



ELIN PEER

MEN OF THE
N^{#10}O R T H

THE PACIFIST

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MEN OF THE
NORTH

THE PACIFIST

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The Pacifist – Men of the North #10

First Edition

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readers due to adult content.

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Books in this series

The Men of the North series can be read as stand-alone books – but for the best reading experience and to avoid spoilers this is the recommended order to read them in.

Forbidden Letters – Men of the North
#0.5

The Protector – Men of the North #1

- The Ruler – Men of the North #2
- The Mentor – Men of the North #3
- The Seducer – Men of the North #4
- The Warrior – Men of the North #5
- The Genius – Men of the North #6
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PLEASE NOTE

This book is intended for mature readers only, as it contains a few graphic scenes and some inappropriate language.

All characters are fictional and any likeness to a living person or

organization is coincidental.

DEDICATION

To Smilla Vanilla

Mila's character was always based on
you.

Your large blue eyes, warm smile, and
those cute dimples that get me every

time.

It's a privilege to be your mother.
Keep spreading sunshine wherever you
go.
I love you!

Elin

PROLOGUE

The Bet

Northlands Year 2447

Mila

It's hard to know who to cheer for when your parents are fighting.

I sat with my back against the wall watching my mom, Laura, wave a hand at my dad, Magni, signaling for him to make the first move. They both looked confident and he gave her a smug smile.

My nine-year old brother, Mason, was standing with his hands on the side of the boxing ring, eager to go in and

fight himself. “Mom, bend your knees, be flexible.”

“Stop poking me.” Aubri, Mason’s twin, was getting annoyed with our youngest sister, Dina, who was only five and couldn’t care less about the fighting.

“Hey Dina.” I leaned down and whispered into her ear, “I bet that if you ask Aubri really nicely, she’ll braid your hair.”

The strategy worked and soon my two younger sisters were occupied.

“Don’t fall back, Mom, attack!” Mason was jumping on the side and it amused me since he would have to be delusional to think that Laura had a real chance of taking our father in a fight. She might be the best fighter of her

generation, compared to other women, but Magni was known as the best fighter in the world. Close to seven feet tall, strong, athletic, flexible, and fast – he was lethal and men had always feared him.

For a moment my thoughts went back ten years to when I'd met Magni for the first time. I'd been a student at the first school integrating children from both sides of the border. Like most of the students from the Motherlands, I had a traumatic past. It wasn't that the founders of the school had deliberately sought out traumatized students, but rather that, almost no parents had been willing to let their child go to the Northlands.

It was the fact that I'd lost my mom

that made me a candidate.

When I arrived, I had longed for someone to love me like she had. Magni was huge and brooding, but I'd taken his protectiveness toward us girls as a sign of affection.

When I couldn't sleep at night, he would talk to me and hold my hand, and if he saw me looking sad during the day, he'd pick me up and swing me through the air or tickle me.

It had been the most wonderful day when Laura and Magni had adopted me and made me part of their family.

I winced and gave a loud shriek when my mom kicked my dad and he made an "umph" sound of pain. My disruption made Mason turn his head and

scowl at me. “Stop screaming like that. You’re ruining the fun.”

“Sorry!”

He rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Mila, if you don’t like fighting, then don’t watch.”

“Mason, shut up.” Laura was jumping from foot to foot. “Stop bothering your sister.”

“But she always ruins it. I bet in a minute she’ll be tearing up like she always does. It’s fucking annoying.”

“Mila will be fine.” Magni kept his focus on Laura and took a few jabs at her. Even I could see this was light sparring for them, and I should be used to it since they did it often.

Mason turned his back on the boxing

ring and leaned against it, giving me a curious glance. “What are you going to do at your tournament? You know men will probably die while fighting for you. Are you going to cry for them too? I bet you’ll faint.”

“I said, shut the fuck up, Mason.” This time Laura moved fast to the ringside, bent down, and pulled Mason’s hair back to make him look up at her. “Do you want to come up here and have both of us kick your ass?”

He made a low comment that I didn’t hear, but Laura did and she raised her eyebrows. “Oh, is that what you think? Then come prove it.”

As always, I was quick to come to my brother’s defense. “It’s okay, Mom, I

know Mason didn't mean any harm."

My dad swung his legs over the rope surrounding the boxing ring and jumped down onto the floor. "Don't worry, sweetie, your mom is just going to knock some manners into Mason." Looking over his shoulder he called back to her, "You got this, right, babe?"

"Yep, I got it." Laura began circling Mason, who was putting on protective gear with eager movements.

I pushed off from the floor and looked on with worry when my brother clapped his hands together, gesturing that he was ready. "But he's only nine." It was a silly thing to say since Mason was taller than my mom and he'd been training for years.

“I’ll be ten soon.”

My dad was pulling off his thin protective gloves. “We know. We were there when you were born, remember?” He smiled down at Dina and Aubri. “That’s a beautiful braid.”

I didn’t hear their response because my eyes were glued on Mason, who attacked Laura without a trace of fear. She rewarded him with a counterattack and rained punches down on him.

“Mason, demand your space,” Magni instructed and instantly, the boy moved forward, forcing Laura back.

“Whose side are you on?” Laura huffed out while moving.

“Sorry, hon.” Magni chuckled next to me and it made me smile. My dad was

handsome and exuded such strength and safety that it always soothed me to be near him.

“Mila, sweetie, don’t worry about what Mason said about your tournament. It’s rare for anyone to die in fights nowadays. You’ll be fine.”

“But I don’t want a tournament.”

He frowned down at me. “Of course you do. We’ve talked about it. A tournament is the only way to make sure you get the strongest protector as a husband. Your mom couldn’t wait to have her tournament. It’s a highlight in a woman’s life.”

I fiddled with my earlobe avoiding his gaze.

“I know you’re not ready to get

married yet, but in a few years, you will be.” With a soft movement, my dad moved a lock of my hair away from my face. “You should marry on your birthday in two years. Then you’ll be twenty-two. That’s a perfect age to get married.”

I agreed, but the violence that came with a tournament made me look away.

“What? You don’t believe you’ll be ready in two years?”

Giving a loud sigh, I met his eyes. “The violence at a tournament is as appealing to me as it would be for you to wear beads in your beard.”

Magni snorted. “Don’t say shit like that.” He looked down at my sisters. “Beads are for pretty Momsi men, not us

badass Nmen warriors. Isn't that right, girls?"

They nodded.

"I'm sorry, Dad, but it's the Motlander part of me that objects to the concept of a tournament. What if someone got hurt? It would be on my conscience."

"No, it wouldn't." He placed a strong hand on my shoulder. "Mila, you're a Northlander now and my daughter. These are our traditions."

I looked down. "I know, but tournaments don't feel right to me. Marrying a stranger would be awkward."

For a moment we stood in silence watching Laura push Mason to his limit

in the boxing ring.

“He’s a good fighter,” I commented.

Magni squared his shoulders with pride. “Yes, he is!” Putting his arm around me, he pulled me into his side and called out to Laura. “Use more force. Mason can take it.”

Mason kept his hands up to block our mother’s punches.

“That’s it, my boy. Use your feet and fight back. You’ve got this.”

Magni grinned when Mason moved out of Laura’s reach and kicked at her. With a wink to me, he muttered, “Someday, his mad fighting skills will serve him when he fights for his bride.”

I knew it was his way of coming back to the subject of my having a bridal

tournament and without thinking it through, I sighed and said, “Tell you what, Dad, I’ll make you a bet. If you wear at least one bead in your beard for a full year, I’ll have a bridal tournament.”

It was impossible not to burst into laughter with the grimace of disgust that Magni produced. “Exactly! So let’s not talk about it anymore. Deal?”

I had expected Magni to laugh with me, but he narrowed his eyes a little. “Hang on a second. You’re saying that if I wear a bead in my beard for a year, you’ll let the strongest warriors in our country fight for you.”

I was still smiling. “Sure, but we both know you would *never* do that.”

“Bet accepted!” His eyes shone with a determination that washed away my smile.

“Dad, no, I didn’t mean it. It was just a stupid bet.”

“A bet is a bet, and now you must honor it.”

Staring at my tall dad, I swallowed hard. He was serious.

A loud sound of pain made me turn to see Mason taking punches to his stomach and when he bent over protecting his core, it felt eerily like a visualization of how I felt myself. Why had I spoken so lightly about something so important?

“Are you okay, buddy?” Magni moved to the ring.

Mason was in obvious pain, but managed a groan and a low “Uh-huh.”

Laura kneeled down in front of him and caressed his hair. “Do you want to stop?”

“No. Just give me a minute.” A second later he shook it off and continued sparring with Laura, who gave him a proud smile.

Magni’s stance eased in front of me. In a fluid movement, he turned and placed his large hands on my shoulders. “Mila Vanilla. Every woman deserves a great lethal warrior as her protector. Don’t worry, dear. One day you’ll come to thank me for having a tournament. You’ll see. And don’t go worrying about your husband being a stranger at first.

You love everybody. Even big brutes like me. If anyone can do it, it's you.”

CHAPTER 1

Falling

The Gray Manor – February 2449

Mila

“Mila... wake up, sweetie. You’re dreaming.”

The distant sound of my mother’s voice brought me back from a violent nightmare and I sat up in my bed. “Dad – where is Dad?”

“Shhh, Mila, relax. Breathe.”

The light was dimmed in my room but the door was open and bright light shone in from the hallway.

“You had that dream again, didn’t

you?” My mother brushed my hair back with sadness on her face.

“It’s the same one over and over.” I pulled my knees to my chest and felt my heart rate slow down. “I see the drone explode with Dad in it.”

“You see him die?”

“Yes. Every night.”

Laura sighed and took my hand. “I have nightmares too. So does your dad.”

“But why do I keep dreaming that he died?”

My mother brushed her long red braid back over her shoulder and gave me a worried look. “I don’t know. Did you talk to Athena about it like I suggested?”

“Yes.” I looked down. “She thinks

it's my way of processing that the father I knew died that day."

Laura leaned back. "I see."

"Athena says I'll probably keep having that dream until I accept that the old Magni is never coming back."

My mother's eyes showed signs of moisture and she quickly looked away. "He's still here. We just have to be patient." Releasing my hands, she petted two of my dogs that lay stretched out on the foot-end of my bed. "You spoil them."

I answered in a yawn. "I'm their mom. I spoil them just like you spoil me."

Laura gave me a small smile and rolled off the bed. "I don't spoil you."

You're just very easy to love while your father is challenging my patience."

I rubbed my eyes. "Did you have another fight with him?"

"Yes. The things he says, Mila..." She shook her head. "It's like his sanity was in the limbs that got amputated after the crash. He makes no sense."

"I know."

Laura bit her lower lip with her eyebrows drawn close. "I hate to burden you, but would you try and talk to him, again?"

"I'll try."

Leaning down over my bed, my mom cupped my face and pressed her lips to my forehead. "Thank you."

As she left my room, I swung my

legs over the edge of the bed and stretched my arms with a loud yawn.

Thirty minutes later, I had showered and walked my dogs. Knocking on the door to my parents' suite, I called out, "Can I come in?"

I took the groan from inside as a "yes", and pushed the door open. Before my dad crashed in a drone, it would have been impossible to find him in bed in the afternoon. He had always been active and loved physical work.

"How are you doing?" I asked and crawled up to sit next to him.

"I'm bored out of my mind."

"No wonder. You've been cooped up in here for almost four months, not to mention the month you spent in the

hospital.”

“I don’t remember much of that time.”

“Probably because you were in a coma for the first week.”

Magni turned his head away and it hit me that he never asked how I was doing anymore.

“Mom said that you two had another argument.”

He nodded and scratched what was left of his amputated left arm. “It’s not your job to smooth things out between us.”

“That’s okay.” I took his right hand. “I’m happy to be the voice of reason that reminds you how much Mom loves you.”

Magni scoffed. “Why the hell would

she?" He nodded to his missing legs. "I've told her, she should get a divorce."

"Dad, that's just your pain medication talking. You don't mean that."

Magni jerked his head back. "I'm not going to force her to be with a ghost of a man."

"But you don't really want Mom to give up on you, do you?"

He looked away again and it made me squeeze his hand tighter to connect with him. "Dad, I know this isn't what you wanted, but why not get robotic limbs and start walking again?"

"Why is everyone so eager to make me a bloody cyborg?" He pulled his hand away.

“Because we see how unhappy you are. You need to get out and live your life again.”

His tone turned sharp. “No robotic legs are going to replace what I had.”

“I know, but it’s better than...” I trailed off but Magni finished my sentence.

“Not having any legs at all.”

“Yes.”

He huffed out loud. “I’ve already agreed to think about it.”

“But you’ve been thinking about it for over four months.”

“No, actually, I’ve been saying ‘no’ for over four months, and you people keep bringing it up.”

I sank deeper into the pillow behind

me and changed the subject. “Jonah is leaving tomorrow.”

“Good.” My dad placed his right arm across his chest and I knew that if he’d had his left arm still, he would have been crossing them.

“Hey, that’s not nice. Jonah has been nothing but kind to you.”

My dad sighed. “I’m just grumpy and Jonah is getting on my fucking nerves.”

“Why?”

“Because he...” Magni sighed again. “He keeps pestering me with questions that I don’t have answers to.”

“He just wants to help. We all do.”

“I know that, but talking to Jonah always gives me a headache. He’s like Pearl. I think it comes with being a

Council member in the Motherlands. They ask too many questions and are always so god damn nosy about other people's feelings. It's annoying."

I tilted my head. "They're not nosy, Dad. They just show a genuine interest in people, that's all."

"What's the difference?"

I sighed. "Mother Nature, you truly are grumpy. Are you hungry?"

"No. I told you, I'm bored."

"How about a movie then?"

"I'm sure you have better things to do than be stuck in this room with me."

"Dad." I let my hand caress his long scruffy beard. "You don't have to be stuck in this room. I could take you out in the park. We have the hoverchair. And

what about tonight when Khan announces the first democratic election in the Northlands? You should be there.”

With his right hand, Magni pushed himself higher on the bed and gave me a stern expression. “You know I won’t let my men see me like this. I can follow the announcement from here.” He nodded to the interactive wall.

“But...”

“It’s not up for discussion!” He looked straight ahead, signaling that he was done talking about it.

“This is what you fought with Mom about, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and I don’t know why you’re taking her side.”

“Because you can’t hide in here

forever. That's why." When he gave me the cold shoulder, I got out of the bed and stood to watch him for a second. "Dad, you know we all love you. Seeing you hurting is hurting us too. No one is going to think less of you because you got injured. It wasn't your fault."

My dad's voice was raw when he answered, "Mila, I know you mean well but you can never fully understand what it means to be a proud Nman. No one will say it to my face but they all feel sorry for me." His voice rose in volume. "I don't want any fucking pity!"

I lowered my head, feeling bad about having upset him when my intention had been to cheer him up. "I'll get you some snacks from the kitchen."

“Don’t bother. I’m not hungry.”

“You’ve lost weight.”

“Yeah, about a hundred pounds of legs and an arm.”

“It’s not funny.”

Magni gave me a dry look. “No, it’s not.”

I left his room with a heavy feeling in my body. At least today, my dad hadn’t screamed and thrown things around.

“Mila.” I had only just exited, when Jonah called my name. “There you are. I was looking for you.”

Despite being twenty-five, Jonah looked young compared to the men here because he didn’t have a beard.

“I was saying hi to my dad.”

Jonah took the last step on the staircase and stopped. “How is he? Is he excited about the announcement tonight?”

“You know my dad isn’t the best when it comes to change, and that he’s no fan of democracy.”

Jonah gave a single nod. “I’m sure that he’ll see the benefit of it soon though. Do you want me to talk to him?” He moved toward my parents’ suite, but I intercepted him, linked our arms, and led him down the hallway toward my room.

“My dad seemed tired. Maybe he’ll feel better later.”

Jonah was tall for a Motlander and looked down at me with a gentle smile.

“All right. If he’s too weak I can come back another time.”

I answered him with a smile and changed the subject.

“Did you have a good meeting with Khan and Pearl?” Pearl had been a member of the Motlander Council before she married my uncle, Lord Khan, who was also the ruler of the Northlands. It was clear that she’d taken a keen interest in Jonah, who was the first male to serve on the Motlander Council in four hundred years.

“I did. They invited me to visit them any time so I think I might be back in a few weeks, when they’re making the final decisions on the public transportation that we’ve been working

on.”

“Really? Wow, that’s exciting.”

“Yeah, it’s a big deal. The Northlands will be the first place to have the new transportation system, but if it’s successful we could be expanding it to the rest of the world.”

His enthusiasm was infectious. “I bet Pearl’s and Khan’s real agenda for asking you to come back here is because they want help with their campaign.”

“Could be.” Jonah bumped my side a little. “Let’s just pretend it is. I’ve been a fan of Pearl since I was a teenager, so the idea that she values my input and needs my help is an ego-boost.”

We reached my door and the sound

of my small dog scratching from the inside made me sigh. “Loki, stop it!” The small dog was barking and as soon as I opened the door, he jumped up my legs to get my attention.

Holger and Happy, my other two dogs, were bigger and calmer. “I’m excited to see you too,” Jonah told Happy, who was making sounds of joy and licking his hands.

“I need to take them out for a walk. Wanna come?” The minute I picked up their leashes, my dogs ran to the door and as always, Happy was jumping up and down like a mountain goat.

“It’s funny. I swear dogs smile too.” Jonah pointed at Happy. “Look at him.”

“That’s why I named him Happy.”

Jonah followed us out and closed the door after us. “How about letting the dogs run full speed while we race on the hoverbikes in the park? That would be fun.”

“Honestly, Jonah. You and your racing. You’re worse than Mason.”

Jonah almost tripped over Loki who kept close to our feet. “It’s in my blood, I can’t help it. One day you should come to the theme park my family owns and we can race on old dirt bikes. I’ll bet you’d love it.”

Angling my head, I smiled. “It’s funny how different you are from other Motlander men.”

Jonah frowned. “I’m really not, Mila. It’s just that you’ve been in the

Northlands for twelve years. Your view on us Motlander men has been skewed by the prejudice against us that is so widespread here. I mean according to your father, all Motlander men wear makeup, beads in their hair, and we dress like women. None of us are supposed to have an inkling of muscle, sex-drive, or quality sperm.”

Jonah was spot on. That was the impression we all had of Motlander men, so I nodded.

He protested, “It’s not like that. Not anymore, at least.”

“I’m not saying that *you’re* like that, but from what I remember...”

“Mila, you were ten years old when you left the Motherlands. How about you

come back with me and see what things are really like?”

I shook my head. “I can’t leave my dad and he wouldn’t allow me to go anyway.”

Jonah frowned. “*Allow you?* Mila, what are you talking about? You’ll be twenty-two in six weeks. You’re an adult woman. No one can control you unless you let them.”

I bit my lip. “No, I know that. It’s just that he tolerates our touching and being friends, but for me to go with you without an escort; that would be unheard of.”

Jonah raised an eyebrow. “Are you afraid that if you go with me, I’ll overstep your boundaries?”

The idea of Jonah coming on to me, made my heart hammer, and my mouth felt dry, but I managed to make a “tsk” sound. “No, of course not. I’m pretty sure if you were interested in me that way, you would have made a move already. It’s just that my tournament is coming up in the spring and if the participants learned that I was traveling alone with a man, rumors might spark.”

Jonah kept his eyes locked with me a little longer than usual. “Except they all perceive me as a homosexual, don’t they?”

I looked down, biting back my desire to ask Jonah if they were right. Jonah and I were close friends but he had never brought up sexuality before

and neither had I.

“Mila?”

“Yes?” I lifted my gaze.

“I’m right about them thinking I’m a homosexual, aren’t I?”

Forcing out the words, I admitted, “Probably. Or maybe asexual.” If Raven were here, she would have shamelessly asked Jonah what his sexual orientation was, but I wasn’t that straightforward.

“Hmm...” He said, “So why don’t we use that to our advantage and you can come back with me for a visit?”

When I didn’t answer, Jonah reached for my hand. “Say yes, please.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Sure.”

We walked the dogs for a few

minutes until we came close to the obstacle course in the park where Mason, my younger brother, was working out with two of the soldiers who belonged to the security here at the Gray Manor.

“Hey, Jonah, come here.” Mason was gesturing and whistling and it made all the dogs sprint toward him.

We turned in the same direction.

CHAPTER 2

The Obstacle Course

Jonah

Mason stood in front of the obstacle course with his hands on his hips and a big smug grin on his face. “I’ll bet I can beat you by more than twenty seconds.”

The boyish excitement that radiated from the eleven-year-old, was amusing, but I didn’t doubt that he was right. Mason was born to compete.

“You want *me* to race you?”

“That’s right. I’ve seen you running

in the park and this morning you did push-ups. Think of this as just another type of exercise.”

“But...” I didn’t get to finish my sentence before he interrupted me.

“Just do your best. Nobody expects you to be good at it.”

“Umm...” I wasn’t sure what to say to this self-assured boy who was already taller than me despite being only ten for a few more months.

“You shouldn’t pressure him,” one of the guards said. “Motlanders don’t like to push themselves.”

It had been a year and a half since I first visited the Northlands. In that time, I’d learned not to get offended by their insulting assumptions about me.

Looking over the obstacle course, I asked, “Okay, so what do we have to do?”

Mason lit up and explained the seven obstacles. Pointing to the last one, he said, “I can climb that tree in less than twenty seconds.” He threw a nod to the two soldiers. “I’m even faster than Kal-El and Neptune.”

My eyes grew wider. “Did you say Neptune? Like the planet?”

The guard in question spoke up, “No, I’m named after the Roman god of the sea. Why are you shaking your head at that?”

“My apologies. It’s just that you Nmen never cease to amaze me with your names.”

“I’m named after Superman,” Kal-El said with pride.

“Is that another mythological god?”

Kal-El, looked away and muttered, “Something like that.”

When Mason snickered, Neptune explained, “Superman was a cartoon character that could fly.”

“He was much more than a cartoon character. Superman was a bad-ass from outer space, all right?” Kal-El defended himself, but that only made Neptune shrug.

“If you say so, but being named after a god is way better. Nobody messes with a god.”

My eyes fell to his injured hand, which looked to be wrapped in a layer

of bone accelerator. “So, I assume that’s self-inflicted then?”

It was clear to me that Neptune wished I hadn’t noticed. He moved his hand behind his back and offered no explanation.

“Anyway, as I was saying, I can beat them and they’re grown men.”

“And I’m not?”

“Yeah, but you’re a grown Momsy, and that’s different.”

“Mason!” Mila’s tone was reprimanding. “We don’t use the term Momsy.”

“Sorry, I meant he’s a grown Motlander.”

“That I am. But surely, where I come from shouldn’t determine how fit or

athletic I am.”

Kal-El and Neptune, who both looked to be in their mid-twenties like me, exchanged a glance while Mason said what they were all thinking, “It kinda does, ’cause everybody knows that we Nmen are much stronger than men from the Motherlands. It’s a genetic thing.”

“Then let me ask you this, strong one.” I hid my smile. “Are you sure you want to race me? Sounds like I have nothing to lose and you have nothing to win. Think about it. If I beat you, what will people think? It sounds like losing to a Momsie man would be embarrassing to you.”

Mason snorted and pushed out his

chest. "There's no way I'll lose against you. Are you in or not?"

"I'm not exactly wearing my running gear."

"You'll be fine. Those sneakers and loose pants will work great."

"If you say so." After rolling my shoulders and jumping up and down a few times, I took off my thick sweater and left only my long-sleeved t-shirt on. "Okay, then let's do it!"

Mila reined in her three dogs to avoid their chasing us, while Kal-El gave Mason some last-minute advice.

"Remember to breathe and find your balance before stepping onto the beam, and this time – fucking duck your head when the balls swing at you."

Mason was eager and exclaimed, “Can I go first?”

I swung my hand in a grand gesture and smiled. “Show me how it’s done.”

We all cheered for Mason and I was impressed how athletic he was and how well-coordinated his long lanky body was. In the middle of the course, he got knocked down by a large ball swinging from side to side.

“I fucking told you to duck,” Kal-El shouted to Mason, who pushed back up from the ground. Placing a hand on a rib on his left side, Mason’s face distorted in a grimace, but the other guard, Neptune, cheered him on, “No time for pain, just get your ass back up there.”

The second time, Mason managed to

get through without getting hit by any more balls. Running toward the last obstacle, the tree, Mason accelerated full speed and used a cat-like technique, taking a few steps on the trunk and leaping high in the air for one of the branches. Once he had a good grip, he pulled himself up. I counted how many seconds it took him to reach the top. Seventeen seconds.

“You’re like a monkey, aren’t you?” I teased when he came back down. “That was incredible, Mason.”

“Told you I’m fast.” His blue eyes shone with pride.

“Well done little brother.” Mila reached up and tousled his red hair that complimented his freckles.

He pushed her hand away with an embarrassed mutter. “I’m not little.”

The guards patted him on the shoulder before turning their attention to me. “Your turn, Councilman. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I had been a fast runner since childhood and with my family unit being in charge of a Nostalgia Park where visitors could experience simulated time traveling, I was used to physical activities.

“What was your time again?” I asked Mason.

“Three minutes and fourteen seconds.”

“All right.” Wetting my lips, I swung my arms a last time and took position.

“I’m ready.”

Neptune held up his arm and set the timer on his wristband. “3, 2, 1, Go.”

The first obstacle required only the use of my arms. Jumping up to reach the first iron bar, I had to switch between my left and right arm and pull myself along twenty more iron bars, positioned far enough apart for me to have to use my legs to swing to get momentum. I was happy that Mason had gone first and demonstrated the technique.

When I got through and jumped to the next obstacle, I heard one of the guards say, “Damn, I didn’t think he would have the strength to do that.”

It always astonished me how Nmen underestimated us people from the

Motherlands. My sister, Emanuela, was a soccer player and one of the best athletes in the world. I'd bet if she were here, she would beat all of us on this obstacle course.

“There's no way he'll get through the next one. It's all about core muscles.”

I ignored their comments and focused on getting through a tunnel that was too low to crawl in. Pushing off on my elbows and using my hips and legs to wriggle forward, I kept my head down and my eyes on the light at the end of the tunnel.

“Fuck, that was fast.” Mason's outcries were followed by Mila's cheering for me.

“Keep going, Jonah, you’re winning.”

It helped that I’d seen Mason go through the course. The third obstacle reminded me of a short zipliner, except that once you grabbed onto the two handles you were twirled around while going fast through the air. I hated getting dizzy and was grateful that at least there was a large safety net underneath in case I fell. I ran up the stairs to the platform and with a firm grip on the handles, I kicked the release mechanism and felt my body spinning around and around, like a dancer on ice doing pirouettes.

It was a small miracle in itself that I didn’t let go of the handles before it was over and that I managed to not throw up

after.

The guards and Mason were laughing and making comments about how I had screamed while spinning, but I also heard one of them say, “He must have some muscles hidden under that shirt because he’s fucking fast.”

If only they knew how many summers I’d worked in my family’s theme park. Last year alone, I’d spent three weeks as a rappelling guide; two to four times a day, I’d had to manually pull myself and a visitor up on a platform because one of the wires in the park wasn’t tight enough. I wasn’t buff like most of the Nmen, but I was strong.

The third obstacle was jumping from one platform to another. I fell down once

but was quick to get up again. By the time I made it to the fourth obstacle, the balance beam where large balls were swinging from side to side, I was ahead of Mason by six seconds.

Mila kept encouraging me. “You’re doing great, Jonah. Keep going and be careful.”

The fifth and sixth obstacles were tricky, but I kept up my time until I got to the last obstacle, the tree. I wasn’t as agile as Mason, who had climbed the tree in an almost running manner.

“Come on, Jonah, get up there,” Mila shouted and it made the dogs bark at her excitement.

My arms felt twice as long as usual, my lungs were hurting from working

overtime, my muscles were burning, and I was panting. Still, I pushed myself to keep going up that stupid tree, ignoring my fear of heights.

Why did you say yes to this stupid bet? You have nothing to prove. He's just a boy... so what if he thinks I'm slow and weak?

Crawling up and up, one thought stood out clear to me.

I'm not doing it to impress Mason. I'm doing it to impress Mila.

“You have seven more seconds to reach the top,” Mila shouted to me and began counting – “6, 5, 4.”

I turned my head and instantly tightened my grip on the branch when I saw how small they looked down below.

“I can win,” I muttered to myself and moved faster.

Don't you dare. You're better than this. He's a child. You're a man. You have nothing to lose. He does!

The top was right there. All I had to do was touch the next branch, yet I didn't.

But Mila... my vanity argued. Mila is watching. She likes strong men.

My arm didn't move. Instead, I inhaled through my nose and exhaled as Mila shouted, “2, 1, and time!”

Below me, Mason raised his hand in the air and shouted, “I won! Told you all I could beat a Momsie any day.”

My legs were shaking when I climbed down the tree.” Seeing Mason's

pride, I knew I'd done the right thing.

“I'm impressed, Motlander. You gave our young one a run for his money.” One of the guards patted my shoulder hard, a custom I'd observed among the men here.

“Thank you. I would like to say it was fun, but that twirling thing had me almost losing my breakfast.”

They laughed.

“Hey, Jonah.” Mason was smiling at me. “Since you did so well on the obstacle course, how about I teach you how to fight? I honestly think you have some skills, man.”

I waved a hand in front of me. “No thank you. I'm a pacifist. I'd feel awful if I hurt you or anyone else.”

He scoffed. “You won’t hurt me. I guarantee it.” Mason placed a hand around my shoulder and led me a few steps away from the others. “The thing is; you spend a lot of time with Mila, and she for sure can’t defend herself.”

“Mason, I heard that.” Mila’s hands went to her hips.

He shrugged. “It’s no secret that you stink at fighting and as one of your protectors, I would feel better if Jonah knew how to protect you. You know, just in case.”

“You can’t expect Jonah to train in fighting techniques. He’s a councilman, not a warrior.”

Mason looked to the guards for support. “All men need to know how to

fight, am I right?”

They nodded and Kal-El suggested, “At least learn how to block so you won’t get beaten up too badly.”

“Thank you, but that’s not necessary. I’m very good at de-escalating any tense situation.”

“Don’t tell me that you’re planning to use words if someone threatens my sister.”

“Why not? De-escalating a potentially violent situation is much better than getting into a fight.”

Mason wrinkled his nose. “I don’t need to de-escalate anything. I’m a fucking excellent fighter. If anyone comes at me, I’ll take them down.”

Tucking my hands under my armpits,

I raised my eyebrows. “I’m sure you will, Mason, but it’s not just about you. What about the good people you hurt? It’s always better to avoid violence.” Turning to Neptune, I nodded to his injured hand. “Were you the only one who got hurt?”

Neptune gave a satisfied scoff. “Fuck no, the other guy was a mess.”

Kal-El grinned. “It’s true. I was there, it was a great bar fight.”

“See, my point exactly. Fighting hurts people and it’s impractical and unnecessary.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Neptune protested.

“No? What happened?”

Neptune, who was wearing a tank

top that revealed an angry red scar running along his collarbone, pushed out his broad chest and used an accusatory tone of voice, "I was sitting in my favorite bar waiting for Kal to come back from taking a piss when this zombie-looking fathead provoked me into a fight."

"And how did he do that?"

"I was just minding my own business and then the idiot called out to me, 'What are you looking at?'"

"And?"

Neptune lowered his brow and sighed as if I was mentally slow and he was losing patience with me.

"He beat him up of course." Mason said with excitement before adding to

Neptune, “Or at least I hope you did.”

“Of course.”

I closed my eyes for a second, reminding myself that these men didn't know any better. “You beat up a man for asking you what you were looking at.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn't you just introduce yourself? After all, you said that your name would make others not want to mess with you.”

“Because he annoyed me. If you'd been there, you would understand. It wasn't so much what he said, but the aggressive way he said it. I needed to teach him a lesson.”

My tone was impassive. “And how did that work out for you?”

Neptune lifted his hand. “That’s fucking obvious, but the worst thing is that I got banned from my favorite bar for a whole month.”

Kal-El placed a sympathetic hand on Neptune’s shoulder. “You didn’t have a choice, man. You can’t let anyone give you shit like that.”

“I know, right?” Neptune nodded. “And I destroyed him, so that was good.”

“No, it wasn’t good. Violence is never good. It’s primitive and barbaric.” This time, I couldn’t keep my dislike for violence out of my tone that became a bit shrill.

My words made Mason and the two guards snort out loud. “You’re just

saying that because you wouldn't be able to defend yourself in a bar fight. If anyone had provoked you..." Neptune chuckled. "Shit, you'd probably piss your pants or something."

I didn't like them laughing at me. "No, I wouldn't wet myself. I would use my words to de-escalate the situation.

"How, by begging him to leave you alone?"

It took all my patience to wait for them to get over their burst of laughter before responding, "It would have been so easy for you to answer him with a de-escalating response instead of letting it get to a fight."

"Like what?"

"Well, try it with me. Tell me what

he told you.”

“Umm... okay,” Neptune stopped smiling and turned serious. “Hey you, what the fuck are you looking at?”

In a calm voice I nodded to his chest. “Your shirt, I like it. Where did you get it?”

“But what if it’s an ugly shirt?” Mason asked.

“Then you can say something like, ‘Did we go to school together? You look familiar.’”

“Alright, I see your point.” Kal-El shifted his balance. “But then let me ask you this. A few months ago, I got in a big fight because a man accused me of looking at his woman. You can’t confuse a woman with a classmate, so what was

I supposed to say then?”

“Easy, you just look at her and say. ‘I’m sorry if I was staring but is your name Susan?’ When she says ‘No’ you just tell her she looks a lot like your new dentist or something. It’s not that hard. What matters is that you don’t get into the fight.”

"Huh." Kal-El looked a little impressed. “I actually do have a female dentist, but her name isn’t Susan, it’s Marianne.”

Mason scoffed. “Don’t listen to Jonah. He’s just afraid of pain.”

“To be honest, I’m more afraid of inflicting pain on others.”

My comment made Neptune roll his eyes. “That’s ridiculous. If a guy

provokes you, he's fucking asking for pain and that means he deserves it."

"Always?"

"Yes, always!"

I thought for a second to find a scenario that they would understand. "What if the man calling you out for looking at him just lost his best friend in another bar-fight? What if his aggressive tone is really just because everything inside him hurts? If you lost your best friend wouldn't you be grieving?"

"Sure."

"Would you still beat him up if he's a decent guy who is full of sorrow and anger because of how much he misses his friend?"

Neptune wrinkled his brow. "Of

course I would.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t know he was grieving, would I? I’d just see that he was being an ass.”

I inhaled and exhaled in long steadying sighs. “My point is that you never know what others are struggling with. Being mature and wise means being kind to others, even when they aren’t being kind to you.”

Mason and the two soldiers laughed like it was the stupidest thing they’d ever heard.

Kal-El pointed at me with a wide grin. “You’re hilarious.”

“Don’t you see that the best way to win a fight is to avoid having one?”

That only made them laugh louder.

Mila hooked her arm under my elbow and nudged me forward. “Come on, Jonah. I’m thirsty.”

We walked away in silence with me trying to see things from their perspective. “Sometimes being in the Northlands feels like I’ve traveled back in time.”

“Pearl says the same thing.”

“Why are they so attached to violence? It’s like they refuse to evolve.”

“It’s a matter of conditioning, I think.” Mila’s clear blue eyes were serious. “They fear failure more than pain.”

“Hmm... funny, when to me it would

be a failure to cause others pain.”

“I know, but Jonah, they do have a point that we wouldn’t be able to defend ourselves in a fight.”

Stopping in my tracks, I looked down at her. “Mila, I’m twenty-five and I’ve never been in a fight. Like any other civilized man, I use my words rather than my body to argue a point.”

“Which is a good thing. I’m just not sure words will get you far here.”

I gave her a confident smile. “You’re wrong. Words are the strongest tool any man has. The right words can diffuse or escalate a situation. In the past, words have started and stopped wars, so never underestimate the power of words, Miss Sunshine.”

Mila began walking again. “You’re probably right, but I’m not as eloquent as you and Pearl. It’s a special gift you have.”

“I’m happy to teach you, unless you prefer the Nman version of crushing your enemies physically.” We shared an amused smile and Mila tightened her hold around my elbow.

“They tried to teach me how to fight when I was in school.”

“And?”

She gave me one of her charming laughs. “I was horrible at it. As soon as I hit my opponent, I would stop to ask if they were okay.”

I couldn’t help myself, but kissed the top of her head. “I like that about you.”

When she beamed up at me, I added, “But then I like a lot of things about you, Mila.”

I’d been lucky enough to meet her on my first visit to the Northlands a year and half ago, and she was the main reason that I kept coming back.

“I like a lot of things about you too.”

Our smiles grew wider as we walked through the park with our arms linked together. A young gardener waved back when Mila greeted him.

“I’ll bet he envies me that I can walk with you like this. I’m a lucky man.”

“I’m not sure about that, Jonah.”

“You don’t think he wants to be close to you?”

“Maybe, but I don’t think he envies

you.”

“Why not?”

Mila bit her lip. “You said it yourself, they all think you’re gay or asexual.”

That made me frown. “Does it bother you that they think that way about me?”

Mila didn’t meet my eyes. “Yes and no.”

I waited and when she didn’t elaborate, I pressured her, “You can’t leave it at that.”

Mila sighed. “It bothers me because I know some of them think less of you.”

“Doesn’t that come with being a Motlander man?”

“I guess. But if they knew you, they

would know how funny, wise, and amazing you are.”

I squeezed her arm. “As long as you think so, that’s all that matters to me.”

“Good. And maybe their assumption isn’t all bad. As I see it, it has given us freedom to have a close friendship.”

Her words released a sadness inside me. From day one, I’d been irrelevant as a suitor. The belief in the Northlands that all we Motlander men had no sexuality made them dismiss me as anything more than a friend to Mila.

In a country where men weren’t allowed to touch a woman, no one seemed to care much about what went on between her and me. The sad truth was that I might as well have been a eunuch

with the trust they showed me.

It hadn't bothered me at first, but over the last year and a half, a close bond had grown between us to the point where we now shared a mutual dependency. When I was away from Mila, I craved her physical closeness.

We had reached the Gray Manor and rain was dripping, but I still stopped, asking Mila one last question. "And is that why you're so comfortable with me, Mila? Because you assume that I'm a homosexual or asexual?"

CHAPTER 3

The Announcement

Mila

The ballroom in the Gray Manor was filled to capacity with three hundred chairs. In the front were the press corps and behind them, Khan's devoted supporters, who were all talking while waiting for the exciting news they had been invited to hear live.

When Khan took his position in front of the audience, he didn't exude his usual aura of confidence. There was a

slight tremor of his hands and his movements were faster and stiffer than usual.

Feeling scared for my family, I rubbed my hands together, fingers stretched out and interlaced. It was a behavior reserved for when things were really bad.

Today, Khan would have to share his darkest secret with a nation of ten million men who didn't value vulnerability. I knew the secret because I'd been there when my grandmother Erika revealed it. She wasn't in the room and wouldn't be watching the live show. Instead she was with my siblings and cousins in the entertainment room, where they would be playing games.

Khan didn't begin his speech until the room was dead silent. "Today is a historic day. I'm going to do what no ruler has done before me." He paused and sucked in a long steadying breath. "Not long ago, an ugly family secret was revealed to me and rather than cover it up, I'm going to share it with all of you."

My hands were clammy and I brushed them off on my pants looking around to see people's reaction. Jonah sat next to me with his eyes fixed on Khan like the rest of the audience.

"About a year after my father, Lord Marcus Aurelius, won my mother Erika in her bridal tournament, they received a visit from the ruler at the time, Nikolai Wolf. For forty-eight years my mother

kept the unimaginable act of cruelty that happened that night a secret.” Khan swallowed and continued, “Lord Wolf brutally raped my mother, while my father was held down by two of Lord Wolf’s trusted generals.”

A collective gasp sounded and Khan waited for the initial shock to lift before continuing. “My father swore to my mother that he would avenge her by one day killing Lord Wolf and the generals. As you all know, he kept that promise and became the ruler of our country for almost thirty years.”

By now, Khan looked more determined and stubborn than nervous. “I was a result of that rape, and that means that I’m not the biological son and heir

of Marcus Aurelius.”

Loud muttering broke out in the audience.

“I have already proven my worth as a ruler. The prosperity, stability, and constant progress in our country during my reign is unprecedented.”

Some in the back shouted supportive comments and Khan waited for the room to quiet down again.

“We’ve never had a similar situation and there’s no doubt in my mind that my critics will see this as a chance to overthrow me, and take power for themselves. It’s how it’s always been in the Northlands, and many good men have died in senseless civil wars.

“That’s why, instead of waiting for

the past to repeat itself, I'm challenging all of you to make up your mind. Do you want me to continue as your ruler? Do you want to keep reaping the benefits of peacetime where Motlander women are coming up here looking for an Nman to love?" Khan's voice grew lower and he raised his index finger in a warning gesture. "Mark my words; if a civil war breaks out in the Northlands, the Motherlands will shut their border and the influx of women will cease! Do you want that?"

Squaring his shoulders and rising to his full height, he continued, "Today is a historic day because I'm announcing that we'll have the first election in the Northlands."

Another wave of shock went through the crowd.

A journalist gasped out loud. “Is he talking about democracy?” He was looking around the room with large eyes, and a buzz of answers expressed how disturbed the crowd was. Some were running hands through their hair and twisting their faces into anger, others were shouting questions at Khan, who stood stoically.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Is this a joke?”

Raising his palm, Khan waited for the room to quiet down. “On April 10th you will all get to cast your vote for me or anyone running against me. It will be a fair process and everyone with the

ambition to run for President can sign up. There will be more information available online.”

A sea of hands went up from the press and Khan pointed to a man in the front.

“If you’re not Lord Marcus’s son, shouldn’t you step down and let the rightful heir rule?”

Khan looked pissed. “My brother, Magni, would be the rightful heir but he has made it clear years ago that he has no interest in being a ruler himself. It’s too much of a desk job for him.”

Another journalist stood up, and spoke in an accusatory tone of voice, “Is this in any way related to Magni’s accident?”

Khan took a second before he answered, “Are you implying that I sabotaged my brother’s drone because I knew he was the rightful heir and I wasn’t?”

“Well, it’s a fair question. Did you know about this before he crashed?”

“No, I didn’t know and I had nothing to do with his crash. Magni and I are a team and will continue to be a team.” With deep frown lines on his forehead, Khan pointed to another journalist.

“Then how come no one has seen Magni for months? There are rumors that he’s dead and that you’re covering it up.”

Khan looked like he wasn’t sure whether to punch the man or answer his

question. With annoyance in his voice, he nodded to me. “Mila, will you confirm that your father is very much alive?”

I stood up and turned to the crowd, feeling my heart race faster when hundreds of people stared at me. “I... I assure you that my father, Magni Aurelius, is alive and growing stronger every day after the accident. He has been part of the decision to have an election and he supports Khan one hundred percent.”

“Then why isn’t he here?” someone shouted from the back.

My mother Laura, who was standing by the wall, stepped forward. “That’s none of your fucking business.”

Khan cleared his throat. “Magni will step out in public when he feels ready. As Mila said, he is involved in making decisions and he supports the direction we’re taking.”

“There’s no fucking way Magni supports democracy. You people are covering something up.” A large man in the middle of the room stood up and gave a loud outburst and others called out in support.

“That’s right.”

“We want to hear it from Magni.”

I was proud of Khan for keeping calm and answering, “On the contrary, we’re being very transparent.” Khan pointed to another journalist. “Do you have a question that doesn’t involve

Magni?”

“Yes. Who came up with the idea of democracy; was it one of the Council members that you socialize with? Jonah Cervici is here. Did he plant this idea in your head?” The question sounded like another accusation and I turned in my seat to see Jonah’s reaction, but he was gone.

“No, it wasn’t Jonah’s idea. It was mine! Next question.”

I didn’t stay to hear the next question. Instead I walked out of the room to call Jonah on my wristband. “Jonah, where did you go? Things are heating up in there.”

“I went to your dad. I’m trying to convince him to give his support via a

remote link, but he won't listen to me."

Magni came into view in the hologram above my wrist. "I told Khan this would be a disaster. People don't want a democracy. It makes us look weak."

Jonah argued before I could, "Which is why they need to hear it from you, Magni. Didn't you tell me that you're the strongest warrior in the world? If you support Khan's vision, others will follow."

"Jonah is right." I looked back over my shoulder toward the room I'd just left. "It's bad in there. Khan needs your help. Some of them think Jonah is behind the idea of democracy and that you're dead."

Magni growled. “I know. I’ve been watching.”

“They need to see you, Dad.”

“You’re wrong. If they see me, we’re going to look even more weak.”

“It can be a close-up of your face only.”

“I look horrible.”

I was going to protest, but again Jonah spoke first, “Yes, you do. Scary even! It’s brilliant for putting them all in their place. You’re a living legend to these men and they need to see you.”

I saw the moment my dad made up his mind. Using his right hand, he pushed his unruly hair behind his ears and sat up straighter. “Okay, but neck up only. Don’t fucking show any of my body, do

you hear me?”

“Got it!” Jonah’s face came into the picture. “Mila, go back in the room and tell Khan that Magni will speak.”

“Okay.” I hurried back to the room, where Khan was now red in the face from the aggressive push-back from the journalists.

“Magni is on the line. Do you want me to project him up so he can speak to everyone?”

Khan frowned, clearly not comfortable with this unplanned development. “Okay.” Turning to the audience again, he raised both hands. “In order to shut down all the ridiculous conspiracy theories you’ve been throwing at me, Commander Magni will

“speak now.”

I projected the hologram of my father beside Khan. With the right side of Magni's face scarred and his eyes flashing with anger, he looked like a furious Norse god who had descended on earth to wreak damage.

“So, you think I'm dead, do you? I'm afraid you fuckers weren't that lucky. I'm still here.”

Spontaneous cheers broke out in the back and one of his soldiers shouted. “Told you! It would take more than a drone crash to kill the Commander.”

Magni eased up a little bit. “As you can see, crashing in a drone did nothing good for my looks, but my mind still works and believe it or not, I support

this crazy idea of Khan's, and you know why?" Magni narrowed his eyes. "Because, if you assholes can't see how good you have it with me and Khan in charge, then you don't deserve us."

Khan nodded. "Thank you, Commander. Anything else you want to add?"

"Yeah. Stop making up stories about me being dead. It's fucking annoying."

"When will you appear in public?" a brave journalist asked.

Magni gave a grimace of annoyance. "I just fucking did."

"But when will you step out of the manor and meet the people?"

Magni shook his head as if the journalist asking was an idiot for using

the word “step” to a man who had lost both legs. “When I feel like it.”

“How are you dealing with the loss of your limbs?” The question from a third journalist made Magni so mad that he flipped a finger to the camera and turned his head. “Jonah, turn this shit off. I’m done.”

A famous reporter called Zeus was allowed a question by Khan. “Was it Jonah Cervici that Magni was talking to?” He stood with his shoulders squared and his body leaned forward as if he was on to something.

“Yes.”

“Would you say that Jonah has been instrumental in planting the idea of democracy in you and Magni, or was it

Pearl perhaps?”

Khan scowled at Zeus, who was known to ask sharp questions.

“I’ve already answered that question, but let me repeat that Jonah did not plant any ideas in us and we are not influenced by him. It’s the other way around.”

It was a predictable answer but nevertheless, I sighed and closed my eyes feeling the heaviness of the constant *them and us* debate drain me. In this integration process, it was always a discussion of which side influenced the other more. Not that I was any better myself; as a Motlander living in the Northlands, I would like to think that I influenced the people around me to be

kinder and more tolerant.

Khan took two more questions but I zoned out until it was all over and people moved around me.

“Mila, are you okay?” Jonah squatted down in front of me.

Blinking my eyes, I refocused. “Yeah, I was just reflecting on something.”

“On what?”

“On culture.”

“Come on.” He stood up and took my hand. “Let’s find a quieter place to talk.”

With a hand on the small of my back, Jonah led me through the ballroom, but we didn’t reach the exit before a deep male voice called my name.

“Mila, may I have a word?”

I turned my head to see one of the Huntsmen approach us. He was massive in height and had a thick neck. “Oh, I remember you. Your name is Python, isn’t it?”

His face lit up. “That’s right. We met at Raven’s and Leo’s wedding a few weeks ago.”

Jonah stiffened next to me. “Ah, yes, one of the five predicted champions.”

Python had told me at the wedding that he owned a workout studio in Kingstown where he taught fighting techniques.

“That’s right.” Python gave Jonah a hard stare. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Jonah didn't blink. "Forgive me but I'm not a fan of senseless violence or Mila's marrying a stranger."

Python ignored Jonah and turned his attention on me. "If you want to, we could get to know each other before the tournament. That way, I wouldn't be a stranger."

His coldness toward Jonah made me sure that I'd never pick him as my husband, but I managed to give him a polite smile. "That's very nice of you, but hardly fair to the other contestants."

"I thought you might say that." Python reached out his hand with a letter. "But would you at least read this?"

I hesitated because knowing that I'd never pick him, I had no interest in

reading his letter.

Don't be mean, just take his letter and smile.

I took it and gave him another stiff smile. "Thank you."

Jonah began walking and like we were tethered together by invisible rope, I hurried after him.

"Wait up."

He walked fast and steered toward the staircase leading up to his favorite spot: the rooftop star lounge.

"Jonah, what's wrong?" It was January and freezing so I wrapped my arms around myself. "We don't have jackets on. It's too cold to be up here."

Jonah stood with his back to me, hands in his pockets, and his head leaned

back. We had been up here at night, often, but never when there was frost in the air. He didn't look like he was going anywhere, so I walked over and turned on the outdoor heater and opened a drawer to find a large blanket.

“I can't stand the thought of you marrying one of those men. Tell me the truth. Are you attracted to any of them?”

“I don't know them.” Only my head peeked out under the large blanket that now covered me.

Jonah walked over to join me under the heater. “But the way his muscles made his shoulders pop up like they were pregnant. It can't possibly be attractive to you.”

“I don't judge people on how they

look.”

“No, I know, but...” Jonah’s head fell forward. “Remember what we talked about earlier when I asked you if you thought I was gay?”

“Yes.”

“To say that you don’t know isn’t an answer.”

“But I truly don’t know.”

He furrowed his brow and looked deep into my eyes for a few seconds before asking, “What about you, North Star? Do you have sexual desires?”

Jonah’s question surprised me. It was unusual for him to talk about sex.

“I’m not asexual if that’s what you mean.”

“Okay.” He kept his eyes locked

with mine. “And is it men or women for you?”

I blinked, unsure why there was a hint of anger in his voice when Jonah was always so calm and kind. “I’m attracted to men.”

Jonah shifted his weight to one side and pointed with a thumb over his shoulder. “Those men? I mean, what kind of name is Python and do you really find it attractive that his upper arm is the same size as his thigh?”

It was an exaggeration but I got what he meant.

“Not all warriors are massive like that. I don’t have to pick him.”

“It doesn’t matter, Mila. If it’s not him, it’s someone like him. Someone

who thinks people deserve pain and that fighting is the best way to communicate. Why would you spend your life with a man like that when..." He stopped talking and with a sigh he turned his back to me.

"When what, Jonah?"

Facing me again, he swallowed hard. "When you have a choice and you can say no."

I focused on his shoes and tried to defend myself. "It began as a stupid bet with my father, but the thing is that it really means the world to my parents."

"Mila, it might mean the world to them that you marry, but it doesn't have to be in a tournament, does it?"

