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Commander & Queen: Part I, Beiramar

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Chapter 1

“I hear your suitor has brought you a horse,” Oona waved her fan in a lazy rhythm, its ornate gold and silver embroidery reflecting the sun. Cilla lifted her head from her pillow and regarded her sister with a sidelong glance. The waves crashing far beneath the balcony had been lulling her to sleep under the hot afternoon sun, but now she was wide awake.

“What use is another horse to me?” Cilla frowned, “He’s not the first prince to come to our borders offering me a pretty pony for my hand.”

“King. James of Vallemont is a *king*, dear sister,” Oona corrected her. Cilla didn’t care if he was a god who could turn rivers to gold. He was unwelcome and she wouldn’t hide it.

“Cilla,” Ursa, the oldest of the three sisters, raised an eyebrow and crowed, “you have to accept *someone* eventually. And why not a king? You don’t want to end up old, wrinkled, and alone, surely.”

“Ideally, yes, I do,” Cilla muttered, darting her eyes away. Her eyes drifted across the balcony, and she fixed her eyes on the trees that hung *just so* to allow privacy as the sisters sunbathed. Ursa and Oona were totally nude. Cilla draped herself in a thin gauze sheet as she stretched across a plush cushion. Not usually one consumed by modesty, she was really unwilling to show her sisters the bruises

from her sparring practice that morning. It was hot, but she'd rather sweat and bathe later than allow herself to be scolded.

“Cilla, dear, you're being absolutely petulant. I was married and birthed my second son by the time I was your age. Nineteen years old, unmarried and not even *considering* your prospects. I don't know *why* Father lets you get away with all this.” Ursa clicked her tongue disapprovingly. She motioned through the arched doorway for the nearest servant to bring her clothes. Her hair, a dark, sandy blonde, was piled atop her head in a style that Cilla could only describe as a sculpture. Only the gods knew how many hairpins it took to construct such a style. Ursa raised her arms high and allowed one of Cilla's handmaidens to drape the gown over her head and fasten it under her breasts with a gem-encrusted broach that had belonged to her mother, the deceased first wife of Cilla's father.

“That's because our Little Tyrant is Father's favorite daughter,” Oona rolled her eyes good-naturedly. Oona was the more easygoing of Cilla's two older sisters but often echoed whatever Ursa said, in a kinder tone.

“Yes,” laughed Ursa, “the only child Father loves more than Cilla is her precious twin.” She reached out and gently pinched Cilla's cheek. Though Cilla wrinkled her nose, she couldn't argue- she enjoyed special privileges as the twin of Julian, the future king of Beiramar, the first and only son of the King. As she was the third daughter, her father was lax in disciplining her, and after the death of his

second wife, Cilla's mother, he had grown soft and sentimental. Ursa and Oona had been paired in profitable marriages to princes in other, albeit lesser kingdoms, so there was no real or immediate pressure for Cilla to marry.

Father was in no rush to let the spitting image of his beloved second wife go, and said so frequently. Ursa and Oona took after their mother, and were fair-skinned and light of hair. There were songs and paintings dedicated to their classic Beiramarite beauty. Cilla's hair resembled obsidian, absent of all color, and was almost never seen out of the tight braid that hung in a long rope down her back.

She disliked hairpins, and the long, elaborately draped gowns her sisters favored. They took what felt like forever to drape and fold just right- Cilla found it to be an absolute nuisance. The extra fabric dragged behind at all times, causing her to trip. It was impractical, as there had to be a handmaiden or servant around to help them out of the thing if they needed to do even basic things like relieving themselves. As her sisters and the young girl struggled with the garments, Cilla rose to her feet and hurried toward where her thin and practical gauzy dress lay. She attempted to pull it over her head before her sisters could see their brother's handiwork from their horseplay that morning.

"Cilla!" Oona gasped. Cilla winced, her back to her sister. She'd been caught. She should have known. Ursa watched her like a hawk at all times. She

was ten years older, and had always tried to parent Cilla rather than grow up alongside her.

“Listen...” She began, as she turned around with a sheepish expression.

“When I get my hands on Julian... heir to the throne be damned. I’ll give him a hiding he’ll not soon forget! You’re both too old to be hitting each other with wooden swords like children!” Ursa’s green eyes, the only thing that she and Cilla had in common, blazed.

“Ursa...” Cilla trailed off when she noticed her young servant scurrying away. Cilla caught her eye and offered her a quick, reassuring smile. Mavreen served Cilla, not her sisters, and though Father referred to her as Little Tyrant, her temperament was still no match for Ursa’s. She wouldn’t allow her young handmaidens to suffer the wrath of the older princess. Ursa’s temper was well known around the castle, even to those who’d never even served her. She hadn’t even lived in Beiramar for well over a decade. Cilla hoped to stop her tantrum in its tracks.

“Listen to me,” she hissed, “unless you plan to confront Father about my sparring practice with Julian, then leave it be. He knows, and he’s taken no issue with it.” She knew Ursa would never cross their father, even if she had grown up and moved to another kingdom. He may have been lenient with Cilla, but Ursa was held to different standards. The sharp tongue and bold, challenging and nature he

found amusing and endearing in his youngest daughter were traits he found to be unacceptable for his eldest. Cilla knew it wasn't fair, but she was prepared to use it to her advantage when the situation called.

Ursa rolled her eyes and heaved a great sigh, defeated. "One day I'd like to see you be a *real* lady, Cilla, that's all. Father has one son, not two."

Cilla recoiled at her words. Although being a noble and refined lady meant nothing to her, it was everything to Ursa and Oona, and the comment stung. She'd always disappoint her sisters. She knew that. She was too rough, too wild, too much like Julian to ever be the lady they expected.

Cilla pursed her lips and brushed past her sister, still clutching her gown in her hand.

"Now, what'd you have to do that for?" Cilla could hear Oona scold, exasperated, "You should've just let her nap."

Cilla didn't care to hear the rest of the disagreement and stormed away, far into her apartments where they couldn't reach her.

"Mavreen," Cilla called for the young handmaiden that had disappeared only moments before.

"Yes, Your Grace?" Mavreen's small voice rang out right before she reappeared, regarding Cilla with an impish grin.

"Come with me. You have an errand to run."

James raised his eyes to the spiral ceilings of the throne room. The air smelled of salt water. Reeked of it, really. He licked his damp upper lip and was certain he could taste it on his skin. Or was that sweat? It was sweltering outside, and the indoors provided little relief, despite the shade. The servants walked around half-dressed, with nearly see-through fabrics draped about them- even the women. Upon their arrival, his mother looked scandalized by the lack of clothing, but James guessed that she was envious of how much cooler they must be. He certainly was.

The ceilings were carved and painted with seascapes that blended in together. There were blues he didn't even know existed mixed in with delicate strokes. Fish he'd never seen before crested the waves. The walls were painted different colors- separated by corners, no two were alike. Some were seafoam green, some were the color of sand, pink like the inside of seashells, some deep blue like the sea surrounding the castle. The floors were inlaid with a mosaic of white shells. He'd never seen a castle like this before. James was out of his element in every way in Beiramar. His father seemed to be having the same reaction, although he'd been here before, years ago.

A girl no older than fifteen scurried over to where he stood with his father in the empty throne room. She was small and mousy, with her hair gathered in a long brown knot at her neck.

“Your Highness,” she bowed to James’ father, then to James, “and Your Majesty. King Pollux will be with you shortly.” Her voice shook, and she seemed nervous.

“Thank you,” James offered her a small smile, “what is your name?”

The girl’s eyes widened, “Mavreen, Your Majesty.”

“That’s a lovely name, Mavreen. Are you one of Princess Cilla’s personal handmaidens?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,”. She kept her voice neutral. James raised his eyebrows and chuckled.

“Interesting that a personal handmaiden is doing a page’s work,” He mused. The girl seemed to forget herself for a moment and flashed him a wicked grin, seemingly impressed by his attention to detail. She dropped the meek handmaiden charade and narrowed her eyes slightly, betraying the mischievous girl she was behind the mask of shyness she entered with.

“All the pages were busy, Your Majesty,” she singsonged, beginning to back away.

“Well-” He began to protest again, but she’d already reached the small corridor she’d appeared from. She shot one last glance over her shoulder before turning and disappearing completely.

“What on earth was all that?” James’s father, Castor, blinked away his bewildered expression.

“Our princess has sent a little spy,” James again wiped the sweat from his upper lip. He just couldn’t get accustomed to the heat. He was still dressed for his home climate, but he doubted the thin Beiramarite fashions would suit him well, either.

Castor snorted, his graying beard twitching. “Pollux did warn me that she was... how do I put this kindly? A handful?”

James nodded. She was certainly proving to be. She had refused to join the welcoming party the day before, though her brother and sisters were in dutiful attendance. James had found himself a little disappointed, as tales of her beauty had spread far and wide. Unfortunately, so did rumors of her difficult, bold and rebellious nature. She’d seen many suitors in the past several years, many of them James’s own friends, and had rejected each and every one of them, often with deliberate cruelty. Or, so he’d been told, though he suspected there were a few instances of bruised pride at work. Her refusal seemed to have the opposite effect the princess clearly desired, which was to put an end to the marriage proposals

altogether. Instead, her ironclad resolve to stay unwed seemed to bring more and more suitors in droves.

“King James of Vallemont! Good afternoon!” King Pollux’s voice boomed from the entrance behind where James and his father stood. They spun toward the noise as the king entered through the enormous grand entrance of the throne room with his son and eventual heir, Julian. The sun shone directly on them as they entered, so James could only make out their silhouettes as he squinted. Julian’s frame dwarfed his father, who was not a short man by any means. The prince was, simply put, a behemoth. Towering over even James himself, who stood at least a head taller than either king, he was an impressive sight to behold. As they approached, James was forced to crane his neck to meet Julian’s eyes.

Height aside, Julian was built of lean muscle and naturally tanned skin deepened further by the seemingly endless supply of sunlight in his country. He wore cloth trousers of a deep blue that draped and billowed out along the thigh and tightened just under the knee with thin leather cords tied around the calf, and leather boots that hit just over the ankle. He wore a simple sleeveless tunic shirt with deep arm holes that showed much of the skin of his trunk, held together at the waist with another thin cord made of leather. James wondered just how much fabric and cord must have been used to make Julian’s clothes.

James noticed Pollux watching him carefully. James' father said Pollux was solid and ruthless as a bull in his youth, an expert in war and swordsmanship, but like most kings, he'd become soft and content with more time spent on the throne. He was dressed formally for the daytime, with jewelry and adornments on his wrists, fingers, and belt, as well as a heavy looking gold circlet nested atop his balding gray head. He was pale in comparison to Julian, and his older daughters' coloring favored his.

"We came to informally greet my sister's latest suitor," Julian joked good-naturedly, "It's good to see you again, James. I trust you slept well." The prince's voice was deep, but he was far more soft-spoken than his outward appearance would suggest. His jaw was well-defined and clean-shaven, and his green eyes were set deep beneath two thick black brows that matched the color of the neat, close-cropped curls on his head. He didn't resemble his older sisters at all. In fact, their only shared trait seemed to be their striking eyes, all identical to their father's.

Pollux trained those eyes on James now. "You must be more than ready to meet our Little Tyrant!" He clapped his plump hands together, the thick gold rings clanging together as he did.

"That's what you call her? Little Tyrant?" James guffawed, earning himself a pointed look from his father. Pollux said the nickname with obvious affection- it

would be wise not to insult him. He may have fallen victim to time and gravity, but James guessed his daughter's famed temper had to have come from somewhere.

"She's also called the Jewel of Beiramar," Julian rolled his eyes and grinned, "perhaps that pleases you more?"

"No, no, the first one is, er, lovely too," James tried to backtrack before he managed to offend either man too grievously. His father rolled his eyes as he witnessed James struggle to engage in conversation. He was sweating in his layers of clothing, unnerved by the size of his potential wife's twin brother, and acting like a stuttering buffoon. James raised an eyebrow at his father- it wasn't like he was providing much help, anyway.

"Good," Julian lowered his voice, "because she hates it. Here's a little advice- don't call her that." He then slapped James on the back and chuckled, though James could tell he still wasn't in on the joke. Pollux laughed. Father laughed. James blinked, wishing he could sink into the floor.

"She'll be at the feast tonight, I promise, my boy." Pollux carried on the conversation and seemed oblivious to James's distress. In his country, a potential wife to a king was at the forefront of the welcoming party. She had failed to show herself, and to James, it felt insulting.

"I look forward to meeting her," James wasn't so sure, though, even as he spoke those words. What kind of woman had Pollux raised?

Chapter 2

Cilla burst from the surface of the water, gasping for air. Droplets flung everywhere, and small waves surged over the edge of the stone bath, splashing to the floor.

“Oh for the love of- Cilla! Nearly twenty and playing in the bath like a child!” Greta, Cilla’s governess, tut-tutted and scowled as she attempted to dodge the sudden flow of water across the stone tiles. Cilla sunk partially beneath the water again, up to just below her eyes, and watched Greta. Greta’s wrinkled skin twitched around her mouth, and Cilla knew she was trying desperately not to laugh.

“Oh, Greta,” Cilla wiped the water away from her mouth as she sat up straight in the bath, “I know I’m too old to play in the bath. Sometimes it’s just nice to pretend to be little again. Don’t you miss it?”

“I most certainly do not,” Greta’s smile betrayed her, “your nickname didn’t appear out of thin air, you know. You made me go gray far too early. I was a radiant young thing when you were born.”

“You’re still radiant,” Cilla poked her lower lip out, “and silver suits you.”

