't in use, the Lumians didn't care to keep it warm, or, as I more properly called it, barely habitable.

But a quick sweep of the room revealed no one waiting inside, only the lit hearth, the dust-covered shelves and a rectangular gold—

Wait, gold?

Across from the hearth, velvet cloth hung like a cloak around a gold box the size of a man. Not just gold... I eagerly stepped forwards, drinking in the turquoises, and reds, and greens, and rich blues, as blue as the ocean back home. All made of metal, it seemed, but unlike anything else I'd found in Lumi, which seemed pleased with its drab grey and black iron fixtures. Blah, blah, blah!

By the gods, staring at the colours filled me with warmth and light and everything that was good in the world, not traitorous little brothers and deceptively calm jailers and...

It was so good just to see something not monochromatic.

My breath came heavily in my chest, and I drooled, as if they'd laid out a feast for me. Pheasant and quail and cakes stacked high. And tea, minty and fresh and sweet, a rich green as colourful as the rest of Nuriya.

My hands rose and hovered over the gold box, as if shy to touch something so magnificent. So otherworldly... So... So...

I pressed my hands down, and the metal was warm, thanks to the blaze. I stroked my hands along the side, and indeed, all of those heavenly colours were wrought of metals. Not even in Nuriya was there such a thing. It was like a miracle.

"You're not supposed to fondle that," a voice said in the trade language.

I growled at the interloper. "Let me guess. I'm not even supposed to look at something so beautiful, because what is the point of making anything beautiful just to look at it? Like your fucking obelisk, except that is as ugly as a used chamber pot."

I heard two breaths sucked in. I finally turned around. Two boys around the age of ten stood in the open doorway. They both wore the same clothes as Jem, drab greys and light blues, with scarves wrapped around their necks because unlike Jem, they knew it was freaking cold in here.

One boy, brown-haired and red-cheeked, stood in front of the other as if guarding him, except their clasped hands linked them. The other boy, more meek or ashamed of my harsh words, ducked his blond head to avoid looking me in the eye. I mentally cursed, having been so wrapped up in the box to see them coming, but... but... it was such a pretty box...

The first boy started to laugh, as if I'd delighted him. "No, *you* can look."

I crossed my arms and leaned against the box. That seemed to delight him even more, and his friend tried to hide a smile at the boy's antics.

"But fondling a coffin is just bad manners," he continued.

I froze. "A coffin?"

The boy nodded.

I jumped away, staring down my side to make sure no offal dripped down it. I exhaled. I seemed to be safe. Why could nothing in Lumi just be beautiful? No, it had to all be like Jem if it must be anything but ugly, pleasing on the eyes so long as one could keep one's stone dinner down.

"Did someone just die? Recently?" I stared at it, as if the corpse were about to burst out of the coffin.

"No..."

"Then why would you keep a coffin around?" I demanded. "Why would you make it so... beautiful?"

And how could I order one for my own funeral? My brothers would die of envy.

"No one really talks about it," the boy said. His friend tried to shush him, but the boy waved him off.

The colour drained from my face. "You don't mean... It's *my* coffin."

It was the only reason the Lumians would bother with splendour. The coffin for whatever remained of me, after the Dark God was through. One final 'fuck you' from the superstitious peons of Lumi.

But the boy shook his head in the trade recognised symbol for 'no'. He grew solemn, the grin disappearing, leaving only a serious young man looking very much like Jem. It must have been the sheer lack of emotion. "It's Hemi's."

That earned a shocked cough from me, the name driving itself straight into my gut. "Prince Regent Hemi?"

The boy nodded.

"He's in there?" The boy started to make a shrugging motion, but I had already moved on. "He, as in Prince Regent Hemi who's ordered me to be horribly murdered so he can take over the peninsula, is dead?"

"Hemi would never do that!"

“Then what am I doing here?” I demanded of him. I knew it was unfair. He was just a boy, he didn’t actually know anything. Even if in Nuriya, a princeling of five was expected to recite the latest political machinations. “What am I doing here if not to build you an empire?”

“You’re here to save us all.”

I gaped at the boy. He sounded so much like Jem in that moment. So sure of himself, as if this fate was all for the best.

But wait, the boy hadn’t spoken. He was only giving me a confused look, as if he couldn’t imagine why the stranger from a foreign land pinned aghast eyes on him.

I wrenched my eyes away to the door while the boy’s friend stepped closer to whisper into his ear. To the filled door, where Jem stood stiffly to the side, hands clasped in front of him, while he looked not at me but at the boy... Or rather, six inches to the left of the boy.

“Right...” As if I had believed that. “It’s not because you’re claiming to take orders from a dead prince, hmm?”

He blinked, shrugging his shoulders, watching over us all, but looking at nothing.

Not denying anything either. Prince Regent Hemi had ordered this, Prince Regent Hemi wanted that. All lies, because Prince Regent Hemi was dead in a gold box worth more than all of Lumi and their mines.

I stepped forwards, searching for some purchase to pry it open with. I wanted to see this Prince Hemi. I wanted to look upon his rotting face and spit in it. Spit in his face for ruining my life over and over and over again and not even being alive so I might kill him.

Jem didn’t stop me, but hovered with a nervous energy in the corner of my eye, as if he wished to tackle me to the ground, but he must not approach the holy resting place of his former master. Good.

But another hand slapped me. The boy. “I told you it’s rude to fondle a coffin.”

I glared down at the boy. “I’m not...” Acting like the royal prince heir of Nuriya? Yes, indeed. I flung my hands up in the air, then shrugged. “And who are you to tell me what to do?”

Now Jem decided to intervene. “Prince Haori, your mother must be looking for you.”

The boy rolled his eyes.

I glanced from the boy to Jem. Jem who refused to look at the coffin, refused to accept the fate of his master. His faithful servant, selling himself into slavery to fulfil his dead master's wishes. My fists tightened.

"Prince Haori," Jem repeated.

"Yes, I know." Haori turned away from me, facing Jem. Jem seemed to curl away from the boy. "But I wanted to meet him."

"Most people start with 'my name is,'" I told him. The boy had just waltzed in, without a single guard, even though he shared the same title as I. No wonder he had a prince regent—even a dead one was smarter than this boy.

"Oh, right." He turned a bright grin at me, as if the clouds had parted and it had suddenly become summer. "My name is Haori, and this is my sweetheart, Ari." He motioned to the shy blond boy, who blushed at the words.

My jaw dropped, and I quickly stared at Jem, waiting for his explanation. Princes didn't just... They didn't have lovers, unless they were female courtiers, respectable enough to marry. But never uncastrated male ones.

"Prince Haori," Jem said, but not in warning.

"You should never say such a thing," I told Haori, since Jem didn't. "You should never do such a thing. It's disgusting and unbecoming of a prince heir."

"Ilyas," Jem hissed.

Haori's sunshine switched off, replaced by an anger seething under his skin, attempting to escape through his snarling lip or his flaring nose or his trembling fists. "How dare you."

"Someone must teach you how to act like a prince," I said. "And for some reason, I don't think a dead regent will be of much use."

"I know that it's rude to walk into someone else's kingdom and mock their culture."

"Disgusting is disgusting, no matter where one wanders."

"What's disgusting is you."

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before Jem abducted me from my home to drag me here to be sacrificed to your god."

Haori went quiet, if not stunned. Then he straightened, pulling together a facade of princely dignity. "Something incapable of love is not even human. It's just a big, dumb animal."

A big... dumb... animal? I was... I was... I was capable of love. Only... only everyone around me couldn't be trusted, each hugging their own agenda to their chest, ready to manipulate me at every turn.

What the hell did Haori even know about life at court? About ruling over a kingdom?

Haori turned and held out his hand to Ari, who gave me a fearful look before taking Haori's hand. Haori led him out the door. Jem bowed to them as they passed, but Haori, lacking all princely manners, grew embarrassed and slowed. "You don't have to do that, Hemi—I mean, Jem."

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## Chapter Nine

*Ilyas*

Jem remained silent, but his shoulders stiffened. Haori flicked him a concerned look, but then caught sight of me, his eyes narrowing, and he hurried Ari out of the room. Had the prince really called Jem...

Jem straightened, keeping his eyes pinned to the other side of the room, but I had no doubt his attention rested squarely on me.

I folded my arms. "Prince Hemi."

Jem didn't answer to it, but neither did he deny it.

"Hemi," I repeated. My fingers scraped my skin as I clutched at my arms. "That's what he called you. Hemi."

"Prince Hemi is dead," Jem said.

"So if I pried open this coffin, I'd find his body?"

Jem's silence was answer enough.

I turned, and paced against the far wall under a window that, like all windows in this god awful place, looked over nothing. Nothing, and nothing, and nothing.

Jem was Prince Regent Hemi. When Jem had said Hemi had ordered me to be sold into slavery, well, there was no part of that which wasn't a lie. Telling me Hemi had ordered this, and Hemi had ordered that, so I wouldn't know where the true orders came from. Why? Why?

I should have guessed it myself. I should have guessed who Haori was as soon as he entered, even though he acted more like a spoiled brat than a prince, and I had seen—I had seen!—the resemblance between Haori and Jem. Looking like brothers, or cousins, except that Jem appeared the perfect Lumian, leached of every bit of colour.

And Jem... Jem claiming he was perfectly obedient to his prince. Someone actually loyal to another, even though he possessed the power to take the village, or so Dajana had intimated. Someone who had cared for me. Someone a prince could trust. Someone who was equal. Someone I had always wanted—

But no, Jem only looked out for his own best interests. He wanted to rule the peninsula, but was too weak to even admit it. Too weak to admit he was the one trying to kill me, and not some distant, faceless prince regent. He... He...



“Prince Hemi is dead, Ilyas,” Jem said.

I stopped and pointed at him. “But you’re right there!”

“But I’m not...” He winced. “It’s difficult to explain.”

“It’s not difficult at all. You lied to me. You lied. And you had no reason to lie. What do I care if the orders to kill me come from some distant prince or you? You, who can summon snow monsters! So why?”

“I didn’t... Prince Hemi died a long time ago. He left me to watch over this body and to enact his plan.”

“To escape responsibility? Just call a spade a spade!”

He quirked his head, but I didn’t really care to explain how proper language worked. I returned to stomping my fury into the ugly, stone floors.

As if it mattered if Jem was Hemi. It changed nothing. Nothing except Jem’s loyalty...

I turned on him again. “And then you let the prince heir go around calling other men his sweetheart!”

Jem—Hemi didn’t flinch. “Such relationships are hardly remarked upon here. And I beg you not to repeat your comments again. They are not welcome.”

“What shouldn’t be welcomed is—”

“What does it matter to you?” he asked. “Rape isn’t welcomed either, if it’s your own chastity you worry about. Haori has a friend. They hold hands, they kiss. Which doesn’t hurt you.”

“He should be busy siring his heir—”

Jem laughed. “He’s thirteen!”

I grimaced at him. “It doesn’t matter. Encouraging him to—”

“You still know nothing about Lumi. I showed you. I showed you what it’s like to live here, and you still can’t figure it out? We don’t have enough to feed anymore mouths.”

“So that means he can—”

“Love whomever he wants?” Jem asked. “Yes, it does. The old king loved a woman, and they bore too many children. The people will be happy their prince has a love which will not bear more mouths to feed.”

“Because they’re idiots!”

“Because that’s the way of life here.”

Jem might have been right—no, no. I turned away, blinking rapidly. “And if it should make it easier for you to take over...”

“Ilyas, we are not in Nuriya.”

“I gathered that.”

“I serve Prince Haori,” he said. “I’m doing all of this so Haori can live to take the throne. I’m sacrificing everything I might have been so that when he takes his throne, he has enough to eat. So that he still has a kingdom to rule. This isn’t Nuriya.”

My shoulders shook. “You don’t give a damn about Haori.”

He meant to take the throne himself. He meant to... then why?

“He means everything,” Jem said, as if he were Haori’s true *tawam rohi*. As if despite his unchallenged snowmancy, as if despite his position as regent, he actually did give his fealty to the prince heir.

How could he say such things and mean it? Why did he have to be so damn... perfect? Absolutely perfect. The one person in the entire world who gave up everything for another, his brother, his prince. The one who might actually be a *tawam rohi*.

A miracle to even meet a worthy candidate. In Nuriya, scrolls and scrolls had been written about brief meetings, before and after the ritual. Scrolls and scrolls detailing the profound trust and admiration between the two, the bond no one else ever felt, especially not in the thick of the Nuriyite court.

A man capable of even tricking me, manipulating me. Someone who may make mincemeat of Nuriyite intrigues... Someone who had tended me when I was ill without recompense or threats, who had held me so close as if I were something precious to him. Someone who blushed when I flirted instead of used me with glee. Someone who couldn’t keep his eyes from flicking up and down my body, as if I were more beautiful than all the riches of Nuriya.

To meet such a man unbound, and yet... Despite all of that, he couldn’t be for me. He wasn’t mine. He lied to me. He hadn’t even told me his real name, his real identity. I clenched my fists together, not seeing the ugly stone walls but fire in my eyes.