"My dad says that it's the only way

to make sure I'm marrying the strongest protector possible.”

Jonah threw his hands up in frustration. “Come on, Mila. You're a Motlander. You don't need a protector. Just come with me to the Motherlands and see for yourself.”

I kept my gaze down. “My wedding day is April 6th. That's in a little over six weeks. I know you don't like it, but I can't cancel it. Too much work has gone into it by now.”

“Of course you can cancel it. All you have to do is say ‘no’.”

“I know you worry, but I won't let my future husband dictate that we can't be friends anymore.” Lifting my hand, I reached out and touched him. “I'm not

giving you up, Jonah.”

He took my hand and squeezed it with a pleading look. “If I mean that much to you, then come home with me. This might be your last chance.”

The cold air made clouds of moisture accompany our words. “I’ll talk to my parents about it.”

“No, Mila. You don’t need to ask for permission. You’re an adult and it’s time you understand that the one in charge has always been you!”

I nodded. “You’re right.”

“Just tell them that you’re going to the Motherlands with me for a week.”

“A week?”

“Yes. Anything less is too short.”

“But don’t you have to work?”

“Council meetings are held virtually. As long as I have a connection, I can work from anywhere.”

“I see.”

“So?” His tone vibrated with excitement. “Will you come with me?”

I wanted to say yes but a myriad of thoughts kept bringing up my father, the tournament, my dogs, and other reasons why I shouldn't.

“Mila, please.”

The more I looked into Jonah's beautiful amber-colored eyes, the less I felt the cold around us. His genuine interest and desire to spend time with me warmed me from within and a tingling sensation spread in my stomach.

“Come with me, Miss Sunshine. It'll

be fun, I promise.”

Unable to break eye contact or refuse Jonah when he always made me feel appreciated and special, I whispered my answer: “Okay. I’ll go with you!”

CHAPTER 4

Poking a Bear

Jonah

Magni's room was dimly lit when I entered. "Are you awake? Laura told me that I could say goodbye to you before I leave."

"I'm awake." With a low buzzing sound, the drapes moved and let in more daylight. Magni sat in his bed with books, plates, and entertainment equipment spread around him.

"Mila and I will be leaving in half an hour."

"She told me."

“You don’t sound upset about her going.”

Magni studied me when I sat down on the chair next to his bed. “With Khan’s new quest for democracy we can’t know what’s going to happen next. Some wannabe dictator might see his chance to overrule Khan. When Mila told me that she is going with you, Laura and I had already decided that we’re sending the children to the Motherlands for a while. Athena and Finn have agreed to let the little ones stay with them until things are calmer here.”

I blinked my eyes. “Are you expecting an attack?”

Magni’s tone was dry. “I’m always expecting an attack. That’s my fucking

job.”

Tilting my head, I pushed him a little. “Then shouldn’t you get out of bed and prepare to take these attackers on?”

If Magni’s look could have killed me, I’d be dead in my seat. “In case you haven’t noticed – I’m a fucking cripple.”

I shrugged. “You don’t need arms and legs to be a great leader.”

Magni narrowed his eyes. “People have said a lot of so-called motivational shit to me since the accident, but that has to be the stupidest thing of them all.”

I didn’t let his insult affect me. “What you need is a clear head, a great mindset, and the ability to delegate.”

“Spare me your lecture on great leadership.”

“Why?” I moved to the edge of my seat and pushed him a little. “What are you going to do if I don’t spare you?”

“I still have my right arm and that’s all I need to punch you.”

I tilted my head from side to side. “True, but that would require you to finally get out of your bed and since you’ve been unwilling to do that for months now, it sounds like an empty threat.”

Magni growled low.

“What?” I continued. “You think I don’t understand what it means to be physically weak among strong men? What it means to have people look at you like you’re a joke of a man?”

“No, I’m sure you understand that

part, but it's different for you because you were never strong to begin with."

There was nothing funny about his pain, but I pretended to be amused. "It's funny you should say that because as I see it, I'm the strongest man in the world."

"Ha... Either you're high or delusional?"

"I'm neither."

Magni pursed his lips. "Look, Jonah, you might be big and strong for a Motlander, but my eleven-year-old son could take you in a fight."

"No doubt!" I held my chin high.

Magni raised his brow. "So, you're admitting it?"

Leaning forward, I gave him another

smug smile, meant to provoke him. “Absolutely. My strength is up here.” I tapped my temple.

“You mean like Khan? He keeps telling us all he’s a genius.”

That made me laugh. “No. I’m no genius. What I am is a change maker who affects millions of lives. Just like you.”

“Don’t compare us. We’re nothing alike.”

His disgust offended me and made it easier to say what needed to be said, “You’re right. I don’t hide in my room feeling sorry for myself.” I shrugged. “People used to think that you’d soon get out of this room, but I guess they were wrong when they said you’re not a

quitter.”

Magni's right hand flew up and he pointed to the door. “Get the fuck out.”

Satisfied with my work, I rose up to my full height in a slow movement and picked up a notepad on the bed. Magni was fuming while I wrote down a sentence.

“Read it a hundred times until you get it,” I instructed him before walking to the door. “It's time for you to redefine what it means to be strong. None of your impressive fighting techniques will work on the demons in your mind.”

“You don't know shit about my demons.”

“I know they keep you trapped in here and that this suite is becoming your

own version of hell.” I began walking to the door. “The good news is that when you decide to beat the demons and take back your life, you can... with the right help of course.”

“You think I need your help? I don’t!”

“Strongest man in the world at your service.” I looked him straight in the eye. “Your first assignment is on that pad. I’ll check in on you the next time I come.”

Magni picked up the pad. “What is this crap?” He read the words and lowered his forehead. “There’s no assignment here.”

“You’re smart. You’ll figure it out.”

When I closed the door, I heard

Magni curse out loud behind me. All I could hope for was that I had poked the bear hard enough.

CHAPTER 5

Secrets from the Council

Jonah

Mila and I crossed the border to the Motherlands on foot and walked up to the community drone that I had ordered to pick us up.

Compared to her father's huge luxury drone that had taken us here, this one was much smaller.

Mila ran the last steps to the drone. "How cute. Look how tiny it is. Can you imagine some of the Nmen in one of

these machines? Their heads would bump the ceiling and they would have to sit like this.” She got in and curled her legs to her chest.

“See, there are advantages to being a normal-sized man. One meter and eighty-two centimeters is a fine height.” I used my voice to give the drone our destination while Mila looked up, calculating in her head.

“That’s six feet.”

“Yes, and then some because my ears work like wings and have me constantly floating above ground.” I had always been teased about my ears being big and it was second nature for me to joke about it.

Mila reached out and touched my

left ear. “I like your ears. It’s like your brain is trying to reach out and hug people.”

I cracked into a wide grin. “Only you would say that.”

The flight to my house took close to three hours, and gave us a chance to talk about all sorts of things from politics to Mila’s dream of being a veterinarian and running a large animal shelter.

“I don’t want a place with large cages. It should be a wonderful sanctuary where the dogs receive lots of love and live just like they would in a real family.”

“But do you only want to help dogs? What about all the other animals in the world?”

“That’s a good question.” Mila looked out the window. “Maybe I could start with dogs, and then move on to include other animals later.” She was quiet for a few seconds before she pondered out loud. “That reminds me, do you ever wonder about the cloned animals? I mean it’s great that we have the technology to revive species that went extinct during or after The Toxic War, but how do we know that they are behaving like their ancestors did?”

“Hmm... I don’t know.”

“I’ve discussed it with Shelly often”.

“Yeah? I’m curious; what did the genius have to say about it?”

Pulling her foot up under her, Mila

turned in her seat and tugged the sleeves of her cozy sweater over her hands. “Shelly agrees that it’s inevitable that the first clones will always differ from their ancestors in behavior. With no parents to raise them they will miss out on learned behavior that would normally have been passed from one generation to the next. It’s safe to assume that there will still be some instinctual behavior, though.”

“So how are the biologists getting around it?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is that they take great care in creating habitats that match each species. It’s fascinating, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It reminds me of something but...” I looked deep into her eyes. “You

have to promise that it stays between us.”

Mila's eyes expanded and she nodded with a serious expression. “Is it something classified?”

“Yes. But I trust you not to tell anyone, and it's coming out to the public in a few days anyway.”

“I don't know. What if it slips out of me? Maybe it's better if you don't tell me.”

“You sure? It's really interesting,” I tempted her.

She was so cute when she bit her lip and creased her eyebrows. “Okay, now I have to know what it is.”

“All right. You know how earth healers are cleaning up one toxic area of

the world at a time, right?”

Mila nodded. “Yes. I heard they just moved into old Europe.”

“I know.” I gave a secretive smile. “And something extraordinary happened.”

Mila didn’t blink. “Did they find a new species?”

“No. But they came across a group of people.”

“Someone got there before the earth healers? Who would be so reckless? What about the radiation and toxicity?”

“That’s the crazy part. Apparently, the ancestors of these people survived in an underground city until it was safe to come out.

“No one can survive underground

for four hundred years, Jonah.”

“Told you it was an interesting story. Basically, according to the report, the French government created underground survival bunkers in a cave-like system. It had the capacity of about a thousand people, but only thirty-eight made it inside in time.”

“Jonah, that’s crazy. How many are they now?”

“Thousands.”

“But are they...” Mila hesitated. “I mean with that few original survivors there’s bound to have been inbreeding.”

“You mean are they illiterate and mentally slow?”

“Yes, or deformed. What do I know?”

“They probably would have been if not for the fact that the survivors were smart enough to write down a strict set of rules to be followed. There were five women and thirteen men and they made mathematical systems to minimize the inbreeding. I suppose that’s what happens when a group of scientists are the sole survivors.”

“Do they speak English?”

“No. They speak French. We used to think it was a dead language, but apparently not.”

“Then how did the earth healers communicate with them?”

“Some of our priestesses with linguistic skills went to help and they’ve been working with the group.”

Mila leaned back. “Wow... I don’t know what to say. I can’t wrap my head around that many people going undiscovered for this many years.”

“I’ve been wondering the same thing, but the earth is no small place and most Council members aren’t interested in spending resources outside the healthy zone. That’s why the cleaning work is progressing so slowly. The good thing is that they’ve proven that at least that part of old Europe is safe to live in. It gives hope that there might be other survivors out there.”

“And are they happy to be found?” Mila asked.

“You would think so, but apparently not. The report said they were aware

there were other people in the world, but they saw us as a threat. For now, doctors are trying to establish a safe way for them to be included with the rest of the Motherlands, but they don't seem too eager."

"Why are there doctors, are they sick?"

"No, it's just that we don't know if they have the immune system to withstand what would be considered common diseases among us."

Mila leaned her head on the window. "I hope that means there are animals who have survived too. It's exciting that you have access to classified information like that. I promise I won't tell a soul."

“It’s one of my favorite things about being on the Council. The other day I found a book I’ve been dying to read since I first heard about it. Did you know that two hundred years ago there was a book that rattled the council so much that they made it illegal to speak about the Nmen?”

There was an eagerness to Mila’s tone. “Yes. I heard about it. It was a romance of some kind, wasn’t it?”

“Uh-huh. I’ve read some of the transcripts from the meetings back then and it was insane how threatened they felt by the desire that book aroused in women around the world. Not only did they make that book illegal, they also banned all other books that were

emotionally charged, be it romance or horror.” I shook my head. “If you ask me, it was a crime to humanity just like the ban on alcohol. To take away people’s freedom to read what we want is censorship of the worst kind.”

“But you’re going to change that, right?”

I narrowed my eyes with determination. “That’s the plan.”

“Tell me about the book. I’m so jealous. Did you read it already?”

“It’s called *Forbidden Letters from the North*, and yes, I read it. Once I began, I couldn’t stop reading. It’s about this young woman who finds a letter that has been thrown over the border wall and then she writes back. Maybe I can

get you a copy because it's so good, you need to read it yourself.”

“Then you'd better get to work and make them lift that ban.”

We laughed together and a minute later I pointed out the window. “Do you see that stadium over there? That's where my sister and Hunter play soccer.”

“Can we see a game?”

“The season is over. You'll have to come back again.”

Mila's face was close to the window, looking down. “I haven't seen Hunter for months. Are they still happy together?”

“Very. It's funny with him and my sister because they're so different but

maybe that's what makes it work between them.”

Mila turned and looked at me. “That’s what my mom says about my future husband. I shouldn’t be afraid of someone who is my opposite.”

My smile vanished because the thought of Mila marrying always came with the realization that I would lose my best friend.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s not true. I can read your body language, Jonah. Was it because I used the word afraid?” Mila exhaled noisily and began fiddling with her wristband – a sure sign she was nervous. “It’s not that I’m scared in general, but

there's one part about marriage that scares me.”

“Being told what to do and what to think?”

She rubbed her nose with the back of her hand. “That too, I guess, but mostly I worry about the wedding night.”

That made me sit up straight. “Why? What happens on the wedding night?”

Mila angled her head. “You know what happens.”

“Are you talking about the consummation?”

“Yes. I know it's part of marriage, but sometimes when I'm close to a Huntsman, I feel so tiny compared to them. I lean my head back to meet their eyes and to be honest, I wonder if...”

“If what?”

“If it’ll work.”

“It won’t!” My answer came fast.

Mila gaped. “But Willow is with Solo and he’s seven feet tall. They seem very happy and they have Nora, so they must have... you know, consummated their marriage.”

“Willow is taller than you.”

“That’s true, but I’ve seen women my size with large men.”

I turned down the heat. “It’s very hot in here, isn’t it?”

“It’s not just the consummation itself. It’s the kissing too. I’ve never kissed a man, or a boy for that matter.”

“Never?”

“No.” Mila looked thoughtful. “The

boys at my school were afraid to come too close to me because of my dad. Now I wonder if I'll be bad at it.”

“How hard can it be?” I pulled off my sweater, leaving only my t-shirt. “And besides, you don't have to impress him. Nmen look at you like you're a piece of strawberry pie.”

That made Mila grin.

“It's not funny,” I said. “It gives me the creeps how they eat you up with their eyes when you're not looking.”

“Did you ever kiss a woman, Jonah?”

I scratched my neck. “Sure.”

Mila put her feet down on the floor and straightened up. “Shut up – you didn't?”

“I did. I told you that my family runs a sex club.”

Narrowing her eyes, Mila drilled for information, “Yes, you told me about the club, but you said that you never had sex.”

“We didn’t have sex. But we made out and she taught me how to kiss.”

“When was this?”

“A long time ago. I was eighteen or nineteen.”

“Did you like it?” Mila’s eyes fell to my lips as if she wondered what it would be like to kiss me. My stomach tingled as if the drone had made a sudden drop. Shifting in my seat, I crossed my legs, hoping to hide that my pants were growing tight in the front.

“Ehh, it’s been so long that I can hardly remember it.”

“But could you teach me how to kiss?”

CHAPTER 6

How to Kiss

Mila

Jonah gaped before stammering, “What... what did you say?”

“I asked if you could teach me how to kiss. That way I wouldn’t be as nervous on my wedding night.” I held my breath feeling vulnerable for having proposed the idea.

“But...” He frowned. “Aren’t you supposed to be untouched to have a tournament?”

I pulled back in my chair. “I won’t lose my virginity from kissing.”

“No, I know that. I’m just confused because I assumed...” Jonah’s Adam’s apple was bobbing in his throat and he didn’t seem to know where to place his hands. “I just meant that maybe you wanted your husband to be the first to kiss you, or... I don’t know, it’s all irrational to me.”

It was irrational to me too. The way I longed for the one man who showed no interest in me sexually. I was so used to men sending long glances at me in the Northlands and I knew thousands were hoping to win my hand in marriage. So why was Jonah all I could think about?

“This isn’t back in the twenties when women were married off at fifteen,” I defended myself. “You said it

yourself. I'm a grown woman and I'm in charge." My hands were shaking a little when I gave Jonah a challenging stare. "If I want to kiss someone, I can, and it's not like you would tell anyone, would you?"

"No, of course not."

"Exactly. It would just be between you and me." I pulled back, taking his initial shock as a rejection. "But if you don't want to, I understand."

"No!" His tone was a bit high-pitched. "It's not that. It's just..." His eyes traveled between my eyes and lips. "Are you sure it's what you want?"

I went from defensive to nervous real fast, and tucked my shaking hands under my thighs. "Why not? We're

friends, and I feel safe with you.”

Jonah watched me as if he was waiting for me to break into laughter and tell him I was joking. When I didn't, his eyes fell to my lips again and he dipped his head a little closer. My heart was in my throat and the masculine scent of him made my nostrils expand to take it all in. This was Jonah Cervici, the most powerful man in the Motherlands and my best friend. I'd wanted him to kiss me for so long and now that he was mere inches away, my eyes shut and I stopped breathing.

No, my brain shouted. I wanted to see the kiss and not miss a thing, but the bombardment of my senses was too much and as soon as his breath warmed

my lips, I stopped worrying about seeing. Every particle of my body was in a state of hyper-sensitivity. The sensation of his lips brushing mine had me sucking in air in a small gasp.

Another soft kiss was followed by his fingertips, sliding up my neck. I pursed my lips, silently asking for more, and Jonah complied with long, soft, and tender kisses.

His lips tasted sweet and I got goosebumps from the delicious feeling of him pulling me toward him and kissing me in a more assertive way. The strong tingles that ran through my belly made me smile and giggle low.

“What is it?” Jonah asked into my mouth.

“Nothing.” I couldn’t tell him that I was elated to find that kissing him felt even better than the romance novels had promised. Afraid that I might embarrass myself by pulling him closer and try that French kissing that I’d read about, I kept my hands under my thighs and didn’t dare move.

“Do you like it?”

I loved that he kept his hand behind my neck and that his nose touched mine when he asked.

“Uh-huh,” I sighed and pursed my lips again, not wanting our kissing to ever stop.

Pressing his lips against mine in another hard kiss, Jonah cupped my face, and then he sucked on my lower lip,

releasing it with a pop sound.

With thousands of butterflies in my stomach, I felt sure that my seatbelt was the only thing preventing my body from lifting in the chair.

“How did it feel?” His question came as a whisper.

Despite having my eyes closed, I knew he had pulled back because I felt the loss of his closeness.

In a breathy voice, I answered, “It made me feel dizzy, like the drone was spinning or something.”

“Do you want to kiss more?”

There was no hesitation, just a quick, “Yes.”

Jonah’s lips were full and plump in the most delicious way. The way he

nibbled at my lower lip and planted kisses on my upper one made me want to never stop. I moved my head and kissed him back, and when my mouth couldn't be quiet about the wonderful feeling that was building up inside me any longer, a moan escaped from my throat.

“You okay, Mila?”

He had pulled back again, but I was reluctant to come out of the daze I was in. Kissing Jonah was everything I'd imagined times a hundred. My head was exploding with the need to tell him about the feelings I'd had for him for more than a year. But this was Jonah, who was critical about my interest in marriage every time the subject came up. He wasn't a romantic but a coolheaded

Councilman. So what if he indulged me in a kiss? It was only because he wanted to help me, and I wasn't foolish enough to think it meant as much to him as it did to me.

Telling Jonah how I felt could be the end to our friendship, and he was too important for me to risk that.

“Mila?”

I exhaled the breath I'd been holding in. “Yes, I'm okay.”

“What about this time, did you still like it?”

My brain felt molten but I still understood that this would be a defining moment in my life. Just like moving to the Northlands and being adopted had been.

“Yeah... Yes... I liked it.” My eyes were blinking as I rambled on, “This was good. Now I won’t be so scared anymore. I mean, if this is what kissing feels like, bring it on... you know?”

Rubbing his face, Jonah moved in his seat and turned to his window. “We’re nearly there. My home is nothing much but then I don’t spend a lot of time there, and I guess that compared to the Gray Manor everything looks small.”

He had changed the subject away from our kissing and I went along with him.

“Small can be cozy.”

“True, but I’m afraid my talent for decorating a house won’t impress you.”

“Don’t worry. I love decorating and

I'm good at it. If you want, I'll be happy to help you."

"I'll take all the help I can get."

The drone began descending to a rooftop in what looked to be a large city.

"Welcome to Old York. Once this was one of the busiest cities in the world. It had buildings reaching high up in the sky."

I took in the colorful houses and the naked trees along the streets.

"It's beautiful but very cold in the winter." Jonah picked up my jacket from one of the empty seats and handed it to me before putting on his own jacket.

"Did you ever consider living in a warmer place?" I asked.

"Yes. Every winter. But the summers

are nice here and one of the biggest restricted archives is located only ten minutes from me. I go there often to research.”

When the door of the drone opened, a cold blast of air made my hair blow back. “You weren’t kidding. It’s freezing.”

Jonah’s smile warmed me. “Come on, Miss Sunshine. You’re much tougher than you think.”

As we walked the three minutes from the drone parking to his apartment building, Jonah pulled me close to his side to shield me from the cold wind. At one point I slipped on black ice and we came close to falling on our behinds, which had us laughing.

“Please don’t get injured while you’re here. Your father already threatened to punch me once today, and I really enjoy my straight nose.”

“I’m sure he was only kidding.”

Jonah was quick to change the subject and pointed to the facades of the buildings that all had vertical gardens in front. “The city is much prettier in the summer when the flowers are in bloom.”

“Which one is your building?”

“The red one just down there. Be careful, there might be ice on the steps.”

Jonah’s apartment turned out to be slightly smaller than my room at the Gray Manor. It had a small bathroom and an open room that served as kitchen, living room, and bedroom.

While clearing away some socks and pants from the sofa, he asked, “What do you think of my place?”

“It’s perfect.”

“You don’t think it’s too small?”

“No. My head is already spinning with ideas on how to decorate it.” Walking over to a poster on the wall I crossed my arms and looked back at him. “Are you very attached to that one?”

“Not really, it was here when I moved in and I figured it added a little color to the room.”

“What is it even supposed to be?”

Angling his head, he made a guess.

“A cloning attempt gone wrong?”

“Hmm. It looks like the artist

couldn't decide if he wanted to make a goat, a horse, or a cow. It's creepy.”

Jonah used his foot to push some flat boxes under the sofa. “I would have cleaned if I'd known you were coming back with me. I'm planning to get a house-bot at some point, but you know...” He didn't finish his sentence.

“It's okay. I have messy siblings and my dad isn't the tidiest of people either.”

Walking over to the bed in the corner he began pulling off the sheets. “That's funny, because I once heard him reprimand one of his soldiers for being a slob.”

“I know, but that's just my dad playing big bad wolf with his men. They expect it of him. It's like he has to live

up to their image of him as the strict disciplinarian.”

“The dynamic between men in the Northlands is fascinating to me. I don’t understand why anyone would scold another adult for not having clean shoes. Why does Magni even care?”

I picked up a pillow to help change the sheets. “It’s a military thing. To be honest I think they make up all sorts of weird rules in order to exercise power over lower-ranking soldiers. It’s how they train them to not question authority.”

Jonah’s hands, with the other pillow, lowered. “People have to question authority. They have to, Mila. You too.”

I watched him open a drawer and find clean sheets.

“I’m not a soldier.”

“No, but you’re not exactly a rebel either. You’re pretty obedient when it comes to your father.”

I sat down on the bed. “It’s hard when your parents are hotheads like mine.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that they don’t take criticism well.”

Nodding my head, I added, “There’s that, and they’re not exactly good at communicating how they feel in general.”

Jonah made a sound between a snort and a laugh. “Yeah, it’s really hard to know if Magni is angry or happy. I can never tell.”

“Very funny, Jonah.” I rose up and

helped him put on the sheet. “It still surprises me how often you use irony and sarcasm. Are you sure you’re not the son of a Northlander?”

“It’s a possibility. Tristan and I are the same age and he was fathered by Finn long before the integration began.”

“You’re right.” I stopped and thought about it. “That would bring us back to the discussion of nature versus environment. Will a bird know how to sing like its ancestors did if no other bird is around to teach it the melody?”

“You mean, how did I get my wicked sense of humor in a place where everyone is nice?”

“Yes! You’re like the wolf that grew up with dogs and began howling even

though no one had shown it how.”

Jonah finished making the bed and picked up the dirty bed sheets from the floor. “Sorry to disappoint you, Milove, but I’m not a lonely wolf howling in a pack of dogs. My siblings are like me and use irony and sarcasm all the time.”

“But why is that?”

He shrugged. “We studied the past to make Nostalgia Park as authentic as possible. Every movie and book we could get our hands on was consumed raw to apply the old-fashioned expressions when we worked in the park. People get a real kick out of our being rude, direct, and speaking like they did back in that time period. I guess it just rubbed off on us.”

“I can’t wait to see that place and meet your other siblings.”

Jonah moved around in the kitchen side of the room. “They won’t all be there, but Cole, my older brother, is head of operations and you’ll meet him for sure.”

“I’ve heard about him from Hunter.”

“Yeah? Why are you grinning?”

“Because wasn’t Cole the one who brought Hunter to the sex club?”

With his hand on his fridge, Jonah wrinkled his brow. “Hunter told you about that?”

“Actually, he told Solo, who told Willow, who told me.”

“Wow, people talk, huh?”

“They sure do. The rumor is that

Cole is something of a sex expert.”

A small snort came from Jonah.

“You disagree?”

“No, I’m just not sure sex is something anyone would want to be considered an expert on.”

“Why not?”

Jonah reached for some cheese in the fridge and smelled it. “I’m not sure this is still good. Here, try and sniff.”

I leaned closer. “Smells fine to me. You were saying?”

“Huh?”

“About Cole being a sex expert.”

“Oh, right. I’m just saying that it’s not something to brag about. Sex is still frowned upon by many.”

“Really? Even with public figures

like your sister and Salma Rose being in relationships?”

“Maybe the attitude is changing, but for the older generations sex is still seen as something only romantics and naturephiles would do.”

“How can people object to something so natural?”

“As I said, it might be a generational thing. There’s a rising number of new members in my family’s sex club, but it’s all younger people.” Jonah had found some biscuits and celery sticks that he placed on a plate with the cheese.

“Ahh, you see! That has to be a result of the Northlands rubbing off on the Motherlands.”

Jonah gave me a speculative glance.

“I can’t argue that. It’s interesting though, that something as unhygienic and old-fashioned as sex is coming back into fashion.”

“Why wouldn’t it? It’s how people procreate.”

“No, Mila. It’s how people in the Northlands procreate, but here we have the fertility clinics and it works great.”

I followed him to the small couch. “But don’t you ever wonder if you’re missing out on something?”

Tilting his head from side to side, Jonah looked like he was making a list of pros and cons in his head. “Sure, I mean, Cole enjoys it, but he did say that the satisfaction from the experience varies depending on what partner he’s

with. Some of the women are inexperienced and tense up and it makes it less enjoyable for him.”

“Can’t he help them relax?”

“Not always, I think.”

I pulled my legs up under me and got comfortable on the couch. “Did you ever consider going to the club yourself? I’ll bet you could get any woman there you want.”

“Probably. But I can’t go.” Jonah placed some cheese between two crackers and stuffed them inside his mouth.

“Because of you being a Council member?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then do it with someone you trust

that wouldn't tell anyone." I felt my cheeks heat up. "I mean if you were curious and wanted to try and have sex."

Jonah gave a low chuckle. "Are you volunteering?"

I had a celery stick in my hand and threw it at him in a playful way. "Don't joke about it."

"Why not? It's funny. I mean the idea of you and me having sex together." Jonah snickered with amusement.

I laughed with him, hiding my disappointment that the idea was crazy to him when I'd dreamt about it often.

"Maybe I should talk to your brother and ask him my questions. That way I can see if Cole is really the sex expert people think he is." Tapping my finger

on my chin, I joked. “I wonder if he’s a better kisser than you.”

Jonah didn’t seem to appreciate my humor because his lips disappeared in a firm line. “Yes, I’m sure he can teach you much more than I can.”

Jonah and I had never been in a fight, but I sensed how tense he’d become and it made me insecure. “I once fell down from a roof and broke a bone.” It was an unrelated thought and my way of changing the subject.

Jonah’s eyebrows drew close together. “I’m sorry to hear that but what does that have to do with your curiosity about sex?”

Feeling on thin ice, I rambled on, “I’m not curious. Well, I was, but you

showed me what kissing is like and now I have my answer. Or I mean, maybe not entirely, but it's good enough, I guess."

Jonah reached for another cracker, but changed his mind and slumped back in the couch. "You should ask me."

"Ask you what?"

"The thing you're dying to ask me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Jonah sighed. "Okay, but when you're ready for the answer, I'm happy to tell you."

"What answer?"

"You were worried that you weren't any good at kissing..."

I wet my lips and blinked my eyes, unable to ask the question he was

referring to.

“Don’t you want to know if I enjoyed the kiss, Mila?”

Not looking him in the eye, I gave an almost invisible nod.

“The truth is that... umm...”

My pulse beat fast and when Jonah didn’t finish his sentence, I met his eyes with impatience. “What?”

“Kissing you felt...” As if he was censoring himself, Jonah settled on the word “good.”

“Good?”

“Yes. You have nothing to worry about.”

My shoulders fell and I shrunk back in the couch. How could something that had blown my mind be nothing more than

good to Jonah? “Was it better than with the woman in the sex club?” The moment my question was out, I wished I could take it back. What if he liked her more?

Trying to lighten the mood, I made another attempt at being funny and distracting him from answering my first question. “If you like kissing so much, maybe you should get married yourself.”

Jonah rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, which was so unexpected that I gaped. “Did you just roll your eyes at me?”

“Don’t look so shocked.”

“But you could get reported for improper communication, Jonah.”

“By whom?” He swung his hands around. “It’s just you and me here and

you're used to much worse from your family and friends up North. If I'm honest, it's one of the things I enjoy most about visiting the Northlands. The freedom to express myself without worrying that someone will get offended about a simple word.”

“What's your favorite swear word?”

Jonah smiled and leaned his head back. “Huh, that's a good question. Maybe fuck a duck... I've heard that a few times and it sounds funny. Same with shit a sheep. We would never say that here but I think we should. It adds color to the language.”

I laughed. “That's true, but then there are plenty of sayings in the Motherlands that I find lovely and colorful too.”

“Like what?”

I thought about it. “Son of a sea lion is one of my favorites, and fidgeting fairies is cute too.”

“Yeah, no... the last one is definitely something only children would say.”

“I was a child when I moved. Maybe that’s why I still like it.”

“Probably, but either way, languages evolve and I’ve heard expressions take hold here without people realizing they originated in the Northlands.”

“You have?” My eyes widened. “Give me an example.”

“Okay... ehh, let me think. After my first visit to the Northlands, I returned full of impressions and when I did my first interview the words ‘dancing

devils' slipped out and it became an instant hit and was considered new slang.

“Why do you think that is?”

Jonah spoke with certainty in his tone. “Because it’s close enough to a curse word to be daring and it’s safe enough to not get reported. People are longing for us lawmakers to bring back free speech.”

“Really? You think Motlanders want to curse?”

“I can’t speak for everyone, but some of us do. It’s *bloody* annoying to be limited and have other people censor you.”

I laughed. “And there we have the wolf howling again. You weren’t born to

live with dogs, Jonah. There's a wild side to you."

"Well, it doesn't take much to appear wild in this country of tame and domesticated people. I'm not saying we need to use vile or hurtful words, but a few swear words won't kill anyone and people need to stop being so sensitive anyway."

"Sometimes I swear too," I admitted. "It's hard not to get affected by the people you live with. Not long ago, I said... shit."

It was easy to see that Jonah was passionate about it as he continued, "Knowing you, I'm sure the situation called for it."

"Actually, it was a very descriptive

word because Holger pooped on the antique rug in the foyer of the Manor. I knew Khan would freak out about it, and he did.”

That made Jonah’s lips lift up in a smile. “I remember you told me about that. Wasn’t that when Khan threatened to ban your dogs and you said that he’d have to kick you out too?”

“Yup, he was furious, but by now, I’m used to that. The Northmen can be explosive in their rhetoric but it’s like a storm that blows over fast.”

Jonah reached for some more crackers. “I can’t prove it scientifically, but I’m convinced that it’s healthier than to never show anger. We Motlanders are taught to control our emotions but what

that means is really to suppress them. You can learn not to show any anger, but what if by capping anger you're also capping off joy?"

I'd never thought about it that way. "I don't feel like I'm limiting myself."

Moving closer, Jonah's eyes shone with intensity. "I've never seen you furious. A little annoyed, sure, but never furious. Why is that?"

I frowned. "It's not my style."

"I know... same with me, but do you think we're limited?"

"Limited?" I shook my head. "Pearl says that Nmen have the emotional control of children. They don't filter their thoughts and they act out all their emotion with foul language, slamming

their hands on the table, and fighting when they get mad. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not. But at least they get rid of their anger. People here, they...” he sighed. “Well, I just feel like sometimes all those suppressed emotions seep out in passive-aggressive ways, and personally, I prefer clear and honest discussions. My sister is direct in her communication and she gets in trouble when she speaks her mind.”

“Yes, I heard.”

“But what if she’s not wrong? What if all the people who are too sensitive to handle her are the ones who are wrong? When I read some of the romance books in the restricted archive, I feel my

heartbeat increase and a tingling up and down my spine. I'm aware of every word on the page, and sometimes I get goosebumps. Why would we want to shield people from feeling more alive?"

I shrugged. "You tell me! Why did the Council ban the books?"

Jonah turned his body toward me. "Like I told you, I've studied some of the transcripts from the Council meetings that took place at the time of the ban. Several experts claimed that books and movies with violence and romantic scenes caused depression in people. Reports were given that the forbidden book had caused women to lose their minds, and in some cases commit suicide.

“The ban was made with the best intentions but I still resent the Council members back then for limiting our choices. Sometimes I feel like we live in an artificial world with a rosy filter that hides all the contrasting colors that would have made our world glorious.”

“You find the Northlands glorious?”

Jonah rubbed the ridge of his nose.

“I find the nature spectacular and the free speech wonderful, but the Northlands have major issues that need to be dealt with.”

“Tell me about it.”

“That being said, I’ll be the first to admit that we could learn a lot from the Northlands and vice versa.”

My smile was warm when I reached

for his hand. “It’s one of my favorite things about you, Jonah. Everyone is always so busy insisting that their way is the right way. But you’re open to seeing the beauty in things that are different from what you know.”

He squeezed my hand. “Thank you. I like to think of myself as a change maker. My job is to keep us moving in a better direction. To be honest, I think we Motlanders might have lost our way. Many of the decisions that were made decades and centuries ago need to be reconsidered.”

“All right.” With a cheeky smile, I handed him a celery stick. “Here’s a magic wand; what will you change?”

Holding the celery stick up in front

of him, Jonah declared, “First, I’m taking away the censoring of books and giving back free speech to the people. Next, I’m lifting the ban on alcohol.”

“Wow.” I laughed. “That sounds ambitious and a bit of a far stretch, but you know you can count on my full support.”

Taking a bite of the celery stick, Jonah looked deep into my eyes. “Thank you, my friend, that means a lot.”

The word friend stung a little. Why hadn’t he used one of his usual nicknames for me like Miss Sunshine, Milove, or North Star?

A sadness spread in my body as I concluded that Jonah had used that word to remind me that he and I would never

be anything more than just friends.

CHAPTER 7

The Theme Park

Jonah

I regretted taking Mila to Nostalgia Park the moment I saw Cole's eyes light up when he saw her.

Mila was sweet by nature and I couldn't blame my brother for being charmed by her beauty and those incredible dimples that came out whenever she smiled.

"How long have you been in the Motherlands?" Cole asked while he and I were giving her a tour of the park.

"Two days," Mila replied from the

back of my hoverbike.

“You have to come back when it’s summer and everything is open. This place is pure magic when it’s up and running.”

“I heard.” Mila’s easy laughter was melodic. “Hunter told me all about it. His favorite part was the antique dirt bikes.”

Cole laughed. “That’s surprising since he took a pretty bad fall and got covered in mud.”

“He left out that part and just said that he had a great time here.”

Cole smiled. “Did he tell you about the sex club?”

I tensed up. “Look ahead, Mila, that’s the Renaissance Castle I was

talking about.”

“Wow, that’s gorgeous.”

But Cole wasn’t as easy to distract as Mila, and he repeated, “Did Hunter tell you about the time I took him to our sex club?”

“Yes, he did. He said there was an overwhelming number of women compared to men.”

“That’s true.” Cole gave her another cheeky smile. “But if you want to go, I’m happy to take you there and I will devote my entire evening to you.” Throwing a nod toward the castle, he laughed. “My specialty is role-playing. Maybe you want to be with a knight in shining armor for a night?”

“Mila is more into large-muscled

Nmen.” My tone was dry.

“Oh, not a problem. I can be dominant for a night.”

“She’s not having sex with you.” I sped up to get away from him, but my brother wasn’t that easy to shake off.

“Since when did you become her spokesperson?”

“I’m not.”

“Listen, Mila, just because Jonah has chosen celibacy doesn’t mean the rest of us have to. I’m serious, I would totally have sex with you if you want to.”

With Mila sitting behind me on the bike, I couldn’t see her face when she answered him, “Thank you. That’s very generous of you, but I’m good.”

“All right, but if you change your

mind, let me know.” Cole grinned and looked up, shielding his eyes to see a drone coming in at high speed. “Look who decided to join our party early.”

By the time we made it back to the main house of our family unit, my sister, Emanuela, and her husband, Hunter, were already inside chatting with our mother.

“That was a quick tour.” My mom gave Cole a questioning look.

“We saw the two superstars coming in.” His tone was teasing as he lifted Emanuela in a hug while I received one of Hunter’s manly hugs with a big smack on my shoulder.

“How are you doing, Councilman? Are you holding up against all the

women?”

“I’m more than holding up, I’m very close to getting my proposal on speed limits through. You know, the one I told you about?”

Hunter gave me another hard slap on my back. “I’m impressed. I didn’t think they would listen to you.”

“The one point two million signatures from citizens will help persuade them.”

“I like it.” Hunter swung his head and took in Mila. “What are you doing here?”

“Jonah brought me as a guest. He wanted me to see the Motherlands, and with everything happening up north it was a good time.”

Emanuela, who had just been hugging Mila, crossed her arms. “Speaking of that, what is going on? The News has been warning about a potential civil war in the Northlands.”

Mila paled a little. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“But is it true that Khan is changing things from an authoritarian dictatorship to a democracy?”

Mila squared her shoulders and stood a little straighter. “I’m not sure what the right term is, but he’s letting the people elect their leader and I’m very proud of him for taking such a bold step.”

“Oh, for sure. I think we should all be celebrating.” My mother’s smile was

warm, while Hunter narrowed his eyes and poked at my chest. “Did you have something to do with it?”

“No, he didn’t.” Mila’s tone was sharp as she took a step forward. “You do not get to blame Jonah for it.”

“Hunter can blame me all he wants to.” I pushed away a lock of hair from Mila’s face. “I’m not vain enough to think that I had anything to do with Khan’s decision, but I’m happy to let people believe it.”

“Huh.” Hunter lifted his chin and looked down at me. “A piece of advice, Councilman. You might not want to take the blame when you are up north. A lot of people are royally pissed and scared of what this will mean for us.”

“Are you saying you don’t want democracy?” my mother asked Hunter.

“That depends. I’ll have to see it to understand what it means for me and my friends. We’re not exactly impressed with your system. You have too many limitations – the most annoying one being that alcohol isn’t allowed in this country. Whoever came up with that law will surely be toasting in hell right now.”

“We don’t believe in hell,” my mother reminded Hunter, who picked a chair from the dining table, turned it around, and sat astride it.

“That’s funny, because to most of us Nmen, the Motherlands resembles hell. We can’t drink here, we have to fly in

slow drones, and we're surrounded by women who in most cases aren't interested in us."

"Stop whining. You don't need other women when you have me, and you can come here if you want to drink alcohol."

We all stared at Emanuela, who had just revealed a dark secret of ours.

"Oh, come on. Mila isn't a regular Motlander. We can trust her. Right, Mila?"

Mila blinked her eyes at Emanuela. "You have alcohol here?"

"Yes, but you can't tell anyone. It's illegal."

"I won't tell."

"Great!" With a satisfied nod, Emanuela clapped her hands. "With that

out of the way, is it possible to have a cold beer?”

The atmosphere relaxed and Cole brought out beers for everyone as we sat down to chat and catch up. When one of our family dogs let out a silent but deadly stink bomb, I opened a window, letting in some fresh air. With snow outside, it was cold so I offered to fetch Mila a sweater from her bag.

“That’s nice of you, it’s in the bedroom.”

Grabbing the first sweater I could find in her bag, my eyes fell on an envelope with four words on it. “To Mila from Python.”

It was the letter she had received from the large huntsman after Khan had

declared that the Northlands would have their first election.

Picking up the letter, I stood for a second just looking at it. My fingers were burning to open it and read what he was trying to fill her head with. But no matter how curious I was, I couldn't do it. Mila had a right to privacy. If I read her letter without permission, I would be violating the trust between us.

I returned to Mila with her sweater and for the rest of the evening, I kept thinking about the letter in her bag. Why had she brought it? Had she liked it enough to want to read it again? Did she intend to answer him? Would she pick him in the tournament? And would she give the same sweet little moans when

he kissed her as she had with me?

That night when we went to bed, Mila asked me, “Why were you so quiet tonight?” She was on her side facing me, while I was on my back staring up at the ceiling.

“I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Like what?”

“Things.”

“What things?”

I turned my head. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

Letting out a sigh, I looked at her. “I saw Python’s letter in your bag.”

Mila propped herself up on her elbow. “And?”

“And nothing... I just wonder why

you would bring it. Was it that special?"

Mila rolled over and picked the letter out of her bag. "You didn't read it!"

"No, of course not. It's yours. Wait... how did you know I didn't read it?"

"Because you would never do that. You're a Motlander."

"What is that supposed to mean? Motlanders do stupid things all the time, Mila."

"Yes, but we are raised to make good choices."

Taking pride in being a rebel, I didn't like how she made us sound like a monolith of conformity. "There are more than one point six billion Motlanders in this world. Some of us break rules and

challenge the system. We are not a homogenous group by any means.”

“You mean the alcohol?”

“Among other things.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll never tell on you.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. It just annoys me that you think I’m some kind of saint when I’m not.”

Holding the letter up, she tapped it against her other hand. “Are you upset that I trust you?”

“No, but I’m tired of being put into a box that I don’t belong in.”

“What box would that be?”

“The sweet guy that isn’t a threat.”

Her eyebrows rose up. “Excuse me?”

I sat up and rubbed my face. “I’m sorry that came out wrong. It’s just that I hate that you’re attracted to all those big brooding well-muscled guys, when they don’t deserve you.”

“That’s a weird thing to say, Jonah. Not every Nman is a brooding giant. Some of them have a lot of humor and they can be sweet and kind. I resent that you talk about them in such a negative way. You’re better than that.”

I groaned with frustration. “I’m not, though! That’s my whole point, Mila. I’m a flawed man with a ton of emotions and I refuse to suppress them just because they’re ugly.”

“Ugly how?” Mila moved into a meditation position with her ankles

crossed and her knees pressed outward.

“There’s anger for one. Just thinking about them taking you away from me.”

She blinked at me. “You’re jealous.”

Even though something inside me recognized her words as the truth, my pride was hurt. Jealousy was associated with people who lacked emotional maturity. She might as well have called me primitive and out of control. I pushed the thought away and grasped for another explanation.

“No. I’m angry. The thought of someone coming between us makes me...” My voice dropped and I couldn’t finish my sentence when I knew she was right. It made me feel jealous.

“I won’t allow anyone to come

between us,” she assured me.

“You keep saying that, but we both know you won’t have a choice. Python isn’t going to want me around and he sure as hell won’t allow you to come visit me.” My index finger wiggled between us. “This right here, with you in my bed, it stops the second you’re married.”

“Something weird is going on with you, Jonah. I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Because I’ve never been in a situation like this. I would have sworn I couldn’t get jealous, but maybe you’re right. Maybe I am.”

“Jealous of Python?”

“Yeah. Just seeing his letter threw

my head for a loop.”

To my surprise, Mila smiled a little. “That’s sweet.”

“Sweet? There’s nothing sweet about it. It’s ugly and I hate it.” I kept my eyes on the foot-end of the bed.

“It’s because you have no experience with it.” Mila stroked my arm. “My dad gets super jealous and protective with my mom; did you know that?”

“Please don’t compare me to Magni. He wouldn’t like that and we’re nothing alike.”

“Except that you’re both scared of losing what’s good in your life.” Mila’s arm kept stroking me. “I have close friends at home. Raven, Willow, and

others, but still, you're the one I call to say good night. What we have is beyond anything I've experienced with others."

I met her eyes. "So why do you have to destroy it by marrying Python?"

The right side of her mouth lifted and made a dimple pop out. "No one said I would pick him."

Pulling my legs up in front of me, I rested my right elbow on my knees and let my forehead drop into the palm of my hand.

"Jonah, the reason I knew you hadn't read his letter isn't that I see you as some saint, but that it's still sealed."

"It's sealed?"

"Yes. The truth is that I'd forgotten about it until I was packing and then I

figured I'd bring it and read it when I had time."

"Why haven't you read it?"

Mila lifted her shoulders and let them fall again. "I don't know. There's been so much else going on."

My eyes fell to the letter in her hand.

"Are you going to read it now?"

"Maybe." She opened it. "Do you want to read it with me?"

"Mila's it's your letter. I don't think he'd want me to hear it."

"We're friends, Jonah. Friends share things."

I was quiet as she unfolded the letter.

"How about you read it, with your masculine voice. It'll be more authentic

then.” She handed the letter to me and with a sigh, I began reading,

Dear Mila,

I have thought about you night and day since our first meeting at Raven and Leo's wedding. To me, you are the most beautiful woman in the world. Your blue eyes, fair skin, and incredible smile makes me think of you as an angel.

We are many men counting the days until we can finally fight for you. Every man I defeat in your tournament will be for you, as a proof of my love.

I promise that I'll go all the way and be one of the five champions for you to pick from.

If you pick me, dear Mila, I'll make it my life's mission to satisfy your every need, just as I hope you'll make it your mission to satisfy my needs.

There are so many questions I want to ask you, like how many children would you want us to have? What's your favorite thing to do, and are you as excited as me to get married?

I've read that women like men who make them laugh, so here's a joke for you. What did the shower hose say?

Every naked person I see turns me on.

I'd be honored, if you took time to write me back.

Sincerely, Python.

Giving the letter back to Mila, I lay back down.

“So what do you think?” she asked me.

“At least we know he can spell.”

“And that he has a sense of humor. I

liked the joke.”

“How do you know he didn’t have someone help him write that letter?”

She sighed. “So you like it too?”

“I never said that.”

“No. But if you’re saying that he might’ve gotten help, it must mean that you think it’s a good letter.”

I snorted a little. “Are you going to write him back?”

“No. Because as I told him I don’t think that would be fair to the others.” Mila lay back down as well and mirrored me by placing herself on her side with her hands under her cheek.

“And what about his questions? If you were to answer him, what would you say?”

“Hmm.” She thought about it. “I would tell him that I want to have four children. A mix of boys and girls.”

“Okay. I’m not going to ask about what you’re interested in because I already know.”

“That’s the privilege of being my best friend.”

I was feeling prickly from our conversation and looked away when I asked, “But what about the last question? Are you excited about getting married?”

She sighed again. “I know you don’t like to hear it, but yes, I’m excited about getting married.”

The pain in my chest made me lash out. “Is that really your only ambition in life? To marry...”

“You know it’s not. I’m going to be a veterinarian.”

After a few seconds of silence between us, she added, “I like the idea of being in a marriage. I only wish that...”

“That what?”

“That no one had to get hurt in the process.”

“Then how about you have a different kind of tournament? If you like jokes so much, have them battle using comedy.”

Mila laughed. “You’re funny.”

“Yeah? Then maybe I would have a chance.”

Mila’s eyes widened. “You would battle for me?”

“Not in a real tournament. As a pacifist I can’t condone that sort of violence.”

“No, I know that, but if there was no violence, would you be interested?” Mila looked beautiful and vulnerable as she asked her question.

“Maybe. If it meant that I could keep my friend.”

Her face fell. “Oh, I see.”

“What’s wrong?”

She chewed on her lip. “Marriage is about more than just friendship. I see how passionate my parents are, and I want that too.”

I got her hint. Mila didn’t feel attracted to me in that way. With the sting of rejection, I turned on my other side.

“Can we sleep now? I’m tired.”

Without any words, Mila turned out the lights. We were both huge snugglers, and lying back to back like this was unnatural and painful to me.

Not being able to sleep, my mind wandered back to the first night I had spent with Mila. It had been the night after Solomon’s and Willow’s wedding. Mila had shown Hunter, my sister, and me the rooftop of the manor where they had a star lounge. Hunter and Emanuela had been on one lounge bed while Mila and I had been on another.

“What do you miss about the Motherlands?” I asked her.

Mila pulled her blanket up higher.

“Hmm, that’s a good question. “I’ve lived here half my life so it’s not something I think about on a daily basis.”

“There must be something you miss,” I pressed.

“What I miss the most is probably physical closeness. I mean I have it with my puppies and my youngest siblings, but even Mason, who’s ten now, feels that he’s too big to cuddle. In the Motherlands, people touch and cuddle all the time and I miss that.”

I was quick to open my arms. “I’ll cuddle with you.”

“Really?” Her gentle smile widened but then she looked at Hunter and it was replaced by a small frown.

“Promise you won’t tell my dad.”

Hunter sighed. “I won’t tell, Mila, but do you think Magni would care? Jonah is a Motlander. He won’t overstep your boundaries.”

“My dad isn’t always rational when it comes to that sort of thing. It’s better if we don’t tell him.” She nuzzled herself against my body and rested her head on my shoulder. “Don’t be mad if I fall asleep. I’m really tired.”

The delicious scent of her soft hair made me wrap my arms around her and pull her close. When she yawned, it was contagious, and I gave an even bigger yawn. I’d only met Mila today but being with her was effortless and felt as natural as if we had been friends for

years.

Coming back to the present, I listened to Mila's calm breathing. The bedroom was dark and I was left with my own thoughts about the stupid discussion we'd had about Python's letter.

I had admitted that I was jealous, but had she understood the depth of it?

Turning onto my back, I groaned and considered my dilemma. As the first Councilman in the world, it was up to me to show that men could be trustworthy and selfless servants of the people. Even if, by some miracle, Mila might be interested in a romantic relationship with me, it would be at the

expense of my seat on the Council.

Entering a marriage would make millions of voters dismiss me as an eccentric or worse – a romantic. It would be hard to get the other Council members to take me seriously, and it could potentially ruin my chances of achieving any significant change in the world. My chances of re-election would be destroyed.

But if I didn't at least try to convince her to pick me as a partner, I'd lose her forever. I'd met enough of the Nmen who were going to fight for her to know that they would never allow Mila and me to be close after their wedding.

The thought brought a sharp pain to my chest. Who was I kidding? Mila had

grown up among Nmen and been influenced to prefer strong warriors. Someone like me didn't have a chance to be anything but her friend.

It felt like I'd only just dozed off when the room got lighter again. Dogs barked somewhere in the house, and smells penetrated my sleepy brain. It reminded me of warm summer nights with music and happy talk around a bonfire. Pulling my duvet higher, I rolled to my stomach trying to sink deeper into lovely dreams of summer, but an insistent warning in my brain prevented it. Annoyed, I opened my eyes and what I saw made me sit up straight.

From the outside a red light was flickering and the smell of fire was

strong.

“Mila, Mila, wake up.” I climbed over her to get to the window and pulled the curtains to the side. The large red storage building outside was in flames.