Greta snorted in disagreement, but patted her tightly pinned curls anyway. Mavreen entered the room holding a small amber bottle with a cork. She paused and glanced down at the steadily growing puddle of perfumed water on the floor.

“Oh, hello, Mav!” Cilla sat up further in the tub and reached out to her young handmaiden. Mavreen smiled and held up the bottle in triumph, her feet making wet slapping sounds as she neared.

“This was the bottle you wanted, wasn’t it?” She asked eagerly, holding it out.

“Yes! This one’s my favorite smell,” she grasped the bottle in her wet hands and watched the oil inside slosh from side to side. Mavreen nodded and took the bottle back, pouring a small amount into her hand and positioning herself behind Cilla. She began to massage the oil into Cilla’s wet hair, her nails just the perfect length to scratch and massage her scalp. The oil smelled sweet and spicy at the same time. It was a blend from the perfumery in the capital square, made specifically for the princess. Cilla could hear her other handmaidens and ladies-in-waiting rush and bustle around in the next room, but she preferred to bathe without a large crowd. For a handmaiden, it was considered an honor to help the princess bathe, especially one as young as Mavreen. It was no secret that she was Cilla’s favorite.

“Your mother and I were just talking about what I was like as a child,” Cilla’s eyes were closed, but she directed her words at Mavreen.

“Oh?” Mav continued working her fingers through the thick black strands of Cilla’s hair.

“Yes,” Cilla feigned another pout, “I remember when you were still in Greta’s belly. I was so excited to meet you, Mav. I used to put my cheek to Greta’s middle and try to feel you move.” Mav’s fingers paused for a moment.

“Really?” She sounded surprised, “You never told me that, Mother.” Cilla opened her eyes and looked up at Mavreen, who wrinkled her eyebrows in confusion.

“I suppose you did, Cilla,” Greta chuckled, “I’d forgotten about that.” Mav made a “hmm” sound as she dipped a large gourd into the bathwater and began to rinse the oil from Cilla’s hair.

Greta marched over and dipped her finger in the water, “It’s cooling down. Time to get out, Cilla. You’ve wasted enough time in the bath today. You don’t want to be late to meet King James!”

Cilla groaned and pulled herself up into a standing position in the tub, swinging one leg over to stand on the woven mat beneath to absorb the water. “I really, really do want to be late. By about a hundred years.”

“Oh, Cilla. Stop it,” Greta approached and wrapped her in a thick white sheet to dry her off. With a smaller sheet, she began to twist and squeeze the excess water from Cilla’s hair.

“Come on, come on,” Greta, with her hands still firmly around her dark mane, guided Cilla through the door that connected the bathing room to her bedchamber.

There were four handmaidens scurrying around her room, making preparations for the night. When Cilla entered, they all stopped and descended upon her; one reaching for her hair, another taking hold of her chin and examining the skin of her face, and two others pulling away the sheet covering her body and whisking it away so she stood, bare, as they inspected her. Cilla sighed.

“Well, get on with it then,” She raised her arms straight out to the sides as they helped her into a silk robe the color of seafoam, embroidered with fish of every shape and size in sparkling golden thread. Even Cilla had to admit it was beautiful. It was a gift from the silk shop in town- the owner constantly referred to Cilla as her muse, despite Cilla’s lack of interest in gowns and fabric. Cilla’s handmaidens tied the matching silk ribbon around her waist and the robe draped to the floor, the train dragging behind her as she was led to the vanity. She sat down and allowed them to work. She tried to keep her lips from pursing in annoyance, but she didn’t quite succeed.

She’d been through this primping process more times than she could count, and it didn’t get any less unbearably boring than the previous time. With every new suitor that came to call, the process seemed longer and her servants seemed to

work harder to make her look better. With her repeated refusals of the proposals, Cilla had hoped that everyone would slowly begin to give up, but instead it seemed to have the opposite effect.

“Which perfume, Your Highness?” One handmaiden, Aurelia, raised two bottles. Without a word, Cilla pointed to the one she held in her left hand. It was the same bottle that Mavreen had gone into town to acquire.

“I thought you might pick that one,” Aurelia said with a grin, “if nothing else, you’re a creature of habit, Your Highness.” Aurelia was only a few years her senior, and had been married for quite some time. If Cilla remembered correctly, her husband had fought alongside Father in battle before she was even born. Cilla tried not to shudder as she realized how old her husband actually was. She wanted to ask if she’d chosen that marriage, or been forced into it. She felt guilty about her privilege to say, “No” over and over again.

“Hold still for a moment,” Cilla heard Greta’s voice behind her, and the metallic clank of the metal brush as she picked it up from the vanity.

Greta began to slowly work out the tangles from the bath, alternating between her fingers and the bristles of the brush to smooth down Cilla’s dark locks. Greta was the only person she trusted to brush her hair besides herself, because everyone else who did it yanked the brushes and combs through without any regard for Cilla’s scalp. Cilla allowed herself to relax, feeling her head pulled

back and forth between each stroke of the brush and Greta's fingers. She closed her eyes and could feel her face relaxing into a smile.

"Excited to meet King James, Your Highness?" Cilla started when Helen, another handmaiden who had been massaging scented oil onto both her legs, piped up. She must've noticed Cilla's smile. Cilla pulled her face back into a mask of indifference.

"No," was Cilla's blunt response.

"I hear he's quite handsome," Helen leaned in with a conspiratorial whisper. Cilla raised her eyebrows. That's all she'd heard since the Vallemontians had arrived. Was there anything more to him?

"Mav," Cilla called across her bedroom to her favorite handmaiden, who was picking through Cilla's jewelry chest for something Greta had sent her after.

"Yes, Your Highness?" Mavreen only referred to her by her formal title in front of the other handmaidens. When they were alone, she was just Cilla.

"Is King James as handsome as they say?" Cilla knew she could count on Mav to deliver the truth. She was notorious for being blunt and straightforward, especially for someone so young.

"I suppose," she began nonchalantly and raised a jewel-encrusted choker to the light for a moment, "if you like blond curls and dark blue eyes and a jaw so

sharp it could cut glass.” The last part of the sentence she delivered as a girlish squeal. The other handmaidens followed suit.

“I saw him in the hallway and he’s so tall and his shoulders are broad!” Said Helen.

“Well, *I* saw him in the courtyard talking with Julian and his voice is deep and soft!” Swooned Aurelia.

“*I* talked to him for several minutes,” Mavreen crossed her arms proudly. The other girls peppered her with questions, and Mav held court like a queen herself for a while.

“Girls, we have a princess who’s not even close to being ready. Quit squawking like hens and get back to work!” Greta clapped her hands and the handmaidens dispersed.

Greta had just finished brushing Cilla’s hair when there was a knock at the door. She clapped her hands together and grinned, “That must be your dress for tonight, Cilla.”

Cilla frowned, “I thought I would just wear one of the ones I already have. I don’t need a new dress for every prince.”

“I know,” Greta said, “but your father wanted something special so he contacted the dressmaker. I think you’ll like this one, I’ve already had a peek at it.”

“We’ll see,” Cilla mused. Greta crossed the room and retrieved the dress, turning her back so that Cilla couldn’t peek, and stowed it away in the wardrobe with the rest of her gowns. Helen and Aurelia finished applying the oil to Cilla’s arms, legs, and back, while Mav and Greta began to style her hair, now mostly dry. Cilla refused the ridiculous pinned up hairstyles her sisters liked right away.

“Can we at least twist or braid the front of your hair away from your face? We do want him to *see* your face. That is the point, dear,” Greta frowned.

“I have no interest in a prince who only cares about my looks,” Cilla knew she sounded petulant, but she meant it.

“Cilla, you have plenty to offer besides your looks but you’re a beautiful girl... despite your best efforts,” Greta’s voice was teasing.

“They don’t call you a jewel for no reason,” nodded Mav. Cilla narrowed her eyes at Mav, who raised her hands palm-out in surrender and laughed.

“Fine,” Cilla relented, “You may twist a few pieces back. But leave the rest out.” Mav and Greta descended on her hair, and moments later she was done. All that was left was to get dressed.

Mav ran to take the gown from its hiding spot and ordered Cilla to close her eyes as they helped her into it. Cilla obliged. She felt the momentary coolness of the air when they removed her robe, and then felt them pull the gown over her body and her arms over her head. Something clasped at her throat, and she felt lots

of fabric, but it wasn't heavy. She could feel no fabric on her back at all. They tied it together at the base of her spine and Cilla heard them step away and gasp.

“Can I see, now?” Cilla was fidgeting, impatient. She felt them take hold of her arms and lead her across the room. The fabric pulled behind her, so she could feel that there was a train on this gown.

“Alright, Cilla, open your eyes,” Greta's voice rang with barely-contained excitement.

Cilla opened her eyes and regarded herself in the large mirror leaning against the wall by the window, “It is a lovely gown.”

She was reluctant to admit it, but the truth was in the soft folds of fabric. The front of the gown had a high neck that gathered at her throat, held together with a heavy golden choker encrusted with jewels. The fabric was dyed with various pale blues, greens and purples, so light they almost looked white, and they faded into each other. Every time she moved, the light caught it in a different way and brought out a different color. She twisted to see the back and saw that she was correct- there was no fabric covering her back, and the train started at the base of her spine and flooded out far behind her.

Greta clicked her tongue disapprovingly as she inspected Cilla's exposed back.

“It would be far more stunning if you didn’t have all of these little scratches and bruises on your back, Cilla.”

“So I’ve heard,” Cilla rolled her eyes, “do what you can with it. I don’t care.” Greta sent Aurelia back to the vanity to fetch a metal container, filled with powder the same shade of brown as Cilla’s skin. Greta stuck one finger inside of it and began patting it over small sections of Cilla’s back. Cilla winced as she packed the powder over the fresh scratches. It stung.

“Good as it’s going to get, I suppose. Your hair should cover the worst of it. You’re ready,” Greta smoothed out the front of the gown, and Helen brought Cilla’s sandals to her and tied the leather straps around her ankles to secure them tightly.

“As I’ll ever be, I suppose,” Cilla shrugged, looking at her reflection again. She didn’t recognize herself.

The great hall looked different at night. Or was it the crowd of people that hadn’t been there this morning, wandering about, sitting at the long feast tables that had been brought in that afternoon? The sun had long since set behind the hills to the west, and James waited impatiently with a goblet of wine in his hand for the princess to make her appearance. He hadn’t seen Julian yet, either, but Pollux was already enjoying his feast, swinging around his own cup of wine, singing along to

the plucking of the string instruments and the drums. It was easy to see how the king had become soft and round as he aged- James had witnessed him sampling several desserts before the feast had even begun.

The music stopped, and James glanced around. One by one, everyone turned their eyes to the ornate golden staircase behind the King's and perpetually empty Queen's thrones.

"This must be it," James took a healthy gulp of his wine and set the goblet down on a nearby table, he made a face. He hated wine, but Pollux had insisted he partake. He made his way toward the staircase, feeling nervous with the anticipation of meeting the infamous Cilla.

The platform where the thrones stood was empty, save for Julian who seemed to have appeared from thin air at the base of the steps. He had changed into more formal attire than earlier that day, and stood with his feet planted a shoulder's length apart and hands clasped together behind his back, waiting for his sister to descend.

She appeared from behind a column. Her dress was white- no, was it blue? Perhaps it was the color of lavender petals. The torchlight from the sconces on the walls cast a different light with every step she took. It fluttered out to the sides like wings as she made her way down. When she reached the bottom of the staircase,

she grasped Julian's outstretched forearm and they turned to face the crowd, who dutifully clapped and cheered.

She was directly in front of James now. He blinked, and blinked again. Surrounded by a halo of inky black hair was a face so striking no portrait could ever do it justice. Cilla's forehead was high and clear, save for a few rogue curls that fell upon it, partially obscuring two thick, dark brows. Her cheekbones stood out sharply as her brother's did. She had a fine and straight nose that perched just above plump, heart-shaped lips. They twitched into the slightest frown when her eyes met his. Her eyes were dark, so dark they almost matched her hair, surrounded by long and feathery lashes.

"Your Majesty. It's an honor to finally meet you, King James," Cilla was tall for a woman, only standing about a head and a half shorter than James. She was almost comically dwarfed by her twin's size. Without a word, Julian took Cilla's hand and held it out to James. Sensing some sort of ritual, he outstretched his own arm, bent at the elbow, allowing Cilla to take his. Judging from her compliance, James guessed that he had done the right thing. Cilla looked none too happy being passed back and forth, but didn't speak a word.

"Hello," James offered a quick bow, noting that she didn't curtsy, but instead kept her chin tipped high and looked him directly in the eye, "Please, call me James."

“James,” Cilla blinked, and seemed to be calculating something, “I’m sure you’ve quite figured it out already, but my name is Cilla.”

“I’ve been waiting quite some time to meet you,” James winced as soon as the words escaped his lips. He sounded like an eager boy, not a king looking to make a solid political marriage.

“Have you?” Cilla sounded distracted. She glanced around and lowered her voice. “We have an audience.”

James’s eyes followed hers. Everyone’s gaze was on them. His skin prickled as he noticed the hundreds of eyes trying to pierce his skin.

“And now you must understand my absence earlier today. This is all terribly uncomfortable,” She murmured, leaning in so that he could hear her. She smelled faintly of spices mixed with something sweet, like berries. The smell lingered after she pulled away.

Cilla turned to Julian and looked at him, expressionless. He nodded and raised his hands, signaling for the band to resume playing. Slowly, the crowd began shuffling back to where they’d previously been, leaving Cilla and James still standing on the steps. James shifted uncomfortably. Cilla cleared her throat.