But he wasn’t entirely Haori’s, either.

Jem stood sentry at the door, resolute and so—so *tawam rohi*-like. I couldn't stomach him any longer and stormed out of the wake room.

I expected him to corral me back to his prison tower room—a room more befitting a scullery maid than a prince, even a dead prince. I stormed away from the tower down the corridor, but he lingered at the door, until I reached the alcove of the stairs and peered back at him. He stared inside the wake room. Why, when he couldn't even bear to look at his own coffin?

According to Haori, it was all right to stare at the coffin, but not at Jem. But Haori had looked up at him, even as the other boy Ari kept his eyes on the floor. Haori would have even met Jem's eyes, if Jem hadn't kept his gaze stubbornly skewed as if the princeling was the obelisk outside.

The one Lumian who even looked at Jem...

I squeezed my fists, resisting the urge to pound them into the stone wall until blood ran down my arms. It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it wasn't fair—

Dear gods, now I sounded like my brothers, whingeing about how unfair it was I outwitted them at every turn. It wasn't fair that I would rule over Nuriya while they jostled for position.

It was fair, because I'd been born first, because every waking moment since I'd been born I had protected my position, never trusting anyone, never showing anyone who I really was—never even showing myself—

Just like Jem, pretending to be somebody else. Architecting his kingdom's rise to prosperity, head of his empire, all for Haori.

Meanwhile, I would just be dead. In pieces. Without a fancy coffin.

No. No. I wouldn't let that just happen. I found the right turn, marked with a lamp I promptly borrowed. As if the lamp proved a magic charm, I found the next turn, and the next, until I burst into the cold. The cold, snowing air, like a slap to the face.

I wrought my own future. I wasn't tiny Prince Haori, blessed with a *tawam rohi* candidate to protect my future, without having done a single thing to deserve him. I had kept my inheritance through my own wits and schemes. And if I wanted Jem, if I wanted the *tawam rohi* candidate dangling himself in front of my eyes...

"But he's not!" I screamed. "He's not *tawam rohi*. He never could be. I'm not losing—"

I slapped my hands over my mouth, then bit my lip in anger. I wrapped the scarf tightly over my mouth, muffling myself. I shook in the silence.

If he was *tawam rohi*, he was another's, and I could never have him. A *tawam rohi*, even unbound, never switched loyalties. He would be forever out of my reach, even if he had turned tender eyes and gentle hands towards me.

No, if he switched loyalties to me, he wasn't a *tawam rohi*. I would prove he wasn't. I would prove he wasn't clever enough to be mine. To be my partner—that he was nothing more than a worthless hack. I'd destroy everything he'd built, and at his devastation, I would laugh and laugh and laugh at the joke that was Jem, the man who thought he would be *tawam rohi*, who thought he could be and could reject me. He wasn't that. And I would prove it.

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The obelisk loomed like a shadow, an ethereal presence I felt more than saw. It sent a shiver over my shoulders—or rather, the cold did. Only the cold. I glanced at it. Not even the snowflakes dared to get close, dancing around but giving it the same berth as the snow demons.

A god that terrified even snowflakes.

The square was empty, no one to disapprove as I spat in the direction of the obelisk. If only it was a statue, so I might spit in the Dark God's face. Instead, I turned towards the building the peasants had lined up outside earlier that Jem had called the storehouse. Lumi's only storehouse, because Lumians were so complacent, so stupid as to keep their most precious resource in only one place.

Even in Nuriya, where food and spice were as plentiful as the stars, we weren't so foolish.

The falling snow had filled in the crowd's footprints. I trudged up to the door. The building itself was windowless—and why not? What was there to look at?—but perhaps...

I tried the front door, and it slid open, because the Lumians were so foolish they had never imagined the starving hordes might actually steal.

The front hall was empty, just light and shadows dancing over the stones as I held up my lamp. I found the next door left open, and I almost laughed, thinking thieves really had gotten here first.

I eyed the oil level in my lamp. I should have brought more to douse the foodstuffs with, but this would be enough to get it started.

And then... And then Jem would have no choice. Lumi would fall before the Dark God came, but I—magnificent bastard I was—would offer Jem the choice to leave behind his failure of a prince to stay at my side, my *tawam rohi*, as I retook the Nuriyite court.

I sniffed. Unlikely. He'd more likely still try to use me as a sacrifice, never mind that he was not and never would be a *tawam rohi*. Never. But perhaps I'd abduct him and train him until he acted a fair likeness. Make him forget Lumi and Prince Haori forever.

But first... I trudged into the next room, my boots echoing in the stone hall. Echoing as if the whole building was empty...

The rest of the building was a large room lined with stone and iron, more like a warehouse in Nuriya. The lamplight bounced along the stones.

The empty stones.

In the empty room.

The storehouse was empty. Not a sack, or a pail, or a box, or even crumbs on the floor.

No. I gritted my teeth, lifting the lamp again to see the back wall. There had to be another door. A trap door no one would try, protecting their stores from thieves and beggars and... and...

“Burn the place.”

My fingers tightened around the lamp handle, and I bit my lip to keep from screaming. I whirled back to the door, where Jem waited, his bare hands folded, his face bare. Unlike last time, though, he'd made the concession of wrapping a scarf around his head, like a Nuriyite woman on her way to the marketplace.

He said again, “Go ahead, burn it. If it will make you feel better.”

Burning their precious little food would make me feel better. Destroying their town would make me feel better. Burning an empty storehouse—no, no. “Why bother? You're already going to starve. Gave away all your rations, did you?”

“I had the little still left moved.”

I tilted my head, not believing him.

He turned his head and smirked, but not with any kind of victory. The smirk of a corpse, muscles taut with rigor mortis. “Why do you think I showed you this place?”

No. No, this hadn't been Jem's idea. It hadn't been his distraction, to make me focus on destroying an empty building instead of escaping. No, this had been my idea, it had been a good move, it—

I felt suddenly like one of those white game pieces, surrounded by Jem's black. The Dark God's black.

Jem continued, "I had also hoped you would understand how... significant your death will be. How much your life is worth."

"My life—" Was worth so much more. More than if I were dead. I couldn't do anything while writhing under the Dark God's torture implements.

"There wasn't much to move." I felt like strangling him. To stop him from calmly explaining his plan, so cunningly wrought but giving him no pleasure. "It took less than an hour. Lumi's coffers are almost empty. Sentei refuses to trade more."

"So?" I demanded. "So I'm supposed to be grateful that I get to—get to be sacrificed for this?"

Jem looked down, as if ashamed. But he wasn't. He was managing me, just like he'd kept me managed this entire time. The things I'd done to defy him only amounted to almost dying in the ice water and upending a game board.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. If he were *tawam rohi*, he was supposed to be... placid. Staring up at me with adoring eyes. Picking me, not some erstwhile brat, while running me in circles.

"Just stop lying!" If he lied to me, I couldn't trust him. If he lied, he wasn't mine. "Stop hiding!"

He looked up at me. "My people—Prince Haori's people—are about to starve to death. They already are, but soon... In a day, in maybe two, it will change. We have nothing to give them. Nothing to stave their hunger off. They'll try to find something to eat, mould or wood shavings or dirt. But nothing grows here. The *katara* are all gone, and so is every other beast around here."

"If only you could summon something useful, then," I said. "They can't eat your snow demons."

He shook his head, unmoved. "No, they can't. They'll try to fill their bellies with water, to pretend they aren't starving, but then... Maybe it will be a few days. Maybe a week. Maybe a little longer than that. People will start dying,

and it will feel like the Dark God's miracle. Horror and hope wrapped up together, as finally, there will be something to eat. But it won't last long. People will stop dying. They'll live off the meat of the dead, until that disappears. But they'll die slower. We start back at the beginning. So..."

"They start to kill each other," I finished.

Jem nodded. "Some might kill themselves so their children will eat. Some might rip apart each other, or eat their own children. If the Dark God doesn't come."

"And why should I care?" I asked. "Why should I care about your little barbarians?"

*Why are their lives so much more valuable than mine?*

"Could you really watch all that?" he asked. "This is the truth I've lived with for... This is the truth Prince Hemi died for."

"It's too bad they can't eat Hemi, then."

Jem's next words were almost too soft for me to hear. "There's a greater purpose for this body."

A greater purpose that should have been—no, he wasn't *tawam rohi*. "Why do you even care?"

He blinked.

"Why do you even care about all those barbarians—those future cannibals—when they won't even look at you?"

He winced, but did not answer. He didn't need to. I already knew why. Because of the feckless Prince Haori. Because of his affection for someone who didn't even know enough to recognise what Jem really was.

I raised the lamp, ready to chuck it at the wall, to watch something go up in flames, to make my surroundings match the turmoil inside. Instead, I let my hand fall to my side, the lamp dangling in my loose grip. Not looking at him, not wanting to see his reaction, I asked, "What happens to me when the Dark God comes?"

Dajana had shown me the woodcuttings. Very descriptive woodcuttings. But I needed to hear it from Jem. I needed him to know what was going to happen to me. How I would end up.

I needed him to stop lying.

Instead, I received silence. I supposed I should find some comfort in that, how even Jem was ashamed of what he was doing to me. What he was handing me over to.

Then he finally said, “You won’t survive.”

That was his answer? I started to laugh. Ah, Jem! So understated. Three words to tell me Dajana hadn’t lied.

He let me laugh hysterically, making no noise or words or movement. Just waiting while I collapsed to my knees, the giggles escaping lips I couldn’t control. Not passing judgement, or labelling me weak. Not plotting how to use it against me. Or perhaps he was. Just... just letting me... be...

After the giggles tapered off, my chest heaving to regain my breath, Jem still didn’t say anything.

“Are you really fine with that?” I asked him. “We have an unfinished board game, after all.”

That evoked a reaction, his lips parting. As if he’d never thought about whether he wanted me to live or die, or the fate of the unfinished game I’d scattered over the floor. Like I’d scatter his people, if I had the chance. He didn’t really care.

I shook my head, the giggles threatening to return.

“I... Your life is precious,” Jem said.

“My death is apparently worth far more.”

“I...”

Still so confused. Was it an act? Was he trying to steer me towards another futile course of action?

I stood, exhaling. “Are you marching me back to your tower room?”

“You may go wherever you like,” Jem said.

“Even though I tried to set your storehouse on fire? Or do you want me to stop the Dark God?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “You’re powerless to stop what’s coming.”

I froze, except for my fingers pressing my fingernails into my palm. I didn’t even know how the Dark God would come. I wrenched myself away, and laughed. “Of course you don’t care. You’re already dead.”



## Chapter Ten

*Jem*

Her Majesty huddled alone in Prince Hemi's room, eyes pinned to the window, but the coffin drew her attention. The coffin I'd seen for the first time after Ilyas had 'fondled' it.

I hadn't meant to look. I'd only stepped into the room to escort Prince Haori away before Ilyas proved a danger. Haori was too curious for his own good, and too... loose with his words. He'd called me Hemi, although he'd known since swaddling his elder brother was dead, and while I may look like him, I was not him. Only the shell left behind.

Ilyas would describe me as the slave left to tend to this body while waiting for its true master.

I thought Ilyas would understand—no, no I didn't. Ilyas didn't understand anything truly important. His thoughts had always been rife with intrigue, and in the few moments they weren't, filled with lust he slaked in his harem. Ilyas had never known what it was like to be expendable.

He'd railed against me, as if he had cause to be angry. He thought I was Hemi, giving the orders. I wasn't. I had my orders from long ago. I put the pieces into place. I waited for the Dark God to arrive. That was all.

And then he'd stormed out, and I'd waited to give him the room he needed to act, or so I'd thought. Instead, I'd flicked my eyes to the object that had entranced Ilyas. The very thing I had no right to look upon.

The day I, Jem, came into being, Her Majesty had lost her son. She still mourned him, and every day she had to look upon me, she had to see her son, knowing it was not him inside.

Ilyas wondered why I would sacrifice everything for people who refused to even look at me. He didn't understand, no matter what words I used to explain.

Her Majesty cleared her throat, and still standing against the door, I started. It was her way of summoning me, without having to use a name—the one that didn't belong to me, or the one that didn't fit her son's body.

I crossed the floor, holding out the clay tablet. Ilyas would call it—us—backwater, but we didn't have reeds and rushes to beat into pulp for paper. We

only had what we brought up from the earth, and clay lasted so much longer than reeds.

The bottom of the tablet was still wet. She took the tablet, holding it carefully so as not to smudge herself with clay. I stayed silent. She knew what it said, and why.

My fingers tugged at my scarf, wrapped over my head and around my neck, crossing over one cheek. If Ilyas had noticed, he hadn't mentioned it.

Her Majesty signed the tablet. Signed my responsibilities away for the few remaining days, as if they even were my responsibilities to begin with. Her Majesty had taken care of Lumi during my journey.

Only days now. Only hours. Time slipped through my fingers.