“What’s going on?” Mila stretched but then she smelled it too, and she shrieked.

“We’ve got to wake the others.” Grabbing my clothes, I ran into the kitchen while shouting for everyone to wake up. Picking up two pots I banged them against each other consistently while screaming at the top of my lungs. “Fire, fire.”

Mila came out with her shirt inside out and ran toward the other guest room, which Hunter and Emanuela were in.

The house of my family unit was large and quickly became lively as doors opened upstairs where most of my family slept. My mom's three dogs came running down from her room. Cole sprinted past me as I was putting on my boots. He was only wearing his briefs but didn't seem to care when he ran out the door. I grabbed his winter jacket and large boots and ran after him.

“Stay back, Cole. There's nothing you can do.”

Cole was standing with a look of horror watching the storage building burn. His hands were in his hair and a silent scream was on his lips.

“Don't go any nearer,” I warned when Cole took a step forward.

The massive building worked as a gigantic bonfire, warming the cool night air.

“Here, put this on.” I pressed Cole’s jacket and boots into his arms and went back in to find Mila. She and my mom were putting leashes on the three dogs and comforting the scared animals.

“You okay?” I’d only asked them the question when Emanuela came running down from the upstairs with Hunter right behind her.

“We’ve checked every room. It’s all clear.”

“Good.”

Everyone in my family gathered outside. We stood powerless watching with grief and shock on our faces as high

flames engulfed the large building.

“How did this happen?” my mom cried out behind me, and was hugged by Emanuela.

“At least there’s snow on the ground. It will help to keep the fire isolated in that building,” Hunter pointed out.

“Mila.” I pulled her between my arms, with her back against my chest, and wrapped my arms around her. We weaved our hands together as if the fire would try and break us apart.

“Look up.” Hunter was pointing to four fire drones flying in. Timed to perfection they each dumped water on the building before circling back and releasing a fine powder that fell like snow. On impact the snow particles

grew in size and soon what was left of the building was covered by a gray layer of fire-inhibiting material.

Mila sighed. “Oh, thank god they came.”

Emanuela, Cole, and I, however, exchanged a worried glance. Most of the things in the storage room were items used for running the theme park, but it was also where the hidden part of the family business was kept.

For years our family had run a side business for a very limited and trusted clientele. Outside the normal opening hours of the park, we arranged illegal races in anything from drones to hover bikes to retro dirt bikes. Not only were the machines tuned to go way above the

legal speed limit, but we also allowed betting between the spectators. When it was too cold to race, we arranged gambling nights where participants put items of value on the line.

Everyone was sworn to secrecy because we were breaking a number of laws – especially when it came to serving the alcohol that we produced in that storage building.

“This is bad,” Cole muttered when the fire drones descended. “They are going to go through the building.”

“Can we get in there first?” Emanuela whispered.

“I doubt it.”

“Maybe we can pay off the fire marshal to avoid being reported.”

“With what? A season card to the park?” I shook my head. “A bribe will only make things worse.”

Emanuela frowned. “But we have to do something, Jonah. Maybe we can offer to include the fire marshal in the clientele.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Cole whispered back. But the moment we saw the fire marshal, a woman of around forty-five come walking toward us with decisive steps, we knew that was a hopeless plan. The small golden pin formed as a honey bee on her chest was a well-known order for high integrity, given to citizens showing an altruistic mindset and willingness to sacrifice themselves for the greater good.

“I’m so sorry this happened,” she said. “While my people make sure the fire is extinguished, would you mind if I ask some questions?”

“Not at all.” Cole took a step forward and introduced himself as the head of the theme park.

We listened as he described what was inside the storage room and that he had no idea what had started the fire.

“We met a drone on our way here. Do you know if anyone left the area?”

“No.” Cole frowned. “What drone?”

“It was a community drone with one passenger. Maybe it just passed over your area.”

“It must have, because no one has come or gone since before dinner.”

“Excuse me, but is it safe for us to go back inside the house now?” my mother asked from behind.

“Yes. We’ll go through everything and make sure there’s no chance of the fire re-igniting. It was a good thing you called us or we might have been too late to save anything.”

“Uh-huh.” Cole’s smile was forced and I knew that like me, my brother would have preferred the building burning to ashes to their finding our hidden brewery.

“Feel free to go back inside and warm up. As soon as we’re done securing the premises, I’ll let you know.”

When the fire marshal walked away,

we returned to the house and everyone was talking over each other.

“We’ll lose everything because of those stupid laws. I told you it was too risky.” Gunnar, one of our three dads, was pacing the floor.

Emanuela sighed. “When the media finds out, they’re going to be all over me and Jonah.”

Cole crossed his arms. “I’m sorry that your celebrity status is at risk, but it’s not just about you, sis. If the public finds out about this, they’ll boycott the park and we’ll lose our family business.”

Hunter held up a hand. “What if I tell them the brewery belongs to me?”

Everyone went quiet.

“I’m serious. It’s no secret that we Nmen like to drink and I don’t mind taking the blame. Worst they can do to me is kick me back to the Northlands, which would suit me fine.”

“It’s worth a try,” Cole agreed. “I mean I doubt they’ll buy that we didn’t know about it, but maybe we can give it an angle that makes it sound like I was the only one who knew and that you pressured me into doing it. Who wouldn’t be afraid of a big strong Nman like you?”

Emanuela crossed her arms again. “You’re not going to make it sound like Hunter physically threatened you to break the law. He had nothing to do with it.”

“But he volunteered to take the blame,” Cole argued. “I’ll just let them know the threat was implied. You don’t mind, Hunter, do you?”

Hunter raised his brow. “Will I mind that you’ll make it sound like you’re scared of me? Not really. A lot of people are.”

Our mother, Lilly, was standing with two of the other mothers in the family. “Are we all staying up or can people go back to bed?”

I answered, “It’s three in the morning. Cole and I will stay up, the rest of you can go back to bed.”

Mila had stayed close to me the whole time. “I’ll stay up with you and Cole.”

“There’s no need, Milove. I’ll wake you if something happens.”

“You sure?” Her large blue eyes were full of concern.

Kissing her on the top of her hair, I nodded. “Yes. Get some sleep.”

Slowly the open kitchen and living room emptied and only Cole and I were left.

“Leave the talking to me,” Cole instructed. “I’ll make it sound like you weren’t part of it in any way.”

“Don’t lie for me.”

“Why not? I’m not a Councilman bound by an oath. I have no moral problem telling white lies to save my family.”

Tapping my fingers on the table, I

looked out the window at the destroyed building. “I wish this hadn’t happened.”

“Me too.”

We sat for a moment in silence, watching the fire fighters work outside, and then Cole stood up. “I know it’s in your nature to help and take charge, little brother, but will you do me a favor?”

“What do you need?”

“Stay inside while I go and face them. By now they’ll have discovered what we’ve been hiding. They’ll have to report it to the authorities and soon I’ll be facing the consequences.”

“You think they’re going to send you to a place of reflection?”

“No doubt! If I’m lucky, I’ll have a week or more to hand over assignments

to the others, but if not, I'll write them from wherever they take me.”

My hands fell into my lap with a deep sigh. “This isn't right.”

“I know.” Cole squeezed my shoulder. “This might ruin your influence on the Council, but you can't give up. Make them see that we're not children and that we have a right to experience thrills in our lives. If they don't want to race or drink, no one is forcing them, but they shouldn't prohibit us from having some fun.” He swallowed hard enough to make his Adam's apple bob in his throat. “Jonah, we're depending on you to fight against the rigid laws.”

Raising my hand, I squeezed Cole's shoulder back. “You have my word.”

CHAPTER 8

Magni's Miracle

Mila

“Mom, did I wake you?”

Laura sounded chirpy and laughed.

“Since when would I sleep until nine on a Wednesday? I’ve been awake for a few hours. How are you, my dear?”

“I’m fine, but I wanted to warn you in case you might hear about it on the News. There was a fire last night.”

“A fire?” She lowered her voice.
“Are you okay?”

“Yes, we are all fine. It was a

storage building here at the family unit where Jonah grew up. We don't know what caused the fire yet, but the Cervici family is famous here, so the news might come out.”

“Got it. Thank you for telling me. And how are you and Jonah getting along?”

I rubbed my face. Unable to untangle all the confusing emotions inside me, I went with an easy answer. “Good as always.”

“I'm happy to hear it, darling.”

“What about Dad, can I talk to him?”

“You can't. He's busy.” There was a burst of excitement in her voice.

“What do you mean he's busy? Is he sleeping?”

“No. He’s actually busy with something meaningful.”

“Are he and Khan plotting?”

In a conspiratorial whisper, Laura spoke fast: “This is too big to keep a secret. Dad finally decided to get robotic limbs.”

I sucked in a breath. “He did?”

“Yes. I’m telling you, sweetie, it’s like a miracle happened. Yesterday we met up with the team of doctors who are going to help him. This morning he interviewed three different recovery specialists who were all recommended by the hospital. Right now, he and Finn are working on a plan to get him through the process as fast and with as little pain as possible.”

“Finn is there?”

“Yes. The minute Dad made his decision, he called Finn and now they’re plotting and planning together. I haven’t seen your father like this since before the accident. He even smacked me on my butt when I left them ten minutes ago.”

“Wow, that’s amazing, Mom.” I felt bubbly inside, as if her words had injected carbon dioxide into my veins, changing my blood from regular to sparkling. “When is the operation?”

“Maybe as soon as the day after tomorrow. It depends on how fast they can get his new limbs finished. They were produced after he woke up from his coma, but there are still adjustments that need to be done. The doctors are

just as excited about it as we are.”

“I’m still a bit in shock. We’ve waited for this for so long. I’m coming home so I can be there.”

My mom grew serious. “No, Mila. It’s better if you stick to the plan. Dad knows that you love him but it feels like this is something he needs to do for himself. He sent me out of the room when he was with Finn. He doesn’t like it when we fuss over him.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. And with everything that’s going on here, we prefer that you and the little ones stay safe in the Motherlands.”

“Okay, I’ll stay then. But do you know what made him change his mind?”

My mom hesitated. “I can’t say for

sure, but I think it's connected to something Jonah told him."

"Jonah?"

"Yes. Dad was so upset after you left. It was strange, because he kept repeating how he could easily win a fight against Jonah."

"That's odd. It's not like Jonah was ever a threat."

"I know. That's what makes it so weird. Did Jonah talk to you about his conversation with Magni?"

"No, he just said that Dad threatened to punch him."

"Hmm. I asked your dad, but the only answer I got was that he wouldn't bother remembering anything that pompous ass had to say."

“Jonah isn’t pompous. He’s the most grounded person I know.”

My mother’s voice turned soft. “I know that, dear, and the next time I see him, I’m giving Jonah the biggest hug because I don’t know what he told Magni, but by some miracle, it was the push he needed.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes. And you’ll be happy to know that the little ones are having a great time with Athena. It’s a good thing that she has the patience of a saint, because all those kids in her small house can’t be easy, and now that Finn is here, she’s on her own.”

“Do you want me to bring them home when I go back later this week?”

Laura hesitated. “I miss them, but as I said: it’s better if they stay a little longer. There’ve been a few... ehh... episodes.”

“What episodes?”

“I don’t want to worry you, dear, but let’s just say the list of men who want to challenge Khan for the role of leader is growing longer every day.”

“But he encouraged that himself. He said any man with the ambition to be the President of the Northlands should run for office.”

“Yes.” Laura sighed. “And so far, thousands have taken him up on it. Problem is that we have no tradition for this sort of thing and it’s not exactly running smoothly. Yesterday, one of the

candidates got beaten badly by the supporters of another candidate.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s in the hospital. Pearl feels awful since she’s the one who encouraged the election in the first place. She went to see him in the hospital this morning and brought a large box of beer and snacks.”

“Yes, that sounds like something Pearl would do.”

From outside the bedroom, I could hear agitated voices. “Mom, I have to go, but keep me posted with Dad, okay?”

“I will, and remember that we all love you.”

“I love you too.”

After ending the call, I walked in to

the kitchen where Jonah, Emanuela, Cole, their mother Lilly, and other family members were having what looked to be an emotional family meeting.

“What’s going on?” I asked Hunter, who seemed to be on the outskirts of the family drama. He had his eyes on an interactive wall that was showing a News station but with the sound so low that I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

“Their sister just accused them of running a crime syndicate on every News channel there is.”

“Sister? What sister?”

“The troubled one.”

Widening my eyes, I silently asked Hunter to elaborate. He pulled me to the

window, away from the family.

“When I first met Emanuela, she mentioned there was an estranged sister called Anne who was troubled. Emanuela sometimes points her out when she sees an ad she’s in.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Anne is a model and works for big fashion houses. Here, let me show you.” Hunter pulled up a number of pictures of a gorgeous woman with symmetrical features and hair down to the small of her back. She was smiling and grinning in all the pictures and it was hard to imagine her as anything but kind and warm.

“She’s troubled?”

“Yes, apparently, she had a falling

out with the rest of the family about five years ago when she was in her late teens.” He nodded to the screen. “Now she’s getting back at them.”

“She’s my age?” I asked because her baby skin and freckles made her look no more than nineteen.

He nodded.

“What exactly did she say on the News?”

“She just told the world that Nostalgia Park is nothing but a false front to hide how her family is distributing illegal drugs and alcohol. There were images from the sex club and one of the fire fighters from last night explained how they had found beer brewing in the storage building. He

basically confirmed that illegal activities have been going on, and now the reporters are speculating what it will mean for the Cervici family.”

I gaped, and the happiness I’d felt about my father’s upcoming operation was overshadowed by the frustration that permeated the kitchen.

“Why would she do that to her own family?”

Hunter shrugged. “Because she’s vindictive.”

“But she’s a Motlander. We are nice people.”

He gave me an are-you-serious glance. “People are people, Mila. Even Motlanders do absurd and nonsensical things. You Motlanders aren’t fucking

perfect angels if that's what you think.”

“I know that, but this makes no sense.”

“Of course it doesn't. Her motive isn't rational. It's emotional. Cole told me that Anne was always dramatic.”

I leaned in to study the pictures of Anne up close. People called me pretty but next to this woman I was plain.

“She looks so nice.”

“Yeah, like an angel, but then Lucifer was an angel too once.”

“You think she's evil?” I whispered the word since it was not a label I wanted to put on anyone.

“I never said that.”

“But you compared her to Lucifer, the devil. Isn't he the very embodiment

of evil?”

Hunter waved a hand through the air. “She’s disturbed and wants revenge, that’s all.”

Like a fish on land I opened and closed my mouth, unable to understand why anyone would hurt their own family like this. “Can’t we talk to her?”

Hunter moved his weight to his right foot. “You know what, that’s an excellent idea! I can’t do it myself, but I could teach you some nice tricks to make people regret their actions.”

I jerked my head back. “I’m not going to beat her up.”

“Shame. I should have known you’d be too non-violent to do it, but we could ask Raven to come and have a talk with

Miss Troubled Sister. I'll bet Raven could make her take back her accusations in no time."

"Geez, Hunter, I wasn't talking about us torturing her. I just wanted to talk to her and understand why she's doing this."

"Who cares what's wrong with her? We just need to fix the mess she made."

"I care! This isn't normal behavior and I want to know what happened to her to feel this angry."

Hunter craned his head and looked out the window as a large yellow drone landed out front. "Alright, while you come up with a plan to talk to the crazy sister, I'm going to do my part."

"What part?"

“I have an interview to give.”

While the family members were still debating back and forth, Hunter put on his jacket and boots.

“Where are you going, babe?” Emanuela leaned back to look at him.

“I’m taking the dogs out. Hopefully, one of them will take a piss on the journalist from *Evening News and Goodies*.”

“Lorraine is here?” Emanuela’s outburst made the others turn to the window as well.

Cole sighed. “We knew it was just a matter of time before the press would show up here. Hunter, wait, I’ll go with you.”

“I’m coming too.” Emanuela, who

had been sitting on a bar stool, jumped down, but Hunter held up an outstretched hand and spoke in a firm voice. “No. I’m taking the blame, and you’re staying here!”

At first, Emanuela looked like she was about to argue, but then her eyes softened and she walked over and kissed him. “You are amazing. I hope you know that.”

The corners of his mouth curved and he kissed her back. “I’m happy you think so, but admitting that I like beer in front of the world isn’t that big a deal.”

We were quiet as Cole and Hunter went outside.

“I feel bad about letting them take the blame,” Jonah muttered with his head

hanging over his cup of coffee.

“You know the press is going to want to talk to you and me.” Emanuela sat down on her chair again, her eyes on Jonah. They had the same bright amber eye color as their mother, who was sitting with her shoulders slumping forward and red-rimmed eyes.

I walked over to give Lilly a hug and as I held her in my arms, she cried into my hair. “I don’t understand why Anne would do this to us. She was always temperamental and dramatic, but this...”

I couldn’t offer her any explanation. All I could do was hug her again and whisper how sorry I was.

“We’ve worked so hard to make this place a success.” More tears formed in

Lilly's eyes. "Anne used to be part of that and when her mom left, we were all here for her."

"So, you're not her biological mom?"

"No, I had Cole, Emanuela, and Jonah. Anne's mom was young and I think she joined our family unit for the thrill of the park. But even a theme park becomes work when you do it every day, and by the time Anne was seven, Nina's sense of adventure made her pack up and leave."

"Without Anne?"

Lilly nodded. "She said she would be back, but a year turned to ten and by the time Anne was seventeen the contact with Nina was down to a few calls a

year.”

“Hunter said that Anne is my age.”

“She’ll be twenty-two soon, the youngest of our kids. I don’t understand why she would destroy something she knows brings great joy to people. What about all the children who come here each summer?”

Gunnar sat next to Lilly. Taking her hand, he nodded to the wall. “Can someone turn on the sound? I think they’re talking about us again.”

Two anchorwomen with serious expressions on their faces were discussing the allegations made by Anne. “It’s a lot to wrap your head around, and I have to say that after all we’ve heard this morning, a lot of things are

beginning to make sense. Think about the perplexing behavior that we've seen from Emanuela over the years with her constant struggle to communicate in a proper manner. No doubt growing up in a crime syndicate will traumatize a person."

"You're right. This would explain her social problems with teammates in the past."

"Yes, the poor woman has been carrying a heavy burden of fear on her shoulders. Thank Mother Nature that her brave sister Anne found the courage to come out and share what kind of oppressive family structure they've all lived under. The lies and the deceit. It's unfathomable what Cole Cervici and

others responsible have gotten away with for, apparently, years.”

The younger of the anchorwomen shook her head. “There are so many unanswered questions at the moment. And more accusations are coming in as we speak from viewers who are commenting on this story.”

The other woman, who was in her fifties, lowered her eyes and read from a screen in front of her, “One viewer wrote, one year we went to Nostalgia Park and I knew something wasn’t right the minute we got there. I have a sense for these things and it was clear that all the employees seemed afraid, like someone was forcing them to be there. I’ll bet they were all being threatened or

something.”

“Oh, come on.” Jonah took a long, steadying breath. “Have people lost their minds?”

“Another viewer writes, I didn’t vote for Jonah Cervici and I warned my friends that he couldn’t be trusted, but they wouldn’t listen and look at us now: having a criminal on our council. It’s an outrage! We need to demand that he resigns immediately.”

It was like the air had been sucked out of the kitchen and no one said a word.

“We’re being told that Lorraine with our eyes-on-the-ground team has been granted an interview with members of the Cervici family. Let’s hear what they

have to say.”

A petite woman wearing a yellow winter coat with a matching hat showed up and spoke directly into the camera. “I’m here in front of the entrance to Nostalgia Park, which has been voted the best theme park in the world three times since it opened almost ten years ago. With us are Hunter Hercules and Cole Cervici, who have agreed to respond to the allegation from Anne Cervici. Let’s begin with you, Cole. Many describe you as the head of the Cervici family since you’re the spokesperson for the park and all your other businesses. What was your reaction when you heard what your sister, Anne, had to say?”

Cole stood with his legs slightly spread and his right hand locked around his left wrist. “We are all overwhelmed with sadness to see a member of our family in such a state of confusion.”

“So, you claim it’s all made up?”

“Not all of it. The sex club is real but that’s a legitimate and legal part of our entertainment business. It’s also true that we did have a fire at our property last night.”

“And can you confirm that equipment to brew alcohol was found along with a laboratory to produce drugs?”

Cole frowned and shook his head. “There was never any laboratory on our property nor have we ever produced

drugs.”

“Are you saying Anne made that up?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“But one of the firemen who helped extinguish the fire explained that they found evidence of beer brewing.”

Hunter raised his hand. “That’s my fault.”

Lorraine changed her focus to him. “What do you mean by that? And before you answer, Hunter, let me just explain to our viewers that your role in the Cervici family is that you are married to Emanuela, whom you met when you first began playing soccer for the Dolphins.”

“That’s right.” Hunter stood confident, with a relaxed stance.

“And you were saying that the beer brewing is your fault.”

“One hundred percent! It’s no secret that we Nmen love to drink beer. It’s one of the reasons why we’re so big and strong compared to you Motlanders. As an athlete, I can’t afford to grow weak. That’s why I convinced Cole to let me brew beer in his storage room.”

“You convinced him to break the law?”

“Yes.” Hunter folded his arms and his expression was stern. “It wasn’t that hard when I told him I’d go back to the Northlands if I didn’t get some beer. Cole loves his sister very much and wasn’t interested in having Emanuela moving that far away.”

“Speaking of Emanuela, does she know about your addiction to beer?”

“I’m not addicted. I just love it and it’s healthy.”

“But hasn’t she tried to help you overcome this urge?”

“No. Why would she when she sees it’s my secret potion to being better and faster than her in soccer? Emanuela is too smart to try and change me. She respects that I come from a different culture and she’s not as judgmental as the rest of you.”

Lorraine stiffened. “You’re calling us judgmental?”

“Uh-huh. You think that you’re better than us and you’re convinced that your way is the right way. None of you take

into consideration that beer was a treasured part of human culture for thousands of years. The real tragedy here isn't that I hid a small home brewery. The real tragedy is that it burned down and that the rest of you have no clue what you're missing out on."

"But alcohol has proven to be addictive."

Hunter shrugged. "So has chocolate. It's all a matter of moderation."

The reporter frowned again and turned to Cole.

"What about your brother, Councilman Jonah, does he know about any of this?"

"Now he does." Hunter's tone was dry.

“I meant, did he know about it before Anne courageously spoke up?”

Cole answered, “Jonah is focused on his job in the Council. He’s not involved in running the family business.”

“But did he know about the beer?”

Cole looked away. “Why would we tell him when he could get in trouble for knowing about it?” It was clear that Cole was trying to avoid giving an outright lie, but Hunter didn’t have those scruples and groaned out loud.

“No, Jonah didn’t know about it and he’s probably going to be very upset about it. Do you have any more questions?”

“Yes.” Loraine kept her focus on Cole. “Did you know that many are now

threatening to boycott Nostalgia Park when it opens? How do you feel about that?”

Cole sighed. “I think it’s sad. One of the reasons I agreed to help Hunter brew beer was my fascination with everything historical. The reason our theme park is so brilliant is that we spend a lot of time researching to get it right. It has been proven that beer and alcohol were a common thing in the past, and my dream would be to make it possible for our visitors at Nostalgia Park to experience what it tastes and feels like to enjoy alcohol.”

“You want to get your guests drunk?” The reporter’s tone was incredulous.

“Maybe not drunk, but Nostalgia

Park is the closest thing there is to time traveling, and we would love for our guests to have as authentic an experience as possible. Wouldn't it be fun if you could have a drink like in the olden days and see what it tasted like?"

"What about your sister's accusations that you've been the leader of a crime syndicate for years?"

Cole tucked his hands in his pockets and looked sad. "I'm not sure if this is Anne's cry for our attention, but the fact is that we haven't seen her for years. Her allegations are absurd."

"So except for the beer brewing there haven't been illegal activities after dark in the park like she claims?"

"Listen, I'm sure people are

intelligent enough to question how I would have time to lead a large crime syndicate like that when I'm busy running an entertainment dynasty with not only Nostalgia Park but also the world's largest physical wellness center. Trust me, our focus and concern always has been and always will be on what happens during opening hours. For instance, right now we're busy making plans for this summer's grand opening of the Nostalgia Express, a real train that will take visitors around the park in a luxurious dining experience."

Lorraine took the bait. Like a curious child, she straightened up and lifted her eyebrows. "A real train?"

"Yes, a replica of a real train. But of

course, we'll have to scratch that if people are serious about boycotting us. We'll know in a month when we open for season tickets. I'm just hoping the authorities and the public can see through Anne's confusion."

"And you, Hunter, are you willing to bear the consequences for your actions? Breaking the law could result in your being forced to leave the country."

Hunter squared his shoulders. "As long as my wife comes with me, I have no problem going back to the Northlands. Living with all your rules is tough for someone like me."

The reporter faced the camera, and spoke in a grave voice. "We've learned that the Cervici family denies running a

crime syndicate. They do however admit to helping Hunter Hercules brew beer, to which Nmen attribute the holding of some kind of magical powers. Back to you in the studio.”

The two anchorwomen in the studio began another round of analyzing the interview. “It’s shocking to see a complete lack of regret for what they’ve done. They both openly admitted to breaking the law but there were no tears or promises of redemption.”

“No, it’s going to be interesting to see what will happen in this case, and of course the big question everyone is asking is, how will it affect our first male Councilman, Jonah Cervici? Can he stay or will his supporters hold him

accountable for his family's shocking behavior?"

"Not just that, but how much pressure will his critics put on their representatives in the Council?"

The camera zoomed in on the older of the women, who summed up. "We'll continue to reach out to Jonah Cervici for an interview and keep you updated on this unfolding story."

The atmosphere in the kitchen was heavy.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" I asked Jonah.

"Not while the press is out there."

"No, I should have thought of that."

It was in my nature to try and cheer up my friends. "I'm so sorry all of this is

happening, but I have some good news for you.”

Jonah took my hand and moved over to a soft chair in the living room. It was a tight squeeze with both of us in it, but that was how we had done things from the first day we met. With him and me everything was tactile and we loved to be close.

“I talked to my mom and something amazing has happened. My dad finally decided to get the operation.”

Jonah lit up. “He did? I knew it! It’s not in his nature to stay down.”

“We’ve been telling him that too, and yet my mom seemed to think it was a conversation with you that gave him the last push.”

Jonah squeezed my body. “The reason isn’t important. What matters is that your dad is doing it.”

“But I would still like to know what you told him.”

“I told him I was the strongest man in the world.”

I blinked my eyes. “You mean the most powerful.”

“No, I said the strongest and it bothered him... a lot.”

“Because it’s what people used to call my dad before the accident.”

“I know that, but a while back, he admitted that Solo was younger and becoming stronger than him. Magni was the strongest of his generation and it was a huge part of his identity. That’s why

being a cripple hit him much harder than it would most others.”

“Of course it did. He is Magni the Magnificent.” My mother had lovingly called our dad that nickname in front of us kids and we’d taken it up quickly, adoring him as our hero.

“No, Mila, he’s just Magni. A mortal with limitations like the rest of us. The thing is, strength fades with age. Same with beauty. You can mourn it, but it changes nothing. I’ve been trying to make Magni see that losing his limbs was in no way the worst that could have happened to him.”

“Jonah...” I pulled back and used a blameful tone.

“Don’t Jonah me. This is year 2449

and he can have robotic limbs that will make him walk and run again. He could have lost his memory or the ability to communicate with others. Magni's scars make him look fiercer than ever before and when he gets over his vanity, he'll see that."

"Still, it's like you don't appreciate how severe a loss it was to him."

"I do. But as I see it, your dad has depended on his strength for way too long. There's much more to him and when he gets back up again, he will be a better man for it."

My face softened in a smile. "Is that what you told him?"

"I wrote him a quote that I hoped would push him to get over himself."

“What quote?”

“It said, ‘True leadership isn’t about being the best, it’s about bringing out the best in others.’”

I marinated the words in my head and repeated them slowly. “True leadership isn’t about being the best, it’s about bringing out the best in others.”

“That’s right.”

“You think that’s what motivated my dad to get the operation?”

“Could be. Or maybe he was just ready. He said that an attack on the Manor is likely, so I questioned why he didn’t get up to make sure his soldiers are ready for it. Magni might not be the best fighter any longer, but he can still be the best leader.”

Leaning my head against Jonah's shoulder, I sighed. "Either way, I'm so relieved."

The weight of Jonah's head leaning down on top of mine made me smile. Even when the world was in turmoil around us, he made me feel safe.

CHAPTER 9

Arson

Jonah

Leaving the restricted part of the archive, I passed a few familiar faces on my way out of the public service building. Several pretended not to see me, while others gave discreet shakes of their heads.

“Jonah, wait up.”

Councilwoman Sheana Rene caught up with me, her large brown eyes and tanned skin made a beautiful contrast to the white coat she was wearing. “May

peace surround you.”

I kept walking but gave her a polite smile. “Thank you, same to you.”

Sheana Rene was someone I respected and admired. She was one of the most fair and reasonable people on the council and her two daughters, Shelly and Rochelle, had taken part in the first experimental school in the Northlands. Shelly had even gone on to marry an Nman called Marco.

“What brings you to Old York?” I asked her.

“Research, but I heard what happened. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Of course you’re not fine. Your future on the Council is in jeopardy and

your family is under attack. I have to ask you, Jonah, did you have anything to do with this side business that your family is accused of running?”

I brushed her off. “No, I had nothing to do with it.”

With a hand to my arm, Sheana Rene stopped me and looked deep into my eyes. “But did you know about it?”

I was trapped. It had been two days since the storage building burned down and so far, I'd avoided all interviews and direct questions. Hunter and Cole had taken the entire blame, but I was a Councilman, chosen as a child for my strong integrity and selflessness. There was no way I could lie to my colleague, and she was too smart to fall for any

attempt at not answering. As if my jaws had a mind of their own and were trying to prevent me from destroying my future, they tensed up, making it hard to speak.

“Yes, I did know about it.”

Sheana Rene’s eyes widened in shock and then sadness followed. “And you just looked the other way?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re a Council member. We’re role models of good and honorable behavior. How could you?”

“I didn’t see any harm in what they were doing. It was a small circle of friends and I believe in a higher level of personal freedom. You know that.”

“Yes, but Jonah, this is serious.” Her voice dropped into a whisper and she

leaned closer. “Please tell me that you didn’t drink alcohol yourself?”

I pressed my lips together. My silence all the answer she needed.

Closing her beautiful eyes for a second, she drew in a deep breath before locking eyes with me. “I was going to defend you but now...” She shook her head. “And to think that I rooted for you during the election.”

It hurt to see her disappointment, and my spirits were low when we parted ways. Soon I’d have to face the entire Council and there was a real chance I’d be forced to leave my seat. I was walking to my apartment with heavy thoughts when Cole called me up.

“How are you hanging in there?”

“Things aren’t looking too good right now. I just spoke to a colleague who used to be a supporter. She’s not any longer.”

My brother gave a pained sigh. “Sorry to hear that.”

“And you? Did you get called in for questioning yet?”

“The request came this morning. They want me to come in for a meeting later this week to explain my side of the story.”

“Pack a bag. They’ll transfer you to a place of reflection. You know that, right?”

“I’m aware, but listen, Jonah, I’m calling you because the report came from the fire marshal. They determined

the cause of the fire to be arson.”

My steps slowed down. “Arson. You’re sure?”

“Yes. And that made me think of that drone the fire fighters passed on their way to us. The one with one passenger. It can’t be a coincidence that Anne goes public with her accusation the same day that the fire reveals our brewery.”

“No, I’ve been thinking the same thing.”

Cole sighed. “We always knew Anne was crazy, but if she set fire to a building that close to where our entire family was sleeping, she is truly deranged.”

I made a sound of agreement. “I could check with the registry of

transportation and find out who was in the area. It's hard to believe her capable of something like that though."

"If Anne is responsible for the fire, she would have found someone else to do her dirty work. She's crazy but not unintelligent."

"All right, I'll keep you posted. Mila is waiting for me back at my place."

"Okay. Give her a kiss from me, will you?"

I frowned. "I don't think so. If I give Mila a kiss it will be from me."

"Ahh." His tone lightened. "It's like that, is it?"

"Got to go, brother." With all the chaos around me, at least I had Mila with me for two more days.

After a quick call to the traffic registry, I bought a bag of groceries and hurried home to Mila, updating her on my run-in with Sheana Rene, the call from Cole, and my inquiry with the traffic registry that I'd just made.

“What did they say?” she asked with interest.

“They did have one drone in our area at the time. The person I talked to promised to retrieve data from the flight and send it to me.”

“It's a lucky thing that you have access to classified information.”

We were in the kitchen, and I leaned against the counter. “Actually, this is public information.”

Mila looked surprised. “Do you

mean to say that anytime someone uses a public drone, others can know about it?”

“Only if they go through the trouble of collecting the information.”

“But what if you don’t want people to know where you’re going?”

I lowered my brow. “Like if you’re a celebrity or something?”

“Yes, or you just prefer to live your life without others sticking their nose in it.”

“I’ve never heard that it’s a problem.”

Mila was sitting on my kitchen counter with a glass of apple juice in her hands. “It’s funny, because I’ve always seen myself as a Motlander among Northlanders, but I’m starting to see that

in many ways I prefer the Northlands. People here are kind and caring, but the Nmen have a point that there's a sheep mentality among Motlanders.”

I jerked my head back. “Take that back.”

Her cheeks flamed up. “I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. It's just that I question things in a different way than I used to.”

“Good. Then maybe you could question some of the Northland culture too. Like say, the insanity of making men fight and potentially kill each other to marry a woman.” Without looking at her I unpacked the groceries I'd bought. My head was exploding with the stress of my family's being under attack from the

whole country and possibly our own sister. I'd just lost an important ally in Sheana Rene, and the last thing I needed was for Mila to attack me too.

"Jonah, I..." She trailed off before asking in a pleading voice, "Will you look at me, please?"

I turned to see Mila biting her lip with a sad expression.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know." I emptied my lungs in a noisy exhalation. "I'm just stressed with everything that's going on right now." Taking my backpack from the floor I placed it on the counter. "I brought you something."

Mila took the white gloves I gave

her and put them on.

“The book is very old so you have to be careful with it.”

“Don’t worry. The Gray Manor is filled with antique books. I’m used to reading them with care.”

“Yes, but this book is extremely precious.”

With both hands, she held the book I handed her as if it were a newborn baby with a fragile neck to protect. Slowly she turned it around to read the title on the cover. “*Gardening in Cold Climates.*”

I gave her a smile. “I thought you might like to read it.”

“Wow, that’s so nice of you, Jonah. Thank you.”

With an amused smile, I revealed, “The cover is from a different book. The real one is underneath.”

“Oh.” Mila removed the first cover and then her eyes popped to double size. “Is this...?”

I nodded. “Yep! It’s the infamous book that aroused a nation and made the council ban all romance books.”

Her fingers trailed above the title on the green cover without ever touching it. “I can’t believe this.” She gave me a quick glance as to assure herself that I wasn’t joking.

“It’s the real thing,” I confirmed.

Mila swallowed and stroked the book while whispering the title aloud. “*Forbidden Letters from the North.*”

“I smuggled it out from the restricted section. Hence the false cover.”

“But Jonah, this isn’t who you are. Breaking rules and laws like this and putting your future on the Council at risk.”

With her sitting on the counter we were eye to eye. “What if it is? I don’t agree with the restrictive laws. None of them make much sense to me.”

“But aren’t you afraid your critics will use it against you?”

My head fell forward and again, I let out all the air from my lungs. “I can’t live my life in fear of losing my place on the Council. If I do, it will paralyze me and I won’t be able to make any change.”

Mila lifted my head. “So, what are you going to do?”

Chewing on my lip, I thought about it. “What I always do. Be myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have to stay true to who I am and what I believe in. I can’t be a populist and say what people want to hear. I’m different than the other members on the Council, but I see that as a good thing. Maybe the majority of the population prefer things the old way, but what about the rest of us? Who’s going to speak for the rebels, the romantics, and the thrill seekers, if not me?”

Mila’s dimples popped out as her face softened in a smile. Swinging her hand through the air she spoke in a

narrator's voice. "Authenticity is the highest form of integrity. Quote Councilman Jonah Cervici."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No. I'm in awe of you." Placing her hand on her chest she still smiled. "When you talk like that it makes my heart beat faster."

"You are making fun of me!"

"No, it makes complete sense because if you can't be true to yourself, you can't be true to any cause. I get it!"

My shoulders relaxed. "Does that mean you agree?"

"By agree, do you mean if I want you to challenge the other hundred Council members to see things differently? Of course I do."

“Good, because that’s what I was elected to do in the first place.”

Mila blew out her cheeks. “True, but be strategic about how you do it. Everyone is threatened by change. It’s the same back home.”

I was thoughtful for a second. “You’re right.”

“Look at the bright side, at least here people don’t beat you up for disagreeing with them.”

“There’s that, but facing a Council full of critics isn’t fun either. It’s just a matter of time before they schedule a hearing. I should prepare my defense.”

Mila’s shoulders fell. “I’m sorry.”

“They will expect me to stand with my head down and apologize to them

like a schoolboy, but I can't do that, Mila. Not when my agenda on the Council is to change the same laws that I broke.”

Lifting her arms, she silently invited me in for a hug. I moved close to her and with her sitting on the counter, my head rested perfectly against her neck.

“No matter what happens, I'll support you.”

Hugging Mila felt like finding a safe haven during a powerful storm and for a short moment everything was all right. “Thank you, Milove,” I whispered against her neck and wondered what she would do if I kissed her again.

“Just do me a favor.” Mila pulled back to look at me. “Talk to Pearl before

the hearing. Didn't she once pull something off against all odds that was of the same magnitude as this?"

I nodded and planted a kiss on Mila's cheek. "I'll talk to her. I promise."

"Good." For a moment we held eye contact and I was so close to kissing her when she turned her attention back to the book. "Do you mind if I read it now?"

"No." Swallowing hard, I pulled back and tried to act normal. "Go ahead, you'll love it."

Mila slid down from the counter, holding the book against her chest like the precious item it was. "You've read it. Is it very steamy?"

"I'm not going to tell you anything.

Read it, and then we can compare notes later.”

She was on her way to my bedroom, when I called out, “But Mila.”

“Yes?” She turned in the doorway.

“It’s our secret, okay?”

Her smile just about blew me over. Anyone could see that Mila had beautiful and symmetrical features, but not many got to see the special smile she shared with the few selected people that she loved. It was an open window into the sweetness that was Mila. The warmth that radiated from her along with the pure excitement in her eyes gave her a special glow. When she smiled like this, I forgot to breathe. “Don’t worry, Jonah, you can trust me.”

And then she was gone.

I blinked my eyes, bringing myself out of the temporary trance I was in and shaking my head to get my brain going again.

Cole called once more, asking if I had contacted the traffic registry.

“Yes, they promised to send over what they had on the drone that the fire fighters saw.”

“Well, did they?” His tone was impatient.

“Sorry, let me check. Yes, I’ve got it... umm, okay, the drone was used by a person called Enna Johnson, but it says the information has been edited.”

“What do you mean it’s been edited?”

“I don’t know. There’s no log of previous information. Only the name Enna Johnson.”

“So not Anne?”

“No.” I narrowed my eyes. “Wait a minute.”

“What is it, do you know her?”

“Enna is a peculiar name, isn’t it?”

“So?”

“It’s also Anne spelled backward.”

Cole was quiet.

“What if Anne changed her name?”

He groaned. “At this point I wouldn’t put it past her. Is there at least a detailed itinerary so we can see where the drone went exactly and what stops it made?”

I scrolled down the report. Yes,

there's an address and a travel log.”

“What does it say?”

“That the drone had a stop at Nostalgia Park at ten past two a.m. It took off again seventeen minutes later.”

Cole spoke fast, “What about a picture from the drone? They all have cameras. Do you see anything on the report?”

Scrolling all the way down, I frowned. “Sorry, it says the camera was malfunctioning.”

“Huh. That's convenient for the arsonist. If Anne is behind the fire, then we'll need some kind of proof to show people how unstable she is. I just saw her give another interview and her stories get more bizarre and disturbing

every minute she's in the spotlight. She talked about the sex club and made it sound like we're a bunch of perverts."

I leaned back in my chair. "She must be talking about you then." It was an attempt at lifting the mood, but my joke didn't make Cole laugh.

"Let's keep digging to get to the bottom of this. I'm going to call the staff at Happy Souls. Anne lived there, remember?"

"But that was years ago, Cole. She was a teenager then."

"I know, but maybe they can tell us something we don't know."

"Okay, let me dig around and see if I can find some pictures of the passenger of that drone. If it's Anne, we'll need to

confront her about it.”

Cole's growl expressed how I felt about that possibility. Anne was three years younger than me. As a child I had adored her, but she and Cole never got along. She was as headstrong as him and would always challenge his authority in our family. I had loved Anne but never the drama she created. A memory of my asking her to pass me the salad came back to me. We had all been confused when she broke down crying, claiming we were all yelling at her. Confronting her with arson would no doubt be a dramatic affair.

CHAPTER 10

Passion

Jonah

I spent my evening calling around and digging through Community Cams, a website that offered access to surveillance cameras in public spaces. The more I watched people go about their lives, Mila's words about privacy stirred something in me and I was beginning to find it slightly disturbing that we never asserted our right to privacy.

Our whole society was based on the

expectation that every citizen conformed and followed the law, and now that my family had been caught breaking the law, I was resenting the level of control that the system had.

The only positive thing was that it came in handy now that I was looking for the arsonist. The address from the traffic registry provided me with a starting point and two hours into my investigation, Cole and I had talked four more times, and we had confirmed three things.

1: Anne hadn't lived in Happy Souls, a well-known place of reflection, since she was a teenager. Despite the helpful staff and the tranquil surroundings of the place, she had

chosen to check out and had never returned.

2: Anne had been the passenger in that drone. We had a picture of her getting into it to prove it.

3: Anne had edited her name in the original booking the morning after the fire.

It was a bit past midnight when I went to bed. “You still reading? I thought you would be asleep by now.”

“It’s this book. I can’t put it down, Jonah.”

Popping a tooth cleaner in my mouth, I undressed down to my briefs, and smiled as I got into my side of the bed. “How far did you get?”

“Chapter seven.”

“Did they kiss yet?”

Mila put down the book and turned to face me. “Yes. And it made my heart speed up, just reading about the way his tongue touched hers.”

“I thought you would be disgusted by that.”

Mila shook her head. “No. I’ve read about it in other books and lately I’ve been thinking about what it would feel like.”

“I’m sure you’ll find out when you marry. After all, passion means everything to you.” Her comment from yesterday about not wanting to marry me because there was no passion between us still stung and made my answer come out in a dry tone.

Her face fell and she pulled her comforter higher. “I’m not going to apologize for that.”

Rolling onto my back, I rubbed my face.

“What’s wrong?”

I gave a long exhalation before answering, “Cole and I found out that it was Anne who set the building on fire.”

“Shut up. You sure?”

“Yes. And it makes me angry. What did we ever do to her?” My voice rose a little. “What if that fire had jumped from the storage building to the house we slept in? Why does she want to destroy us like that?”

Mila didn’t interrupt me but just listened as I continued.

“Remember when we talked about emotions and I said that I don’t agree with how we’re taught to suppress our feelings? This is exactly what I was referring to.”

“Okay.”

“We have every right to be angry. I’m tired of people telling us that anger serves no purpose.”

“You mean teachers?”

“Yes. Every child in this country is told that anger doesn’t solve anything. All we learn is how to suppress it and not to engage in negative emotions.”

“But what’s wrong with changing your state of mind and focusing on things that make you happy?”

I was boiling over with frustration

and that made my hands swing around as I spoke. “There’s nothing wrong with being happy, if you are happy. But if someone sets fire to your house, shouldn’t you be allowed to be angry? I think we’ve been lied to. I think anger serves a purpose. Your dad told me this before his accident; he said that anger is his fuel to fight injustice.”

“But he’s talking about people who plot to kill our family.”

“What’s the difference? Anne is trying to destroy my family. The Council is upholding outdated laws that prohibit our free speech and freedom to live the lives we wish to. None of that is right and just thinking about it makes me angry.”

Mila lifted her head. “Do you want me to give you a massage? Maybe that would help.”

“Why? Does my anger make you feel uncomfortable? You of all people should be able to handle it, Mila.

She lifted her shoulders in a small shrug. “It’s what I do at home too. I’m the peacekeeper in our family. You just seem very tense, Jonah.”

“That’s because I *am* tense.” My voice was louder than intended and it made Mila pull back. She had never seen me like this because I’d never been under this much pressure.

The fact that Anne had turned on our family like this was shocking. It was likely that Emanuela would need to

leave the country to be with Hunter, and that Cole would have to spend months in a place of reflection. Nostalgia Park could be lost and then there was the ominous likelihood that my time as a Councilman might be cut short. It was depressing to think that all my ambitious dreams of changing the world into a better place would go up in smoke. I sighed as another huge point of stress made my lungs feel like a hand was squeezing them tight. In thirty-eight days, I would lose Mila. The woman I loved would marry a large warrior who would be as protective and possessive as all other Nmen. It was a given that there would be no more alone time between us. No more hugs or kisses. Of all the

things that stressed me out, losing Mila was soul-wrecking to me.

“I’m sorry about Anne, Jonah. You don’t deserve any of it.”

My chest weighed a hundred kilos and it made it hard to breathe, but I forced my words out. “If I’m completely honest, it’s not just because of Anne.” I met Mila’s large blue eyes that shone with concern for me. “You telling me that you’re thinking about kissing... well, it brought back part of our conversation from last night. You know, the part where you said you need passion in a marriage.”

“Yes?”

“It felt like a rejection and this is what happens, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“The subtle passive-aggressiveness that we Motlanders do so well. I was hurt by your rejection and then when you brought it up, I felt frustrated. Not enough to confront you, because that’s not our style, is it? But enough to take some small punch at you verbally. And now I feel bad about that.”

She almost had a unibrow from the concern on her face. “Don’t feel bad. I’m not mad at you, Jonah.”

“No, of course you aren’t, because that would be a first for you, wouldn’t it?” I instantly regretted the sharpness of my tone and covered my face with both hands. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that.”

Mila pulled at my hands. “At least we can talk about it. At home people smash things against the wall or shout when they get angry.”

I calmed myself. “Yeah, I’ve noticed. They act out while we look in.”

Mila tilted her head. “I never thought about it like that. You’re right. Maybe instead of acting out I could teach them to look in and reflect more.”

“Looking in and reflecting is never a bad idea, but neither is speaking up when your boundaries are broken.” I shook my head. “There has to be a middle ground somewhere.”

For a while none of us spoke.

Lying on her side, using her right arm as a pillow, Mila was still holding

on to my hand with her left. “What’s your favorite scene in the book?”

I recognized Mila’s signature move to diffuse any situation by changing the subject, but I didn’t mind.

“Hmm... there are many. From the first letters to their first kiss.”

“That kissing scene was amazing.” Mila reached for the book and began searching for the right place.

“You should read it aloud?”

She shook her head. “No, I want you to read it. I love listening to your voice.”

I complied and began reading aloud.

“You promised you’d be open to our culture.”

She smiled up at me, her cheeks red

from the cold, and her eyes clear with curious intelligence. "Okay, then teach me."

"If I kiss my little sister or my mother, I do it like this." I leaned in and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

"We do that here too."

"Good. But there's another type of kissing that's only shared between a man and his woman."

"Ahh, you mean a romantic kind of kiss. I've seen them in movies and read about them in books."

"Have you?"

"Yes, but it seems very fabricated. I've never met a man who made me want to act that foolish. No woman would behave like that in real life."

“But will you let me show you?”

She hesitated.

“It’s an important part of our culture, Deidra.”

“Okay, one kiss then.”

With a small smile of satisfaction, I let my finger trail down from her temple to her jawline. From the way her collarbone rose and sank, I could tell she was nervous.

*“Relax,” I whispered and used my thumb to trail across her lips. We both had our eyes closed when I leaned in and kissed her. At first it was soft and my hand slid around her neck while I took in the exhilarating sensation of kissing **Deidra** after all this time dreaming of her.*

*She was quiet and alert as I slid my tongue against hers like a knock on a door to a house no one had ever been granted access to before. The rush that went through me when **Deidra** opened up and let me enter her divine mouth made me moan out loud.*

I read the rest of the chapter and when I stopped, Mila looked over with a cute smile. “Hearing you read it just made that scene even better.”

“Does it make you feel disappointed with the kiss we had? You know, because we didn’t use tongue.” My voice was roughened from the effects of reading in the book.

Mila was slow to answer, “No, but

it leaves me with unanswered questions.”

“Yeah, me too.”

We were quiet for a moment and then she asked in a low voice. “Are you going to kiss someone like that one day?”

“Probably not.” I closed my eyes and turned on my back feeling ashamed of my passive-aggressive comment. It was just that reading that scene had made me long for Mila even more. Another long moment of silence between us was followed by her speaking first.

“Jonah, I’m a bit confused about why you felt rejected last night when I talked about passion in a marriage.”

“Because despite what Northlanders

think, we Motlander men have pride too.”

“But I never rejected you.”

“Yes you did! I said I’d fight for you in a comedy battle if it meant keeping my friend and you said that you needed more than friendship in a marriage. You needed passion. You made it very clear that you don’t have those sorts of feelings for me.”

“I made that clear?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure we were having the same conversation.”

I widened my eyes. “Are you denying that you said it?”

“No. But I never said that I couldn’t be passionate with *you*.”

“It was implied.”

Mila gave a snort of disbelief. “Not from my side.”

Full of skepticism, I looked deep into her eyes. “You’re being the peacekeeper again, trying to make me feel better, but we both know that you’re not sexually attracted to me.”

Mila angled her head. “That’s not true.”

It would have been easy to buy into her words, but I wouldn’t allow myself that kind of hope. With a sigh, I confronted her. “Mila, stop being polite. You’ve said it before; you’re into big well-muscled men. I’m six-foot-tall and fit, but I’m no seven-foot mountain of a Huntsman.”

“All I’ve said is that I don’t judge people on how they look.”

“Come on. You have eyes in your head, and physical attraction plays a big part in how passionate you want to be with that person. You can’t deny that.”

Mila looked down. “You’re right. Does that make me shallow?”

I intertwined our fingers. “No, Mila, it makes you human.”

We were close when she met my eyes again. “What if I’m not attracted to any of the champions that I can choose from?”

My eyes closed for a second as I squeezed her hand. “I’m not going to repeat what I’ve already told you a million times, Mila.”

“That I don’t have to do it,” she said for me.

“Yeah.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Is it childish of me that I wanted to practice kissing with you?”

“No. It makes sense to try new things with someone you feel safe with.”

Her brow lowered. “You know I wouldn’t do it if I weren’t attracted to you, right?”

The hand squeezing my lungs eased a bit.

“Would you...” Her cheeks flamed up. “I mean you don’t have to of course, but that kiss in the book made me curious. I’m always impeccable with my oral hygiene and I used a tooth cleaner,

but if you think it's gross..."

A smile grew on my lips. "You want to kiss again?"

"Yes, but like they did in the book."

"With tongue?"

She was holding her breath and was flushed with embarrassment. "Maybe it's a bad idea to..."

I didn't let her finish before I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers. She made a sound of surprise from my sudden movement but I was determined to show her that I could offer her passion.

All my life I'd been raised to be altruistic and always put others first, but in that moment none of that mattered. Maybe making out with me would only complicate things for Mila. Maybe the

right thing to do would be to discuss it with her some more. But I did none of that. For once in my life, I gave in to my own desires and poured all my fear of losing her into my kiss.

