

ROYAL

PROTECTOR



3
BOOKS
IN ONE

CAITLIN
CREWS

DANA
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MANN



Dana Marton

**Royal Protector: Traded to the
Desert Sheikh / Royal Captive /
His Pregnant Princess Bride**

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Royal Protector: Traded to the Desert Sheikh / Royal Captive / His Pregnant Princess Bride / D. Marton — «HarperCollins»,

A royal to keep her safe...In the desert, Sheikh Kavian's word is law. So the defiance of his promised queen Amaya, who flees after their betrothal ceremony, is intolerable! Kavian's already tasted her sweetness, perhaps his reluctant bride-to-be needs reminding of the pleasure he can give...*Prince Istvan of Valtria expected to inherit his crown, not lead a death-defying chase to retrieve it. Until museum curator Lauryn Steler storms into his life, sets off sparks, and just as quickly vanishes—along with Valtria's crown jewels!*A princess and a billionaire are expecting twins! Gervais Reynaud has no time for romance. But he can't say no to a tryst with Erika Mitras. True, she's a princess, Erika wants nothing from Gervais. Yet the tempting tycoon just may charm her into a future she desires all too much.

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[About the Authors](#)

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Royal Protector
Traded to the Desert Sheikh
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Catherine Mann

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Caitlin Crews

[**CHAPTER ONE**](#)

SHE HAD NO WARNING.

There had been no telltale men with grim, assessing eyes watching her from the shadows. No strange gaps in conversation when she walked into the small coffee shop in a tiny lakeside village in British Columbia. There hadn't been any of the usual hang-ups or missed calls on her latest disposable mobile phone that signaled her little noose was drawing tight.

She had a large mug of strong, hot coffee to ward off the late-autumn chill this far north, where snow was plastered across the Canadian Rocky Mountains and the thick clouds hung low. The pastry she chose was cloyingly sweet, but she ate all of it anyway. She checked her email, her messages. There was a new voice mail from her older brother, Rihad, which she ignored. She would call him later, when she was less exposed. When she could be certain Rihad's men couldn't track her.

And then she glanced up, some disturbance in the air around her making her skin draw tight in the second before *he* took the seat across from her at the tiny little café table.

"Hello, Amaya," he said, with a kind of calm, resolute satisfaction—while everything inside her shifted into one great big scream. "You've been more difficult to find than anticipated."

As if this were a perfectly casual meeting, here in this quiet café in an off-season lakeside village in a remote part of Canada she'd been certain he couldn't find. As if he weren't the most dangerous man in the world to her—this man who held her life in those hands of his that looked so easy and idle on the table between them despite their scars and marks of hard use, in notable contrast to that dark slate fury in his too-gray eyes.

As if she hadn't left him—His Royal Highness, Kavian ibn Zayed al Talaas, ruling sheikh of the desert stronghold Daar Talaas—if not precisely at the altar, then pretty damn close six months ago.

Amaya had been running ever since. She'd survived on the money in her wallet and her ability to leave no trail, thanks to a global network of friends and acquaintances she'd met throughout her vagabond youth at her heartbroken mother's side. She'd crashed on the floors of perfect strangers, stayed in the forgotten rooms of friends of friends and walked miles upon miles in the pitch dark to get out of cities and even countries where she'd thought he might have tracked her. She wanted nothing more than to leap up and run now, down the streets of the near-deserted village of Kaslo and straight into the frigid waters of Lake Kootenay if necessary—but she had absolutely no doubt that if she tried that again, Kavian would catch her.

With his own bare hands this time.

And she couldn't repress the shiver that swept over her at that thought.

Much less the one that chased it, when Kavian's sensually grim mouth curved slightly at the sight of her reaction.

Control yourself, she snapped. Inside her own head.

But Kavian looked as if he heard that, too. She hated that some part of her believed that he could.

"You seem surprised to see me," he said. "Surely not."

"Of course I'm surprised." Amaya didn't know how she managed to push the words out of her mouth. A list of things she needed to do—right that second, if there was any hope for her to escape him again now that he'd be fully expecting her to try—raced through her head. But she couldn't seem to look away from him. Just like the last time she'd met him, at her brother's palace to the south of Kavian's desert kingdom, for the occasion of her arranged engagement to this man, Kavian commanded her full attention. "I thought the last six months made it clear that I didn't want to see you, ever again."

"You belong to me," he said, with that same sheer certainty that had sent ice spearing through her at the celebration of their betrothal in the Bakrian Royal Palace half a year ago. That same spear felt even colder now. "Was this moment truly in doubt? I was always going to find you, Amaya. The only question was when."

His voice was deceptively calm, something like silken in the quiet of the small café. It did nothing to lessen the humming sort of threat that emanated from that lethal body of his, all harsh muscle and a kind of lean, austere maleness that was as foreign to her as it was oddly, disruptively fascinating. He looked nothing like the local men who had been in and out of this very café all morning, wreathed in hearty beards and thick plaid jackets to fend off the northern cold.

Kavian wore unrelenting black, relieved only by those furious slate-gray eyes he didn't shift from her for a single moment. Black trousers on his tough, strong legs, utilitarian black boots on his feet. What looked like a fine black T-shirt beneath the black bomber jacket he wore half-zipped that managed to show off his granite-hard chest rather than conceal it in any way. His thick dark hair was shorter than she remembered it, and the closer-cut style accentuated the deadly lines of his brutally captivating face, from that warrior's jaw with the faintest hint of his dark beard as if he hadn't bothered to shave in days, his blade of a nose and cheekbones male models would have died for that nonetheless looked like weapons on such a hard-hewn face.

He looked like an assassin, not a king. Or perhaps a king in hiding as some kind of nightmare. *Her* nightmare. Either way, he looked catastrophically out of place here, so far across the planet from Daar Talaas, where his rule seemed as natural as the desolate desert and the stark, forbidding mountains that dominated his remote country.

Or perhaps the only catastrophe was the way her heart thundered inside her chest, louder by the second. He was like a shot of unwanted, far-too-tactile memory and adrenaline mixed into one, reminding her of the treacherous, unwelcoming desert where she'd been born and where she'd spent the first few years of her life, wrapped up tight in all that sweltering heat, storming sand and blinding, terrible light.

Amaya hated the desert.

She told herself she wasn't any fonder of Kavian.

"You are quite enterprising."

She didn't think that was a compliment. Not exactly. Not from this man, with his harsh gaze and that assessing way he looked at her, as if he was sizing her up for structural weaknesses he could then set about exploiting for his own ends. *That's exactly what he's doing*, she told herself.

"We almost had you in Prague two months ago."

"Unlikely, as I was never in Prague."

That crook of his mouth again, that made her breath feel choppy and her lips sting, and Amaya was certain he knew full well that she was lying.

“Are you proud of yourself?” he asked. She noticed then that he hadn’t moved in all the time he’d sat there. That he remained too still, too watchful. Like a sentry. Or a sniper. “You have caused untold damage with this pointless escapade of yours. The scandal alone could topple two kingdoms and yet here you sit, happy to lie to my face and sip at a latte in the wilds of Canada as if you are a stranger to your own responsibilities.”

There was no reason that should hit Amaya like a blow.

She was the half sister of the current king of Bakri, it was true. But she hadn’t been raised in the palace or even in the country, as some kind of royal princess draped in tiaras and expectations. Her mother had taken Amaya with her when she left and then divorced the former king—Amaya’s father—and Amaya had been raised in her mother’s painful whirlwind of a wake. A season here, a season there. Yachts in the south of France or Miami, artistic communes in places like Taos, New Mexico, or the beach resorts of Bali. Glitzy cities bristling with the rich and famous in their high-class penthouses and hotel suites, distant ranches ringed with fat, sleek cattle and more rustic interpretations of excessive wealth. Wherever the wind had blown Elizaveta al Bakri, wherever there were people to adore her appropriately and pay for the privilege, which Amaya had come to understand was her mother’s substitute for the love her father hadn’t given her, that was where they’d gone—as long as it was never, ever back to Bakri, the scene of the crime as far as Elizaveta was concerned.

That Amaya had returned to the country of her birth at all, much less because Rihad had prevailed upon her after their father had died and somehow gotten into her head with his talk of *her birthright*, had caused a distinct rift between Amaya and her mother. Elizaveta had been noticeably frosty to her only child since the old king’s funeral, which Amaya had attended and which had been, in Elizaveta’s view, a deep betrayal.

Amaya understood. Elizaveta still loved her lost king, Amaya was sure of it. It was just that Elizaveta’s thwarted love had grown more than a little gnarled and knotted over all these years, becoming indistinguishable from hate.

But there was no point thinking about her complicated relationship with her mother, much less her mother’s even more complicated relationship with emotions. It solved nothing—especially not Amaya’s current predicament. Or what Kavian viewed as her *responsibilities*.

“You’re talking about my brother’s responsibilities,” Amaya said now, somehow holding Kavian’s hard warrior gaze steadily as if she weren’t in the least moved by his appearance before her. It she did it long enough, maybe she’d believe it herself. “Not mine.”

“Six months ago, I was prepared to be patient with you.” His voice was soft. It was the only thing about him that was. “I was not unaware of the way you were raised, so ignorant of your own history and the ancient ways, forever on the run. I knew this union would present challenges for you. Six months ago, I intended to meet those challenges as civilly and carefully as possible.”

The world, so still already since he’d sat across from her, shrank down until it was nothing but that flame of sheer, crackling temper in his dangerous gaze. Gray and fierce. Piercing into her, beneath her skin, like a terrible burning she could neither control nor extinguish. It seared through her, rolling too fast, too unchecked, too massive to bear.

“How thoughtful you were six months ago,” she said faintly. “It’s funny how you didn’t mention any of that at the time. You were too busy posturing and grandstanding with my brother. Playing to the press. I was nothing more than a little bit of set dressing at my own engagement party.”

“Are you as vain as your mother before you, then?” His voice turned so hard it left her feeling hollow, as if it had punched straight through her, though he still didn’t move at all. “That is a great pity. The desert is not kind to vanity, you will find. It will strip you down to the bone and leave only who you really are behind, whether you are ready to face that harsh truth or not.”

Something flickered behind that fierce gaze of his, she thought—though she didn't want to know what it was, what it meant. She didn't want to imagine who he *really* was. Not when he was so overwhelming already.

"You paint such a lovely picture," she threw back at him. She didn't understand why she was still sitting there, doing nothing but chatting with him. *Chatting*. Why did she feel paralyzed when he was near? The same thing had happened the last time, at their celebration six months ago. And then far worse—but she refused to think about that. Not here. Not now, with him watching her. "Who wouldn't want to race off to the desert right now on such a delightful voyage of self-discovery?"

Kavian moved then, and that was worse than his alarming stillness. Far worse. He rose to his feet with a lethal show of grace that made Amaya's temples pound, her throat go dry. Then he reached down, took her hand without asking or even hesitating and pulled her to her feet.

And the insane part was that she went.

She didn't fight. She didn't recoil. She didn't even *try*. His hand was calloused and rough against hers, hot and strong, and her stomach flipped, then dropped. Her toes arched in the boots she wore. She came up too fast and once again, found herself teetering too close to this man. This stranger she could not, would not marry.

This man she could not think about without that answering fire so deep within.

"Let go of me," she whispered.

"What will you do if I do not?"

His voice was still calm, but she was closer to him now, and she felt the rumble of it like a deep bass line inside her. His skin was the color of cinnamon, and heat seemed to blast from him, from his hand around hers and his face bent toward her. He was bigger than she was, tall enough that her head reached only his shoulder, and the fact that he'd spent his whole life training in the art of war was like a living flame between them. It was written deep into every proud inch of him. She could see the white line of an old scar etched across the proud column of his throat, and refused to let herself think about how he might have come by it.

He was a war machine, this man. *Kavian is of the old school, in every meaning of the term*, her brother had told her. She'd known that going in. She couldn't pretend otherwise.

What she hadn't realized was how it would affect her. It felt as if she were standing too close to a wicked bonfire, her face on the verge of blistering from the intense heat, with no way to tell when the wind might change.

Kavian tugged on her hand, bringing her closer against his chest, then bending his head to speak directly into her ear.

"Will you scream?" he asked softly. Or perhaps it was a taunt. "Cry out for help from all these soft strangers? What do you think will happen if you do? I am not a civilized man, Amaya. I do not live by your rules. I do not care who gets in my way."

And she shook, as much from the sensation of his breath against her ear as the words he used. Or maybe it wasn't either of those—maybe it was that he was holding her against that body of his again, and she was still haunted by what had happened the last time. What she hadn't done a single thing to stop—but that was desert madness, nothing more, she told herself harshly.

She had no choice but to believe that. It was the only thing that made any sense.

"I believe you," she hissed at him. "But I doubt that you want to end up on the evening news, uncivilized or not. That would be a bit too much scandal, I think we can agree."

"Is this a theory you truly wish to test?"

She yanked herself back from him, out of his grip, and it wasn't lost on her that he let her go. That he had been in control of her since the moment he walked into this café—or before, she realized as her stomach flipped over inside her again and then slammed down at her feet. It must have been before.

Amaya looked around a little bit wildly and realized—belatedly—that the café was unusually empty for the early afternoon. The handful of locals who remained seemed to have studiously averted their gazes in a way that suggested someone had either told them to do so or compensated them for it. And she could see the two brawny men, also in head-to-toe, relentless black, standing at the front door like sentries and worse, the sleek black SUV idling at the curb outside. Waiting.

For her.

She jerked her gaze back to Kavian. “How long have you been following me?”

His dark eyes gleamed.

“Since we located you in Mont-Tremblant, all the way across this great, wide country in Quebec ten days ago.” Kavian was calm, of course. But then, he’d already won. Why wouldn’t he be calm? “You should not have returned there if you truly wished to remain at large.”

“I was only there for three days.” She frowned at him. “Three days in six months.”

He only gazed back at her as if he were made entirely of stone and could do so forever—and would, if it was required. As if he were a monolith and as movable.

“Mont-Tremblant was your favorite of the upscale ski resorts your mother preferred whenever her winter tastes ran to cold weather and ski chalets. I assume that played a part in why you opted to go to university in Montreal, so you could better access it in your free time. I’ve long suspected that if you were likely to return to any of the places your mother dragged you over the years, it would be there.”

“How long have you been *studying* me?” Amaya managed to scrape out, her heart right there in her throat. She was surprised he couldn’t see it.

And Kavian smiled then, a quirk of his absurdly compelling mouth that made her doubt her own sanity. But there was no doubting the way it wound in her, tightening the knot in her belly, making her feel unsteady on her feet.

She had the strangest notion that he knew it.

“I don’t think you’re ready to hear that,” he told her, and there was something else, then, in those slate-gray eyes. Inhabiting that warrior’s face of his, stone and steel. And he was right, she thought. She didn’t want to hear it. “Not here. Not now.”

“I think I deserve to know exactly how much of an obsessed stalker you are, in fact. So I can prepare myself accordingly.”

He almost laughed. She saw the silver of it in his gaze, in the movement of that mouth of his, though he made no sound.

“What you deserve is to be thrown over my shoulder and bodily removed from this establishment.” She’d never heard him sound anything but supernaturally calm and almost hypnotic in his intensity, and so that rough edge to his voice then shocked her. It made her jolt to attention, her eyes flying wide on his. “Make no mistake. If I’d caught up to you in a less stuffy place than Canada, we wouldn’t be bothering with polite conversation at all. My patience ran out six months ago, Amaya.”

“You threaten me, and then you wonder why I ran?”

“I don’t care why you ran,” he replied, ruthless and swift, and she’d never heard him sound quite like that, either. “You can walk outside and get in that car, or I can put you there. Your choice.”

“I don’t understand this.” She did nothing to hide the bitterness in her voice, the anguish that she’d walked into this trap six months ago thinking her eyes were open, or the fear that she’d never get out of it again. “You could have any other woman in the world as your queen. I’m sure there are millions who lie awake at night dreaming of coronations and crowns. And you could certainly ally your country to my brother’s if that was what you wanted, whether or not your queen was related to him. You don’t need me.”

Again, that smile, dangerous and compelling and world-altering at once. The essence of Kavian, boiled down to that small quirk of his too-hard mouth.

“But I want you,” he said, deep and certain. So very certain, like stone. “So it amounts to the same thing.”

* * *

Kavian thought for a moment she would bolt, despite the obvious futility of another such attempt.

And that wildness that was always a part of him, the desert that lived inside him, untamed and unconquerable and darker than the night, wished that she'd try. Because he was not the kind of man she'd known all her life. He was not pallid and weak, Western and accommodating. He had been forged in steel and loss, had struck down treachery and rebellion alike with his own two bloodstained hands. He had made himself what he most hated because it had been a necessary evil, a burden he'd been prepared to shoulder for the good of his people. Perhaps it had been too easy a transition; perhaps he *was* the darkness itself—but those were questions for a restless soul, a long, dark night. Kavian had never been a good man, only a determined one.

He would not only chase her to ground; he would enjoy it.

Something of that must have showed on his face because she paled, his runaway princess who had evaded him all this time and in so doing, proved herself the very queen she claimed she didn't want to become. The very queen he needed.

And then she swallowed so hard he could hear it and, beast that he was, he liked that, too.

"Run," he invited her, the way he'd once invited a challenger to attempt to take his throne. With untrained hands and an unwieldy ego. It had not ended well for that foolish upstart. To say nothing of the traitorous creature who had struck down Kavian's father before him. Kavian was not a good man. The woman who would become his queen should have no doubts on that score. "See what happens."

He didn't know what he expected her to do, but it wasn't that defiant glare she aimed at him, her hands fisted on her hips, as if she was considering taking a swing at him right there in public. He wished she'd do that, too. Any touch at all, he'd take.

She was so pretty that she should have been spoiled and delicate, a fragile glass thing better kept high on a soft, safe shelf—and he'd thought she was. He would have worshipped her as such. That she was *this*, as well—with the ingenuity to hide from him for this long and the sheer strength to stand before him without shrinking or collapsing when many grown men did not dare do the same—came far too close to making him...furious.

Well. Perhaps *furious* was not quite the correct term. But it was dark, that ribbon of reaction in him. Supple and lush. And it gripped him like a slick vise all the same. He imagined it was a kind of admiration. For the fierce and worthy queen she would become, if he could but tame her to the role. Kavian had no doubt that he could do it, in time. That he would.

Had he not done everything he'd ever set out to do, no matter how treacherous the path? What was one woman next to a throne reclaimed, a family avenged, the stain on his soul? Even if it was this one. This woman, who fought him where others only cowered.