“Would you... like to meet my sisters? They’ve just arrived” She glanced down toward the floor as she said it. The impression he’d gotten from her father

and brother this afternoon was that she was headstrong and confident. The princess before him was acting meek and unenthused.

“I’d love to,” James tried to make his voice as polite as possible, “I didn’t get a chance to speak with them at the welcoming ceremony this morning.”

Cilla, still holding his arm, guided him toward the enormous carved doorway at the entrance of the Great Hall. As he neared it, he could see more fish, shells, and topless women with tails carved into the light, sun-bleached wood.

“Your Majesty,” The taller, lighter-haired sister addressed him first, followed by the slightly smaller one with the darker gold hair.

“Your Highnesses,” James bowed as they curtsied. Cilla observed, looking bored. She disengaged herself from James’ arm and introduced them.

“Ursa, the eldest, and Oona, second eldest.” There was no joy in Cilla’s voice. She did not smile at her sisters, or at James.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Prince James,” Ursa spoke first again. Oona and Cilla both seemed to withdraw and shrink when in Ursa’s presence. A Beiramarite custom, James guessed.

“Please, just James,” He gave a short bow. Cilla’s eyes began to dart around the party, like an animal trying to escape a predator.

“Well then, James, doesn’t our sister look lovely this evening?” Ursa reached out and clasped one of Cilla’s hands in her own. Cilla noticeably stiffened.

“Oh, Cilla, you aren’t still sore about this afternoon, are you?” Ursa chuckled, as if she were talking to a small, petulant child.

“Ursa, this isn’t appropriate conversation-” Oona muttered, but was interrupted.

“Cilla is upset that I scolded her for sparring, with *wooden swords* of all things, with our brother.” Ursa waved at Oona dismissively. Ursa was clearly used to being in a position of power as eldest sister.

“It’s just not ladylike,” she continued, “she should be concerning herself with finding a husband, not impossible dreams of becoming a *soldier*.” Oona, though she didn’t speak up again, at least looked appropriately scandalized by Ursa’s boldness and readiness to humiliate her youngest sister.

Surprised, James turned to Cilla, whose face was flushed in all shades of bright red- with anger or embarrassment, he couldn’t discern. “Is that true?”

“I’m well aware that I will never be a soldier,” Cilla responded quietly, through gritted teeth, “but I like to fight.” She glared at Ursa. “I don’t want to be a weak, helpless woman.”

Ursa raised her eyebrows, “And this is why you’ll never find a husband.”

James was shocked. He had never seen women so openly disrespect one another before.

“If I may intrude,” James could hear that his own voice was terse, “I think Cilla *does* look beautiful tonight, more beautiful than *every single woman in this room*. Any man, myself included, would be struck with good fortune to be matched with her.”

Ursa bared her teeth, attempting a grin, her eyes narrowed. She looked almost snakelike in that moment, “I apologize if I have offended His Majesty with my boldness.”

“I accept your contrition,” James’ voice hardened, “but it’s your sister who truly deserves the apology.” Ursa’s lips flattened into an angry white line.

“Cilla,” She tilted her head but didn’t break eye contact with James, “please accept my sincerest apologies.” James offered Cilla his arm.

“Leave us,” he commanded. Oona and Ursa stiffened, but pivoted on their heels- one looking uncomfortable, and the other pale with fury. James stifled a laugh as they moved away.

“I didn’t need you to do that,” Cilla sounded surprised, her dark eyebrows knitted together.

“I know you didn’t,” James offered her a small smile, “but you’re welcome, anyway.”

Cilla’s lips twitched upward- almost into a smile.

James looked like he wanted to say something more, but instead turned and greeted Pollux, who was quickly approaching the pair.

“Cilla!” Father grasped her shoulders and held her out at arm’s length, looking her over. Cilla felt the first genuine smile she’d felt in hours fighting its way across her mouth.

“Hello, Father,” She reached up to her shoulder and placed her hand over his, feeling the hefty sapphire ring he always wore on his forefinger.

“How is my favorite daughter?” Cilla looked into her father’s eyes and lied.

“I’m fine, Father.”

“Good, good!” Pollux, never bothering to look beyond the surface, left it alone as she knew he would.

“It looks as though you two are getting along well?” Father posed it as a question, but Cilla knew him well enough to understand what answer he wanted to hear.

“Of course,” Cilla turned and pulled a happy expression in James’s direction. James looked bewildered beyond measure. Cilla didn’t blame him.

“Cilla has introduced me to your other two daughters,” there was an unmistakable edge to James’s voice. Cilla raised an eyebrow in warning. *Stay out of it, James.*

“Oh, dear,” Father’s mouth twitched beneath his bushy mustache, “has Ursa been cruel to you again?”

“Father,” Cilla sighed, “it’s fine. You know how she is. It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“I’ll be having another word with her,” Pollux waved her off, “she knows better than to subject esteemed guests to her silliness.” Cilla knew better than to argue further. On the other hand, Ursa should’ve known that her meddling would result in a reprimand eventually.

“Ursa can be difficult,” Pollux explained, “and Oona is a sweet girl. I married their mother for politics. I married Cilla and Julian’s mother for love. I suppose I haven’t been as fair amongst my children as I could’ve.”

Cilla was taken aback until the smell of wine on her father’s breath reached her nose. Father became oddly sentimental when he’d been partaking in merriment.

“Twice a widower, never to love again...” Father trailed off, clapping a stunned-looking James on the shoulder.

“James and I were just going to walk through the gardens,” Cilla backed away with a tiny curtsy, “we’ll be back shortly, Father.”

“Very good, dear,” Father blinked, his eyes glassing over. He seemed to have forgotten his ranting already.

“Thank you,” James looked grateful, as he tried to keep up with her steps. The din of the feast had become so loud that Cilla needed to both escape the noise and her family. Julian, the only one she could stand to be around, was nowhere to be found. He was impartial to parties and celebration, as was Cilla, and tended to slip away if he was able to do so unnoticed. It was an impressive feat, given his size.

“It’s no problem at all,” Cilla shrugged, tugging his sleeve and pulling him into a quiet corridor. All at once, the sounds of the party muffled down to a distant murmur. She could hear every one of James’s soft breaths as they stood beneath a wall of portraits.

“Is that one a portrait of you?” James pointed up, directly above their heads.

“No,” Cilla’s voice was soft when she answered, “that was my mother.”

“You look just like her, although now that I look at it, she’s certainly darker than you are.”

“She was. Her name was Ileona. Ileona the Black, they called her.”

“Because of... her skin?”

“No, James,” she barked out a laugh, “her hair.”

She turned to face him. The way he stood, with his neck craned and his mouth slightly open, he looked like a child. His golden hair fell away from his

forehead, giving her a better look at his face. He truly was as handsome as her handmaidens had gossiped about.

“She was beautiful,” was all James said.

“She was.”

“Do you remember her?” James turned to face her. Cilla swallowed.

“Yes. Well, almost. I remember how she smelled, sometimes, if I really try. Her voice was deep, for a woman’s, I remember that. I have very few memories of her alone- she was always by my father’s side. She would sing me to sleep and rub my back.” Cilla struggled to pull the memories forward in her head.

“She sounds lovely.” James continued to gaze up at the portrait.

Cilla narrowed her eyes. “Are you always so... formal?”

“Well, no, I suppose I’m not. First meetings are always awkward, aren’t they?” James shrugged. Cilla shook her head.

“Every other suitor has been much better with pleasantries than you are.”

“I suppose I’m sorry, then?”

“That won’t be necessary. It makes you seem genuine.”

“Oh?”

“Or, it would, if I didn’t know what you were here for.”

“And what’s that? What am I here for?”

“A political marriage. Your father and advisors seek access to our trade ports. The most direct route to the sea.”

“That’s what my father wants, yes.” James fiddled with a button at his wrist. He didn’t meet her eyes.

“And what do you want?” Cilla took a step closer. She was challenging him. James looked deep in thought. He was silent for a long while. Cilla didn’t interrupt. Finally he broke the silence. “I don’t know.”

Cilla blinked and shook her head. “That’s not a very good answer.”

“I know.”

“Are you marrying for politics, or aren’t you?” She pushed, impatient.

“I can’t exactly answer that, can I? We hardly know each other. We’ve only just met.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Cilla nodded, “Father says he fell in love with my mother the moment he met her. It took him years to finally fall in love with his first wife.”

“I don’t believe either of those to be very realistic,” James shrugged, “maybe somewhere in between those two would be alright.”

“I don’t know if it even exists,” Cilla walked by James and her mother’s portrait in order to continue to the garden. She could hear him following after.

“There’s just as good a chance either way,” James agreed. Cilla hadn’t expected that. Her other suitors had been quick to try to woo her. It didn’t seem as though James was trying to impress her at all.

They walked out into the garden. It had cooled down since the daytime, but still the air was hot and hung heavy in the air. The air tasted of salt, in a most familiar and comforting way for Cilla. She could see that James was struggling with the heat.

“Maybe, if you Vallemontians didn’t wear so many layers, you’d be a bit more comfortable.”

“If your people wore what you wear, or rather *don’t* wear, to my country, you’d likely freeze to death.” James retorted dryly. He wiped the sweat from his brow. Cilla looked on, amused.

“Is it quite cold in Vallemont?” She was genuinely curious.

“This time of year, it is, which is likely why I’m suffering so,” James chuckled.

“I don’t suppose I’d like the cold,” Cilla mused. She liked the warm breeze on her skin.

“Well, it isn’t *always* cold. My country has a winter. Doesn’t yours?”

Cilla’s arm made a sweeping motion. “You’re looking at it.” James made a choking noise.

“You mean to tell me,” His eyes grew wide, “that it gets *hotter* than this?”

Cilla laughed, “Unfortunately for you, it does. Although I suppose you won’t be here to see the changing of the seasons.”

“I suppose. But then, perhaps you’ll be in Vallemont instead,” James was intently inspecting a flower as he said this, “we get snow. Lots of it.”

“Terrible marriage proposal,” Cilla rolled her eyes, “just terrible. You must try harder than *that*.” She laughed, despite herself.

“I intend to,” James looked serious, “In fact, I have a gift for you.”

“I know. A horse.” Cilla made her voice sound as bored as possible. She didn’t yet find James to be as insufferable as her other suitors, but she still wouldn’t make it easy for him.

“No, Princess, not just any horse.” He offered Cilla his arm. She took it, curling her slender brown fingers around the soft velvet of his shirt. He really was dressed inappropriately for a Beiramarite winter, and she tried to hide a grin by turning her face toward the flowers in the moonlit garden.

“Yes, keep laughing,” James muttered, “tomorrow I’m going to get one of those tunics with the sides missing that Julian wears.”

“That would be wise,” Cilla fought to keep a straight face.

They walked in silence toward the courtyard. Cilla watched as James’ eyes darted around as they walked. He seemed to be taking in as many of his

surroundings as possible. She wondered, despite the heat, whether or not he liked it here in Beiramar.

“Your country is quite beautiful,” James seemed to read her mind. He didn’t look at her, still taking in the willows and the short, rounded sculptures made of shells and marble in the garden.

“Thank you,” Cilla nodded. She took great pride in Beiramar. She wasn’t sure how to talk to him. Usually by now her suitors had fallen to their knees, confessing false undying love and begging her to marry them. James seemed content to exchange awkward pleasantries all night long, and she didn’t know how to respond.

“Now, about your gift...” James stopped her at the very entrance of the courtyard. She could hear the low murmur of voices, as though the entire party had been moved outdoors to the entrance of the palace. All this for a horse? She felt her lips flatten into a firm line. Gifting a horse was no grand gesture.

“Yes, the *horse*,” Cilla resumed her cold façade.

James looked confused, “Yes, about the horse, it’s not quite what- Cilla, wait.” He called after her, but Cilla marched into the courtyard toward the semicircle crowd of nobles and royalty assembled within. She could see white equine ears twitching above their heads. *Of course he’d think a white horse is what a princess would want.*

“Cilla,” James called again. She could hear him jogging to keep up with her, but she didn’t break her determined stride. The crowd parted for her and she found herself staring down a massive horse, white as the sun-bleached shells on the shore. This was no horse for pleasant, leisurely afternoon riding on the shore. This horse was packed with muscle, and had long, strong legs meant for miles of galloping.

Cilla gasped and stopped in her tracks. “What... what is this?”

“I tried to tell you,” James threw his hands up in exasperation, “she isn’t just a regular horse.”

“That, dear sister,” Julian sidestepped his sister to get closer to the horse to examine it, “is a war horse.” Cilla turned to look at James. The crowd of partygoers ooh-ed and ahh-ed, and there was polite applause.

“Has she seen battle?” Her hands hung uselessly at her sides. She didn’t know what to do.

“Plenty of battle. She’s still quite young, and her previous rider decided it was time to retire before she did,” James nodded. He kept his face carefully neutral.

“A marvelous gift!” Cilla’s father clapped his hands together. Cilla started- she’d forgotten her father was even in the area. He was becoming more of a loud and ridiculous old man as he aged. And he was certainly aging- his beard had more

and more gray, it seemed, every time she saw him. His belly grew rounder and his rings seemed to fight tighter and tighter on his ever-expanding fingers. His skin crinkled and collapsed around his eyes and mouth every time he pulled his face into a toothy smile. Who would be there to look after him if she married and left her country, like her sisters? He drank ale more than water and ate only savory, oily foods as of late.

“Yes,” Cilla moved toward James, slowly, “a marvelous gift.”