"How is he?" Her Majesty asked. "Your exotic prince."

Since Ilyas had returned to his room straight from the storehouse, he hadn't said much of anything. All he'd done was perch on the windowsill and stare at his enemy, the 'boring nothing'. "Despondent, Your Majesty."

I'd tried to cheer him, or at least distract him. I offered him my very last biscuit, a venerable feast in Lumi, but Ilyas hadn't even turned to look.

My eyes dropped to the ground.

Her Majesty shifted her foot. "You have to do something."

I'd tried. I could devise a new scheme, give him hope that he would escape his shackles. Escape me. Like everyone else wanted to.

"The Dark God will not be pleased with a despondent offering," she said.

I jerked away from her. The scarf slid back on my hair, and Her Majesty gasped. I quickly returned it to its proper place, but the damage was done. If I could have beaten myself, punched myself in the stomach...

That wasn't a sight any mother should see on her son's body. And yet, I'd let it happen because I'd forgotten about the Dark God's desires.

The Dark God wanted an exotic creature, yes, but a defiant one. I'd known the moment I'd laid eyes upon Ilyas, he was the one as his violet eyes dared his brothers to try to take him. The Dark God wanted to break that defiance.

"Ilyas knows," I said.

Her Majesty made a pained sound.

“He knows he’s the sacrifice.” I didn’t add that he didn’t know the other thing.

She breathed deeply. “How?”

“The ambassador, I expect.” Although how she’d managed to approach him without my snow demons noticing... “He’s being completely...”

She tilted her head, as if about to snap at me. But she held herself, a vision of modicum, and asked, “How did you think he would react?”

“Ilyas is selfish,” I snapped. “If it were his people, he would let them starve to save his own life. And it’s not even certain the Dark God will kill him. Only...”

Only my death was certain.

“Few people can be like you.”

Few people. Few people ever had their first memory, their first true memory as themselves, be their father explaining why he wasn’t his real son, his fate set out for him with a defined deadline. Knowing he would die, knowing he didn’t have to... Not unless he watched all those people who didn’t even look at him die far more slowly, far more painfully, exactly as I’d described to Ilyas.

“Your exotic princeling regards his life as precious—” Her Majesty had started to say.

“My life is precious as well!”

The words rang in the otherwise empty room. My eyes tugged towards the coffin, my coffin—Prince Hemi’s coffin.

I started to shake my head. “My apologies, Your Majesty. I spoke... I did not mean it.”

“Didn’t you?” she asked.

“Of course not. It’s always been my pleasure to be...” My voice cracked. It wasn’t pleasure. I’d walked through this life like a ghost, keeping everything I touched to a minimum.

She lowered her head, folding her arms across herself. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

My hand rose to the scarf, to press against the parasite of a tattoo hidden beneath, but I stopped myself. “It won’t be long.”

“The scriptures say—”

“I know what the scriptures say.” The tattoo began to burn. I took a deep breath. “I apologise, Your Majesty.”

Her chin moved a fraction, in as much of a nod as I would receive. “It isn’t you, these feelings. It’s only the bleed over.”

I closed my eyes. But what was me? The boy who waited to die, I supposed, whose room was empty. No one to miss me when I was gone. No one to care either way.

Well, one person would care. Ilyas would curse me long after I was gone. He would dream about me, about wrapping his brown fingers around my neck and strangling me. He would remember me. My lips turned upward in a smile.

“Hem—” Her Majesty started to say.

I blinked my eyes open, almost as startled as Her Majesty herself. I bowed to her to break the confusion, the motion familiar ground.

She winced. “Maintain your focus. Do not let anything distract you.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I said. When had my focus ever wavered? But it didn’t matter what I thought. I just accepted the signed tablet back and bowed out of the room.

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## Chapter Eleven

*Ilyas*

No wonder the Lumians made no art. I stared out the window onto the featureless landscape, just miles and miles of grey ocean. The scenery was not provocative in the least, and my thoughts—my plans, or rather lack of them—ran over and over in my head. No new ideas, no ideas for escape popped into my mind.

Just... just...

Jem was not getting to me, especially not the matter of fact way he'd spelled out his village's demise, as if it was a foregone conclusion. As if he knew the villagers wouldn't resort to cannibalism right away, but would wait until the situation grew desperate.

But then apparently Jem had had a long time to think about this—and he still didn't know. He only thought...

My life, for theirs. Jem acted as if it was such an easy choice. As if I should actually care about this backwater village, with the even more backwater peasants, with the... with the...

Jem's snow demon flew past the window, failing to provoke a flinch. Just another round, another check in, while Jem had left me alone long ago, a biscuit in an otherwise empty tin box set on the ledge next to me.

A biscuit. A biscuit. A biscuit... The last biscuit...

I tore at my black hair, messing it up, as if somehow the motion would make my thoughts behave. Messed it around like I was a madman, not a prince, and of course that was it. Jem wanted me to go mad. He wanted to hobble me. He wanted...

A light—the firefly—buzzed in front of my eyes. I stared at it, eyes hooded, resting my head on the arms wrapped around my knees. When I didn't give the response it wanted, it dove at me, like a particular pesky insect. I swatted it away.

"Ouch, don't do that!" came Dajana's tinny voice.

"Fuck off," I muttered.

The firefly returned to the window, but out of reach. “If I didn’t know any better, I would think you want to die more horribly than anyone has ever suffered in all of history.”

I snorted. All of history, was it? And just how much history did Lumi or Sentei or any of the rest of the frozen wasteland of a peninsula have? “Why not? It’s not like there’s anything I can do.”

The firefly made a strangled sound like a bee buzzing. Bees. That was something Lumi didn’t have. No bees, no honey, or even locusts. “Of course there is!”

“The storeroom—”

“The storeroom? The storeroom is useless. The entire city is about to starve.”

And then people would start to die, and the survivors with empty pits instead of stomachs would go mad, and then no one—

“Your Highness!” Dajana shrieked, her voice so high that it was nearly unintelligible. “Are you really going to wait to be sacrificed for a bunch of half-starved mongrels?”

Half-starved mongrels. I opened my mouth to ask her what she thought of Haori exchanging kisses with another boy. Were the Sentei like Nuriyites? Or did the Sentei simply think of Lumi as peasants to be shoved into a mine when they needed metal, and left to starve when they didn’t?

“Then what?” I asked, instead. “What is your great plan? How can I possibly stop the Dark God from coming?”

“I’m glad you asked.” I loathed the sound of her voice, so smug and dark and blood ridden.

“So you finally have a plan. Good for you.”

“It’s a plan you will love. Something you will beg me to do.”

I turned my head back to the window, waiting for the snow demon’s next rotation. The snow demons didn’t need to rest, it seemed, and lived bound in their snow shells until the shells were destroyed.

Was that how Jem saw himself? As if he were merely a snow demon, left in Prince Hemi’s body to do his bidding? But he was—

“Your Highness!”

Was she really trying to reprimand me? I ground my teeth. “What?”

“All you have to do is kill Jem.”

My shoulders tensed, and in this position, it felt like my whole body had turned to stone. Or ice, like the snow demons or the icicle fortress walls outside.

“See? I told you you’d like it.”

Slowly, the vertebrae in my neck grinding as if fashioned from stone, I turned back to that smug little firefly bastard.

The firefly buzzed. “He only has one weakness, his fleshy, soft little body. He has snow demons to defend him, but they won’t help if someone is already close to him. Someone he would hesitate to hurt. Someone who he’s brought into his own room, where he sleeps undefended.”

“Because it wouldn’t matter,” I said. “If Jem dies, someone else will continue the ritual.”

“No one else can.”

“Of course they can. Jem is too clever to leave such an obvious gap. He probably has a line of people ready to step in.”

“No, he doesn’t. He can’t.”

My body unfurled as the blood drained from my face, settling and solidifying in my belly. I turned my head slightly, eyeing the firefly. Eyeing it like I could read her thoughts on the insect’s tiny face.

“No one else can be the Dark God’s vessel.”

No, I was wrong. That hadn’t felt like a stone in my stomach, because now it felt like Dajana had chucked a boulder into my belly. I gasped, my chest unable to draw the breath necessarily to ask. To deny it. To demand she deny it.

Enough breath for the words to arrange themselves in my mind, spelling out only one certainty.

I swallowed, and finally inhaled. “What are you saying?”

“Jem is the vessel. The Dark God’s being is unwrapping itself inside him as we speak. If you kill him—”

I didn’t wait for her to finish before jumping off the ledge and out the door. The firefly called after me, but I ignored it. Dajana wasn’t important. I had to find Jem. I had to hear it from Jem.

But he wasn't in the coffin room, only an old woman who looked surprised at my abrupt appearance, but like Dajana, I didn't wait for her to babble out her shock. Hurrying down the corridor, and the next, and the next, just searching for him without a single word, or a single thought of where Jem might go. Just searching empty room after empty room.

Until I found myself back at the tower room, the door open and no sign of errant fireflies. But Jem was there, standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed, as he stared at where I'd been sitting when he'd left.

That light-grey scarf was wrapped around his head and neck. It only took three steps to cross the room to him, but in that time, he had already started to turn, his blue eyes widening in surprise. His lips parted to lie to me again.

When we'd first arrived in Lumi, only two or three days before, Jem had pranced around in the bare minimum of clothing, outside or inside. I suspected he'd meant to fool me when he'd worn the coat and hat trekking from Sentei to Lumi.

Then he'd worn the scarf. And then longer sleeves. And now he'd wrapped it around his head.

I yanked the scarf from his head while Jem clawed at the fabric to keep it. I let it drop to the floor, pooling between our feet. Jem made a keening sound.

He turned his head away, showing me the clean side, all white skin like an empty snowfield. But I grasped his chin and turned his head back to me. He only fought me a little.

And then he turned his head the other way, as if even once I'd seen what he'd tried to hide, he couldn't bear to look me in the eye—couldn't bear to see my thoughts.

Just as well. I sucked in my breath, and even to my deaf ears, I sounded shaky.

The side of Jem's face, his neck and down into his tunic, was covered in black, swirling rot.

Rot. It was the only word I could think to describe it, even though it wasn't actually rotting. Just black, black as the obsidian obelisk in the square, almost like a tattoo.

But the energy, the feeling in my gut, said 'rot'.

I cleared my throat. Jem still didn't dare to look. "Is it true?"



He pursed his lips. His Adam's apple shifted.

"Is it true?" I demanded. "Is he—are you the Dark God's vessel?"

For a moment, Jem was still. I waited for him to deny it. To say he wasn't the thing his Dark God would slide into, he wasn't the body that would torture me. To lie to me again.

"Yes." His voice was soft.

"Yes, what?"

"When the Dark God comes, I will cease to exist."

I slammed my hands on Jem's shoulders. He tensed further, as if trying to decide whether to allow me to attack or to intervene, but neither was on my menu. I shook him. "What the hell do you mean?"

"What else could I mean?"

"Stop being... you!"

He smiled wryly, and the emotionless gesture made me choke. "Soon enough. Just wait."

I made a half-growling, half-crying sound. Just wait? Just wait for him to stop being him? "This is—this is idle fancy. Backwater superstition. A charlatan coming down from the mountain, tricking you into..."

He shook his head, but used no words to convince me. The evidence was writ on his face, on his body. I tore at his robe, ripping away the tie while the white of his cheeks turned pink, except for the black, rotting tattoos.

I tossed the robe away, my fingers returning to brush down one strand of curling black. They curled and swirled all the way down his arm and his chest, down below his trousers. I moved to the next one and the next, as if I might suddenly find they were all a joke, just another one of Jem's plots.

The tattoos—the rot felt like the rest of his skin, strong and smooth, except for the goose pimples erecting under my touch.

His skin rippled under my fingers. His body shivered like a virgin touched for the first time, as I knew very, very well. I slid my hands over his body, both black and white, the short white hairs standing at attention, reaching for me. Wanting me. Just as my fingers drank in the feel of him.

Jem pinched his arms to his side. He should have been covering himself, hiding the tattoos. I jerked my head, a black lock returning to dangle in front of my eyes. The lock appeared brown compared to Jem's tattoos.

Not hiding, but shoving my hands away. Preventing me from running my hands all over his chest and over his shoulder, following the design. For that matter, I shouldn't be doing this. Jem was the enemy and he was not a eunuch, and as my hands approached the band of his trousers, he made that fact very much apparent. In Nuriya, my brothers would rejoice at such a shaming, the chance they needed to bollocks up the kingdom, but we weren't in Nuriya. And such things were okay in Lumi.

And such things were okay if bound to each other, *tawam rohi* to *tawam rohi*...

Jem turned his cheeks to the side, either unable to watch me or embarrassed by the adorable pink blush bridging from cheek to cheek. Yet still he didn't push me away, but remained very, very still. I could do anything I wanted to him.

Why wasn't he shoving me away? Was this merely his way of distracting me again? Or did he actually want me to touch him?