God help him but he liked it. The angrier she made him with her defiance, the more he liked her.

Her beauty had been a hammer to the side of his head from the start, taking him by surprise. His first inkling that he, too, was a mortal man who could be toppled by the same sins as any other. It had not been a revelation he had particularly enjoyed. He could remember all too well that meeting with Rihad al Bakri, the other man at that time merely the heir apparent to the Bakrian throne.

"You want an alliance," he'd said when Rihad was brought before him in the grand, bejeweled throne room in the old city of Daar Talaas that had been hewn into the rocks themselves and for centuries had stood as a great stronghold. Kavian wanted to make certain it would stand for centuries more.

"I do."

"What benefit is there in such an alliance for me?"

Rihad had talked at length about politics and the drums of war that beat so long and so hard in their part of the world that Kavian had started to consider it their own form of regional music. And it was far better to dance than to die. Moreover, he'd known Rihad was correct—the mighty powers

around them imposed their rule by greed and cunning and, when that did not work, the long-range missiles of their foreign-funded militaries. In this way, the world was still won, day after bloody day.

“And I have a sister,” Rihad had said, at the end of this trip through unsavory political realities.

“Many men have sisters. Not all of those men also have kingdoms in peril that could use the support of my army.”

Because Daar Talaas might not have been as well funded as some of their neighbors, nor was its military as vast, but they had not been beaten by a single foreign force since they had ousted the last Ottoman sultanate in the fifteenth century.

“You strike me as a man who prefers the old ways,” Rihad had shrugged, though his gaze had been shrewd. “Surely there remains no better way to unite two families, or two countries, than to become one in fact.”

“Says the man who has not offered to marry my sister,” Kavian had murmured, lounging there on his throne as if he hadn’t cared one way or the other. “Though it is his kingdom that hangs in the balance.”

Rihad had not replied with the obvious retort, that Kavian had no sisters and that his brothers had been taken out much too young in the bloody coup Kavian’s predecessor had led. Instead, he’d handed over a tablet computer and had pressed Play on the cued-up video.

“My sister,” he’d said. Simply enough.

She’d been pretty, of course. But Kavian had been surrounded by pretty women his whole life. Supplicants presented them to him like desserts for him to choose between, or simply collect. His harem had been stocked with the finest selection of feminine beauty from all over his lands, and even beyond.

But this one was something else.

It was the perfect oval of her face and that lush, carnal mouth of hers as she’d talked back to Rihad in a manner that could only have been described as challenging. Defiant. Not in the least bit docile, and Kavian found he liked it far too much.

It was the thick, lustrously dark hair she’d plaited to one side and thrown over one of her smooth shoulders, covered only by the faintest thin straps of the pale white tank top she wore that drew attention to her olive skin even as it was perfectly clear that she’d given her appearance little to no thought. It was the crackling energy and bright, gleaming light in her faintly Eurasian eyes, the color of bittersweet chocolates ringed in fancifully dark lashes, that inspired a man to look again, to look closer, to do what he could to never look away.

And it was what she was saying, in that slightly husky voice with an unplaceable accent, neither North American nor European, not quite. She’d used her hands for emphasis, and animated facial expressions besides, instead of the studied, elegant placidity of the women he knew. She’d talked so quickly, so passionately, that he’d been interested despite himself. And when she finished, she’d laughed, and it had been like clear, cool water. Sparkling and bright, washing him clean, and making him thirsty—so very, very thirsty—for more.

“Let me guess,” she’d said, her voice dry and faintly teasing in a way that had shot straight to the hardest part of him—forcing Kavian to remind himself that she hadn’t been speaking to *him*. That what he’d been watching was a taped video call between this woman and her brother. “The mighty King of Bakri is not a Harry Potter fan.”

She had been a hard blow to his temple, making his head spin. The effect of such an unexpected hit had coursed through his body like some kind of ferocious virus, burning away everything in its path and leaving only one word behind:

Mine.

But he’d only smiled blandly at Rihad when the video finished.

“I am not at all certain I require a wife at present,” he’d said languidly, and the negotiation had begun.

He'd never imagined it would lead him here, to this inhospitable land of snow and ice, pine trees and heavy fog, so far north he could feel the chill of winter like a dull metal deep in his bones. He admired her defiance. He craved it. It would make her the perfect queen to reign at his side. But he also needed a wife who would obey him.

Men like his own father had handled these competing needs by taking more than one wife—one for each required role. But Kavian would not make his father's mistakes. He was certain he could find everything he needed in one woman. In this woman.

"Listen to me," Amaya was saying, her hands still on her hips, her defiant chin high, as if this were another negotiation instead of a foregone conclusion. "If you'd listened to me in the first place, none of this would have happened."

"I have listened to you." He had listened to her back in Bakri, or he'd intended to listen to her anyway, and then she'd run. What benefit was there in listening any further? Her actions had spoken for her, clear and unmistakable. "The next time I listen to you, it will be in the old city, where you can run your heart out for miles in all directions and find nothing but the desert and my men. I will listen and listen, if I must. And it will all end the same way. You will be beneath me and all of this will have been a pointless exercise in the inevitable."

CHAPTER TWO

KAVIAN TURNED THEN and started for the door, aware that all the exits were blocked by his men on the off chance she was foolish enough to try to escape him one last time.

He still hoped she would. He truly did. The beast in him yearned for that chase.

"We are leaving, Amaya. One way or the other. If you wish me to force you, I am happy to oblige. I am not from your world. The only rules I follow are the ones I make."

He yanked open the door and let the sharp weather in, nodding to the guards who waited for him on the other side. Then he looked back at this woman who did not seem to realize that she'd been his all along.

That all she was doing was delaying what had always been coming, as surely as the stars followed the setting sun. As surely as he had assumed the mantle of his enemy to defeat the murderous interloper and reclaim his throne, no matter the personal cost or the dark stain it left behind.

Her hands had dropped from her hips and were balled into fists at her sides, and even in the face of her pointless stubbornness he found her beautiful. Shockingly so. He could still feel that resounding blow to the side of his skull, making the world ring and whirl all around him.

And this despite the fact that she still wore her hair in that same impatient braid, a long, messy tail pulled forward over one shoulder as if she hadn't wanted to bother with it any further. At their engagement party, she'd worn it up high in too many braids to count, woven together into some kind of elegant crown. And here he stood on the other side of the world, still itching to undo it all himself and let the heavy, dark length of it fall free.

He wanted to bury himself in the slippery silk of it, the fragrant warmth. In her, any way he could have her. *Every* way.

It didn't even matter that she was dressed in a manner that did not suit her fine, delicately otherworldly allure—and was certainly not appropriate for a woman who would be his queen. Jeans that were entirely too formfitting for eyes that were not his. Markedly unfeminine boots. Both equally scuffed and lived in, as if she were still the university student she'd been not too long ago. A bulky sweatshirt that hid her figure, save those long and slender legs of hers that nothing could conceal and that he wanted wrapped around him. And the puffy jacket she'd thrown over the nearest chair when she sat down that, when she wore it zipped up to her chin, made her look almost like a perfect circle above the waist.

Kavian wanted to wrap her in silks and drape her in jewels. He wanted her to stand tall beside him. He wanted to decorate her in nothing but delicate gold chains and build whole palaces in her

name, as the ancient sultans had done for the women who'd captivated them. He wanted her strength as much as her beauty.

He wanted to explore every inch of her sweet body with his battered hands, his warrior's body, his mouth, his tongue.

But first, and foremost, he wanted to take her home.

"Is it force, then?" he asked her, standing in the open doorway, not in the least bit concerned about being overheard by the townspeople. "Will I throw you over my shoulder like the barbarians of old? I think you know I will not hesitate to do exactly that. And enjoy it."

She shuddered then and he would have given his kingdom, in that moment, to know whether it was desire or revulsion that swept through her at that thought. He hated that he didn't know her well enough, yet, to tell the difference.

That, too, would change. And far quicker than it might have had she come with him as she'd been meant to do the night of their engagement party, when he'd been predisposed toward a gentler understanding of her predicament. But there was nothing gentle left in him. He had become stone.

Amaya swept her big coat up in one hand and hung the ratty bag she carried over one shoulder. But she still didn't move toward him.

"If I come with you now," she said, that husky voice of hers very even, very low, "you have to promise that you won't—"

"No."

She blinked. "You don't know what I was going to say."

"What can it matter? I made you a set of promises upon our betrothal. You should not require anything further. You made me promises, too, Amaya, which you broke that very same night. It is better, I think, that you and I do not dwell on promises."

"But—"

"This is not a debate," he said gently, but he could see the way the edge beneath it slapped at her.

Her lips fell open, as if she had to breathe hard to get through that slap, and he couldn't pretend he didn't approve of the way she did it. She even stood taller. He liked that she was beautiful, of course he did. Kavian was a man, after all. A flesh-and-blood king who knew full well the benefits of such beauty when he could display it on his arm. But his queen had to be strong or, like his own fragile and ultimately treacherous mother, she would never survive the rigors of their life together. She would dissolve at the first hint of a storm, and he couldn't have that.

Life was storms, not sunshine. The latter was a gift. It was not reality.

Kavian was a warrior king. Amaya had to be a warrior queen, in her own way. No matter how little she liked the lessons that would make her into what he needed.

He was certain he, at least, would enjoy them.

"There are no caveats, no negotiations," he told her. Perhaps too firmly. "You have no choices here. Only an option regarding the delivery method toward the same end."

He thought she would argue, because it seemed she always argued—and, of course, when he'd elected to quiet her in the only other way he knew, she'd bolted for six months. He could admire it now that it was over. Now that she was in his possession, where she belonged.

But today, his warrior queen lifted her head high and walked toward him instead, her dark chocolate gaze cool on his.

"That sounds ominous," she said. Still, she walked through the door of her own volition, out into the moody light of this cold northern morning. "Will you throw a potato sack over my head? Keep my mouth shut with duct tape? Make this a good old-fashioned sort of kidnapping?"

Kavian probably shouldn't have found that amusing. He was aware that was begging for trouble, but he couldn't help it, especially not when she walked out in front of him and he understood, at last, the true benefit of a tight pair of jeans on a fine-figured woman.

His palms ached with the urge to test the shape of that bottom of hers, to haul her against him the way he had done but once, six months ago. It hadn't been nearly enough, no matter how many times he'd replayed it while scouring the earth for her trail.

"It is a relatively short helicopter flight to Calgary," he said. "Then a mere fifteen hours or so to Daar Talaas. It is entirely up to you if you wish to dress in sacks and tape. I can drug you, if that will appeal to your sense of victimization. Whatever you wish, my queen, it shall be yours."

She stopped then, on the street in this small little Western town in the middle of so much towering wilderness. She turned slowly, as if she was still processing that dry tone of his, and when she met his gaze her own was solemn.

"I can't be your queen," she said quietly. "You must know that. Surely that, if nothing else, became clear to you over all these months."

He didn't try to keep his hands off her, then. He pulled that thick plait into his palm and let the warm silk gently abrade his skin. It wasn't lost on him that if he wished it, he could tug her closer to him, hold her fast, use that braid to help him plunder that plump mouth of hers. The specter of that possibility danced between them and he knew, somehow, that those dark, greedy moments in her brother's palace hung there, too. Steaming up the cold air. Making her cheeks bloom red and his blood heat.

"You promised yourself to me," he reminded her. "You made oaths and I accepted them. You gave yourself into my hands, Amaya. You can confuse this issue with as many words as you like—forced betrothal, political engagement, arranged marriage. Whatever way you hedge a bet in this strange place and pretend a promise need not be kept. In my world, you belong to me already. You have been mine for months."

"I don't accept that," Amaya whispered, but he was attuned to what she didn't do. She didn't weep. She didn't pull away. She didn't so much as avert her gaze. He felt all of those things like caresses.

"I don't require your acceptance," he said softly. "I only require you."

* * *

There were no direct routes into the ancient desert city that comprised the central stronghold—and royal palace—of Daar Talaas. It had been a myth, a legend, for many centuries, whispered about by traders and defeated challengers to its throne, incorporated into battle songs and epic poems. In these modern times, satellites and spy drones and online travelogues made certain there was no possibility of truly hiding a whole city away from the rest of the world, but that didn't mean the old royal seat of the warrior kings of Daar Talaas was any more accessible for being known.

The roads only led an hour or so into the desert from any given border, then ended abruptly, unmarked and nowhere near the city itself. There was nothing but the shifting desert sands in the interior of the country, with secret and hard-to-find tunnels beneath the formidable mountains that the natives had used to evade potential invaders for centuries. There were other, somewhat more modern places in the country that appeared on all the maps and were easily approached by anyone insane enough to consider the wide, empty desert a reasonable destination—but the ancient seat of Daar Talaas's power remained half mystery, half mirage.

Almost impossible to attack by land.

Much less escape.

She might not ever have wanted to end up in this place, Amaya reflected as she stepped out of the small, sleek jet into the bright, hot desert heat and the instantly parching slap of the wind that went with it, but that didn't mean she hadn't studied up on it. Just in case.

Kavian moved behind, shepherding her down the stairs toward the dusty tarmac as if he imagined she really might fling aside her jet lag and race off into the treacherous embrace of the shifting, beckoning sand. And after fifteen hours in an enclosed space with all that sensual menace

that blazed from him like a radiator in the depths of a Canadian winter, Amaya was almost crazed enough to consider it.

"I won't even send my guards after you," he murmured, sounding both much too close and entirely amused, as if reading her mind or the longing in that glance she'd aimed at the horizon was funny. "I'll run you down myself. I'm not afraid to tackle a woman, particularly not when she has proved as slippery as you have. And imagine what might happen then?"

She didn't have to imagine it. She'd spent a large portion of her time and energy these past six months doing her best to cast the memory of that night at her brother's palace out of her head.

"That will never happen again," she assured him.

His hand curled around the nape of her neck as her feet hit the ground. He didn't release her as he stepped into place beside her; if anything, his hand tightened. He leaned in close, letting his lips brush against her cheek, and Amaya was certain he knew exactly what that did to her. How the heat of it rushed over her as if she'd dropped off the side of the parched earth into a boiling sea. How her skin pulled tight and her breasts seemed to swell. How her breath caught and her core melted.

Of course he knew. He remembered, too. She had no doubt.

"It will happen often," he said, warning and promise at once, "and soon."

Amaya shuddered, and she couldn't convince herself it was entirely fear. But he only laughed, low and entirely too lethal. He didn't let go of her until he'd helped her into the waiting helicopter and started to buckle her in himself.

"I'm not going to fling myself out of a moving helicopter," she gritted out at him, only *just* stopping herself from batting at those fascinatingly male hands of his as they moved efficiently over her, tugging here and snapping there, and managing to kick up new brush fires as if he'd used his teeth against the line of her neck.

He eyed her in that disconcertingly frank way of his that made something low and hot inside her constrict, then flip.

"Not now, no," he agreed.

It was a quick, dizzying ride. They shot up high into the air in a near-vertical lift, and then flew over the nearest steep and forbidding mountain range to drop down in a tumultuous rush on the other side.

Amaya had a disjointed, roller-coaster sense of a city piled high along the walls of a deep, jagged valley, the stacked buildings made of smooth, ancient stone that seemed almost a part of the mountains themselves. There were spires and minarets, flags snapping briskly against the wind, smooth domes and thick, sturdy walls that reminded her of nothing so much as a fort. She had the impression of leafy green squares tucked away from the sprawl of the desert, of courtyards bursting with bright and fanciful flowers, and then they touched down and Kavian's hands were on her again.

She started to protest but bit it off when she looked at the expression on his hard face. It was too triumphant. Too darkly intent.

He'd promised her months ago that he would bring her home to his palace, and now he had done so. Her throat went dry as he herded her off the helicopter with him—she told herself it was the desert air, though she knew better—as she wondered exactly how many of his promises she could expect him to keep.

All of them, a small voice deep inside her intoned, like a death knell. *You know he will keep every single promise he ever made to you.*

She had to repress an involuntary shiver at that, but they'd stepped out onto a breezy rooftop and there was no time and certainly no space to indulge her apprehension. Kavian wrapped his hard fingers around her wrist and pulled her along with him as he moved, not adjusting his stride in the least to accommodate hers.

And she would die before she'd ask him to do so.

They'd landed on the very top of a grand structure cut into the highest part of this side of the valley, Amaya comprehended in the few moments before they moved inside. And then they were walking down a complicated series of sweeping, marbled stairs and through royal halls inlaid with jaw-droppingly beautiful mosaics, lovingly crafted into high arches and soaring ceilings. Though they'd gone inside, there was no sense of closeness; the palace was bright and open, with light pouring in from all directions, making Amaya feel dizzy all over again as she tried to work out the systems of skylights and arched windows that made a palace of rock feel this airy.

People she was dimly aware were various members of his staff moved toward him and around him, taking instruction and carrying on rapid-fire conversations with him as he strode deeper and deeper into the palace complex without so much as a hitch in that stride of his. They all spoke in the Arabic she'd learned as a child, that she still knew enough of to work out the basic meaning of what was said around her, if not every word or nuance. Something about the northern border. Something about a ceremony. An aside about what sounded like housekeeping, a subject she was surprised a king—especially a king as inaccessibly mighty as Kavian—spent any time thinking about in the first place. Each aide would approach him, walk with him briefly and deferentially, then fall back again as if each were a part of the royal wake he left behind him as he charged through his ornate and bejeweled world, never so much as pausing as he went.

That was Kavian. She'd understood it six months ago, on a deep and visceral level. She understood it even more clearly now. He was a brutal force, focused and unstoppable. He took what he wanted. He did not hesitate.

It took her a shuddering sort of moment to recognize it when he finally did stop walking, and even then, it was only because he finally let go of her arm. She couldn't help putting her hands to her stomach as if she could stop the way it flipped and rolled, or make her lungs take in a little more air.

First she realized they were all alone. Then she glanced around.

It seemed as if they stood in an enormous cavern, lit by lanterns in the scattered seating areas and sconces in the stone walls, though she could see, far on the other side of the great space, what looked like another open courtyard bathed in the bright desert light. It took Amaya another moment or two to notice the pools of water laid out in a kind of circle around the central seating and lounging area where they stood. Some steaming, some not. And all the fountains that poured into them from a dragon's mouth here, a lion's mouth there, carved directly into the stone walls.

"Where are we?" she asked.

Her voice resounded in the space, coming back a damp echo, and smaller, somehow, than she'd meant it to sound.