“Have some wine, my dear,” Father thrust his goblet at her as he moved in to get a better look at the horse. Cilla raised her eyebrows.

“Don’t you like wine?” James inquired.

“He’s never allowed me to drink wine before,” Cilla responded skeptically, taking a tentative sip, “I’ve only had a taste here and there. It’s sweet.”

“Yes, until you’re singing and stumbling and retching on the floor,” James chuckled. Cilla smirked.

“You don’t like to drink wine? Or even ale?”

“No,” James wrinkled his nose in distaste, “but don’t let me stop you. Enjoy.”

“Thank you,” She took a bigger sip, “and thank you for the gift.”

“You’re quite welcome. I heard your nameday is approaching. If not a betrothal gift, at least accept this horse to honor the day you were born.” James bowed. Cilla raised her eyebrows.

“How did you know all of these things? How did you know I would like a war horse?” Cilla’s voice was skeptical, but her mouth was grinning. James laughed.

“Well, Princess, you’re not the only one gathering information on your potential betrothed,” James shrugged, “I simply learned from the mistakes of my predecessors. Or, at least, I tried to.”

“Oh, did you?” Cilla laughed, crossing her arms over her chest. She tilted her head, and her hair fell over her shoulder. James’ eyes darted toward the lock of hair quickly, then flicked back up to meet her eyes.

“I did,” he puffed out his chest out, prideful but jesting, “they offered you things they thought princesses would like.” The crowd began to disperse, with a few people hanging back to continue to marvel at the horse.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. I’ve quite more jewelry and seasonally inappropriate gowns than I know what to do with, now.” Cilla shrugged.

“But they each made the same slight error.”

“Oh? And what error did all of my previous suitors make?” Cilla was amused.

“They didn’t know what kind of princess they were dealing with.”

Cilla laughed. “You make me sound like a…” She waved her hand, searching for the right word. Her head was beginning to feel light. The tip of her nose seemed to be going numb. She giggled. James looked at her with an amused expression.

“Tyrant?” James chuckled, “so I’ve heard.”

“So you’ve heard I was a difficult child,” Cilla muttered, reaching up to the horse’s neck. It was even smoother than the fine velvet of James’ shirt, and the horse leaned in to nudge her hand with her nose. She grinned.

“And now?” James, with his arms crossed, watched her with a measured gaze.

“I suppose I do still have the capacity to slip back into my old… tempers,” Cilla laughed, but the underlying message was clear. A warning.

“I suppose that’s well within your rights,” James shrugged, and turned to one of the stable hands who was still holding the horse firmly by the lead, “Please bring Adella back to the stable. She’ll be staying there from now on.”

Cilla smiled. “Her name is Adella? Who named her that?”

“Our old commander,” he chuckled, “he named her after his *wife*.”

Cilla erupted into laughter, “His wife? How did she feel about that?”

“She wasn’t pleased, that I can say for certain,” James grinned.

“And what about me? What would you name after me, if I were your wife?”

Cilla teased, reaching out to nudge his arm.

“Something spectacular. Something no king has ever named after his queen before. If you accept my offer, of course.” He shrugged.

“You haven’t officially offered,” She retorted.

“Well, Princess,” James reached out and grasped the inky black lock of her hair that had fallen over her collarbone. Cilla froze. No other suitor had ever been so bold as to touch even a single hair on her head. He flicked it behind her and it settled in with the other curls. “I’ve brought you a war horse.”

“Yes? And?”

“There’s your offer.”

“And if I accept?” Cilla slurred and raised an eyebrow.

“Vallemont is the land of the mountain valleys. Naturally, I shall name my country’s greatest mountain after my queen.”

Chapter 3

It was still dark when Cilla awoke. She wasn’t in her gown anymore, and couldn’t remember when her handmaidens had changed her into her sleeping gown. Her pulse pounded painfully in her head past her ears. She felt as though she would be sick at any moment. Her candles had been blown out, or gone out on

their own. The only illumination came from the moon, peeking white light through the windows.

“Ah, yes,” Cilla massaged her temples with her fingers as she sat up in bed. Father had allowed her to drink wine for the first time. He never allowed her to consume it before this. He was of the opinion that it was unbecoming for a Lady, and especially a Princess, to become drunk. Especially in public. She’d snuck some from her brother’s cup once or twice, but always out of Father’s eyesight, and never in the quantity she’d consumed. She was certain that he’d be quite upset with her in the morning, but he was so full of wine himself it was possible that he may not even remember it.

It wasn’t morning yet- By the placement of the moon, she guessed that she had a few more hours until dawn arrived. She swung her legs over the side of her bed until her bare feet made contact with the cool tile floor. The heat had died down considerably, and it was finally a comfortable temperature.

She stood. She could feel the room swaying around her. Or was it her body that rocked back and forth like the willows beneath her window? Slowly, Cilla lurched toward the arched doorway leading to the balcony. She gained her balance as she closed the distance, and leaned against the bannister. The party was still going in the great hall, spilling out into the gardens where she and James had

walked alone not too long before. There was laughter and shouting, mostly men, as the women tended to retire earlier.

Cilla squinted, looking for Julian, or even James. She saw her father with a noble's wife in his lap. She rolled her eyes and laughed. *Dirty old man*. She found her brother and James walking side by side in the garden, slightly away from the party. She was too far away to hear what was being said, but Julian was leaning down to speak quietly to James, whose head bobbed up and down as he nodded to the words.

Cilla tried to call out their names, but trying to shout proved too much for her, and she was forced to empty her stomach contents over the side of her balcony. Wiping her mouth, she turned to look at where the two men stood. They were both looking in her direction. James looked uncomfortable while Julian shook with laughter. She couldn't hear him, but his laugh was as low as his voice. It rumbled like thunder- she knew it from memory. She lurched back into her bedchamber and fell back onto the bed. The room spun.

The next time Cilla awoke, the sun was just creeping out through her windows. Greta had bustled in and was running about like a beheaded chicken, tut-tutting and tsk-ing as Cilla groaned.

“May I have another hour, Greta, *please*? My head...”

“You may *not* have one more moment in that bed, child, get up at once and get in the bath,” Greta’s voice was firm. She was in a mood, and Cilla knew better than to push back.

“Greta, I’m sorry if I made a fool of myself, but I’ve never had wine before. Have I not suffered enough?” Cilla pulled herself up into a sitting position, squinting at her governess. She felt her hair- it was rough and tangled like a bird’s nest. It would be a chore to untangle that mess.

“Bath, Cilla,” Greta didn’t humor her. Cilla sighed, stood, and trudged over to Greta.

“Please don’t be upset with me,” she bent down to place her head on Greta’s shoulder, “I feel ill enough as it is.”

“I suppose you have suffered enough,” Greta sighed, “but you truly do need a bath- you smell like a tavern drunk.” Cilla laughed and planted a kiss on Greta’s soft, slightly wrinkled cheek. She opened the door to her bathing room, where Mavreen was yawning. She grinned when she saw the state Cilla was in. She glared at her handmaiden, daring her to tease her.

“I wasn’t allowed to go to the feast last night, but I hear you were quite the entertainment,” Mav singsonged, pouring a scented oil into Cilla’s waiting bath.

“Quiet, you,” Cilla grumbled, pulling her nightgown from her shoulders. She let it drop to the floor and stepped out of it. Slowly, she began to climb into the tub.

“Oh, no!” Cilla howled, “it’s so cold! Can’t we warm it up just a little?”

“It’s scorching hot out already, and besides, this’ll wake you right up!” Mav pushed Cilla’s shoulders down until she landed on her bottom in the tub with a splash and a thud. Cilla shivered violently.

“Gods, this is awful,” Cilla slowly let her head slip beneath the water, “no wonder Father doesn’t like me to drink.”

When she was finished bathing, Cilla changed into a light gown, tied with leather straps that dragged behind her as she walked. She didn’t want to have to face her father, or their guests, but she had to sometime.

The halls were quiet, as they often were the morning after a feast. She knew the rest of the partygoers were nursing their own headaches and wounds. The sun had begun to bake the walls of the castle, and the servants were beginning to open the doors wide in order to let in the sea wind. They bowed and curtsied as she passed. She nodded her head in salutation.

The halls were quiet and still, but the kitchens were as busy as they always were, preparing breakfast for the many royals and nobles inside.

“Your Highness, what would you like this morning?” The head of the kitchen, an elderly man named Randall, was upon her as soon as she stepped through the door. It was oppressively hot in the kitchen, located in what she could only describe as the bowels of the castle.

“I’ll just have a few pieces of fruit for now,” she swallowed hard as a servant walked by her holding a plate piled high with meat. The smell almost caused her to retch. “I’m not feeling very well this morning.”

“As you wish, your highness,” Randall’s mustache twitched as he rounded up a medium-sized wooden bowl of small fruits, fresh from the palace gardens, and handed them to her. She smiled.

“Thank you, Randall,” she turned to leave as he bowed deeply at the waist.

Cilla popped one of the small fruits in her mouth as she continued on her walk through the castle. She was headed for the courtyard to have her breakfast in the sun, but she could hear that someone had beaten her to her spot. She heard voices, male voices. One of them was Julian’s, surely. She recognized his laugh. There was a clash of metal. It sounded like swordplay. Cilla drew closer, crushing the tiny fruit between her teeth and letting the juice roll over her tongue for a few moments before swallowing it and placing another into her mouth.

She peered around a pillar into the courtyard, where Julian and James were joking and lunging back and forth, play fighting with swords.

Real swords.

Cilla had never sparred with Julian with a real sword before, only a heavy wooden version. She felt ready to advance to a heavier weapon, but she was sure Julian and Father had been protective. That would explain why his stance was so

relaxed, rather than the controlled movements he performed when sparring with Cilla. He lunged and parried, stopping every so often to bat James' sword away with his. It was no question that Julian was the better swordsman. It was seen almost as a shame that Beiramar had experienced a thirty year peace, because Julian would have been invaluable in battle.

James noticed her first. He had made good on his promise to find an airy tunic like the one Julian wore, but he was still sweating profusely, and so early in the morning, too.

"Good morning, Your Highness," James bowed. Julian did not, as was their custom. He was the future king. She curtsied to him, then to Julian.

"Good morning, Your Majesty. Julian," Cilla was guarded.

"I trust you slept well," Julian's voice was level, not giving anything away, but his lips twitched upward, fighting a smirk. Cilla raised an eyebrow.

"Quite well, despite the heat. And you, James?" She turned to her suitor.

"Much better, once I availed myself of my heavy Vallemontian clothing last night," James responded casually. His face turned a bright shade of red, however, when he realized that his statement could have been taken the wrong way. Cilla fought to stifle a laugh.

“Yes, it’s probably best to wear what’s most comfortable in the countries you visit,” Cilla was growing bored of the pleasantries, but neither of the men had brought up her getting drunk the night before, and if they wouldn’t, she wouldn’t either.

“Are you feeling much better than you were last night?” James’ voice sounded innocent enough, but he was smirking the same way Julian.

“Oh, you two are like little old ladies, gossiping little hens!” Cilla stamped her foot and laughed. “It’s not fair that you both gang up on me this way!”

“My apologies,” James placed his hand over his heart, “Julian and I were merely passing the time while we waited for the rest of the palace’s patrons to awaken.”

“Passing the time at my expense, no doubt,” She huffed, but still offered them the bowl of fruit to share. They each took a handful and there was silence as they all chewed.

“So,” Cilla broke the silence, “was I awful last night? Be honest. I hardly remember a thing.”

“The king allowed you a glass of wine, I suspect because he’d had too many himself, and before we knew it you were dancing and swaying, singing along with the band,” Shrugged James.

“Off-key, might I add,” Julian snorted. Cilla glared at him. He was always merciless in his teasing.

“Stop being awful,” Cilla poked her bottom lip out in a frown, “you tease me too much, Julian. You’re worse than Ursa sometimes.”

“Oh, stop, Cilla. I’m sorry, you’re right,” Julian draped his arm over his sister’s shoulder. She narrowed her eyes at him, but let the issue go for the moment.

“I was hoping to take Adella for a ride today before it gets too hot,” Cilla squinted out toward the sea, “will both of you join me?”

“I’d love to, Dear sis, but I’ve got some politics to attend to with Father. James, I trust you’ll keep my sister in good company while I slave away in the king’s study?” Julian didn’t leave any room open for James to decline.

“It would be my pleasure,” James offered a small smile, “if Her Highness doesn’t mind having me for company this morning.”

“Well, perhaps another time then, brother. I wouldn’t mind your company at all, James,” She nodded, “especially since you know the horse better than I do, for now.”

“I’ll meet you at the stables in half an hour?” James bowed to the twins. Cilla curtsied and he took his leave.

Julian rounded on her when James was out of earshot. Cilla held up her hand.

“Don’t even start,” Cilla pulled her mouth into a taut line.

“I like him,” Julian grinned.

“Of course you do,” Cilla rolled her eyes, “he’s the only man besides you brave enough to tease me so brutally.”

“I grew up with sisters, can’t you at least let him stay and court you for a while longer? It’s so boring with just Father for company.” Julian pleaded.

“I suppose I’m not suitable company. Your own twin,” She huffed.

“Yes, in the womb. Sometimes I don’t want to be surrounded by sisters,” He raised a dark eyebrow.

“We shall see,” Cilla pursed her lips, “this will be the longest we’ve spent together. Hopefully I can still stand him by the time we get back to the palace.”

“I have faith,” Julian planted a kiss onto his sister’s forehead and began to walk away, “be good. Be *nice*.”