When Mila's hand nuzzled my neck and her lips parted a little, I ran my tongue over her upper lip as an invitation for her to come play. The feeling of her tongue meeting mine sent an electric current from the top of my scalp all the way down to my toes. We circled our tongues and explored like travelers finding new territory.

Her sweet little sounds of pleasure made my hard erection twitch in my briefs.

Mila asked for this. The thought

gave me the courage to lift the comforter and roll on top of her – my kissing growing bolder and more demanding, my fingers weaving into her long hair and my belly button pressing down on her pelvis.

She spread her legs and kept kissing me. The sensation of kissing her while rubbing myself against the mattress should have been enough but I still moved upward, matching my crotch with hers. Mila moaned into my mouth and it made the blood in my veins heat up in a way I'd never experienced before.

“My North Star,” I whispered and gently bit her lower lip while grinding against her. This was more than she had asked for but I couldn't get enough of

her. My hand found its way to her waist, moving under her shirt and caressing her soft skin.

“You can touch them if you want to,” she whispered and without her specifying, I understood what she was talking about.

Wanting to be sure I didn't misread her, I kept looking straight into her eyes as I slowly pushed her soft shirt up to her collarbone. Nudity wasn't a big thing for us Motlanders, but this was different. Hundreds of Nmen would soon be fighting for her. Some of them would potentially end up giving their lives to be in the position I was in now.

My hands shook a little when I touched her firm breasts. “You're so

beautiful, Milove.”

She giggled a little. “Stop staring.”

That was easier said than done.

“It’s like showing me a breathtaking piece of art and telling me not to look.”

“You’re making me shy.” With her hand behind my neck, Mila pulled me in for another kiss, this time nibbling at my upper lip in a playful manner that made my breathing go shallow and my stomach tense up with a raw desire unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

“Mila,” I groaned and didn’t even care that I sounded like a horny romantic.

Mila’s breathing changed too as we kept kissing and touching each other. I got goosebumps when her hands

explored my body.

“Jonah, this feels so good,” she moaned and followed the rhythm of my grinding against her.

“Yeah?” I pressed my crotch against her hard and whispered in her ear. “Then imagine what it would feel like without underwear.”

She leaned her head back and let her hands slide down to put pressure on the top of my behind as if silently asking me to grind harder.

I complied and imitated what I'd seen in the sex club. Our sounds and movements were identical to people having intercourse but our clothing created a barrier between us.

At first I didn't understand what

Mila was trying to do, but then I felt her push my briefs down while at the same time licking my jawline and rotating her hips under me.

Despite my brain's trying to get my attention, my fingers hooked inside her panties and I pushed them down. Mila raised her behind to make it easier and a second later, I was back between her legs grinding against her.

My eyes almost rolled back in my head at the feeling of her warm skin against the top of my cock.

"Ahh, Jonah, I've wanted this for so long."

Intertwining our hands, I was careful to only slide up and down her folds without penetrating her.

"Do you want me too?"

My answer was hoarse with need.

"Yes."

"Do you think we should make love?"

Everything was screaming *yes* inside me, except for the small alarm bell that made me pull back and look down at my gorgeous best friend half naked and about to do something she might regret.

The words hurt to get out, but I had to ask, "Are you sure you want that?"

"Why? Aren't you?"

"But what if you regret it?"

The doubt on my face and the question spoken out loud broke the magic and she shut her eyes for a second.

“Don’t get me wrong. I would be honored to make love to you, Milove, but I don’t want you to regret it later.”

“Why would I regret it?” The way she pulled her shirt down to cover herself said it all. She wasn’t sure about this.

I sighed but gave her room to pull her panties back up while I lay down and tried to steady my pumping heart. Trying to ease the awkwardness, I opened my arm for her and used a light tone, “Come here, my North Star. Good kiss, huh?”

Mila relaxed and snuggled up against me. “Yeah, that was a really good kiss.”

“I think we found one of your hidden

talents.” I laughed to release some of the pent-up energy still in my body.

“Not sure I did anything. You’re just a very good kisser, Jonah.”

Taking another deep breath to steady my racing heart, I spoke on the exhalation. “Thanks, but how would you know? You have nothing to compare it to.”

Mila lifted her left hand up in front of my face. “My whole body is shaking – look, that can’t be normal.”

“Of course it’s not normal. None of this is normal.” I kissed her forehead.

“Would you have gone all the way?” She whispered her question like she was afraid of my answer.

“Would you?”

“I asked you first.”

“Yes, Mila, I would have. I’d still like to.”

I tried not to be disappointed when she didn’t respond to my last comment.

“Jonah, when did you know that you weren’t asexual?”

A snort escaped me. “I never thought I was asexual. I told you that I wasn’t. It was all of you people who assumed it.”

That made her lift her head. “The reason you’d still like to make love to me... is it because you’re curious?”

I brushed hair away from her forehead. “No. It’s because kissing you made me want to never stop.”

“Me too.”

I could have drowned in those large

blue eyes shining up at me. “You sure?”
My heart was hammering fast.

“Yes, but does that mean you’d be open to...” She took a long steadying breath. “Would you be open to marriage?”

“*Marriage?*” My head was suddenly back to exploding with every obstacle in front of me. Not only did I have to find a way to confront my sister with what she’d done, I also had to fight for my seat on the Council, and support my family through potentially losing everything they’d worked hard for. Marrying would be sabotaging myself as people would think I’d completely lost my mind.

Cupping her face, I spoke in a

serious tone of voice. “Mila, I love you. You know I do, but marriage... it’s archaic and your dad might only have one hand but he would definitely use it to strangle me to death. I’m not exactly his ideal son-in-law. Right now isn’t a good time for me with everything that’s going on with my family and the Council. You understand that, don’t you?”

Pulling away from me, Mila turned on her side.

“Sweets, come on. Don’t be like that. I’m just being honest here. An hour ago, I didn’t think you were attracted to me, and now you’re talking about marriage.”

“Forget it.”

“Sweets?” I touched her shoulder

but she didn't move. "Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad. I'm just tired."

"You're being polite again. Be honest about how you feel."

"I want to go to sleep and forget that this happened."

"Why? That kiss was amazing."

Slowly, Mila turned and looked back at me. Her eyes moist. "You know I want *everything*, Jonah."

"But marriage... wasn't that just to please your parents? If you stay with me in the Motherlands we don't have to marry. We could just be together."

My words made her curl up, and when I tried to pull at her shoulder, she refused to turn.

All my training in conflict resolution

was running through my head, but I was mentally exhausted and flopped back on the mattress with a sigh of resignation.

Mila had never been truly mad at me before and after what had just happened between us, she had to know how much I desired her. Tomorrow we would figure it out.

CHAPTER 11

Heading Home

Mila

Looking up from his desk that I had rearranged to be closer to the window, Jonah watched me pack my bag.

“This isn’t what I had in mind when I invited you to come back to the Motherlands with me. I was going to show you all the beautiful places and have you experience the freedom women enjoy here.”

“It’s fine.” I kept my focus on packing everything meticulously.

“Mila, we need to talk about what

happened last night. You can't just shut me out."

My chest was heavy with un-cried tears that would no doubt pour out of me the minute I could be alone. Yesterday I'd thought Jonah was in love with me too. His kisses and touches had been like an out-of-body experience.

"I have the first draft for my speech at the Council."

"That's great." I still didn't look at him.

"Mila, come on. This isn't like you at all." His pleading tone pushed at my already fragile state of mind and I fled into the bathroom, where I crouched down and sobbed into my hands. Trying to dampen the sound hurt my chest, but I

couldn't hold it in anymore.

Jonah had wanted me last night. Not just as a dear friend, but as a lover. He had behaved like a man claiming his woman and I'd been ready to give myself to him.

In my head, I'd seen us confronting my parents together and standing our ground side to side. With Jonah as my partner, I could do anything.

But Jonah wasn't an Nman and he didn't want the same things as me. After twelve years in the North, I dreamed of family and a lifelong commitment. Jonah was a servant of the people and he would always put them first.

My sobbing died down and, drying my eyes, I did some breathing exercises

to regain control before I walked back out to face him.

“You’ve been crying.” Jonah looked pained. “Milove, please talk to me.”

“I’m just homesick. I know I was supposed to stay until tomorrow, but with my dad’s operation, I want to go back.”

Jonah’s arms fell to his side and he sighed.

“Besides, with me gone, it’ll give you peace and quiet to write your speech.”

“I won’t be able to write anything if I worry that you’re mad at me.”

My nose was itching from all the crying. “I’m not mad at you. We just want different things.”

Jonah moved to stand right in front of me. “But Mila, I do want you. It’s just that marriage is... risky.”

“I get that. You don’t want people to think you’re a romantic.” My eyes were fixed on his elbow.

“I’m already under pressure. I can’t afford to take that chance.”

Tears were forming in my eyes again. “Would you please arrange for a drone for me?”

Jonah touched his wristband, making the reservation. “I’ll come with you to the border.”

“Don’t. You have things to do and it would take too long.”

“But if it meant spending some more hours with you...”

My smile was tiny and polite. “You’ll see me next time you come back to meet with Pearl and Khan.”

Picking up my bag, Jonah gestured to the door. “Let me walk you to the pick-up place at least.”

“It’s okay, I know where it is.”

“Mila, stop. I’m coming!” Jonah was using a firm tone and sounded as bossy as my dad for once. It softened me that he wouldn’t allow me to push him away, completely.

At the drone pick-up place, Jonah looked like he was about to cry himself. “I wish we could have talked about what happened last night.” He stepped close to me. “I can’t stand the thought that I hurt you.”

I kept my eyes down.

“Mila, I feel your sorrow and I want to take it away. I just don’t know how.” Taking my hand, he squeezed it. “You know I love you, right?”

I knew that. We had told each other for more than a year.

“Mila, I mean it. I really love you.”

Lifting my gaze, I locked eyes with him. “I love you too, Jonah.” I swallowed the rest of the words that were in my thoughts. *Enough to put you before everything else. If only you’d do the same for me.*

Instantly, I was hit with guilt. How could I ask for Jonah to put me before the rest of the world when he had taken an oath to lead with love, integrity, and

devotion? How selfish could one woman be?

Jonah pulled me in for a long hug and as I stood in his arms, I began crying again.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “I’ll see you soon.”

Maybe he didn’t understand that from now on, I’d have to protect my heart. I couldn’t go back to what we had before I showed him my true feelings. Being close to him would hurt too much.

After placing my bag in the drone, Jonah gave me a hand and helped me inside. “Call me when you get home, okay?”

“Will do.”

The door closed and after going

over safety details and confirming my desired destination, the drone slowly rose from the ground.

I looked out the window, seeing Jonah wave at me and mouthing the words “I love you.”

My stomach cramped in pain and my heart wanted to stop the drone and beg him to be everything I’d dreamed he would be. Placing my hand on the window, I mouthed the words back, hoping he wouldn’t see my tears falling.

Jonah kept waving at me as I leaned my forehead on the glass watching him turn into a small dot as the drone took me back north.

For hours I sat in deep thought until it dawned on me that I’d need a ride

from the border. Not wanting to disturb my parents, I called my soul sister Raven instead.

Raven and I had been friends since I was ten years old, and after one glance at me, her happy smile faltered and she exclaimed, “What happened to you?”

Bursting with emotions, I told her everything.

“You made out with Jonah?” Her confusion would have been funny except that with the pain I was in, nothing was funny. “But he’s a Motlander man. I didn’t think they were interested in that sort of thing.”

I rolled my eyes. “Raven, everyone is different.”

“I know, but Jonah...” She gave a

small whistle. “Damn, who would have known?”

Ignoring her comment, I changed the subject. “How have you been?”

“Good. I’m working hard and I just nailed one of my tests at the academy.”

“And how are you and Leo?”

Raven swung her hair over her shoulder and frowned. “I’m not going to be your obnoxious friend who raves about my relationship while you’re grieving.”

“But you’re fine?”

“Yes.” The corners of her eyes crinkled as her face softened. “Leo is just...”

Her wistful smile made me chuckle and take a guess: “Amazing?”

“Yes. Amazing.”

“I’m so happy for you, Raven.”

Giving her hand a last squeeze, I let go and sat back in my seat taking in the view. “I love the lushness of the Northlands. It’s so pretty here.”

“Everything will be prettier in the spring.”

“Yes.” I tensed up just thinking about what else spring would bring.

Raven was perceptive and leaned closer. “Are you still going to have the tournament?”

I looked away. “Why not? I wouldn’t be the first bride to be in love with someone else, and I’m not going to settle for a hidden relationship with a man who doesn’t want people to know that

we're together.”

“Jonah said that?”

“Raven, people like us are seen as romantics and it's not a compliment. They think of us as naïve and insecure fools who believe in fairytales and need someone to make us happy.”

“I never saw myself as a romantic.”

“That doesn't matter. Others will see you that way because you're married.”

She wrinkled her nose up. “Why should I care what others think?”

“You shouldn't, but Jonah was chosen by the people and their opinion of him matters. Especially now that his family is under scrutiny.”

Raven leaned back again. “I still can't believe his sister said those things.

We saw some of it at the academy.”

“Yeah? How did people react?”

Raven snorted. “Everyone was shaking their heads over the fact that drinking beer is illegal, but to be honest they kind of lost their shit when the News showed a background story on Anne with pictures of her modeling.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing, except the News stations have been showing pictures of her in swimwear morning, noon, and night. It’s a big deal for everyone here that there’s finally a man on the Council, and now the people are nervous that Jonah could be kicked out. Do you think that could happen?”

I fiddled with my hair. “I know he’s afraid of it. Many Motlanders still think men are power hungry and easily corrupted, but he’s nothing like that.”

“Of course not. And what a bunch of bullshit. I would like to meet the sister, although I’m not so sure she would like the things I want to say to her. What the hell is wrong with her? Why would she make such a big deal out of some beer and booze?”

“Hmm, I’ve been wondering the same thing, and something Jonah’s mom told me has me thinking that it’s not really about the illegal stuff to Anne.”

Raven straightened up. “What’s it about then?”

“I’m not sure yet, but Lilly told me

that Anne used to love racing herself. It's weird that she suddenly has a problem with it after being estranged for almost five years."

"Huh! Yes, that's weird."

"Something must have happened to provoke this. I wish I knew what."

Raven shrugged. "I'm just tired of my colleagues drooling over her. It's like they're willing to forgive what she did to Jonah just because she's gorgeous. How fucked up is that?"

"I wonder if Anne knows that she's a celebrity up here."

"Let's hope not." Raven tapped my shoulder. "But you still have a decision to make about that tournament. Don't think I didn't see how you stiffened

when I said the word spring. You don't want to do it. Admit it!"

I hid my face in my hands. "No, I don't want to do it, but I promised my parents."

"Then un-promise."

"Raven, it's not that easy and I'm not strong like you. That's why I needed Jonah to stand with me."

"No no no... you don't need any man to fight your battles." Raven was staring into my eyes and her hands clasped around my shoulders. "You are much stronger than you think. Do you hear me?"

I looked down. She was wrong. Everyone knew that Raven was the strong woman who confronted unfairness

head on, while I avoided conflicts and smiled at people I didn't even like.

“Look at me, Mila!”

She waited until I met her eyes and then she continued, “You're the woman who stopped the fighting at the reunion by simply whistling and saying no. You're the woman who rescued me from an endless line of well-wishers at my wedding. If not for you, I would have been standing for hours shaking hands with people I didn't even know. You took control and confronted hundreds at once, telling them no. And what about the time you rescued that dog from the man who abused it? When he discovered you, you stood up to him and told him no.”

“But that was different.”

“Why?”

“Because I did it for others.”

“So what? You proved that you are strong enough to stand your ground. It’s time you stand your ground for yourself too.”

I was trying to find the right words to explain how I couldn’t, but Raven was right and in a painful confession, I whispered, “I want to say no.”

“Then say no.”

“But what about all the arrangements for the tournament?”

“Don’t worry about that! There’s still time to cancel. Trust me, the fighters will survive.” Raven broke into a smile. “I mean that literally, they’ll *survive!*”

“My dad is going to be furious with me.”

“He’ll be disappointed, but at the end of the day, he wants what’s best for you and he would never force you to marry someone against your will.”

I pushed out air from my lungs. “It’s weird, but I feel such a huge sense of relief.”

“Because you finally admitted it.”

“Yes.” Looking deep into Raven’s large brown eyes, I emphasized, “I still plan to marry one day.”

“Nothing is stopping you. You just have to find the right man.”

“Maybe I’ll pick someone who’s funny.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Or smart. I like smart men.”

Raven’s eyes shone with love for me. “Whatever you like, sweetie.”

“He doesn’t have to be the strongest warrior. I can pick a man who makes me feel good.”

“You’re damn right.”

I nodded. “I’m going to tell my parents that I made my decision and that I won’t be in the tournament.”

“When?”

The thought of breaking my promise to my father on top of everything he was going through made me sweat. “I’m not sure.”

“Do it soon, Mila. No procrastination.”

“Yes... soon.”

CHAPTER 12

How to Win an Election

Jonah

Six days after Mila left for the Motherlands, Pearl and I met in virtual reality in a setting she had picked with a sunrise over a mountain chain.

My avatar looked well rested and healthy. In real life I had dark circles under my eyes and I'd lost weight. Mila wasn't responding to my messages and I missed her.

“Isn't it pretty?” Pearl asked.

“Very nice.” I smiled and sat down among the wild flowers on the picnic blanket where Pearl sat in a cross-legged position. “How is the campaign going?”

Ever since I was a boy, I’d admired Pearl for the role she played in the integration between the Northlands and Motherlands. Pearl had bravely offered herself up as a hostage to save Athena and later she had managed to make Khan, the ruler of the Nmen, listen to her. I had read and re-read the speech she made in the Council that ended the ban on mentioning the Men of the North.

“I would like to say that the campaign is going according to plan but that would be untrue.” Pearl brushed a

hand across her flowery pants. “My experience from elections in the Motherlands doesn’t do much good here. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine how many men would sign up to lead the Northlands.”

“How many?”

“Thousands.”

I was amused and chuckled. “You can’t have an election with thousands of candidates.”

She sighed. “That’s what I’m telling Khan, but he says the more the better.”

“But how will he organize town hall debates with that many candidates?”

“He won’t.” Pearl threw her hands up in the air. “His logic is that the more candidates there are, the fewer votes for

each of them. Spreading the votes will make it hard for any one candidate to win against him.”

“But you’ll have to narrow it down to no more than ten candidates before the election.”

“You tell him that. I’m not sure Khan wants to fully understand the concept of democracy. All he cares about is winning. I’ve suggested that he could let the candidates who get the most votes become council members and delegate responsibility to them, but one of the most prominent candidates is Edward Wolf and the two hate each other.”

“Edward Wolf. The name sounds familiar.”

“Probably. Khan calls him Edward

the Low-life.”

“Ahh, yes, now I remember. Khan mentioned him to me. He’s the son of the ruler that Khan’s father replaced.”

Pearl sighed. “Yes, and with the revelation that Khan’s mother was raped by Lord Wolf, we now know that Edward and Khan are half-brothers.”

“Dancing devils, that complicates things, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. With Khan’s personal grudge against Edward for having plotted to overthrow him in the past, he’s refusing to even entertain the idea of letting the candidates with the highest votes form a council or senate. He wants to be democratically elected but other than that, I don’t see much changing in the

Northlands.”

“Maybe he’ll change his mind later.”

Pearl brushed her hair back. “We’ll see. One step at a time. First, we have to help him win the election.”

“Did he take any of the advice we gave him on running a campaign?”

“Yes. He has done four rallies; maybe you saw some of it on the News?”

I nodded. “What about my idea of handing out flowers?”

Pearl shook her head. “Nah, he didn’t go for it.”

“And the hugging booth?”

“He laughed at that idea. It might have worked for you, but Khan isn’t a hugger, Jonah.”

“That’s a shame because that booth secured me a lot of votes.” I frowned. “How is he going to win then? Can’t you at least push him to have town hall meetings?”

“I already tried, but Khan says that it’s too risky and maybe he’s right. You saw the reaction from the press when he announced the election. All the critical questions had him fuming for days.”

I plucked at the grass but since it was virtual reality, nothing came off. “It’s just because Khan isn’t used to open criticism. This is all new to him.”

“You’re right. Now let’s work on your speech for the Council. I read your draft and I liked it.”

Angling my head, I pursed my lips.

“I’m sensing a but coming.”

“No, it’s just that I have a few suggestions.” Pearl’s finger ran over the speech until she stopped sixteen lines down. “It’s this section. I see what you mean, but I fear that it will offend the members of the Council. They see themselves as open-minded and fair.” She pointed to a line and I read it aloud.

“Free thought is an illusion! You may think that your thoughts are your own, but they are not! We are all just a product of the society we grew up in, the schooling we had, and the ideas of right and wrong that were planted in our heads. As a society, we can never break the them-and-us mentality unless we unpack the baggage that was given to us

by our ancestors, and take a critical look at what we want to keep and what we are better off leaving behind.”

Pearl spoke with enthusiasm. “You’re on to something; I just predict that your opening will stun them and make them not want to listen to the rest of what you have to say. Using a sentence like ‘Free thought is an illusion’ sounds very confrontational and as you know, people tend to get defensive when they feel attacked. You might get a better response if you asked it as a question instead of stating it as a fact. What if you said, ‘Have you ever considered whether free thought is an illusion?’”

“But I want to shock them and get their attention.”

“I get that, but you want to do it in a way that makes them want to listen and reflect.”

“Of course.”

“Then ask them a question and make them think.”

I read the paragraph again and changed it as she had suggested.

“I like this part.” Pearl pointed to the end. “It’s very strong and persuasive.”

“Do you think it will work?”

Looking up, she hesitated before speaking. “I can’t say. The whole world is changing and it’s human nature to hold on to safety in times like these.”

“But there’s never going to be any progress if we’re paralyzed with fear.

How do I convince the Council members that the laws are too rigid?”

“They are going to argue it’s for people’s safety.”

I looked up at the sky. “I get that, but why can’t they see that it’s impossible to live in a bubble of safety? Almost anything can be dangerous if you don’t know how to handle it. Just think about the millions of bicycles that we have. Do you know how many accidents we have each year because people fall and get hurt? Or what about sports? People break their legs and bang their heads together. Should we ban all ice skating, soccer, and dancing?”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, Jonah, but you’re up against a Council

where a large part won't be swayed by anything you say because they didn't want you on the Council to begin with."

I sighed. "You don't think I can swing the Council to my side?"

Her chest lifted and fell before she answered, "Miracles do happen."

"Pearl, be honest."

Taking my hand, Pearl spoke with sincerity, "Jonah, you are progressive in your thoughts and you challenge life as they know it. Few people have succeeded doing that, but then as I've told you before, you should never let yourself be limited by what others failed to do, because maybe they would have succeeded if they were you."

I smiled. "That rhymes. I want that

on a t-shirt.”

Pearl laughed. “I’m happy you appreciate my words. When I tell my children they typically roll their eyes at me.”

Pushing myself up from the blanket, I offered my hand to help Pearl up. “Thank you for your help.”

“My pleasure. How is your brother doing? I heard he had his interview.”

“He did and as expected, he was asked to spend some time in a place of reflection.”

“For how long?”

“I’m not sure. It was implied that they were willing to put all the blame on him and let the rest of the family continue running the park.”

“So he went?”

“Yes.”

Pearl crossed her arms. “I spent some time in a place of reflection.”

“How was it?”

“Beautiful and peaceful. Everyone was nice and caring.”

“But you hated it.”

“Even the most beautiful island will become a prison if you can’t get off it. The only way out is to tell them what they want to hear. I hope Cole understands that.”

“He’s smart, resourceful, and has little scruples about playing the system. I’m sure he’ll figure it out.”

“And Anne, have you talked to her?”

“We’ve been trying to, but she won’t

meet with us.”

“She’s afraid of facing you all after what she did.”

I drew in a long breath. “I don’t blame her, but she’s out of luck. We’ve called for a mediation meeting and that means she’ll have to show up.”

“You were granted a mediation meeting?”

“Why are you surprised? We should have a chance to defend ourselves against her accusations.”

“Yes, but with the drama involved in this case, I figured they would protect her from a public appearance like that.”

“They did. No media or outsiders will be allowed.”

“I see. And how do you feel about

seeing her again?”

Scratching my left eyebrow, I thought about it. “I’ve been very angry with her but you know how Mila always says, don’t ask what’s wrong with you, ask what happened to you?”

“Sounds like Mila all right.”

“I keep thinking that the timing of all this is odd. I’m still frustrated, but I’m also worried about what might have happened to Anne to make her behave this way.”

“Good. Then you’ll meet her with an open mind. I hope you will reach a peaceful understanding.” Pearl leaned in to hug me. “I’m afraid I have to go, but we’ll see you soon, Jonah.”

Hugging in virtual reality felt like

hugging a ghost, but I still hugged her back. “Yes, and say hi to Mila from me. Tell her I miss her.” I didn’t tell Pearl that Mila wasn’t answering my calls.

She leaned back and smiled. “I will.”

I let her leave first. In early versions of virtual reality, the avatars had simply popped in and out, but in this version, there was always an entry and exit to make it feel more realistic. Usually it was a door, but being that this setting was an open field, Pearl’s avatar moved to a group of trees and disappeared behind them.

I exited and found myself back in my living room knowing that my avatar would continue walking until it reached

the same group of trees.

The clock on my wristband told me I had three hours until my family would be expecting me at the House of Mediation where we would have our chance to confront Anne and get answers.

CHAPTER 13

Saying No

Mila

It was the smallest of words and yet so hard to say.

With my dog, Loki, yapping around my feet I practiced in the mirror.

“No.

“I know you’re disappointed, Dad, but I won’t do it.

“I said no.”

Placing my hands on my hips looked unnatural to me and so did pushing out my chin. Raven had told me to stand my ground and look my parents square in the

face when I told them.

Spreading my legs, I bent in my knees and raised my head up as I spoke to myself in the mirror. “It’s not up for discussion, I’ve made up my mind.”

I looked strange in that position but at least my voice had sounded firm. Straightening up, I gave myself a nod. “Nothing to be scared of. It’s going to be fine.”

My hand went to my wristband and I bit down hard on my lower lip. What I wouldn’t give to call Jonah and have him reassure me that I was doing the right thing.

But Raven had a good point. This was something I had to do for myself.

After my talk with Raven, I

wondered if I'd fallen in love with Jonah because he was safe and my ticket out of marrying a stranger in the tournament. My love for him felt a hundred percent real, but what if it wasn't?

With the pain in my chest and the longing I felt for Jonah, I almost hoped that it had all been my mind playing tricks on me. If I was lucky, my parents would take the news well and I'd feel a huge sense of relief when I realized that my feelings for Jonah weren't anywhere as powerful as I thought they were.

With another nod to my reflection, I left the dogs in my room and went to my parents' suite.

“Oh hey, honey, we're just about

ready to leave for the hospital. Next time you see your dad, he's going to be able to hug you with two arms."

"And walk," my dad added.

My mission of saying no to the tournament faded in the background as I was sucked into their world of nervous excitement before the operation.

"I can't wait to walk in the park again. They say that in time, I might be able to run as fast as I did before."

"Good, then you can take my dogs running. They would love that."

He laughed. "Sure, I'll need all the training I can get."

I moved over to hug him as he sat in the hoverchair. "Are you nervous, Dad?"

"Of course I am. What if they

accidentally put the left leg where the right leg is supposed to go?” He laughed. “It’s a good thing that Finn is there to help with the operation.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, and Mom said you’ll be home in two days.”

“Only because we have all the equipment here and Finn is staying for a while.”

“It’s a lucky thing that your best friend is a doctor. Finn is a good man.”

My dad kissed the back of my hand. “Finn is the best.”

It softened my heart to see my dad’s eyes grow a bit moist and I gave a loving tug at his beard where the black bead still reminded me that we had once made a bet.

“I see gray in your beard; it suits you.”

“It’s from the accident.”

My mom came over and kissed Magni on his cheek. “It’s part of reaching his forties and it only makes him look sexier.”

Laura jerked and gave a loud outburst when Magni smacked her behind. With a mischievous grin, he winked at her. “You’re biased. Not even the scars of my missing limbs have made you run for the hills, so I doubt a little gray hair will.”

She bent down and nuzzled her nose against his. “I’m glad it finally sunk in.”

It was touching to see my parents so flirtatious and at the same time I felt my

heart yearn for what they had. Again, my right hand found my wristband and my thoughts went to Jonah.

“Mila Vanilla, do me a favor, will you?” My dad was moving toward the door while my mom had gone to pick up a bag from the floor. “Stay inside if possible, okay? My men are busy keeping things peaceful but there are murmurs that worry me.”

“About what?”

“The usual. Ambitious men with a dream of ruling the country.”

“But that’s not a new thing, is it?”

Magni shook his head. “Look, I don’t want to worry you, but we’ve received threats and the other day the Huntsmen brought down a large group

plotting to overtake Khan.”

“But that makes no sense. With the election coming up, they have a chance to win the presidency without violence.”

“What can I say, some men aren’t in favor of democracy. Just stay inside!”

“Yes, Dad.”

I walked my parents to the drone and together my mom and I supported Magni from the hoverchair into the drone.

Magni drummed his hand on the panel in front of him “This is it, time to become a fucking cyborg.”

“I’ll see you soon, Dad.”

He pointed at the house. “Stay inside.”

My mom waved and got in the drone too. “Love you.”

“I love you too.” I waved as long as I could see the drone.

“Mila sweetie, why are you outside by yourself?”

I turned to see Pearl with four security guards come out from the manor.

“I just sent off my parents.”

“That’s odd. I said goodbye to them more than an hour ago; I thought they’d already left.”

“Where are you going?” I asked and noticed that she had double the normal security.

“I’m going to the school. I want to involve the children in the first election and give them a deeper understanding of what it will mean for them as adults.”

“That’s nice.”

“Also, I just spoke to Jonah. He asked me to tell you that he misses you, although I’m sure he’s told you that himself.”

I didn’t confirm or deny it. Jonah had called several times, but I was on a detox and trying to clear my mind, so I hadn’t answered. Once again, my hand found my wristband and a strong urge to call him came over me. *If I could just hear his voice for a few minutes.*

“We worked on his speech for the Council. It’s good.”

“That’s great. I know he’s nervous about it. I’m sure he appreciates your help.”

“It’s a strange situation with his sister, Anne. Did you know he will have

a mediation meeting with her today?”

The fact that Pearl knew more than I, left a sadness in me. It was proof that Jonah and I were drifting apart. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“Their family have been granted a mediation meeting and he is hoping to get answers from Anne.”

A sound close to a low snicker came from two of the guards behind Pearl and it made her turn her head with a frown. “What was that?”

The four guards exchanged looks but none of them spoke.

“You’re behaving funny, what is going on?”

Neptune, answered her. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s something when you’re making faces to your colleagues. What’s going on?”

“It’s just because you were talking about Jonah’s sister, Anne, Madam Pearl.”

Pearl arched a brow. “Neptune, how long have you been with us?”

“Almost seven months, Madam.”

“And how many times have I told you that my name is Pearl? Just Pearl. Not Madam.”

“Understood, but Lord Khan and Commander Magni don’t want us to use your first name only.”

Pearl sighed. “Not this again. I thought they had removed that silly rule long ago. But either way, what is it about

Anne that has you two snickering?"

Neptune shifted his weight and looked away.

"Just spit it out, soldier."

"Ehhh," the large young guard began, "It's just that you were talking about Anne."

"Yes, I'm aware. What about her?"

"Umm, she has a lot of admirers."

Pearl inhaled through her nose. "Are you talking about yourself?"

"Yes, but not just me." He looked down when he confessed. "We've been trading pictures of her."

"Have you?" Pearl spoke in a calm voice but because I knew her so well, I detected a bit of annoyance. "How would you men like it if single women in

the Motherlands traded pictures of you in nothing but your underwear?”

The four guards lit up, and Jules, one of our more seasoned guards, answered, “I think I speak for all of us when I say we would be flattered.”

Pearl sighed. “Never mind then. I’ll pretend I didn’t hear about it.” Turning to me, she asked, “Would you like to come with me to the school? I’m hoping to brainstorm with the children to get new ideas on how to campaign.”

“I can’t today. I promised my dad I’d stay home and I have some things I need to follow up on.”

“All right. If I’m not home by seven, will you swing by Khan and make sure he eats something? He’s working way

too hard.”

“I’ll check in on him. But you know he’ll just brush me off.”

Pearl moved to the drone. “Only if you don’t stand your ground with him. You can do that, can’t you?”

I thought about all my practice in front of my mirror a little while ago. “I can be firm. I promise!”

Pearl gave me a long glance. “I know you can, Mila.”

Her words meant a lot to me. Pearl was graceful and kind, but also persuasive and strong-minded.

As I watched her take off with the four guards, I felt empowered by her trust in me.

CHAPTER 14

Answers from

Anne

Jonah

My mother was visibly nervous and kept fiddling with her pocket when I met up with my family in the House of Mediation.

Cole had been allowed to be present and stood against the wall chewing on something.

“Good to see you.” I took both his hands. “Peace.”

“Yeah, peace to you too. What do

you think of this place?” Cole threw a nod to the walls, which were decorated with happy colors and inspirational quotes.

Being right isn't nearly as satisfying as being together.

Few can be kind to people who aren't kind to them. Can you?

Grow as a person and you'll rise above insults and hurt.

Being kind beats being right.

I brought my focus back to Cole. “It’s kind of fitting in a place like this, wouldn’t you say?”

“Hmm...”

“Did I tell you that I once came here on a fieldtrip with my school? We sat for a whole day and listened to the

mediators work. It's fascinating to watch, really."

Cole raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything because in that moment Anne came through the door. She slowed down the moment she saw our group and complete silence fell upon us. She was as feminine, curvy, and beautiful as in her modeling pictures.

I took a step forward. "Hi, Anne."

All I got was a small nod before she hurried into the mediation hall.

"You ready?" Cole asked behind me.

"I guess so."

The mediation room was bright with lots of daylight streaming in. Relaxing music played and there was a pleasant aroma of sandalwood and apple from the

large air diffuser in the corner.

“Welcome.” A voluptuous woman with a big afro gestured for us to come closer.

“My name is Melissa Meek, but you can just call me Missy.” Making a quick head count of our group, she instructed. “We’re not having Anne face ten of you at one time. There can only be two of you and to make it fair, we’ll let Anne pick one and you’ll pick the other.”

Cole was quick to raise his hand. “Me.”

“Are the rest of you okay with that?” Missy asked us and no one disagreed.

“All right, as promised, you may pick the other representative from your family, Anne.” Missy waved her hand

toward our group and right away, Anne's eyes fell on me.

“I pick Jonah.”

“Good. Then the rest of you will sit over there as observers.” Missy pointed to the wall where two rows of chairs were placed. “And now, let me just place these four chairs and then we can get started.”

The atmosphere was tense when we sat down in a small circle with Anne between me and Missy.

“Oh, Mother Nature. I can hardly squeeze my behind into these chairs anymore,” Missy laughed. “I'm a fat-donor you see.”

“That's very generous of you.”

Missy had a beautiful and warm

smile. “I figure we all have to contribute with what we do well and I’m a great eater. It’s one of my favorite things to do, so why not help the ones who need to recover from disease or simply can’t gain weight. I’ve donated five times already.” Her pride made me smile.

“That’s great.”

“Right, enough about me. First, let me begin by saying thank you for agreeing to sit down and talk about what happened between you. Only through communication can we bridge the misunderstandings that occur between people.”

Turning in her chair, Missy addressed Emanuela, Lilly, Gunnar, and the other family members by the wall.

“Thank you for accepting a role as observers for now. I want to make sure you feel heard, so let’s make this deal. Should you have unresolved questions or feelings after this meeting, you can have your chance to speak.”

Anne sat on the edge of her seat, her pretty features serious with her eyebrows drawn close and her lips in one straight line.

“Now, Anne, you have made some hard accusations in the media about your family. I understand that it’s doubtful that your sister Emanuela and her husband Hunter Hercules can play for the Dolphins in the next season. Jonah is facing potential exclusion from the Council, and your brother Cole left the

family to do some serious soul searching and reflect on his poor choices.

Cole narrowed his eyes. “I didn’t leave by choice. It was that or losing the park.”

Missy nodded. “And we can all sense how upset that makes you. Yet you admitted that Anne’s claim of your brewing and selling beer was in fact true and later others have confirmed that after-dark activities such as racing have taken place.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Cole muttered low.

“What was that?” Missy asked and leaned her head toward him.

Cole shook his head signaling that he didn’t wish to repeat, but Anne gave him

away.

“He said that there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Missy jerked her head back and sat straight in her chair. “Is that what you said?”

Cole crossed his arms, not speaking.

“Well, for one it’s illegal,” Missy pointed out.

“Legal and right isn’t the same thing.”

“Ahh, so you feel your sense of morality is above the law?” Missy scrunched up her mouth.

Cole’s tone was defensive. “Why don’t you ask Anne how she knew about it? Isn’t it funny to you that Anne had no problem racing and drinking while

living at home, but five years later she's pointing fingers and setting fire to her family's home?"

Anne gasped and Missy blinked as if projectiles were coming at her.

I hadn't spoken until now, but sensing that this meeting was off to a bad start, I looked straight at Anne and spoke with a calm voice. "What happened? Why did you set the storage building on fire?"

Anne's cheeks flamed red and she averted eye contact.

"This is what we know." In a factual tone of voice, I used my wristband to present the evidence to Missy and Anne. "You ordered a drone and landed close to the family unit at ten past two a.m.

Seventeen minutes later you left again. Here's a picture of you getting into the drone. We also know that you attempted to hide your tracks by editing your name in the traffic registry the next morning.

“We were all sleeping inside the house but woke up to find the storage building in flames. The firefighters concluded it was arson. If the authorities haven't spoken to you about it already, they will very soon.”

Anne moved in her seat, crossing and uncrossing her legs.

“Why? Please help us understand. Were you trying to kill us?”

“No!” Anne looked genuinely disturbed by my question.

“Then what was your plan?”

“I was going to destroy the brewery, but then things went wrong. I didn’t mean to burn down the whole building. I was just going to melt one of the...” She looked down. “Anyway, when it caught fire, I tried to put it out but I couldn’t find a water hose. The next best thing was the buckets of water bubbles that stood close by, so I poured them on the small fire. Only it didn’t put out the fire, it just made it worse.”

Cole made a sound of annoyance. “Those weren’t water bubbles, they were...” His eyes went to Missy. “Never mind.”

“What were they?” Missy asked in a firm voice.

Clearing his throat, he answered,

“Alcohol, and you don’t want to mix that with fire.”

“Why, what happens when you mix alcohol and fire?”

With alcohol being illegal we couldn’t blame them for having no experience or understanding of what alcohol could do to a fire.

“Alcohol has an explosive effect on fire,” I explained and turned to Anne. “So, let me get this straight. The fire got out of control and then you fled leaving us to possibly burn up? Is that it?”

“No. I was running toward the house when I saw lights coming on in the guestroom window, and then I panicked.”

“And took off.”

“Yes.” She shrank in her chair, folding her arms around herself.

“But why did you want to destroy the brewery in the first place? After all these years, why now?”

Tears ran down Anne’s cheeks and she brushed them away with annoyance. “Because of Cole.”

“Me? What did I do? You were always ungrateful and dramatic. I didn’t do anything to you.”

“You burned my clothes.”

Cole gave a grimace of confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m just going to stop things for a second.” Missy held up a hand. “The tone got a little high-pitched there so we’re all just going to take a deep breath

and release it slowly, like we're letting go of our anger. Come on, do it with me." She waited until the three of us were all taking deep breaths. "Good, now continue, Anne. Explain what you meant when you said Cole burned your clothes."

"I was a teenager and nothing I did was ever good enough for him. And then one morning he took my favorite outfit and burned it right outside the house."

Missy moved to the edge of her seat. "Do you want to comment on that, Cole?"

Cole chewed on his lips like he was trying to hold back his words. "I'm the oldest in a family unit with ten kids, okay?"

Missy gave a nod. “Yes, I understand that.”

“Right. Our whole family has worked tirelessly to create a sensational park and much of that work was hard and no fun.” Pointing with his chin to Anne, he continued. “Little Miss Anne over there didn’t like the concept of work. Every day I would get complaints from guests because of her. I had my reasons for burning her clothes.”

“And what would those reasons be?”

Cole pushed his jaw out. “Every job we gave her was too hard and boring, so we came up with the perfect role just for her. All she had to do was sit on a throne and play a princess in the Renaissance

part of the park. Little girls stood in line to see her be the beautiful princess. All she had to do was smile, and talk to them about her life as a princess, but even that was too tiresome for Miss Anne. Half the time no one could find her and then one day, she showed up but refused to put on the costume. Instead she sat on the throne in her modern clothes and destroyed the whole illusion for the guests. I demanded that she put on the beautiful Renaissance dress that we'd had made just for her. But instead of doing her part, she ignored me, making me look like a complete fool as I stood right next to her. So yeah, that night, I took some of her modern clothing and burned it. I figured it would get her to

put on the costume.”

Missy's eyes were large. “Wow, that sounds very dramatic.”

“Oh, it got way more dramatic after that.” With a sarcastic smile, Cole nodded to Anne. “Why don't you tell her how you reacted?”

Anne sighed and kept her face down-turned. “I was seventeen and everyone treated me like the baby in the family. All my siblings were doing the cool stuff like welding iron or rappelling with guests while I had to sit on my butt and smile. Cole got to boss people around, but he wouldn't share any responsibility with me. So, when he burned my clothes I complained to the rest of the family and they all took his

side. Every single one of them.” Anne looked at me and to the others by the wall. “That’s when I knew they didn’t love me.” Anne paused and my pulse raced as I waited to hear a traumatic part of our family’s history told from her side.

“I wrote them a letter and left.”

“Left where?”

“To a friend’s house.” Anne used a nail to scratch on the armrest of her chair.

“Okay, you took a break, so to speak.”

Cole’s tone was vibrating with suppressed anger. “What she’s not telling you is that she left us a suicide letter blaming us for pushing her to kill

herself.”

Missy swallowed hard and exhaled noisily. “Well, that wasn’t very nice, Anne.”

Anne finally met my eyes, but only briefly. “I only did it because I wanted them to see how hurt I was, but everyone got furious with me and I was sent to Happy Souls as a punishment.”

“I’m sure they only meant to help you,” Missy said with a sympathetic look on her face. “And did some time in reflection make things better?”

Anne looked away. “Not really, but with all their disappointment in me, I didn’t want to go back.”

“Where did you go then?”

“I got a job in a nursing home. The

old people were kind to me and they taught me a lot.”

Missy leaned her elbows on the armrest and weaved her fingers together. “I thought you were a model.”

“Yes, I have been for the last three years.”

I spoke up again. “You still haven’t explained why you came back that night. After almost five years of refusing our attempts of contacting you, why did you decide to sabotage us now?”

She was still hugging herself. “Because Cole wouldn’t let me come home.”

My face turned to Cole, but he remained impassive.

“I’d been traveling a lot and I

missed my family, so I reached out to talk to Lilly, but Cole answered. When I asked if I could speak to Mom, he told me that he preferred for me to stay away if I was going to be dramatic.”

“That’s right.” Cole didn’t look apologetic.

“Why didn’t you tell us this?” I asked him but he didn’t get a chance to answer before Anne spoke with her eyes welling up again.

“He made me feel unloved and unwanted all over again. Just like he always does.”

“Oh, honey.” We all turned to see Lilly with tears in her own eyes. “May I give my daughter a hug?” she asked Missy.

“Yes, of course.”

Lilly left her purse on the chair and walked over with open arms. Anne stood up and turned to her and the two women hugged.

“Don’t you doubt for one second that you’re loved,” Lilly whispered to her and from Anne’s shoulders I could tell she was crying hard.

“Here, let me pull a chair over for you.” Missy moved a chair between her and Anne and encouraged Lilly to keep holding Anne’s hand as they sat down.

“I can understand how alone you must have felt for all those years and then to be rejected again...” Missy gave Anne a sympathetic smile. “But it doesn’t change the fact that your actions

were reckless and harmful to others.”

Anne used her sleeve to dry her eyes and took the tissue my mother gave her to blow her nose.

“May I speak?” I asked.

“Yes, of course, Jonah. I would love to know how you feel about this turn of events.”

“I’m sorry that Anne felt rejected, but there are still holes in her story. You’ve given us your motive for coming to the house, and explained that it wasn’t your intention to burn down the storage building. You even claim that you intended to wake us up and only left when you saw lights being turned on inside the house. But what about all the interviews with your accusations?”

You've done far more than hurt Cole. There's a big chance that you've destroyed my future on the Council and Emanuela's career as a professional soccer player. What did we ever do to you?"

"You took his side." Anne couldn't look at me.

"Anne, do you hear yourself?" I kept my gaze locked on her and leaned forward, placing my elbows on my thighs. "I can forgive your immature and inconsiderate actions as a teenager, but you're twenty-two now, and you still think everything is about you."

In a small voice, she gave a meek "I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

“Yes, I never meant to hurt anyone but Cole.”

Cole stretched his legs and moved in his seat.

Missy said, “Since we have now established that the root of this conflict is really between Anne and Cole, let me ask you this, Lilly. Can you love them both?”

Lilly brushed a lock of Anne’s hair behind her ear. “I’ve always loved them both. And I’ve reached out over the years.”

“That’s why I responded,” Anne cried.

“All right, I’m going to ask the same question of all of you. Can you find forgiveness and love in your heart?”

I thought about it. “It’s not my natural state to feel resentment, and I can empathize with your pain. Right now, I just have to focus on saving my seat on the Council. I owe that to all the voters who put me there.”

“I voted for you,” Anne said in a low voice.

“So you don’t wish to see Jonah excluded from the council?” Missy asked.

“No.” She gave me a pleading look. “I shouldn’t have said the things I said in the media. But after the fire, I was scared and confused and I didn’t think very far.”

Cole shook his head. “So basically, nothing has changed.”

With the temper of a hormonal teenager, Anne shot back, “I guess not. You still hate me. I don’t expect that to change.”

Everyone was quiet. We were Motlanders and even in our unconventional family a conflict including the word hate was unheard of.

“I don’t hate you,” Cole muttered. “I just don’t understand you. And I wish you had talked to me instead of ruining our lives.”

Lilly was holding Anne in her arms, making soothing sounds to calm her crying.

“What’s going to happen now?” I asked Missy.

“Well, ideally, I’d love you all to

forgive each other.”

“No, I meant with Anne. Arson is a crime.”

Missy frowned. “Ohh. Yes, I suppose it is. Anne, what are your thoughts on that? How do you plan to clean up this mess?”

Anne pulled back in her own chair and collected herself. “I don’t have time to stay in a place of reflection.”

“*You think I do?*” Cole asked with his eyebrows arched. “At least take some responsibility for what you did.”

“Why? It’s not like you have taken any responsibility for burning my stuff.”

Pushing his hands through his hair, Cole puffed out air. “You’re right. I’m sorry I didn’t handle that situation

better.”

“Do you recognize that you should have talked to Anne about it instead of burning her things?” Missy asked him.

“Yes. But how do you talk to someone who ignores you?”

“You use a middleman or you wait until there isn’t a whole audience looking at me,” Anne exclaimed.

Cole’s palms flew up. “As I said, I didn’t handle it well and for that I’m sorry.”

“Thank you and I’m sorry too.” For the first time Anne and Cole were looking at each other. “I know I made things hard for you back then, and that I overreacted when you rejected me again. I wanted to annoy you by destroying the

brewery, but I never meant to burn down the whole building. I truly wish I could take back all the stupid things I said in the media.”

“Cole, now that Anne has apologized, can you forgive her?”

Cole broke eye contact. “I think what is the hardest for me to forgive is that suicide note.” His head fell forward. “I still have it.”

We were all watching him in silence. I reached out to touch his arm when his shoulders began to bob and his hands went to his face.

“It’s okay to cry,” Missy assured him.

“I thought my baby sister had killed herself because of me.” Cole’s voice

broke and I teared up too, remembering how destroyed I'd felt for the twenty-seven hours we'd thought Anne was dead. Every one of us had been ripped apart with grief and self-blame, but no one more than Cole, whom she had named in the letter.

"I'm sorry, Cole. I'm so sorry," Anne kept repeating.

Raising his eyes to meet hers, his face was red and his eyes puffy from the crying. His voice staggered as if he didn't have breath enough to both talk and cry at the same time. "That day, you broke something inside me." His hand was on his chest. "You broke my heart."

Anne moved down from her chair and kneeled in front of him, touching his

arms. “If I could take it back, I would. It was cruel and I didn’t understand what I was doing to you.”

With all of us watching them, Anne and Cole cried together and then finally they hugged.

Missy passed around tissues and used several herself.

“What I would like to do is somehow bring you back together again.” Missy looked to Lilly. “Do you think that’s possible?”

“Yes.” Lilly sniffled, and hugged Anne again.

“Then I suggest that those of you who can find forgiveness in your heart join us up here in a love circle.”

One after another, we gathered

around Anne. We didn't sing the way children did in love circles, but we each quietly welcomed her back in the family.

Missy had us holding hands as she finished the mediation meeting. "I'm proud of you all. Today, you took the first important step toward healing your family. What we did was clean a bleeding wound, but I'm asking you to be patient. Wounds take time to heal; they can be itchy at first, and they leave scar tissue. Still, I believe with all my heart that you can heal as a family if you show grace, tolerance, and forgiveness toward each other.

Before we left, I hugged Anne, who whispered in my ear, "I'll do whatever I can to clean up the mess I made for you.

Just tell me how.”

I pulled back to look at her. “Thank you, but it might be too late at this point.”

CHAPTER 15

Jonah's Speech

Mila

I avoided talking with Jonah for two long weeks. The short texts between us were bad enough. They made me miss sharing every thought in my head with him.

Despite the Northlands being in a messy and chaotic time itself, the country was still buzzing about the unfairness of what was happening in the Motherlands.

On the day of Jonah's hearing in the Council, Raven and Leo came over and we gathered in the entertainment room of

the Manor with my family. It felt extra special because Magni was with us.

Erika kept fussing over him. “Maybe we should open a window so you can get some fresh air. You’re always running hot... are you hot?”

“Mom, I’m fine, just sit down and relax for a moment.”

“You sure you don’t need anything to drink or eat? I don’t want you moving around too much.”

Magni grunted. “I’m not some frail flower. The doctors told me not to overdo it. They didn’t tell me to stay still.”

“But it’s only been a week since the operation.”

“And I’m feeling good.” My dad

looked deep in concentration as he lifted his new legs and placed them on the coffee table in front of him. “Ahh, see, you don’t know how good it feels to be able to put my feet up again.”

Raven, who sat curled up with Leo in the large sectional sofa, chuckled. “At least no one can accuse you of having stinky feet.”

“That’s right.” Magni grinned. “I’m thinking about what tattoos I want.”

“Are you getting the same bear again?” I sat close to my dad and touched his new arm where he’d once had a large tattoo of a roaring bear on its hind legs showing claws and teeth.

“Maybe.”

I played with the fine hair on his

arm. “It looks so much like your old arm. I mean your fingers... it’s incredible how real they look.”

“We have Shelly to thank for it. Her pet project of designing natural-looking sex-bots took the robotic limbs industry to new heights. This is skin grown from my own tissue in a lab, and according to Shelly, the engineering that went into the machinery underneath is cutting edge.”

Laura smiled and played with his hair. “You’ll be the sexiest sex-bot Shelly has ever created, and all mine.”