And Kavian stood there before her, his arms crossed over his magnificent black-covered chest with the gleaming pools all around him, and smiled.

"These are the harem baths."

There was something sour in her mouth then. "The harem."

"The baths, yes. The harem itself comprises many more rooms, suites, courtyards. A whole wing of the palace, as you will discover."

"It's empty." Amaya forced herself to look around to confirm that, and hated that she was afraid she was wrong. She didn't particularly want his attention anyway, did she? What did it matter if it was shared with the other women who must surely be around here somewhere? Her father had been the same kind of man. She'd lived the first eight years of her life in his palace, with his other women in addition to her mother, each one of them one more lash of pain Elizaveta still carried with her today. *Loving a man like your father is losing yourself*, her mother had taught her, *and then watching him lavish his attentions on others instead, while what remains of you shrivels up and dies*. Amaya shouldn't have been surprised, surely, that Kavian was cut from similar cloth. "Surely it can't be a harem without...a harem."

Again, that dark, assessing look of his that she worried could separate her flesh from her bones as easily as it bored inside her head.

“Do you not recall the conversation we had in your brother’s palace?”

She wished she didn’t. She wished she could block that entire night out of her head, but she’d tried. She’d tried for six months with little success. “No.”

“I think you do, Amaya. And I think you have become far too comfortable with the lies you tell. To yourself. To me.”

“Or perhaps I simply don’t remember, without any grand conspiracy.” But her voice was much too hoarse then and she saw that he knew it. Those eyes of his gleamed silver. “Perhaps I didn’t find a conversation with you all that interesting. Blasphemous, I know.”

“You told me, with all the blustering self-righteousness of your youth and ignorance and many years in North America, that you could not possibly consider marrying a man with a harem, as if such a thing was beneath you when you were born in one yourself. And I told you that for you, I would empty mine.” His mouth crooked again, but she felt it like a dark, sensual threat, not a smile. “Does that jog your memory? Or should I remind you what we were doing when I made this promise?”

Amaya looked away, blindly, as if she could make sense of this. What he’d told her then, when she’d been shooting off her mouth to cover the tumult he’d caused inside her. What he appeared to be telling her now.

“I didn’t think you really had a harem.” She didn’t want to look at him again. She didn’t want to see the truth on that face of his that had yet to soften a single blow for her, and she really didn’t want to question why she should care either way. “My brother doesn’t have a harem.”

“Neither do I.” He waited until, despite herself, she looked at him again as if magnetically drawn to him. As if he controlled her will as easily as he controlled her body. “I haven’t had a harem for the past six months. You are welcome.”

Amaya blinked, and tried to process that. All its implications.

As if he saw some of that internal struggle on her face, Kavian laughed, which hardly helped anything. He moved away from her, toward the nearby seating area that dominated the central expanse in the middle of the pools, all stone benches and bright floor pillows around graceful round tables covered in trays of food she didn’t want to look at, because she didn’t want to eat anything. She didn’t want to be here at all.

Amaya had read entirely too many ancient myths in her time. She knew how this went. A few pomegranate seeds and she’d find herself forced to spend half her life trapped in the underworld with the King of Hell. *No, thank you.*

She refused to accept that this was her fate, like her mother’s before her. *She refused.*

So she didn’t follow him. She didn’t dare move a muscle. She was afraid that if she did, the graceful, high ceilings would crash down and pin her here, trapping her forever.

Or maybe she was afraid of something else entirely—and of naming it, too, because she knew exactly where this ended. She’d witnessed it as a child. She’d lived through its aftermath. It didn’t matter how hard her heart beat. She knew better.

“How many women did you keep here?” She meant to sound arch and amused, a great sophisticate who could handle what was happening here and the fact of *a harem*, but that wasn’t at all how it came out. She felt the searing look he threw her way, though she didn’t dare look over at him, felt it sweep over her skin, making her wish she hadn’t discarded all her winter outer layers on the plane. Making her wish there was some greater barrier between them than the simple, too-sheer T-shirt she wore.

“Seventeen.”

“Seven—you’re messing with me, aren’t you? Is this your version of teasing?”

“Do I strike you as a man who teases?” he asked, mildly enough, yet she could hear the heft of his ruthlessness beneath it, the deadly thrust of his intent, like the rock walls all around them.

“You kept seventeen women locked away here.” She felt as if she were in the helicopter again, that wild ride like a slingshot across the mountains. “And you—did you—at night, or whenever, did —”

She couldn’t finish.

“Did I have sex with them?” he finished for her, his voice smooth and dark, and it moved in her in all the worst possible places. It made her feel greedy and panicked, exactly the way she’d felt in that terrible alcove in her brother’s palace when she lost her mind. And everything else. “Is that what you want to know, Amaya?”

“I don’t care,” she threw at him. “I don’t want to know anything. I don’t care what you do.”

“Do not ask questions if you cannot handle the answers, because I will not sugarcoat them for you.” His voice was so dark, so harsh. Inexorable, somehow, as it wrapped around her. “This is no place for petty jealousies and schoolgirl insecurities. You are the queen of Daar Talaas, not a concubine whose name is known to no one.”

She jolted at that, as if he’d electrocuted her. “I’m not the queen of anything!”

And it was as if her body only then realized it could move if it liked and that she wasn’t trapped here—not yet—and so she whirled around to face him again.

A mistake.

Kavian had stripped down to boxer briefs that molded to his powerful thighs and made Amaya’s head go completely, utterly blank. No harems. No concubines. Nothing but him. *Kavian*.

And when she could think again, it wasn’t an improvement. There was still nothing but that vast expanse of his steel-honed chest, ridged and muscled in ways that defied reason, that made her mouth water and her knees feel wobbly. He was beautiful. He was something far more intoxicating than merely *beautiful*, more overwhelming than simply *hard*, and yet he was a harsh and powerful male poetry besides.

Her mouth fell open. Without realizing she’d moved at all, Amaya found her hands clamped tight over her heart as if she was afraid it might burst from her chest.

She was, she realized. She was afraid of exactly that.

“I hope you are finished asking these questions I suspect you already know the answers to, Amaya,” Kavian said with that dark, quiet triumph in his voice that washed through her like a caress and made her body feel like someone else’s. As if it belonged to him, the way it had once before, and she hated that she couldn’t get past that. That she felt indelibly marked by him. Branded straight through to her soul. *Owned* whether she wanted to be or not, no matter that she knew better than to let herself feel such things. “Now take off your clothes.”

CHAPTER THREE

AMAYA COULDN’T POSSIBLY have heard him correctly.

“I would strip down all the way myself,” he was saying, his eyes never leaving her face as he started toward her again. “But I imagine that if I did so, you would faint dead away. And the marble beneath your feet is very hard. You would hurt yourself.”

“I would not faint.” She cast about for some way to convince him, then settled on the easiest, most provocative lie. The one most likely to repel a man like him. “I’ve seen battalions of naked men before as they paraded in and out of my bed. What’s one more?”

“No,” he replied as he closed the distance between them, and there wasn’t the faintest hint of uncertainty on his face, in his hard-edged voice. “You have not.”

Amaya’s shoulders came up against one of the great stone arches, which was how she realized she’d backed away from him. She’d been too lost in his dark gaze to notice anything else. And then he was in front of her and it took every bit of self-preservation she had left not to let out that high-pitched sound that clamored in her throat, especially when he didn’t stop stalking toward her until he was *right there*—

If she breathed out, she would touch the golden expanse of his skin. That glorious, warrior's chest with all those fascinating planes and stone-carved shallows that begged for her fingers to explore. That she hungered to *taste* in ways that made her head spin.

But then, she could hardly breathe as it was.

"I told you to remove your clothes, *azizty*."

His mouth was so close then. She could feel his breath against her lips, particularly when he said the unfamiliar word she was terribly afraid was some kind of endearment. She was more afraid that she *wanted* it to be an endearment, that she was starting down that slippery slope. She could taste him if she only tipped forward—and she would never know how she managed to keep herself from doing exactly that.

She wanted it as much as she feared it. The push and pull of that made her feel something like seasick, though that certainly wasn't *nausea* that pooled in her. Not even close.

"I'm not very good at following orders," she managed to say.

There was the faintest suggestion of a curve to that grimly sensual mouth, entirely too near her own.

"Not yet, perhaps," he said. "But you will become adept and obedient. I will insist."

Time stopped, taut and desperate in that tiny sliver of space between them, and the past tangled all around the present until she hardly knew what was happening now as opposed to what she remembered from the night of their betrothal ceremony.

She could feel his hands in her hair, holding her elegant upswept braids in his palms, holding her head still as he'd taken her mouth like a starving man, again and again and again in that private corner of the Bakrian Royal Palace where they'd gone to "discuss" the very formal, very public promises they'd made to each other. She could feel him again as she had done so then, hard against her as the rest of the world ignited. She could feel that catapulting passion as it had eaten them both alive and made her into someone wholly new and entirely ungovernable, could feel the way he'd hitched her up between his tough, strong body and the alcove's hard wall, and then—

But that had been six months ago. This was here, now, in a great room of bathing pools and echoes, the ghosts of seventeen harem girls and that silvery awareness in his slate-gray eyes.

Amaya thought he would simply bend forward and take her mouth again, the way he had done then, with that low, animal noise that still thrilled her in the recesses of her own mind, still made her nipples draw tight and her toes curl even in memory—

He didn't.

Instead, he shifted and knelt down before her, making what ought to have been an act of some kind of submission feel instead like its opposite.

She should have felt powerful with him at her feet. Bigger than him at last. Instead, she had never felt more delicate or more precarious, and had never felt he was larger or more intimidating. It didn't make sense.

And her heart stopped pretending that what it was doing was *beating*. It wasn't anything so tame, so controlled. It tried to rocket straight out of her chest.

It took her a confused, breathless moment to realize that he was removing her boots, one at a time, and then peeling off her socks, as well. The cool stone beneath her bare feet was a shock to her system, making her remember herself in a sudden rush, as if Kavian had thrown open a window in all this stone and let a crisp wind in.

She reached over to shove him away from her, or that was what she told herself she meant to do, but it was a mistake. Or maybe she hadn't meant to do anything but touch him, because her hands came up hard against those powerful shoulders, and she couldn't describe what she did then as a *shove*. She couldn't seem to *think*. She couldn't seem to do anything but hold on to all that heat, all that fiercely corded strength, and when he tipped his head back to fix her with one of those unsmiling

looks of his that wound deep inside her like some kind of spiked thing, laying her bare, she didn't say a word.

She didn't tell him to stop.

His hands moved to the waistband of her jeans, and the denim was shoved down around her thighs before she took another breath, then around her ankles. And she still didn't tell him to stop.

"Please," she said as his big hands wrapped around her ankles, when it was much too late. "I can't."

But she didn't know what she meant. And he wasn't caressing her; he was undressing her with a ruthless efficiency that stunned her into incoherence. He surged to his feet and pulled her against him with an arm banded low around her hips—not an embrace, she realized as every nerve inside her sang out in something a little too much like exultation, but so he could kick her jeans out from beneath her. And when he was done, her palms were flat against his gloriously bare chest and she could feel that great, scarred hand of his at the small of her back, and she thought she really might faint, after all.

"Can you not?" he asked her in that low, stirring voice of his, his head bent as if he was moments away from another one of those drugging, life-altering kisses that had ripped her whole world apart six months ago, so far apart even half a year on the run hadn't put it back together. "Are you certain?"

And she didn't mean to do it. She didn't know *why* she did it. But she arched her back as if she couldn't help herself, and her breasts were so close then, so very close, to pressing against him the way she remembered they had that once, that delirious pressure that had undone her completely.

Kavian let out a small, indisputably male laugh then that did nothing at all to soothe her, and then, unaccountably, he let her go.

She stumbled back a step, and might actually have crumpled where she stood had that cool stone pillar not been right there behind her. She dug her fingertips in to it as if it were a life raft and still, her breath was as shallow as if she'd run a marathon or two.

"Take off the rest of your clothes, Amaya," Kavian said, and there was no mistaking the royal command. The powerful imperative. Or that surge of *something* inside her that wanted nothing more than to obey him. At once.

"I can't think of a single reason why I would do that." She managed to meet that gaze of his. Hold it. "More important, I don't want to take the rest—*any* of my clothes off."

"That is yet another lie. Soon there will be so many they will block out the desert sun above us, and I have no intention of living in such a darkness. Know this now."

That had the unpleasant ring of prophecy or foreboding, or perhaps more than a little of both, and it was as if her pulse had gotten too hard, too loud. It hammered at her.

"It's not a lie simply because it's something you don't want to hear," she threw at him, forcing her knees to lock beneath her, to stop their wobbling. "You don't own the thoughts in my head. You can't order me to think only the things you like."

His gray eyes gleamed, and there was not a single part of him that was not hard, unflinching. Tempered steel. Barely contained power. She'd seen softer, more approachable statues littered about the sculpture gardens of Europe.

"It is a lie because you do, in fact, wish to take off the rest of your clothes." His voice was so quiet it almost disguised the cut of his words, the way they sliced into her. Through her. "More than that, you wish to give yourself over to me the way you did before, but this time, not in a sudden rush in a hidden alcove. You wish to run like honey against my palms and shake apart when I claim you. Again and again."

"No." But she scarcely made a sound.

"You are mine, Amaya. Can you doubt this? You shake even now, in anticipation."

"I was never yours. I will never be yours. I will—"

"Hush." An expression she might have called tender on another man, one not carved directly from stone and war and the cruel desert all around, crossed his brutally handsome face. He reached

over and fit his hard palm to her jaw, cradling her too-hot cheek. “I did not know you were an innocent, Amaya. I would never have taken you like that, with so little consideration for anything but passion, had I known. You did not have to run, *azizty*. You could have told me.”

And something yawned open inside her then. Something far more terrifying than the things he made her feel when he was autocratic and overbearing. She was drawn to him even then, yes. More than simply *drawn to him*. But this... She shoved the great sinkhole of it away in a panic, afraid it might spill out with that hectic heat she could suddenly feel behind her eyes. Afraid it marked her as weak and disposable, like her own mother before her.

Amaya jerked her cheek back, out of his hold, as if his palm had scalded her.

“I...” She felt too much, all at once, buffeting her from all sides. Her memories and the present wound together into a great knot she couldn’t begin to unravel—and was afraid to poke at, lest it fall apart and show him too much. She lied again, hoping it would push him back into temper, or put him off altogether. Anything but that hint of softness. *Anything but that*. “I wasn’t innocent. I was the Whore of Montreal while I was at university. I slept with every man I could find in the whole of North America. I ran because I was bored—”

Kavian sighed. “And now I am bored.”

She didn’t know what he would do then and felt oddly bereft when he only stepped back from her. His dark gaze pinned her to the pillar behind her for a long, uncomfortably assessing moment that could easily have lasted whole years, and then he simply turned and dove into the nearest great bath.

It should have been a relief. A reprieve. She should have taken it as an opportunity to regroup, to breathe, to figure out what on earth she was going to do next as that solid, smooth warrior’s body of his cut through the water and briefly disappeared beneath it.

But instead, she watched him. That marvelous, impossibly strong body could not possibly have been the product of a fleet of personal trainers or hours on modern gym equipment. He used every part of his intense physicality in everything he did. He was a smooth, powerful machine. And he fit here, in this age-old place. A weapon carved directly from the mountains themselves, beautiful and graceful in its way, but always, always deadly. Lethal in every particular.

Kavian surfaced in the middle of the pool and slicked his dark hair back from his face, his gaze like a punch, even from several feet away. Then he reached up with one perfectly carved arm and threw something toward the far end of the pool. It arced through the air and landed with a wet *splat*, and Amaya felt drunk. Altered. Because it still took another few moments to realize what he’d thrown was his boxer briefs.

And another jarring *thud* of her misbehaving heart to realize what that *meant*. That he was naked in all his considerable glory. Right there. Right in front of her.

She had to get a hold of herself, she thought sternly, or she was at definite risk of swallowing her own tongue and expiring on the spot. Which the Whore of Montreal would have been unlikely to do, surely.

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” she said, forcing herself as close to an approximation of *calm* as she could get.

“Do you not? And yet you claimed you were no innocent. I’d have imagined that a woman of so much sordid experience would scarcely blink at the sight of a naked man in a pool.”

He was no longer touching her. He was no longer caging her between his masterful body and that pillar. He was no longer even *near* her. So there was absolutely no reason that Amaya should have been standing there at the edge of the pool, staring at him as if he were holding her fast in one mighty fist.

“Is this—do you really want to—right here? You dragged me straight off the plane without any discussion or—”

He was pitiless. He said nothing, only watched her as she cut herself off and sputtered off into nothing as if she really were the artless, naive little girl he seemed to think she was already. She hated it. She hated herself. But she stood there anyway, as if awaiting his judgment. Or his next command.

As if it didn't matter what she felt, only what he did.

You know where that goes, she reminded herself with no little despair. You know exactly where that leads, and who you'll become, too, if you let this happen.

But all the vows she'd made to herself—that she would never lose herself so completely, that she would never disappear into any man until she could not exist without him the way her mother had done, until the loss of his affection sent her staggering around the planet like some kind of grieving gypsy with a thirst for vengeance and a child she resented—didn't seem to signify as she stood there in nothing but boy shorts and a T-shirt in the harem of the sheikh who had claimed her.

"This is a bath," Kavian said evenly. Eventually. Long after she was forced to come to several unfortunate conclusions about how very much she was like her mother, despite everything. "I dislike flying. I want the recycled air washed off my skin as soon as possible. And I want the last six months washed off you."

* * *

Amaya shivered, visibly, and Kavian tamped down the roaring beast in him that wanted nothing more than to put his hands on her and drag her to him, and who cared that she was anxious? He needed to be inside her. He needed her—and he had long since stopped *needing* a damn thing.

But he would not leap upon her like a feral thing, no matter the power of will it required to keep himself from doing so. This was no pretty diversion he was trying to lure into his bed for the night, not that he had ever needed much more of a lure than his name or his mere presence. Amaya was his queen. She would bear his sons, stand at his side, raise his heirs. She deserved what passed for a courtship here in this hard place he loved with every part of himself despite what he had done for it and no matter that there was only one possible, foregone conclusion.

This was a long game he played, with clear objectives. Like all the games he'd played in his time. And won.

So Kavian waited. He, who had not had to wait for much of anything since the day he reclaimed his father's throne. He, who had already waited for this woman for half a year, unaccountably. He, who was better used to women throwing themselves at him and begging for his notice.