“I am nice!” Cilla called to his retreating back. “Julian! I *am* nice!”

“Of course you are,” He laughed, and waved as he rounded the corner.

James was late. Cilla had changed into brown, well-worn riding boots instead of her usual sandals. She tied the skirts of her light dress into a knot by her shins, in order to use her legs more easily while riding. She'd had her handmaidens braid her hair into a tight rope down her back so as not to hinder her. And now here she was, pacing back and forth in front of her new horse's stall, growing increasingly impatient. The good impression he'd left last night was quickly fading.

Cilla glanced up, hearing feet approaching. James appeared, carrying a basket. She looked at it, then to him.

"You're upset with me," James stopped in his tracks. How could he tell that? He barely knew her.

"I'm not," Cilla tried to smile, but it fell flat. She was just relieved that he'd shown up. That had been her real worry.

"You are. I'm sorry. I should've been on time," James looked genuinely contrite. Cilla felt a rush of guilt- they had the entire day to ride horses. Why give him a difficult time?

"It's fine, really. What's in that basket?" She gestured toward it. Cilla thought he blushed, but she couldn't be sure in the shade of the stables.

“I thought it might be nice to have a picnic. I asked the cooks in the kitchen what you liked to eat and they were scrambling to make it for you and I tried to get them to go faster but-”

“That’s very thoughtful. It’s a fine day for a picnic,” She patted his arm to calm him down.

“I’m glad. I’m afraid I lost track of time,” He looked at her with a sheepish expression. He was more a boy than a king, Cilla thought.

“Not to worry. Shall we get started? I admit, I’m a little nervous to mount Adella. She’s quite a bit larger than any other horse I have,” Cilla motioned toward the horse, who stared back at them with large black eyes like polished rocks from behind the stable door. She seemed calm, which was a good sign. Still, Cilla’s heart fluttered. She was going to ride a horse that had seen real battle.

“You mount her like any other horse. It just takes a little more maneuvering because she’s quite a bit larger than an average one,” James opened the stable door and began to lead Adella outdoors. The horse followed along without complaint.

“She seems quite agreeable, for a war horse,” Cilla remarked. James handed her the lead with a quizzical expression.

“Have you been in contact with many war horses?”

“Well, no,” She muttered, her face flushing.

“I’m sorry,” He ran a finger through his hair and went on to explain, “it’s just that horses used in battle are chosen not only for their size, but their temperament as well. A well-tempered horse is preferable for a soldier, because they take direction well.”

“Interesting,” Cilla murmured. She gazed up at her new horse. Two stable hands appeared and began to prepare Cilla’s saddle on Adella’s back. The white mare stood patient and stoic as they fastened the gilded leather saddle to her back and beneath her belly.

“May I help you?” James motioned toward the saddle.

“I assure you, James, I am a capable rider,” Cilla insisted. She gripped the saddle firmly and pulled up, swinging her leg up and over Adella’s back until her bottom rested firmly in the seat.

“Oh,” James averted his eyes. Cilla tilted her head, confused.

“Is something wrong?”

“It’s just... I’ve never seen a woman riding astride a horse in that way.”

Cilla laughed, “In what way? How else would a woman ride a horse?”

“Well... sidesaddle, actually,” James blinked.

“You gift me a horse that’s only been ridden astride by a man and expect me to ride it like the women of your country?” Cilla pursed her lips.

“It’s just not ladylike to sit in that way,” James shrugged, sheepish.

“Why on earth would it be unladylike?” She demanded.

“You’re sitting with your legs open. It’s seen as improper for a woman to...”

James trailed off when Cilla inhaled sharply. She swung her leg over Adella’s back and hopped back down to the ground. She glared up at him, who took a step away from her.

“Let me be sure I understand your words correctly. Men expect women to open their legs for their husbands, open their legs to give birth, but if we ride a horse to transportation, *then* it’s improper? That’s a stupid custom. Of course a man thought it up,” She hissed.

James looked thoughtful, “I’d never thought of it in that way before. Sitting sidesaddle doesn’t seem to be very practical, anyway. I suppose you’re right.”

“I don’t need you to tell me I’m right,” She rolled her eyes and mounted her horse again. By this time, James’ horse had been brought out and dressed.

“I’ve never understood it, really,” Cilla went on, as he mounted his horse. The stable hand fastened the basket to a hook on the saddle.

“Understood what?” His voice was sober as he busied himself with adjusting his grip on the reins.

“What’s acceptable for men isn’t acceptable for women. And the other way around. Haven’t you ever thought it strange?”

“I don’t suppose I’ve ever thought about it at length. It’s just the way things are done,” James shrugged, “shall we get started?”

They rode together in silence. James was certain he’d ruined any chance of leaving Beiramar with a marriage agreement. He chastised himself, remembering only after he’d called her unladylike that Ursa had accused her of the same thing and upset Cilla greatly. He could only imagine how she felt about him, an almost total stranger, insulting her.

Cilla stared forward, not taking in any of the surrounding sights. James suspected that she rode these trails often. He looked to his right, past the off-white sand and out to the ocean. He had travelled far and wide, but had never seen a horizon so smooth and blue. It was unbroken, no islands or land in sight as far as the eye could see. Closest to the shore the water was a bright, clear turquoise, and faded out to a deep and bottomless blue the farther out he looked. He craned his neck to see further up the shore, to the harbor where the boats waited to transport cargo to distant lands. Out on the water was a long fishing boat, where men dove into the water and surfaced a while later with fish and oysters in nets. It was early and many of the castle’s inhabitants still slept, but the rest of Beiramar seemed to be very much awake and working the day away.

The horses' feet left tracks in the sand, finely milled by millennia of waves crashing repeatedly against the shore. It was so bright reflecting against the sun it looked as if it were snow. James watched it settle back into itself after being disturbed over and over again. The only sounds he could hear were the rumbling of the surf hitting the shoreline and the occasional snorts and sighs of their two horses.

To an outsider, the scenery was remarkable. Mixed in with the familiar foliage of his own homeland were peculiar trees he'd noticed on his journey to the castle. They were tall, with bent brown trunks and bark that resembled scales. There were no branches or leaves save for the very top, where the long, wide leaves stuck out to the sides like parasols. From the very inside James could see large green and brown fruit hanging beneath where the leaves grew from the bark.

"Palms," Cilla had noticed his gawking.

"Pardon?" James was startled out of his sightseeing. Cilla pointed up at the odd-looking tree.

"Those are called Palms. Palm trees. The fruit hanging from it is called a coconut. They're hollow, with delicious, sweet water that's safe to drink," She stated matter-of-factly.

"Marvelous trees," James nodded. He was just pleased she was speaking to him at all. That was not to last- they faded back into silence. This was not what he

had hoped for when he'd planned this outing in his mind. He began to take in his surroundings again. The trail was leading them further into the foliage and away from the sand and shore. As their horses trekked on, it became cooler as the spaces between the trees grew smaller, providing more shade. To James, the shade was a relief. Cilla didn't seem to notice.

“Be aware, the Vagari like to patrol this area of the forest in particular as it's closest to the castle,” Cilla warned, “you may notice them moving between the trees.”

“Yes, our traveling party was met by a few of their soldiers at the border,” James remembered it well. The men were dark-skinned, far darker than his potential bride, and even less clothed than the people of Beiramar he'd already encountered. On their bodies were white, yellow and red painted symbols. The weapons they carried were large and sickled, like swords but even more wicked-looking.

“Are they friendly or hostile?” James pried, “They didn't seem too enthused to see us approaching the border.” There had been hundreds of them, stone-faced, watching their every move.

Cilla laughed, “Friendly? Not particularly- at least to outsiders. They patrol and protect our borders in exchange for the ability to roam freely in our forests.

They do no harm to our people, and help protect us from attacks on our landside borders.”

“It would seem to an outsider that the ability to roam freely through trees is an uneven trade for the task of being solely responsible for the protection of Beiramar’s borders,” James mused. They trotted along in silence for a few moments before Cilla spoke again.

“The Vagari are a nomadic people. They do not value possessions, power or politics. They don’t believe the land belongs to them, but to the gods. They only wish for the freedom to move about the lands they have roamed freely since the beginning of their people.” She sounded thoughtful as she said this. A small smile crept across her lips.

“It’s a very interesting notion, a group of people not valuing land or power. What do they value, then?”

“They value the sea and how it provides them fish to eat. They value the trees’ ability to provide them comfort, shade, and fruit. They value loyalty within the tribe, and family,” Cilla replied.

“Family? Do they really?” James tried to hide the incredulity in his voice.

“Yes, James,” Cilla rolled her eyes, “even naked black-skinned brutes like the Vagari have a basic idea of family. In fact, they are more closely-knit than any family I have ever encountered outside the tribe.”

“That’s not what I meant,” James tried to explain, but Cilla just shrugged.

“I understand that to an outsider from so far away, it’s a strange concept to grasp.”

They lapsed into silence again as James rolled this newfound information over in his head. They had reached a small clearing between the trees, shady and cool but still bright enough to see from the sun poking through the leaves of the palm trees.

“Shall we have our picnic here, then?” Cilla looked over into James’s eyes for the first time in what felt like an eternity.

“This spot looks perfect,” James quickly agreed. They dismounted their horses and stepped into the clearing. There was some dew left in the grass, James supposed because there wasn’t enough sunlight and heat there to burn it away. They found a spot partially shaded and sat, unpacking the basket. Cilla pulled off one boot, then the other, stretching her legs in front of her and sighing. She noticed James looking at her, eyebrows raised in amusement.

“What?” She asked, a defensive edge to her voice, “don’t your feet sweat when you’re riding?”

“Of course they do, but I don’t just take my shoes off wherever I feel like,” James laughed. Cilla eyed him quizzically. “I’m beginning to find your country’s customs are strange and constricting.”

“I can see that,” James chuckled. He offered her a small fruit tart wrapped in a napkin embroidered in gold cloth. It was piled high with berries of every shade of purple he could imagine, all different shapes and sizes.

“Thank you,” Cilla offered him a polite smile and began to eat it. He picked up the second tart and bit into it. The first bite exploded with a crisp sweetness, and he felt juice running down his chin. He tried to wipe it away before it dripped onto his pants, to no avail. His hands scraped the pale stubble on his chin- he’d neglected shaving while he travelled.

“Be careful, it’s messy,” She laughed. She had no juice dripping down her chin.

“How do I...” James tried to ask her how to properly eat it, but she interrupted with, “Smaller bites, Your Majesty.” James took a handkerchief from the basket and wiped at his chin.

“So you didn’t actually tell me *why* the Vagari protect your borders so fiercely,” James prodded. He was curious. For a tribe that cared little for material things, they protected Beiramar with steadfast determination.

“Didn’t I?” was Cilla’s cryptic reply.

“You didn’t,” James was growing frustrated. She spoke in riddles often, he was beginning to see. She left no opening for him to see anything past the mask she carefully constructed.

“Well,” She took another bite and chewed thoughtfully, “I did already say that they value family. They protect their kin fiercely,” Cilla pointed at the milky brown skin of her arm. The final piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

“Of course,” James slapped his own forehead with a laugh, “you’re half Vagari. I should’ve realized that when I saw the portrait of your mother last night.”

“Not just that,” Cilla grinned, “I’m the High Cheiftan’s only granddaughter. And Julian is his only grandson.”

James balked. “I didn’t know that.”

“My father’s marriage to my mother was far more political than he would lead you to believe, Your Majesty,” Cilla smirked. James raised an eyebrow.

“You see,” she continued, “my grandfather- not the Cheiftan, my father’s father- arranged the marriage of my father and his first wife, Maxella. As you already know, it wasn’t exactly a love match at first. He grew fond of her, but he didn’t love her. His father died a few years later, and my father became king. A few years after that, when my sisters were still quite small, Maxella became grievously ill with a summer fever and died. My father was distraught and did not seek to marry again for some time.” She paused, probably to make sure James was still paying attention. He was.

“Father was riding in the woods one day when he came across a beautiful woman with dark skin and eyes, and even darker hair. At the time, the Vagari were

not welcome on Beiramarite lands, even the woods. Father's father, the old king, hated the Vagari people. He thought them to be savages and a blight on the more civilized people of Beiramar. So, any Vagari tribe member on Beiramar's borderlands were to be imprisoned, or worse, put to death if they were caught trespassing." Cilla placed her tart down on the handkerchief in front of her so that she could mime out her words with her hands. She was becoming far more animated than he'd seen her yet.

"To her surprise, he asked for her name. Frightened that she would be punished for trespassing in the forest she fled, and for weeks Father roamed these same trails trying to catch sight of her again. Eventually, in his efforts he instead stumbled across the Vagari where they set up camp right on the outside edges of our borders. He found the High Chieftain, asked him for a meeting, and described the woman he'd seen. The High Cheiftain chuckled and said 'You have just described my daughter, Ileona,' and called her out of her hut. As surely as the sun shines each morning, it was the same woman." James leaned forward, wanting to hear more of the story. Cilla was smiling as she continued.

"My father, as you know, is quite single-minded, almost to a fault, and so he stopped at nothing to make Ileona his wife. He and the High Cheiftain reached an agreement- Ileona would be his wife and the new Beiramarite queen, in exchange for the Vagari's extra protection at our borders. They knew the forests more than

we ever could, and they had any intruders at an advantage. They were the primary reason we stayed almost untouched during the Great Wars.”

“The songs from the war sing of black-faced devils who creep through the trees,” James murmured, “Your kin, I presume?” Cilla nodded.

“Then, Julian and I were born, and even after my mother died, they have resolved to protect us so long as there is Vagari blood inheriting the throne.”