My dad chuckled and whispered something in her ear that made Laura flush red.

“I’m very impressed, Dad. I’ll have to call Shelly and compliment her.”

My mom was glowing with love as she twirled her finger around a lock of her red hair. “Your father already did. Of course, he took Shelly down a notch when he told her a real genius would have figured out how to grow whole body parts in a lab by now.”

“Ha, good one.” Raven grinned. “But seriously, when are you going to be ready to fight again? I wanna enjoy it while I can still beat you.”

Magni gave Raven a cheeky smile. “I’ll let you know. It’ll be good for me with some easy training partners, you know, to start slow.”

Raven puffed herself up and placed her hands on her hips. “I was going to go easy on you, but that’s not happening

now.”

The whole-hearted laugh that came from Magni was like sweet music filling the room. “I love how easy it is to rile you up, Raven.”

Leo was grinning too and pulled Raven in to kiss her on the top of her hair. “That’s usually her talent.”

“Shhh... You people are way too noisy with all your laughter,” Pearl complained and turned up the sound. “They are talking about Jonah and I can’t hear what they’re saying.”

Magni groaned. “They’ve been talking about him all morning and they keep saying the same things over and over. When is his speech coming on?”

My grandmother, Erika, expressed

concern. “Magni, are you tired? Do you need to rest?”

Before the accident, my dad would have rolled his eyes and resented that kind of comment, but this time, he leaned forward and took Erika’s hand with a warm smile. “Mom, I appreciate how much you care, but I’m fine.”

It was another reminder of how much Magni had changed after the crash. Being forced to accept help from others had humbled him. I kept stroking his new hand and turned my attention back to the large interactive wall where a journalist was interviewing people on the street of Kingstown.

“We managed to gather a couple of random people and it’ll be interesting to

hear what the opinion on the street is.” The journalist had a red nose from the cold and his jacket was closed all the way up to his beard.

The camera showed a group of five men and one woman.

“How do you feel about the prospect of Jonah Cervici losing his seat on the Council?”

The man who answered was in his sixties and wore a leather hat. “It’s stupid. Momsies are fucking crazy.”

“Do you think it’s fair that Jonah is punished for his family’s organizing illegal races and serving beer and alcohol?”

“Hell no. And they shouldn’t punish his family either. Doing those things

should be fundamental human rights.”

“If you could say one thing to the Council members what would it be?” The journalist nodded to a man with four beads in his beard.

“I’m not much of a talker. I’d rather pull out the sticks they have up their asses. They need to get over themselves.”

The camera swung to the woman, who was in her late thirties and stood close against a man her own age. “You told me before we began that you’re from the Motherlands and have lived here for almost six years. What are your thoughts on what’s happening with Jonah?”

“Well...” Her lips disappeared and

she gave a sideways glance to all the men in the group. “I’m a big fan of Jonah Cervici’s work and I think Nmen in general respect him. I mean they like to make fun of Motlander men, but Jonah is different somehow.”

“Only because he doesn’t wear make-up and shit,” her husband interjected.

The woman nodded. “Yes, and he has visited the North several times and shown a willingness to listen and understand the culture here. I just hope the Council understands that expelling the only man on it would be a major setback for the integration.”

A younger man with his hands in his pockets threw a nod in her direction.

“Yeah, what she said.”

Khan was sitting on the soft armrest on the couch. “Why are they interviewing people on the street? Why aren’t they asking me what I think? I’m the one who knows Jonah the best.”

Magni snorted. “We should have that guy from the street come pick out the stick you have up your ass. If anyone knows Jonah best it’s Mila, and we all know Jonah likes Pearl way more than he likes you.”

Khan glanced back over his shoulder and threw a hand up in the air. “I just meant that I know Jonah better than those random people.”

“But you made it sound like you were best friends with him.” Magni

grinned and rolled his eyes at Khan. It was amazing to feel how amused and happy he seemed.

“Don’t be stupid. I’m more like a mentor to Jonah.”

My dad winked at me. “Good to know that Khan isn’t challenging you for your best friend, huh?”

“Jonah isn’t Mila’s best friend. I am,” Raven corrected Magni.

I smiled at her. “You’re more than a friend, Raven. You’re my soul sister.”

“Ooh, I like that.” Raven elbowed Leo and spoke in a singsong voice. “I have a sister. I have a sister.”

Leo smiled. “Yeah, the resemblance between you two is stunning.”

I smiled since Raven was my

opposite with her caramel-colored complexion and large brown eyes.

“It’s starting... Jonah’s speech is starting.” Pearl was closest to the interactive wall and waved a finger, shushing us to silence. “Shhhh...”

Raven giggled but received a raised eyebrow from Laura, who moved to the edge of the couch.

Seeing Jonah made my stomach do a somersault. I loved how he looked like a Roman emperor from a lost time with his chiseled jawline, straight nose, and full lips. I even loved his big ears that his short hair did nothing to hide. But the best part about Jonah was the kindness radiating from him.

“He has such nice eyes.”

“Laura, shhh...” Pearl shushed again.

My dad squeezed my mom’s thigh and the two of them gave silent grins to each other with heated looks before turning their attention back to Jonah, who began to speak.

“Nine days ago, my family and I woke up to find one of our buildings burning. Little did we know that long after the flames were put out, our world would still be on fire.

“Our initial relief that no one got hurt changed to shock and sadness when the next day, accusations were made against us. I’m well aware that these allegations have the potential to ruin everything we have created as a family,

including me losing my seat on this council.

“Many of you have raised the question how someone like me could turn a blind eye to criminal behavior such as drinking alcohol, racing, and playing cards.

“Several of you have expressed how disappointed you are with me, and how we as Council members should have a higher level of integrity than the rest of the population.

“But since when did integrity mean to blindly follow every rule set up in front of us? I was taught in school that integrity is about being incorruptible, having a strong character, and standing up against injustice.

“Isn’t that why all of us feel compelled to come in here day after day to argue against laws that we and our voters find rigid, harmful, and archaic?”

Jonah looked to the right. “Just last month Selena Herman stood in front of us arguing about the unfairness of some rigid rules that her voters complained about. I felt proud when we came together and lifted the ban on snowball fighting and off-piste skiing. But why stop there?

“Why not allow people to drink a beer if they want to? Or race a dirt bike if they so choose?

“I’m here to advocate for more personal freedom, and to point out that there were no victims of the crimes my

family and I are accused of.

“From all our past discussions about lifting bans and modifying strict regulations, I know that the counter argument always revolves around safety.

“I see the good intentions behind the argument that it’s our responsibility to protect our fellow citizens and that we need to eliminate all danger. It’s a nice thought. But it’s also a pipe dream that ends up causing more harm than good to our people. Why? Because it’s a proven fact of life that we can never create a natural environment without dangers!”

Jonah held up a hand with three fingers. “Humans have fallen from trees and died, yet cutting down all the trees is not an option if we want to breathe clean

air. Humans have drowned in water, yet removing all the water is not an option if we want to live. Fire has killed people and burned down whole towns, yet it has also helped cook our food and keep us warm since we lived in caves.

“We can never shield people from all danger. The best we can do is educate them against dangerous situations.” He paused. “Raise your hand if you learned how to swim in school.”

All the Council members raised their hands.

“Now ask yourself this question... how would you feel if two hundred years ago swimming had been banned because someone drowned? Would that seem fair to you? Would it seem right?”

“We forget that many activities that are now illegal used to be everyday pleasures in the past. Enjoying a horror or romance book, having a glass of alcohol, racing for fun, or gambling with your friends... all these things were done responsibly by billions of people throughout history. They were ordinary and legal things in the past and in some parts of the world, they are still legal.

“And yet, here I stand defending myself.

“Some of you have mentioned that I was bound to get in trouble because of my male gender and that I’m proof that men can never be trusted.”

Leo booed at the screen and was shushed by the rest of us.

“I’m fine with you calling me a rule breaker. But it’s mind-blowing how many of you identify as advocates for change, while pointing fingers at me for taking a stand against rigid rules and laws that hurt and suppress a number of minority groups among us. Many of which never felt like they had a voice on this council, until I came along.

“The irony is that you’d all like to call this council an open-minded place with values of inclusiveness and tolerance. But how can it be tolerance when the only people you tolerate are the ones who agree with you, act like you, and share the same values as you?

“You embrace people of all colors, shapes, and sizes. But only as long as

they think like you. Where's your tolerance for those of us who don't fit into your mold of homogeneity?"

Pearl was nodding her head. "I love that part."

This time we all collectively shushed her.

Lifting his hand, Jonah held up the forbidden book that I'd read seven chapters in. "Two hundred years ago, this small romance book called *Forbidden Letters from the North* caused our predecessors to take radical measures. Out of fear that women would throw themselves at the mercy of the monsters living on the other side of the wall, they banned all romance books and made it illegal to even speak about the

Nmen, whom they believed to be violent and brutal by nature.

“People who dreamed of love were ridiculed in public as being simpleminded, and even to this day, being called a romantic is an insult. But did you know that there was a time before all this when a romantic person was seen as an idealist, dreamer, visionary, and someone with a kind and soft heart?

“As a bunch of bullies, the Council members of the past pushed good people into a corner full of shame that they never deserved to be in. Obviously, we are not responsible for what our ancestors did hundreds of years ago, but if we do nothing to rectify this mistake,

we'll be remembered by future generations as a bunch of followers who failed to stand up against injustice.

“Romantics shouldn't be forced to trade love stories on a black market or live in fear of ridicule and being caught. Nor should anyone who likes a cold beer or the adrenalin rush of driving fast.

“Who are the romantics harming by reading books about love?

“Who were we harming by racing in a secluded area?

“The good thing is that things are changing for the better. For one, we now know that our neighbors to the North aren't really monsters. They are just big, hairy men who are crude at times.

Magni pushed his arm against mine.

“What the fuck is he talking about? He’s saying crude like it’s a bad thing.”

I smiled but kept my focus on Jonah.

“Twelve years ago, after a powerful speech by Pearl Pilotti, a number of brave Council members agreed to lift the ban on mentioning the Men of the North. Today we have many of the men living among us. Likewise, many of our fellow Motlanders have chosen a life up North.

“That’s why I have to ask you this; doesn’t it bother you that it’s legal to have a romantic relationship, while it’s still illegal to read about it?

“My point is that sometimes it’s not the people who are wrong. It’s our outdated laws that need to be revised. Rather than punish good people like me

and my family for enjoying alcohol, a game of cards, and some racing in private, we should lift the ban on those things and allow our people freedom to live as they see fit.

“Thank you for listening.”

Jonah stood stoically and waited for the reaction of the Council.

Pearl’s mother, Isobel, had served as the chairman of the Council for as long as I could remember and she spoke first. “Thank you, Jonah. You made some good points, and I’m sure the Council has a whole lot to say. Let’s begin the questioning.”

Almost the entire room of women had activated their question mark buttons, signaling that they wanted to

Speak.

Juliana Hernandez, a woman close to seventy who had been a member for more than thirty years, stood up. "I'm deeply disturbed by your lack of regret. I'd hoped for a heartfelt apology and instead you're putting the blame on us and former members of this council. I demand an apology for you calling us bullies. Shame on you, Jonah. It would be irresponsible of us to lift any ban on things that have the potential to harm our dear citizens. I haven't had a good night's sleep since Josephine Martin, the poor woman who married an Nman, got killed by him. She died because we failed to protect her, Jonah. I fought as hard as I could against our women being

allowed to marry those awful men, but I failed. Now, I will carry her death as a burden on my conscience to the day I die. For you to suggest that we should make books legal again is the kind of reckless behavior one would expect from a man. Romance books are a gateway to more disasters. We can't allow those toxic fairy tales to poison the already fragile minds of romantics. They may be soft hearted, but they are also naïve and believe in soulmates and finding one true love. Josephine was a romantic who followed her heart, but it cost her everything.”

Jenna McFulham was the next to speak. “I just want to point out that if we were to lift some of the laws you

suggested, it wouldn't help you since you broke them while they were still in place; you understand that, right?"

Jonah didn't respond so Jenna continued,

“Although I sympathize with the guilt that Juliana is carrying, I don't think the blame for Josephine's death is on us. She was an adult who made a decision for herself. No brides have ever been killed before or after, so her death should be seen as an isolated case. Personally, I thought Jonah made some good points today. I'm willing to look at lifting the ban on romance books. Not that I would ever read one myself, but with the rise of people who enjoy that sort of thing, I agree that we should

show acceptance and tolerance.”

Councilwoman Leah was the next to speak. I'd seen her before and thought her drooping eyes reminded me of Holger, my big Great Dane. “Jonah might have a point about the romance books, but I would like to remind the council members that Jonah isn't accused of reading forbidden books. His crimes are much worse, and with the complete lack of guilt he's exhibiting, it would suit him to reflect on his actions and work on his self-awareness. The Council is no place for a self-proclaimed rebel and rule breaker.”

Pearl protested when Khan stood up and turned down the sound. “Turn it up, I want to hear it.”

“Why, that debate will go on for hours and it’s clear that Jonah is screwed.”

“You might not want to watch the whole thing, but I do.” Pearl got up and walked out of the room with a worried expression on her face.

Leo emptied his beer and sighed. “Jonah gave a good speech, but they’re still going to kick him out and lock him up in one of those places of reflection. It’s hard to wrap my head around that drinking a beer is a crime half an hour from here.”

Raven sat leaning against Leo. “At least we’re getting Hunter back to play soccer here. Willow is excited about that, so it’s not all bad.”

“Yes, it’s bad, Raven!” Khan began pacing the floor. “Getting a male on the Council was hard enough and I was hoping that by the next election in two years, at least ten or twelve men would follow. If Jonah is kicked out for criminal behavior, who knows how long it will take for the next candidate to get elected?”

Magni stretched out his arm. “Don’t be so gloomy, brother. You might be surprised that the people want what Jonah has to offer. The forbidden has a certain appeal to humans. Maybe they’ll vote in fifty men next time just to make a point.”

Khan stopped pacing. “Let’s hope so. But right now, it’s not the people

who get to decide. It's a hundred uptight mother hens who think it's their job to shield their citizens from all potential harm. There's no way they'll ease those rigid laws, and Jonah took a big gamble by standing his ground like that."

Magni snorted. "What choice did he have? If he had apologized, every man in the world would have lost respect for him. I've always found Jonah annoying, but he faced those women head on and didn't take any shit from them. That was badass and for that I respect him."

I gaped a little. For my dad to say that about a Motlander man was a first.

Khan stood with his left hand supporting his right elbow, while his right hand was covering his chin and

nose. It was his favorite thinking pose.

Even though I was still grieving over my broken dream of a life with Jonah, I wanted him to succeed and be happy. “Couldn’t we do something? We should show our support from the North. Maybe Pearl could go and talk to them. She’s always been good with that sort of thing and Jonah always talks about the time she changed the Council’s mind with a powerful talk.”

Khan tapped his chin. “Hmmm, yes, I think I know what we need to do.”

“Brilliant, what is it?” Raven sat up straighter.

“Mila just gave me an idea. Pearl’s speech back then was good, but if you ask her, she’ll tell you that it was the

video that Christina and Kya recorded with Boulder, Archer, and Raven that made the difference. The Council wouldn't let her return to me because they feared I had brainwashed her, but then Boulder and Archer spoke about how I'd gone soft in my head with Pearl around and how I'd shown mercy to my enemies. They joked that people were starting to wonder if it was me or Pearl who was running the Northlands."

Raven tilted her head. "I think I remember that video. Christina and Kya made Archer and my dad shave and they insisted that they couldn't wear any leather that day."

Khan pointed to Magni. "We need to make another video."

Magni's hand flew to his beard. "I'm not shaving!"

"You don't need to. The more gruesome you look to the Motlanders, the better. All your scars are great for this."

Laura was quick to defend my dad. "Hey, those scars make him look sexy, not gruesome."

"I'm talking about the Council members, Laura. They already fear Magni and we need to use that to help Jonah."

Magni gave a crooked smile, and grinned to Leo. "Khan's right. They once called me public enemy number one."

Leo grinned back. "Wow, that's an impressive title!"

“Dad, it’s not something to brag about.”

“Magni, focus!” Khan stabbed his hand in the air. “We’re going to take advantage of the fear and resentment they have for you.”

Magni squared his shoulders. “You had me at fear and resentment... I’m in!”

“Good, you’re going to talk about how you were always against democracy and how Jonah changed your mind. And then you’re going to talk about how you respect him and that he has become someone you trust and admire.”

“Wait, what?” My dad pushed himself to the edge of his seat. “I can’t

say that.”

“Why not?”

“We’re talking about a five-foot-eight Motlander who pisses me off with all his positivity shit. I can’t say that I admire and respect him.”

I didn’t even think before I defended Jonah. “He’s six foot tall and you just said that you respect him.”

“Yeah, but that was because he didn’t take any crap from the women.”

“He doesn’t take any crap from you either,” I pointed out and my mom was quick to support me.

“And what about that quote he left you? Don’t pretend it didn’t inspire you to get the operation.”

Khan came over and sat down on the

coffee table. “This isn’t really about how much or little you respect Jonah. It’s about getting what we want, which is males on the council.”

“Then *you* say it. You’re the ruler, that’s much better.”

“Let me paint you a picture.” Khan swiped his hand around like he was physically painting in the air. “You’re a Motlander woman watching the biggest most lethal grizzly bear growl and roar, and you’re terrified.”

Magni frowned. “Go on!”

“And then as you’re watching in fear, a brave person steps in front of you to protect you.”

“Me?”

“No, not you, Jonah.”

Magni gave a grimace. “Jonah doesn’t know shit about bears.”

“Nevertheless, as you’re watching in fear, he walks in and reaches out his hand to pet the bear.”

Magni growled low, “That’s not brave. That’s stupid! Told you he knows nothing about bears. He’s gonna need one of these.” He wiggled his new hand.

Khan sighed. “As you watch him pet the bear, something unexpected and unexplainable happens. The bear sniffs Jonah’s hands and settles down. It’s a miracle and you’re impressed with him.”

Magni looked around to Laura, Raven, Leo, and me. “Okay, tell you what, if Jonah walks up to a roaring grizzly bear and makes friends with it,

I'll record a video telling the whole world how impressed I am.”

Khan looked straight into Magni's eyes. “He already did.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I would have heard about it.” Magni snorted and waved a hand dismissively.

Khan's face was impassive. “You were there. To the Motlanders you're that scary bear and Jonah made friends with you.”

Magni frowned and then he narrowed his eyes. “I hate it when you speak in metaphors.”

“If the Council members believe that Jonah has done the impossible, they will respect him. And if they are smart, they'll keep him on, thinking he can

influence us.”

Magni looked thoughtful. “You think it’ll work?”

“Of course it will work, I’m a genius.”

I watched my dad and uncle. “What about the scrutiny that you’re going to face at home when people see that you two were influenced by a Motlander Council member? Remember when you announced the election and the journalists kept asking about that. It’s going to bite you in the butt.”

“Mila is right.” My dad gave me a nod of recognition and tapped his temple. “Maybe my daughter is the real genius here.”

Khan crossed his arms and scoffed.

“Obviously, we’ll have to make sure the video is seen only by the Council and not in public.”

“There’s still the risk that a video like that would get leaked or at least talked about,” Leo warned. “Don’t get me wrong. I want to help Jonah too, but are you willing to risk losing your power in the Northlands to help secure Jonah’s in the Motherlands?”

Magni looked at Khan. “No.”

Khan had that faraway glance in his eyes telling me that his head was spinning with thoughts.

“You’re not risking our position to help Jonah,” Magni repeated.

I leaned back in the couch. “It might be worth it from an equality standpoint. I

mean no matter who wins the election in the Northlands, a man will rule. If Jonah loses his seat on the Council it might push back the chance to have equality on the Council for decades.”

Khan shook his head. “I’ll come up with a way to secure both him and us.” Standing up in a fast movement, he walked out of the room. “Where did Pearl go? I need to discuss this with her.”

I looked back at the wall, where Jonah was still answering questions. Even without sound it was clear that the Councilwomen were critical and he was doing his best to defend his position. “I feel bad for him.”

My dad nodded. “Yeah, when you

talk to him, tell him that, worst case, he can always come live here in the Northlands. At least here, he can drink, gamble, and race as much as he wants to. We'll help him pack on some more muscle to fit in.”

I felt emotional just from talking about Jonah, and changed the subject to something I knew would work. “What about Mason, Aubri, and Dina? When are they coming home? I miss my little troopers, and talking with them long distance isn't the same as being together.”

My parents exchanged a glance and I sensed that they had debated this topic recently. “Honey, your dad and I are hoping to bring them back home in a few

days.”

“Good!” Getting up, I hugged them all and withdrew to my room with an excuse of being tired.

My dogs were happy to snuggle up with me on my bed and, surrounded by their warm bodies, I thought about how amazing Jonah had been today. His strong personality and high level of confidence made him the most attractive man in the world to me.

Don't torture yourself like this!

But what if we didn't marry but just lived together?

Wouldn't it be better to have him in secret than not have him at all?

The mere thought of having to hide my love made my stomach churn. I was

affectionate and loving by nature. Hiding our relationship would mean suppressing the very essence of my soul. I'd grow to resent myself for giving up on my dream of a family.

You deserve to be loved fully, not just when no one is looking.

As if Holger could read my mind and agreed with me, he licked my ear.

In the loving and slightly silly voice I always used with my dogs, I muttered, "That's right. I'm lovable, just like you are. I'm so happy we agree on that, my friend."

I was scratching Holger's ear when my wristband chimed the melody of Jonah's incoming call.

This time, I didn't even consider

ignoring him. My friend had been in battle and he needed me to be there for him.

CHAPTER 16

Licking Wounds

Jonah

“Jonah.” The sweet sound of Mila’s voice was like a soothing blanket and I sighed with relief.

“It’s over. I gave my speech.”

“Yes, we saw it. You did good.”

I was sitting by my desk in my apartment looking out the window where a group of birds sat in a nearby tree. “In a way, I wish the Council met in a physical building instead of virtual reality. It feels empty to sit here alone.”

“Did they tell you what happens

next?”

“The discussion will resume in two days. Having a break gives everyone a chance to reflect on what was said today. I’m expecting a second round of questions on Friday, and after that they’ll vote on whether or not I can stay.”

“What’s your feeling?”

I placed my elbows on the table in front of me and let my hands carry my heavy head. “They want me out.”

“But you could run for election again next time, couldn’t you?”

“Yeah, but what would be the point? I’m a criminal in their eyes.”

Mila was quiet for a few seconds. “My dad asked me to tell you that you can always come and live here.”

“Thank you.” I gave Mila a small smile. “How is he?”

“Good. He’s cracking jokes and flirting with my mom.”

“And how is everything healing?”

“Surprisingly well. He’s already moving around.”

“And Khan and Pearl?”

“They worry about you.”

I gave another long sigh. “I feel like I’m disappointing them. Pearl helped with my speech.”

“No one up here is blaming you for what happened. You’re right, the laws are too rigid.” The hologram of Mila that flowed in front of me showed her large expressive blue eyes. “I know this may sound funny, but in some ways, it

reminds me of when I first moved to the Northlands as a child. Our teachers Kya and Archer had such different ideas about how we children should be raised. They always argued. She wanted to protect us from all harm while he wanted to expose us to danger so we could learn how to assess risk.”

“But at least they were having a fair debate. I’m one Archer against a hundred Kyas.”

Mila frowned. “Yeah, it doesn’t look good.” We were quiet for a few seconds and then she added. “I liked what you said about the romantics. That people used to call us softhearted and visionary.”

“Thank you.”

“And yet, Jonah, I don’t mean to criticize, but why would you bring a forbidden book and admit to breaking another rule?”

“What do you mean? As a member of the Council, I’m allowed to read it.”

“Yes, but you’re not allowed to bring it outside the archive, are you?”

I was quiet.

“Jonah?”

Letting out a deep sigh, I groaned. “I’ve been so focused on my speech that I didn’t consider... I mean every person in that room is allowed to read it.”

“Yes, but the rest of us aren’t and your speech was broadcast to the whole world. You know everyone is going to want a copy of that book now, right?”

“I feel sick!” In a slow movement, I banged my head against the table.

“Hey, don’t do that, your hologram just disappeared.”

“Sorry. If you have your mood reader around, we could meet in VR...”

“No, this is fine. As long as you keep your head up.”

“I should have used the quote.”

“What quote?”

“It was a quote I found while researching and it just summed it up perfectly. It said, ‘Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.’”

“Not bad. Who said it?”

“A man called Benjamin Franklin

who lived half a millennium ago. He was a politician who helped end a great war and form a nation.”

“So why didn’t you use his quote?”

I groaned. “I wrote and rewrote that speech so many times, Mila. I had another section about free thought being an illusion, but Pearl wasn’t sure about it, so I cut that part too.”

“But if you liked that quote, why did you cut it out?”

“Because I figured that the moment I mentioned his name it would lose power. They don’t want to listen to men. Especially not men who lived prior to the Toxic War.

As always, Mila tried to cheer me up. “I liked your arguments about

tolerance.”

“You did?”

“Yes.” She smiled at me. “Tell me how it went with Anne.”

“Oh, right.” I blew out my cheeks and exhaled noisily through my nose. “She’s remorseful, but the mess she created is huge.”

“She’s got quite a fan group up here, did you know that?”

“Who – Anne?”

“Yes. She’s been in the News a lot with pictures of her modeling in swimwear.”

“But they don’t know her.”

Mila smiled. “Almost two thousand men signed up to fight for me in my tournament and none of them know me

either.”

“Huh. I should tell her that.”

“You talk to her?”

I gave a small nod. “Yes. My mom is bringing Anne back into the family and insisting that what happened was a terrible tragedy that we need to put behind us.”

“Your mom is a saint.”

“Yeah, she is.” I thought about it. “It’s going to help a lot that we saw how horrible Anne feels about what happened.”

“I would love to meet her one day.”

“That could be arranged. We’re having dinner with her tomorrow. Wanna come?”

“I wish, but it’s too far. Why don’t

you bring her with you the next time you come?”

Talking with Mila had made me feel much better. “I really missed this. Talking with you about things.”

She looked down but smiled. “Me too.”

“You’re my best friend, North Star, you know that, right?”

Mila gave a small nod.

“I mean it. I love you and I know how lucky I am to have you in my life. These past weeks you’ve been quiet and it’s been hard for me. Don’t ever disappear, please.”

Mila blinked her eyes fast and sounded rushed when she spoke, “Jonah, I’m sorry, but my mom is calling for me.

I'll talk to you later, okay?"

Her hologram faded and left me missing her already.

While talking with her, I'd received fourteen unanswered calls from family, friends, and colleagues on the council. Pearl had called too.

Getting up, I walked over to my bed. I wasn't physically tired, but my mind was exhausted from the pressure I'd been under, and except for Mila, I didn't feel like talking to anyone.

Sitting on my bed, I saw that the birds outside my window had flown away. A heavy feeling in my chest accompanied the question in my mind, *Now what?*

I'd given it my best today, but it

would take a miracle to win them over. In two days, I would most likely be a former Council member with no plan for my future.

Every word of my speech ran through my mind. Juliana's words about romantics being naïve and fragile bothered me. Mila was a romantic and I'd enjoyed reading the forbidden book too.

With a sudden burst of inspiration, I went to get the book and returned to make a recording of myself reading it to Mila. She had been engrossed in the book before she left and I thought she might appreciate listening to more of it. If nothing else it would give me a distraction from my own problems and

the emptiness I felt inside.

“I told you not to come, it’s too dangerous.”

“I’m a risk taker.” He moved a little closer. “Why do you look so scared of me?”

“I’m not scared. It’s just that...”
When I didn’t finish my sentence, he joked:

“That my handsomeness is overwhelming. I understand.”

“You’re much taller than I expected.”

“Funny you should say that, because so are you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, I imagined you the size of a

child.”

“Why in the world would you think of me as a child?”

“I never thought of you as a child. Only that you would be small as one. It’s what I’ve always been told. That women on this side of the border are short like children.”

“Well, I suppose that depends how big your children are.” I leaned my head back to take in the full size of the large Nman in front of me. “I have no problem imagining that you were my size as a child, but then you’re male and I’m female.”

His smile grew. “I’m very aware of that fact.”

After reading two chapters, I closed the book and looked up on the ceiling with a sudden epiphany. My idea of a hugging booth could work. I just needed to make a few adjustments.

After my next Council meeting, I would go to the Northlands and explain my plan to Khan. After this week's poll numbers, it was clear that he was under pressure and needed all the help he could get to win the election.

Pearl, Khan, Mila, and their entire family had shown me kindness, and now, I finally knew how I could repay them. I might not be able to save my own seat on the Council, but I wasn't powerless.

CHAPTER 17

No Means No

Mila

It had been eight days since my dad's operation and every day, I'd promised myself that today I'd tell my parents about my decision to drop out of the tournament.

A few times, I'd begun saying the words that I'd rehearsed in my head a thousand times, but every time, I'd backed out and changed the subject.

With only three weeks to the tournament, my mom and grandmother had insisted that today we should go

over all the details for my wedding.

My appetite was nonexistent and I'd hardly slept at all. By ten a.m. I was shaking from nerves.

Just get it over with.

My right hand touched the wristband on my left hand for the umpteenth time, and I wondered if my urge to call Jonah for a confidence boost would ever go away.

Taking deep breaths in through my nose and exhaling through my mouth, I walked up and down my floor. Loki, the smallest of my dogs, kept tripping me up because he stayed too close to my feet. Holger lay on my bed with his big drooping eyes following my movements.

“Don't give me those eyes. It's not

like I want to break my dad's heart or cause any trouble. I know he and my mom have been excited about this tournament for as long as I can remember.”

Holger's face remained unchanged.

“It's my life, Holger. You get that, right?”

This time the Great Dane lifted his head with interest and I placed a big kiss on his snout. “Thank you. Good talk.”

With the determination to not let anything stop me this time, I walked out my door to find my parents and tell them.

I found them in the basement gym where my dad was doing rehab with a specialist.

My mom was glowing with pride

when she saw me. “Mila, honey, come see what your dad can do now. Magni, do it again, I want Mila to see it.”

My dad was wearing shorts and a t-shirt that was drenched from sweat. “I can do squats.”

“You can?”

“Yes.” In slow and precise movements, my dad held out his arms and squatted down five times. “I’ve already done eighty. It feels good to feel my thighs burn again.”

“Wow, Dad, be careful that you don’t overdo it too soon.”

“Wanna see what else I can do?”

“Sure.”

Bending forward, my dad planted his palms on the floor and raised his legs

in the air. Doing handstands had always been a signature workout move for him and to see him find the balance with his new arm and legs made me almost tear up. Panting hard, he was putting most of his weight on his right arm and only supporting with his new arm. He didn't look as secure as he used to but he managed to stay on his hands for ten seconds before he came back to stand on his feet.

I clapped my hands with excitement. "That's amazing, Dad. I'm so proud of you." I wanted to hug him but he shook his head with a large grin.

"Don't, sweetie, I'm soaked in sweat. You just wait and see, soon I'll be walking on my hands again."

“How long have you been working out today?”

“A few hours.” Magni threw a nod to his physical therapist, who was packing up some equipment. “I want to go harder, but Mr. Careful over there says we need to be patient.”

I gave the man a grateful smile. “Patience isn’t my dad’s strongest skill. He likes to push himself.”

He nodded. “It will serve him well. He’s already ahead of schedule.”

“Of course he is.” My mom was sitting on the edge of the boxing ring with her legs swinging. She patted the spot next to her, gesturing for me to join her.

My smile stiffened a little and I

fiddled with my hands as a nervous energy spread in my body. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you both about something important.”

The physical therapist took the hint. “It’s fine. I’ll see you tomorrow morning at the usual time.”

My dad raised his artificial hand to show he had heard the man, and walked over to get out a ball of water bubbles. “Are any of you thirsty?”

“I’m good,” I said even though my throat felt dry.

“What’s up?” My dad popped a few bubbles in his mouth and swallowed.

“It’s about the tournament.”

That made him turn and give me his full attention. “What about it?”

“I’ve... I’ve decided that... ehm... that...” It was as if an internal barrier stopped me from finishing that sentence. All my life I had focused on pleasing others and it was impossible to speak words that I knew would cause pain to my loved ones.

“Mila, are you okay?” My mom frowned and came to stand next to me.

“Maybe it’s better if we go somewhere to sit down,” I suggested.

“Vanilla Bean, what’s the matter?” My dad had a worried expression on his face.

Just say it!

“There’s no good way for me to say this.” My whole body was shaking and all instincts told me to change the subject

or stay quiet.

“Say what?” My mother came over to place a hand on my shoulder. “What’s going on sweetie?”

Gathering my courage, I rushed out the words, “I can’t go through with the tournament.”

There it was, out like a wrecking ball aimed straight at their hearts. My body was tensed up with fear and I closed my eyes expecting a huge wave of anger to come back at me.

Instead I heard my mom chuckle.

Opening one eye, I stared at her. Maybe she hadn’t heard me.

“Mila, dear, it’s just nerves. Don’t worry. That’s normal.”

I cleared my throat. “No, Mom. I

really don't want to be in a tournament where someone might get hurt because of me, and I don't want to marry a stranger either.”

My parents exchanged a long look.

“I've made up my mind,” I emphasized. “I'm not doing it.”

“You're serious?” My mom's light laughter was long gone.

“Yes, I'm serious.”

My dad's face was already red from the workout, but he looked like he was about to explode. “How long have you known?”

My right foot touched my left and I looked down.

“Mila, do you have any idea what this means? The amount of planning that

has gone in to this and the number of fighters and spectators who are coming to town for this event? Not to mention the significance this tournament holds for our country. Khan's campaign to win the presidency is already under pressure. Your tournament was going to be his chance to show everyone that he's not selling out our culture. For fuck's sake, Mila. Canceling it isn't an option at this point."

Guilt weighed me down but then Raven's voice came through, reminding me, *You are stronger than you think, Mila*. I raised my head and faced my parents. "I knew you would be upset, but isn't it better that I tell you now instead of on the day of the tournament?"

My mom touched my forearm. “Mila, I think you’re making a big mistake. Your dad is right. Too much is on the line.”

“Mom, I’m not like you. I didn’t dream of a tournament since I was a little girl, and I don’t have a secret crush on the strongest man in the country.”

Laura looked more shocked than angry, but my dad couldn’t stand still. “This is a fucking disaster.”

I’d always hated conflict and seeing my parents this upset made me physically ill. My heart was racing, my mouth was dry, my stomach felt like someone had tied all my intestines into knots. I was a peacekeeper and it was my nature to make people feel at ease.

It would be so easy to give in and go ahead with the tournament, but a conversation I'd had with Jonah months ago played back in my head. He'd argued that I needed to be better at setting my boundaries with people. In my mind I recited the pointers I could remember from that conversation,

I'm allowed to say no.

I'm allowed to disagree with others.

I'm allowed to look out for myself.

I'm allowed to feel whatever emotion I feel.

Others are allowed to feel whatever emotion they feel.

Their feelings and reactions are not my responsibility.

I don't have to defend my right to set my boundaries.

The memory from last summer of Jonah talking about setting boundaries, while looking at the stars with me, felt like him being right next to me, whispering in my ear, *Stand your ground, North Star*. Inside me a calmness spread because I knew the hardest part was over.

“Mila, why are you smiling? Do you think this is funny? We are three weeks away from the tournament and you throw this bomb at us.”

“I'm sorry that I didn't tell you sooner.” I pointed to my dad's beard. “And I'm sorry I made that stupid bet, but just because I made one mistake

doesn't mean I have to pay for it for the rest of my life.”

My mom let go of my forearm, looking more confused than angry now. “But I thought you wanted to have a family.”

“I do.”

“Then why won't you marry?”

“It's not that. I just...” I let out a long sigh. “I want to do what Raven did. You know, fall in love and find the right man for me.”

My dad groaned. “Is this about you going to the Motherlands? Did Jonah set you up for this?”

“No. This is about what *I* want.”

Magni turned to my mother with eyes saying, *How do we fix this?*

“Okay, why don’t we all calm down and think for a second.” My mom held up both palms. “Dad and I are shocked. We didn’t see this coming.”

I kept quiet.

“How about this...” Laura took a steadying breath. “We’ll give you a few days to think about it before we cancel the tournament. If it’s a matter of nerves, maybe they will settle and you’ll change your mind again.”

“Yeah... let’s not cancel right away.” Magni nodded.

“I won’t change my mind.”

“You might.” My mom reached out to hug me. “Sweetheart, it’s normal to be insecure about big decisions.”

I kissed her cheek. “Mom, I love

you, but my decision is final.”

When my parents left the gym, I sat back with mixed feelings. I felt both elated that I'd told them and sad that I'd caused them distress.

Maybe there's a way to have the tournament anyway, without me as the grand prize. Maybe the money would be enough for these men to want to participate.

As I walked up the stairs in my own thoughts, I heard a girl's voice call out my name.

“Hi, Mila.”

I had reached the large entrance area of the Manor and didn't see anyone except two guards.

“In here.”

Moving toward the voice, I entered the dining room and bent down to find my cousin, Freya, lying at full length under the dining table.

“What are you doing down there?”

“My mom says I can’t lie on the table, so I’m lying under it.”

Getting to my knees, I crawled closer. Freya was the same age as my younger siblings, Mason and Aubri, and I missed them. “What are you doing?”

“I’m making an important list.”

“Of what?”

“I heard my dad say that if he doesn’t win this election, he’ll be a joke to everyone.”

“He said that?”

Freya nodded, her lips turned

downward. “My mom was hugging him and telling him not to be scared. I’ve never seen my dad scared.”

I caressed her hair. “I’m sorry.”

Her green eyes were serious when she tapped her finger at her list. “I’m going to help my dad win this election, and here’s my list of ideas.”

“Can I see it?”

Biting down on her lip, she handed it over. “My mom always says that leaders serve the people and not the other way around, so I’ve been asking the guards and staff here at the Manor what they want the most from my dad.”

“Interesting approach, and what did they say?”

“Well, I’ve asked seventeen of them

so far and five of the guards said they wanted more comfortable uniforms.” Freya frowned. “Apparently leather can get very hot in the spring and summer. I wouldn’t know, since my mom refuses to let me wear it.”

“Okay, and what did the others say?”

“Well, Jimmy and Sheriff in the kitchen are worried about what happens when they can’t work anymore. They are both old and live with the rest of the staff for now, but they have no real savings and Jimmy complained that his leg is giving him trouble.”

“Oh, they shouldn’t worry.” I loved our two chefs. “I’ll tell them they can stay as long as they want.”

Freya shook her head at me. “Are

you going to tell the same thing to every staff member who is too old to work?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she had a point. “I don’t know.”

“Anyway, I’ve categorized the wishes of the people I interviewed into four main desires. Number one is a wife, but that didn’t surprise me because men fight for women all the time.

“The second one is comfort, and then there’s a pay raise, which I’ve categorized into wealth, and the fourth one is adventure. I’m not sure what to do about that one.”

“All right.” I looked at her list with its four bullet points.

“Comfort, love, wealth, and adventure.”

“Yes. Now, I already talked to my dad about the uniforms and he said that he’s willing to look at a change in design but not right now. Then there’s the part about love and I’ve come up with some ideas.”

“Let’s hear them.”

“You know Willow and Solo are actors in a series that tells the story of how the integration began when Christina came to the Northlands and fell in love with Boulder, right?”

“Of course, they play my parents on the show, which is kind of cool.”

“Uh-huh, but my dad told me the show ran into problems with some people in the Motherlands who are prunes and won’t allow any kissing on

the show.”

“Do you think maybe he meant prudes?”

Freya shrugged.

“It’s true, though. Willow was devastated because she had these great visions of being an actress and now the series might never be shown.”

“It’s stupid.”

I didn’t disagree, but tried to explain, “There are rules against entertainment that contains violence or romance. From what I heard the Council had agreed to show lenience, but once they saw the first episode, they changed their minds.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “Motlanders are silly. My mom is so lucky that she

met my dad and moved here.”

“Freya, there’s good on both sides.”

“I know. But anyway, I want Solo to convince the producers to show the series here at the amphitheater. It could be a big event that people pay to be part of live, and for those who can’t get a ticket, it could be transmitted. Ten million people watching are still a lot of people.”

I nodded.

“Okay, so imagine that after the show, the real people who the show is about could answer questions.” She lit up. “And you know what would make it extra special?”

“What?”

“If after each episode, a new couple

gets married.”

“What couple?”

“That doesn’t matter. There are people marrying through the Matching Program all the time. My dad would just showcase that Nmen are finding love every day under his rule.”

I blinked my eyes and must have looked confused because she clarified by tapping at the pad again. “The whole point is to make them feel like my dad can give them love.”

“I see.” I nodded. “You want to give them hope that it can happen for them too.”

“Yes.”

“Freya, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Good!” She sat up in a cross-

legged position like me. “Now about the wealth part.”

“Yes?” I was eager to hear what the mind of this brilliant eleven-year-old girl had come up with.

“I made some calculations, and if there are five episodes and we sell out the twelve hundred seats in the amphitheater for five live shows over five weeks, then we should make more than three hundred thousand dollars if we charge fifty dollars per person.”

“Fifty dollars?”

“Yes. I asked Willow about the show she did with the performers from the Motherlands, and she told me that the audience each paid between forty and fifty dollars to see it.”

“You really did a lot of research, didn’t you?”

“Uh-huh. But that’s not all.”

“There’s more?”

“Yes, I might be a kid but I know that three hundred thousand dollars isn’t going to be enough to make ten million people feel wealthy. It will only get them thirty-three cents each.”

“Good point.”

“I had an idea of printing more money, but when I discussed it with Archer at school, he explained the concept of inflation to me.”

“Okay.”

“Then I talked to my dad about redistributing the wealth from the few to the many, but he didn’t take that well. I

left when he began ranting about my mom raising me to be a socialist.”

“All right, so what do you plan to do?”

“I’m sorry to say it, Mila, but with limited means and time, all we can do is spend our money in a way that benefits the most people. If we give Boulder a hundred dollars it won’t make much difference to him because he’s already rich. What we need to do is spread the money like sprinkles on a birthday cake and make it look like a fortune.

“You mean philanthropy?”

Freya frowned. “No. Nmen are too proud for that. They need to feel that they earned it. What we need to do is create jobs for those who don’t have any.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Freya, that’s not an easy thing to do.”

“Why not? If we have the money, all we have to do is come up with something that needs to be done.” She angled her head. “How hard can it be?”

“Sweetie, three hundred thousand dollars might sound like a lot of money, but there might be expenses that you haven’t taken into consideration and until you’ve actually made the money, you can’t plan to use it.”

Freya looked so much like her father when she gave me a steady glance. “Then you tell me where to find money.”

“Well, I don’t have that kind of money lying around, but maybe we can do something else. Come with me.”

Freya was quick to crawl out from under the table and with eagerness in her steps, she followed me as I picked up a key from my dad's office and took her down to the storage room in the basement.

“What is this place?” Her head was turning from side to side, taking in all the stacks of boxes, bed frames, pictures and furniture.

I grinned and spread out my arms. “This is a treasure chamber.”

Picking up an old hat, Freya looked skeptical. “You think we're going to find money down here?”

“Believe it or not, there are people who are crazy for old stuff. If we can get our dads to give this all away, I'll bet

we can sell it for a lot of money.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes.” I walked over and picked up a small painting. “We could open an entire antique store with all the goods that are down here. I’ve heard of people paying more than three hundred thousand for a small painting like this.”

Freya gaped. “You’re shitting me?”

“Nope. Some people will pay more money for old things than for new, and imagine what it will do to the value of the item when the buyers learn that it came from the Gray Manor. The historical significance of many of these things alone will make them interesting.”

“But who has time to go through all this?”

“Someone who loves all things old.”

I smiled at Freya and we said the name at the same time. “Christina.”

“But isn’t she busy working on that excavation?”

“Not while the ground is still frozen. She’ll have a least a month.”

“Can we go talk to her now?”

“We sure can.”

After I turned off the light in the large storage room and locked the door behind us, I put my arm around Freya and walked back down the long corridor. “One day, you’ll make a fine leader.”

“Thank you, but I can’t be the ruler of the Northlands. My dad won’t allow it because I’m a girl.”

“For now!”

Her eyes crinkled as she smiled.

“You think I can change his mind?”

“I think you can do anything you set your mind to. You’re strong, Freya.”

“As strong as you?”

I smiled. “You think I’m strong?”

“Of course you are. Even when your dad was at his worst and threw things at the wall you kept going back into his room.”

“That’s because I love him.”

“Still, you could have hidden in your room. It takes a lot of strength to love someone who is that mean to you.”

“Not when you can see the person is in pain and that their anger has nothing to do with you.”

Freya was close to my height and snaked her arm around my waist. “All I’m saying is that anyone couldn’t do what you do, Mila. You make everyone feel loved. That has to be some kind of super power.”

I laughed. “It’s a shame that it’s not the kind of super power that can make money grow on trees or make your dad see that he needs to change that stupid rule and make it possible for a woman to run for president.”

“Maybe that will be *my* super power.”

I squeezed Freya’s shoulder a little. “You know what, I have a feeling it will be.”

CHAPTER 18

Recruitment

Jonah

Seeing Anne at the dinner table was both wonderful in a nostalgic way and sad because her dramatic return to our family also meant that Cole was absent.

We had made it through some of our family's favorite dishes and with Anne sitting across from me, I could see how many times she had teared up when someone brought up memories from her childhood.

The first half hour had been a bit awkward, but Anne had given us all

another heartfelt apology and we had all seen her on the News this morning expressing her remorse in public too. Several times, she repeated that she would do anything to clean up the mess she had made.

When we reached the dessert, my wristband vibrated with an incoming call.

“It’s Cole.” I scanned their faces. “Maybe it’s best if I don’t answer. What if he gets sad to see us all gathered without him?”

“Answer it!” Hunter, who was sitting to my right, elbowed me, and as soon as I projected Cole up in a hologram, Hunter spoke: “Cole, my friend, so nice of you to drop by. How’s

the vacation going?”

Cole took in the room full of family and frowned a little. “You’re having a family dinner?”

“That’s right. When the boss is out, the employees party.” Hunter seemed oblivious to how painful it had to be for Cole to see us like this and not be able to be part of it. “So, tell us how you’re enjoying your break. I’ll bet you’re lousy at being lazy!”

To my surprise, Cole’s lips tugged upward. “Turns out I’m good at taking it slow. Except for walking, reading, meditating, and taking naps, I haven’t done much.”

“Sounds boring,” Emanuela pitched in.

“It is, but I feel rejuvenated and relaxed. A group of us are going snowshoeing tomorrow. We’re bringing lunch and having a picnic in the snow.”

Hunter snorted. “What kind of punishment is that? Sounds like something we would do for fun back home.”

I leaned in. “Hunter, Cole isn’t being punished. The extra time is meant to give him time to reflect on his choices.”

“Have you told them that you regret your actions?” Emanuela asked Cole.

His answer was abrupt. “No! And I still don’t.”

Hunter gave a small whistle. “You’d better prepare for a long vacation then.”

Cole shrugged. “I’m counting on

Jonah's speech to change their minds. You did amazing, by the way."

"Thank you."

"I heard that you're going back for round two tomorrow, and that they'll cast their votes then."

"That's right." I played with my fork, feeling a heaviness in my chest. "It doesn't look good. So far I haven't had many signs of support."

"If only there was something I could do," Anne repeated for the third time.

I gave her a small smile while Hunter lifted a beer and showed it to Cole. "Look what your mom saved for you."

"A beer?"

"Yup, the last one, and I'm drinking

it now.”

Cole groaned. “You’re an ass.”

The room filled with Hunter’s unburdened laughter. “I’m kidding. She had three left so I’m not drinking yours... Gunnar is.”

We all laughed when Gunnar’s eyes went large. “Am I drinking Cole’s beer?”

My mom shook her head. “Cole, don’t listen to anything Hunter says. I still have one saved for when you return.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Are they treating you well?” Her tone of concern made me love Lilly even more.

“Yeah, Mom, it’s beautiful here, and

I've met several who sympathize with what happened to us. Turns out a lot of people dream of more freedom.”

“I'm one of them.” Hunter grinned. “Which is why I want to make a toast to Anne, whose skills as an arsonist helped convince my wife to finally move to the Northlands with me.”

Emanuela sighed. “I'll admit that we've been talking about it for a long time.”

Hunter took her hand and squeezed it. “And now that the Dolphins terminated our contracts, it's been decided for us. No more excuses.”

My mom, who had been poking her fork at the cake, agreed. “Better that than wait for the authorities to put us all in a

place of reflection.”

Anne placed her elbow on the table, and rested her head in her palm. She looked devastated. “I’ve ruined everything, haven’t I?”

“That depends.” My tone was dry. “We might all like snowshoeing and napping. Who knows?”

Hunter took a sip of his beer. “At least you’re going down with the rest, Anne. I’m sure they have some special meditation program for crazy people.”

“Hunter, that’s not nice,” my mom scolded him. “Anne isn’t crazy.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, normal people don’t fake their own death or set fire to their family’s buildings. Anne is by far the most extreme Motlander I’ve

ever met and that says a lot since I'm married to Ema." Hunter's hands flicked between my sisters. "You two don't take shit from anyone and I respect that."

Anne blinked her eyes as if unsure whether she should be offended or flattered. "Thank you, I think."

"Sure, no problem, but I'm standing by my words, you're fucking crazy."

"In a good way," my mom added like the kind Motlander she was.

I pushed the last piece of my cake to the side of the plate and leaned back in my chair. "Hunter has a point, Anne. You committed a crime like the rest of us. It's just a matter of time before you'll get invited for your interview. Cole made a deal that he and Hunter took all the

blame for our brewing alcohol and racing, but setting fire to a building wasn't part of that deal.”

Anne skewed her mouth like she was chewing on her inner cheek. “Can't I just decline the invitation?”

I gave her the same patient smile that I'd given her when we were children and she had been too young to understand that catching bees with her hands was a bad idea.

“You can try, but I doubt it'll work.”

“Then I'll go somewhere to hide for a while.”

I nodded. “I'm going to the Northlands after the last hearing in the Council.”

My mom looked surprised. “You

are?”

“I miss Mila and I want to see her again.”

“How long do you plan to stay?”

“That depends on the vote tomorrow night.” I shrugged. “I’d rather be in the Northlands with Ema, Hunter, Mila, and my other friends than be under constant attack in the press here. From the latest news, Khan is under pressure and can use my help to win the election.”

“Yes, come to the Northlands.” Emanuela gave me a grateful smile. “I’ll feel better knowing that you’re around.”

Anne looked from me to Emanuela, and back again. “Maybe I could visit you sometime, if that’s okay. I’ve always been fascinated with the Northlands.”

This was my cue and like a cat stretching in the sun, I told her what I'd been dying to tell her all evening. "It's funny you say that because they seem to have a fascination with you too."

Anne's hand went to her collarbone. "With me?"

"Yes."

"But why? I don't know anyone up there."

"They've seen your modeling pictures and apparently you have a whole fan group."

We laughed at Anne's surprised expression.

"They like my photos?"

"Yes."

"That's weird. I can't imagine men

wearing bikinis or swimsuits.” She gave a small laugh.

Hunter leaned in. “Anne, things are very different back home. Here people see the bathing suit in your pictures, but in the Northlands the men see you. And why wouldn’t they? You’re as beautiful as your sister and they are attracted to your femininity.”

“Really?” An intrigued smile grew on Anne’s face and with a fluid movement, she pushed her long brown hair back over her shoulder.