He, who had never had a woman run from him in his life, before now. Before Amaya.

It was of little matter. She was here. She would stay here, because he willed it so. The world would return to the shape he preferred and do his bidding besides, and he would be inside her soon enough.

"Each pool is a different temperature," he said in the faintly bored tones of a tour guide, as if that fire in him didn't threaten to consume him whole despite the water he stood in. "There are any and all bathing accessories you could possibly require, from handmade soaps crafted here in the old city by local women to the finest luxury products flown in from Dubai."

She was beautiful even when she was obviously nervous, standing there in a small white T-shirt that she obviously wore nothing beneath and those stretchy little shorts that made her hips look nothing short of edible. Her legs were even longer than he'd imagined, and perfectly formed, giving her a bit more height than the average woman—which meant he would not dwarf her in bed or out. Her narrow feet were pale and delicate, and she'd painted her toes a cheerful, bright blue that made his chest feel tight and hit him as critically important, somehow. Though he knew that was foolish.

"Come in, Amaya," he said, invitation and order in one. "You will be the happier for it."

Her head canted slightly to one side. "Do you promise not to touch me?"

He let his gaze move over that full mouth of hers that he'd dreamed of, these past months, more than he cared to admit. That thick, dark hair he wanted to see swirling around her shoulders and that he wanted to feel slide across his own skin. Those small, proud breasts and the peaks he had yet to

taste that he could see poking against the sheer fabric of her T-shirt, perhaps an invitation she didn't mean to extend. The hint of that smooth, olive expanse of her belly between her panties and her shirt, which he wanted to spend a very long time learning with his mouth. And that tempting triangle where her legs met, that he wanted to lick his way into until he forgot his own name.

Kavian took his time dragging his gaze back up her tempting body, noting the goose bumps that marked her arms as he did, and then smiled when his gaze tangled with hers again.

"No," he said. "I certainly do not."

Her lips parted as if that threw her off balance, but then she moved—and not away from him, as he'd expected. Instead, she walked along the edge of the pool toward the wide steps that led down into it from one side.

"Well," she said, with a certain primness that reminded him of that way she'd laughed at her brother in that long-ago video, and coursed through his veins like that same sweet wine. "I have nothing against hygiene, of course."

"Merely against sheikhs?" Perhaps, he thought with some surprise, he had it in him to tease after all. Only Amaya. Only alone.

"Sheikhs and kings and desert palaces," she agreed, her gaze touching his, then moving away again as she made her way down the wide stairs and on into the water, still wearing that shirt and those sexy little shorts as if they were some kind of swimming costume. "Awful things, I think we can all agree."

"Your misfortunes are vast, indeed. Of all the princesses I have chosen to become my queen over the course of my life, your burden is by far the heaviest."

Amaya moved farther into the water until it lapped at the sweet indentation of her waist, and skimmed her palms over the surface of the pool on either side of her, as if testing the water's temperature. She kept herself out of his reach, which Kavian could not abide a moment more. He moved toward her.

She watched him with as much enthusiasm as if he were an approaching shark. It shouldn't have been quite so entertaining, he supposed, but her various forms of defiance...delighted him. If that was what that sudden bright thing inside him was. He hardly recognized it.

"How many have there been?" she asked. When he didn't speak, when he only closed the distance between them, she swallowed in a way that belied that light tone she used. "Princesses that you've turned into queens? Am I the last in a long line? A parade?"

He didn't answer her. He liked the question too much, and what it told him of her, and she seemed to realize that. She danced back from him, then dropped abruptly, dunking her head beneath the water. For a moment she was a shimmer, the inky darkness of her hair obscuring her limbs from his view, and then she shot up again.

And the beast in him roared.

Her T-shirt was soaked through, showing him every contour of those glorious breasts, every mouthwatering detail. And better still, her hair had finally tumbled out of its braid and the dark mass of it coursed over her, framing her and presenting her like some kind of slick mermaid fantasy.

His mermaid fantasy, which Kavian hadn't realized he had until that moment.

She was swiping water from her face and she let out a sharp, high noise when she opened her eyes and found him there, much closer to her than he'd been when she submerged—which he also found entertaining.

He slid his hands over her hips, those sweetly rounded hips that had been seared into his memory, so deep that the tactile memories had kept him awake some nights. And then he pulled her toward him with his pulse a wild thunder in his veins, almost in pain, his need for her was so intense.

She gulped, but she didn't say a word, not even when he lowered his head and put his mouth *just there*, almost against her lips. *Almost*. He felt the fine tremors move through her, like an orchestra

of *want*—a music that only she could hear. But Kavian could feel it. He felt the heat of her, let her scent—honey and rain—move in him like a blessing.

“I don’t think I can kiss a man who kept seventeen women,” she said, and he could feel each word against his mouth the same way he could feel the taut points of her nipples against his own chest, and neither was even close to enough. “I don’t think I can reconcile myself to it, whether you emptied your harem or not.”

“Then by all means, do not sully yourself,” he said against the lush seduction of her mouth. “You can stand there and suffer. I do not mind at all.”

And then he slid his hands up into the thick, wet glory of her hair, indulging himself. He dragged that smart mouth of hers the remaining millimeter toward his, and then finally, finally, he took her mouth with his.

CHAPTER FOUR

HIS KISS WAS like a bomb.

It detonated inside her, she burst into a shower of light and all the need and want and haunting desire that had been chasing her across the months she’d run from him slammed into her.

Amaya clung to him. She didn’t think. She didn’t *want* to think.

She kissed him back.

Just like six months ago, his kiss stormed through her. He wasn’t gentle. He wasn’t particularly kind. His kiss was carnal and dark, a blistering-hot invitation to a wickedness she’d experienced but once and still only vaguely understood.

But she wanted it. Oh, the things she *wanted* when this man took hold of her as if he had every right to her. As if her presence was all the surrender he required.

His hands moved from her hair to slide sleek against her skin, and she shuddered against him as he fit his hard palms to her breasts the same way he had done earlier to her cheek. But this was nothing like tender. This was pure, uncontainable wildness.

And it thrilled her, low and hot, dark and deep.

Amaya had never considered her breasts one way or the other. They were small, incapable of creating cleavage without help, and she’d have thought they weren’t the least bit sensual or enticing. But that low growl in Kavian’s throat, the one she felt inside her as he continued to take her mouth as if he truly did own her, made her think otherwise for the first time in her life.

Made her feel something like beautiful and cherished, all at once, which was as bright as another flame. And as dangerous.

When he pulled his mouth from hers, she let out a moaning noise she knew she’d later regret, which she almost regretted even as it happened—but in that moment, she didn’t care. She couldn’t.

There was that bright hot fire, dancing inside her. Whispering that she was as beautiful as he was, as powerful. Telling her that she was his. His mate, his match. *His*.

Amaya didn’t even care when he let out that very male sound of laughter, of sheer and unmistakable victory. She felt the same thing shudder through her, as if the more he won this intimate battle of theirs, the more she did, too. She only shook when he pressed his open mouth to the column of her throat, and then she simply gave herself over into his talented hands.

The way she’d done once before. He made her mindless with longing. He made her shake with need.

He made her feel more alive, brighter and wilder and hotter and *right*, than she’d imagined was possible.

And Kavian knew exactly what he was doing. He bent his head to her breasts and this time he took one taut peak in his mouth. Then he lifted her against him with another matter-of-fact display of his superior strength, settling her so that she straddled his leg. The bright hot center of her was flush against the rock-hard steel of his thigh, and she could tell by the way that his hands moved to press her there that it was no accident.

And then he sucked her nipple in, deep and hard despite the T-shirt she wore, and the world disappeared.

Heat. Delight. That impossible blaze she'd half convinced herself she'd made up over all these long months alone and on the run—

He never removed her T-shirt, and that made the whole thing feel more illicit, more wild. Amaya could hardly breathe. Her thoughts crashed into each other and flew apart, and there was only him.

Only Kavian. Only this.

He toyed with her through the sheer material, using his hot mouth, the edge of his teeth, his remarkable hands, all the while keeping her in place against his hard thigh, where she couldn't help rocking herself with increasing intensity as the sensations stormed through her.

It was like being caught in a lightning storm, struck again and again and again.

Amaya couldn't imagine anyone could survive this—and she didn't care if she did. It was worth it, she thought. It was all worth it—

Harder and harder she moved herself against him, shameless and mindless at once, wanting only to *do something* about that wild need that shook through her and centered in her core. Wanting nothing more than *him*.

Kavian made a harsh noise, and that only lit her up all the brighter.

"You will be the death of me," he growled, low and intent, as if he read her mind.

As if, she managed to think with no little wonder, she had the same affect on this hard, wicked man as he did on her.

He took one nipple deep into the heat of his mouth again while his fingers rolled the other between them, lazy and sure. The twin assaults were like a new flash of light, a new storm. He did it once, then again, her core molten against his thigh.

"Now, Amaya," he ordered her, his mouth against her breast.

And Amaya shattered all around him, only aware that she screamed as she toppled straight over the edge into a wild oblivion when her own abandon echoed back from the walls as she lost herself completely in his arms.

When she came back to herself, Kavian had swept her up, high against his sculpted chest, and was carrying her out of the pool toward the central seating area. He wrapped her in a wide, soft bath sheet and sat her down on one of the lounging chairs. Amaya couldn't breathe—but then he left her there while he claimed his own bath sheet and tucked it around his lean waist, which only seemed to call more attention to the mouthwatering perfection of his glorious form.

She should say or do something, surely. She told herself she would, just as soon as her head stopped spinning. Or when he came back over here and claimed her once again, as he was surely about to do.

But he didn't.

Instead, Kavian went to the low table and the trays of food laid out for his pleasure. He took his time filling his plate with various local delicacies, and then sat in a lounge chair facing her where he could watch her as he ate.

Amaya didn't understand what was happening.

Her heart still pounded. She could feel it in her temples, her throat, her belly. And hot and soft between her legs.

"Aren't you going to...?"

She trailed off into nothing, irritated with herself. Why did this man turn her into the blushing, stammering fool she'd never been at any other point in her life? Why did he make her feel so foolish and so young with only the merest crook of his dark brow?

"If you cannot say it, Amaya, it does not exactly inspire me to do it," he replied mildly. Almost reprovingly, she thought.

And then he carried on eating, as if he hadn't left her in a spineless heap only moments before. As if that had all been a demonstration of some kind and he was entirely unaffected by the lesson he'd decided to teach her.

She didn't know why that made her furious, but it did—in a shocking, searing wave from her head all the way down to her feet. And if the rush of temper felt like some kind of relief, she told herself that hardly mattered. She struggled to sit up, ignoring the aftershocks of all that pleasure that still stampeded through her, as if he really had made her body his own.

She didn't want to think about that. She *refused* to think about that.

"I'm not a two-year-old," she threw at him instead. "I have no idea what your expectations are. We had sex once, by accident, and you chased me all over the planet for six months. You rant about how I'm *yours* and how I *gave myself to you*. But then you give me an orgasm and break for a quick snack. Right here in a subterranean bathhouse where you kept seventeen women under lock and key until recently, or so you claim. I have no idea what *reasonable* is under these circumstances. I have no idea what you're capable of doing." She pulled in a breath that felt much too ragged. "I don't have the slightest idea who you are."

That gaze of his took on an unholy gleam, but he only lounged back in his seat, looking otherwise unperturbed. Remote, as if she were looking at a carving on the side of a temple, not a man. She thought of ancient kings and actual thrones, feats of chivalry and strength and drawn-out, epic battles better suited to Tolkien novels, and found her throat was dry again.

"No one was held here under lock and key," he said after a moment, when she could feel anxiety like pinpricks all up and down her body, and was afraid she'd actually broken out in hives. "This is neither a prison nor a work of overwrought fiction."

"I'll keep that in mind the next time you start thundering on about promises."

Something far too dangerous to be amusement moved across that face of his and did not make her feel in the least bit secure. It occurred to her then that she was wearing nothing but a soaked-through T-shirt and panties, and a towel. And that this man had absolutely no qualm using her body against her when he felt like it.

But he didn't move toward her and prove that all over again, as she was far too aware he could. He stayed where he was, and Amaya couldn't understand how that was worse. Yet it was.

"And this might come as a great surprise to you," he said, his voice like smoke and temptation, "but thus far you are the only woman I have ever encountered who was not delighted at the prospect of sharing my bed."

"As far as you know, you mean." She glared at him, trying to be as furious with him as she should have been. Furious with herself that she was not. "People lie, especially to terrifying kings of the desert who threaten the very air they breathe."

"Ask yourself why I am so sure," he encouraged her, in a tone that made her stomach swoop toward the ground, though he could not have seemed more relaxed as he said it. No matter that glittering silver thing in his gaze. "Ask yourself how I can know this."

Amaya had absolutely no desire to do anything of the kind. Because she could think of several ways a man could be that certain, and he'd already demonstrated it to her twice. Six months ago in an alcove of the Bakrian Royal Palace and right here in the large pool today.

And she had no idea what must have showed on her face then, but Kavian only smiled, an edgy and dangerous crook of that hard, hard mouth of his she could still feel, as if he were still touching her when he was not.

That didn't help.

"You do not have to wonder about my expectations," he said, the way other men might comment on the weather. Their favorite sports team. Unlike with other men, whole armies he could command with a wave of his hand lurked beneath his words and settled around her neck like a heavy choke

collar. "I do not traffic in subterfuge. I will tell you what I want. I will tell you how I want it and when. You will provide it, one way or another. It is simple."

"Nothing about that is simple." But he only gazed back at her, implacable and resolute, and she felt a searing kind of restlessness wash through her. Hectic. Almost an itch from deep within. She couldn't name it. But she couldn't sit still, either, and so she let it take her up and onto her feet. "I don't want to be here. I want to go home."

"If you wish it," he said amiably enough, and everything stopped. Her breath. Her heart. Had he truly agreed—and so easily? But that smile of his was not the least bit encouraging. It made her feel...edgy. *Edgier*. "Which home do you mean?"

Amaya thought in that moment that she might hate him. That she might never recover from it. That it was stamped deep into her bones, like a different kind of marrow, as much a part of her as her own.

It had to be hatred. It couldn't be anything else.

"You can return me to Canada," she bit out. "Right where you found me. I'll take it from there."

"Canada is not your home." Still he lounged there, as if this were a casual conversation. As if he weren't holding her between his hands like a giant, malicious cat, and toying with her because he could. Because he felt like it. Because he enjoyed using his damn claws. "You were born in Bakri. You lived there until you were eight years old. Then you and your mother wandered for the next decade. Here, there. Wherever the wind blew her, that is where you went. The longest you stayed anywhere in that time was fifteen months at a family-owned vineyard in the Marlborough wine region of New Zealand's South Island. Is that the home you mean? It pains me to tell you that the gentleman you stayed with then moved on from your mother's much-vaunted charms some time ago and now has a new family all his own."

Amaya remembered crisp mornings in a late New Zealand winter then, walking through the corridors of rich dirt and gnarled vines with the friendly man she'd imagined might make Elizaveta better. *Happier*, anyway—and he'd seemed to manage it, for a time. She remembered the long white-capped mountain range that stretched out lazily alongside her wherever she went, reaching from the vineyard she'd called home that year toward Blenheim and the sea in the east. The skittish sheep and curious lambs who marked her every move and bounded away from any signs of movement in their direction, real or imagined. The stout and orderly vineyards, set in their efficient lines all the way north to the foothills of the Richmond range.

Most of all she remembered the thick black, velvety nights, when the skies were so filled with stars they seemed messy, chaotic. Magic. Weighted down, as if, were she to blink, all that fanciful light might crush her straight down into the rich, fertile earth like nothing but another seedling. And yet somehow they'd made it impossible for Amaya to believe that she could really be as terribly alone as she'd sometimes felt.

She hadn't thought about that period of her life in a very long time. Elizaveta had moved on the way Elizaveta always did and Amaya had stopped imagining anyone could fix what her father had broken. She felt something crack inside her now, as if Kavian had knocked down a critical foundation with that unexpected swipe—but he was still talking. Still wrecking her with every lazily destructive word.

"Or perhaps you are referring to your years at university in Montreal?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "While it appeared to be a city you enjoyed, in many respects, you left it as often as possible during your studies. You went to the mountains, as we have established. But also to Europe. To the Caribbean for sun in the midst of all those relentless winters. And you left Canada altogether shortly after your graduation for Edinburgh, where you took up a very unsuitable job in a local pub while you made the most feeble of gestures toward a master's degree in some or other form of literature at the university there."

Amaya wanted to make a gesture toward him that was anything but feeble, but restrained herself. Barely. She felt the prick of her own nails against her palms, and wished she could sink them into him instead.

"It's not up to you to decide what feels like home to me. My life is not something that requires your input or critique." She fought to keep her voice even. "You can tell because I didn't ask you for either one."

"Unfortunately for you, it is indeed up to me." Kavian shrugged, and it was not a gesture of uncertainty on a man like him. It was another weapon, and Kavian, she was beginning to understand all too well, did not hesitate to use the weapons he had at his disposal. "You do not have a home, Amaya. You never have. But that, too, has changed now. Whether you are prepared to accept that or not is immaterial."

She couldn't breathe. She felt as if he'd thrown her down a staircase, as if she'd landed hard on her back and knocked all the air from her lungs, and for a moment she could do nothing but stare back at him.

"I want to be somewhere you are not," she managed to grate out, finally.

"I am sure you do. But that is not among the choices available to you."

"This is a huge palace. There has to be a room somewhere you can stash me, far away from everything and everyone. I don't care if it's a dungeon, as long as it's nowhere near you."

Where she could figure out how to breathe through this, recover from this. If that was even possible.

Where she could work out what the hell she was going to *do*.

"There are many such rooms, but you will be staying in mine."

He only watched her, utterly without mercy. And she didn't know which was worse, the wet heat threatening to spill from her eyes, the simmering flame deep in her core that she wanted to deny, the shaking she couldn't quite seem to control now he'd upended the whole of her life in a few short sentences or the fact that he'd trapped her here. In every possible way, and they both knew it.

"No," she said.

But it was as if she hadn't spoken. It made her wonder if she had.

"I apologize if this distresses you, but I am not a particularly modern man," Kavian replied. He did not sound remotely apologetic. Nor did he look it. "I do not trust what I cannot touch. I want you in my bed."

Bed. The word exploded inside her, ripping through her with a trail of white-hot images that centered on his mouth, his hands, that body of his above her and around her and in her—

"I don't want to be anywhere near your bed. You've already done as you like with me in an alcove, a pool—why can't we leave it at that?" She sounded hysterical. She felt hysterical. "Why can't we just *leave it*?"