Cilla stopped to take a breath. She smiled. “You look stunned.”

“I am,” James admitted. He had been watching her, rapt, as she talked, hands fluttering around her with each word. The mask had fallen off for a few moments as she told him part of her family history, and her face relaxed and moved in a way he hadn’t seen it do since they’d first met.

“Every family has an origin story,” Cilla shrugged, looking suddenly bashful.

“Yours is quite enthralling,” James murmured, “but I do wonder, what do you think your father’s father would think about his half-Vagari grandson inheriting the throne?”

“He’s likely throwing quite a fit in his tomb,” Cilla smirked. James returned her grin.

“I should one day like a proper introduction to the Vagari, if I may,” James implored. Cilla smiled, but it faded when her eyes darted over his shoulder.

“I suppose you shall get your wish sooner than expected,” there was concern rising in her voice, and James twisted around to follow her gaze. Several painted Vagari men were emerging from the trees in every direction surrounding them. James’ heart pounded. His sword was still tied to his saddle, and he’d never make it there if he needed it. But Cilla had told him that they were relatively peaceful, so he was confused by her worried expression.

One of them stepped forward and began to speak quickly and urgently in a language he didn’t understand. Cilla’s eyes focused on him and from her focused expression he could tell that she understood what he said. She responded- a question. The language was harsh and it seemed as though they bit off the end of each word with their teeth. The man mimed shooting a bow and arrow.

There was a bit more back and forth, and then the Vagari soldier rejoined his company by the trees, watching.

Cilla turned to James. “We must go back to the castle. Now.”

James began to protest, “What do you-”

“*Now, James!*” Her voice was shrill, setting James on edge. She moved quickly over to her horse, but before she reached Adella something dark and shapeless crashed through the trees. When it straightened itself out, James could see that it was actually a man.

He wasn't Vagari, that much was evident by the color of his skin. He was pale, paler than even James himself. He didn't seem to be a Beiramarite, either. His clothing was all wrong. He was draped in long black cloaks unsuitable for the climate, with tall black boots. His face was narrow and severe, covered in a thick, dark beard. He stared them down with an expression devoid of any emotion.

Chapter 4

"Who are you?" Cilla kept her eyes trained on him, but was aware of the Vagari soldiers edging closer. The man's face was hard and still as stone. His eyes were beady and black, and her only indication that he'd heard her was his mouth twitching into a twisted smile.

"I'm going to go for my sword," Cilla had almost forgotten James was standing behind her until he whispered in her ear. She flinched, surprised, but recovered. She kept her eyes on the man.

"Don't," She kept her voice low and even, "it's too far away. You'll never make it in time." James tried to protest but she placed her hand on his arm.

To the man she asked again, "Who are you?"

"Princess," The man's voice sent a chill through Cilla's body, "who I am is of little importance. I am one of many."

“What are you doing here?” She tried again. He went silent, smirking, inching closer like a predator. Cilla felt James brush against her back as he ran for his sword.

“Damn it, James!” She managed to choke out, just as the strange man seized his opportunity to lunge at her.

He grasped her forearm with painful force and brought his other arm back and up from beneath his cloak, revealing a wicked-looking curved dagger. Cilla dropped into a fighting stance like Julian showed her during their sparring practice. She stayed low to the ground so she couldn't be knocked off balance, and brought her arm up just in time to block the assassin's blow. The dagger was inches from her throat.

Her arm shook, but held steady as she wrenched her other arm free. She brought her fist up hard and fast until it connected with his chin. His teeth clicked together as he went down, eyes wide, and dropped the dagger. Cilla kicked it away from his reach as he lay flat on his back. The Vagari rushed forward and seized him before he could scramble back to his feet. She turned to James, who was just unsheathing his sword, looking stunned.

“How did you-” He sputtered, and his arms hung uselessly at his sides.

“Princess,” The man's eyes glinted, beady and sharp like a rat's eyes, “do not think you are safe yet. I am one of many.”

Cilla flinched as he wrenched his arm free, revealing another dagger as the Vagari restraining him struggled to maintain control. Her heart slammed against her ribcage. There was no way she could fight him off twice. Her arms and hands were already tender and bruised from defending herself the first time. She wasn't strong enough.

She took an involuntary step back, but the assassin made no move toward her this time. Instead, he sunk the dagger into his own neck and dragged it across to the other side, spraying her in his blood. Cilla watched him die, twitching and gurgling as he fell forward, and she instinctively reached out to catch him. His dead weight sent Cilla crumpling to the ground with him, his fist still clutching the dripping dagger.

Cilla jumped away from him without a sound. She stood like a statue and watched the flurry of activity around her. James was shaking her shoulders, touching her face, waving his hand in front of her. She was aware of blood dripping down her cheeks and onto his bare arms. The Vagari seemed to be multiplying, more and more men arriving into the small clearing with every passing moment. She felt as though she were in a tunnel. All their voices echoed in her ears, deafening her.

“For god’s sake, she’s in shock,” She heard James pleading with them, his voice sounding as though it were miles away, “we need to get her back to the palace!”

She felt herself being lifted by her waist, and struggled against whomever dared to lay a hand on her. She heard screaming, almost like a woman’s scream. It was guttural and wild, almost like a frightened animal.

A face appeared before her, but it was one she recognized. It was her grandfather. His white beard was a shocking contrast to his dark skin, and below two white brows were her mother’s eyes. His skin was weathered and wrinkled, but soft. The skin around his eyes collapsed when he smiled sadly at her. She could feel the blood beginning to dry and harden on her skin. He placed a finger to his lips to shush her, then placed his fingers on her neck as though to pinch her, and her legs buckled. Her body went limp, and everything went dark.

Chapter 5

James watched Cilla sleep with his arms crossed over his chest. Her black hair was damp, and it fanned out around her head on her satin pillow. Her face was even more lovely than it was when she was awake. James hadn’t realized that she was constantly on edge until he’d seen her totally relaxed.

He didn't want to leave her side. She'd screamed herself hoarse before the High Chieftain managed to put her to sleep. When they brought her back to the castle Cilla wouldn't respond to anyone, not even Julian. She just stared forward, hardly blinking. Her face was still as stone.

She was caked in blood. When the assassin took his own life, it rained down on her in red waves. By the time they arrived at the palace, it had dried into a sticky coating. Pollux had called the doctor, who gave her an herbal tea mixture that made her eyes glass over. Her handmaidens led her into her chambers and bathed her, then tucked her into bed.

"I should have been there. She could've been killed." Julian sat in a chair next to her bed, elbows resting on his knees and hands covering his face. He had muttered those two phrases over and over since James and the soldiers carried Cilla's limp body into the great hall.

"She's alive. Let us be grateful for that," Julian and James turned to see the High Chieftain walking into the room, followed by Pollux.

"High Chieftain," James bowed his head as he noticed the Vagari did when he walked by. Cilla's grandfather raised his hand and smiled.

"Please, I am Argus," he was large like Julian, but he seemed more frail and angular. His old body seemed to drown in his green robes.

“Argus,” James avoided meeting his gaze. He was ashamed to be in the presence of these three men. He and his pride had almost gotten their beloved daughter, sister, and granddaughter killed. At the very least, her trauma would not be easily undone. And he was to blame.

“Why do you cast your eyes down in such a way?” Argus allowed Pollux to pull over another plush chair for him to settle into. He sighed wearily as he relaxed into it.

“This is my fault,” James kept his arms crossed over his chest. He looked over at Cilla resting peacefully again and another wave of guilt washed over him.

“She’s made of hardier stuff than she looks, I can promise you that,” Pollux nodded in her direction. His smile was small, but mixed with something like pride and affection.

“No, you don’t understand,” James shook his head, frustrated, “she warned me not to go for my sword. She knew that he would attack if I made a sudden move. I went for the sword anyway, thinking I knew better than she did. And he did exactly what she guessed. He almost cut *her* throat. Because of my negligence, and my pride. I am truly sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize to us. She’s alive. Although I think she’d like to hear that same apology from you when she wakes up,” Pollux raised his eyebrows knowingly.

“Of course,” James’ stomach dropped. She would never want to speak to him again after this. Julian stood and approached James.

“Did she run from him?” His attention was off his sister, and on James now.

“No,” James gave out a barking laugh, “she fought him off. Knocked him right on his ass.”

Julian’s eyes widened, “She did?” He was beaming. He leaned in, prompting James to continue.

“She did,” James shook his head and smiled proudly, “she knocked him off balance and kicked the dagger out of his hand. You should’ve seen his face as he went down.” He mimed the way she punched the assassin in the chin.

“Amazing,” Julian looked over at his sleeping sister again, “amazing.”

“It was. And she is,” James shook his head in disbelief.

“My granddaughter is a Vagari woman, truly. Just like her mother,” Argus reached forward to pat one of Cilla’s hands affectionately.

“Vagari women are trained as warriors, just as the men are,” Julian explained. James chuckled.

“Well, now your sparring practice makes a bit more sense,” James nodded.

“She has been my equal since the moment we opened our eyes. She is little, but she is vicious as any predator,” Julian’s voice was full of pride.

“I know that now,” James nodded, “and it saved her life.”

“Every other suitor ridiculed her or treated her like a little fool when she revealed her interest in sword fighting,” Julian glanced at his sister again, “you’ve been the first one out of dozens to take her seriously.”

“Cilla wouldn’t be alive today if she didn’t have the wherewithal to use the man’s own balance against him. That’s one of the first things I was taught when I was learning to fight. How could I not take her seriously?” James nodded.

“You should have seen the look on her face. Her eyes were hard and cold, determined. I recognized that look from grown men on the battlefield. She knew it was either him, or her, and she was going to fight to live. It was simply...” James searched for the right word.

“Amazing,” Argus finished his sentence for him, “Just like her mother. Fierce as a bull, vicious as a lion and stubborn as a mule.”

James couldn’t help but agree.

When Cilla awoke, it was bright outside. The windows were open, the warm soft wind blowing the sheer window drapings into the room in a soft rhythm. She squinted against the sun and rolled over, coming face to face with Mavreen. Startled, she uttered, “Oh!”. The sleeping Mavreen shook awake in her chair by her bedside and blinked.

“Good morning,” Cilla tried to pull her face into a smile. She felt groggy, and her voice was hoarse.

“Morning?” Mavreen glanced outside, “it’s just past midday.” Cilla raised her eyebrows and motioned for water. Mav jumped up and filled a gilded cup, handing it to her gently.

“How long have I been asleep?” Cilla asked after she’d taken a few gulps of cool, crisp water. Her throat was raw.

“Two days, just about,” Mav began fluffing her pillows. Cilla choked on her last mouthful of water.

“*Two days?*” She squeaked out between coughs. Mav slapped her back to loosen the water and laughed.

“Whatever concoction the doctor gave you worked a little *too* well, if you ask me,” Mav stood up, “I’ll be right back. I’ll let everyone know you’re awake.”

Cilla, stunned, nodded and watched her go. Her entire body was sore. All at once, the events of her attack came flooding back. The daggers. All the blood. She checked herself for any signs of harm, but aside from a bruised arm, she was unscathed. Then she remembered the blood had been her almost-assassin’s. She winced and sat up, but felt lightheaded and fell back against the pillows. At least she wasn’t lying down anymore. The room spun a little.

“Cilla!,” Greta ran into the room, skirts flying. Cilla had never seen her run before.

“Hello,” Cilla couldn’t think of anything else to say. Greta rushed to her bedside and sat next to her, gathering Cilla into a long, tight hug. She was panting from running.

“I’m alright, Greta, I promise,” Cilla’s reply was muffled as her head was forced into her governess’ bosom.

“Well, if that’s true then you had us all fooled two days ago,” Greta rained kisses down onto the top of Cilla’s head, “you were lost in there somewhere.”

“I’m sorry,” Cilla shook her head as Greta released her from her embrace, “I don’t know what happened to me. My throat hurts. Was I screaming?”

“Oh yes,” Mav nodded, “you’d sit up with your eyes wide open, but you weren’t awake, and you’d scream out loud for minutes at a time. Then you’d just fall back down and settle back down.” Cilla’s eyes widened.

“Don’t scare her with such things. Shes fine now,” Greta glared at Mavreen.

“I’m sorry, Cilla,” Mav looked apologetic, “you’ve been alright for the last day or so. No screaming at all.”

“Thank you,” Cilla reached out and squeezed her younger friend’s hand, “you two always take such good care of me.”

“Can you stand? We’d like to get you washed up and some food in your belly,” Greta looked concerned. Cilla couldn’t even fathom how she would manage to eat. Her stomach was still in knots.

“I think so,” She sat up, slowly, and moved her legs over the side of the bed. Her legs felt unsteady, but she was standing, at least.

After her bath, she allowed Mav to braid her wet hair down her back and dress her. Her stomach growled loud and long just as Mav fastened the last brooch at her hip.

“Hungry?” She laughed.

Cilla grinned. “Well, I haven’t eaten in two days.”

“Good point. Let’s get you fed- I know what you’re like when you’ve been without food,” Mavreen rolled her eyes. Cilla laughed.

“I’m not a monster, Mav!”

The halls were quiet as they walked through. There was hardly anyone around, and those who they did come across only stared at her in awe, sometimes even forgetting to bow as she walked by.

“I think they’ve seen a ghost,” Cilla halfheartedly joked.

“They did see you barely conscious and covered in blood being carried inside,” Mav shrugged.

“So much blood,” Cilla sighed, “I can only imagine what I must’ve looked like.”