“Actually, I had an idea I wanted to discuss with you.” I looked into her eyes. “A way for you to make up for what you did to me.”

Her smile vanished instantly.

“Anything.”

“I’ve been giving Khan advice on how to win the election. He’s in no way a perfect man, but with Pearl by his side, I believe he’s the best candidate to keep the peace and prosperity in the Northlands. One of my suggestions was for him to have a hugging booth, like I did during my own campaign.”

“Yes, that’s a great idea.” It was no surprise that my mom was in favor of the idea since it had been her suggestion to me when I ran for the Council.

“I know, but Khan refuses to do it.”

Hunter snorted. “Good, because that would have made him a complete joke.”

“Why?” Anne asked.

“Because it’s not what we do.”

Hunter squared his shoulders. “No one would hug him.”

“Do Nmen not like hugs?”

“Sure, but not with our ruler. And the safety concern for him is too great. Not everyone is a fan.”

I placed both my elbows and palms on the table, leaning forward. “I still believe that a hugging booth would get a lot of attention. Especially if the people hugging are someone the Nmen would form long lines to hug; like women.” My gaze shifted to Anne, who raised her brow.

“You want me to hug people to help your friend, Khan?”

“Uh-huh. I’m happy to do it alongside you, but I think your line

would be a lot longer than mine.”

Hunter crossed his arms. “A hug sounds excessive. I’m not sure you two know what you’re getting yourself into. Let’s keep it to a handshake and a picture.”

“How can a hug be excessive?” Anne asked.

“A hug is one thing, but we’re talking hundreds maybe. Big men who will swallow you up in their arms and resist letting go again.”

“Men like you?”

Hunter nodded. “Yes, and bigger than me.”

A small smile played on Anne’s lips. “I think I can handle it.”

My voice rose with excitement. “So

you'll do it?"

"Yes. It sounds fun." Anne looked as excited as the time she was five and we took her on a secret mission to Mom's cherry tree. "When are we leaving?"

"Whoa, slow down, you two." Hunter pointed at me. "I see what you're doing and I can't let you do it."

"Do what?"

"You're recruiting Anne to do something that fits your agenda, but she has no way of fully understanding what she's agreeing to."

"Anne is an adult who can make her own decisions," I argued.

Hunter stood his ground. "The tournament isn't until April the sixth. That's still three weeks away, so why

not bring Anne to the Northlands for a visit before then?” He nodded his head like it was already decided. “It’ll give you a chance to make a more informed decision.”

Emanuela gave Anne an apologetic smile. “Nmen are very protective of women. Hunter means well.”

“It’s fine. I understand.”

“Okay, then you can come with me when I leave tomorrow night. If you’re available.”

“I might as well since all my modeling jobs have been canceled. Apparently, there’s too much attention around my private life at the moment.”

“Good. Bringing you will give us a chance to discuss the idea with Pearl

and Khan. I'm sure they'll agree a hugging booth is a great idea."

Hunter waved his hands in front of him. "Stop saying hugging booth. I like the idea of helping Khan, but please don't make the mistake of promising people a hug. Just call it a meet and greet. If you feel like hugging you can, but otherwise shake their hands. Trust me, fans can be a bit much. Ema and I have a lot of experience with this sort of thing."

Emanuela agreed: "Hunter is right, but if this is important to you, Jonah, then I'm happy to help too."

Hunter huffed out, "Then it's definitely only handshakes. I'm not letting my wife hug strangers."

Emanuela pushed her chin up. “Like I need your permission.”

“Ha! *You* might not need my permission, but the men do. All I have to do is stand beside you and they won’t touch you.”

“You know perfectly well that if you stood beside me, they would all be flocking to meet you anyway.”

“We should all do it,” Anne exclaimed. “The councilman, the soccer players, and the swimsuit model.”

I lit up in a wide smile. “That would be some meet and greet booth.”

“Fine with me.” Hunter gave a nod of agreement. “It would give me a chance to meet my fans again and let the clubs see that I’m still popular.”

“Oooh, I love campaigning.” My mom pushed her plate out of her way. “You should have big banners and matching shirts too. I can make some in the print shop if you need me to, and remember to tell everyone you meet that you are counting on them to vote for Khan.”

A smile spread on my lips as I listened to my family take over the planning of the meet and greet booth. One of the first things I’d learned at the Council academy when I was a child was that the best way to distract yourself from your own problems was to focus on solving someone else’s.

“How about this idea?” Emanuela widened her eyes. “If the Nmen are so

skeptical about democracy, why not use women to sell it to them? They want more women to come and live there, right?”

“Sure.” Hunter nodded.

“So, show them interviews with women on the streets here. Have them explain why moving to the Northlands would be much more appealing if the country was a democracy instead of a dictatorship. Have a headline that says democracy is sexy.”

They kept throwing out ideas and I couldn't wait to tell Mila about our plans. The thought that I'd see her again soon made me smile wider. And then Hunter dropped the bomb.

“I'm not sold on the idea to sell

democracy as sexy, but the meet and greet booth could work. Actually, you know what would be the perfect place for this booth? Mila's tournament. There's going to be tens of thousands gathered."

I'd worked so hard to block the thought that Mila's tournament was going to happen soon.

Shifting in my seat like the chair was on fire, I got up. "Excuse me."

"Are you okay, Jonah?" my mom called after me as I hurried out of the room with an intense pain in my chest and stomach.

Mila was marrying and I'd blown my chance to stop her.

Fresh air. I need fresh air!

Outside, I took large inhalations of the cold night air in an attempt to get my shaking hands under control.

The stars were shining bright above me, just like they had the first night I spent with her on the rooftop star lounge.

Time was running out and I was losing Mila. For real!

Bending over, I thought I was going to puke.

Sweet, adorable, funny, and kind Mila.

Falling to my knees like a man hit with a bat in the head, I clamped my arms around my solar plexus, which was burning like I'd just swigged down a large glass of acid. I'd never prayed in my life, but something made me turn my

head to the sky and ask the stars for help.

“Please... you can take my seat on the council, but not Mila. I need my North Star or I’ll be lost.”

Our last night together came back to me. Her question about marriage, and my stupid, stupid rejection. I hid my face in my hands.

What have I done?

I sucked in more of the night air as a brutal and ugly realization hit me. All my talk about staying authentic and defending romantics in my speech. Mila was the purest romantic of all, and I’d rejected her need to put a label on our love because I feared what society might think of it.

I’d called myself a rebel and yet I’d

been willing to conform to secure my seat on the council.

What a hypocrite I've been.

People like Mila were as rare as pearls in the ocean. I'd known that from the first time I met her. How had I let a jewel like her slip through my fingers when I should have grabbed on with both hands?

I'm the biggest fool in the world.

I wanted to call her and beg her to forgive my stupidity and pride, but some things were better said face to face.

Leaning my neck back again, I swallowed hard, and asked a last favor from the stars.

“If you can't grant me my first wish, will you at least make sure that she

marries someone kind and worthy of her?”

There was no answer from above.

Only the sound of my quiet sniffing broke the night air as I texted a few words to Mila. “Good night, my North Star, I love you.”

It was a text I’d sent so many nights, but never had I understood the significance of the level of love I truly felt for her. Would she sense it this time?

Her answer came fast. “Good night, wise one, and good luck tomorrow.”

Staring at Mila’s text, all I could see were the three missing words.

She doesn't love me anymore

CHAPTER 19

The Vote

Jonah

All day, I'd walked around in a daze feeling strangely detached from the result of tonight's vote.

In the scheme of things, my role was minimal and insignificant. We humans liked to believe we were on top of the world, but the Toxic War had showed us we were as vulnerable as any other species on the planet.

How strange that we spent so much time discussing what rules to live by and held such strong opinions about how

others ought to live their lives.

I doubted any other species on this planet wasted as much time worrying and arguing about such senseless things.

This time, I wasn't required to give a speech in the Council but merely answer any follow-up questions that might be lingering from Wednesday's hearing.

As I heard them make arguments about my unworthiness on the Council, my mind wandered back to the time I was eleven and my granddad was diagnosed and told he had only weeks left to live. I had grieved his passing while he was still alive, just waiting for the inevitable to happen.

That's how this felt. Like a slow but

steady road to the end.

“Jonah, you may answer the question.”

The mention of my name made me come back to the present and stand up. “May I have the question repeated, please.”

A Council member as young and new as me cleared her throat. “In regards to your suggestion to modify censorship on entertainment, can you clarify where you wish to draw the line? If we allow free speech in books and movies, then what about in real life? How will it affect our laws on proper communication?”

I didn't speak with the same enraptured energy that I'd presented my

speech with on Wednesday night. In the acceptance of the inevitable, there was a quiet freedom. I no longer longed for the approval they would never give me.

“I believe language holds a significant power in our lives. A power that can be used for good and bad. In the olden days they had a word that described the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions through language. The word was catharsis. The limitations we've put on our people by denying them the use of certain words have consequences that I don't agree with. We are easily offended and sensitive. No one dares speak their mind freely for fear of being reported for improper

communication.

“I’m not in favor of hateful words, but there has to be a balance where we can show a higher level of tolerance for people who wish to express themselves with a more colorful style of communication.

“To answer your question, I would like to see a higher level of freedom in both entertainment and real life.”

“Does that include profanity?” the same young Council member asked me.

I shrugged. “In my opinion, yes. Whether you want to use it is up to you, but I can tell you from experience that when you bump a toe it feels good to use the worst words you know.”

Chairman Isobel spoke up. “Since

this meeting is being transmitted to the world and the next topic we will be discussing is classified, I ask that the transmission be turned off for a short period.”

I expected her to show a passage from the forbidden book, and to confront me with the accusations that I'd smuggled out a copy without permission. Instead, she said, “I'm told we're off air now. Which gives us the opportunity to view a video that was sent to me in confidentiality. I would like to remind everyone that we are now looking at sensitive material that in no way can be shared or discussed outside this Council.”

Meeting in virtual reality felt a lot

like real life. Everyone looked like themselves, but there were features that were only possible here. Hanging in free air in front of every seat, a video popped up showing Pearl in her office. “May peace surround you all, dear Council members. Today, you’re making a decision that will affect generations to come. I’m sending you this message to be sure you understand the important role Jonah Cervici has played in the integration between the Northlands and Motherlands so far, but also the potential he has in playing an even bigger role in the future.

“We are in the middle of a historic victory for the Motherlands council. With our influence over the last twelve

years, the Northlands will soon have their first democratically elected leader. I can tell you that Jonah has been instrumental in that progress, but I'm afraid that your decision today could backfire and help the wrong candidate win. The outcome could be devastating to us all. What you're about to see is a recording from a meeting between my husband Khan Aurelius and his brother Magni Aurelius captured on a security camera only Khan and I have access to.

“I've tossed and turned all night feeling torn about what to do, but I've decided to share it with you for the sake of world peace. I trust that it will be for your eyes only.”

The picture changed and showed

Magni and Khan in Khan's office. I'd been in there several times but never noticed a camera. From the angle the video was recorded in, the camera would have to be hidden in the bookshelf by the wall.

“Stop pacing, Khan, you're making me fucking dizzy.”

Groans came from Khan, who had his hands in his dark hair. “Those imbecile women shouldn't be allowed to rule. To punish a man for being a man is just the kind of extreme sabotage they would do. All they want is a world of mindless clones who act the same way as them.”

Magni was sitting in a chair in front of Khan's desk and followed Khan with

his head. “It’s crazy what they’re doing to Jonah. I mean he’s a Momsie and a pain in the butt, but the man had balls to stand his ground and not apologize to the Nanny Club. For a second, Jonah actually gave me hope that not every man in the Motherlands has been broken by women.”

Khan stopped for a second. “He seems like an outlier. The rest are like domesticated, docile lions who have been fucking castrated and declawed at birth. It makes me furious that women can be so cruel. Aren’t they supposed to be caring and loving by nature? The Momsies are more like fucking tyrants suppressing anyone different from them.”

Magni scoffed loudly. “At least we

won't have to listen to Jonah preach about his damn love for democracy. Now he'll see that our way was always the best. Why the fuck did we let him talk us into having an election in the first place?"

Khan began pacing again and Magni continued, "If the Nanny Squad kick him out tomorrow, you have to cancel the election, Khan. Our men are going to be outraged if they see their one hope for equality in the world being crushed like that. That wave of fury is going to help one man only..."

Khan sneered the name, "Edward the Lowlife. I know, and it makes me sick. We can't let someone like him win. Yesterday he had another of his rallies

and do you know what he said?”

“No, I don’t listen to that hate-spewing ass. He gives me a headache. But my guess would be some strong rhetoric about breaking down the wall and taking back power and world domination.”

“Yes, and then some. If Edward wins, we’ll have another world war on our hands.”

Magni moved from the chair to sit on the edge of Khan’s desk. “He has a point, though. I’m tired of seeing men treated as second-class citizens. All ten million of us Nmen are.”

“I don’t want a fucking war!” Khan roared it out. “War is nothing but destruction and death.”

Magni got agitated too. “Are you just going to let the women run from their promise of equality on the Council? Remember when the wall crumbled during the earthquake and I wanted us to seize the moment and attack? You made me patrol our side of the border with my soldiers for weeks, like a good little puppet of the Motherlands. Do you have any idea how many of our own men we fought back when we could have let them cross the border? I told you the Council would screw us over with that deal you made, and now they’re proving me right. All their talk about integrity, ha! You should have never trusted them to keep their word in the first place. They don’t have honor like us.”

Khan came over and placed both his hands on Magni's shoulders, speaking in a firm voice. "Maybe not, but they have integrity. Or at least they pride themselves that they do."

"If that was the case, they would keep their fucking promise to us, wouldn't they?"

"There's still time. Pearl was a Council member and she's a good woman. We have to trust that there are still fair-minded and intelligent women like her on that Council who aren't fucking ignorant about the significance Jonah holds to the rest of the world."

Magni let out a long sigh. "You have too much trust in them. The only Council member I've ever respected was Jonah

and only because he's a man.”

The video ended and complete silence was heard. I was horrified that Pearl had chosen to share what was clearly meant as a private conversation between the brothers. If Khan and Magni knew about this... I shook my head with a deep sense of dread. What had the world come to, that good and honest people like Pearl would betray the man she loved?

Around me white noise rose from the Council members who were talking with unusually high-pitched voices. I was staring straight ahead, only picking up random bits and pieces.

“How can Pearl be with a man like Khan – did you hear his primitive

language?”

“Who is that man they talked about? Edward Lovelife, was it?”

“I’m warning you: men and war go together.”

“That Magni is terrifying. His voice is so deep and scary.”

Isobel made an announcement, “I think we all need a few minutes to process what we just heard. There will be a ten-minute break before we continue with our votes.”

I sat shell-shocked on my chair, my mind twirling with a million thoughts at the same time. Magni respected me. He had said the words himself and even though it shouldn’t matter what others thought of me, I felt a deep satisfaction

inside. From my first meeting with Magni, he had stood out as a traditional patriot, which explained why I'd come to think of him as the personification of the old Northlands. His traditional views combined with a deep distrust for the Motherlands had made him slow to warm up to me. Magni was rough around the edges and uncompromising by nature, but he was also loyal to the core, and protective of the ones he loved.

It's like getting approved by the biggest alpha of the pack.

The thought was ridiculous. I was a man, not a wolf. And yet the constant teasing comments from Nmen about us Motlander men being feminine and domesticated had always stung, as if I

knew there was a grain of truth in them. For four hundred years, we Motlander men had carried a guilt complex about what our ancestors did to almost destroy our planet.

Enough!

Hearing Magni say that he respected me empowered me to stand up. I couldn't sit down any longer when my spine suddenly felt stronger and straighter.

Enough!

The word kept repeating in my mind, and forcefully, I hammered my fist on the red button in front of me. A red light shone, symbolizing that I had asked to address the Council.

Like a collective beehive, the white

noise died down and everyone sat back in their seats with their focus on me.

I didn't look at any of them but kept my eyes on Isobel, the leader of our council.

"It looks like we're ready to resume this meeting, and I see that Jonah wishes to speak. Is this classified or can we open up the transmission again?"

"By all means, open it up."

"Good." She waited ten seconds before she continued, "We are now back to the public part of the hearing and Jonah Cervici has asked to speak. Go ahead, Jonah."

Holding my head high, I spoke from my heart. "One point six billion people live in the Motherlands. Over one

hundred million of them are men. Let me repeat that. One hundred million! And yet, I'm the only one ever given the chance to have a vote in the Council.

“I love women. I respect women, but on behalf of those one hundred million men, I have a message for you.

“Enough with the mental war on young boys and men to make them feel inferior. We are not – and never were – inferior!

“Enough with the guilt you place on us men because of what happened four hundred years ago. We are not our ancestors and it's time for you to acknowledge that.

“Enough with the arguments about whether or not men and women are

different. We are!

“Enough of we men having to fit into societal rules created by women to fit the needs of women.

“It’s time you listen to us men. It’s time you respect what we have to offer.

“Men and women were never supposed to suppress one another. We were created to complement each other. Did you know that there’s a great deal of mythology in our collective history concerning the union between man and woman? Wisdom passed down from the ancients of different cultures and eras spanning many millennia. It’s said that the idea of woman, deriving as it does from the word man, celebrates the notion we were once just one being. Neither

man alone nor woman alone. Rather, a unisexual creature of some kind, an entity with both masculine and feminine energies swirling about like dust storms in a prairie wind. In these beginnings, through whatever story you prefer, the end result was that we were separated. The masculine parts of this being divided from the feminine. Woman from Adam's rib was one example, not that she was derived from him or is subservient to him, the masculine. No. It's that they both came from Mother Nature as a oneness. We were once one being. The whole of our goal as men and women is to reunite this force, to meld the great masculine and feminine energies of our original existence into a

power greater than each is on its own.”

I squared my shoulders. “Athena Kelly, celebrated as one of our wisest priestesses, understood this and chose to marry an Nman. So did hundreds of thousands of other women including strong personalities we’ve all heard about, such as Christina, Kya, Willow, Salma Rose, my sister Emanuela, and even former Council member Pearl and our greatest genius Shelly Summers.

“Are you going to dismiss those women and many more as hopeless romantics or are you going to acknowledge that they have been right all along?”

“Our heroes should be people who stay positive and rise above fear. I’m

talking about the few who remain focused on what unites us rather than what divides us. People who are brave enough to open their heart even when there is a chance of rejection and disappointment. If you know someone like that, I hope you respect them, because *that* is true courage.” My hands began shaking a little. “Being loved by a beautiful romantic who sees the best in you is the greatest gift that can be bestowed on anyone. I had that happen to me, and I screwed up and lost it. Don’t make the same mistake!

“I would love to serve on this council and help shape the future of the Motherlands, but I don’t want you to cast your vote in fear.” I held up my hand. “If

you're thinking about letting me stay, you need to know that as soon as this meeting is over, I'm going to fly to the Northlands and fight for the woman I love. If that makes you think less of me, so be it. The beauty, depth, and richness of Mila Aurelius is worth it!"

CHAPTER 20

Suicide Mission

Mila

I gaped at the screen.

“Holy fuck, did Jonah just say that he’ll fight for you in the tournament?” Solo looked as baffled as I felt.

I was at Willow’s house and sitting with Solo’s and Willow’s cute toddler, Nora, on my lap.

“Has he lost his mind?” Leo exclaimed. He was standing next to Zasuash, who shouted down the hallway, “Willow, Darlene, come in here... you gotta hear this.”

My wristband began vibrating right away with incoming calls from my dad and Pearl.

“Did you know Jonah was in love with you?” Solo asked while Raven reached for Nora and nodded to my wristband, silently asking if I was going to answer.

“I... I...” My thought and words were stumbling on top of each other and nothing came out.

“She’s shocked,” Leo concluded.

“What is it?” Willow came into the living room followed by Darlene. “We were going through the baby stuff that Darlene wants to borrow.”

“Jonah just declared that he loves Mila,” Solo told them.

Willow frowned. “What’s new about that? The two have been inseparable ever since our wedding.”

“No, he loves her in a romantic way, and he’s coming to fight in her tournament.”

Willow, who was holding a white baby blanket in her arms, wrinkled her forehead. “You’re not going to let him, are you, Mila? It would be suicide for sure.”

Everyone was speaking around me and I was still trying to get my tongue to work when Raven spoke for me.

“Mila isn’t having a tournament.”

“Shut up, Raven, that’s not funny,”
Zasquash exclaimed.

“I’m serious. She’s not having a

tournament.”

“But what about all the fighters? Morris, Conlan, and some of our other colleagues are fighting for her.”

Crossing her arms, Raven stood up for me. “It’s not happening. Mila already told her parents.”

Solo looked to Zasuash. “But I heard Conlan talk about it, just yesterday.”

“Yes, and Jonah clearly thinks the tournament is still on. Jeez, those guys are going to kill him if he fights them. Has he ever fought anyone?”

“Not unless you count the times that I’ve challenged him to thumb wrestling.” Raven sounded amused. “Maybe his two victories gave him a scent for more

fighting, but it doesn't matter because there's not going to be a tournament."

"Raven is right, Jonah isn't fighting in my tournament because I'm not having one." I finally spoke the words.

"Tell me you're kidding." Zasuash's arms fell down. "I've been looking forward to that weekend since forever, and I had saved up money to gamble on Conlan."

"Can we keep it between us, please? My parents asked me to think it over and give them a final answer tomorrow night. I don't want you to spread the news until it's official."

Zasuash sat down with a deep sigh. "To think of all the hours I spent in the gym training with Conlan. I was going to

make so much money on him when he won.”

Darlene stroked his back. “It’s okay.”

Zasquash looked up at her. “I wanted to win that money for you and the baby.”

“I know, but money isn’t everything.” She gave him a loving smile.

We had all gotten distracted from the Council meeting, and I walked over to stand closer to the screen where two presenters were now speaking.

“It’s been a very bizarre Council meeting. First, we were told it would be public and then chairman Isobel, chose to cut parts of the meeting and make it classified. We were then allowed to hear

Jonah's passionate speech, which I have to say came as a surprise to many."

The other commentator agreed, "Yes, not only was his message very personal, but he was also presenting it with a different off-script style that has to have influenced the Council members."

"Well, we're about to find out since the Council members are getting ready to cast their votes on whether or not Jonah Cervici will be allowed to stay on the Council."

I bit my lip and watched as one after one, red and green lights showed as the Council members voted either for or against Jonah.

With the two brilliant speeches he'd

given it should have been all green in my opinion, but a summation on the bottom of the screen showed twenty-three negative, and only fifteen positive votes.

“They’d better get those yes votes going,” Solo commented behind me.

“Thirty-seven to twenty-nine.” I crossed my fingers and stared at the numbers as they trickled in.

“Why are people so slow?” Raven complained.

I wrung my hands with nervous energy. “Forty-two to thirty-eight. That’s only four points’ difference. Just give us ten more votes, please.”

Forty-six to forty-four. We’re catching up,” Leo mumbled low.

“Fifty to forty-nine.”

“Oh no!” Willow’s hands covered her face.

“There’s still two more votes, right?” I clung to the hope that there was still a chance.

“No!” Raven crossed her arms on top of her head. “There’s one hundred and one council members, but Jonah can’t vote because it’s about him. With ninety-nine votes cast, that leaves only Isobel left to vote and she rarely does.”

A loud scream of excitement sounded when the number changed to fifty-fifty.

Nora, who was now in Willow’s arms, clapped her little hands and made sounds of glee at our happy faces.

“Now they have to do a recount,

don't they?" I asked eagerly.

The camera showed Isobel, who spoke in a calm voice. "With a split council, we'll have another vote after the weekend. Meeting adjourned."

"Damn, I was sure they would let him stay." Solo was shaking his head. "Half of them want him out."

"But he's not out!" I squeezed my hands into fists and held them up to my face. "There's still a chance."

Raven gave me a hug. "Sounds like Jonah is coming here next."

My heart was pounding when I pulled back from her embrace and looked into her eyes. "I should go home then."

She stroked my hair and winked at

me. “You probably have to calm down your father. I bet he shit a sheep when he learned that Jonah is the reason you don’t want a tournament.”

I gasped. “You’re right. He may not let him in. I have to get home, now.”

Leo was quick to offer his help. “Raven and I will take you home.”

“Yes, please, if you don’t mind.”

We said our goodbyes and twenty minutes later I was facing my father, who was with Khan, Pearl, and my mother in the dining room.

“There you are. Why didn’t you answer when we called you?”

“I was with friends and a bit distracted.”

My dad got up from his chair. “You

saw Jonah's speech?"

"Yes."

Khan had frown lines on his face. "Care to explain what he meant when he talked about receiving a gift of love from you?"

"Did you sleep with him?" My dad's tone was hard.

"That's none of your business."

"Mila, your tournament is a big deal and the contestants will expect that you're..."

I cut off Khan, "I'm not having a tournament. I already told my parents."

"Oh, thank Mother Nature. Good for you, dear." Pearl's comment made Khan, Magni, and Laura scowl at her, but that didn't seem to bother Pearl in the least.

“I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.”

“Waiting for what?” my mom asked.

“For Mila to stick up for herself. You should be proud of your daughter, she’s grown into a strong and beautiful woman.”

Khan grunted a few words I couldn’t hear.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you. I know a lot of work went into the tournament, but why can’t we have it without a bride? It would still be a large event with drinking, entertainment, and the fighting and betting that the men care about so much.”

“A bridal tournament without a bride?” Magni sounded like the idea

was idiotic. “How would that work, when the whole idea is to prove themselves worthy of a wife.”

“Dad, things are different now than they were when you and Mom got married. Today men have the chance to meet a woman through the Couples Matching Program. Don’t you think most would fight for the million dollars alone?” I spoke fast. “And how about if we came up with some new initiatives like inviting Motlanders from the Matching Program to come and be part of it? Maybe there could be tents where men could show off other skills than just fighting.”

My dad jerked his head back. “Like what?”

“There could be cooking and baking contests, or stand-up comedy. Don’t get me wrong. I love you and I admire your strength, but for me and most of the Motlander women, other things are more important in a man.”

Magni narrowed his eyes. “I doubt the Motlanders would find our crude humor funny.”

“You never know. All I’m saying is that times are changing and this is an opportunity for us to improve some old traditions. This tournament could be the biggest matchmaking event the Northlands have ever seen.”

Khan leaned back in his chair and stretched his feet out. “Actually, it’s not a bad idea. We could make it an annual

celebration and have a whole week of fun and games.”

“Yes!” I was so relieved that Khan was warming up to the idea that my hand flew out and pointed at him. “Exactly.”

“The tournament is in three weeks. How do you propose we get all that done in so little time?” My dad shook his head. “Everything is changing. I don’t like it!”

“Change is inevitable and it doesn’t have to be a bad thing. You’ll still have your fighting and Khan will get to perform weddings. We’ll make it even better than it was in the old days.”

My mom came over and brushed my hair back over my shoulder. “Are you sure you want to back out of the

tournament? Having a large strong warrior as your husband is not a bad thing.”

“Mom, I’ve made up my mind.”

“Because of Jonah?”

I sighed, but didn’t answer her because my dad was snorting out loud.

“We’ll have to give him credit for offering to fight for her,” my mom told Magni.

“As if he stood a chance.” Magni rolled his eyes. “Stupid kid. What was he thinking?”

“I don’t know.” My lips tugged upward and butterflies made my stomach tingle. “But it’s kind of flattering that he declared his love for me like that.”

Khan and Magni exchanged a glance

and then Khan cleared his throat. “He overestimates his skills as a fighter, but your father and I are impressed with his willingness to risk his life for you.”

My smile grew. “That was surprising to me too.”

Playing with a lock of my hair, my mom mused, “It shows a level of respect for our culture that we appreciate.”

“Do you know when Jonah is coming? It sounded like he’s coming straight here.”

“Yes, he texted that he’ll be here around eleven and that he’s bringing his sister.”

Khan nodded. “Yes, Hunter and Emanuela are moving up here. It will be good to welcome them with a cold

beer.”

“No, he’s bringing Anne. The swimsuit model.”

That made both Khan and Magni sit up straight and frown.

“What’s wrong?” Pearl asked. “Why do you look like that?”

Magni crossed his arms and nodded to Khan. “You tell her.”

Khan moved in his seat. “It’s nothing. Just make sure she and Jonah don’t go to the sleeping quarters of the guards.”

“Why would they go near there? I’ve never been.”

Magni groaned. “Good... It’s better if you don’t go. None of you.”

Leaning over the table, Laura pinned

Magni with her eyes. “I’m gonna march right over unless you tell us what it is you’re not saying.”

Magni scratched his neck. “I inspected the place yesterday and they’ve added a lot of pictures on the walls since I’ve been away.”

My forehead rose up. “Of Anne?”

“Yes, and others.”

“I’m surprised you let them keep them.” My dad had always been a strict authoritarian with his men.

“Solo had allowed it. Khan and I discussed it and we decided not to overrule him.”

“So, you think it’s fine for the soldiers to objectify women like that?” Pearl gave Khan a sharp look, but Laura

defended the men.

“Isn’t she a model? I would think they’re honoring her work by having her pictures up. I can’t imagine models minding. That would be like an actor recording a movie and then getting upset about people watching it and praising their talents.”

Pearl rubbed the bridge of her nose and then she held up both palms. “I’m going to pick my battles, and as long as the soldiers can behave professionally around her, it’s not up to me to judge.”

“Honey, let me know when Jonah and his sister are arriving at the border and I’ll make sure they are picked up.”

I walked over and gave my dad a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you. And

please don't be hard on Jonah. He's going through enough as it is with the Council."

Magni raised an eyebrow. "I've always been hard on him. It's like a tradition."

"I know, Dad, but not all traditions are good ones."

My dad crossed his arms. "It goes both ways, you know. The last time he was here he mocked me and told me he was the strongest man in the world."

Khan laughed. "Jonah said that? Then he truly is delusional."

"He meant mentally strong," I clarified.

With a scoff, Magni continued his rant, "And then he accused me of hiding

in my room feeling sorry for myself. As if I'm some kind of wimp.”

Pearl spoke in a sympathetic tone. “Grief takes time and you said it yourself, you don't like change.”

Magni looked offended. “What's that supposed to mean? You make it sound like I'm inflexible.”

The rest of us exchanged glances and then we laughed.

“What's so funny? I'm fucking adaptable.”

Khan was still laughing. “Sure you are.”

Magni pointed to Laura. “Babe, tell them how well I coped with you changing from meek to strong-minded. And what about Pearl turning up here

and coming between me and Khan? I've adapted, haven't I?"

My mom pushed up from her chair and walked over to him. "Yes, you have. It always takes you a while, but eventually you make it work."

He pulled her into his arms and shot Khan and Pearl a told-you-so look.

Khan held up two palms signaling that he surrendered. "Maybe in time you can adapt a little faster and skip the shouting and throwing things around part?"

My dimples came out as I smiled at my dad. "I second what Khan said, but I've got to go now."

"Tell Jonah I want to see him in my office as soon as he arrives," my dad

called out behind me.

“It will be late. You can talk to him tomorrow.”

“Why isn’t she listening to me anymore?” he complained to the others, but there was no need for me to stop and answer him when Pearl did it perfectly for me.

“Because Mila is finally her own woman now.”

CHAPTER 21

Forever

Jonah

“Stop tapping your foot on the floor. It won’t make the drone fly any faster,” Anne complained.

Sitting strapped in for hours was a nightmare when my body was pumped with nervous energy.

I hadn’t called Mila because I was terrified that she’d tell me not to come. All I had done was write her a text informing her when we’d be at the border.

She had given me a short answer

confirming that she'd arrange for a pick-up. Why were there no hearts, kisses, or puppies in the text? Mila always used to include a bunch of those things. I kept looking down at my wristband hoping for the words, "I can't wait to see you," but they didn't come.

When we finally arrived at the Northlands, I recognized the two guards who stood waiting for us. They had been at the obstacle course back when Mason had challenged me to a race. It was a little past eleven at night and projectors from the border were lighting up the path to where they were parked.

They elbowed each other with excitement when Anne and I came close.

"May peace surround you," I said

and smiled at them.

They stared from me to Anne and then at each other like summer had come early.

“We’ve met before, do you remember?”

They both nodded.

“Were your names Kal-Rai and Neptune?”

“Kal-El,” one of them corrected me.

“Sorry. Anyway, this is my sister, Anne.”

Anne looked beautiful as she walked up to the two young men with a big smile on her face and reached for the hands of Kal-El.

He jerked his hands away.

“My apologies. Jonah warned me

you might not want to touch me, but I was just so excited to meet Nmen that I forgot.”

“I don’t mind touching you.” Neptune had a charming grin on his face when he offered his hands to her. “As long as you’re okay with it.”

Anne lit up in a smile. “May peace surround you and your shy friend.”

“I’m not shy,” Kal-El defended himself. “We’re just not allowed to touch women.” He gave a minor scowl to Neptune.

“Oh, but it’s completely fine with me.” Anne batted her eyelashes and when Kal-El picked up her luggage, she rewarded him with a thankful smile.

“I don’t mind touching you either,”

he assured her. “I just don’t want to get in trouble for it.”

“Do you want me to take your luggage?” Neptune asked me, but I waved a hand, gesturing that I had it.

All the way from the border to the Gray Manor, Anne and the guards talked. Neptune entertained her with stories about life as a guard and made her laugh several times.

“Do you mind if I touch your beard?” she asked Kal-El, whose beard went to his collarbone. “It’s just that I’ve never seen a beard that long.”

With pride he leaned forward and let her feel it.

“How long did it take you to grow it that long?”

“Four years.”

“I can grow mine long too, I just prefer it shorter.” Neptune was clearly jealous over the attention his colleague was getting.

With a twinkle in her eye, Anne shifted her attention to Neptune and like it was the most natural thing in the world she leaned forward and cupped his face. “Your beard is perfect the way it is.”

His eyes blinked like he had no idea how he’d just got so lucky as to be touched by an angel.

“Thank... thank you.”

When we landed at the Gray Manor, it was close to eleven thirty at night. Normally, Mila always came running out the door to greet me, but this time the

door was closed.

My heart sank and fear grew that I was too late.

“Ooh, it’s cold up here.” Anne shivered a bit while Neptune and Kal-El were bumping shoulders to get to Anne’s luggage first.

Walking up the steps, I was relieved when the door swung open and Pearl’s friendly face showed. “Come in, come in.”

“Thank you.” I hugged her tight before introducing my sister. “This is Anne, whom I’ve told you about.”

“Yes.” Pearl gave Anne a polite smile. “What a surprise that you decided to visit us.”

Anne looked as star-struck as I’d

been the first time that I met Pearl. “It’s such an honor. I’ve learned about you in school and Jonah has told me so much good about you.”

“I’m sure he’s exaggerating.” Pearl leaned to the side and gave instructions to the guards. “Will you take their luggage to the guest suites... ehh.” She wrinkled her forehead. “Oh, dear, I forgot what suites Mila picked out for you.”

Just then, Mila came running down the staircase looking like something from my personal fairytale. Her long blond hair was loose and she was wearing a sweater in a warm purple color that complimented her large blue eyes. Without words, Mila ran straight into my

arms and linked her arms around my waist.

My whole body relaxed as I wrapped my arms around her and took in the delicious scent of Mila.

Neither of us wanted to let go, and it made Pearl and Anne laugh.

“I guess they’ve missed each other.”

“Oh, you should have seen Jonah all the way up here. He looked tortured having to sit still.” Anne placed a hand on my shoulder. “It’s good to see you this happy, brother.”

I still didn’t let go of Mila but turned my head and smiled at Anne and Pearl.

“Mila, if you’re capable of loosening your grip on Jonah, maybe you could show our guests to their rooms.

It's late and we have much to discuss tomorrow."

"Did you see the vote?" I asked Pearl.

"The whole world saw the vote, Jonah. I've already called my mom to thank her for evening out the votes. Tomorrow, we'll discuss how to flip the votes in your favor for Monday."

"You think we can?"

Pearl arched an eyebrow. "We have to!" She left us with a soft "Good night. I'll see you all tomorrow."

Mila eased back and looked up at me. "I'm so glad you came."

My smile beamed back at her. "So am I."

"Hi, Mila, my name is Anne."

Mila became flustered. "I'm so sorry, you must think me rude for forgetting my manners like this." Shaking her head, she took both of Anne's hands. "Welcome. We are delighted to have you here in the Northlands and we hope you'll find peace surrounding you."

"Thank you. May peace surround you too. I'm excited to be here. It's so exotic."

Turning to Neptune and Kal-El, Mila grinned. "Did you hear that?"

They laughed. "Doesn't feel exotic to us."

"Neptune and Kal-El, will you follow us with the luggage?"

"Oh, no, you don't have to do that. I'm happy to carry my own bag. It's not

heavy.” I reached for my blue bag and Kal-El handed it over.

“I can take my bag too,” Anne offered Neptune but the blond guard pulled it back. “Please, it would be my honor.”

Mila and I walked up the stairs shoulder to shoulder, followed by Anne and Neptune. We didn’t talk much but just kept smiling at each other.

“Anne, this is the room I picked out for you. It has a view of the garden and is the largest of the guest suites on this floor.” Opening the door, Mila stepped aside and let Anne look into one of the roomy guestrooms that I’d stayed in before.

“That’s very kind of you. Thank

you.”

“My room is seven doors down.” Mila pointed to the left. “You’ll see a big happy dog face on the door that says ‘This room is filled with kisses, wagging tails, wet noses, and love.’ Please just knock if you need anything.”

Neptune went inside the room to place Anne’s bag on the bed.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine, but thank you, Mila. Good night, you two.”

When Neptune came back out from the room, he gave Anne another charming smile. “I hope you’ll have a nice stay here. If there’s anything I can help with let me know, please.”

“You’re so sweet, Neptune.” Anne lifted up on her toes and hugged him. I

stood behind her and saw the surprise on Neptune's face and how his ears grew red.

Clearing her throat, Mila spoke in a soft voice, "Anne, a small piece of advice. Don't hug the guards in front of my dad or uncle."

"Oh, I'm sorry, but Neptune said he doesn't mind touching me and I'm a natural hugger."

"Yeah, me too. But the soldiers are working and my dad says it's a distraction."

I swallowed a grin because the stunned look on Neptune's face confirmed that he was heavily distracted.

"I'm sorry, Neptune, I won't do it

again.” Anne left us in the hallway and closed the door to her room.

“None of the others are going to believe that she hugged me.” His hands were trembling and he looked more like a teenage boy than a grown soldier.

“It doesn’t matter what they believe. It happened.” Mila gave a light chuckle. “Thank you for picking up my friends. I was going to wish you pleasant dreams tonight, but I don’t think that will be necessary.”

They smiled at each other and then he jogged down the corridor away from us.

“Do you know the name of every guard in the castle?”

“It’s not a castle, and yes, I know

them all by name.”

Mila began walking and nodded her head for me to follow.

Holding my breath and crossing the fingers on my right hand, I gave her a sideways glance. “Please tell me, I’m staying in your room tonight.”

“Officially, you’re staying here.” She pointed to the door next to Anne’s.

“And unofficially?”

“You’re staying with me.”

My fist went up in the air as I exclaimed a big “YES!”

That made Mila laugh. “I can’t wait to hear more about your plans to fight for me.”

“I was afraid I was going to have to beg for you to let me back into your

life.”

“Why? I never wanted you out of it to begin with.” Opening the door to her room, Mila let go of my hand and gave ear rubs to the dogs who’d run up to her.

“You have another one?”

“She’s a rescue. One of the guards found her starving so I had to take her in. I already found a family for her so she’s only staying one more night.”

A skinny dog with an underbite and fearful eyes kept its distance when I tried to pet it.

“It’s okay, she’ll warm up to you.” Mila walked over to her bed and sat down. “I’ve missed you, Jonah.”

I sat down my bag and joined her on the bed. “Not as much as I’ve missed

you. I've been such a fool, Mila. I should have told you how madly in love with you I am. This whole thing with Anne and the council. It distracted me and I screwed up."

She waited for me to elaborate.

"Last night I was with Hunter and he spoke about your tournament. It made me physically ill to think about you marrying someone else." I took her hands and looked deep into her eyes. "Mila, what we have together is special."

"I know."

"There's no one like you and last night it became painfully clear that I'd rather lose my seat on the Council than lose you."

She tilted her head. "You mean

that?”

“Yes. That’s why I had to come up here and convince you not to go through with the tournament.”

Her eyes widened. “But I thought... wait, but you said that you were going to fight for me.”

The moment she said it I understood how my words could be misinterpreted. My eyes shut tight together and I cursed on the inside. “I didn’t mean that I’d physically fight for you in the tournament. I wouldn’t be much use to you dead. I meant that I was going to plead and beg for you to give me another chance.”

Mila’s face softened. “Ahh, that makes more sense, because we all

thought you had lost your mind,”

“They all think I’m planning to fight in the tournament?”

“Yes. My dad and Khan were very impressed.”

I fell back on the bed with my hands to my head. “Oh geez, I must look like an idiot to them.”

“They did call you delusional, but if I were you, I wouldn’t correct their misconception. The fact that you were willing to fight for me means a lot to them.”

“I can’t lie, Mila.”

Mila leaned back and propped herself up on her elbow facing me. “Letting them assume something isn’t the same as lying.”

“It’s not honest either.”

“You said you were willing to fight for me. Did you think you wouldn’t have to make any sacrifices?”

I linked my little finger with hers. “You wouldn’t think less of me if I let them believe a lie?”

“Nope. I’m not some innocent Motlander. I was raised among wolves, remember?”

I looked around her beautiful room with crown moldings and rich colors on the walls. “Yeah, it’s a rough environment.”

“I know, right?” She laughed. “Wolves everywhere.” Lifting her head, she nodded to the floor where the four dogs lay stretched out. “But at least

they're cute and friendly.”

“And does your pack have room for another member?”

Her smile drew me in with the urge to kiss her.

With a hand to my chest, she stopped me. “Are we sure that we want the same thing?”

“I want you.”

“You said that the last time, but you weren't ready to go all the way.”

My eyebrows rose up. “I was ready! We talked about it. I wanted to make love to you.”

“That's not what I meant. I said I wanted everything, as in marriage and family, remember? You were the one who didn't see the need. You wanted to

keep our love secret.”

Letting my fingers caress her face, I spoke with sincerity. “The secret is out, Mila! After my speech today, the whole world knows that I love you.”

Her adorable apple cheeks brought out her dimples as she smiled. “I love you too.”

“Does that mean you’ll cancel the tournament?”

“No.”

“No?” I blinked my eyes in confusion. “But I want to marry you.” I pulled back. “You’re not actually making me fight in the tournament for you, are you?”

“Would you?”

“Mila... I... I... hate violence. I’m

not a fighter.”

“Is that a no?”

“Yes, that’s a no. If you want me to fight, then I’m not the right man for you. I’m a pacifist and I thought you were too.”

Mila chuckled. “You should have seen your face. For a second there, you thought you didn’t know me at all, didn’t you? Of course I don’t want you to fight.”

“So, you are going to cancel the tournament?”

“No, but I’m not going to marry the winner either. There will still be fighting, gambling, drinking, and fun. The winner will get money, but no bride unless one of the Motlander women from

the Matching Program picks him. I've suggested that we invite as many of them as possible and make it a big matchmaking event. That way Khan can still perform weddings at the end."

"Sounds like you have it all figured out."

"Not quite, but I discussed it with my parents, and Pearl and Khan a few hours ago."

"Huh. And here I was preparing to have a couple of black eyes after telling Magni that I plan to marry his daughter."

Mila reached out for me. "That might still happen."

"You're worth it."

She gave a soft laugh that got muffled when I kissed her.

Physical contact between us had always been as easy as breathing. I rained kisses down on her while we helped each other undress and get under the covers. The feeling of her naked body against mine was arousing and licking the valley between her breasts felt satisfying in itself.

"Are we really doing it this time?"

She whispered her short answer into my ear. "Yes."

The thought that we were about to take our relationship to the closest physical level a man and woman could reach together was exhilarating.

Everything happened organically, from kissing to rubbing against each other. We were rocking slowly, neither

of us forcing or pacing anything. It felt like no time had passed since the last time we had ground against each other.

At first, I was focused on our kissing but then Mila wriggled into position, making the tip of my cock slide up between her folds. When I pressed at her entrance, I kept looking into the beautiful eyes of my best friend in the whole world, worried that she might not like it, but Mila kept smiling at me.

With every rocking movement I penetrated her a little more.

“It feels good, Jonah.”

I couldn't answer her. My throat was only able to produce inarticulate sounds as I pushed deeper, hoping I wouldn't hurt her.

“Yes.” Leaning her head back, Mila arched a little and in doing so she pushed her amazing breasts upward toward me like a delicious serving of herself. My head lowered and my tongue slid across her skin and then an instinctual need made me suckle her hard nipples.

“Mmm.” Another sweet moan from Mila gave me confidence that she enjoyed this too.

The warmth that radiated from her made me want to go as deep as I could possibly go into this gorgeous woman who was by some great miracle giving herself to me. Her eyes became hooded and her breathing shallow as sweet little moans came from her.

Making a sound of deep appreciation, I whispered, “You’re perfect.”

Being inside a woman was a new experience to me, but as Mila wrapped her arms around me and pulled me up for more kissing, I knew this was my new favorite thing in the world.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“Not as much as I love you,” I pushed a little harder inside her.

“I want you so much.” Mila raised her legs and locked her feet around my waist. With her arms already wrapped around my neck, and us connected at our cores, she whispered while looking deep into my eyes. “Now we’re as close as we can ever get.”

I stopped rocking my hips and just took a second to enjoy the way our hearts were beating against each other and the oneness I felt with her. “This is magical. Like coming home.”

“Welcome home, then...” Her laugh was sweet and melodic, and then she moved to show me that she wanted more of our lovemaking.

In my mind I thought about *Forbidden Letters from the North* and the many positions they had discussed in that book. In the past I'd had always imagined sex to be a somewhat mechanical activity that required variation and creativity, but nothing could make me change my position from being between Mila's legs. Being face to

face with her and feeling her gorgeous naked body wrapped around mine was satisfying on such a deep level that I didn't want it to ever stop. "I want this to last forever."

"Me too."

Every erogenous zone was activated, and her cute panting and moaning in my ear combined with the sweet friction between us brought out a new side of me. I didn't want to hurt her, but my hips pushed in and out of her faster and harder.

"Fuck yes." My politeness was gone and left me reduced to a man with a raw and primal desire for his woman. "Is this passionate enough for you?"

"Yes. So good..." Mila was panting

like me and as I pulled back to look into her eyes, I saw only intense lust for me.

She is the sexiest woman in the world. The words in my head made it impossible for me to hold back anymore. “I’m coming,” I warned and pushed at her legs to break free from her hold.

Mila lifted her head to see when I spurted semen on her belly and pelvis area. “Wow.”

We were both breathing heavily and stared at the clear fluid on her stomach.

“I’m sorry,” I said and lay down beside her. “I couldn’t hold it back.”

“Don’t be sorry. It was amazing.”

“But you didn’t come.”

“Are we done?” Her eyes blinked at me and it made me laugh.

“No, we’re not done. I just had this vision in my head of us coming together at the same time. You know, like they do in the books.”

Mila reached for some tissues on her nightstand and began drying her stomach off. “I’m not sure those books are always realistic. What about the part where they give each other oral at the same time? It sounds fictional to me. I mean they would have to be acrobats, wouldn’t they?”

“No. It’s possible. They’re referring to a book called *Kama Sutra* and it’s a real thing. I looked it up and there were movies made with people demonstrating one hundred and one sexual positions. We can watch it if you want to.”

She chuckled. “How about you watch it and then you teach me?”

I smiled at the prospect of having sex with Mila one hundred and one times. “I may not know that many positions, yet, but I do know five or ten. Would you like to try a few of them tonight?”

Mila nodded.

“You trust me, right?”

“Yes.”

Her face grew a little red, but she didn't protest when I spread her legs again and moved in a better position to pleasure her with oral sex.

“Mmmm, this is much better than I imagined.” Mila's hands weaved into my short hair.

I'd never given oral sex before, but I was curious and enjoyed the taste of her. I knew enough about the female anatomy to know about the clitoris and let my tongue circle around it. Mila drew in a breath and arched on the bed a little. It only empowered me to keep licking her with long slow movements of my tongue.

“Mmmm,” she moaned and when I inserted my index finger inside her, she spread her legs further. “Yees.”

My tongue and fingers tirelessly experimented with ways to bring her pleasure. My reward came when her breathing grew faster and faster and her hands grabbed the bedsheet and squeezed her hands around the fabric. With Mila arching on the bed and giving

small screams of pleasure, her dogs reacted and came to see what was going on. I tried pushing Happy away when he jumped on the bed and began licking Mila's face like he was worried she was sad. When Holger and Loki followed, we ended up giving up and laughing at the situation.

We stayed up all night, crossing into a magical wonderland, too busy exploring this new world of sex to sleep. When Mila finally gave in after four times of making love, I was exhausted too.

With a large yawn, I pulled her against my body. "I feel like when you go to a large buffet and you get full before you've tasted all the things you

wanted.”

“Me too, but we don’t need to stuff ourselves. We’ll spend the rest of our lives together. We have time to take it easy.”

I chuckled against her blond hair. “I don’t plan on taking it easy with you. I’m too in love to be mellow.”

“Who said anything about being mellow? I like that you’re passionate.”

My eyes were heavy and my breathing already slow and deep. “Goodnight, Miss Sunshine,” I muttered low.

“Goodnight, my love.”

CHAPTER 22

Legendary

Mila

I woke up at the sound of my door opening and Freya calling out to me. “Mila, get up, we need your help.”

With my hair pointing in all directions, I sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes.

“Freya, what’s wrong? What time is it?”

“It’s ten o’clock and breakfast is long over. Everyone wants to talk to you two.” She nodded to Jonah, who lay comatose on his stomach. “How can he

sleep so heavily?”

“He was... ehh... very tired.”

Squatting down, Freya snuggled with the dogs, who wanted her attention. “I don’t think your dad likes that you two had a sleep-over.”

“I’m an adult, Freya. I don’t need to ask my dad’s permission.”

Freya came closer and lowered her voice. “Is it true that you’re not having a tournament?”

“Yes.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How did you get out of it?”

I reached for her hand and squeezed it. “I said the magic word.”

Freya leaned closer. “There’s a magic word?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

I looked deep into her green eyes, hoping that this beautiful girl with her brilliant mind and promising future in front of her would remember it forever.

“The magic word is no.”

“No?”

“Yes, just no.”

She pulled back. “I thought you were going to teach me a real magic word.”

“Sometimes, the smallest things hold the biggest power. There will come a time when saying no will be the hardest thing you’ve ever had to do. I need you to promise me that you’ll still find the courage within yourself to say no, if yes doesn’t feel right.”

“I know how to say no.” Freya twisted her mouth. “I’ve known since I was two. I swear, sometimes you grown-ups are weird.”

“Yes, we are, and one day you’ll be weird too.”

She shrugged. “My parents told me to wake you up, so you’d better come downstairs.” Giving the dogs a last rub behind their ears, Freya moved to the door before turning to me, “I forgot to tell you that Christina came early and began working her way through the basement. I’m going down to help her.”

“All right. I’ll come and help in a little while.”

I gave my young cousin an air kiss before she closed the door and then I

poked at Jonah. “Time to wake up, handsome.”

He made a sound of protest but I rolled on top of his back and kissed his neck. “Wakey, wakey...”

Jonah gave a long yawn. “Can we stay in bed all day?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“I feel dead. How long did we sleep?”

I moved off his back, so Jonah could turn around. He opened his arms and I snuggled up against him.