Kavian, by contrast, went very, very still, though his dark eyes burned.

And she felt another foundation crumble into dust at that look on his face.

"The next time I take you, Amaya, two things will happen," he said softly. So very softly. It was a whisper that rolled through like a battle cry. "First, it will be in a proper bed. I may not be civilized, precisely, but I do have my moments. And I wish to take my time. All the time in the world, if necessary." He waited for her to shudder at that, as if he'd expected it. Then he nearly smiled again, which was its own devastation. "And second, you will use my name."

"Your name?"

"You have yet to utter it," he pointed out, and she could see that though he still lounged there, though his voice was almost as languid as he looked, there was absolutely nothing *mild* about him at all. That *mildness* was an illusion he used to do his bidding, nothing more, like everything else. "I assume this is yet another attempt on your part to maintain distance between us. Is it not?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I say your name all the time, usually as a curse word."

“You will use my name.” He didn’t rise. He didn’t have to. It was as if he held her tight between those hands of his even as he reclined in his chair. She was sure she felt the press of his palms, like all those New Zealand stars when she’d been thirteen, crushing her deep into the earth. “You will sleep in my bed. You will give yourself to me. There will be no distance between us, Amaya. There will be nothing but my will and your surrender.”

“Followed by my suicide, as quickly as possible, to escape you,” she threw back at him to hide the pounding of her heart that told her truths she didn’t want to face.

But Kavian only laughed at her, as if he could hear it.

As if he knew.

CHAPTER FIVE

AMAYA HADN’T MEANT to fall asleep.

The smiling, almost too deferential attendants had been waiting for her when she’d pushed her way out of the baths, still reeling from all that had happened with Kavian. They’d surrounded her as they’d led her through the gleaming labyrinth of a palace, and Amaya hadn’t been able to tell if they were deliberately taking her on a confusing route to her rooms or if the palace really was that difficult to navigate.

Either way, they’d deposited her in a rambling suite of rooms that clearly belonged to the king himself. And had pretended they didn’t understand her when she demanded to be taken elsewhere.

“I don’t want to stay here,” she’d told them, again and again, until she’d finally had to take it up with the two intimidatingly ferocious guards who stood at the doors.

They’d only stared back at her, without any of the sweet smiles or pleasing laughter of her attendants.

“I need my own rooms,” she’d said stubbornly. “This is a mistake. I’m not staying here.”

The guards had only stared back at her, for what had seemed like an inordinate amount of time, especially when Amaya realized she was wearing nothing but the robe the attendants had wrapped her in.

“You may take that up with the king if you feel it is your place to question him,” the larger of the two guards replied eventually, in a tone that suggested this conversation was itself scandalous and inappropriate—or perhaps, Amaya had realized belatedly, it was simply that *she* was. After all, from this man’s perspective, she wasn’t the unfairly trapped woman who deserved to make her own choices in life no matter whose blood ran in her veins—she was the princess who had been exalted by his beloved king’s notice only to throw her good fortune in the sheikh’s face by running away.

She’d been certain she could *see* that very sentence run through the man’s expression like a tabloid ticker at the bottom of a television screen. That—and the fact that he and his compatriot looked as if they’d have relished the opportunity to chase her down in the corridor like an errant fox—made her retreat into the suite and shut the door.

Amaya had stood there for a long moment, breathing much harder than she should have been, her back against the door that represented her only path out of Kavian’s rooms, her bare feet cold against the chilly marble floor of the sheikh’s grand foyer.

That was when she’d decided that her best bet wasn’t to run. That should have been obvious. He’d already caught her once, in the most remote place she’d known. Her only option now was to hide.

Surely Kavian couldn’t be *that much* a barbarian, she’d told herself stoutly as she wandered from room to room in the rambling collection of gorgeous chambers on two floors that composed His Majesty’s royal suite. There were two or three elegant salons, making clever use of the many stacked terraces and the sweeping views down into the hidden, protected valley. The marble foyer opened into a private courtyard with a graceful fountain claiming its center. Several sitting rooms were scattered here and there along with a media center, a well-stocked library, even a formal dining room dressed in silk tapestries and golds.

She'd kept looking for a hiding place. Kavian might have talked a big game there by the bathing pools, but the reality was that he'd never forced her to do anything, as shameful as that might have been to admit. The truth was that she'd agreed to marry him in some pathetic attempt to please her brother and possibly her dead father, and then she'd melted all over Kavian every time he touched her.

Amaya didn't fear him physically. She feared herself. She feared the depth of her own surrender and how much a part of her wanted nothing more than to sink to her knees and exult in Kavian's claim over her. To let him keep every one of those dark, delicious promises he'd made to her. To learn precisely what he meant when he told her she would learn *obedience*...

Stop it, she'd snapped at herself as she moved from room to room. She was a liberated woman, damn it. She might have been born into a society like this one, she might even have been briefly nostalgic enough to let her brother talk her into returning to it after their father's death a few years back, but her heart wasn't here. Her heart had never been here.

It can't be here, she'd assured herself. Because she'd seen what leaving a heart behind in a harsh place like this could do to a woman, hadn't she? She'd spent her entire childhood handling the aftermath of her ever more brittle mother's broken heart.

But that particular organ was all too traitorous, she'd realized then, when she walked into a gilt-edged room that Kavian clearly used as a private office and saw the portrait of the man himself hanging there on the wall, in thick oils and bold shades that made him seem a part of the very desert he commanded. And her heart had thumped at her. Hard.

Too hard, as if it had its own agenda.

She'd rubbed at her chest, annoyed that the attendants had taken her clothes from her and given her nothing to wear but a silky thing she refused to acknowledge was some kind of negligee and a raw-silk wrapper to ward off the complete lack of chill in the air. She might as well have been laid out on a silver platter, trussed and bound for Kavian's pleasure—

That was not a calming image. She'd shoved it out of her head, but not before her entire body had broken out in goose bumps. *Damn him*.

She'd finally settled on Kavian's dressing room. It was a vast space, much larger than the dormitory rooms she'd lived in while in halls at university and probably bigger than the whole of the flat she'd shared with three other postgraduates during her brief time in Edinburgh. She'd ignored the rows of exquisitely cut suits that had clearly been made in the finest couture houses for Kavian alone, the traditional robes in the softest and most gorgeous of fabrics that she couldn't help touching as she passed, all the trappings of a great man who could dress to kill in any scenario he chose.

She'd ignored the somersaults her heart and belly did at the sight of all that sartorial splendor that summoned him to her mind as if he'd stood there before her, those slate-gray eyes gleaming silvery and lethal.

And then she'd crawled into the farthest, darkest corner and curled up amid a selection of what appeared to be stout winter boots and dark wool overcoats, hiding herself from view.

She'd meant to wait him out. To see what he'd do when he returned to the suite—as he'd do soon, she had no doubt, because she'd been quite certain he'd meant every word he said to her near the bathing pools—and if maybe, just maybe, the fact that she'd been moved enough to hide from him would impress her position on him with far more emphasis than mere words.

But she hadn't planned to fall asleep.

She jolted awake with a terrific start, but for a panicked moment she couldn't figure out what was happening. Kavian loomed above her, and the world spun drunkenly and by the time Amaya understood what was going on, he'd hauled her out of her hiding place and into his arms.

"You have the mark of my boot upon your face," he said, his voice cool and yet with all that power of his seething beneath it, like the darkest shadows. "How very dignified you are, my queen."

Amaya would have said she wasn't particularly vain, that there'd been no point with a mother like Elizaveta, who had been a model in her youth, and yet her hand moved to her cheek anyway.

It felt nothing but hot, and the way he gazed at her while he held her against that steel-hard chest of his didn't help.

"It should tell you something that I'm willing to go to such lengths to avoid you," she said, hating the rasp of sleep in her voice. She tried to pull herself together despite the fact that he'd started to move—but every step he took made her far too *aware*.

Of him. His strength. His heat. The hardness of his chest, the granite bands of his arms around her. And of herself, too. The way the silk moved over her skin. The lick of flame that followed every soft, sleek shift of the fabric against her belly, her hips, her breasts.

"It tells me a great many things," he agreed, in what did not sound like a particularly sympathetic tone of voice.

He shifted her, which had the cascading effect she most wanted to avoid, a spinning sort of caress that sank deep into her core and was nothing short of a full-body betrayal. She sucked in a breath audibly. He glanced down at her as he moved through the door, out of his dressing room and into the larger sitting area that lay between it and the actual bedroom she hadn't wanted to investigate too closely earlier.

She could see sunlight on the far side of the sitting room, drowning the terrace that ran the length of it in all that golden desert light, and she couldn't have said why that made her breath catch. As if she'd imagined he could only come after her in the dark? But she'd known better, surely. Kavian didn't play by any rules. Ever.

But she kept trying to make him. What other choice did she have?

"Does it tell you that you are a monster?" She knew it was dangerous to poke at him when he was holding her like this, when there was no possibility of escape. But she couldn't seem to stop herself. "That you are so overwhelming and so unreasonable that I was forced to hide in a closet to try to get through to you?"

"That," Kavian said. "And the fact that you are desperate. I suspect you think that if you act like a child, I might be tempted to treat you like one instead of the woman we both know you are."

There was no reason that should have stung. "I've never claimed I was a child."

"That is wise, Amaya, as the definition of a *child* is markedly different in my country. We, for example, do not coddle our young well into their twenties, then welcome them into our homes again until such a time as they feel sufficiently inspired to begin an adult life. We expect them to assume their duties far younger, and then take responsibility for the choices they've made. I myself was a soldier at thirteen and something far less palatable when I was barely twenty. I was never treated like a boy."

"If you think either one of my parents coddled me in any way, at any point in my life, you're insane."

She hadn't meant to say that, certainly, and could have bitten her tongue once she did. Kavian only gazed down at her for a brief, electric instant—but that glimmering moment of contact seared through her.

"I know exactly who and what you are," he said as he strode through the far door into his bedchamber, a stately affair in dark woods and richly masculine shades of red and gold. "Whether you stage melodramatic displays in my closet or race across the planet in a bid to humiliate me in front of the world, it is all the same to me. It will all end right here."

And then he set her down on his bed.

As punctuation.

Amaya expected him to leap on her, but of course he didn't do that. He simply stood there before her, a part of the magnificence of the room, the palace—and at the same time its intensely masculine focal point. He'd donned a pair of very loose white trousers that flowed around him and somehow made him look even more like the desert king he was than anything else she'd ever seen

him in. And that was it. He folded his arms over the golden expanse of that carved and battered chest of his that shouldn't have been half so appealing, and watched her.

And she wanted to run. In her head, she threw herself to the side, she scrambled across the slippery gold coverlet and leaped from the mattress, she threw herself off the side of the terrace into thin air to escape him—

But in reality, she did none of those things. She was frozen into place. She was too tense and she couldn't quite breathe and she *hurt*... Except she realized, one shuddering, shallow breath after the next, that it was a very specific kind of ache, located in a very particular place.

And worse, that the knowing expression on his hard face and that silvery awareness in his gaze meant he knew it.

How could he know it? But he did.

"You didn't have to chase me." Amaya hardly knew what she was saying. "You could have let me go."

His hard mouth flirted with the possibility of a curve. But then didn't give in to it.

"Are you wet?" he asked.

For a moment, Amaya didn't understand. The baths had been hours ago and she'd dried off with the towel—

Then she got his meaning, and she simply *ignited*.

The flush lit her up, inside and out. She was certain she was bright red, searing and glowing, *neon*, and she could neither pull a full breath into her lungs nor look away from him. Much less control the surge of desire that pooled between her legs.

"I will take that as a yes," he said, sounding darkly amused and something far more dangerous besides. "You already came apart in my hands today, Amaya. Do you doubt that you are mine? I wasn't even inside you."

She should have leaped to her feet then. Slapped him. Screamed at him. Made it clear to him that this kind of behavior was completely unacceptable—that he couldn't treat her like this. That she wouldn't *let* him.

But Amaya did none of those things. She only stared back at him, that ache in her growing hotter and more desperate by the moment.

"I want you naked," he said, and there was a certain gruffness to his voice then. A certain edge that told her that perhaps he wasn't as unaffected by this as he was pretending he was.

"I don't want—"

"Now, Amaya." That gruffness turned to granite and pounded through her veins. "I already stripped you once today. Don't make me do it again." His gaze moved over her face, and she was sure there was something wrong with her, that she should feel it like a caress. That she should long for more. "Show me, *azizty*. Show me you are as proud of your beauty as I am."

Something shifted deep inside her, then turned over. It was like a dream, she told herself. And the truth was, she'd had this dream. Again and again. This, or something like this, all across the long months since she'd fled the Bakrian Royal Palace on the night of their betrothal. It always starred Kavian in some or other state of undress, so that part was familiar, though he was far more magnificent in reality. And it always involved this same roller-coaster sensation inside her, hot and then cold, high and then low, a longing and an ache and a *need*.

This is just another dream, she assured herself.

And in a dream nothing she did mattered, so she could do as she liked in the moment. It had no meaning. It held no greater significance. She could lose herself in that calm, ruthlessly patient gray gaze of his as if it was a way home. She could let that become what mattered instead.

So that was what she did.

Amaya pulled the wrapper off her, letting it slide over the skin it bared, in an almost unconscious sensual show. Then, before she could question her motives, she pulled the silken little scrap she wore

beneath it up and over her head, tossing it with the wrapper so they sat there in a slippery heap of deep blue against the gold coverlet.

Then she swallowed, hard, and simply sat there.

Completely naked, as he'd commanded.

And she knew that it didn't mean anything. That it was nothing more than a psychological trick to imagine it was the crossing of a very serious line. She'd lost her virginity to this man in a shocking rush six months ago. He'd had his mouth and his hands on her in the palace pools only today. But both of those times, she'd had clothes on.

It was amazing how different it was to sit before him, utterly naked, for the very first time.

"Why are your shoulders rounded like an ashamed teenager's?" he asked her, so mildly that she'd have thought that he hadn't noticed her nudity at all were it not for that near-hectic glitter in his gaze. "Why are you slumped before me as if you do not know your worth? Is this how you offer yourself to me, Amaya? In apology?"

"I'm not apologizing." She didn't think she was offering herself to him, either, so much as following his orders for reasons she didn't care to examine too closely—but somehow that part got tangled on her tongue and stayed in her mouth.

"Are you certain? I have seen more tempting sea turtles, tucked away in their shells where no one can see them." As if he'd said that purely to make her flush with temper, his mouth curved slightly when she did. "Sit up. Arch your back as if you are proud of your breasts."

"I think we both know perfectly well that they're nothing to be proud of. Why flaunt what I don't have?"

"I am not interested in your opinion of them." His eyebrows edged higher on his forehead, as if he was amazed at her temerity. "I am recalling how they felt in my mouth. More, please."

She hadn't realized that she'd done as he asked until then. But she had. She'd sat up and let her back arch invitingly. That presented her breasts to him, yes, and it also made her hair move around her shoulders, and she knew, somehow, that he liked that, too.

And for a long moment—it could have been years, for all she knew—he simply looked at her.

It should have been boring. She should have felt awkward. Exposed. Embarrassed. Cold, even.

But instead, Amaya burned. She ached. She *wanted*.

"Look at you," Kavian said softly. "Your breath comes faster and faster. You are flushed. If I were to reach between your thighs, what would I find?"

She couldn't answer him.

"It would take so little," he continued, his voice almost soft. "Your nipples are so hard, aren't they? Think of all the things I could do with them. Think how it would feel." She shifted against the bed beneath her, pressing herself against it and hardly aware of what she was doing, and he laughed. "None of that. You will come for me or not at all, Amaya. Remember that, if you please."

She knew, distantly, that there were a hundred things she should say. She should challenge him. She should fight him. She should refuse to act like this simply because he wanted her to do it—but she knew, of course she knew, that he wasn't the only one who wanted it. And she wasn't sure she could face what that said about her, what it made her.

So perhaps it was easier to simply do as he asked instead.

"Kneel up," he told her in that same low, knowing voice, as if he was already inside her. As if he was in her mind, as well. As if he knew all those dark, twisted things she couldn't admit to herself. "Right where you are."

"I'm not going to kneel before you and beg you for—for anything," she threw at him. But she didn't sound like herself and he didn't look particularly moved by her outburst.

"Of course not. You are so appalled by all of this, I am sure."

"I am."

“I can see that.” His head canted slightly to one side, and those slate-gray eyes gleamed silver. “Kneel up, Amaya. Do not make me ask you again.”

This, right here, was the moment of truth. She didn’t entirely comprehend why she’d taken her clothes off when he told her to, but she couldn’t unring that bell. But this, here, *now*—this was where she had to draw the line.

It was simple. All she needed to do was stand up. Climb off this bed and walk away. Kavian was many things, but she didn’t believe he was truly a brute. Hard, yes. The hardest man she’d ever met. But she understood on some deep feminine level of intuition she hadn’t known she possessed that while he might merrily shove away at her boundaries, he wouldn’t actually force her into anything. All she needed to do was get off this bed.

She moved then, though her body hardly felt like hers. She could feel every part of her skin, as if every square inch of it was alive in a way it never had been before—a way *she* never had been until now. She felt so highly sensitive it was as if the air around them were a thick, padded thing, massaging her.

Maybe that was why she didn’t really notice what she was doing until she’d already done it. And then she was kneeling there before him, precisely as he’d commanded her to do.

That was bad enough. Worse, when he only looked at her, she arched her back again, pulling her shoulders back and presenting him with her breasts as he’d asked her to do before. Not only her breasts—her whole body. Right there before him.

This *was* the silver platter, she understood then. She’d climbed up onto it and undressed for it and arranged herself on it, all for him.

Her pulse skittered through her body, wild and erratic and much too fast.

He waited.

She didn’t know how she knew he was waiting, but she did. He was.

And the air between them seemed charged. Spiked. She couldn’t see anything but that hard, oddly patient gaze of his. She couldn’t *feel* anything but hunger. A deep, dark, consuming hunger that made her knees feel so weak she was deeply, wildly grateful that she wasn’t trying to stand.

She wanted him to touch her. She wanted him to take her the way he had done that night six months ago, the way he had today in that pool. She wanted *him*.

“Then you must say the word, *azizty*, and you will have me,” he murmured, and Amaya realized to her horror that she’d said all of that out loud.