I clenched his shoulders, my fingers wanting to rove again but held taut there. I inhaled, then shook him again. "You can't be... You're just going to die? You're going to let that thing carve you up inside—you're going to—"

He batted at my hands, but I shook him again. Now he looked annoyed. Good. "What choice do I have?" he asked. "Either I die, or I'm swallowed by the Dark God. And only one of those will save my people. You will save my people."

"Fuck them!" I turned to the window. "FUCK YOU ALL!"

"Ilyas..." He sounded resigned to his fate. Well, I wasn't resigned at all.

"And you! Just giving up. Just... just... giving up! Oh, it's okay if people who won't even look at me hand me to the Dark God—who's fucking vicious, by the way—on a silver platter. It's okay if I pretend I'm dead for years and years, waiting in a mortuary. I won't even start a game because who knows if I'll even live long enough to finish it!"

He pursed his lips. "That does sound like me."

I shook him again, and again, and again, waiting for words that never came.

He furrowed his brow. "Why are you even angry—"

I interrupted him by yanking him into me, wrapping my arms around him. Those Lumians didn't know. They didn't understand. Jem wasn't just some...

some body they could throw around. He could be someone's *tawam rohi*. He could make someone—make me truly happy, and not just...

But of course the Lumians didn't understand how special he was. Their prince just bonded with whomever he wanted, male or female, peasant or lord—if there even were any lords. They didn't know what it was like to have to play the part, every single moment, and then—and then to find the one person in the entire world who didn't put himself first... The one person who put me first...

I clutched him to my chest, and pretended I shook from rage, and not from anything cold and wet sliding down my cheeks. He couldn't see my expression, only felt my cheek and neck pressed against his. Pressed against the rot that felt even colder than Jem's already chilled form.

"I don't want you to disappear," I whispered.

Jem didn't say anything, but remained stiff in my arms, before his arms wrapped around me. Like a doll manoeuvred into position without understanding why or how. Because no one ever hugged Jem. Because all they saw in Jem was the dead prince.

"How can you just accept this?" My voice was thick, and it made me angry, clawing at his back. At the muscle still on his bones, thanks to his extended stay in Nuriya.

"I..." Unlike mine, his voice was thin, as if he was so far away, even though he was clutched in my arms. "I just... I've always known I would die. I'm only the slave left to care for this body until the Dark God claims it."

"Bullshit!" I spat. "You're the man who toppled the Nuriyite prince heir. You like playing that board game, and can't bear to leave a game unfinished. You like the view, although only the gods know why, and—and you love to eat those biscuits, although even the gods have trouble understanding that. And—and you're the most powerful magic user on the peninsula. Dajana said so. A snowmancer. That's who you are. That's... that's you!"

"My abilities are the Dark God's power spilling over."

I clenched him harder. "No. That's you."

"Everything I am is to be His vessel. His power spills into me, over me, to make me into his vessel, and protect me until the time comes for Him to take rightful possession of me."

“And so... and so you’re going to ignore who you are? You’re going to believe you’re already dead so nothing matters? You—”

“Why do you even care?” Jem pulled back, but I was stronger, and kept him trapped against me, where I kept a close eye on him. Where I kept him safe.

“Because you’re...” I started to answer, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t tell him that. Because he was not my *tawam rohi*. He was... “I don’t want you to disappear. Why don’t you even seem—”

“It’s your life that’s precious.”

I growled into his neck.

“It’s your life that’s worth something, and I’m stealing that away. But I’m not you. I’m only worth something once I die.”

Because his people were dying, because the one he was sworn to had a responsibility to the people, because he thought this was the only way.

“It’s too late, regardless,” Jem whispered. “I can’t stop the Dark God from coming.”

I blinked, and held him harder until he found it difficult to breathe, as if that would stop everything. But it wouldn’t, would it? Once again, I was completely powerless. I couldn’t save myself.

And I couldn’t save Jem.

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## Chapter Twelve

*Jem*

Ilyas had crushed me to his chest for a long time, until darkness had arrived and his stomach grumbled. He'd allowed me to pass out of arms' distance to tell a servant to bring bread, and to feed him the biscuit.

He wouldn't accept it. He broke it in half, and made me eat while he choked down the other half. He didn't even complain about how bland it must have seemed to him.

And then we'd fallen into the bed, Ilyas with his strong limbs wrapped around me, his body curved around mine. His hand stroked my stomach, just as he had when we'd been standing, his fingers seeking out every strand of the Dark God's touch. My body grew uncomfortably hot remembering, and I held myself stock still to avoid fidgeting and shoving the blankets down. Ilyas needed to stay warm, and this was not the way I needed to think in the days to come.

He slept now, or pretended to, his chest rising and falling with slow, even breaths. I pretended, my eyes closed and my breaths careful.

Ilyas knew what I was, and if he knew that, he also knew how to stop the Dark God and doom my people to a slow and horrific death.

The way he had yelled... Was it a trick? An act he fell into in order to lull me? Trick me into thinking he valued my life, so I would trust him until he slipped a knife across my throat? Not that he had a knife, but there were things he could do. I knew, I had seen, back in the Nuriyite court when Ilyas had trained in the martial arts.

It had to be a trick. The alternative was impossible. I'd abducted him from his rightful place, and dragged him all the way to Lumi to be sacrificed as the Dark God's plaything. He had to revile me. He couldn't think of me any other way...

I'd glimpsed the look on his face when his eyes had roved over the Dark God's mark. The revulsion. His expression hadn't matched his words... well, the sentiment behind his words, because his words were all angry. Angry at me for not being afraid. Angry at me for accepting my fate.

Once upon a time, I had been afraid. Or rather, Prince Hemi had been. He'd been brought into a dark room full of strangers in black robes, laid naked on a

stone slab, and no one told him why. He begged his father, the king, to explain, but no explanation was forthcoming. Not then.

That had only been a time of fire, and daggers, and blood, and ice so cold Prince Hemi had screamed. His body had been warm, like Ilyas' body was now, but it didn't stay that way. No, Prince Hemi had begged and begged for relief, for help, to escape, but instead they cut into his body. They held him face down and stuffed his mouth full of fabric. He cried around the gag as they laid the first tattoo on his neck.

He had never understood why. I had learned, and in those first few months, perhaps even years, if I had ever dared question it, they beat the truth into me. Carefully, of course, as to not leave a scar on the Dark God's vessel. The Dark God disdained imperfection.

True understanding only came later, when we experienced our first famine. Sentei had produced a poor crop that year, and while we'd had enough to sustain Lumi until the next harvest, not everyone had survived. The elderly died, the children died. Some had even wandered out of the city to die of exposure. Better to die quickly than slowly.

That was what it meant to be Lumian. Ilyas acted as if it were a choice.

Ilyas moved, and I readied myself, forcing my breathing to slow. He merely curled around me, pressing his chest against me, and wrapping his arms around my shoulders. As if I were something precious. We lay like that for a long, breathless moment, before Ilyas released me and started moving again.

In the dark, I waited, counting my breaths, listening to Ilyas' movements. Waiting for him to attack, to wrap his arms around my neck and snap it before my snow demons burst through the window.

Ilyas started to move away. To retrieve a blunt instrument? I'd never been knocked out before, so I didn't know if my snow demons would sustain themselves if I were unconscious. They might still attack Ilyas.

But Ilyas still didn't return. I heard fabric rustle, as if he were undressing, which he wouldn't because he found it chilly. And he wouldn't, because I was there and might get ideas.

Or Ilyas might get ideas, but he still didn't attack. I heard him hiss as his bare feet swept over the cold stones, but the sounds didn't match any attack I'd ever heard.

I opened my eyes. The room was dark with the dying moon and the fire banked, but enough to pick out Ilyas' figure, nude, and... And moving. His

arms swept over his head, and then he swept down, hanging halfway, and then one foot stepped back so he was braced in a fighter-like stance, but not. More like... dancing?

But not any dancing I'd ever witnessed in Nuriya.

He stretched his arms up, every muscle in his back and arms gleaming in the firelight. His attention wasn't on me, but somewhere else, far away, or just focused on his own body. I pushed myself up to lean against the wall, watching him.

And then he turned into a side lunge, his hands resting on the ground like they were just decoration. He rose to both feet and moved into some convoluted balancing motion, arms in front with his knee lifted before he brought both hands and foot behind him, his chest moving down to the ground—

And he saw me. I knew the exact moment, because it was the split second before his side hit the stone with a sickening crunch.

An apology bubbled from my lips.

Ilyas rose to his feet, shrugging his shoulders. "It's fine. You just startled me."

Apparently.

He rubbed his neck. "I thought you were asleep."

"Sorry."

"This..." He motioned around him. "It's the only thing that's ever made me feel better, something where I can just be me. In my skin, without worrying..."

"What the court thinks of you." I knew his court well enough, filled with noblemen who had nothing better to do than cause mischief. To gossip with each other about what prince did this or that, and such useless gossip carried weight.

"Yes..." Ilyas hissed the word, his eyes rising up. His shadowed face hid its secrets from me, whether his thoughts had turned good or bad. He just thought. And it hurt him.

I started to rise to my feet. "I'll leave you alone."

Ilyas made a grunting sound, shaking his hand in a negation gesture. The grunt sounded like a very fast, very loose pronunciation of 'no, it's fine'.

"I really can—"

Ilyas shrugged his shoulders, before taking position again, both feet planted together and hands pressed in front of his chest as if in prayer.

I settled back against the wall, wondering why Ilyas would show me this. Why he would show me this instead of destroying me, the only path to his salvation.

And I wondered if Ilyas even knew why.

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## Chapter Thirteen

*Ilyas*

I awoke to a dying fire and a cold bed, my arms wrapped around nothing. I glanced to the far wall Jem liked to crouch against, but it was equally cold and empty. Pulling the blankets around me, I perched on the window ledge, looking out over the ocean of nothing, my head equally full of nothing, as I waited for him to return.

Jem was... Jem was... Jem would leave this world before I did. But his body would remain, like Prince Hemi, and walk and talk, and grin down at me, pleased by the way I screamed. But it wouldn't be Jem, and I wavered between thinking that was a good or bad thing.

This was no idle superstition, either. I'd seen—I'd felt those rotting tattoos, felt...

The frozen heart of the Dark God.

I had no plan. I had no thoughts, not even stupid foolhardy plans with twice the chance of ruining me as gaining me—us—a day or two of life. Just... nothing. My mind was utterly nothing.

Perhaps my brother was right in stealing the throne from me. I'd finally been stumped.

*Except, Dajana's tinny voice reminded me, you can always kill Jem.*

I turned my head away from the nothing and buried it in my knees.

The door to the tower room creaked open. My fingers tightened their hold on my calves. It better not be Dajana. If it was her, gloating, urging, cackling...

Without lifting my forehead from my knees, I rolled my head to catch the doorway. Jem had stopped just inside, his lips pursed in concern. All at once, a thought entered my mind, stumbling around in the nothingness. A thought, a memory, a fever-streaked image of Jem soothing me with the same look. Concern for me, when he had far bigger worries than what happened to me.

He stepped to the right of the door, folding his hands. "Her Majesty has invited you to a dinner party."

"A dinner... party?" I started to laugh. "You reached an agreement with Sentei?"

Jem looked away. “I thought the wording would please you.”

“Please—” I cut myself off.

“The royal family is partaking in their meal, and they’ve asked you to join them.”

“And you?”

He avoided me again. No, his own family hadn’t cared to invite him, because they couldn’t stand to look at what Jem had done for their sake.

I jumped off the ledge. “You’re coming with me.”

“The family—”

“As my guest.” I took his hand, like I’d seen Haori do with his friend. “It’s a dinner party, you said, so they must have extended an invitation plus one. You’re my plus one. Now stop arguing and find me some fresh clothes. Just because Lumi is starving to death doesn’t mean we shouldn’t look our best.”

Well, ‘best’ might have been too much to ask for. In his ghost-like fervour, Jem only seemed to keep a spare pair of clothes for himself. Nor did he manage to rustle up anything for me that wasn’t well worn and decades old. But at least it was clean.

On the way down to dinner, I asked him why they didn’t trade for better cloth. It wasn’t as if they were trading for anything else. A warehouse full of goods seemed a waste. In a distant voice, Jem in turn explained they couldn’t ask the villagers to work in the mines on an empty stomach so the royal family might wear silks. It would only hasten the inevitable. And in times of famine, with Sentei holding the monopoly, prices grew steeper and steeper. Every last scrap of ore was needed in case the Sentei changed their minds.

“So why not just go to war?” I asked as we walked down the same corridor Prince Hemi’s coffin resided on. “Take some of their farmland for yourself.”

“With what army?”

“You don’t...” I made a disgusted sound.

“We’re a kingdom of miners,” another voice said. Haori, the prince brat, leaned out of a room. “Sentei has five times our population, and an actual trained army.”

“Oh good, you do know something,” I said. “I thought you were just window dressing.”

To disprove me, Haori stuck his tongue out at me. “Mother was wondering if you’d got lost.”