“It was frightening,” Mav looked serious, “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Thanks, Mav. Me too.” They arrived at the door of one of the smaller banquet rooms. Before she could even fully open the door, Cilla’s father and brother were upon them. Oona and Ursa hung back and waited for their turn to address Cilla. Julian picked her up and swung her around, squeezing her bruised arms tightly.

“Ow, Julian, hello to you too!” She laughed. He set her down and inspected her with his keen green eyes.

“I’m fine. I promise,” she reached up and patted her brother’s stubbled cheek.

“Father,” Cilla accepted his kiss on her forehead, “I really am.”

“We know, but you know we do worry. You came back to us in quite a state.” Pollux patted his daughter’s shoulder.

Ursa and Oona approached her next.

“Sisters,” Cilla held her arms out for them. They both rushed in to hug her, and immediately began to fuss over her.

“Have you eaten?”

“My gods you’ve got a bruise!”

“You could’ve been killed!”

“Are you hurt?”

Cilla laughed, “I’m alright, please, everyone believe me.” She raised her hands up in surrender.

“Cilla…” Ursa looked exhausted. Dark circles framed her eyes and she looked pale. Cilla raised her hand to stop her.

“Forgiven,” She planted a kiss on her sister’s cheek and smiled. Ursa clung to her as if they were being torn apart.

“We can resume this embrace after I’ve had some food. I’m starving,” She explained, pulling out a chair at the small banquet table and reaching for tarts and fruit, salted meats and a goblet of water. She was ravenous. She was using two hands in an alternating rhythm to bring the food to her mouth faster, and her family watched her in awe.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t be ladylike right now,” She grumbled through a mouth full of tart crusts. Julian laughed, but said nothing in protest. When she was done, she sat back, her belly full. She was content.

“Have you seen anyone else today?” Cilla asked as innocently as she could muster. Julian laughed.

“If you’re asking if James is nearby, he’s in the garden reading,” Julian rolled his eyes.

“At this hour?” She ignored the first part of his answer completely. “It must be sweltering outside.”

“He’s been pacing around the castle for two days straight. He needed to go outside for some fresh air. I’m not sure he’s even slept,” Oona nudged Cilla and grinned. Her cheeks went hot and red.

“I suppose I should go see him,” Cilla pushed her chair back. Her family stood, watching her as if she were made of glass.

“I’m *fine*. Honestly, you must stop this,” Cilla rolled her eyes and stood, waving Julian off as he approached her, “I do not need an escort. Thank you.” Her voice was firm, but weary. She closed the door behind her and sighed. They never made this much of a fuss over her, and frankly she did not like it.

As she walked, Cilla wondered what state James would be in when she found him. Would he be quite shaken, as she was? She couldn’t forget the look on his face, as he tried to shake her out of her stupor. He looked desperate. He looked terrified.

She rounded the corner into the garden and squinted in the sunlight. By the fountain, stretched out on a chaise under the shade of a tree, was James. He had a book perched on his lap, and his hand shading his eyes from the sun. Cilla watched him for a few moments from behind a pillar, where she wouldn’t be noticed. He looked pensive, fully concentrated on his book. He was wearing Beiramarite

clothing again, and looked more comfortable than he had been a few days prior. She caught herself smiling a little as she stepped out from behind the pillar and closed the gap between them.

“You’re awake,” The way he said it sounded like a statement. He sounded surprised, and he looked relieved. Cilla said nothing, just watched him as he scrambled out of his chair. They stood facing each other in silence.

“Cilla, I owe you an apology,” James kept his hands clasped behind his back. Cilla struggled not to laugh. He was always so formal and stiff.

“Please, James,” Cilla raised her hand as if to stop him, but he continued.

“No,” he shook his head, blond curls bouncing over his ears, “I should have listened to you. If you hadn’t been able to fight him off, your last words would have been ‘damn it, James’.” His face seemed to crumple.

Cilla studied him for a moment. He had stubble on his face where there usually wasn’t, like Julian. His hair looked unkempt and he looked as though he hadn’t slept, as Ursa did. He watched her carefully as though she were made of porcelain, as her father did. She could see that James cared for her. He made no effort to hide it in the short time frame they’d known each other. She admired him for his inability to hide behind his own face.

“I’m just happy to be alive-”

“No thanks to me.”

“-and I wanted to thank you for getting me to safety.” She talked over him as if he hadn’t interrupted her. “Now please stop feeling sorry for yourself and let’s go for a walk on the beach.” She offered her arm, but James hesitated.

“We’re not to go on the beach for a while,” James watched her carefully for her reaction. Cilla bristled.

“And why not? Why can’t a princess walk through her own country?” She demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. She stuck her chin out, defiant. She knew she sounded petulant.

“I’m sorry,” Cilla believed him when he said it, “it was at your father’s insistence. You, your sisters, Julian, and myself aren’t to venture past the palace walls until the threat has been traced back to the source.”

“I can’t help feeling that this is all my fault,” Cilla sighed, sinking onto the bench, “I’ve made us all prisoners, in a sense.”

James sat down beside her. “None of this is your fault. None of it.” He reached out and grasped her hand. His hands were large, and rough and calloused where his hand gripped the hilt of his sword.

“Why do I feel so terrible?” She asked him. He looked at her with an expression she couldn’t interpret.

“Someone tried to take your life. You’re going to feel pretty awful for a while. But it will fade. I promise.”

“Has anyone ever tried to... kill you?” She asked cautiously.

“God, yes,” he laughed, “I’ve seen battle. Well, small skirmishes here and there really. It’s not as peaceful up in the mountain valleys where I live. It’s quite a different world from Beiramar, actually.”

“And you can laugh about it now?” Cilla was curious.

“Yes,” he nodded, “seeing someone die the way you did for the first time can be jarring. It will take time, but you will be able to look back on it without fear someday.”

“Someday,” Cilla scoffed, “I see him plunging the knife into his neck every time I close my eyes.”

“Take my word for it, Princess,” James patted her hands and stood, “You will recover. That I can promise.”

“Are you in the habit of breaking promises?” Cilla teased.

“I am not,” James feigned an insulted expression.

“Good,” She laughed, “if we can’t walk the beach, shall we at least stroll through the gardens?”

“Lead the way,” James grinned, holding out his arm for her to take.

Late that night, Cilla curled her legs under her in the plush chair in her father's study. Cilla was still angry. She was still frightened. But as she sat across her father and brother, she allowed herself to relax a little.

Her father and James' father sat side by side, with Julian at Pollux's left. All three men wore strained expressions. Julian looked as though he had aged years in the past several hours. They were discussing the assassin. This was the first time Cilla was hearing it, but she guessed they'd had many discussions while she recovered from her ordeal.

"I just don't know how else he could have snuck into our borders unless he was part of your regiment, Castor," Pollux chided, "perhaps you have a snake in your midst."

"My men are loyal, Pollux," Castor was on the defensive, "perhaps your grass has a snake or two lurking."

"I saw the body. He was an outsider. That man was no soldier of mine," Pollux huffed.

"Nor mine," replied James' father coolly.

"Perhaps he took on the guise of one of Vallemont's soldiers in order to gain access. You came with a large party, it's possible he slipped past your notice," Cilla offered. Both men stared at her blankly.

“Now is not the time to place blame on one another,” Julian shot Cilla a warning look, then stared down the two older men, “Our most important objectives are to discern where he came from, and why he tried to murder my sister.” Cilla was grateful that at least Julian was thinking clearly, because the two older men were having a spitting contest like small boys.

James entered the room, looking calm. He was dressed in warmer clothes, now- it was late, the sun had set, and it was a cool night. He was in a woven fabric tunic, no velvet to be seen, and looked comfortable, if a bit tired. He reached down to quickly touch her hand as he passed her. Cilla blinked. No one else had noticed him do it.

“He mentioned being ‘One of Many’,” James answered Julian’s question, “It’s possible that someone is unhappy about a potential trade alliance between Beiramar and Vallemont. There would be seemingly no end to the riches the sea route would open up for both our countries if we were to be married,” James shrugged.

“You speak boldly,” James’ father warned. James raised his eyebrows.

“I am king. I will speak as I please,” he snapped, “I inherited my kingdom through my uncle, not you, Father. Remember that.” James had bluntly nudged his father back into his place. He seemed to be in no mood to be treated like a child. Cilla wished she had that ability to overrule those who wished to control her. Her

mind went immediately to Ursa, who would not accept anything besides her ideas of etiquette. Castor nodded, cowed, and did not reply further.

“Someone wanted to send a message,” James continued, “and they wanted to stop any marriage between our royal families in its tracks.”

“I believe you are right, Your Majesty,” Cilla nodded, “though I wish it were not so.”

“Does this mean that you will not be accepting James’ offer, then?” Pollux refilled his goblet of wine. He sounded disappointed. By the way he slurred his words, he also sounded drunk.

“I’d rather not discuss that, given recent events,” Cilla frowned, “I’m sure you can understand that, Father.”

“Alright, dear. There’s still time,” Pollux’s tone was patronizing. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. He was her father, but he was still the king, and it was her duty to show him due respect.

“Yes,” Cilla muttered. Her eyes suddenly felt heavy, and she yawned.

“I think it’s time for bed. The Vagari will be using extra men to patrol, so we can sleep soundly,” Julian’s voice was coaxing, and he was looking at Cilla.

“I’m fine, really,” She protested, and yawned again.

“Cilla,” Julian gave her a meaningful look. She was moments older than her twin, but he acted as though he were years older than she was. She hated to admit it, but he did make a good point. She felt weak and exhausted still.

“Alright, alright,” Cilla took his hint and stood. She felt strange. Her heart beat hard and fast and her mind seemed to race, but she was still groggy from the medicine she’d been given. The rest of her body was tired and heavy.

“I’ll escort you, Your Highness,” James stood quickly and offered her his arm.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. That’s very kind.” She hooked her arm around his.

“Good night, Father. Brother. Lord Castor,” Cilla gave a half-hearted curtsy. There was a scraping of chairs as the remaining three men stood and bowed. Cilla then allowed James to lead her from Father’s study.

“I’m surprised you’re tired already, given how much you’ve slept,” James remarked.

“Yes, well, the doctor did say I would need a while for his tonic to fade,” Cilla replied.

“After we left the garden, you retired to your bedchambers with guards outside the door,” He looked at her quizzically. He always had that confused, bewildered look on his face. She found it endearing, despite her best efforts to

dislike him. He looked like a boy when he pulled his face into that confused expression. It made him look vulnerable and safe. He'd looked that way in the clearing. So helpless.

“Yes, I'm sorry about that. That is apparently what our guards are trained to do when a member of our family is threatened,” Cilla shrugged, “I'm being watched day and night, it would seem.”

“Apparently?” James implored.

She raised her shoulder again, “We haven't been really threatened since the Great War, and that was over ten years before I was even born. I've never seen this happen before. I've never been in any danger before.”

“They locked me in my chambers when we returned, like a child,” James huffed.

“You're a king,” Cilla laughed, then yawned again, “you are quite more important than I am in this situation.”

“I must disagree,” James shook his head, “there is an argument to be had that you are beloved here. For someone they call Little Tyrant, you seem to have captured the hearts of your people. Beiramarites *and* Vagari.”

Cilla was touched. Then she felt a wave of sadness hit her.

“And now you understand my hesitation at leaving this place,” Her voice was forlorn. She was stunned for a moment- she had perfectly crafted an aloof

exterior for James, and she was casting it aside now for real displays of emotion. She brushed it off as exhaustion seemed to be getting the better of her. On the other hand, they had almost died together. She felt closer to him than she had imagined she would.

“Cilla,” James turned to her as they stopped in front of her door, “I would never ask you to leave this place if it meant that it would bring grief into your heart.”

“Thank you,” Cilla pulled a small smile, “this place is the only home I have ever known. The only home I ever *want* to know.”

“I understand,” James’ face took on a resigned expression.

“That doesn’t mean I’m saying no, James,” She reached up and patted his cheek. He had shaved- the downy white stubble on his chin was gone, and his skin was warm and smooth.

“What does it mean, then?” He pressed. Cilla smiled.

“Someone who can never leave a place could be called a prisoner from some perspectives,” She curtsied, “good night, James.”

James bowed, and offered her a polite smile, “Good night, Cilla. I’m glad you’re alright.”

Just as he turned to walk away, a servant appeared and handed him a letter. He paused to read it, his eyes flicking back and forth across the page. He turned to look at Cilla.

“There’s another assassin. Alive, in the dungeon. They found him lurking in the woods by the palace just moments ago,” James explained. Cilla’s heartbeat began to speed up again. An assassin, so close.

“May I come with you?”

“No, Cilla, you need to rest. Please,” James’ eyes were pleading. Cilla nodded.

“Normally I’d fight you harder,” She yawned, “but I do need sleep. Please, let me know any information you find in the morning.”

“I will,” he bowed, “sleep well, Princess.” The guards closed her door, and she felt them move in front of it so that none could enter. Another guard stood at her balcony, facing the sea.

Cilla dreamed of cold knives pressed against her neck. The dagger and the assassin’s hand hung over her head, suspended in time. She called out, but no sound escaped her lips. She heard him gurgle and die over and over.

She reached for James, but he was already dead, blue eyes vacant and staring only at her. There was a permanent look of fear on his face. Blood dripped from his neck. She felt blood dripping from her cheeks. She shook, violently. The

assassin brought the knife down and into her body over and over. The sound of tearing flesh made her feel sick.

Silently, she screamed herself hoarse again.