Her throat was as dry as if she’d inhaled the whole of the desert outside. She shook, over and over, and she didn’t think she’d stop. She understood that this was a line she could never uncross. That there would be no returning to who she’d been before. That if she was honest, it had already happened six months ago and she’d simply been trying her best to deny it all this time. Running and running and ending up right back where she’d started.

Worse, this time, because she knew not only what she was doing, but what he could do, too.

“Please,” she whispered. But that wasn’t what he was looking for.

“Say it,” he ordered her, his voice tight.

She didn’t pretend it wasn’t a full and total surrender. But in that moment, she wasn’t sure she cared.

You will use my name, he’d told her. Perhaps the begging part had been implied, even then.

Amaya didn’t care about that, either.

“Please,” she said again. “Kavian, *please*.”

Kavian smiled. It was very male. Dark and satisfied. It made her whole body light up and burst into flame.

And then he reached for her and made it all that much worse.

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

KAVIAN WANTED TO throw her down and sink deep inside her in that instant. He wanted to slake the white-hot burn of *hunger* inside him, made all the worse for the uncharacteristic restraint he'd showed these past months while he scoured the planet for her.

He'd found to his great surprise that after he'd had Amaya, even in such a blind rush, no other woman would do.

She would pay for that, too.

But first he would bind her to him in a way she'd never untangle. First, he would make certain she saw nothing else in all the world but him. He would make her need him more than air and maybe then she would stop looking for exit strategies. He wanted to own her, body and soul. But first, he would worship her.

Kavian told himself they were the same thing.

And if the idea of having her completely at his command—the way she should have been since the day of their betrothal—made that tight thing in his chest feel easier, well, he told himself it was the conquest that fired his blood, nothing more. That tightness was about the injustice and sheer insult of the way she'd kept herself from him, that was all. She was his. It was time she behaved as if she knew that at last, as if she finally understood her place.

Because Kavian was king of this harsh land, not a bloodhound who could roam the earth forever in search of his runaway bride. He had won back his father's throne with his blood, his strength. He ruled Daar Talaas with his own cunning and his commitment to defend what was his no matter the cost. He'd had no choice but to chase down the woman who had tried to shame him in the eyes of his people.

More than that, he'd wanted her. He thought he would always want her. *She was his.*

But it was past time he got back to the intricate business of running this ancient, desert-hardened place, or he would lose it to someone who would do so in his stead. That was the law of Daar Talaas. That was the price of power—it belonged only to the man who could wield it.

His relationship with this woman could be no different. He would not allow it.

Kavian took Amaya's sweetly rounded chin in his hand and held her there, though he knew he could hold her as easily with his gaze. He could feel the way she shivered at his touch. He could see emotion and longing in those dark eyes of hers, and he reveled in both. He could smell the delicate scent of her soft skin and the sweet fragrance that rose from the masses of her dark hair she finally wore down around her pretty shoulders.

And beneath it all rose the far richer fragrance of her arousal.

The only thing he'd ever wanted more, in all his life, was the throne he'd won back through his own fierce determination. He'd found the darkness within him; he'd become it. He'd used it to do what was necessary. He'd been raised on vengeance and he'd finally taken his when he was barely twenty. And even that—the achievement of his life—seemed far off just now, with Amaya naked and obedient before him, her gaze fixed to his.

This is the way back to reality, he assured himself. Conquer her here, now, and you will never need to risk the throne for her again.

He'd known that he wanted Amaya from the moment he saw that video of her. And he'd known precisely how he would take her, and how she would thrill to it, the moment he met her in her brother's palace. He'd suspected then that she would fit him perfectly.

Now he knew it as well as he knew his own name.

Six months ago, the wild passion between them had been a burst of flame, unexpected and all consuming. They'd met for the first time when Kavian arrived with his entourage at the Bakrian Royal Palace to claim her as his betrothed and begin the official alliance between their two countries. It had been a formal and very public greeting of political allies, an elegant affair in a majestic salon, surrounded on all sides by ministers and aides, ambassadors and carefully selected palace reporters who could be relied upon to trumpet the appropriate information into all the correct ears.

There had been all those contracts to sign, all those oaths to take, and this woman he'd agreed to marry had been dressed in a fine, formal gown that made her look every inch the untouchable desert princess. They'd talked with excruciating politeness while surrounded and closely observed on all sides. They'd been feted at a long, formal dinner ripe with too many speeches from what seemed like every Bakrian noble in the whole of the kingdom. And for all that they'd sat next to each other during the endless evening, they'd never been out of that too-public fishbowl for even a moment. There had been no real conversation, no chance of anything but the loosest connection.

Then they'd had their betrothal ceremony the following day, in the grand ballroom of the palace that had been draped in every shade of gold in the glare of too many cameras to count. Cameras and gossips and a parade of aristocrats to comment on every last bit of it. Like carrion crows, pecking away at them.

"In my country," Kavian had told her as they'd made their formal entrance together, touching only in that stiffly appropriate manner that befitted their respective ranks on such an occasion and before so many judgmental eyes, "there is no need for a wedding ceremony. It is the claiming that matters, not the legalities that follow. A wedding is all but redundant."

"My brother's kingdom may not sit at the forefront of the modern age, exactly," Amaya had replied, and he'd been lost in the bittersweet chocolate gleam in her eyes, the sweet lushness of her lips, that kick of deep, dark need that had haunted him since the moment he saw her face. To say nothing of the unscripted, less than perfectly polite thing she was saying then and that flashed in her gaze, giving him a hint of the woman beneath the high-gloss Bakrian princess adorning his arm. A glimpse of that defiance of hers that sang to him. "But he does prefer that any royal marriages be legalized. As do I, I will admit."

"As you wish," Kavian had murmured. In that moment, he'd thought he'd give her anything she asked for another glimpse beneath her surface. His name, his protection, that went without saying. His kingdom, his wealth, his lands, certainly. His blood. His flesh. His life. Whatever she desired.

But she'd kept her gaze trained on the ceremony, not on him.

He'd hated it.

They'd exchanged their initial vows, there before the kings of the surrounding realms, sheikhs and rulers and sultans galore. Officials and ministers, the ranks of Bakrian aristocrats and the high-placed members of his own cabinet. Her brother. His men.

And then, once it had been finished and all the rest of the formal speeches about unity and family had been made for the benefit of their enemies in the region, Kavian took his betrothed aside so they could finally, *finally*, have a moment to themselves.

Merely a moment, he'd thought. He hadn't had anything planned. He'd only wanted a little bit of privacy with her, with no eyes on them and nothing but their real faces. He'd wanted to see what was between them then, when there was no one but the two of them to judge it, pick over it, analyze it.

He had congratulated himself on his magnanimity, proud of himself that he was not like his own forefathers, that he had every intention of winning this woman slowly and carefully—instead of throwing her over his saddle and riding off into the desert with her like the Bedouin chiefs of old who made up a sizable portion of his family tree. He'd had absolutely no intention of playing the barbarian king to a deeply Westernized woman like Amaya, who no doubt had all sorts of opinions about what *civilized* meant. Oh, no. He'd planned to wine her and dine her like all the urbane sophisticates he'd imagined she'd known all her life, in all the cities she'd visited in all those concrete and glass places he abhorred. He'd planned to do what he had to do, whatever it took, to bind her to him in every way.

She'd led them to that alcove, tucked away out of sight in a far-off corner of the ballroom's second-floor balcony while the rest of the assembled throng moved about far below, reveling in Rihad al Bakri's lavish hospitality. Kavian had stared down at her when they were finally alone. He hadn't smiled. He'd been trying to see inside her, trying to match her exquisite beauty in person to the image

he'd carried around with him in his head. He'd been trying to process the fact that she was well and truly his already, no matter *how* he approached her.

It had felt like sunlight, deep inside him, warm and bright. He hadn't known what to make of it.

"Well," she'd said with false brightness. "Here we are. Officially betrothed and still total strangers."

"We are not strangers," he'd corrected her, with far more gruffness than he'd intended. He hadn't meant to speak. He'd found those intricate braids that she'd worn like a crown of her own glossy hair an enchantment, and he'd been deep in their spell. He'd felt her gaze like a caress, an incantation. "I will soon be your husband. You are already mine."

"I'm not yours yet," she'd said, and then she'd lifted her chin in a kind of challenge that he'd only understood, in retrospect, had been a bit of foreshadowing he should have heeded. Back then, he'd simply enjoyed it. "And you should know that I can't marry a man with a harem. A betrothal for political purposes is one thing, especially if it helps my brother, but a marriage under such circumstances? No. I refuse."

Kavian had only continued to watch her, as if it was a deep thirst he felt and she the only possibility of ever quenching it. Most people caved under his regard, and quickly. Amaya had only squared her shoulders and held his gaze.

He'd liked that. Far too much, truth be told.

"For you," he'd said, as if she had any choices left, as if she hadn't just signed herself over to his keeping in full view of two countries and by now, the better part of the world, "I will empty mine. Is that what you require? Consider it done."

He'd stopped restraining himself then. He'd looked at her with all that fire, all that dark longing, right there on the surface. He hadn't hidden a single bit of the beast inside him. He hadn't tried.

And Amaya had done the most extraordinary thing. She'd flushed, hot and red and flustered—but not frightened. Not horrified. Not even particularly scandalized—all of which he'd expected, on some level. Just...*hot*. Then she'd looked away as if the heat was too much. As if *this* was too much. As if he was.

As if she felt exactly as he did.

Everything in him had roared, approval and acknowledgment.

Mine, he'd thought, with every cell in his body. With every breath.

And he'd taken her head between his hands, those braids warm and soft beneath his palms, and he'd tasted her for the first time. It had changed everything.

It had blown them both up, right then and there.

That flame had only intensified in all the months since, while he'd had nothing to do while he chased her but imagine her right here, naked before him in his very own bed, the way she was right now. *Finally*.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Amaya asked, and he could hear the nerves in her voice. The hunger and the heat.

He'd been right about her—about this magnificent chemistry between them—six months ago. He was right now, too.

"I keep telling myself I am going to take this slow," he said, dropping his hand from her chin but moving closer to her. "Act like the sophisticated gentleman I am not. But that is unlikely, *azizty*. Very, very unlikely, the longer you look at me with those big, innocent eyes of yours that are nothing but a temptation."

"My eyes aren't innocent." It was as if she couldn't help herself, when she must know he knew she lied. "They're wicked. As dirty and debauched as the rest of me. I keep trying to tell you."

He only gazed back at her until he saw that flush again, warming her skin, prickling over all the soft flesh on display before him. Just as he recalled it. Then he smiled. Slightly.

"I want you to take it slow," she whispered.

“No,” he said, gathering her into his arms and pulling her against the wall of his chest, exulting in the way she slid against him, then melted into him, as if she really had been made to his precise specifications. “You do not.”

And then he settled his mouth over hers, at last, and let the fire break free, searing both of them.

* * *

Kavian *consumed* her.

There was no other word for it.

His kiss was a slick addiction. A wild, impossible ride, and she couldn't get enough. He held her against him and he angled her head where he wanted it and he simply *feasted*.

And Amaya loved it.

The more he took, the more she gave, meeting every slide of his tongue against hers. She arched into him, pressing her aching breasts against the dizzying wonder of his hard chest, reveling in the sensation of that strong hand of his on her bottom, kneading her. Guiding her.

Driving her crazy with need.

He pulled his mouth away from hers, letting out a very male sound of satisfaction at the small, disappointed noise she couldn't keep herself from making.

“Be patient, *azizty*,” he said in that dark way of his, and she didn't know how she knew that he was teasing her. That he was deliberately drawing this out to make that ache in her intensify.

Or that he would continue to do it until he felt like stopping; that what she wanted would have nothing to do with it.

She loved that, too. She had the sense he'd known she would.

Kavian took his time, lazily tracing a path down her neck to taste every inch of her collarbone. Then he dropped his head to play with her breasts again, making her moan and shake against him as he tested the plumpness of each of them, then tasted and tugged each proud peak.

This time, he didn't let her topple over that edge. This time, he had more on his agenda. He swept her up and then he laid her out on that big, wide bed, stretched himself out beside her, and kept going.

He licked his way over her navel, then lower, laughing as she bucked against him, lost somewhere between desire and delirium, and she didn't much care which as long as he kept touching her. Tasting her. Making her feel more beautiful, more precious, than she'd had any idea she could feel.

“Kavian.” She didn't mean to say his name. She hardly knew what she was doing as he took her hips in his big hands and held her there before him as if she truly were a feast and he was nothing but hungry. “Please.”

“I like that,” he said approvingly, and she could *feel* his voice against that most private part of her that was molten and aching and already his. It made her shudder, deep within, the feeling radiating out everywhere, coursing in her veins and washing over her whole body. “Beg me.”

And then he licked his way straight into the core of her.

Amaya exploded.

She thought she screamed his name, or maybe that was only what it *felt* like inside her, and either way she was lost in the storm of sensation. Lost completely. It swept her away. It altered her very being.

It was like dying, and the crazy part was how much she loved it. All of it.

She felt like someone else entirely when she came back to that bed with a jolt and found Kavian propped up above her and entirely naked, holding his weight on his elbows while the hardest part of him probed at her entrance.

He looked harsh. Unsmiling, as ever. And incredibly, impossibly beautiful.

Amaya couldn't seem to breathe. She was falling, she realized—tipped off the side of the world and tumbling end over end without any hope of stopping, washed out to sea forever in that dark gray gaze of his.

He looked at her as if he wanted to eat her alive. He looked at her as if he already had done so.

She wanted to say a thousand things. She wanted to tell him of that mess inside her that was all his doing, that she hadn't known could exist. She *wanted*, and yet she couldn't seem to do it. Instead, she held that terrible and wonderful gaze of his, and she only reached up and slid her hand along his proud jaw, holding his lean cheek in her hand.

His gaze burned. And then he pushed himself into her, easy yet ruthless at once, sheathing himself to the hilt.

For a moment—or a year, a lifetime, more—they only stared at each other, stretched out to near breaking on the edge of all that impossible sensation.

"Last time, I hurt you." His voice was gruff. Raw. Not apologetic in any way and yet it made a wet heat prick the back of Amaya's eyes. She pressed her hand that little bit harder against his face.

"Only for a moment," she whispered, as if he'd asked for her forgiveness. As if she was giving it.

And more, it was true. It had only been an instant of pain, easily forgotten and soon forgiven in the wild tumult that had followed. Even if she still didn't understand how any of that had happened. One moment they'd been talking while officially betrothed; the next their mouths had been fused together as if there was no other possibility, and the moment after that her skirts had been pulled up to her waist and he'd been buried deep inside her.

Inside her.

Amaya had understood with a vivid shock that she had no control around him—over *herself*. She'd managed *not* to have sex for twenty-three years because she'd never felt that kind of connection with anyone, and then Kavian had come along and wrecked that in a day and a half. She'd been as shocked at herself for allowing it as she had been at what had actually happened.

He was inside her again now, and this time she was far less shocked. But no more in control of either one of them. He waited, still propped there on his elbows, an enigmatic curve to that hard mouth of his.

"Go on," he murmured, as if he knew that she didn't know what to do with herself and didn't know *how* to do it anyway. Any of it. Last time had been like careening over the side of a cliff into a brilliant, cataclysmic explosion. This was no less vivid, no less overwhelming. But the explosion hovered out of reach. She thought perhaps that was his doing. His iron control. Because it certainly wasn't hers. "Find out what feels good to you, *azizty*. I want to know."

Dimly, Amaya thought that she should find this all deeply embarrassing. He seemed to read her far too well. He seemed to know too much.

He always has, a little voice whispered. He always will.

But Amaya ignored it, and took him at his word. She circled her hips, tentatively at first. Then, when Kavian growled in stark male approval, with more deliberation. It made a whole new fire sear its way through her as she tested out the deliriously hot sensation, the drag and the friction. She ran her hands along those delectable ridges in his torso, learning the flat, hard muscles and the carved perfection of his form, crossed here and there with scars that spoke to a life of action, lived hard. She tested the shape of his strong neck, teased his flat male nipples and licked the salt from his skin.

She pulled back, then surged forward, testing his length deep inside her, so hard in all her quivering, melting softness. Again and again and again. Until she shivered all over with a new crop of goose bumps, and looked to him, feeling something like helpless. Vibrant and electric, and still unsure.

"Allow me," Kavian said then, his voice hoarse and dark, and rich with satisfaction.

And then he dropped down closer to her, slid his hands beneath her bottom and took over.

It was the difference between the light of a candle and the blaze of the desert sun.

He took her the way he'd kissed her—all-encompassing, almost furious, dark and sweet and *necessary*. And Amaya could do nothing but wrap her arms and legs around him, hold him as tightly as she possibly could and surrender to the glory of it.

He reached between them and pressed hard at the juncture of their bodies, right where she needed it most, and she thought she heard him laugh as she shattered all around him.

But then he followed after her, right over the side of the world, and the only thing Amaya heard him call out then was her name.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT SHOULD NOT have surprised Amaya that Kavian was a man of very definite opinions, all of which he had no trouble sharing with her as he saw fit. After all, he'd never pretended otherwise.

What Amaya should wear, and when, and with whom. How she should spend her time in the palace when he was not with her, and certainly what she should do when he was. What she should eat, how often she should take walks in the extensive, terraced gardens, how much coffee she should drink and so on. There was no detail too small to escape his attention. Not because he was so controlling, he'd told her, but because they were making her his queen. A role that would be dissected by the masses of his people and a thousand tabloids the world over, so they could not gloss over the details.

"You can't really care about that," she'd said one afternoon, a bit crossly.

He'd come upon her in one of the gardens, bursting with bright pink-and-purple blossoms beneath the blue fall sky, and told her flatly that he didn't like her hair up in a ponytail. That he preferred the braid she wore over one shoulder sometimes or it loose and flowing around her as she moved.

He'd reached over and pulled the elastic from her hair himself, then tucked it into one of his pockets, as if he couldn't bear to so much as look upon the offending ponytail a moment longer than necessary. "Can I not?"

"You have a country to run, Kavian." She'd scowled at him, and had wondered as she did where the courage to defy him so openly came from. When he still made her quake deep within. When it took everything she had. "What I'm doing with my hair should be the least of your concerns. Literally, the very least."

"I find nothing about you insignificant, *azizty*." That hint of a smile on that hard mouth of his, and it spilled through her like the desert sun above them, hot and bright, and made her think she'd do anything to see it again. Stand up to him, run, submit—whatever it took. The rush of that realization had stunned her. "None of it is beneath my notice. You are my queen."