“We’re fashionably late.”

“You’re unfashionably delaying our meal.” Haori’s stomach gurgled. Beside me, Jem tensed. “Come on.”

He disappeared back into the room before I made my retort, and Jem gestured for me to follow. Like all Lumian design, it was dreadfully sparse with only wall-hangings to keep the heat in. At least it was warm, the fireplace taller than I and the fire built to match.

The dining table was already nearly full. An older woman I recognised as the one I’d caught sitting in Hemi’s coffin room—Jem’s mother, excuse me, Hemi’s mother, I presumed—sat pride of place at the head of the table. Along her right sat a gaggle of gaunt-faced children, ranging from what looked to be two or three to eight. But they were probably older, like Haori, stunted by a lack of nutrition. They each sat glumly, hands on stomach, staring at the bereft table.

Haori waved me over to sit in the empty seat next to him. I dragged Jem with me. If I was stuck with the princeling brat, I was not letting Jem leave. He slunk behind me, shoulders hunched, as if trying to make himself invisible.

I felt the queen’s eyes follow us, but she made no comment. The children gawked openly, and when one little girl the size of a toddler started to wail, I cut her off with a funny face. She blinked, caught off guard, and I pushed my advantage with another shape.

This time, she reciprocated, and I told her, “If you do that, your face will freeze that way.”

She made a shocked face, then grew suspicious, exactly like my brothers had. Oh, the sweet days of yore, before they grew into conniving little bastards.

I turned to Haori. “Where’s your lover? Tired of you already?”

Haori puffed up like an angry blowfish. “Ari has a requiem to attend.”

“Oh, who—” Jem cut me off, placing his hand on my shoulder. He hadn’t taken a seat, but lingered behind me. He leaned down to explain, but Haori beat him to it.

“His grandfather’s ill, so he’s taking the walk.”

I blanched. “He’s ill, so he’s walking?”

“Out the city gates.”

“But why would he...” Then, I didn’t need it explained.

Jem did anyway. “He doesn’t wish to waste rations.”

“That’s...” Lumian reality. Harsh, brutal... It made Nuriyite politics seem frivolous. Then again, the Nuriyite noble sons wouldn’t mind the tradition one bit, sending their doddering fathers into the sea so they might inherit sooner. “Why are you standing? Sit!”

Jem glanced at the queen, who didn’t return the look but seemed to concentrate on her line of children. He dropped into the seat, hunching his shoulders again, as if that would make him disappear.

Haori, for his part, seemed pleased.

A grizzled, squat old servant entered, carrying a tray. He set it down in the middle of the table, revealing tonight’s very special meal. Squares of bread.

No one talked or joked as they sucked on their bread. I stared at my own piece, more rock than edible. When Jem had first presented it to me, I’d thought it just part of my humiliation. Scraps thrown my way. But now...

Jem kept a wary eye on me, as if waiting for me to dash the food on the ground. Throw a fit, like I had before. Mine was the biggest ration, even bigger than the queen’s. I suckled on the head, imitating the children, and my stomach started to churn, remembering that yes, despite everything, I still needed to eat. I wouldn’t waste it. Jem finally seemed to relax.

A flash of silver was the only warning.

I caught it out of the corner of my eye, and I threw myself at Haori. Haori yelled, and Jem screamed at me, a blizzard of cold air slicing around him, but I was more concerned by the knife slicing through my scarf.

Then me, Haori, and the chair tangled on the floor. I braced myself above him, ready to strike, and glanced back. The grizzled old man held his knife out, his eyes wide and afraid, and he lunged for us again.

The glass windows shattered behind Jem, his snow demons charging in.

But not fast enough. I blocked the manservant’s lunge, spinning around on my hands and kicking his knife-holding hand. He held onto the knife, turning to strike again.

The snow rabbits carried him to the ground.

The children screamed and the queen hastened them to the door.

Jem, arctic air and snow a furious blizzard around him, stood over the man. The rabbits growled menacingly, their noses twitching. “Explain yourself!”

The man babbled, sending furtive looks at Haori, who crawled out from under me. His skin had turned even starker white mimicking Jem’s and his breathing was fast.

Jem glanced away, biting his lip, then told the snow demons, “Kill him.”

I jerked my eyes away before I heard the crunch. The man stopped babbling.

Without looking, I snapped at Jem, “You needed to interrogate him! Find out what he was possibly thinking—”

“I know why.” Jem stepped over the body, feet squishing in the widening wet pool. To Haori, he said, “Go with your mother.”

Haori started to shake his head.

Standing, I grabbed his arm and shoved him towards the door. “Go.”

He stumbled, but remained stubbornly. “I know why too.”

Jem squeezed his eyes shut. His rabbits turned their heads to him, sniffing, waiting. “Go.”

Haori stalled a moment later, looking from me to Jem, as if one of us would break, but then heaved a breath and stumbled out of the room.

I turned back on Jem, catching sight of the corpse. Not horribly mangled, except for the neck. It had been fast. I jerked my eyes up. “Do you mind explaining to me? Why would he—”

“Are you hurt?” Jem tried to turn me around to look at the tear in my scarf.

I shrugged him off. “I’m fine. Not even bleeding a little bit. Now tell me why he did this.”

“To have his family accepted in Sentei.”

“What—”

“To save his family,” Jem said. “If he had succeeded, if he had hurt Haori... They would have fed his family.”

“But that won’t stop...” There was something Jem wasn’t telling me. There was a reason why he wouldn’t look at me now, and it had nothing to do with his shyness.

The true target hadn't been Haori. It had been Jem. As Dajana had said, they couldn't hurt him directly, not with his magic. The Dark God had given him his snowmancy to protect him.

I looked up, and caught his eye, and for that brief moment, I saw the confusion. He'd seen through that man in a moment, less than a moment. Why was he suddenly confused by me?

Jem removed his gaze first, and rather than stare at someone who refused to stare back, I dropped my gaze. My portion of bread lay on the ground, one end sticky with blood. Perfect.

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Jem's confusion hadn't been the only reason he'd kept his head turned away. This I discovered as he had tried to disappear out the door. The scarf didn't hide the tattoo anymore. It had spread farther across his face, his eyes watering in pain.

*It didn't hurt as much anymore.* That's what he told me. Anymore.

He left without any explanation as to why, but I imagined he was tightening his snow demon guard. Keeping Haori under watch because if he died... If he died, it wouldn't matter, in the grand scheme of things. The Dark God was coming. Only Jem would care, and his mother would grieve.

Left to my own devices, I wandered back into Hemi's room—Jem's, staring at his empty coffin. The gold and blues and reds sparkled in the firelight. My father would trade a fortune in rice and spices to obtain it without thinking twice.

But it was too late for such thoughts. Lumi would die during the ship's journey. The Dark God would take Jem's body. He would kill Dajana and her family, retake his lands. He would...

I shook that last thought out of my head. It would become real soon enough. I didn't need to ponder on it in the meantime.

"What were you thinking?" Dajana's voice rang clear. I still checked for the light of her firefly, but it was her very real feet stomping towards me. "Or were you even thinking?"

"What were *you* thinking?" I turned to face her, leaning on the coffin. Jem's coffin. "Haori's death won't change anything."

“That wasn’t the point.” She dug her heel into the ground, one hand on her hip, the other pulled behind her back. As if she had a right to be furious at me. “Do you know what I risked to give you that opportunity?”

“To kill a little boy?” I asked.

“To kill Jem!”

I shook my head. Jem had been right.

“Don’t act high and mighty with me,” she said. “One boy’s death doesn’t matter. You should know. In the Land of Fire stories, the princes are always trying to kill each other.”

I straightened, towering over her. She didn’t seem to notice.

“You had a chance to kill him, to stop all of this.” She bounced on her toes, but not in the cute way my harem slaves had when trying to seduce me. No, this was more a fighter stance. “You leave me no choice.”

“As if you could kill Jem—”

She lunged forwards, revealing a serrated dagger in her hidden hand. I ducked to the left, protecting my heart area, but she wasn’t going for my heart. She stepped forwards again, her dagger perfectly aligned over my eyes. No time to do anything but blink as she slashed across my face, across my eyes.

I screamed. I tried to stumble back, but the coffin was in the way. She was in perfect position to kill me. But Dajana didn’t press her advantage.

“Jem isn’t the only key,” she said. “If he doesn’t have His sacrifice, the Dark God will destroy Lumi in His wrath. My family will have a chance.”

I fell to my knees, clutching my eyes. My eyes felt like they were on fire, my wet palms not extinguishing it.

She had blinded me—the bitch had blinded me.

“You don’t even need to die. The Dark God won’t accept a scarred and blinded sacrifice.”

“Bitch!”

She laughed, the noise sharp and grating. “You should be thanking me. You’ll live.”

“Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!” It was the only word I was capable of, my head spinning, blood pouring down my hands. And the pain, oh god, the pain unveiling itself as the shock wore away.

“Remember, I died to save you.”

She'd gone mad. A mad, fucking bitch. I curled over myself, my stomach heaving. I should have known. I should have known what she'd do next. I should have... I should have... What the fuck was she babbling on about?

“Ilyas!” Jem's voice, taut with rage.

Sounds, indescribable. The whole world swirled around me, ice and wind. The patter of snow demons.

“You won't win,” Dajana told him. “Our army is coming, we'll destroy you before—”

Her words were cut off in a gurgle. Heavy bodies hit the floor, the metal dagger skittering across the stone. More blows, more gurgling, as if in an attempt to scream. Tearing sounds. Flesh and cloth and the pungent smell of blood—mine or hers, I couldn't tell.

Too quickly, it stopped. Stupid, fucking, bitch.

A hand fell on my shoulder. I jerked away. Was I crying? Could I cry? It was too much, too much...

“Ilyas.” Jem's voice again. Gentle. Like he hadn't just had Dajana ripped to pieces by giant snow rabbits. “Ilyas, let me see.”

He pried my hands away as blood dripped down my cheeks. It felt so much like tears, but that was stupid. Blood was far thicker than tears. There should be a difference. I couldn't cry. I bled instead.

“Oh, Ilyas, Ilyas, Ilyas.” He whispered my name over and over again, as if my name was a magic spell that would heal me. But with each repetition, his voice cracked more, until his voice grew too hoarse to repeat it.

More people, running. I heard their footsteps rebounding in the empty corridor outside. Someone else knelt next to me, took my chin away from Jem, and I jerked away.

“Her Majesty needs to tend you.” Jem held my shoulders in place. “She needs to stop the bleeding.”

“What happened?” The queen's voice was harsh, but her touch remained gentle. She had bandages with her and tended me. The queen of fucking Lumi knelt at my feet, like I thought she should when I first arrived. The Lumian royal family beneath me, hardly better than backwater rubes.



“Dajana.” Jem had said her name, but it sounded nothing like him. Too filled with grief and hatred and fury.

“Obviously.” The queen shifted, as if staring back at Dajana’s broken body.

“Can you heal him?”

“It will scar.”

Jem’s fingers clawed me where he held me.

Gentler fingers tugged at my eyelids and I cried out. “Shh, shh,” the queen said. As if she had a mothering bone in her body. “I just need to see... Yes, good boy, you’re doing well. Just a little...”

Light seared my eyes, but she released me.

“Your eyes are not damaged, sweetie.” She rubbed my arm. “You won’t be blind.”

Just scarred. Just ruined.

She stitched the wound and tied bandages around my eyes to stop the bleeding. She tapped her fingers around the wounds with little bursts of warmth. I almost laughed at her, mocked her. She said I wouldn’t be blind, yet I couldn’t see. She patted my head, then stood. To Jem, she said, “You know...”

Jem didn’t say anything, but the queen must have understood. She left.

A hand covered my eyes, soft, but I still winced, and the motion tore at the stitches. The hand felt cool, as Jem always did, but then it went colder, like he pressed ice to my eyes. His hand trembled.

“Run.”

At first, I imagined the word. “What, run? I’m blind!”

“You have to run.”

“Did you not—”

“You have to leave the city.”

“I...”

“We don’t have a sacrifice.” Jem’s voice was choked. “Dajana got her wish. There’s no time to find... When the Dark God comes, he will destroy the city and everyone in it. Every Lumian. But you can escape. Take my—Her Majesty, and her youngest. Head to Sentei, return to Nuriya... Just go. As fast as you can.”

He removed his hand.

“Jem...” No more words came out of my mouth. My eyes felt better, as if Jem had cut off the pain.

“Run, Ilyas. Run far, far away. Return to Nuriya and retake your land.”

“But what about you?”

He didn't answer. He was already gone.

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## Chapter Fourteen

*Ilyas*

My eyelids screamed at me for moving their ruined flesh, but I had to pull the bandages up high enough to peer out at blurry shapes. If traversing the cursed tundra before had been insane, doing so blind would be a guaranteed death sentence.

Whatever Jem's intentions, the queen did not agree with him. Oh, she agreed I should run, but no, she wouldn't abandon her city. Nor would she send her children away. They were Lumian. It didn't matter if it was now or a year from now, the Dark God would track them down. The longer it took the Dark God to do so, the worse it would be.