When she awoke the next morning, she was somber. She hardly spoke a word during her morning bath, she silently allowed her handmaidens to dress her, and she walked stiffly through the halls of the castle. The previous days' events hung heavy in her mind. Her sleep was plagued by nightmares, of murders in ways she had never even heard of before. She had slept fitfully, and she was paying the price in her waking moments.

It was early, much earlier than when she'd risen the day before. Greta had tried to feed her fruit, bread and salted meats for breakfast, but Cilla's stomach clenched at the smell of it. She wanted desperately to go for a walk in the gardens. Fresh air would do her good, but there were no servants opening the doors to let the air in today. This morning, she felt like a prisoner, both inside and out.

She watched a page disappear through a servant's passageway and was struck with inspiration. If she could not venture outside, she would explore the tunnels. She hadn't entered them since she was a child playing hiding and seeking games with Julian and her sisters, and was curious to see if she remembered where all the interconnecting tunnels and passageways led.

She slipped through the passageway after glancing around to see if anyone noticed her skulking about. The halls were empty. Upon entering the passageway, she was startled to see how much she'd grown since the last time she had ventured inside. The passages seemed cramped and low, and she was forced to crouch down in some places. Her steps echoed. It was damp and smelled of seawater. It smelled exactly as it did when she was a child.

Cilla had been feeling as though her childhood was slipping through her fingers at an alarming pace. She longed for the days when she could run wild, messy-haired and bright-eyed through her home. It seemed that lately everything was shrouded by death and politics.

She knew where every door led. Every room had an entrance for the servants to move in and out easily and quietly. She continued on toward her destination- James' door. She wondered if he was awake yet. The birds had just begun to chirp when she woke, so it must have been early. She felt the walls with her hand. It was dimly lit inside the passages, but though it was wet inside it was also cool, a sensation she didn't feel very often.

She paused when she reached his door- she could hear voices. Two male voices, one of them belonging to James. She pressed her ear to the door and strained to hear.

“What did we learn from our uninvited guest?” Castor inquired.

“Not much. The prisoner took his own life before we could inquire at length,” James sounded frustrated.

“Did he tell you why he came?”

“No,” James grunted, “he just repeated what the last one said. ‘I am one of many’. Then he broke his own neck.”

“Good god, how on earth did he do that?” Castor had the good sense to sound scandalized.

“He grasped his chin, like this,” James paused, probably miming the motion, “and twisted it quickly. The snap was so loud we all jumped.”

“Why on earth would someone do such a thing to themselves?”

“I don’t know,” James sounded exasperated, “it’s as though they’ve been instructed to commit suicide in the event of a capture. Its truly bizarre. And unsettling. What cause are they fighting for that they’d be willing to be so expendable to the one they serve?”

“James, there are dangerous times ahead. There are people who would do anything to stop your marriage to Cilla.”

“What marriage? We haven’t made an agreement yet.”

“You have to have *some* idea if she’ll accept. You’ve lasted longer here than any other suitor has. That must mean something,” James’ father was speaking plainly. James sighed.

“I honestly don’t know, Father,” James sounded bored with the conversation.

“You’d have your hands full with her as queen. Can she be controlled?”

“*Controlled?* If you think a woman like that can be controlled, you are a fool,” James laughed. Cilla bristled. It appeared as though James was making jokes at her expense.

“I have no interest in controlling her,” James continued, “and I doubt she’d allow me to even if I gave it my best effort.”

“Then what do you want out of this?” James’ father sounded exasperated. There was a long pause before James answered him.

“I want what’s best for my country, and for my people,” James replied carefully, “but the world outside is unkind. I don’t want to thrust her into that. The royal court of Vallemont is a different world from here. And the road back is full of treachery and danger.”

“You care for her,” Castor didn’t pose it as a question.

“I do,” James admitted. He didn’t sound happy.

“Do you believe she cares for you?” Did she? Cilla didn’t even know anymore.

“Not enough to leave everything she’s ever known. No,” James sounded defeated.

The conversation turned away from Cilla and to other matters of state. Cilla stood there, stunned. James wasn't pressuring her into marriage because he cared for her. She didn't know what to make of the new information. The way he spoke about her, the tone his voice took on when he said her name. It sounded something like admiration tinged with sadness.

Cilla moved quickly away from his door. There was a lump in her throat. She'd heard enough.

Chapter 5

James nearly tripped over Cilla as he rounded the corner in the hall. It was almost evening, and he hadn't seen her all day. She looked beautiful, in that lazy way she always seemed to. Flyaway hairs escaped her braid and framed her face, curling in at her temple. Her face was bright and dewy, as though she'd been running. In fact, she *was* panting.

"Cilla?" James looked up and down the hallway. They were alone.

"I'm sorry," She laughed, "I didn't mean to scare you. I was coming to find you. I was just headed to the library. Would you care to join me?"

"Of course," James was stunned that she was seeking him out of her own accord. And what was more, she seemed happy to see him.

"There's something I'd like to show you," She smiled her cryptic smile and he followed behind, chuckling,

“Do you always withhold information like this?” He struggled to keep up. She was walking fast, her deep blue skirts flying out behind her.

“Maybe,” She laughed. James rolled his eyes just as they came to a stop at a set of massive pale wooden doors. Like the other doors in the palace, it was carved with sea creatures.

“This is my favorite place in the palace, aside from my rooms,” she explained as she pushed open the doors. The library was impressive. There were bookshelves made of the same pale driftwood that the doors were. There were rows and rows that reached right where the high walls met the ceilings.

“I think it’s now my favorite place, too,” James let out a low whistle.

“Over here,” Cilla beckoned him toward a table and chairs in the middle of the shelves, by a large window. There was a massive book laying open and she leaned over it, her brown face flushed pink with excitement. Dark locks of hair fell onto the pages, partially obscuring his view of it.

“Which mountain?” She pointed at a map. It took James a moment to realize that it was a map of his country.

“What?” he asked, bewildered.

“Which mountain would you name after your queen?” She laughed. James wasn’t sure if she was having a laugh at his expense.

“You know, Princess, this isn’t a funny joke,” James knit his eyebrows together. She must be teasing him.

“James,” Cilla’s face turned suddenly serious, “this isn’t a joke.”

“Oh,” James blinked, “well then, I’m not sure.” He stroked his nonexistent beard jokingly.

“Be serious!” She crossed her arms over her chest, feigning annoyance.

“I suppose I would have to name her after the greatest of all our mountains. The least explored, perhaps?”

“Good idea,” She laughed and peered down at the book.

“It must be a beautiful landscape, but more dangerous than meets the eye,” James nodded. “Perhaps this one. It’s unnamed yet.” The mountain was surrounded by forests, several miles away from Vallemont’s capital city. The path to the mountain looked treacherous.

“Mount Cilla?” She glanced up at him sideways.

“Lovely name for a mountain,” James nodded, his heart beating fast.

“I agree. And... I accept.” She chewed her bottom lip and met his eyes with hers.

“You accept? My proposal?” James winced at how simple he sounded. She laughed.

“Yes. On one condition. Besides naming a mountain after me.”

“What is it? Anything,” James meant it.

“I want to be a soldier. I want to learn how to fight. Truly fight. I have never felt so insignificant and weak as when that man lunged at me the second time. It keeps me up at night. I see it every time I blink. I want a soldier’s training,” the words tumbled from her lips.

“Consider it done,” James nodded.

“Really? Even though it’s not ladylike?” Her eyes went wide. Her voice was incredulous.

“I hope there won’t be a time I won’t be able to protect you,” James placed his hand over hers, “but that’s already happened. So, I want you to be able to keep yourself safe like you did that day in the clearing.”

“Even an animal knows how to keep itself alive when it’s threatened,” she said, “I want to learn to be a fighter. I want to move with the ease that you and Julian do. When I wield a sword, I want it to be made of metal.”

“I will find you the finest swordsman in Vallemont to train you. That I promise you.”

She looked thoughtful. “What will people think?” James guessed she was recalling their discussion about propriety.

“They’ll think what they think,” He shook his head, “I am king. They will have to accept you as you are. As their queen.”

“Do you think they will?” Cilla looked worried.

“They will have to,” James patted her hand, “I am their king. And I will order them to.”

“James,” Cilla sighed, frustrated, “you cannot tell your people what to feel about me. I must earn their love and trust.”

“I am confident that you will. It may take some time, but they can be won over. With kindness and ferocity, both of which you have an abundance of.”

Cilla looked doubtful, but she nodded.

“Let’s go.”

Cilla walked slowly down the aisle of the great hall, followed by Mavreen, holding the train of her gown. The music was soft, with flutes and harps beckoning her toward the throne. There her father stood, with his arms open, waiting for her. He was dressed in his finest clothes. Julian stood to his left, and James was at his right with his back to her. Noble men and women dressed in elaborate clothing watched her as she walked by. She felt like a spectacle, being consumed by their eyes.

She wore the same lovely gown she’d worn to the ball only two weeks before. It was beautiful, and it was the dress she wore when she and James met for the first time. It seemed only right to wear it one more time.

James turned around to face her. His blond curls were slightly flattened under his crown. He was wearing a long sleeved white tunic embroidered with gold and silver thread. Cilla smiled. She was wondering whether he'd wear Vallemontian or Beiramarite garb, and was happy he'd chosen to wear the clothing of her people on such a day. James grinned as she approached. She climbed the steps and turned to face him. She handed her bouquet of wildflower to Mavreen and reached out to grasp James' waiting hands. He squeezed them, and smiled reassuringly.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He whispered jokingly. Cilla rolled her eyes.

"I'm sure," she hissed back, trying not to laugh, "besides, even if I wanted to, I don't think I could change my mind now. Do you see how many people there are?"

James grinned and gave her hands another squeeze, "I'm trying not to notice how many people there are out there, staring at us."

"Fellow Beiramarites," Pollux's voice boomed out above the silent crowd "we gather here today to pair Princess Cilla, my beloved daughter, with King James of Vallemon in marriage." The crowd cheered.

"Please kneel," Cilla's father's eyes looked glassy. She'd never seen him cry, and this was the closest he would likely get.

James and Cilla kneeled before him, side by side, and grasped each other's hands again.

"Raise your clasped hands," Pollux instructed. They did so. He began to wrap a blue silk ribbon around their hands, binding them together with a tight knot.

"Do you promise to uphold the laws of your land as a married pair?" Pollux asked them.

"We do," The couple answered in unison.

"Do you agree to serve one another, in times of peace and times of war?"

"We do."

"Do you swear to nurse each other back to health in times of sickness?"

"We do."

"And lastly do you promise to serve your King, and you, your Queen?"

Pollux looked from Cilla to James.

"I do," Cilla turned to look at James.

"I do," James grinned back. Pollux gently placed a warm hand on each of their heads.

"You are husband and wife. Please stand," Pollux clapped his hands together. James helped Cilla to her feet.

The crowd cheered again.

Cilla and James, still bound together, walked down the aisle side by side. Their guests threw rice and flower petals as they passed. Cilla laughed as she was pelted with tiny bits of rice.

“What an odd tradition,” James laughed and winced, “rice is sharp!”

“For once, I agree with you,” She laughed, “I don’t know who started that tradition. It’s done at every wedding.”

Their wedding feast was held outside, in the courtyard. Cilla and James sat at the head of the table and watched their guests dance and drink.

“I won’t be having any more wine after that first time,” Cilla joked, and raised her goblet full of water at her husband. James raised his own and they clinked them together in a secret toast.

“Wine tastes of rotten grapes, anyway,” He laughed and placed his goblet down.

“So you never told me,” James leaned in close so that he could keep his voice low, “why *did* you accept my offer of marriage?”

“Does it matter? We’re married,” She laughed.

“Always speaking in riddles!” He smiled at her affectionately.

“Alright, alright. Do you really want to know why? Fine. You took me seriously when not many people did. You hardly even acted surprised when I revealed that I wanted to be a soldier that night we first met at the ball. You

accepted me,” She shrugged, “and I was willing to take a risk for you. You’ve taken quite a few for me already.”

“That’s the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me. You don’t find many genuine people around you when you’re a king,” James mused.

“You will need to help me learn everything there is to know about Vallemont. I admit that I am a little nervous,” Cilla chewed her bottom lip. James nodded.

“I know more about my country than anyone, I think,” He smiled, “It isn’t as exotic as Beiramar, but it has its own charm. I love my country as you love yours.”

“Beiramar isn’t my country anymore, is it?” Cilla smiled sadly.

“Cilla, Beiramar will always be your country. Your people will always love you. You will always be their princess. Remember that,” James lifted her hand and kissed it.

The sun was setting over Cilla’s balcony when she returned to her bedroom. She leaned over it, still in her wedding gown, and stared at the ocean as it crashed against the rocks below. Her feet were tired from dancing. Her cheeks hurt from smiling. She wasn’t sure what the future held, but she knew she was content in this moment.

Dolphins played in the waves in the distance. Fishermen rowed their boats back to shore. Cilla could still hear the party going on without them below in the

courtyard. They probably hadn't even noticed the bride and groom slip away. Cilla rested her chin in her hand and drank her country in with her eyes, trying to memorize every detail of her homeland. She still didn't feel safe. The assassins and her almost-murder tugged at the corners of her mind. Still, she tried to savor these quiet moments while she was still able.

"My queen," James' voice startled her. She turned to face him. He had taken his crown off. He looked like her familiar James again.

"I'm no one's queen yet," She laughed, "we still have to be married again in Vallemont, and only then can I have my coronation."

"That's true," James looked thoughtful. They stood in silence, side by side.

"Wife," He looked down at his hands, grinning. He was blushing. Cilla placed her hand on his.

"Husband."

END OF PART I