And then he'd taken her in his arms, right there in the gardens, and kissed her until she'd decided that she had no particular allegiance to wearing her hair in a ponytail after all.

But it occurred to her—as she sat with the group of advisers who were tutoring her each day on a selection of subjects Kavian felt it was important his queen know, like proper palace protocol and the intricate social hierarchies of Daar Talaas—that she always gave in. Or he caught her and then she gave in. That it wasn't only Kavian—that her life was a series of similar surrenders that had led her straight here.

Because it had always seemed easier to bend than cause a commotion.

"You don't have the right to make that decision for me," she'd told her own father some years back. She'd wanted to take a few years off from her studies; he'd wanted her to get her degree—and he'd wanted her to stay in one place so that he'd be able to more closely monitor her, she'd suspected. She'd been very brave indeed on a mobile phone from Paris, far away from him. Polite, yet firm.

"I beg your pardon," the old sheikh had replied, and his voice had boomed down the phone line as if he'd been delivering a new edict he'd expected would become law within the hour. "I am your father and your king, Amaya. More than this, I pay your bills. Who has the right if I do not?"

And she'd acquiesced. She'd told herself that she'd simply made the practical choice. That she'd done what she had to do in the space that she'd been given. That she'd always done so as a purely rational survival tactic.

Or perhaps it's that you are a weakling, she'd snapped at herself back then, more than once, and again now as the dry and surpassingly dull vizier in front of her launched into a lecture on the importance of learning the appropriate address for visiting ambassadors. *Or you'd stand up for yourself*.

But the only person she'd openly defied in all her life was Kavian when she'd run from their betrothal—and she couldn't understand how everything had gotten so twisted since then, that she could still want to defy him with every atom in her body, fear him as much as hunger for him with every breath and yet melt at his slightest touch.

And worse, feel all that as if it was no contradiction at all.

Kavian was like all the other men in her life. Worse. They expected instant obedience not only from her, but from the whole world—and usually got it, like her late father. Her older brother, Rihad, the new king of Bakri, had been crafted from the very same mold. Even her lost brother, Omar—who'd died in a car accident while Amaya was on the run but had long been the black sheep of the Al Bakri family because he'd refused to dutifully marry on command like the rest of them—had very much lived his life on *his* terms, no one else's.

It was only Amaya who bent. Or was it only Amaya who had to bend? It seemed the longer she spent in Kavian's intense, commanding, addictive presence, the less she knew the answer to that question.

"You are not made of rubber," Elizaveta had told her not long after her father's funeral, which Elizaveta had expected Amaya to boycott. She'd been furious that Amaya had defied her and gone to pay her respects anyway. "What happens when you cannot bend? When instead you break?"

Amaya had so desperately wanted to say, *You didn't break me, Mother. If you didn't, who could?* But she hadn't. Because it had been easier not to fight. Easier by far to simply bend.

Amaya al Bakri didn't break. She bent and she bent, and then, when she could bend no more, she ran away. There was another word to describe that kind of behavior, she often thought as she plotted escapes from Kavian's palace she knew she didn't dare attempt. *Coward*.

But she didn't feel like a coward. She felt as courageous as she felt overwhelmed every time she surrendered herself to Kavian's sensual, demanding possession, the days blending into the nights and all of it focused on his masterful touch. Was that bending? Or was she simply allowing herself to sink deep into a dizzying world of hunger and want she hadn't known existed? Where need and desire were all that mattered—despite how deeply each terrified her?

Surely the ease with which she'd given herself over to this man who'd claimed her and brought her here against her will should worry her, she thought then. She nodded along with the vizier as he gestured wildly and made points in rapid-fire Arabic that she understood more and more of by the day. Surely Kavian himself should trip every last one of her alarms.

She'd been opposed to men like him her whole life. Autocratic, overbearing, dangerous and very, very sure of themselves in all things. From what they wished to have for breakfast to what they thought Amaya should do with her life. From ponytails to polygamy.

That was why her mother had left her father, she knew—because he'd had no intention of curtailing his extramarital activity both in and out of his harem. He'd been offended when Elizaveta expressed her dismay. And that was why Amaya had spent the better part of her time on the run, furious with her brother Rihad for ordering her to marry Kavian in the first place. He had never once indicated that he understood how difficult it was for her to marry a complete stranger when he should have, having done so twice himself.

It was why she'd been certain she had to escape Kavian within moments of meeting him. Because he was *that much worse* than all the rest of them put together. That eternal, relentless

imperiousness he wielded so offhandedly. That dictatorial need of his to issue commands at will and his arrogant astonishment when said commands were not immediately obeyed. That intense focus on every last, seemingly insignificant detail of *everything*. She should have been horrified by him after spending these weeks with him—as overwhelmed and trapped as she’d felt the night of their betrothal.

The trouble was that when it came to Kavian, every time he put those hard hands of his on her it was pure magic.

Maybe all men were equally magical, she reasoned. Maybe all sex was exactly the same, exactly like this. She told herself that what happened between them was probably run-of-the-mill and boring—she simply had no context by which to judge it. Because Kavian was the only man Amaya had ever known this way, ever touched this way, ever *surrendered to* in this way. Or at all.

And the truth was that she didn’t find his bossiness and sheer male certainty as upsetting in the bedroom as some part of her, deep inside, insisted she should. Quite the contrary, in fact, no matter how her heart pounded at her or her head swam at the thought of him. Then again when he touched her. No matter that sheer, stunning drop into pure sensation that terrified her in retrospect and yet seemed to disappear when he hauled her against him and—

“Are you following, my lady?” The vizier’s voice was an unpleasant slap back into the here and now and Amaya had to force a polite smile to cover it. “I cannot stress to you the importance of official palace protocol. It is—”

“All we have left when the world crumbles around us,” Amaya finished for him, trying to sit up straighter and focus, glad she’d paid enough attention earlier to parrot that back at him. “Please, continue. I assure you I’m hanging on your every word.”

* * *

The following morning Kavian rose before the sun, which Amaya had learned he did religiously. A man in his kind of peak physical condition did not happen into it by chance—he subjected himself to a rigorous fitness regime every day without fail. For hours, with what appeared to be half of his army and all their hardcore military drills.

And then, also without fail, he came back to their bed and woke her in his typically inventive, wicked style.

Sometimes with his hands. Sometimes with his mouth.

Sometimes in other imaginative ways altogether.

Today he took her as she lay sprawled on her belly, one of his big hands beneath her to prop her up and hold her hips at the precise angle he wanted them, the other flat against the mattress beside her and his mouth hot on the nape of her neck.

It was blisteringly hot, wild and fast, and almost too much to bear.

“Come,” he ordered her in that dark voice of his when he’d held her there on the brink for what seemed like a lifetime. When she’d lost herself completely in that desperate world of intense sensation he built so effortlessly around them, where she didn’t care who was surrendering or what that might mean. “Now.”

And he’d taught her so well in the weeks they’d been together. It took only that rasped command and she was gone. She wept out some kind of plea or prayer as she shattered into too many pieces to count, her face in the pillows and her hands curled into fists beside her. Then Kavian shouted out his own release and nearly threw her over once more.

He kissed her again, right there on the nape of her neck until she shuddered from the sweet kick of it all over again, and then he murmured something she didn’t quite hear before he left her lying there to begin his day in earnest. It didn’t matter, she thought then, dreamily suspended in that delicious in-between state where there was nothing but that sweet heat thrumming in her body. Whatever he did, however he did it, it felt like another caress.

It took her a while to rise from the bed. It took her longer to find her way into the walk-in shower that could have comfortably fit the whole of the harem he’d discarded—though that wasn’t

a topic she cared to think about too closely, as it led nowhere good. She stood under the hot spray and let it work its way beneath her skin.

When she was finished she wrapped herself in a silken robe so she could join him at breakfast in the sunny room directly adjoining the bedroom suite. It was the finest of his private salons, all wide-open doors to his secluded terrace and vast, sweeping views of the mountains and the desert beyond, and it struck her as she hurried into it that she was something very much like...eager.

That was a jarring thought. She told herself they'd fallen into a routine, that was all—or more accurately, he'd set one for them. He'd insisted they share these mornings from the start.

"I never know where my day will lead me," he'd said that first morning in the palace, when Amaya woke with a start to find herself draped over his chest as if she'd always shared his bed. His voice had been gruffly possessive, and he'd held her gaze to his with her hair wrapped tight around his fist, holding her head where he wanted it. "I want to know exactly where it will start, and who with."

At first she'd acquiesced because she'd been so swept away by him, by everything that had happened since she looked up to see him standing over her in that faraway café. Or that was what she'd told herself—that it was far better to lose a battle than the war. That it had nothing to do with the softness that had washed through her when he said something that might have been very nearly romantic, had he been another man. Had they been other people.

Today she recognized another truth wrapped up in that eagerness that she wanted to deny but couldn't, quite: that there was a large part of her that wanted nothing more than to sink into this life he'd laid out for her after all her years of following her mother's changeable whims and broken heart all over the planet. It was much too tempting to simply dissolve into this place, into this man, into the vision he had of her and into this life he obviously ran as smoothly and as ruthlessly as he did everything else.

It was more than tempting. It was something very much like comforting.

It feels like safety, something inside her whispered. *Like home.*

Like a note of music, played loud and long.

But she couldn't let herself think those things.

Amaya slipped into place at the glass-topped table where Kavian sat, his newspapers spread around him and his laptop open before him. Nothing about this man was safe. She knew that. Not when his gray eyes sparked silver as he gazed at her. Or when he showed her that small, dangerously compelling crook in the corner of his mouth that had become everything to her.

Though she was careful not to think of it in those terms.

"Today you will tend to your wardrobe at last," he told her, by way of greeting. "I've flown my favorite dressmakers in from Italy and they await you in the yellow parlor even now. They've brought some ready-to-wear pieces, I imagine, but will also be taking your measurements."

It took a moment for all that to sink in. Amaya jerked her attention away from his temptation of a mouth and back across the hearty breakfast Kavian preferred after his intense morning workout, set pleasingly on an array of gold and silver platters as befit a king.

"What's wrong with my wardrobe as is?" She blinked down at herself, wearing nothing but a silk wrapper and the desert breeze in her wet hair. "I don't mean this."

"I like you like this." That dark gray gaze. That responsive flip inside her chest that boded only ill. "But I would kill anyone else who saw you dressed in so little."

And she felt it again. That deep flush of pleasure, as if his *liking her* was the only thing that mattered to her—and as if he was being romantic when he said such things. It almost diverted her attention from the fact that he had *favorite dressmakers* in the first place.

"How many dresses have you had made, exactly?" she asked him, raising her gaze to his slowly. Very slowly. "Seventeen, by any chance?"

Kavian sat there in his favorite chair with the golden morning light cascading all around him, and his slate-gray gaze seemed deeply and darkly amused the way it often did these days, though his mouth had lost that curve she craved.

“Do you truly wish me to answer that?”

“My wardrobe is perfectly adequate as it is, thank you,” Amaya said quickly, as much because she really didn’t want him to answer her question as because that was true. Her brother had shipped over all her things months ago, long before Kavian had caught up to her in Canada and brought her here. She’d woken up that first morning in Daar Talaas to find a separate, equally vast second closet off Kavian’s sitting room stocked with everything she’d left behind in Bakri, from the gowns she’d worn to formal affairs at her brother’s palace to her favorite pair of ripped black jeans from the university that she doubted Kavian would find at all appropriate. “What fault can you possibly find in it?”

“None whatsoever, were you still slinging pints in a pub in Scotland. Alas, you are not. I can assure you that while your duties will inevitably vary here, according to the needs of the people, they will never include tending a bar.”

“It was a perfectly decent pub. And what do you care where I worked?”

“You were a royal princess of the House of Bakri.” He had never looked like more of a king than he did then, royal and arrogant, that gaze of his a dark fire as he regarded her with some kind of astonishment. “Aside from the fact that it involved parading yourself before crowds of drunken Scotsmen every night, which your father must have been insane to allow, such a job was quite literally beneath you.”

Which had been the appeal of the job, not that she was foolish enough to admit that now. Or that both Rihad and her father had read her the riot act about it, the latter almost until the day he’d died. As rebellions went, hers had been a tiny one, but it had still been hers. She couldn’t regret it. She didn’t.

But she’d also been relieved, somehow, when Rihad had called her to Bakri after her father died and told her it was time she took on a more formal role. She’d never had much defiance inside her. Only Kavian seemed to bring that out in her. Even now.

“You and Rihad rant on and on about my being a princess,” she said then, not quite rolling her eyes at him. “It’s embarrassing at best. It’s nothing but a silly title from a life that was only mine for a few years when I was a child, and then again recently for my brother’s political gain.” Amaya shrugged. “I’m no princess. Not really. I never have been.”

She couldn’t read the look on his face then, and ignored the small trickle of sensation that worked its way down her spine. She didn’t want to read him anyway, she assured herself as she poured out a steaming mug of coffee from the carafe at her elbow and stirred in a healthy dollop of cream. He would do as he liked either way.

It was unfortunate that she found that appealing rather than appalling.

“It is a silly title that you will no longer suffer to bear, you will be happy to learn.” It was amazing that he could sound so scathing when he was still so irritatingly calm, she thought, and not for the first time. She stirred her coffee harder than necessary. “You are now a queen, Amaya. My queen, should that require clarification.”

“Officially, I am only your betrothed.” She shouldn’t have said that, of course. That level, considering stare of his made everything inside her go still, as if she’d roused the predator in him again and was fixed in its sights. “I’ve been learning a great deal about the traditional Daar Talaas palace hierarchy in the classes you’ve made me take.”

“They are not classes.” His voice was as dangerously soft as his gaze was severe. “You are not a fractious adolescent who has been dispatched to some kind of summer school in place of the detention she clearly deserves.”

She really did roll her eyes then. “Lectures, then. Is that a better term?”

“You are meeting with your aides and advisers to better understand and shape your role as queen of this great land.” The way he arched those dark brows at her dared her to contradict him. “Just as you are practicing your Arabic so you may converse with the subjects under your rule whenever appropriate.”

He meant *when fully vetted by my men*. When it came to any issue that could be construed as pertaining to her physical safety, Amaya had found that Kavian was utterly inflexible. Unlike the rest of the time, when he was only *almost* utterly inflexible. Which should not have amused her, surely. Where was her panic?

What happens when you cannot bend? her mother had demanded, and what did it matter what Elizaveta’s motivations for asking had been? *When instead you break?*

“The point is that the role of ‘princess,’ whatever that means, was never one I learned to play,” she said instead, because she couldn’t sort out what was happening inside her. Because she was afraid this was what *broken* looked like, this absurd idea that she could be safe with a man this elemental, this raw and powerful. “I was never treated as a princess of anything anywhere we went after my mother and I left Bakri.”

Quite the opposite, she thought then as the memories she usually kept locked away rushed back at her, thick and fast. There had been a long stretch of years when Elizaveta would fly into one of her cold furies at the very sound of the word *princess* and punish Amaya for it whether or not she’d been the one to say it out loud.

She took a sip of the thick coffee and tried to swallow the unpleasant past down with the dark Arabian brew. “If anything, my mother downplayed it as much as possible.”

That shrug of his was still a cool, harsh weapon, and then he turned his attention back to the papers before him, which only made it worse. “Because you outrank her.”

The shrug was a weapon and the words a blow.

For a moment, Amaya simply reeled. She placed her mug back down on the glass table very, very carefully. She blinked.

“My mother doesn’t care about rank,” she said, and she couldn’t have said why her voice sounded like that, as if there were rough and terrible things simmering there beneath the surface. “She walked away from Bakri of her own volition. If she cared about rank she would have stayed in the place where she was queen, not taken off into the big, bad world where she had no means of support.”

“No means of support?” Kavian shook his head when she frowned at him in confusion. “She had a walking, talking bank account at her disposal. She had you.”

That sensation of reeling, of actual spinning, only worsened. “What are you talking about?”

“You,” he said very distinctly, his gaze a fierce shot of intense gray in the bright room, “are the daughter of a king. Your mother did not live by her wits or her charm or even her looks, Amaya. She lived off the trust your father set up in your name, for your support.”

Amaya couldn’t speak. Or move. She felt as if he’d hammered a giant nail straight into her and pinned her to her chair.

She thought of all the times Elizaveta had lectured her about her *expectations*, her terrible *entitlement*. She remembered the many, many times her mother had embarrassed her in front of others by claiming that Amaya was “her father’s daughter,” in a manner meant to suggest Amaya always selfishly wanted far more than her share, that she was greedy and ill-bred, that she was entirely, deliberately heedless of reality. She’d excused these things, one after the next, because she’d understood where her mother was coming from, what Amaya’s father had done. She’d assumed these things came from her mother’s panic at having to find ways to support them all on her own.

“I treat you like an adult because you would otherwise grow up coddled and spoiled like every other member of the Bakri line,” Elizaveta had said when Amaya was perhaps eleven. “The truth is that we have nothing. We are dependent on the kindness of friends.”

She'd meant her many lovers, the men who she'd never stayed with for too long, because they had always required such careful handling to put up with a woman with a sulky daughter in tow. Or so Elizaveta had always claimed.

"I don't expect you to be as grateful as you should—that's your father's influence in you, I'm sure—but you must comprehend what there is to lose if you don't do as I say." Elizaveta had glared at Amaya as if she'd expected her daughter to argue, when Amaya had long since learned the folly of that kind of thing. Even then, even as a child, she'd known it was better to bend to those who could not. "We'll lose everything. The roof above your head and the clothes on your back. Is that what you want?"

That had not been what eleven-year-old Amaya had wanted. The very idea had given her nightmares. And Elizaveta had never been a perfect parent, certainly. Life with her had always been complicated, but Amaya had been sympathetic because she'd understood that her mother hadn't said those things to be cruel. Amaya's father had broken something inside her, and sometimes it came out as poison. Amaya had learned not to take it personally... Or anyway, she'd tried her best not to take it personally.

"You are mistaken," Amaya said to Kavian now when she could speak without that rough-edged thing inside her taking over and revealing too much. "I don't know where you heard such a thing."

"Had she married any of the men she found, she would have had to return you to your father and worse, to her way of thinking, give up her access to your money." Another shrug, which made her want to throw her plate at him. A flicker in that gray gaze made her think he knew it, too. "This is not an attack, Amaya. This is simply a fact. I did not hear this through some grapevine or other—I've seen the paperwork."

Amaya shook her head, so hard it almost hurt, and noticed her heart had started to kick at her, almost as if she was panicked.