But I was free. I was not a fit sacrifice anymore, and I wasn't Lumian. In fact, it was better if I left. No sacrifice was better than the Dark God thinking they tried to cheat him.

Some god they worshipped. The queen gave me the same answer as Dajana. "Wouldn't you?"

The queen gave me a pack with a few niblets of food, a warm coat and boots, and strict instructions to care for my eyes. She pressed a dagger into my hand—Dajana's dagger, my blood drying on the edge. For my protection. Then she and her brood had shoved me out the door.

I tried to linger, to catch one last glimpse of Jem's fuzzy figure. Perhaps even to beg him to come with me. We both knew he couldn't. Wherever Jem went, the Dark God followed. His arrival was imminent. Any hour now, any minute.

Jem didn't wish to see me or be seen. Nor did I catch sight or sound of Haori, who I thought Jem might risk trying to save if he could save no one else. But Jem hadn't made one mention of Haori, not even when he begged me to take his family and leave. He had said 'her youngest'.

Was it only a few days ago I had scampered through Lumi, Jem's snow rabbits hot on my heels? I would have been overjoyed—all right, irritated at Jem for letting me loose, but I would have run without a second thought—well, besides demeaning insults against Jem.

But now I trudged through the city, each step wrenching my gut. As if that's where Dajana had stabbed me, and now I pulled at the stitches.

The cold air felt merciful against my wound. Small favours.

I caught no blurred figures huddled in the streets, heard no choked whispers. Only the wind howled through them, kicking up snow into my eyes. Had the villagers heard what had happened? Did they know what was coming? Or was there simply no reason to leave their houses, not when the storehouse was empty?

Each foot fell heavier than the last. Each slower than the last. I felt like I shouldn't have even made it ten feet from the castle, but each time I peeked out of my abused eyelids, the scenery had changed. The market. The main street. The ice gates.

Then the empty fields on either side of the path. Well, empty, except on the one side where a hole pocked the landscape. Where I had fallen through the ice due to my own stupidity, and Jem had saved me. Then taken me back his own room, the only thing he had to give, and actually cared whether I lived or died.

My shoulders curled inward. Had he cared because of me? Or had he cared because he didn't want to lose his sacrifice?

I breathed in through my nose, then coughed as the cold air attacked my delicate sinuses.

I cared. I was free, and I still cared. I didn't want Jem to disappear. I wanted him to stay with me, to lay with me, to scheme with me. To sit quietly while I ran through my stretches, both comfortable in the silence.

I wanted... I wanted...

My left foot stepped forwards. My right foot stepped forwards.

There was no want. Or rather, no way to ever have it. The Dark God was coming. I couldn't stop it, not unless Jem died, and that was unacceptable as well.

Left foot. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot.

Either way, Jem would... Jem would count his last breaths, and tell himself it didn't matter. He was already dead. He was already nothing. Not a real man, forgetting that he liked to play his board game and he liked his biscuits and he liked that view and that he was the sort of man who would sacrifice everything for his prince, for his kingdom, for... me. He wasn't nothing, and that thought would prove even worse for him, because then he had something to lose. Something he would lose any moment, any breath...

Left foot. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot.

Now I trudged up the hill. At the top, on our way to Lumi, Jem had changed. He'd seen his village, and his steps had grown lighter. He had stood taller, shoulders back, as if he was actually happy to see the godforsaken village.

As if he were returning home. As if Jem had a home. He wasn't nothing. He was a man with likes and dislikes and a home.

*A tawam rohi*, or he should have been. He could have been mine.

But he never would...

I paused on top of the hill. Something black edged the horizon, and my eyelids screamed as I tried to peer closer. It had only been a graze over my eyelids. What gave them the right to hurt so much?

I swallowed the pain down, refusing to let it defeat me. The smudge on the horizon wasn't right. It wasn't trees or mountains or rocks or... I had to pull the bandages back. Rocking on my feet kept me from dropping to the ground, hands clutched over my eyes. I heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing, thought nothing, as the pain sizzled over my nerves.

Then I heard a high pitched jabbering of foreign words—of Lumian. The snow crunched under running footsteps. I reached for the dagger, shoving the irritation in my eyes away, focusing on the approaching figure.

“Il—Ilyas?”

I flung the dagger out, then froze in place. I knew that voice, sort of. I'd only heard it whispered before. Haori's little friend Ari.

More footsteps crunched up behind him. Oh, that was right. Haori had said Ari had been busy escorting his grandfather out to die.

“Ilyas.” Ari kept his distance out of respect for my blade. Did he eye the blood? Or the bandages wrapped around my eyes? “We have to warn them.”

“They know.” I tried to step past him, but he bounced into my way before scuttling back out of arm's length.

“They know?”

“It's pretty obvious.” I motioned my bandages.

Ari groaned. “The Sentei army is coming.”

I turned my head up to what I thought was a blue sky.

That black smudge was the Sentei army. The only army on the peninsula. Dajana had said it was coming, hadn't she? And they were fast approaching.

Even if... Even if...

I sheathed the dagger in my belt and held out my arm. Ari understood and took it to lead me back down the hill. We had to hurry.

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## Chapter Fifteen

*Jem*

I leaned back against Prince Hemi's coffin. It seemed only right. I was about to die, and while his body still wouldn't join his grave, it should still be here. I huddled under the scarf, grasping it against my skin and holding it up like a shield. Or a mask to pretend. As if this would keep him from getting frightened.

My hands were black now. Most of my body was too. The Dark God's tattoo still grew, covering more and more, leaving my hair white and my eyes blue but everything else black. I would end up darker than Ilyas. My lips didn't turn up, even though it seemed a funny thought.

No, I was too concerned that the marks didn't hurt anymore. They spread like a mould across my body. I used to feel the Dark God scraping out my insides, transfiguring my body into something that could sustain him.

But what was left of me now? Of Prince Hemi's own body? If I slashed my wrists, would it hurt?

I mustn't try it. The Dark God would not be amused. He might take it out on someone else. His body, like his sacrifice, must be in perfect condition. A condition worthy of him. I was already too thin. The additional rations hadn't helped.

Any moment now. Any moment, I would die. Would it hurt? Would I feel it?

Or would I just cease to be, and I would never even know?

The snow demons had dragged the broken body from the room, leaving blood smeared across the floor. More drops speckled the walls, and underneath me, was Ilyas' own strings of blood. The sight and smell should please the Dark God. A pity Ilyas had to leave before he saw it too. He would have appreciated the splash of colour.

Chair legs scuffed on the stone floor, its occupant shifting nervously. I glanced up through the scarf at Prince Haori twisting his hands in his lap, looking as if he was going to cry. But he didn't run. He choked down his tears.

Haori was never supposed to be the sacrifice. He was supposed to become the Dark God's vassal, ruling over Lumi in the Dark God's stead. It was why

I'd travelled far and wide to find the perfect sacrifice, so the Dark God would be pleased with Haori, not just satisfied.

But now... But now we had no choice. The Dark God was coming, the sacrifice—Ilyas was scarred and running and safe now, and if we didn't offer anyone... It was Haori's duty. He had to sacrifice himself to save Lumi. Just like his older brother, Hemi had.

I had no words for Haori. Nothing to comfort him except to hide under my scarf. Nothing to soothe the tears away. Because he should be afraid. He should be afraid of me. It was my face he'd be forced to see...

He had never been afraid before. When everyone else scattered away from me, Haori always looked at me. He always smiled.

Not anymore. I very much doubted Haori would ever smile again.

And I, I would... die. I would be... I leaned my head back, staring at the unobtrusive ceiling through the fabric instead. At least Ilyas was safe. At least he was—

The door burst open, slamming against the wall hard enough to crack the stones. I jerked upright, reaching to feel my snow demons' call and loose them upon this intruder.

The intruder stumbled inside, his princely bearing lost due to the bandages over his dark eyes. Ilyas.

What was Ilyas doing here? Why wasn't he on the edges of Lumi, running away as fast as he could?

He tripped himself coming around the coffin, but then stopped short, peering out under the bandages.

"Ilyas!" I scrambled to my feet. "What—"

"The Sentei army is coming."

My heart paused—was this the end? Was this my last moment?—but it picked up the beat again. I turned away from him, so I didn't see his bandages, the fear in his tense mouth... Everything that I had caused him. "I told you to run."

"Did you not hear what I said?" He sounded angry. "The Sentei army is coming!"

"They will let you through." The scarf wasn't big enough. I couldn't hide. "You're not Lumian."



“Jem.” Ilyas flung up his hands at the empty space beside me.

“Leave, now.”

He growled deep in his throat.

“Don’t you—” I fell back into the coffin, my head gone suddenly light—was now the moment?—and slithered down until my buttocks struck the ground.

The next moment, my head begun to clear, feeling returning to my limbs, and Ilyas rushing three steps away from me to hover, hands stretching out to find me. As if he was worried about me.

I turned away. “Go, now. Before He comes. Before it’s too late.”

“If you would stop with the clichés...” Ilyas stepped towards me, following my words. He stepped again, hands held out until one latched onto my shoulder. “The Sentei army approaches.”

So he kept saying over and over again. “It does not signify. They will come, and the Dark God will destroy them. They can’t stop Him.”

“They’re at the gates!”

“Which will hold.”

“There isn’t even a door on them. Jem! You know as well as I what they will do to your—”

“And what do you think I can do—” I started to snap, but Ilyas wasn’t that naive. He should know as well as I there was only one way this would all end. I would be gone, and there would be bloodshed. I couldn’t choose whose now.

I snapped my head to Haori. “Get away from him!”

While Ilyas had distracted me, Haori’s little friend Ari had snuck in. Haori was shaking his head at Ari as the boy tried to pull Haori away, both their eyes wide in fright.

Ari jerked at my words, but he steeled himself to face me. The scarf had slipped from my head, baring my rot for all the world to see. His shoulders hunched, but he puffed up his chest. I jumped to my feet, the world slipping all around me as my body swayed to the side. I curled into myself, demanding the world stabilise itself.

“Get away from him.” I found my snow demons, ordered their appearance. “Or I will have you rent limb from limb—”

“Hemi, no!” Haori cried out.

But Ari stood his ground, stepping between me and the prince. Didn't he understand what was happening? Didn't he understand there was no choice? Didn't he understand he was dooming everyone with his adolescent yearnings?

“I'll stay! I'll stay!” Haori promised. “Ari, go. Go now. Please.”

Ari shook his head. The little fool thought he had the leniency to promise ‘not without you’.

My snow demons were close. They clawed their ways up the cool corridors, small fires from rooms scalding their frost skin. But they would last long enough. Long enough to rip Ari's head off in a spray of blood—

Then I was whirling, whirling and now facing Ilyas, his hands clutching my shoulders. “Why is Haori here?”

As if Ilyas didn't know. As if he hadn't planned this with Ari. “Do you really hate me so much you would destroy us all?”

Ilyas' anger crumbled away, his lips parting in surprise. “Hate? No, I... Why is Haori here? Unless...”

I watched the emotions swirl across his features as he figured it out, full living emotions forcing their way across his features even though his eyes, his most expressive feature, were almost completely covered. His eyes... His beautiful, violet eyes... All my fault...

“You said there wasn't another sacrifice,” Ilyas said at last.

I shook my head. It was more complicated than that. “He'll have to do.”

“But it's *Haori*,” he said, as if that was supposed to mean something.

It did. I just couldn't allow myself to think of the meaning.

“Just let him go, Jem.” His voice was soothing. I didn't even know Ilyas could make his voice sound soothing. “I'll stay here—”

“No!” I backed up. Where were my demons? Why weren't they here? “The Dark God is coming! It's all over if He only finds you here. Haori has to—he has to save his people. I feel Him coming. He claws at what's left of my soul. Any moment now, any moment now...”

Pain creased Ilyas' forehead. He stepped forwards, stepped towards me, as if to embrace me again.

“Jem...” How did he make his voice like that? All I’d ever heard before was haughtiness, hurt, anger...

My vision wavered—sharp breath, was this my last?—my eyes feeling wet. “I don’t *want* to do this. Any of this. I don’t want to sacrifice Haori, or you, or anyone. I don’t want to...” I choked on the word. “But what can I do? Tell me, what can I do that won’t end in death and destruction? Tell me, how can I save them when ruin awaits us at either choice?”

Ilyas stepped forwards again, so close to me, just like before. Just like when he... “I think I love you.”

A gasp escaped me. Half a gasp, half a giggle. What was he saying? What the hell was he saying now?

Love. He said love. That he, the subject, did. And the object was me.

Was he lying? Was it mere platitudes, calculated to destroy me? But if that was his objective, why hadn’t he tried to kill me when he had the chance? When we had lain together, curled in bed, and he thought me asleep?

But love? It couldn’t be love. No one had ever loved me since the ritual. Not since Hemi had died and I had taken his place.

“I don’t want you to leave,” he continued.