“It can’t have been more than a few hours.”

“That’s because sex with you is my new favorite thing in the whole world.”

“Ditto.”

Jonah grinned and tickled me. “I never thought anyone or anything would rank higher on your list than your dogs.”

Squirming to get away from his tickling, I grinned. “I know, I’m surprised too.”

We showered and dressed before walking downstairs to get some breakfast. Since the buffet in the dining room had been cleared away, I took Jonah’s hand and led the way to the kitchen, where my friends Sheriff and Jimmy were working on lunch and dinner.

“There you are. We were getting worried that you might be sick,” Sheriff said in his hoarse voice that always made his laughter sound so funny.

“Nope, Jonah and I were catching up all night. We’re hungry.”

Both men had been hired by Grandma Erika more than twenty years ago and were now in their sixties.

Sheriff had his hands down on a ball of dough but stopped kneading it. “Now, Master Jonah, I don’t want you to think we aren’t as technologically advanced up here as in the Motherlands. We have kitchen-bots; I just think bread tastes better when I put my love into it.”

“Aha!” I grinned and teased, “I knew there had to be a secret ingredient, I just never knew it was your sweat and love. Do you mind if I grab something for Jonah and me in the fridge?”

“Help yourself, Mila.” Sheriff

turned to Jonah and threw a nod to his colleague. “Me and Jimmy saw your speech. I can’t tell you how lucky we felt to be Northlanders. The way those women ruin your life and deny you basic freedom, like the joy of drinking beer is crazy. They should be fucking ashamed of themselves.”

Jimmy, a lanky man with a big heart, was quick to agree. “That’s right.”

“Why are you standing by the oven like that?” I asked him.

“Ah, this old thing has been giving us trouble. I don’t want the cookies to burn so I’m keeping an eye on them.” He pointed to Jonah. “You know what you should do if they fire you? You should stay up here and be free like us.”

Jonah gave a slight nod. “Thank you for your kind sympathy. I appreciate the support.”

“No, for real...” Sheriff frowned. “People are furious about what happened to you. There are several protests taking place right now.”

“Really?” Jonah shifted his balance.

“Yes, our local bar sent out a call for people to come and show their disagreement. It’s not right how the Council has been treating you. Jimmy and I are going tonight after dinner, right, Jimmy?”

Jimmy, who was busy taking the cookies out of the oven, gave a loud “Fuck yeah.”

Handing Jonah a glass of celery

juice from the fridge, I gave Sheriff a sideways glance. “You sure your local bar isn’t just trying to capitalize on the general disappointment about the situation? It’s not really a protest if you all just sit around and complain about it over large beers, is it?”

Sheriff pummeled a bit extra upon the dough. “It’s not like we can fucking march to the Motherlands and give them our opinion face to face.”

“Don’t worry about it. The fact that you care means a lot to me.” Jonah took a sip of the juice and yawned just as the door swung open behind us.

“Why aren’t you answering when I call you?”

I turned. “Dad.”

“It’s almost noon and we have work to do.”

Jonah sat down the juice and took a step toward my dad. “Hey, Magni, it’s good to see you. Geez, I’d forgotten how tall you are when you’re out of bed.”

My dad didn’t smile back. “I want to see you in my office, now!”

“But we haven’t had breakfast yet,” I protested.

My dad had already turned and was leaving. “I said now!”

Jonah gave me an oh-shit look but followed.

When the door closed, I swallowed and looked to Sheriff and Jimmy. “He’s gonna be fine.”

They both averted their gazes and

focused on their work. “My dad would never hurt Jonah.” I was trying to calm myself, but their silence made my hands tremble. “Do you think he would harm Jonah?”

Sheriff’s shoulders lifted and fell as he let out a long sigh. “Magni is unpredictable. It’s impossible to say.”

Jimmy tried with a more optimistic approach. “Maybe he just wants to warn him against fighting in your tournament. I mean, people have been laughing about it on the News since he said it last night.”

I looked up to the screen in the kitchen. “People are laughing at Jonah?”

“Well, you know, more like shaking their heads that he would think he would

stand a chance in the tournament. Everybody is talking about how the competition is crazy this year. At least three men from the Doom Squad and several Huntsmen have signed up. Even skilled fighters won't stand a chance against them. They're giants."

Sheriff flexed his biceps. "In my day I could have given them a good run for their money, that's for sure."

"Ha!" Jimmy shook his head. "You're dreaming. Those warriors were trained by Magni. They aren't regular men."

My eyes fell on the screen again, where a large crowd was being filmed from a drone above. "What's going on there?"

“Didn’t I tell you people are protesting?” Jimmy gave an order for the interactive wall to turn up the sound.

“You made it sound like it was a handful of guys down at your local pub. That right there is a massive protest.”

Both Jimmy and Sheriff stopped working and turned to the screen with me to listen.

“All morning we’ve been seeing pop-up protests around the Northlands, but here on North News, we’ve kept an eye on the media in the Motherlands to see how the people are reacting to their Council’s vote last night. What we’re showing you right now is actual footage from Old York in the Motherlands, where Jonah resides. What began as a

small group of protesters is currently growing exponentially by the hour. Here is an interview with the organizer from about an hour ago.”

The camera changed to a female reporter interviewing a vain-looking man.

“I’m here with Hans, a mediator who says he couldn’t stay home but had to come out and show his disappointment over what is happening to Jonah Cervici.” The reporter swung to the man, who was wearing heavy make-up and had his blond hair in a braided bun. “Can you tell us what you’re protesting about?”

“I’m protesting the fact that men are being held back and stifled in this

country. We want equal opportunities and we're with Jonah when he says that enough is enough."

"Do you feel Jonah is being treated unfairly on the Council?"

"I know he is. We all feel it in our daily lives. It's impossible to get ahead as a man without being called opportunistic and deceitful. We grow up hearing about legendary women and as boys we're made to feel that greatness is a female trait. That needs to stop. Being legendary isn't gender specific."

"Are you surprised that so many are joining your protest and that so many are women?"

Hans looked behind him where people were walking with banners

saying:

Enough!

Hands off Jonah

Nannies not needed

Less Control – More Freedom

Let's get drunk and dance together

Hans looked back at the reporter.

“Yes, I’m a little surprised but mostly excited and relieved. This feels like the beginning to a more balanced society. Jonah has given a voice to what all of us men have been thinking for years.”

“Can you understand how many Motlanders feel shocked and scared from waking up to see thousands of protesters in all major cities? We really haven’t seen anything like this for decades.”

Hans nodded. "I can see why some would feel that way. I'm just hoping that the Council members take note that the people want Jonah to represent them on the Council."

The reporter nodded. "It will be hard for them not to. Thank you."

"See, I told you." Sheriff snatched three cookies and handed them to me. "Give these to Jonah from us. He'll need something after your dad is done with him."

"If he has a black eye, we have ice too," Jimmy added.

With a grateful smile, I took the cookies and headed straight to my father's office. Placing my ear against the door, I listened. I could hear talking

but not the exact words.

At least there's no shouting.

“Are you waiting for Jonah too?”

Anne came walking toward me and immediate guilt filled me. Taking her hand, I led her away from the door before I answered. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’ve been an awful hostess. Have you been waiting for us all morning?”

Anne smiled. “It’s fine. Your mom was kind enough to give me a tour of the Manor and I had breakfast with your cousin, who surprised me.”

“You mean Freya?”

“Yes. She is so young but when she speaks, she makes me feel like I’m the child and she’s the adult.”

“I know, it can be a little freaky.”

“She was telling me about her plans to raise money for the poor, and had some great questions.”

“About what?”

“About how we care for our elders in the Motherlands.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“I know, and unexpected.” Anne looked to the door. “Is Jonah in there?”

“Yes, he’s with my dad.”

“Oh, then I hope he tells him about the hugging booth?”

“What hugging booth?”

“Jonah didn’t tell you?” Anne lit up in a bright smile showing her perfect teeth. “It’s to help Khan get elected. Hunter and Emanuela are helping out too. You should come.”

A sound from inside my dad's office made us look at the door.

“I'm curious to know what they're saying?”

“Me too,” I said. “I really wish I knew what is going on.”

CHAPTER 23

Tribal Nature

Jonah

As I followed Magni into his office, he pointed to a chair. “Sit!”

I took a stance behind the chair and waited, just to show that I wasn't someone he could boss around.

“Tell me, what is going on with you and my daughter?”

“I love her.”

“Yeah, you said that in your speech last night, but does Mila love you?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm... you know I want her to

marry a big, strong protector.”

“I’m aware.”

“You’re fucking up my plan, Jonah.”

“If I’m allowed to continue my work on the council, I’m hoping Mila will stay with me in the Motherlands. She won’t need a protector there.”

“The Motherlands.” He scoffed. “I don’t want my girl in the Motherlands. People are psychopaths there. Look at what they’ve done to you.” With a loud snort, he muttered. “Denying people basic freedom.”

“Please don’t call us psychopaths.”

Deep frown lines showed on Magni’s face. “I’m not talking about you. You’re the only decent one, but the others are fucking lunatics. I’ve heard

the way they talk about us Nmen and I've seen how they break down men. It's disgusting."

I sat down and crossed my feet at my ankles. "If I could change anything, it would be this destructive them-and-us culture that exists on both sides of the border."

"We didn't start it, they did." Magni was pointing to the door as if a delegation from the Motherlands were waiting outside. "Listening to them judge you for doing normal things is enough to make me furious. And you want to bring my daughter to that awful place."

I kept my tone calm and civil. "As with all extremism it's really just a matter of good people convinced by bad

ideas. The Council members who want me gone aren't all man-haters. They have just been conditioned to feel unsafe with men in power. When they lash out, it's because of fear.”

“Why are you defending those mean-spirited hags?”

“Because the only way to get us all back on track is to break down those barriers of fear and misconception. Magni, I've told you this before. There are a lot of great things to be said about the Motherlands. It's not a homogenous country. It's people of all colors, spread out around the world. They have different cultural backgrounds but no one is richer or poorer. Now, we just need to work on the equality.”

“Screw them. At this pace, it’s going to be at least a hundred years before there’s equality on the Council. Those ladies are no better than the men before them that clung to power like it was an oxygen mask.”

“Which is why we need to keep pushing the integration process and the question of equality.”

“Fuck yeah we do. The more women we get to come up here and the more men we can send down to infiltrate their ways, the better.”

“Magni, you’ve got to let go of this combative them-and-us mentality. It’s not like they are wrong and you are right. No country is perfect and there’s no wrong way here. It’s just *different ways*.”

I was impressed with how real Magni's new hand looked when he picked up an apple and began peeling it with a knife. "If there's no wrong way, then why not just do it our way?"

With a sigh, I let my shoulders fall. "One day I hope to hear you say that the people in the Motherlands are great people."

"Not fucking likely."

"How can you demonize one point six billion people as psychopaths and monsters?"

Placing his elbow on the desk, Magni leaned forward, pointing at me with the little knife. "You should say the same to them. They've villainized us for centuries, and you know it!"

I threw up my hands. “You’re right, but they’ve also come far in terms of admitting they were wrong in some ways. Magni, you’re smart enough to understand that tribal nature is inherently ingrained in us. You’re just as tribal-minded as they are.”

“You’d better not be sitting there calling me primitive.”

I shook my head. “We’re all primitive when it comes to how our nervous system is programmed. Exclusion from a group used to mean certain death. Who was going to help you when you got sick? I’m not calling you primitive, Magni. I’m just trying to make you understand that it’s human nature to group together. It’s the old story

of me against my brother, my brother and me against our cousin, my family against your family, our village against the neighbor village.”

“The Motherlands against the Northlands,” Magni added. “Don’t forget they call me the biggest enemy of their state.”

“That was years ago.”

Magni raised his voice. “I’m still banned from crossing the border.”

“Because you kidnapped Athena.”

“So? That was twelve years ago and Athena is back home. It’s not like I would do it again.”

“My point is that we need to stop dividing people into mental boxes of them and us.”

“You keep saying that, but it sounds like idealistic bullshit to me.” Magni popped another piece of apple in his mouth. “I can’t believe you would defend them when they’re screwing you over.”

I sighed and crossed my arms. “I represent change and some people prefer the status quo because it offers safety. I get that.”

“Sounds like you’ve given up.” Magni narrowed his eyes and used my own words from our last conversation. “And here I thought you weren’t a quitter.”

“I’m not! If I’m removed from the Council, I’ll continue working for equality and fairness for all.”

“Huh!”

“In the end all that matters to me is that I do it with Mila by my side.”

Magni moved in his seat and frowned. “I don’t care what you want, Councilman. What the hell would Mila even be doing in the Motherlands?”

“She wants to become a veterinarian. There are great schools where I live.”

“I don’t care. We have schools here too. As I said, you’re fucking up my plans.”

I stiffened and listened as he continued.

“But Mila makes up her own mind and for some reason she likes you. I can’t imagine why, because you’re the

most argumentative and annoying man on the planet.”

“Hmmm. Maybe it’s because I remind her of you in that way.”

The corners of his lips pursed upward. “Except, I’m right and you’re wrong!” Pushing his chair back, he stood up. “I’m sure Mila already told you about her decision to back out of her bridal tournament, but I want you to know that I appreciate your being willing to fight for her.”

I stayed quiet, remembering Mila’s words about letting them assume.

“Laura and I both thought you were crazy, but we liked that you would risk your life to marry our daughter.”

“Thank you.”

“By the way, what did you think about our video?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. “What video?”

“The one Pearl shared with the Council.”

“You know about that?” I was confused.

“Of course I fucking know about it.”

“But Pearl said that it was a surveillance video. Wait, are you telling me that Pearl lied to the entire Council?”

Magni swung a dismissive hand. “Aghr, don’t look so shocked. She didn’t want to do it, but even a righteous Motlander will get corrupted after living with Khan for twelve years. It was a matter of saving your seat on the

Council.”

“It was all a set-up then?”

“Pretty much, but I meant every word I said.”

Remembering how he had praised me, I bowed my head. “Thank you.”

“Do you think it helped? Khan had this idea that we should show them how you’re brave enough to befriend a bear.”

“Excuse me?”

“No, not a real bear. The bear is just a metaphor for me; you know, because I’m scary and shit.”

“I’m confused.”

Magni sighed. “Khan thought the Nanny Club would be impressed that you have befriended us and that we spoke about you with respect.”

“Oh. I see.” I rubbed my forehead. “I think that message might have been drowned in all the profanities and insults you spewed at the Council.”

“Huh. It wasn’t that bad.”

My brow lifted. “It was bad!”

Giving a small shrug, Magni brushed some crumbs off his desk. “Okay, so maybe we got a little carried away, but they’ll still be impressed that you’ve made friends with me and Khan, won’t they?”

I hesitated before speaking. “A few of them might be, but to be honest, I think most of them liked me less because of it. They are disturbed that I would associate with people who act and speak like you do.”

“Well, fuck them.” Magni changed the subject. “Now, about the tournament; it will still take place and after discussing it with Khan most of last night, we’ve come to the conclusion that it’s not a bad idea to develop the tournaments into something more modern that doesn’t rely on one bride.”

“Good. I have a few ideas on how to maximize Khan’s exposure to his voters.”

“I’m sure he’d like to hear about it, but you should go eat some food first. The noise from your growling stomach is distracting!”

I stood up too and for a moment Magni and I just looked at each other.

“You’ve changed,” I said in a

compliment.

With a shake of his head, Magni walked to the door.

Just before he opened it, I repeated, “You’ve grown a lot, Magni.”

I’m sure he knew what I meant, but in typical Magni style, he squared his shoulders, “Nope, I was always tall enough. Didn’t need them to give me extra height with the new legs.”

CHAPTER 24

Treasures

Mila

“I can’t believe you talked Hunter into giving out hugs at the tournament. He doesn’t seem like the type to do such a thing.” Christina had listened to Jonah explain about his plan to help Khan gain goodwill from the voters and pondered out loud, “I suppose living in the Motherlands for a few years had a greater effect on him than I would have anticipated.”

“Hunter isn’t giving out hugs,” Jonah said and looked to Anne but she had her

head in a box. The three of us had joined Christina and Freya in the basement to sort through sixty years of unwanted items.

“He called it a meet and greet with his soccer fans.”

“It’s a great idea.” Christina turned a candlestick over and studied it closer before noting something on a pad and taking a picture of it.

“Do we have to take photos of everything?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s part of cataloging the treasures.”

“When you say treasures, you don’t mean this one, do you?” Anne had pulled her head out of the box and was holding a broken toy car in her hands. “One of

the wheels is missing.”

“Place it in that corner over there. Toys go next to sports equipment. I’ll look at it later.”

“Wow, check out these old skis.” I picked them up and took them to the area Christina had pointed to.

“I found another painting.” Freya held it up and wrinkled her nose. “It’s not very pretty, but do you think it could be worth three hundred thousand?”

Christina smiled. “You ask that every time you find a painting. Just place it with the others and I’ll catalogue it and share it with my colleagues. They’ll help me estimate the worth of all these items.”

“But have you found anything that is

worth a lot of dollars?” Freya’s arms were spread out wide as she carried the large painting. “I made big plans for how I’m going to use the money, so we’d better find some down here.”

“Well, the coins you found should be valuable and so is the trunk with private thoughts from Augustus that we uncovered. To have a sixty-year-old notebook from a historical figure like that is remarkable. It makes me think he was fascinated with the past like me. Why else would he write in a notebook and not use an electronic pad?”

“Maybe he was scared of being hacked. Pen and paper can’t be accessed unless you know where to search.”

“That’s a good point, Jonah.” I gave

him a sweet smile and lost my train of thought for a second when my body remembered what had happened between us last night.

Jonah smiled back and for a long moment we just stood there with locked gazes and sparkling eyes.

“What do you plan to do with the money, Freya?” asked Anne.

Freya was about to crawl up on a book ladder, but she paused with one foot up on the first step. “I’m going to help my dad win the election of course.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“By giving the people what they need. I already talked to Mila about how my research shows that the people want comfort, love, wealth, and adventure.

We came up with a plan to show them how my dad can help them find love, but I've been thinking a lot about how to give them wealth and comfort.”

Jonah stopped what he was doing. “Do you need ideas?”

“No. I've already decided that the best way to spend the money is on the most fragile in society. The children don't need my help, since most of them are born into families now. It's the old Nmen that we need to target. Those are the people who are skeptical of my dad making the Northlands into a democracy, but I reckon that many of them are just lonely and worried about what the future will bring for them.”

“Old people never like change,”

Christina added. “It’s the same in the Motherlands.”

“I know. Grandma Isobel can be stiff like that too.” Freya looked thoughtful. “It’s funny, you know, because I was one of the first kids to be born here in the Northlands with parents from each side of the border. Maybe that’s why I see the contrast between my parents and how they both could learn from each other. My mom needs to relax more. She’s too proper, and I agree with my dad that Motlanders have too few problems and that’s why they invent stupid ones like fussing over curse words and getting offended for no reason. It has to be a type of boredom. But then I really think the Northlands could learn from the

Motherlands when it comes to caring about each other. Do you know how high the suicide rate among old Nmen is?”

Anne and Jonah shook their heads.

“Nine out of ten suicides are committed by men older than fifty.”

I knew those numbers and felt a heaviness in my chest.

“Why is that?” Jonah asked.

“Because they don’t have family and when they get old and lose their jobs, they lose their identity. They are too proud to ask for help and end up lonely and isolated. That’s why I think we should have community homes like in the Motherlands where people take care of each other.” Freya spoke fast with excitement.

“Everyone needs a sense of community and to feel like they belong. How would you feel if no one knew your name?”

“I would hate it, which is why I love your idea, Freya.”

“Thank you, Mila.” Freya gave me a wide smile. “If we build community homes, it would also be a great place for people with physical handicaps to work and live. Inclusion is something the Northlands have never been good at, but the Motherlands are experts at it. We just need to make sure the Nmen have a job. It’s a matter of pride to them.”

“What if someone is paralyzed from the neck down?” I asked.

Freya faced me head-on. “If they’re

paralyzed from the neck down, they may still have the ability to speak, which means they can help combat loneliness by being friends with others.” She held up a finger like she’d just thought of something. “Or they could work as a taster for different food products.”

I loved how easy everything seemed in the mind of an eleven-year-old and even though I realized that things were rarely that uncomplicated in the real world, I chose to give her all my support. “It’s a great idea to mix old and young people.”

“I know, it’s almost like we’re creating family units for adults.” Freya swung her hand to all the boxes in the storage room. “That’s why we need to

raise a lot of money to help the poorest in our society.”

Jonah crossed his arms. “I’m impressed, and you’re right about one thing. From the polls there’s clear evidence that the older and destitute voters don’t like Khan’s idea of democracy.”

“But that makes no sense,” Anne said. “Democracy is always good for the weakest in a society.”

Jonah shook his head. “They wouldn’t know, as they’ve never had it. All they hear are all the presidential candidates out on the streets talking about the things that are wrong with the way Khan rules the Northlands. The biggest audience that those candidates

have right now are the poor and miserable who long for change.”

“Jonah is right.” Christina supported me while picking up a heavy box. “If Khan is to win this election, then we need to convince the old Nmen that they have the brightest future with Khan as their leader.”

“Here, let me take that.” Jonah was quick to help Christina with the heavy box.

“Freya, I’m sold on your idea.” I smacked my hands together. “Let’s do this.”

Anne chipped in, “Can I just say, that I think many of the Motlanders living here will be naturally drawn to volunteer at these community homes

because it's what we know from home. I used to work in a nursing home and if I lived here, I'd be happy to help."

"That's a good point." I gave Anne a nod of recognition and then we heard a loud gasp.

"What is it?" All our eyes were on Christina, who sat squatted down in front of a box.

"This is..." Words failing her, Christina picked up an item wrapped in a sheet, with slow and careful movements.

"What is it?" I repeated.

"Wait." Christina moved like she was carrying unstable explosives and, one slow step at a time, she moved the item in her hands to the only clear

surface there was; the floor.

Jonah, Freya, Anne and I moved closer, holding our breaths to see what had Christina so excited.

Opening the wrapping of the white cloth, Christina stared at the item on the floor.

“Is that it?” Freya’s shoulders fell with disappointment. “It’s a chipped vase. No one is going to want that.”

The small item was a brown-colored vase that didn’t look very impressive, but the way Christina pulled out a pair of white gloves from her pockets and put them on gave me hope that it was special somehow. “You’re right, Freya, it’s an old chipped vase, but if we’re lucky it’s millennia old. We

know that before the Toxic War there were museums full of old artifacts but most of that was lost when the old world was buried. It's long been speculated that some of the first Nmen might have had private antique collections that they brought with them when they came here to avoid being ruled by women.”

“But I thought the first Nmen were all bikers.” Anne straightened up. “Why would they care about antiques?”

“They weren't all bikers. Some were religious leaders who felt superior to women, other were successful businessmen who didn't like the idea of sharing their wealth,” I informed Anne, but Christina, who was examining the vase, cut me off.

“Look at the drawings on the side. That symbol is called the key of life and those signs are hieroglyphs. It’s a written language.”

“What does it say?” Freya squatted down and leaned in like she could read it herself.

Christina bit her lip. “I learned a bit in school, but I’m ashamed to say that I’ve forgotten.” She looked up. “But don’t worry, I have colleagues who can help me.”

“How much is it worth?”

Christina pulled the vase closer and gave Freya a disturbed look. “You can’t put a price on something as precious as this. It belongs in a museum.”

Crossing her arms, Freya raised an

eyebrow. “Are you saying that a broken vase is worth more to you than helping people battle depression and loneliness?”

“But this is a lost part of human history.”

“It’s a vase, Christina. We’re here to find valuables to sell and raise money.”

While the two of them continued arguing about what to do with the vase, I moved over to the box where Christina had found the vase. It was yellow with age and had three letters written on the side. “FBD,” I read aloud and looked inside. “Why would someone hide a real artifact in a place like this?”

“I think it’s clever. What better place to hide treasures than in a crowded

storage room where any thief would think there's only discarded old stuff?" Jonah came over and kneeled down next to me. "Maybe there's more than one treasure in that box."

There was an empty wooden box inside that I guessed had protected the vase. Taking it out, I saw two other wooden boxes beneath it. "This one is heavy."

Jonah took it from me and set it down on the floor. "If you two are done arguing about the vase, maybe you want to see what else we have?" he called out to Christina and Freya.

"Hang on." Christina wrapped the cloth around the vase with care and returned it to the wooden box before

joining us. “I’m ready.”

“Finally!” Freya sighed and then I opened the flat lid of the wooden box.

A collective outburst of joy filled the storage room as we all screamed. The box was full of gold and jewels.

“I knew it. I knew it!” Freya exclaimed.

“You knew there would be gold and jewels down here?” I still remembered her skepticism when I first brought her down here.

“No, but I knew we would find the money some way. I’ve been visualizing attracting money to build the community homes and here it is.”

We sorted through boxes for another two hours and there was a lot of joy and

laughter as we speculated that one of the kings and rulers that had lived in this house had hidden away treasures in the basement but been killed before telling anyone about it.

Scratching my neck, I looked at Freya. “I wonder if our dads are still going to be okay with donating everything in here to charity like they promised.”

Freya, who was sitting on her knees and counting silver coins from another box we’d found, rose up enough to fish out a note from her pocket. “I got them both to sign an agreement before Christina began her work.”

That had me laughing. “Of course you did. I wish I thought ahead like you

do.”

“My dad always says that we need to expect the unexpected.”

Jonah gave Freya a sideways hug. “He might regret teaching you that when he realizes that he’s had millions in his basement all this time.”

Christina stretched her arms above her head. “My back is killing me. I need a break. We should have all of this moved to a secure location and, Freya, you should run upstairs and get Khan and Magni. They need to see what we’ve found.”

“But I wanted us to catalogue all of it before revealing it to them. I want them to be really surprised and happy.”

We laughed and assured her that they

would be.

“Okay, I’ll go get them then, but just because we found all this doesn’t mean we can’t still do the film events, does it?”

“What film events?” Jonah asked.

Freya explained to him about her idea to show the first five episodes of the *Men of the North* series at live events and added with excitement, “Christina and Alexander already agreed that they would be on stage to answer questions about how they met and fell in love.”

Christina nodded. “We did.”

“I didn’t know they were making a whole series about how the integration began between our countries.” Anne

looked to Jonah. “Did you?”

“Yes. It was pre-approved by the council, but withdrawn after we saw the first episode. Of course, I loved every part of it.”

“But if they pre-approved the series, then why can’t it air as planned?”

“Because there were violent scenes and the romance wasn’t as toned down as the pre-approval had requested. A small majority argued that the violations to our entertainment laws were too great and it could make viewers uncomfortable.”

Anne sighed. “Now I want to see it even more.”

“Then you can buy a ticket. It will be fifty dollars,” Freya said with a satisfied

smile. “You’ll have to be quick though, because there’s only twelve hundred tickets and they are going to sell out fast.”

I grinned. “If you’re sure about that, then maybe we should raise the price.”

“Is there a family discount?” Jonah asked.

“What do you mean?”

Jonah pulled me against his side, placing his arm around me. “Mila and I are getting married. That will make Anne and me family, won’t it?”

Christina looked surprised but opened her arms to hug me. “So it’s final, is it? You won’t have that awful tournament after all?”

“There will still be a tournament,

but they'll fight for money and not me.”

Anne wanted to hug me after Christina. “I was afraid to ask him if you'd said yes. Jonah was so nervous that you would rather marry a big warrior in that tournament.”

Freya angled her head. “Tell you what, Anne. If you become part of the family, you can sit on the balcony with the rest of us. It's free.”

“I would love that. When is it?”

“Maybe next week or as soon as we can make it happen. I've already talked to my parents about it and they loved the idea. My mom promised that she would contact the production company and set it up.”

“I'm serious, people, I'm starving.”

Giving Freya a gentle push toward the door, Christina reminded her, “Run upstairs and get your dad and Magni to come down here. Just tell them we found something they need to see.”

“I’m on it!” My cousin threw the words over her shoulder before she was out of sight and ten minutes later, she returned with Magni and Khan.

Khan walked straight to Christina, who was sitting on an old piano stool with her legs crossed. “This’d better be good, I was in an important meeting.”

“Didn’t Freya tell you what we found?”

“She mentioned something about a broken vase.”

“Ah, but did she mention that it’s an

old Egyptian artifact?”

Khan shook his head and gave Freya a questioning look.

The sneaky smile that grew on her face had me laughing. “Tell him.”

“Okay, we found a bunch of super old stuff that Christina says people will pay fortunes for.”

Christina got the wooden box and gently uncovered the vase. “May I present to you, this ancient Egyptian amphora from the later part of the eighteenth Dynasty, created somewhere between year 1350 and 1321 before the common era.”

Khan reached for the vase but Christina pulled back. “This vase is almost four thousand years old. You

can't touch it.”

Lowering his hands, Khan studied the vase. “Yes, I can count, but are you sure? How do you know it's not a replica?”

“Because we found a certificate in the box that explains its origin. Before the Toxic War it was in a museum but one of the executives moved here after the war and brought several artifacts with him.”

“We also found a lot of gold and silver.” Freya took her father's hand and pulled Khan a few steps further into the storage room.

“Whoa.”

“What is it?” My dad was quick to follow and the way his face lit up when

he and Khan saw the fortune we had found made me reach for Jonah's hand and squeeze it.

“Now, are you okay with us calling you out of your meeting?” Christina was grinning with the brothers, who were touching everything.

“You found all of this down here?” Magni's hands ran through his hair and his tone was full of disbelief. “I can't wait to tell Laura.”

“Remember you promised that Mila and I could donate the money we could get from selling everything in the storage room.”

Khan opened his mouth to protest, but Jonah stepped forward. “Actually, Freya has a brilliant plan to help the

people and secure you more votes.”

“She has?”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to build community homes where people can work and live. That way no Nman has to be homeless or lonely.”

Khan frowned. “Sounds like the Motherlands. Our people aren’t used to a safety net like that. They won’t like it. It’s humiliating to have to accept help.”

“Which explains why far too many who need help choose to commit suicide as a way out of their misery,” I argued. “We just have to sell it to them in a way that doesn’t hurt their pride, and I have an idea.”

“I’m listening.” Khan locked eyes

with me.

“You know how I’m always talking about creating animal shelters. What if we created community homes and advertised that we needed live-in caregivers for a group of pets?”

Christina had put away the vase and walked to the door. “I’m happy to hear all your great ideas, as long as it’s over lunch.”

“Lunch? We should have a fucking feast with this kind of amazing news.” Magni winked at me. “Why don’t you tell Sheriff and Jimmy to find some good bottles of wine and do a bit of their food magic?”

CHAPTER 25

Outrage

Jonah

All morning I'd been talking to Khan, Magni, and Pearl about upcoming events that would help shine a positive light on Khan as the future President. Everyone had jumped at Freya's idea to have film nights, and the first was already planned to happen the following Saturday night.

Tasks were delegated to a small army of people and I was proud when Magni, Khan, and Pearl praised me for my idea of a meet and greet booth called

Friends of Khan. By making a few calls, Pearl had added Salma Rose, Willow Darlington, and Shelly Summers to the list of celebrities who would volunteer to campaign for Khan.

Magni had arranged for a security meeting this afternoon and assured us all that his special forces would guarantee our safety.

There were times during the meeting when it was hard to concentrate because I still felt high from the three nights that I'd spent with Mila. Flashbacks of making love to her made me smile at random times and when I remembered our naked play-fighting from this morning, I accidentally chuckled. Magni, who was discussing the logistics of

moving the line along fast enough, stopped and gave me a funny look.

When we broke off the meeting, I went straight to find Mila and found her in the entertainment room where she was talking with Anne.

“What’s wrong?” I could tell Anne had been crying.

Mila was holding Anne’s hand when she looked up at me. “The News is showing all the protests in the Motherlands.”

“Still?” I looked to the screen.

“Yes, it’s been three days since the vote, but people are still out walking the streets across the Motherlands. We figured that it would die down now that the weekend is over, but no.”

Anne dried her eyes. “I received hate mail. One wrote that she was happy that she doesn’t have a sister like me.”

I frowned. “That wasn’t very nice.”

“That was one of the milder ones. Another wrote that he wished I’d get a bad case of diarrhea because it would give me time to sit still and think about what I’d done to you.”

“Anne, I’m sorry, but they have a point. What you did was selfish and destructive.”

“I know.” Her voice broke and she covered her eyes. “I just want to reverse time and take it back.”

Her voice soft, Mila stroked Anne’s back. “I can’t help you with time travel, but if you need a distraction, Jonah has

just the right thing.”

My eyebrows creased together. “I do?”

“Yes. You could let Anne read *Forbidden Letters from the North*. I guarantee she’ll forget about her problems while she reads it.”

“Wait, but that’s the forbidden book.” Anne looked to me. “You’ll let me read it?”

“Only if you promise not to tell anyone.”

“I promise you, sweetie, once you begin reading, you won’t be able to put it down. Jonah has been sending me recorded chapters of it and I’ve been completely engulfed in the story.”

“What is it about?”

Mila moved to the edge of the sofa and turned her whole body to Anne. “It’s about a woman called Deidra who lives close to the border. One day she finds a bottle with a note inside that has been thrown over the border. It’s from a man who lives on the other side, and the two begin to share details from their lives and through all their corresponding they fall in love. It’s the most beautiful love story and when he can’t stand to be separated from her anymore, he climbs over the wall to see her.”

Anne pulled back. “That’s not possible.”

“He has a long rope with a hook on it and he’s strong enough to pull himself up and rappel down on the other side.”

“But he would be detected by the drones if he climbed the wall.”

Mila sighed. “Anne, it’s a fictional story that happened two hundred years ago. It doesn’t have to be realistic. The point is that he came to her and that’s when the steamy scenes happened.” Lowering her voice, Mila smiled. “I promise they will distract you.”

Anne bit her lip. “Can I read it now?”

“Sure. I brought it. It’s in my bag in Mila’s room. Would you mind getting it yourself? It’s just that I have something to discuss with Mila.”

“Not a problem.” Anne was quick to get up and leave the room.

“What is it we need to discuss?”

Mila asked.

I walked over and locked the door before returning to her.

She had guessed what I was up to, and getting up from the couch she smiled. “We can’t do it in here.”

“Why not?” I was on her, pulling her down again, and sending her heated looks.

“Jonah, we should go up to my room.”

“I’m too impatient. I need you now.”

In the background the News people were talking about the election and interviewing some of the candidates, but all I could see was my beautiful Mila. Once I kissed her, she gave in and from the way her hand tore at my t-shirt to get

it off me I felt her craving me too.

“We’ll have to be quick, someone might come.”

“I can be fast,” I promised and kissed her neck and collarbone.

“None of that *Kama Sutra*, you have to make it a quickie.” Mila was opening my pants and pushing them down over my hips.

“Is that a complaint I hear?” I kneeled down on the floor, took myself in hand and stroked up and down a few times before moving Mila to the edge of the sofa to line up with her.

“No, it’s not a complaint, but you always take your time and make love to me for hours... we don’t have that sort of time.” There was a cute smile on her

lips when I slid inside her.

The couch was the perfect height for me to take her, and she let me control the pace.

“You have beautiful abs.” Her hand slid down my torso and she licked her lips.

“That’s what hours of daily sex does to you,” I teased.

Mila closed her eyes and made sounds of enjoyment as I pumped in and out of her. Pushing her knees up, I got in deep and rotated my hips. “You feel this?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You like it when I take you hard and fast?”

Opening her eyes, Mila gave me a

challenging stare. “You call that hard?”

I gave her a wicked grin. “Oh, North Star, you shouldn’t have said that.” Leaning forward, I fisted a hand into her hair and held her in position while I took her in the most primitive way.

She retaliated and pressed her nails into my shoulder. The rawness made me grab her tighter and pick up my pace, which made Mila’s body move up on the couch. With a firm grip around her butt, I brought her back to the edge. Suction on my neck alerted me that she was adding another love bite to the three she’d already given me.

“You’re marking me?”

Her pupils were dilated and her tone low and sexy when she spoke. “Because

you're all mine.”

I lost all control. Cupping her face, I kissed her forcefully, biting her lower lip, and making guttural sounds that sounded a lot like growls. “What are you doing to me?”

“Same as you're doing to me.” Her lips were puffed from our kissing and she closed her eyes when I hammered in and out of her over and over.

“More, Jonah... yes, yes...” Her nails were digging into my back as I kept pushing her to her climax. The way her insides contracted when she came felt like a warm fist pumping me to my own orgasm.

It took everything I had to pull out and not come inside her. Finishing off

with my hand, I marked her in my own way. I'd come to love the sight of Mila with my semen sticking to her creamy skin.

We were panting for air and looking at each other with awe.

“Quickies are totally underrated,” Mila declared. “I read somewhere that it was a waste of time, but this... this was amazing.”

“It was.” Getting up, I got her paper and dried her off. “I never knew you could be so animalistic.”

Her face turned to the interactive wall. “Shh... they said something about the Council voting.”

I listened and when a small pop-up window blinked with breaking news,

Mila activated it. A second window opened up on the wall with a headline saying, “Council meeting postponed until Wednesday.”

We dressed while listening to Chairwoman Isobel make a public statement that pushed the final vote back two days.

“Are you disappointed? I know you wanted to get the vote over with and have a decision.”

“Yes and no. Now I don’t have to rush home to be in the Council meeting.”

“Couldn’t you do it from here?”

“Sure, if I’d been smart enough to bring my VR device. Unfortunately, I was frantic to get to you after the last meeting and I left without it.”

Mila caressed my cheek. “I love you.”

Leaning my forehead against hers, I swallowed hard. “I love you too, Milove.”

“I’ve always loved when you call me that.” Mila smiled and then she pulled back and used her hands to flatten her hair. “Do I look okay?”

My face softened as I pulled her back in to indulge in another kiss. “You look gorgeous.”

With her fingers caressing my chest, Mila nibbled at my lower lip. “You know who will be happy that you don’t have to go back today? Anne will. She thinks everyone hates her at home.”

I released a heavy sigh. “It’s not an

easy situation. Intellectually, I've forgiven her, but I'm no saint and at times, I feel anger toward her."

"That's understandable."

"Yeah, well..." I shrugged. "We should check up on her and tell her that we have another two days here before we go back."

We held hands all the way up to Anne's room, where we found my sister on her bed reading.

"You okay?" Mila asked in her soft singsong voice.

Anne held up the forbidden book. "I found it and I've already read the first two chapters. Did you two get to talk?"

Mila and I exchanged a look. "We did, thank you. By the way, the Council

postponed the vote until Wednesday so we don't need to go back today as planned.”

“Oh, I'm sorry, Jonah. Why did they postpone it?”

“Isobel just made a statement in response to the demonstrations. Basically, she said that we Motlanders need to remember who we are and that the protesters should go home and trust the Council to make the right decision. I think her exact words were, ‘Shouting at us won't make us work faster or sway our decision.’”

Mila chuckled a bit.

“What's funny about that?”

“It's just so typically Motlandish. You might not know this, Anne, but I was

part of the first integrated school with both Motlander and Northlander children.”

“Yes, Jonah told me on the way here. That’s how you ended up staying in the Northlands.”

“Exactly, but Isobel’s words are funny to me because they remind me of our teacher, Kya. Whenever the Nboys lost their temper and began screaming profanities, Kya would stay calm and say, ‘I can’t hear your words with all the shouting. When you’re ready to speak in a calm voice like me, I’m happy to listen.’”

Small crinkles formed at the edges of Anne’s eyes when she smiled. “Did it help the boys or did it just make them

even angrier?”

“Mostly it helped, but it’s like Jonah said, up here people act out while back in the Motherlands people look in.”

“As in we reflect more, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Anne tilted her head. “I don’t know about that. I feel like I acted out quite a bit. If I had reflected a bit more, maybe I wouldn’t have...”

I cut Anne off. “Let it go. We’ve all done stupid stuff we regret.”

She looked down. “Yeah, I guess.”

For a moment there was an awkward silence but then Mila spoke. “Anyway, Isobel had a point. It’s hard to have a conversation when people are screaming at each other.”

Anne frowned. “But they’re out there protesting with outrage because they want to save Jonah’s seat on the council.”

I shifted my balance. “It’s not about me so much as it’s about what I represent to them. Honestly, I’d like to think that I empowered people to find their voice and now they want to be heard.”

Mila gave me the sweetest smile. “Yes, you have that effect on people. Me included.”

CHAPTER 26

The Final Vote

Mila

On Wednesday morning, I went back with Jonah to the Motherlands. He offered to go by himself, but I sensed that he was nervous and I wanted to support my man.

The Council had closed the meeting to the public due to the tension after the last meeting. The News would be given the final vote after the meeting, but that was all.

I sat quietly in the corner of Jonah's sofa and watched him arrange the mood

reader and put on his device.

For the longest time, he said nothing and I couldn't hear the other Council members speak. All I could do was watch his body language as the meeting went on.

I knew the moment the vote began. Jonah stopped breathing and folded his hands into fists. I held my own breath, reading his stiff stoic pose and preparing myself to see his head fall forward in defeat.

“Please, please,” I muttered low.

And then his body eased up. There was no smile on his face and no sunken shoulders either. The suspense was killing me as I couldn't figure out if he was in or out.

Without having said a single word the entire time, Jonah finally took off the device and blinked his eyes.

“What happened?” I breathed.

“There was a difference of five votes... in my favor.”

I screamed. “Does that mean you’re staying on the Council?”

“Yes.”

Raising my hands above my head, I jumped up to hug him. “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“I’m shocked. I was convinced they would throw me out.” A sudden burst of laughter erupted from Jonah. “Wow, I feel happier than when I was first elected to the Council. What a relief.”

“How could you think they wouldn’t want you? The whole country has been

showing them how loved you are.”

Jonah squeezed me in a tight hug. “And the best part is that they know about my feelings for you. We never have to hide our love.”

“We should celebrate.” I ran to the fridge to find a pair of sweet drinks but before I’d made it back, Jonah was being bombarded with calls from colleagues on the Council wanting to congratulate him.

I let him soak up all the attention, while I took the opportunity to call my parents and tell them before they heard it on the News.

After that came the requests for interviews from the press. Jonah had stayed away from all the drama of the

press since the last Council meeting, but now he accepted an interview without hesitation.

“Come on, Milove, I agreed to meet them at the old archive.”

Jonah had a happy bounce in his steps as we walked, hand in hand, the ten-minute walk to the old archive. Because it was raining heavily, we hid under an umbrella and weren't stopped by passersby, but once we got there, people were flocking to him like he was some kind of rock star.

I tried to pull away to give him space to do his interviews, but Jonah only tightened his grip on my hand. “Please stay with me.”

The deep eye contact between us

made me melt a little. Jonah wasn't like the big macho men of the North. He had no shame in admitting that he needed me as much as I needed him. Without a word, I moved closer to him and smiled when he placed his arm around my waist.

“Jonah, tonight you secured your seat on the Council. How do you feel?”

“Touched, and grateful to everyone who supported me.”

“At Friday's Council meeting, you declared that you were going to fight for Mila. As you may have seen in the News, many have been worried about you and speculated whether you meant metaphorically or literally. There were theories that your absence in the media

was due to injuries sustained while fighting.”

“I’m flattered that so many were worried about me, but as Lord Khan explained in his announcement last night, Mila’s bridal tournament will have a new format and won’t involve Mila choosing a husband.” Jonah couldn’t stop smiling at me. “She can’t because she already chose me.”

“Mila, were you surprised when Jonah declared his love for you at the Council meeting?”

My heart was beating fast with the intensity of the interview being turned on me. “Ehh...”

“Did you see it when Jonah declared his love for you?”

“Yes, I was with friends. It was surprising that he was willing to share it with the whole world when he knew many would judge him for it.”

Turning to Jonah, the journalist asked, “Do you consider this a turning point?”

“It’s all so new that I haven’t truly understood it yet.”

“Are you aware that Councilwoman Wendy Douglas just announced that she’ll propose a bill that will make romance books legal again?”

“No, I was not, but I’ll support it of course.”

“Jonah, what do you have to say to your critics who accuse you of being in the pocket of Lord Khan?”

“I’m not!”

“Can you see why marrying his niece would make people think that there’s a close relationship between you and the ruling family of the Northlands?”

“I understand, and it’s no secret I’ve been an admirer of Pearl Pilotti since I was a young teenager. Her focus on equality and her tireless work to heal the centuries-old dispute between our nations is inspirational. I’m one of the few Motlanders who have met Lord Khan in person, and he is a man with a sharp intellect. He is also very much his own man and prefers to make his own decisions, which is something I can relate to. There’s no doubt in my mind that Lord Khan is the best-qualified

person to be President. I've studied many of the other candidates and should they win, it would be a major setback to the Northlands."

"Why is that?"

"Because the trust that Lord Khan has built with the Council won't be transferred to a new ruler. It's taken twelve years and with the political agenda that many of the other candidates have, we would need to protect ourselves from potential attacks."

"Mila, do you agree with Jonah on his analysis?"

"I'm not much of a politician. All I know is that there are a lot of amazing initiatives being planned at the moment that will make the Northlands a better

country. It would be a shame if Khan didn't get a chance to implement them.”

“Can you tell us a bit more about these plans?”

I looked to Jonah, who shook his head a tiny bit. “Ehh, no, I'm sure that my uncle will share the good news himself, very soon.”

“Any last words for your supporters?” the journalist asked.

Jonah looked straight into the drone camera that hung steady in the air. “From the bottom of my heart, thank you to all of you who walked the streets and showed that you care. Together, we'll change the laws that we should have never accepted to begin with.”

By the time the first interview was

over more journalists had arrived. Jonah did two more interviews with much of the same questions and then as we were leaving, a fourth journalist began calling out questions.

“How are you going to celebrate this victory? Will you stay here or go back to the Northlands? And when is your wedding?”

Jonah hesitated but being polite, he took time to stop and answer. “I think we’ll celebrate by going home and find the answers to where we’ll live and when we’ll marry.”

“So, you don’t know?” The reporter looked to me.

“Jonah serves the people of the Motherlands. I’ve always known that if I

wanted to be with him, I'd have to live here where his work is." I gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm okay with that and Jonah has promised me that we'll go back often to visit my family."

"And your wedding? When will it be?" the woman asked.

"Soon." Leaving it at that, Jonah pulled me along.

We had only made it out of earshot from the woman when I said, "I bet that lady who is proposing to make romance books legal was inspired by your speech."

"Could be."

"You know what this means, right? The *Men of the North* series could potentially be shown around the world.

This is what Willow has been dreaming about.” My voice was full of excitement. “This would be such a great way to break down prejudice on both sides of the wall. I mean, most Motlanders live too far away from the border to have ever seen an Nman in real life. Seeing the show and getting to learn about my family will be wonderful.”

Jonah wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Just be prepared that not everyone is going to love your dad and Khan. They are hard men with a different set of values than we’re used to. I suspect it’ll be hard to understand what they’re even saying since the censorship will have to cut out all their curse words.”

I frowned. “Yes, that might be a problem. It makes me happy that we’re seeing it in the Northlands.” In an abrupt movement, I stopped and stared at Jonah. “Do you know what I just realized?”

“What?”

“If the *Men of the North* show becomes a huge success, there’s a chance they will one day tell our love story too.”

Jonah cleared his throat. “I doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“Because from what I heard they were focusing on the mixed couples. You and I were both born in the Motherlands. Besides, I’m not some big scary warrior with hair between my teeth.”

“So what?”

“Isn’t that the theme of the series?”

“You’re probably right, but if you ask me, the real theme should be tolerance and being open-minded to others.”

Jonah pulled me closer. “There’s my sweet pacifist.”

“You really don’t think they would tell our story?”

“It would surprise me if they did. Our story isn’t as dramatic as the others and they have so many different couples to pick from.”

“Yeah, but your point about them only focusing on mixed couples isn’t true. I mean, my parents were both from the Northlands but their love story was still beautiful because they overcame so

much as a couple.”

We had reached Jonah’s building and he held the door open for me. “I’m just hoping they’ll make a show about Shelly and Marco. That woman cracks me up.”

“Oh, yes, they should totally tell the story about how she pretended to be a sex-bot. Their story was really sweet because Shelly had a long-time crush on Marco. Did you know that?”

“Na-huh.”

“I wonder what the producers would do if they chose to tell the story of how Willow and Solo got together. You know, because with them playing Magni and Laura, someone else would have to play them.”

We made it into Jonah's apartment and he went straight for some cold drinks.

“Also, don't you agree that the theme of their show should be second chances? After all, they were childhood sweethearts.” I dropped my shoes and jacket in the entry and planted myself on the couch. “But seriously, how would you feel if they told our story?”

Bringing me a large glass with orange juice, Jonah shrugged out of his jacket and threw it across a chair. “I don't see how they can do you justice. Where would they find an actress as gorgeous and sweet as you?”

“Aww.”

“And where would they find an

actor with ears as remarkable as mine? I don't want to be portrayed by someone who has small ears, just saying.”

We laughed and cuddled up together on the sofa, his fingers opening my blouse, his lips planting kisses down my neck.

“About that celebration. How about we do my favorite thing in the whole world?”

My eyes were full of mischief when I teased him. “I'm really not up for solving the world's problems right now.”

“That's my second favorite thing.” Jonah bit at my earlobe and whispered, “My number one favorite thing in the world is to make love with you.”

CHAPTER 27

Men of the North

Jonah

Freya beamed like a Christmas light when I saw her on the balcony. Her head kept nodding a little as if she was counting.

“Are you excited?”

Without turning, Freya kept her eyes on the amphitheater below us. “Did Mila tell you we have sold out all five shows? There’s even a waiting list.”

“You have every reason to be proud. This was your idea.”

“Yes and no.” Her head turned. “My

dad was furious when he first heard that the Council had withdrawn their approval to show the series in the Motherlands. He always intended to show it here in the Northlands. All I did was come up with the idea to make live events out of it.”

Solo and Willow arrived with Raven and Leo, and were all greeted by Khan and Pearl like Mila and I had been.

“Where’s Magni and Laura?” Solo asked.

Mila rose up on her toes and spoke in a low tone close to his ear. “Dad came up with the idea to sit among the audience. He wants to know what they really think about him in the show.”

“And Laura went with him?”

“Yes, they’re were snickering about their disguises like naughty kids.”

Willow, who stood close enough to have heard Mila’s words, leaned over the railing of the balcony and looked down. “Why didn’t we think of that?” With eagerness she turned to Solo. “Do you think we can still do it?”

“Sorry, but we’ve sold all the tickets.” Freya, who was still by the railing, said in a matter-of-fact tone. “I even made Laura and Magni pay for their two seats.”

“You did?” Mila laughed. “Freya, you’re a true businesswoman, aren’t you?”

She smiled. “I just pointed out that if they wanted to go incognito, they would

need tickets to blend in with the rest of the audience.”

“Yeah, but you could have given them the tickets for free?”

“Why? Your parents have more money than most of the people down there. It’s all for charity anyway.”

“Fair point.”

Heaters had been placed on the balcony, making the chilly March air comfortable. “It’s a good thing most of them are wearing thick jackets. It’s going to be cold for them to sit on the stone seats.”

Freya gave a me a quick glance before throwing a nod to the area next to the scene where Nmen were lining up to buy beers and snacks. “Don’t worry, my

mom and I made sure that there are cushions and blankets for sale.”

Taking a closer look, I saw plenty of audience members sitting on colorful cushions.

“The cushions even come with a small note encouraging people to donate them to charity after use. That way we can resell them at a discount next week and make even more money for the community homes.

“Hey, Councilman.” Leo joined us and held out his glass to mine. “Cheers!”