"My mother was a self-made woman. She had nothing when she left Ukraine. She talked her way from minor dance halls into the fashion houses of Milan. She had nothing *but* her wit, her charm and her looks. That was how she entered her marriage to my father, and that was how she left it. If anything, I was a complication."

It was only when she was finished speaking that Amaya realized her voice had risen, as if every sentence were a plate thrown, a blow landed on his wholly impervious form.

"She also had ambition," Kavian said softly. He was so much more dangerous the quieter he got, she knew. She sucked in a breath against it. "Never forget that. She left Bakri because she was losing the sheikh's favor. Better to leave and tell a sad tale across the years to a thousand receptive audiences. Better by far to hold the king's daughter as ransom than to remain in Bakri as a neglected, forgotten wife. The sheikh would have banished her to one of the outlying residences, far away from the palace where she would wither away into irrelevance, and she knew it. That, *azizty*, did not suit your mother's ambitions at all."

Amaya stared at him, willing herself not to react in the way she suspected he wanted her to do. Her lips felt bloodless. Her stomach twisted—hard. "You don't know anything about my mother. She was not ambitious. She was in love."

She shouldn't have said that. She shouldn't have uttered those words. Not to him, not here. Not out loud—and she didn't dare ask herself why that was. But Amaya couldn't take them back, no matter how much she wished she could. She couldn't make that taut, near-painful silence between them disappear, or do anything about that sudden arrested look on Kavian's austere face. She straightened in her seat instead, and forced herself to meet that edgy gray gaze of his straight on as if she felt nothing at all.

"My father was a convincing man when it suited him." She heard that catch in her throat and she knew Kavian did, too, but she pushed on. "He convinced a woman who had been born with nothing

and raised to expect little else that he adored her. That he worshipped her. That he would remake his world in her honor.”

She didn’t point out how familiar that sounded. Just as she didn’t give that searing blast of temper in Kavian’s dark gaze a chance to form into harsh words on his lips.

“He lied. Maybe he meant it when he said it—what do I know? But my mother believed him. That was why she thought there was something she could do to regain his favor, to win back his attention once it drifted. Anything to make him love her again. But what my father truly loved was collecting, Kavian. He was always looking for his next acquisition. He didn’t lose much sleep over the things he’d already collected and shunted aside.”

He didn’t speak for a long, cool moment that careened around inside Amaya’s chest, leaving jagged marks. She tilted up her chin and told herself she could handle it. *Him*. Or survive it, anyway.

“Is that what you’re afraid of?” he asked.

She would never know how she held his gaze. How she managed to keep herself from reacting to that terrible, infinitely destructive question. She only knew that she did it. That she stared back at him, stone to his stone, as if her life depended on it.

“Are you talking about your mother, Amaya?” Kavian pushed at her in that quiet way of his that nonetheless made every bone in her body ache. She fought to restrain a shiver. “Or yourself?”

“Don’t tie yourself in knots looking for comparisons that don’t exist,” she managed to bite out at him, still channeling stone and steel and *calm*. “I’m nothing like her.”

“I am aware. If you were, you would not be here.” She hated the way he looked at her as if knew all the things she carried inside, her memories and her dreams and her darkest secrets alike. As if what Kavian enjoyed collecting was every last piece of her soul. And once he had them all, she couldn’t help wondering then in a panic, what would become of it? Or her? “And as fascinating as this conversation is, it doesn’t alter the fact that you require an entirely new wardrobe. You must look like my queen whether you feel like it or do not. Especially at our wedding ceremony, which, I hesitate to remind you, is in a matter of weeks.”

“I don’t want a ceremony.”

“I didn’t ask you what you wanted. I told you what was necessary and what I require.” His gaze glinted with amusement then, and that was much worse. It moved in her like heat. Like need. “Shall I demonstrate to you why you should begin to learn the distinction between the two? And the consequences if you do not?”

But Kavian’s consequences always ended the same way—with Amaya stretched out naked on the edge of some or other gloriously intense pleasure she worried she might not survive, begging him for mercy and forgetting her own damn name. So she only picked up her coffee again and took another sip, schooling her features into something serene enough to be vaguely regal and ignoring that wicked crook of his hard mouth as she did it.

“A new wardrobe fit for a queen?” she murmured, her voice cool and smooth. Stone and steel. Just like him. “How delightful. I can’t wait.”

“I am so pleased you think so,” Kavian said in the very same tone, though his gray eyes gleamed. “We leave for your first public appearance as queen tomorrow morning. I’m thrilled you’ll be able to dress the part at last.”

“As am I,” she said dryly. Almost as if she couldn’t help herself—couldn’t keep herself from needling him. “I have worried about little else.”

“Ah, *azizty*,” he murmured, sounding as close to truly amused as she’d ever heard him, “when will you understand? I am not a man who does anything by halves.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

IF HE WAS a good man, Kavian reflected the following day, he would not have set up his betrothed for this particular day of tests. He would not have tested her at all. Had it been about what he wanted, he simply would have kept her in his bed forever. He would have lost himself there in the

sweet madness of her scent, the addiction of her smooth skin. The glory he'd found in her arms that shook him far more than he cared to admit.

But this was Daar Talaas and Kavian had never been good. He'd never had the chance to try. He was the king, and thus he did what was necessary for his people. If that happened to align with what was good, so be it. But he would not lose sleep over it if it did not.

He would sleep like an innocent, he assured himself, whatever happened in the desert that had forged him. It would be the making of Amaya, too, he knew. There was no other way.

After all, she had already taken the news of her mother's true treatment of her in stride. Kavian dared to allow himself a shred of optimism that she would rise to whatever occasion presented itself.

They'd left the palace in the morning, taking a helicopter out to the stable complex on the far side of the treacherous northern mountains. They'd stood together in the center of the courtyard while his men, a sea of servants and stable hands, and a selection of his finest Arabian horses hurried all around them.

"Do you ride?" he'd asked, almost as an afterthought.

She'd been dressed like a Daar Talaasian noblewoman, in an exquisite dress that adhered to desert custom with her arms and legs covered and her head demurely veiled. It only made her every graceful movement that much more intoxicating, to Kavian's mind, because he had the pleasure of knowing what was beneath. All her soft skin, the temptation of her hair, the sweet taste of her, woman and cream. But there'd been no veiling that cool gaze of hers, dark chocolate mixed with ice as it met his.

"I've ridden a horse before, if that's what you mean. I'm sure you already know that my mother and I spent several summers on a ranch in Argentina."

What he knew was far less interesting to him than what she chose to tell him. "Did you fall off a great deal?"

She stiffened almost imperceptibly, and those marvelous bittersweet eyes of hers narrowed. "Are you asking me if I've suffered a head injury?"

He'd kept himself from smiling by sheer force of will, and it was much harder than it should have been. Much harder than he could recall it ever having been before. "I am asking if I can expect you to topple off the side of a horse while you are meant to be riding it."

"Not on purpose," she'd retorted, and it had only occurred to him then that they weren't in private any longer. That his men stood around him, closely watching this exchange with the scandalous woman who had evaded him for months—whom he had clearly not yet subdued. "Do you plan to ride me out into the desert, throw me to the sand dunes and then *claim* I fell off?"

They had been speaking in English, which was lucky as very few of his men understood a word of it. The fact that he'd been nearly smiling at her in obvious indulgence, however, was less lucky. Any softness, any hint of a crack in his armor, would be exploited as a weakness by his enemies. Kavian knew that all too well.

He couldn't have said why he cared so much less in that moment than he should have.

He'd given the order then. It had taken only a few moments for the small party to mount up, and when he'd looked back down at Amaya she'd been standing there, doing an admirable job of keeping herself from frowning at him. He'd seen the effort she expended in the way her dark eyes crinkled in the corners.

"Did you ask me all those questions for your own amusement?"

"Yes," he'd replied dryly. "I am a hilarious king. Ask anyone."

And then he'd simply reached down from the back of his horse, clamped an arm around her middle and hauled her up before him.

He'd felt more than heard the tiny noise she made, somewhere between a gulp and a squeak, and he knew that had he found her pulse with his mouth, it would be going wild. Yet she only gripped the arm he'd banded around her abdomen and said nothing.

“Courage, *azizty*,” he’d murmured, his voice low and for her ears only. “Today you must prove you are the queen my people deserve.”

“But—”

“Whether you wish it or do not. This is about Daar Talaas, Amaya, not you or me.”

He’d felt the breath she’d sucked in and he’d thought she’d planned to argue further, but she hadn’t. She’d been quiet. Perhaps too quiet, but there’d been nothing he could do about it then—or would have done if he could, if he was honest with himself. A test could hardly matter if it was without some peril. So instead, he’d given the next order and they’d ridden out into the desert, deep into the far reaches of the desolate northern territories.

It was not an easy ride by any means, but Amaya did not complain, which pleased Kavian greatly. She did not squirm against him, nor divert his attention any more than the simple fact of her there between his legs, her pert bottom snug against the hardest part of him as they rode, distracted him.

He found it impossible not to notice that she fit him perfectly.

They reached the encampment by midafternoon, after hours spent galloping across the shifting sands, racing against the sun itself at this time of year. Fierce men on bold horses met them some distance away and led them the rest of the way in, shouting ahead in their colorful local dialect. The collection of tents that waited for them had the look of a makeshift traveling camp instead of a permanent settlement, despite the goats and children who roamed in and around the grounds and told a different tale. Kavian knew that it was all a deliberate, canny bit of sleight of hand. The truth was in the quality of the horseflesh, the presence of so many complacent and well-fed camels, the fine, sturdy fabric of the tents themselves.

It could have been a scene from any small village out here in the desert, unchanged in centuries, and there was a part of Kavian that would always long for the simplicity of this life. No palace, no intrigue. No political necessities, no alliances and no greater enemy than the harsh environment. Just the thick heat of the desert sun above, the vastness and the quiet all around and a tent to call his home.

Though he knew that was not the truth of this place, either.

“What are we doing here?” Amaya asked as they rode into camp, and he wondered what she saw. The dirt, the dust. The sand in everything. The rich, dark scent in the air that announced the presence of the tribe’s livestock, horses and camels. The suspicious frowns from the people who could see at a glance that she was not one of them. The lack of anything even resembling an amenity.

There was no oasis to cool off in here, because it was another fifteen minutes or so farther north, fiercely guarded and zealously protected for the use of this tribe alone—but Amaya couldn’t know that. The women who clustered around the fire, beginning their preparations for the evening meal, eyed them as their party approached but made no move to welcome them, and Kavian imagined how they must look to Amaya. But he knew what she could not—that their seeming poverty was as feigned as the rest.

Nothing was ever quite what it seemed. He came here as often as he could to remember that.

“I have come a very long way to have a conversation,” Kavian told his betrothed, and that, too, was only a part of it.

“To settle a dispute?” Amaya asked. She didn’t wait for him to confirm or deny. “The king himself would hardly ride out to discuss the weather, I suppose.”

Kavian pulled on the horse’s reins, bringing the Thoroughbred to a dancing stop in front of a line of stern-faced elders, all of whom bowed deep at the sight of him. He inclined his head, then swung down from the horse’s back, leaving his hand resting possessively on Amaya’s leg as he stood beside her.

He greeted the men before him, introduced Amaya as his betrothed queen and then they all performed the usual set of formal greetings and offers of hospitality. It went back and forth for some

time, as expected. Only when the finest tent belonging to the village's leader had been offered and accepted, as was custom, did Kavian turn to Amaya again and lift her down from the horse.

"That wasn't the Arabic I know," she said, in soft English that sounded far sweeter than the look in her eyes. "I caught only one or two words in ten."

He didn't laugh, though he felt it move in him. "Let me guess which ones."

"Did you accept the man's kind offer of a girl for your use?" she asked, and though her voice was cool, her eyes glittered. "They must have heard you'd gone from seventeen concubines to one. A tremendous national tragedy indeed."

He could have put her mind at ease. He could have told her that the girl, like so many of the girls he was offered in these far-off places that never advanced much with the times, was little more than a child. He had taken many of them back to the palace, installed them in his harem and given them a much better life—one that had never included his having sex with them. He could have told Amaya that such girls accounted for most—though not all, it was true; he had never been a saint by any measure—of the harem he'd kept. He could have told her that there had never been any possibility that he would take a young girl as his due tonight and more, that the elders had known that, hence the extravagant effusiveness of their offers.

But he did not.

"They approve my choice of bride and have offered us a place to stay," he replied instead, his voice even. "More or less. It will not be a palace, but it will have to do."

She blinked as if he'd insulted her. Perhaps he had.

"I'm not the one accustomed to palaces," she reminded him, her voice still calm, though he could feel the edge in it as if it were a knife she dragged over his skin. "I keep telling you, I was only ever a princess in name. Perhaps you should be worried about how you'll manage a night somewhere that isn't drenched in gold and busy with servants to cater to your every need. *I* have slept under bushes while hiking across Europe, when it was necessary. I've camped almost everywhere. *I* will be fine."

He wanted to crush her in his arms. He wanted to take that mouth of hers with his, and who cared what was appropriate or who was watching or what he had to prove? He wanted to lose himself inside her forever. But he could do none of those things. Not here.

Not yet.

"I will also be fine, *azizty*," he said, his voice blunt with all these things he wanted that he couldn't have. Not now. "I grew up here."

* * *

Kavian strode off and left Amaya standing there, all by herself in what was truly the middle of nowhere, as if he hadn't dropped that bomb on her at all. He didn't look back as he disappeared into a three-sided tent structure with a group of stern-faced men. He didn't so much as pause.

And for a wild moment, Amaya's pulse leaped and she thought about running again now that she was finally out of his sight—but then she remembered where she was. There had been *nothing*, all afternoon. Nothing but the great desert in every direction, which she'd found she hadn't hated as she'd expected she would. But that didn't mean she wanted to lose herself in it.

She had no idea how Kavian had located this place without a map today, just as she had no idea what he'd meant. How could he have grown up *here*? So far away from the world and his own palace? Her brothers had been raised in royal splendor, waited on by battalions of servants, educated by fleets of the best tutors from all over the world before being sent off to the finest schools. Amaya supposed she'd thought that all kings were created in the same way.

It occurred to her, standing there all alone in the middle of the vast desert that Kavian was clearly bound to in ways she didn't understand, that she didn't know much about this man who had claimed her—even as he seemed to know her far too well. And better every day whether she liked it or not.

You do like it, a small voice whispered. *You like that he notices everything. You like that he sees you.* But she dismissed it.

Kavian had marched off with those men as if he was a rather more hands-on sort of king than her brother or father had ever been. Amaya assumed, when she shifted to see the women watching her from their place by the central fire, that she was meant to be the same sort of queen. No lounging about beneath palm trees eating cakes and honey, or adhering to the stiffly formal royal protocols in place at her brother's palace. No disappearing into the tent that had been set aside for them and collapsing on the nearest fainting couch. All of those options were appealing, and were certainly what her own mother would have done in her place, but she understood that none of them would win her any admirers here.

You run, she reminded herself. *That's who you are. Why not do that here? Or do the next best thing—hide?*

But she hated the notion that that was precisely what Kavian expected her to do. That he believed she really was some kind of fluttery princess who couldn't handle herself. It was so infuriating that Amaya ignored the waiting tent, ignored what her own body was telling her to do. Instead, she made her way over to the group of women and set about making herself useful.

When Kavian finally returned to the center of camp with that same cluster of men hours later, Amaya found she was proud of the fact that the evening meal was ready and waiting for him, as the encampment's honored guest. It wasn't the sort of feast he'd find served in his well-appointed salons, but she'd helped make it with her own hands. There was grilled lamb, a special treat because the king had come, and hot, fresh flatbread the women had made in round pans they'd settled directly in the coals. There was a kind of fragrant rice with vegetables mixed in. There were dates and homemade cheeses wrapped in soft cloths. It was far more humble than anything in the palace, perhaps, and there was no gold or silver to adorn it, but Amaya rather thought that added to the simple meal's appeal.

The men settled down around the serving platters and ate while the women waited and watched from a distance, as was the apparent custom. It was not until the two old men who sat with Kavian drank their coffee together that the village seemed to relax, because, one of the women Amaya had come to know over the long afternoon told her in the half Arabic, half hand gestures language they'd cobbled together as they'd gone along, that meant the king had settled the dispute.

Amaya ate when the women did, all of them sitting on a common mat near one of the tents, in a kind of easy camaraderie she couldn't remember ever feeling before. Out here in the desert, they didn't have to understand every word spoken to understand each other. It didn't take a common language to puzzle out group dynamics.

Amaya knew that the older woman with the wise eyes whom the others treated with a certain deference watched her more closely than the others did. She knew exactly when she'd gotten *that* woman to smile in the course of their shared labors, and she hadn't been entirely sure why she'd felt that like such a grand personal triumph. Or why she'd laughed more with these women she'd only met this afternoon and only half understood than she had in years.

The night wore on, pressing down from all sides—the stars so bright they seemed to be right there within reach, dancing on the other side of the fire. It reminded her of that winter in New Zealand, but even there the nearby houses had cast some light to relieve the sprawl of the Milky Way and its astonishing weight up above. Not so here. There was no light but the fire and the pipes the men smoked as they talked. There was nothing but the immensity of the heavens above, the great twisting fire of the galaxy. It pressed its way deep into Amaya's heart, until it ached as if it were broken wide-open or smashed into pieces. Both, perhaps.

"You did well," Kavian said when he came to fetch her at last. He reached down and pulled her to her feet, making the other women cluck and sigh, in a manner that required no translation.

"They think you're very romantic," she said, and she didn't know why she felt something like bashful, as if she thought so, too. Or worse—wistful.

“They think we are newly wed,” he corrected her. “And still foolish with it.”

“It’s the same thing, really.” She tilted her head up to look him in the eye as best she could in all the tumultuous dark. “Either way, it’s not expected to last.”

She thought he meant to say something then, but he didn’t, and she didn’t know why it felt like a rebuke. She had to repress a shiver at the sudden drop in heat as he led her away from the group, the flames, the laughter. She felt a sharp pang as she went, as if she was losing something. As if she would never get it back—as if it was so much smoke on a Bedouin fire, curling its way into the messy night sky above them. Lost in the night, never to return.

Amaya made herself breathe. Told herself it was the thick night, that was all, making everything seem that much more raw and poignant than it was.

There were lanterns guiding their way through the cluster of tents, and Kavian’s strong body against the impenetrable darkness that pressed in like ink on all sides, but that didn’t change the way she felt. It didn’t help that ache inside.

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