“I don’t want to leave you either.”

The words, once spoken, couldn’t be unspoken. I couldn’t pretend they didn’t exist. I couldn’t pretend they weren’t real. I couldn’t even stop myself from continuing to babble.

“I don’t want to die. I don’t want to disappear. I want to finish our game—finish a game with you. I want... I want...” I crumpled to the ground, my knees unable to hold me up. The room around me disappeared. All I felt was myself, myself and Ilyas swooping over me, concerned and afraid and—and grieving already... “But there’s no other way. Either I die, or I’m swallowed by the Dark God. There is no other—”

Ilyas embraced me, clutched me tight to his chest. Tears threatened to come, all the grief and despair I’d hidden for years, as he said, “I promise you we will save your people.”

“Y-you can’t—”

“I promise you. We will do it.”

My lips started to shape his name, holding the meaning of everything inside it. *Ily*—

I choked, my heart stopping. Both our gazes fell between us.

I might have laughed, but my body felt paralysed.

The dagger. Dajana's dagger. Sticking out of my chest, blood staining the rent cloth.

Then all my tattoos screamed. And there was pain, so much pain, and none of it from the dagger slicing my heart in two. Distantly, I heard Ilyas tell Ari to take Haori away.

And that was my final moment. The last moment before there were no more.

Ilyas had stabbed me.

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## Chapter Sixteen

*Ilyas*

Ari dragged a stunned Haori from the room, leaving me alone with the overwhelming stench of blood, and Jem's body.

His dead body. Heart stopped. Breath gone. The black rot wisping from his body.

Just Jem. Only Jem.

Dead.

I didn't have a moment to lose.

I gripped the dagger's handle, my connection to Jem. The same blade that had spilled my blood now soaked in his, combined in Jem's heart.

It would have helped if Jem had repeated my words. *'I love you too'*. There was a ritual to this sort of thing. A set procedure. But Jem didn't understand. He hadn't even known what the term meant, but had wielded it to the effect of mightily pissing me off.

Or maybe he just couldn't say the words. Not yet. Not when the Dark God approached...

Then again, murdering Jem hadn't been part of the ritual either.

His already tepid body grew colder as every second passed. I dragged him towards the coffin. It was supposed to be a mirror, but apparently, Lumians felt themselves above such fancies. The gleaming gold surface would have to do, capturing both of our images together, Jem wrapped in my arms, my hand on the dagger connecting me to his heart.

The words I knew since birth, ever since I had first learned what a *tawam rohi* was. How a *tawam rohi* was different from everyone else scheming and plotting behind my back, one person in all the world I could love and trust without censure, and they doing the same for me. Two people, bound soul to soul.

If Jem didn't feel the same way about me... If the magic wasn't strong enough... But it was a chance. A chance where Jem didn't disappear but remained in this world, by my side. Forever and ever until our very natural deaths. As my love, forever.

I plucked apart the stitches beside my eye, fresh blood spilling down my cheek. With my free hand, I found the exposed metal of the dagger and painted it with my blood. Peeking under the bandage, with both our blood mixed on my hands, I drew a circle around our golden reflections.

The words tumbled from my mouth, not in any usual language I understood, but I'd learned the translation by heart. From my heart to Jem's stopped one.

The one magic of Nuriya grew around us, enveloping us like a rabid blanket. It stabbed through me, it stabbed through Jem, his body jerking in my arms.

It wasn't too late. I laughed out loud, and crowed. His soul was still there, eager to be bound to mine.

The magic transformed, tiny lights so bright they pierced the bandage and my eyelids, turning my vision red. The souls of our ancestors. Mine from Nuriya, a long line of kings and princes, queens and princesses, happy for me and this privilege as only the dead could be, and faintly jealous.

But still, they whispered their encouragement to me, in feelings and images if not real words.

Jem's followed, less talkative to me, not understanding what was happening, but still aiding us. Following my goddess' will to bind us together.

They flew together, they dove through us. Through the dagger that had shed both my blood and his. The dagger that led through Jem's heart, and my heart behind it, beating strong enough for the both of us.

My strength poured into him.

The bond snapped into place, and my head whirled as I suddenly saw. Saw what I could not see before.

Jem still lived. His heart may not beat and his lungs may not breathe, but he still lived. A spark of him remained there.

The Dark God too was there. I screamed, for I felt his claws. How had Jem withstood this all on his own? The tattoos, his marks on Jem weren't just disappearing. The Dark God continued to claw at him, at his soul, shredding his way into Jem, using the marks as fingerholds.

Fingerholds that he tore out in his efforts—in his failure to crawl inside Jem's flesh. Instead, the Dark God only succeeded in pulling him down into the underworld, into death.

I held onto Jem as hard as I could with my physical body and with our bond. I, and only I, anchored us in the land of the living.

I had known the risk; that Jem could drag me into death with him, but knowing and feeling it happening... I held onto him harder, as if it would help.

I wanted to stay. I wanted Jem to stay. I even wanted to stay in Lumi, this tundra of hell. I repeated the words, scratching at his body, feeling his body in my grip, my one connection to reality in the blackness.

“I want us to stay!”

The Dark God found our connection, ripped at it. Ripped at the only thing anchoring Jem in life, but what did I expect of a stupid backwater god? It heard my thoughts and grew more vicious, clawing, climbing, and biting at me. I screamed.

I screamed and screamed and screamed. Anything physical, anything in this world. Anything that kept me here. I had to stay. I had to anchor Jem here. I was his only chance.

He couldn't die with his last sight being me stabbing him.

The pain. The pain. The pain. The pain.

Too easy to think better to just die. Too easy to wish it all to go away. Pain was life. Pain was here. Pain was me protecting Jem, as no one had ever protected him before.

I had to stay. I would stay. And I would hold Jem to me.

Then the last foothold tore off Jem, and there was nothing left connecting him—us—to the Dark God. It plummeted back into the darkness where it belonged.

I gasped, deep cold breaths that burned my lungs, but were all too sweet because we had won—almost won.

With no better way to go about it, I yanked the dagger out of his chest and pressed that same hand to his heart. I was here, alive, and Jem had to stay with me. He had to heal quickly. The bright lights of souls tended him, closing the wound until his heart spasmed beneath my hand and he gasped too. And exhaled, and inhaled again. Breathing, heart beating, like a living person.

I smiled down at him, unable to speak.

The magic around us crescendoed. The ritual over, the ceremony done, my heart bound to his, my soul his. But the goddess wasn't finished. The souls of the dead weren't finished.

I cared very little what they might do, content with listening to Jem breathe. But Jem cared, or at least watched what I couldn't see through the bandage, his breath coming in needy, amazed gasps as the souls swirled above us.

The spirits were gone, replaced with wet sounds, almost like goldfish flapping in a pond. I must be hearing things, since it came from above us, so I settled for curling around Jem.

"I'm—I'm afraid," I started, then needed to catch my breath. Jem touched my cheek. I pulled myself up, forcing myself beyond exhaustion to say what needed to be said. "I'm afraid you can't disappear yet. No more excuses. You have to stay to save your people."

His lips twitched. Would his next words, his first words as my *tawam rohi* be his denial?

Although, to be fair, my first words as his hadn't been all that special either.

A hand covered mine, still pressed against his chest, a hand cooler than my own. Jem's hand, holding mine. Our first hand holding as *tawam rohi*. I felt the slight ridge of the *tawam rohi* rune over his beating heart. I would have one of my own.

I smiled at him and leaned down, capturing his lips with my own. Our first kiss, and, well, I would teach him how to kiss better than one of his bird fish flopping its mouth. He hadn't been a proper pleasure slave, had he, in either my brother's or my own harem. We had a whole life for me to teach him these things, and for a first kiss, it was pretty good.

I especially loved how he shuddered in my arms, as if each touch was the very first he'd ever experienced. As it should be.

I would have loved nothing more than to spend the rest of the day—the week—the month—just lying there together teaching him how to kiss, but there was still the small matter of the Sentei army on the castle's doorstep.

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## Chapter Seventeen

*Jem*

For the first time in a decade, the trapped *katara* flew over our head in a shimmer of golds and silvers Ilyas would love. Enough birds perhaps to stave off starvation for days. But I was not going to tell him, wrapped instead in his lips and his arms, not much able to think of anything else.

“Hemi?” Haori’s voice was hesitant and meek. I wrenched my lips away from Ilyas.

Haori huddled against the doorway, Ari at his shoulder, protective but not pulling him away. The Dark God was gone, and would never come to me again, so Haori was safe from his—my—clutches. Haori shifted, looking torn between delight at the sight of me, and frightened about something else.

I tried to get to my knees, but Ilyas held me on the floor. “What is it, Your Highness?”

Ilyas scrunched his nose, like he had in court whenever he casually thwarted his younger brothers’ attempts to get one over on him.

“There are birds—” Haori started, but Ari elbowed him.

“The Sentei are in the throne room,” Ari said.

I tried to feel for my snow demons, but like the Dark God’s marks, they were gone. Cut off from me. I was only...

Me.

What could I possibly do?

Ilyas pulled himself up, and because I was half lying on him, he pulled me to my feet too. As if he expected me to do something about the Sentei too. The Sentei who would be very angry at the death of their ambassador, and our—my—attempt to summon the Dark God.

Perhaps there was one last thing to do, as Ilyas had already determined. I nodded to Ilyas to indicate I understood my role in this.

“And the birds...?” Haori stared overhead.

“Dinner,” I said as I stumbled towards the door. My mind was alert, but my feet... less so.

“What birds?” Ilyas looked up, jerking his head as if searching. As if he’d forgotten his bandages blinded him.

I pursed my lips, but stepped into him. His hands found my shoulders, but not before mine found the edge of his bandages to lift them up. I gasped as the bandages revealed pink scars rather than open wounds.

Ilyas gawked at the *katara*. Their scales glinted impossible colours as they swam about each other, flicking their fins.

“They’re fish!” Then he dropped his head and sighed. “You know, you could take one moment to appreciate their majesty before you call them ‘dinner’.”

But why else would I think they were majestic? They would buy some time, at least. Provide an option.

Ilyas sighed again, as if he had heard my thoughts. I removed his bandages and he blinked in surprise again, as if it hadn’t occurred to him that his wounds were healed. I shook my head and turned to leave. He followed behind me.

I motioned for Haori and Ari to stay out of trouble, but Haori dragged Ari along. Ari tried to shove him off, understanding as I did what would happen to Haori if I failed and the Sentei army found him, but Haori was determined to follow.

A good future king, I supposed.

More of the *katara* flew above us in the corridors, and when we passed a window, we all stopped, stunned. The air above Lumi was thick with them, swimming in and out of a light fog rolling off the ocean.

“Dinner, he says,” Ilyas moaned.

Enough to last until the next harvest? Maybe. But that wasn’t my pressing concern, and I tore myself away from the window to continue down to the throne room.

Skinny men in metal armour forged from our ore guarded the door, but with my still white hair and skin, they recognised me for what I had been.

What colours had I been before the ritual? Had I looked like Haori, with brown hair and slightly darker skin matched by hazel eyes?

It didn’t matter. I strode through the guards, the others following me even though they should be running for the hills.

Her Majesty stood to the side of the empty iron throne, chin raised as she stared defiantly down at the Sentei queen and her guard. Sentei Queen Arana was easy to pick out, even dressed in the same armour as her fighting men and women. She looked eerily similar to Dajana, except older, her bared face wizened from years of ruling over such a harsh land.

I glanced at Ilyas, who had developed wrinkles around his eyes.

Her Majesty flicked her gaze to us, then stumbled back towards the throne, her eyes widening and jaw slackening. Half a second later, she recovered herself, straightening and stepping forwards, chin high in the air.

But Sentei Queen Arana had already turned our way, her back stiffening as she took in my white features. Her guard surrounded her, spears pointed at me, as if they would be enough to stop the Dark God.

I took my place beside and slightly behind Her Majesty. The warriors glanced at each other, shifting from one foot to the next.

The Sentei queen recovered first. “I will repeat myself only once. Hand over the vessel for execution, or we will kill every last person in this town.”

On the sideline, Ilyas jerked as if awakening.

Sentei Queen Arana stared down her nose. “What will it be? The vessel or your people?”

My hands fisted at my side, and I bit back a maniacal laugh. I didn’t really remember much, only the dagger sliding in, and then waking to find the *katara* swimming once more and Ilyas’ lips on mine. I still tasted him on my lips, felt his lips bruising mine. I touched my heart, my new mark, which I felt even through the fabric of my robe. He’d done that, hadn’t he? He’d saved my life.

And I would still die.

I stepped forwards, my hand moving to pull my white hair aside. Was the Dark God’s tattoo still there, contained but not forgotten?

“Hemi—” Her Majesty started, hands outstretched to me.

I parted my lips to tell her it was all right, everything would be fine, but only a guttering noise came. I turned to Ilyas, shoving his way to the throne. It wasn’t fair. Not yet. It wasn’t—

I swallowed, and released my hair. I stood tall above her. “No.”

Sentei Queen Arana grunted, then to Her Majesty, said, “You will kill everyone for him?”

“No,” I said, “because if you and your army do not retreat immediately, my snow demons will destroy you all.”

I held my breath. I think we all did, as my words sunk in. Arana hadn’t noticed my markings. Her little sister might know what it meant, but I was betting everything Arana hadn’t studied the legends well enough.

What gave me the right to risk Lumi bluffing the Sentei queen?

Ilyas broke the silence, laughing happily. More than one warrior turned to stare, adjusting themselves to protect their queen not only from the vessel, but from this new madman threat. He jumped to my side. “You better do what he says, or you will all die for nothing.”

The Sentei queen narrowed her eyes, lifting her chin to stare down at Ilyas. “What do you mean?”

Ilyas shrugged. “The Dark God isn’t coming. Jem is no longer the vessel. There’s no reason for you all to be slaughtered. Just go on home.”

Arana glanced between me, Ilyas and Her Majesty. “How can we be sure?”

“It’s true,” Her Majesty said. “Do you see a mark on him?”

“I see the vessel.”

“You would know if he was still so.”

Arana paused, considering. “And my dear sister, Dajana? Why has she not come to greet me?”

“She’s dead,” I said. “I murdered her.”

Ilyas made an exasperated grunt and pulled me back behind him. My hands hovered, and then settled on his shoulder. He didn’t shove me away.

Ilyas told her, “Dajana attempted to murder not one but two noble persons, the prince heir of Lumi and myself, the prince heir of Nuriya. Her death was just, and if you want to make an issue out of it, then—”

“Why is this foreigner talking to me?” Arana demanded. “Can the Lumians not even handle their own affairs without your little sacrifice defending you?”

So she knew that much, but that didn’t stop Ilyas. He stepped back to my side, lacing his hand with mine and holding them up in a way he’d never dare in Nuriya. And to kiss me... But Ilyas seemed oddly proud of himself. “We are *tawam rohi*.”

Ilyas said the words like everyone should gasp and bow down at his feet. Instead Arana turned back away from him. “So hand—”

“Ahem!” Ilyas pretended to clear his throat, his brow cocked. “For those of you who cannot even properly speak the trade language, it means Jem—Prince Regent Hemi—and I are bound as one soul. By magic and deity.”

I stared at him. At how happy he looked, even in the midst of a diplomatic argument, at the very thought of us being... *tawam rohi*.

*“I think I love you.”*

Not a slave owner, then.

Ilyas continued, “As such, we speak with one voice. I speak in his name, as he does in mine, so you’d better listen.”

The Sentei queen pursed her lips, her hand moving to rest on her sword hilt.

“As I was saying, the Dark God will not be appearing, so there’s no reason for you to stay. Your kingdom is safe. So go on now.” Ilyas waved his free hand, like commanding small children to leave the room. “Unless you wish to all die at the hand of Jem’s snow demons, just like Dajana. You don’t want that. We don’t want that. It was pretty horrifying to watch the first two times, but we will, if you decide your sovereignty and peace isn’t enough.”

The Sentei queen examined me. I met her gaze with my own cold glare, the one that people had fled from ever since I was a child.

Arana was no different. She broke away first, pressing her lips together as if she had meant to do it. “Fine, we will remove ourselves. But if we can’t punish the vessel, then we’ll just have to punish the whole city. Henceforth, trade between Sentei and Lumi is forbidden forever.”

My jaw dropped. Everyone would still die, because I hadn’t died, because I’d been so selfish. Her Majesty drooped, staring at the empty ground. I rushed to offer myself in penance, anything to keep our trade in line.

But Ilyas dragged me back, muffling me with his other hand. “Very good. Now don’t let the snow dragons bite you on the way out.”

The Sentei queen snorted, but whirled about, leading her guard from the room. I struggled in Ilyas’ grip, trying to reach her before the offer was gone for good. If I’d only just died, and not been so selfish—

Ilyas squeezed my shoulders. Asking for my trust. How I knew that... I just did.

My shoulders fell. The others were unable to protest in shock, but Haori tried roundly, once almost pronouncing a word. But after the army disappeared, I turned on Ilyas. “Why would you let me be such an idiot?”

Ilyas blinked. “What? Why?”

“The birds won’t last us long,” I told him. “We have to trade with Sentei—”

“Don’t worry, dear soul,” Ilyas said, patting my captured hand with his other. “I have a plan.”

I pursed my lips. As good as the plan where he fell through the ice and nearly died?

His grin fell, leaving him perfectly serious. “Please trust me. I did save you.”

I breathed in deeply, steadying myself. Then nodded.

“You’re quite brilliant,” Ilyas told me, “but you have one fatal flaw.”

I lifted my brow.

“You think along one narrow route. You think the Dark God will save Lumi, and that’s all you see. You miss every other opportunity that turns up along the way.”

“It seems I missed them as well.” Her Majesty stepped forwards. She still didn’t look at me, but she looked Ilyas in the eye, and if we were as one, that was enough, wasn’t it?

“Ah, but you didn’t have access to the vital clue.” Ilyas smirked at me. “Jem here did, and completely missed it. By the gods, he could have saved Lumi ages ago. But thank the gods, he has me now.”

I smiled, a crooked little smile, but happy. It felt like a happy smile, a completely alien and unsettling feeling.

I did have Ilyas now. I wasn’t alone anymore. And with him, I had my whole life—our whole lives ahead of us.

But there was still the imminent matter of Lumi starving to death.

Ilyas returned my smile. “Perhaps even I would have missed it, except for, you know, me being me.”

Her Majesty glared at him. “And this wonderful, impossible miracle is?”

“Hemi’s coffin,” he said, as if revealing the world’s wonders to us.

Instead, we all stared at him, even Haori.

“That coffin...” I tried to explain what it meant, but couldn’t.

“We can trade it,” Ilyas explained. “Or rather, metals like it.”

My brow furrowed. “But they’re worthless. We toss those metals in the heap. No one wants them. They’re not particularly good for anything.”

“Oh, so Lumian! I am going to have to fix that.” Ilyas still held my hand tight. “The point is they are beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like them, and Nuriya hasn’t either. And you should know what Nuriyites are like. They like shiny things, not dull, practical ores. We’d probably buy those too, you know, for the architecture. Didn’t you notice all those metal screens and the lack of any mines whatsoever? It’s our one major import.”

It was too much to dare to hope.

“And food is cheap for Nuriyites.” Ilyas turned to Her Majesty, Haori, and Ari, bending over hands on knees as if talking to toddlers. “I know you can’t imagine this, but in Nuriya, food is so cheap you can buy enough to feed a family with just a little of that so called worthless metal. And—hey!” He stood up, glaring at me. “Are you telling me they enshrined their beloved Prince Hemi in worthless metals?”

He was angry on my behalf, and I should have felt grateful and not burst out into laughter like I did.

He cracked a grin himself. “Trust me. We have enough of your bird fish to last until a trade mission can be completed, bringing back all the wondrous food and spices of Nuriya. Who cares for bland potatoes—”

“Snow tubers,” I corrected.

“Snow tubers? Why do you name everything with the word ‘snow’? Oh, never mind. We shall import new words too!” And then Ilyas descended into giddy laughter. “Pardon me. Oh, but I’m going to stick it to my brother. We’re going to negotiate a trade deal such has never been seen before in all of history! And I will rub Mehdi’s face in it like I used to shove him into faeces—well, that’s another story. But...” He stopped again, grinning at me. “That will pale in comparison to his outrage as I show off my *tawam rohi*, and my cunning in becoming a prince of Lumi.”

Her Majesty eyed Ilyas, then stared up at the pair of *katara* swimming into the throne room. “Well, if we are to last until then, we had better enforce

staunch rationing. It wouldn't do to gorge ourselves only to die before your return."

"Yes, yes, go forth." Ilyas waved his free hand, the most joyous person in the throne room. The rest were just amused.

Except for me. After they left, I turned him towards me. His brow furrowed at my serious look. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I will never be king," I said. "The most I can be is regent. In five years, Haori will ascend to the throne."

I couldn't give him his position back. I couldn't make up for what I'd stolen from him, even in what Ilyas termed a backwater village.

Ilyas swept a lock of white hair behind my ear. I shivered at his touch. "That's good."

I looked up at him.

"Because in five years, we'll be able to hide ourselves away together."

He wanted...

"But in the meantime, I have plans. Yes, now it's my turn to have plots within plots. We have so much to do to make Lumi worth handing over to Haori, after all. Starting with the trade mission."

I couldn't contain the swelling in my chest, the way it bubbled to my eyes, making them burn. I turned my head away. "Do you really think Mehdi will trade with you?"

"He'll fight as hard as he can," Ilyas said. "But you'll just have to help me. You're exceedingly good at manipulating Nuriyite princes."

I froze. Manipulated? Had I manipulated Ilyas into doing this, into being with me, against his own will?

Ilyas stepped close, caressing my jaw and sending frissons of pleasure up and down my back. "None of those thoughts. I've finally found what I want. I won't be alone anymore, and neither will you. We'll not only save Lumi together, we'll make it great."

Not be alone anymore, death looming in front of me. That sounded, very, very good.



## Chapter Eighteen

*Jem*

The austerity of my tower room was marred by a trunk filled with the most colourful cloth found in Lumi, which according to Nuriyite standards, was barely brighter than grey. But Ilyas had insisted. We had to look presentable at court.

Or rather, I should say ‘our’ tower room. Because, as Ilyas explained over and over, after showing me the mark—rune, Ilyas had called it—over my heart, and the rune over his, what was mine was his, and what was his was mine. Including each other.

Ilyas lounged on his side, head propped up by his hand. His eyes had healed enough to remove the bandages and stitches, leaving only a red scar across his eyes. The game board separated us, and Ilyas toyed with a white stone.

He hadn’t seemed to notice for the past five minutes it was his turn.

“We should also trade for cloth and mats to brighten this place up with.” He tossed the stone and caught it again. “It’s so... boring!”

I glanced to the window, and then back to his long dark body stretched out, violet eyes gleaming at the thought of silks. “I like the view.”

Ilyas turned his gaze back on me, noticing where I was looking. He smirked. “Yes, there is something to be said for the view.”

I blushed, turning slightly away from him.

“But some creature comforts would be nice.”

I chuckled. Of course he wouldn’t leave it at that.

“I am about to make Lumi very, very rich after all.”

Indeed. The past week had been a whirlwind of activity. Lumi had no ships of her own, since the Sentei had always delivered and retrieved their goods themselves, as did our other trade partners. So not only were people in a flurry mining the shiny but useless metals to trade, but in constructing human-pulled carts to haul our ore to the Sentei port.

Her Majesty had already arranged for us to have a non-Sentei ship take us directly to Nuriya, as well as the Sentei’s allowance for us to use the port.

Arana thought we would starve to death soon, so allowed it. Ilyas insisted Her Majesty should start work on building our own ships and harbour.

Everything was in place, ready to leave today. But Ilyas had talked me into one last game. One I was winning, and which I'd started to suspect Ilyas was very much aware of.

I started to say, "Ilyas, it's your—"

A knock on the door interrupted me. Ilyas perked up at the sound, but as always, the servant didn't enter, but for an entirely different reason than before.

"Time to go." Ilyas stood and stretched his arms overhead.

I stared down at the board, the game only half played.

"Oh shit." Ilyas dropped back down to sit cross-legged. "We can finish."

The board stared me down. If we didn't... I dropped my black piece back into the box. "No, that's okay. We have all the time in the world."

Ilyas smiled at me, and offered his hand. Which wasn't as useful as it could be, as now it was harder for both of us to stand, but Ilyas didn't complain. He let the servants in to carry the trunk while I packed up the game pieces to take with us.

And then we were on our way, walking hand in hand past the black obsidian obelisk to which Ilyas still refused to pay proper homage, through the ice gates towering above us, past the hole in the ice Ilyas had fallen through, while Ilyas hung onto me, as if afraid any deviation from my path would prove disastrous.

The line of carts waited on the other side of the hill, jovial people stamping their feet and rubbing their hands together in the cold, and we really ought to be going.

But at the top of the hill, I looked back, surveying our city wrapped in ice under a bright-blue sky shimmering with *katara*, the ocean lapping at its frosted walls. The view Ilyas called 'boring' and I called 'home'.

"We'll be back home before you know it," Ilyas whispered to me.

Correction, the view we both called 'home'.

We turned together back to the carts, ready to save Lumi.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Olivia Helling doesn't believe in love at first sight... but maybe, just maybe, it blossoms along a few books. That is, after all, how she fell in love with her husband.*

*Olivia writes about the darkness and flaws from within, the struggle with self-confidence, self-perception and fear of failure, and fantasy and historical worlds that refuse to allow love between men. So be warned: happily ever after is not guaranteed.*

*The protagonist and love interest don't always end up together by the end of one book. But when they finally come together, their love will be a thing of beauty.*

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