Clinking my glass against his, I took a large gulp of the amber-colored beer.

“We’re all ready for your celebrity love fest at the tournament. Magni made me responsible for the safety.”

With a grunt, Solo crossed his arms next to me but that only got him an eye roll from Leo, who sighed.

“Don’t give me any more shit about it.”

“What’s the problem?”

“It’s just that when Magni was indisposed after the accident, Solo took over as Commander, and now that Magni is back, Solo has to get used to not being in charge anymore. He’s pissed that Magni didn’t ask him to be in charge of the security for all the celebrities.”

Mila placed her hand on Solo’s forearm. “But I thought Magni explained to you why you can’t be responsible for the safety.”

“No, he didn’t.”

Mila threw a small nod to the large screen below us. “It’s because of the show. You’re playing Magni and he’s convinced that will make you the biggest star in that series. He said that you can’t be security when you’re going to be plenty busy with your own fans.”

Solo’s brow rose up. “He’s joking, right?”

“You never know.”

“I hope Magni is right.” Willow swung her hair back. “I’ve dreamed about being a movie star since I was a little kid.”

Solo looked troubled by the thought and dipped his head close to Willow’s. “Why did we say yes to this again?”

Below us, the lights were turned

down, spotlights lit up the stage, and music began playing. The audience hurried to find their seats while I searched their faces to see if I could spot Magni and Laura.

“It’s beginning.” Freya moved her chair all the way to the railing, which could be lowered for events. Leaning forward she placed her arms on top of it.

A stylish-looking man came out on-stage and waited for the white noise of the audience to die down before he spoke: “Welcome to the world premiere of the first episode of *Men of the North*.”

Wild cheers broke out.

“Before we begin the show, let me introduce you to the director, Neil Bauer,

who will tell us about the production of this magnificent series.” A man came onstage looking a bit intimidated.

“Neil, you were the man who came up with the idea to tell the story of how the integration began between us and the Motherlands. Why did you feel it was important to share that story with the world?”

Neil’s eyes were darting around. “I can’t take credit for getting the idea. I came on board after the initial concept was already created, but when the idea was presented to me, I jumped on the chance to be part of the project.”

“The show is called *Men of the North*. Why not call it *The Motherlands* or *The Border Wall*?”

“I believe it was because the show was supposed to air in the Motherlands and to most people there, the Northlands is an almost mythological place surrounded by a sense of mystery.”

“How did you know where to begin the story?”

“You’ll see in a minute that we chose to start the story when Christina crossed the border to the Northlands. It’s really a defining moment in our shared history. Alexander Boulder wasn’t expecting a woman when he came to pick up an archeologist from the Motherlands. Imagine if he had sent Christina back home. Chances are that it would still be illegal to talk about you Nmen in the Motherlands.”

The presenter waited for the audience to stop booing before asking his next question.

“Talking about bans, how do you feel about the Council banning your show from being aired in the Motherlands?”

“We’re all very disappointed about it.” Neil scratched his wrist. “When we received the funds to produce the series, we never imagined that the Council would regret their approval.”

“Why did they?”

“Because it was impossible to tell this story and avoid any sort of violence and kissing.”

The audience gave loud applause to that comment. The presenter laughed

when he turned to them and hyped them up further. “What do you think? Are you ready to see what only we free men of the North are allowed to see?”

Loud shouts confirmed that.

“After we’ve seen the first episode, we’ll have a talk with Christina and Alexander Boulder, who will answer questions from you lucky audience members. And after that you’re all invited to witness the wedding of two lucky people who found each other through the Matching Program. But for now, enjoy the show.”

Another round of applause broke out as the presenter and the director walked off the stage.

I sat transfixed and watched how

Christina and Alexander met and fell in love. I laughed at some of their misunderstandings, and I reflected on the clash in culture that was portrayed so accurately.

Mila sat next to me, our fingers entwined, and her thumb caressing the back of my hand. Solo, who was playing Magni in the movie, had me on the edge of my seat in the scene where he found out that Laura had left to go to the Motherlands. The fit of rage, of despair, that was portrayed in the movie was so convincing, and now that I'd found love myself, I could relate to the pain of losing it.

Leaning against me, Mila whispered, "They make my dad look much worse

than he is.”

“Or maybe you’ve had a good influence on him and he’s a different man today because of it.”

She smiled and returned to watching the show, where secrets that we never knew came out. When it was over, I heard Mila ask Raven, who sat on her other side, “Did you know that your parents planned to free Athena?”

Raven shook her head. “No, and I don’t get why my dad didn’t destroy the cameras in his room when Khan admitted to the surveillance. They made it look like my dad was afraid of Khan.”

Pearl was on the balcony too and she spoke up. “Everyone was afraid of Khan. He wasn’t as even-tempered as he

is now.”

“Are you talking about me?” Khan, who had been in conversation with Leo, turned to us.

“We were just talking about how you’ve mellowed out with age,” Mila explained.

“Or maybe it’s Pearl’s influence that’s made you a better version of yourself,” I suggested and received a sweet smile from Pearl.

Freya, being loyal to her dad, muttered, “There was never anything wrong with my dad to begin with.”

I tilted my head from side to side. “Except it sounds lonely to have everyone be afraid of you.”

“He wasn’t lonely, Jonah. My dad

always had Magni, and people respected him.”

Mila supported me. “Sure, but what Jonah is trying to say is that fear-based respect isn’t nearly as satisfying as love-based admiration.”

Khan raised his brow at me. “And how would you know that, Councilman? I doubt anyone has ever respected you out of fear.”

“I hope not.”

“You’ll have to excuse us, Khan has a wedding to perform on stage.” Pearl touched Khan’s arm and gestured that they had to leave.

Mila moved in her seat. “I wish they hadn’t ended the episode on a cliffhanger like that. I know it sounds

silly because we've heard the story many times, but I want to see what happens next. I want to see my parents get together and now I have to wait another week.”

On stage, the presenter had returned with Raven's parents, Alexander and Christina, who were now taking questions from the audience.

I smiled as Christina made everyone laugh when she talked about her first impression of Alexander. “I'd never experienced such a rude and crude person. And for him to have the nerve to call me a girl was the greatest insult in my life. Of course that was only the beginning, and I've since learned to appreciate the direct and unapologetic

style of communication that you Nmen use.”

After the questions, the presenter asked everyone to rise for Lord Khan, who then entered the stage.

“Did you enjoy the first episode of the series?” Khan asked the audience, who stamped their feet in response. “It’s human nature to always look ahead and see what we don’t have yet, but tonight we got to look back and realize how far we’ve come already.

“Back in 2437 when Christina first crossed into our country, we had around one hundred women. Weddings happened only once or twice a year and some years, we had no weddings at all. Do you remember that?” Again, the

audience responded with nods and sounds of agreement.

“Allow me to share a fun fact with you. Up until I became ruler there had been less than one thousand weddings in the Northlands. And that’s if you count the entire span of four hundred years. In the fifteen years that I’ve ruled the Northlands, we have had close to six hundred thousand weddings.” Khan paused and let that number sink in. “In that same time span, we’ve gone from having one hundred women to almost nine hundred thousand women and girls among us.” Spreading out his arms, Khan looked like he was on top of the world. “You asked to find love and I delivered.”

Another round of applause and whistling broke out and had me smiling.

“Some of you are scared of what this means for our culture, and you fear that the women will take over like they did in the Motherlands. I guarantee that won't happen while I'm your leader, but our culture isn't a static thing and any society evolves and changes in an organic way. While we celebrate the influx of women, it's also inevitable that it will change us, just like it's inevitable that the many Nmen in the Motherlands will change them. Today, the *Men of the North* series is banned for anyone on the other side of the border to see, but next week the Council is voting to ease the rules of censorship. I predict that

someday Motlanders will succeed in demanding the same freedom that we Nmen take for granted. In fact, the recent protests around the world give us hope that we have inspired a desire for more.

“I’d like to present to you the man who has become the face of that rebellion. Jonah Cervici, will you stand up and show yourself?” Khan pointed to me and I stood up on the balcony, waving my hand to the audience.

“Jonah has become a figurehead for a movement of freedom seekers in the Motherlands.” The audience whistled and stamped their feet again and it made my ears grow red from all the attention. Sitting back down, I listened as Khan continued.

“I’m sure that we can expect to see great things from him, especially now that he’ll be marrying my niece, Mila Aurelius, right here on stage next week.”

Khan had already made the announcement days ago, but still there were men among the audience who booed. Mila squeezed my hand and gave me an apologetic look, like she was sorry for their behavior.

On the stage, Khan held up his hands. “I understand your frustration. Many of you were looking forward to Mila’s bridal tournament, but I stand by my words that the tournament will still happen. The winner will still get the prize money, and we’ll invite women from the Matching Program to attend. It’s

a new format, but if you are willing to adapt, you'll find that it's an improvement. One of the new things that will happen is the chance to meet and talk to a number of my friends in person. Hunter Hercules has returned to play soccer with his old team and will be there with his talented wife Emanuela. The two of them will show off their impressive skills with a ball. The celebrated genius Shelly Summers and the world-famous singer Salma Rose are coming, and so is dancer and actress Willow Darlington, whom you just saw as Laura in the show. You'll also get to meet Councilman Jonah Cervici, who is bringing his single sister, Anne."

Excited mutterings broke out among

the audience members. Several whistled loud and Khan had to hold up his hands to silence them.

“I know it’s all very exciting, but let’s get back to the highlight of this evening.” Music began playing and Khan’s voice grew softer. “It’s time for another beautiful wedding. Please help me welcome Katrina and Andrew.”

The bride looked very pretty wearing a long-sleeved dress that underlined her narrow waist and sat tight across her chest. The flowers in her dark brown hair made her ooze with femininity and Andrew beamed with pride like he’d just won a tournament and now got to claim his bride.

Mila and I intertwined our fingers as

we witnessed the wedding ceremony. Next week it would be us on that stage. We had discussed marrying at Mila's tournament but it seemed like a provocation to the fighters. Khan wanted it to be a public affair and that's how Mila had always envisioned it in her mind too. In the end, marrying after next week's show seemed like the best way to do it, and Mila had a good point when she mentioned that it would make it easy for the guests arriving from the Motherlands if they wanted to stay for the tournament too.

“Did you hear from Shelly and Marco?” Raven asked Mila.

“Yes, they're coming for the wedding, and so are Finn and Athena.”

Mila was beaming with happiness. “Even Kya and Archer are leaving the school for a day. Everyone will be there.”

CHAPTER 28

Party

Mila

The week leading up to our wedding went by fast and before I knew it, twelve hundred spectators were watching us getting married.

All I could see was Jonah standing in front of me in his formal attire with moist eyes. We were in a bubble of happiness and while holding hands we kept gazing into each other's eyes as Khan's voice sounded loud and clear.

“Twelve years ago, a sweet angel descended on the Northlands. From the

beginning, Mila melted us with her kindness, cute dimples, and beautiful singing voice. And then by some miracle Magni and Laura were lucky enough to adopt you into our Aurelius family.

“Jonah, it’s no secret that you spoiled our plan of Mila’s marrying the strongest protector in our country. But then you are no ordinary man yourself. You’ve been named the most powerful man in the Motherlands and have already achieved more than any other man before you. I can tell you from experience that having a loving partner and best friend by your side makes the sacrifices you make for your country more tolerable.

“It’s a great honor and privilege to be the first to congratulate you both on

making this commitment to each other. I have no doubt that we can expect great things from you two in the future.”

Taking a deep breath, Khan asked, “Mila Aurelius, do you take Jonah Cervici as your husband?”

I stood in my beautiful white dress, smiling from ear to ear. “I do.”

“And Jonah Cervici, do you take Mila Aurelius as your wife?”

His chest lifted and then he spoke with a powerful voice. “Yes, I do.”

“Then I now declare you man and wife.”

Jonah and I didn’t wait for Khan to tell us we could kiss before we pressed our lips together.

“I love you.” His eyes were glowing

with emotions and made me tear up.

It was perfect. From Khan's beautiful words at the ceremony and the cheer from the audience to, later, the celebration in the ballroom at the Gray Manor for our closest family and friends.

Athena and Finn finally brought back my three siblings and even though I'd spoken with them often while they were gone, I still kept hugging them like I hadn't seen them in a year. Dina and Aubri wanted to dance all night and I joined them several times during the night, feeling such a sense of relief that my dad's paranoia had calmed down. With Magni back in public, looking strong and fierce, Khan's popularity had

gone up. It helped that the *Men of the North* show had become a massive success and that it was portraying him as a ruthless and clever man.

It was impossible not to sense the renewed pride the Nmen took in their nation, and with that came a new appreciation for the work Khan did as their ruler, especially when it came to the integration process.

After my last dance with my two younger sisters that evening, I found Jonah in conversation with Shelly Summers, a world-renowned genius, who had been an assistant teacher at my school when she was fifteen.

“Hey, Milove, I was just trying to understand how the mind of a genius

works.” Jonah pulled me in and kissed the top of my hair.

“And did you figure it out?” I smiled at Shelly, who looked pretty with her long brown hair and feminine dress.

“I’ve concluded that it’s a matter of having a curious mind. Shelly keeps generating questions and some of them are hilarious.”

Marco, who stood next to Shelly, nodded. “Others are bizarre.” He smiled at his wife. “Like when you wanted to know if I ever liked the smell of my own farts.”

I laughed. “Geez, Shelly, you didn’t ask him that, did you?”

Marco laughed too. “Ha. That’s my life on a regular basis.”

“I can’t help that my mind comes up with all sorts of random questions all the time,” Shelly defended herself.

“Tell them what you told me about dogs when we arrived here,” Marco encouraged her.

“That wasn’t a question, but an observation.”

“Still, it shows how your brain works.”

Shelly shook her head like we were all being silly. “I saw Freya playing fetch with some dogs and I just wondered if maybe the only reason the dogs were bringing back the ball was because they thought it brings her joy to throw it.”

I laughed. “If that’s the case, then

I've wasted endless hours throwing the ball for my dogs.”

“What about the question you had about deaf people? We still need to find an answer to that.” Marco looked to Jonah. “You don't happen to have a deaf person in your family we can ask, do you?”

“No.”

Shelly chewed on her inner lip. “That's the thing, deaf people have operations early on these days, but back in the olden days there were people who lived a whole life without hearing. You've got to wonder what their thought process was. I mean we all have a narrator in our minds. We think in words and just by looking at an apple, the word

will appear in our minds. But what if you've never heard speech? Will a deaf person think in symbols, sign language, or make sense of everything in a completely different way than the rest of us? I'd love to know."

Jonah and I exchanged a look. "I've never thought of that," I admitted.

"Me neither," Mila said in support.

Marco chuckled. "That's because we aren't cursed with a mind that will never shut up asking questions. I'm telling you that living with Shelly is the most entertaining thing. She never ceases to amaze me."

Finn and Athena, holding hands, came over to join in our discussion "Are you talking about me? I always amaze

people. I can't help it," he said.

"We're talking about the entertainment value of a curious mind and the obscure thoughts Shelly has."

"Ah, I can relate. I'm a bit of a genius myself, sometimes." Finn tapped at his left temple. "For instance, do you ever think about how your future self is watching you right now through memories?"

"And how many animals probably need glasses but nobody knows it," Athena added.

I felt like I had an aura of happiness around me when I grinned. "You're all geniuses and I love you."

"Aww, you're the sweetest." Athena hugged me and then Finn enveloped us

calling out, “Group hug.”

Athena and I were laughing when they squeezed us together. With the size of Finn, Marco, and all the others, I couldn't see much but I heard Magni protest when apparently someone tried to get him to join.

“I would, but group hugging is bad for my legs. It said so in the instruction manual.”

When finally, they all let up again, I had tears in my eyes from laughing and from the deep sense of happiness that filled me from within. Jonah opened his arms and I placed my cheek against his chest and cried a little.

“Did someone hurt my baby?”
Magni called out.

“No, I think she’s just a little overwhelmed with emotions,” Jonah answered for me while holding me in his arms. “That’s what a massive group hug will do to you. Mila is an empath; she soaks up all the love.”

“Ah, that’s okay then.” I felt my dad’s hand on my back. “It’s okay to cry, you know.”

With a sound between a snort and a gasp, I turned my head to him. “Dad, did you just say that it’s okay to cry?”

Magni lowered his brow. “Yeah, for women, you know.”

“Ahh, okay.” I dried my eyes. “For a moment you had me worried that you might have fallen and hit your head.”

“Men can cry too, just never in

public.” Magni crossed his arms and gave a firm look to Finn and Marco, who were the only Nmen within ears reach. “Don’t pretend you haven’t cried too.”

Finn’s hands flew up in the air. “I bawled like a baby when I thought Athena had died, and I’m not afraid to admit it.”

Marco shifted his weight from one side to the other, but didn’t answer.

“I cry.” Jonah admitted with no shame. “It’s natural.”

“Marco cries too. He did it a few weeks ago, remember?” Shelly seemed oblivious to Marco’s bulging eyes as he tried to tell her to keep quiet.

“It was just because I got burned by a jellyfish and it hurt like a bitch.”

Shelly took a sip of her drink. “You still cried.”

“There might have been a few tears but that’s because it got me at my crotch and I was afraid I might not be able to use it again.”

Jonah, and Finn scrunched up their faces in grimaces of sympathy pain.

“What’s a jellyfish?” Magni asked.

“It’s a fucker who lives in the sea and looks completely innocent until it touches your skin and burns your balls off.”

“You’re shitting me?” Magni stared at Marco. “You lost your balls because you swam in the ocean?”

“No, I still have them, but it’s fucking painful to be burned by those

little animals, and there can be a whole swarm of them.”

With an expression of horror, Magni turned his head and called out to Khan, who stood with Pearl and my mom, not too far away. “You’d better fucking win that election, Khan.”

“What happened?” Khan called back.

“Our plan B of living on a beach just lost its appeal. There are real monsters in the ocean that we didn’t know about.”

“Come on.” Jonah led me to the dance floor, creating a bubble for him and me where our rhythmic movements were in sync and our smiles and touches worked as foreplay for our wedding night.

Dancing and chatting until one in the morning, we left the party to consummate our marriage.

“This is our first night as man and wife,” Jonah whispered after we were done with our second round. Like me, Jonah was warm and sweaty from our intense lovemaking.

“I’m just so grateful that I get to do this with you.”

“Because you feel safe with me?” He let his hand slide up my arm.

I nodded. “Yes, and because no one makes me feel as good about myself as you do. When I’m with you I never worry that you might find me too soft or too weird. My pacifistic Motlander ways don’t offend you and I can be

myself with you.”

Over the last two weeks, Jonah and I had tried out at least a dozen of the *Kama Sutra* positions, but we always came back to him on top of me with my legs wrapped around him.

“There’s nothing better in life than being this close to you. It’s like that story about man and woman being one being before we were separated. When I’m inside you, I feel at peace.”

“Me too, but I still think there’s one thing that will complete it.” I smiled as he nuzzled my nose.

“How can anything be better than this?”

I felt my heart race as I whispered the words, “It will be when you leave

some of you inside of me.”

His eyes expanded and he hesitated. “You want me to come inside you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You sure?”

I didn’t answer except for the calm smile in my eyes.

Jonah pushed deep inside me and rotated his hips. Our sex suddenly became about so much more than him and me. If our love could result in a part of me and a part of him merging together to create new life, it would be the closest thing to oneness we could ever achieve.

“Jonah, yes, I want to feel you come inside me.” I looked deep into his eyes and pushed against him in the most

intimate dance between a man and woman.

Again and again, he thrust in and out until our breathing and moans were high-pitched and my eyes rolled back from the intense spasms in my body that came with the best orgasm of my life.

“Ohh, Mila, I’m coming.” Jonah’s body tensed up as he leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and made sounds of deep pleasure. “Ahhh.”

The sensation of him pushing all the way inside me and filling me up with his semen took satisfaction to a whole new level. I didn’t want him to ever pull out again.

For a full minute after, Jonah lay with all his weight on top of me.

“Are you okay?” I nuzzled his neck.

“Uh-huh.”

“Did you like it?”

Lifting his head, Jonah kissed me and rolled down beside me. “That was the most extreme thing I’ve ever done.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been special to me since the first day we met. You know that.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I didn’t grow up thinking I’d ever be with a woman. At first when I met you, I was just happy to be your friend... there were no ulterior motives.”

“I know, Jonah.”

Still out of breath, he blew out air and took a deep breath before continuing. “Then you asked me to kiss

you in the drone and I felt more honored than you can ever imagine. All that talk about you marrying a large warrior had made me feel insignificant as a male.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Mila I’ve been a changed man since we became lovers and I truly never thought you could make me feel better than you already had, but this... this was the most healing experience.”

“What do you mean by healing?”

“It’s one thing for you to accept me despite being different from what you imagined your husband would be, but today you committed yourself to me in front of everybody and then you asked me to leave something of me inside of you. It’s like the ultimate feeling of

complete acceptance a man can get. Since you said yes to marrying me, I've walked with a different confidence. I don't care how big the Nmen are. I'm no longer an underdog. I'm the fucking winner of your heart."

"Jonah..." I gave a mock gasp. "You said the F word."

"That's how good it felt to come inside you. I'm well aware that thousands of men are envious of me right now."

I trailed a finger down his chest. "I don't care about any other suitors. All I care about is us."

"Do you think they're still partying upstairs?"

"I don't know, but I feel bad for the

dogs. They didn't get their evening walk."

Jonah lifted up on his elbows and looked at the three dogs lying around. "They seem fine to me."

"For now, but I guarantee that they'll wake us at six if we don't take them out."

"Why didn't we have someone take the dogs for our wedding night?"

I sighed. "I should have thought of that, but it's okay. I'll just take them out really quick and then we can sleep longer tomorrow morning."

"It's almost three in the morning. You want to take them out now?"

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

Leaning in to kiss me, Jonah whispered against my lips. “For better or worse.”

“You’re coming?”

“Uh-huh. I always knew marrying you was a package deal. Walking dogs in the middle of the night is a small price to pay to spend the rest of my life with you.”

My heart was melting. “I love you even more for saying that.”

Holger, Loki, and Happy were quick to get up when we began dressing. A walk in the park was welcome at any time of the day.

We didn’t hear any music as we walked out. Nor did we hear the attackers when they came up on us from

behind.

CHAPTER 29

Revolution

Jonah

As soon as we came out into the park, Happy and Holger got a scent of something and took off.

“Darn it, I should have brought leashes. The same thing happened a few days ago. The rabbits had them on a chase for at least twenty minutes before they came back. I’ll bet they just picked up their trace.”

“Let’s hope it won’t take them twenty minutes to come back this time,” I said and tucked a hand in my left pocket.

“It’s cold tonight.”

Loki, the smallest dog, stayed around us.

“Doesn’t he like rabbits?”

“Loki is afraid of the darkness.”

Mila and I were close to the house where lights made it possible to navigate the areas with water fountains and seating arrangements. The lights didn’t extend to the whole park, so we walked in the area around the house that was lit up.

One minute we were walking hand in hand talking about the magic of our wedding day. The next minute, Loki barked and growled at some bushes like an animal possessed.

“Shhh, Loki, you’re waking up

everyone,” Mila scolded the dog, but he wouldn’t stop. We were walking toward him when, all of a sudden, he made a sound of pain and fell to the ground.

“Loki!” Mila cried out in panic and broke free from my hand to run to him.

“No, Mila.” I grabbed for her elbow to stop her, but a strong force jerked me back, just as men dressed in black from head to toe appeared from the bushes.

“Help! Someone help us!” Mila screamed when a large man picked her up and held a gun to her head.

“Quiet or I’ll shoot you,” he hissed.

I didn’t believe for one second anyone would shoot Mila. The thought was ridiculous, but seeing Mila being manhandled blinded me with fury.

Throwing my elbow back in my attacker's face, I got away from him and was able to attack the man holding Mila. All it did was knock his gun out of his hand and make him let go of her to turn his focus on me instead. He punched me in my face but the adrenaline in my system numbed my pain and I raised my hands to block his next punch.

“No, let me go...”

Mila's screams made me look back to see her being dragged away by two other men in black. The distraction caused the man I was fighting to take advantage and plant his fist in my face again. This time, I went down and lay flat on the ground with my body not responding.

The man had a black mask covering his face with only holes for his eyes and he was twisting and turning to find something.

His gun. It was dark and I felt something under my hip that had to be the gun he was looking for.

“Come on,” one of the men holding Mila sneered to the man while she wriggled in his arms.

“Nooo.” Her screams were muffled because of his hand covering her mouth. It tore at my soul to see her in danger and I tried to force myself to get up, but my body was unresponsive, like the blow had numbed me somehow.

“Mila...” My voice was weak and my conversation with Mason and the

guards came back to me. They had wanted to teach me to fight and I'd insisted I could deescalate a situation with my words. How naïve I'd been, but then a situation like this was unthinkable in the part of the world that I came from.

When a beast came out of the darkness and jumped one of the men dragging Mila, I wondered if I was hallucinating. The menacing growls from the monster mixed with the frightened screams from the man being mauled by the eerie thing. It had to be wishful thinking concocted by my injured brain, but then the monster barked and I realized it was Holger, Mila's normally calm and loving Great Dane.

“Someone shoot the damn thing,”

one of the men wearing black snarled while the man beneath the biggest dog I'd ever seen was kicking his feet and trying to protect his face from Holger's relentless attacks. I closed my eyes when I saw Holger rip off a chunk of the man's shoulder.

“I can't find my gun.” Mila's first attacker shouted and pointed to another man closest to Mila. “You shoot it.”

A shot was heard, but either he missed Holger, or the dog was too amped up to register it. Mila, however, spread her arms out and stepped between them.

Seeing Mila facing a man with a gun made everything inside me freeze up. *No!*

With panic spreading inside me, I managed to roll to my side and reach for the gun underneath me.

Another shot was fired but looking up Mila still stood with her arms spread out and Holger was going at the man with as much fury as before.

Taking two decisive steps forward, the man stretched out his arm and pressed his gun at Mila's forehead. "Three, Two..."

Before he reached one, I fired the gun.

It all happened in slow motion. The way they all turned their eyes and looked to me in confusion. I was a peaceful Motlander and shouldn't have been a danger to them, but there I was holding a

gun.

Another soul-ripping scream came from Holger's victim, and with resolute shine in his eyes, the man in front of Mila turned his head to her.

He was going to shoot her. I knew it in my heart and without hesitation, I fired my second shot. The bullet penetrated his chest. First his legs collapsed under him and then he fell on the grass with his eyes and mouth open.

I killed him!

With tunnel sight, I stared at the man on the grass feeling bile rise in my throat. *I was a killer.*

And then the owner of the gun came running with rage on his face. I had the gun in my hands, but I couldn't shoot

him. Adrenaline helped me get up on my knees, but before I could get up on my feet, he was on me, kicking me back down and twisting the gun from my hands.

“Nooo.” The last words I heard was Mila shouting my name. “Jonaaah...”

CHAPTER 30

Mayhem

Mila

All around me, men were shouting as soldiers came running from the house. It felt like Jonah and I had been under attack for an hour but really it couldn't be more than a few minutes.

I ran toward Jonah who was on the ground with an attacker on top of him.

“Holger!” I screamed. “Help Jonah.”

My great Dane had viciously defended me and mauled another man and although I didn't like it, I would do

anything to save Jonah.

Holger's bark was a warning to the man and when he looked up and saw the dog approaching, fear showed on his face. Holger was already huge but with his deep barking and the red foam around his mouth, colored from the blood of his last victim, he looked like a hound from hell. The man looked uncoordinated as he stumbled to his feet and ran for his life.

"Stop him." I pointed after him and Holger took up the chase.

"Mila, are you all right?" Solo shouted to me.

"Yes," I confirmed and kneeled down next to Jonah who was bleeding from his nose and ear.

Archer and Finn came jogging up and gesturing to Zasquash, Finn called out, “Will you see to him?” He pointed to the man on the ground who was still groaning in pain from Holger’s attack.

“Got it.” Being a special forces soldier, Zasquash was a trained paramedic.

Solo, Hunter, Marco, and Leo were mixed in with a group of soldiers who had quickly overpowered our attackers.

“Holger went after another one,” I told Archer and nodded in the direction he’d run.

We heard shots, and I winced.

“It sounds like Holger found him.” Archer’s face was serious as we all heard screaming. “I’ll find them.”

“Be careful, Holger might be confused and attack you too.”

“Are you kidding me, I’ve known him since he was a puppy.” Archer gave me a *I’ve got this* and jogged off.

“Is Jonah going to be all right?” I asked Finn who was searching for injuries.

“Hmmm.” Shaking Jonah’s shoulders, he spoke in a demanding tone. “Wake up Jonah.”

To my relief, Jonah stirred.

“Finn, I saw that man kick him hard.”

Slowly, Jonah opened his eyes and blinked as if it was hard for him to focus.

“How are you feeling champ?” Finn

stared into his eyes. “Your pupils look dilated but it could just be the lack of light out here.”

“Mila...” Jonah’s hand lifted to touch me and then his eyes teared up. “He was going to shoot you. I had no choice.”

“I know.” Squeezing his hand, I hoped he could see that I didn’t blame him.

“Looks like you got knocked out, but you’re not in any critical condition. You’ve got a bloody nose and a ripped ear, but that’s it, although we should check for a concussion.”

Jonah’s hand went to his ear. “They tried to shoot me.”

“Hey.”

We all looked up to see Zasquash approach.

“Do you need help with the other guy,” Finn asked.

“Nah, not unless you can wake the dead. The dog finished him. Ripped out his throat.”

I paled. “Holger killed the man?”

“Yeah.” Zasquash looked around. “Where is he?”

“He’s chasing another one of the men.” I stood up and whistled for Holger to come back to me, hoping that no one else had been hurt.

“What about the other man?” Jonah asked and looked over to the man he’d shot.

Zasquash followed his gaze. “That

one is dead too.” With a frown Zasquash squatted down in front of Jonah.

“What happened to you? You’re smeared in blood.”

Jonah looked down but Finn answered for him.

“Our friend here proved that even a devout pacifist is able to kill under the right circumstances.”

“He was about to shoot Mila,” Jonah muttered.

Zasquash arched an eyebrow. “No need to get defensive. You did what any protector would do. Good for you.”

Hearing the large warrior praise Jonah for killing a man to protect me felt surreal. How had we gone from our wonderful wedding night to this

nightmare. My brain was trying to process and replayed what had happened.

“Oh no, Loki,” I shrieked when I remembered how he’d been hurt.

“Mila stay here,” Jonah shouted but I was already running toward the bushes where Loki had fallen.

“For fuck sake, Solo, stop her.” Zaskash shouted behind me.

Solo was fast for his large size and stopped me with two hands to my shoulders. “Whoa, whoa, where do you think you’re going. We’re not done searching the area.”

“But Loki is hurt.” My voice broke.

“I’ll get him for you.” Solo walked me back to Jonah and the others before

going after Loki.

A deep bark was heard in the distance and I knew it was Holger, so I whistled loud again.

My large protector came running out of the darkness and came straight to my side.

“Where’s Archer,” I asked him as if he could answer.

“Is Archer out there?” Zasquash asked with a frown. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me. He’s not a soldier.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that Archer wasn’t qualified to go after the attacker. He was one of the best fighters I’d ever seen.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, but Zasquash had already run off and was

disappearing into the darkness of the park.

“I found Loki.” Solo was carrying my small dog in his arms.”

“Is he dead?” Reaching out my arms, I took him and tears welled up when I saw the life less body of my fierce little friend. “They shot Loki.”

“Let me see him.” Finn let his hands run over the little dog. “No, he’s still alive. I’m no vet, but I can remove the bullet if you want me to.”

“Pleaaase.” My voice was brittle from tears.

“Give him to me.”

Handing Loki over to Finn as if he was a small fragile newborn, I kissed his head and whispered, “I love you so

much Loki. Don't you die on me."

Only Jonah and I were left and he stood up from the ground and opened his arms to me.

"Come here."

As soon as he opened his arms to me, I buried my head against his shoulder and cried.

"Is she okay?" Solo was walking past us with one of our attackers.

I gave a little nod and watched, as the soldiers rounded up a total of eleven men and sat them down in a group.

A moment later Holger, began to growl when Archer and Zasquash came out of the darkness with a man stumbling on his feet between them.

"Holger, stay here!" I commanded

when he moved forward toward them. To my relief he listened.

I stood in Jonah's arms for what felt like ten minutes while the soldiers roamed the park and shed their light into every bush.

"Area secured," Solo finally declared and a minute later Khan and Magni came out with my golden retriever, Happy, sprinting toward me.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see that you're okay." I bent down and hugged the dog.

Marco and Archer came over and stood next to us. "We better leave the rest to the professionals." Archer was referring to Zasuash, Leo, and Solo who were all police and military.

Petting Happy on his head, Marco

informed us. “This guy was scratching the patio doors and barking to get our attention. We were playing cards in the ballroom when we heard noise outside.”

Happy began cleaning up Holger, by licking his friend’s mouth that still had red foam around it.

“You two did good,” I praised my dogs and decided that I’d double their treats from now on.

“Who are those men?” Jonah asked

With the man Holger had tracked down there were now twelve of them. Sitting on the ground, most of them looked down and avoided the hard stares from the armed soldiers who surrounded them. Only a few were brave enough to face Khan and Magni.

“That one to the right with the mask pulled up to his hairline is Jurgen Lopez. He’s one of the candidates for the presidency.”

Jonah’s brow creased. “But why would he attack us like that?”

Archer shrugged, “My guess is that the plan was to kill Khan and Magni and claim leadership of the Northlands before the election. Jurgen isn’t exactly leading in any of the polls.”

“Not the best night to pick for it,” I said as I watched some of the largest and fiercest men of the North stare down at the captured men. “They must have known that our wedding party would involve a lot of strong warriors. Who would want to mess with all of you

guys?”

Marco shrugged. “Maybe they were waiting for us to leave and hoping that Khan and Magni would be dead drunk from the party. Sorry for asking, but what were you two doing out here anyway?”

“We were taking the dogs out.”

Marco gave me a confused look. “A bit late for a stroll.”

“We figured that by taking the dogs out they would let us sleep a little longer tomorrow,” I explained.

Archer crossed his arms but kept looking to the attackers. “Maybe it was a good thing. We found explosives in one of the bushes. You two might have saved us all.”

In front of us, Khan was confronting

our attackers, but after a while, Magni came over to check up on me. He kissed the top of my head.

“I’m so sorry this happened, sweetie. I guarantee that these fuckers will pay for what they did.”

“Jonah shot one of the men to protect Mila.” Archer sounded proud when he spoke, but I could tell his words made Jonah's head sink.

My dad’s eyes went from Archer to Jonah, as if to ask for him to confirm.

“The man had a gun to my head. Jonah saved me.”

My dad stood for a moment, and then he walked closer to Jonah. “Come with me.”

They only took a few steps away and

I could still hear my dad's words when he spoke.

“Thank you, Jonah. You did the right thing.”

“I killed a man.”

“Yes, but you did it with a pure heart to protect the innocent. I can see that you're blaming yourself, don't.”

Jonah was quiet.

“Look at me, Jonah.” My dad waited for him to look up. “That man came to kill us. He made his choice and he paid the price for it. You did *nothing* wrong.”

“But there's never an excuse for killing.”

“Bullshit!”

I felt the intensity in my chest from my dad's words. “I'm proud of you for

protecting my daughter and I won't allow you to sink down in a hole of self-blame.”

Jonah dried a tear away and my dad placed his right hand around Jonah's nape. “It's okay to feel bad about it for a while, but then you need to let it go. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Jonah looked down again.

“Good. Now say after me, I did the right thing.”

Jonah's eyes shone with tears when he spoke. “I did the right thing.”

“One more time.”

“I did the right thing.”

With a satisfied grunt, Magni released his grip on Jonah and walked off to join Khan again.

“Come on.” I reached out my hand to Jonah. “Let’s get the dogs inside and check up on Loki.”

We walked in silence, keeping our distance from the frightened men sitting on the ground.

“My parents kept saying this could happen. That’s why they had my siblings stay in the Motherlands with Athena and Finn.”

“I know.”

“It’s ironic that the same day my siblings return home, an attack happens.”

Jonah sighed and rubbed his face. “I’m still in shock, but everyone is safe now. That’s all that matters.”

“Not Loki.” My eyes teared up again. “He might die.”

“Milove.” Looking lost for words, Jonah pulled me in for a tight hug.

I could have stayed in the comfort of his arms forever, but with a steadying breath I pulled back. “Will you go with me to find Finn and Loki?”

“Of course, you don’t even have to ask. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“Yes, you proved that,” I whispered and felt Holger push at my hip. “And so did you.” I scratched him behind his ear before looking back up at Jonah. “Thank you!”

CHAPTER 31

Tournament

Jonah

I'm married to Mila.

The thought kept popping up at the weirdest times and each time it released a warm tingling in my body.

With Mila, time flew by so fast that it felt like my life was on fast forward. After the attack it was like we had been given a second chance at life and we couldn't waste a second. In the week between our wedding and the tournament, we had found quiet corners at the Manor that were perfect for

quickies, and most nights we talked until she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. Sometimes, I would watch her sleep while trying to wrap my head around how much I loved her and how lucky I was that she loved me back.

Mean-spirited tongues whispered that the attack on our wedding night had been staged by Khan to gain sympathy. Pearl assured me that it was nonsense and I believed her.

From the interrogations of the attackers the incident was categorized as an impulsive act concocted out of envy and a deep lust for power.

Magni called the attackers stupid amateurs for thinking they could overrun him and Khan with only a dozen men. He

also took time for some long walks with me and probed about how I felt about the killing.

I had always been the one trying to make him reflect on things, so it was an interesting change between us. When Solo and Zasquash came to talk about their experience with killing, it felt like an intervention but I didn't stop them because I knew Magni had sent them and that they were trying to help. Besides, with the scars on their souls, I figured that they needed to talk about it as much as I did.

The irony of the men's failed attempt was that their attempt to overrun Khan only made him more popular as it served as a reminder to the nation of how

unpredictable and fragile life used to be in the Northlands.

Before the Aurelius family came to power and secured peace for the last forty-two years, there had been a slew of self-appointed men ruling the Northlands until they were killed by the next ambitious man in line. No one wanted to return to those days, and it only made Khan's popularity soar to new heights.

On the first day of the tournament, the third episode of the *Men of the North* series aired in the evening. By now, the whole country was hooked on the show. Mila and I were no exception. It was her birthday but she declined a party. All she wanted to do was to watch the show with the rest of us.

The media kept the hype going by giving away more details from the original story behind the series. That part only had Magni groaning when headlines surfaced from the time Laura had left him. The articles brought back painful memories and came with unflattering pictures of him in drunken bar fights.

Men of the North Tours popped up, promising to take visitors to the sights where the series had been filmed, and when the tournament finally began, a huge booth sold out on *Men of the North* merchandise in only two days.

Instead of the normal two to three days that a bridal tournament lasted, the festivities were now spread out over a

whole week. With thousands of participants, there were constant fights in the three large arenas that each held up to ten fighting rings. For the Nmen it was a giant feast of violence. For the rest of us there were street musicians, a comedy tent, a marketplace selling craft works, and of course plenty of beer tents and food stands for the hungry.

The number of visitors surpassed all predictions, in large part because of the dating area, which attracted Nmen from all over the country who were hoping that one of the Motlander women from the Couples Matching Program would pick them. It was a short cut through a selection process that could normally take years since each Motlander was

only presented with ten suitors at a time. The meetings in the dating area didn't rely on algorithms or compatibility in terms of answers on a questionnaire. Instead it was up to the people to chat and figure out if there was a connection.

This was the first time Nmen and Motlander women were meeting without knowing anything about each other.

Mila and I spent a lot of our time in the political corner of the festival. With the election only a week away, all the remaining presidential candidates had been given room to meet voters and stump for their ideas. By now the number was down to thirty-four Nmen fighting for the presidency. The rest of the candidates who had signed up when

the election was first announced had lost interest when they realized the amount of work involved in running a campaign.

Our meet and greet tent was located in the corner with a large banner outside that had the faces of all us celebrities who had volunteered to take shifts in the tent. A headline said:

*Ask us why you should vote for our
friend
Khan Aurelius.*

A long line formed hours before we opened on the first day. Seeing a business opportunity, Freya made sure the people waiting in line could buy refreshments and merchandise from the

Men of the North series.

“How are sales?” I asked her Tuesday when I found her on the side of the tent, bent over boxes in the spring sun.

“Great. We had new supplies printed overnight. I’m just sorting through the boxes. For some reason the sizes got mixed up.”

“But surely someone else can do that.”

Freya’s eyebrows drew close together. “Don’t give me the ‘you’re too young to be part of this’ speech. I’m not.”

“I never said that.”

“Do you know how annoying it is to be eleven years old and have everyone

look at you like you're a kid.”

I suppressed a smile. “Technically, you are a child, Freya.”

She rolled her eyes. “I had to convince my parents to let me be part of this project and still I'm constantly watched by two guards.”

I'd already noticed the two Manor guards watching us.

“Your father is just looking out for you.”

“I know.” She pulled up two large shirts and held them up for me to see. “We sold almost ten thousand of these two.”

I read the text on the first t-shirt aloud:

*Fucking proud to be a
Free Man of the North*

The second had a large beer on the front with a text saying:

*I make beer disappear
What is your super power?*

She handed me another one. “This one sells well too.” It said,

*Beer
Technically a vegan meal*

“That’s great, Freya, and what’s the update on the community homes?”

“We’ve had to make some

adjustments.” She nodded toward the tent. “Despite the positive reaction when my dad announced it, I’ve noticed that almost none of the men that walk through the tent take time to study the information on the screens. My theory is that it’s because they don’t want to step out of the line and lose their place.” She sighed. “And of course, once they’ve met you celebrities they’re dazed and can’t think of anything else.”

“Maybe we can move the screens closer to the entrance instead of the exit,” I suggested.

“That would be nice. Also, my mom and I had these flyers made last night.” Freya handed me one. “So far, it looks like the men are not just reading them,

but keeping them.”

I studied the flyer and read to myself:

Job Opportunity for Animal Lovers

A number of community homes are currently being designed and built to provide a better life for rescue animals in the Northlands.

We are looking for animal lovers of all ages who will take on the role as their protectors.

Each protector will have a private bed and bathroom.

If you have a handicap and need special arrangements, that can be accommodated.

Payment

Chosen applicants will be paid with board and lodging. Your responsibilities are to take care of the animals and work with the other protectors and caregivers to create a warm community for all residents to thrive in. If you already have a (non-aggressive) pet, you may bring it.

“This is good, Freya.”

Her intelligent green eyes lit up. “Do you like the part about calling them protectors? My mom used the word caregivers, but I know Nmen and they all want to be protectors. It gives them a purpose in life.”

“No, it’s good. I’m sure you’ll see many applications, but what about the poor people who don’t like animals?”

Freya wrinkled her nose up. “I’ve never met an Nman who doesn’t like at least dogs.”

“But some people are allergic.”

“Hmm, why don’t we start with this project first? My parents told me that with the ticket sales and the treasures from the storage room we’re good to go. Next, we’ll be looking for suitable buildings that can be transformed. By this time next year, we might have the first ten community houses up and running. The first one could be opening in as little as three months.” She pointed to the flyer in my hands. “They are being

passed out at all food banks as well.”

“Brilliant.” I leaned in to hug her but that made Freya step back and hold up her palm. “You can’t touch me. You’re a man.”

“But I’m a Motlander.”

“You’re still a man.”

I couldn’t argue with that, and part of me was pleased that she saw me as an equal to the Nmen.

“Don’t take it personally. I don’t mind hugging you, but my guards take their orders to protect me very seriously and I don’t want you to get in trouble.” She was just about to walk away when she frowned. “I almost forgot to tell you that we managed to get an express order in for the stickers that you ran out of last

night. They were delivered to the main entrance and Leo went to pick them up.”

“Excellent. To be honest, I’m amazed at how willing they all are to let us put those stickers on them.”

“People always behave weird around celebrities. I’ve seen enough grown men come out of that tent looking goofy just because they got to meet Anne, Salma, you, or one of the others. It’s bizarre if you ask me. You’re just normal people.”

I grinned. “You’re right, we are. But don’t forget that you’re a celebrity too. The media talk about you. I heard they’ve been saying flattering things.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “Who cares what they say? They don’t know me.”

“True, but saying that you have your mom’s kind heart, and your dad’s intelligence to find strategic solutions isn’t the worst that can happen.”

She sighed. “I guess I’m just pissed on my mom’s behalf. She’s intelligent too.”

I smiled and held up both my hands. “I’m Pearl’s biggest fan so I won’t argue. Still, I find it interesting that you object to the media thinking you have your intelligence from your father, but you don’t object to them thinking that you have your warm heart from your mother. Does that mean you don’t think Khan has a kind heart?”

Freya bit her lip. “I guess he does, but in a different way. I saw him cry

when Magni was hurt so I know he cares, but my mom doesn't hide her sympathy or pain like my dad does. She's not afraid that the people might see her tear up or think her weak. It's so strange with adults."

"What is?"

Freya tilted her head. "The way they like to categorize things. My dad explained what it means to be a man to Mason and Thor the other day and he used words like strong, respected, stoic, and protective, but I'm those things too."

"That's right." I smiled because it wasn't hard to envision what a magnificent woman Freya would one day grow up to be. "Can I ask you a question?"

She shrugged and her beautiful green eyes met mine with that intelligent curiosity that made her stand out.

“Are you having a bridal tournament when you’re older?”

Lowering her brow, Freya scanned all the large Nmen waiting in line in front of the tent. “I doubt it. My mom would be crying for weeks if I did. She says I need to find a partner who can make me laugh more.”

“A comedian?”

Freya gave another shrug. “I’m too serious for my own good, but it’s just that most people bore me, especially children my own age. It’s not that I don’t have a sense of humor. I know a lot of Nman jokes.”

“Really? Well let’s hear one then.”

“Okay.” Freya delivered the joke with confidence. “A man went to a barber shop for a shave. The barber asked him to put a wooden ball in his mouth so he could get a closer shave around his cheeks. ‘But what if I swallow the ball?’ the man asked and the barber replied rather casually, ‘No problem, you just bring it back tomorrow like everyone else.’”

My laugh made Freya smile. “That’s a good one.”

“Now you tell me a joke.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m terrible with jokes.”

“Come on Jonah, everyone knows at least one joke.”

“All right!” I rubbed my forehead but only one from my childhood came up. “A patient complains to the doctor, ‘I think I’m starting to forget things.’ The doctor asks, ‘Since when have you had this condition?’ The patient answers, ‘What condition?’”

She tilted her head to the left. “It’s not a bad joke, but your delivery sucks.”

“More stickers.” Leo came walking toward us with a large box in his hands.

“Excellent, you just saved me from embarrassing myself in front of Freya with more bad jokes.” I took the box from him and walked inside the tent where the line of people was moving slowly and men were greeting Anne, Mila, and Shelly, the three celebrities on

duty with me.

“I’m so hungry,” Anne whispered to me when I joined her in the line. “When are the others coming to replace us?”

“Any minute now,” I whispered back.

Just a few minutes later we looked to the tent opening. By now we’d learned to recognize the rise in volume from the voices of the people outside. Sure enough, Tristan and Salma Rose walked in with their guards keeping people away. She was a world superstar and a professional at meeting fans. After greeting us in her warm fashion, she went to work immediately, replacing Anne, who still looked a bit star-struck whenever Salma was around.

I knew from Mila that Salma suffered from anxiety and that she preferred for Tristan to stay close to her. It was fun to see how he did most of the small talk, selling Khan while Salma smiled and placed a sticker on the shoulder of the people who came to meet her. “Don’t forget to vote for our friend Khan,” it said above the exit of the tent.

Hunter and his wife Emanuela strolled into the tent more than ten minutes past their shift’s beginning. “Tristan, Mila... look who we found outside.” Hunter grinned and pulled an Nman his own size in with him.

“Nero, my friend.” Tristan stepped out of the line to greet the man with that arm-grasp, shoulder-slapping thing that

Nmen preferred. “I haven’t seen you since the reunion. What have you been up to?”

“Mostly, I’m keeping out of trouble.” Nero’s eyes were full of life and although tall and fit, he wasn’t an intimidating giant like Solo, Magni, and some of the guards. With his boyish grin Nero seemed friendly and approachable.

“Who is he?” Anne leaned against me and spoke into my ear.

“I don’t know. Maybe he went to school with them.”

Mila gave him a bright smile. “Nero, it’s good to see you.”

“Same. How is your little dog doing? They said on the News that he survived the operation after that stupid

attack.”

“Loki is recovering fine, thank you for asking.”

Tristan still had a hand on Nero’s shoulder but turned to his wife. “Salma my rose, this is my old friend, Nero. He was at the school and used to drive Raven mad and come up with the best pranks.”

Salma held out both hands to Nero and gave him a warm smile. “May peace surround you.”

“Thank you and same to you.” His eyes lowered to the small bump on her stomach before he gave a questioning look to Tristan.

“You didn’t know? It’s all the News is talking about these days.” Tristan

grinned at me. “When they aren’t busy discussing Jonah Cervici, of course. Is or isn’t Salma Rose expecting?” Tristan’s easy laughter filled the tent and he spread out his hands. “I’m happy to tell you that she is. I’m going to be a dad.”

A lot more back-slapping happened as people congratulated him and Salma Rose.

“Hey, Nero.” Shelly turned away from the line of people to meet him.

“Hey, that’s not fair. He’s jumping in front of the line. It’s my turn to say hi to Shelly Summers,” a man complained.

Shelly paused and addressed the man with a soft smile, “My apologies, but I’ve known Nero since he was a

teenager. Tell you what, if you can be patient for a few minutes, Mila will give you a hug in the meantime.”

I stepped forward. “Shelly, you can’t give out hugs from Mila as you please.”

Shelly looked baffled. “But Mila loves to hug.”

“Still, it should be her decision and not yours,” I argued.

“Don’t tell me you’re as jealous and possessive as the Nmen. I didn’t take you to be that kind of man, Jonah.”

“I’m not. Mila can hug whomever she chooses, but it’s up to her and no one else.”

The man in question followed our conversation until Mila laughed and opened her arms. “A hug never harmed

anyone.”

“So, what have you been up to, Nero?” Shelly lifted her elbow and pointed it at him. When he looked confused, Hunter explained, “Shelly is tired of us not being comfortable touching women so she came up with a new way to greet us with a minimum of touch.

“Ahh...” With a grin, Nero bumped his elbow against hers and answered her question. “I’ve been fine. Business is good and I made a lot of extra money training the contestants.”

“You offer fight training?”

“Yeah. But my main job is trade.”

Leaning back with her eyes narrowed a bit, Shelly asked, “Are you

fighting in the tournament?”

“No.”

“Why not? If you’re so good at fighting why not win the money?”

“First of all, Mila was the bride and no offense, but I didn’t want Magni as a father-in-law.”

Mila was done hugging and moved closer to me. “Ah, stop it. My dad isn’t half as bad as you all make him out to be.”

Nero stood his ground. “Yeah, well, I pity the man who makes you unhappy, even once. Magni is no joke and he always overreacted when it came to you.”

“He’s just protective.”

Shelly crossed her arms with an

inquisitive look on her face. “But Mila isn’t part of the tournament anymore. You could fight for the money now.”

Tucking his hands in his pockets, Nero rocked back on his feet. “I could, but there are too many Doomsmen signed up, and against them none of us stand a chance.”

Leo, who stood in his police uniform and kept an eye on the line, snorted. “That’s because they’re all fucking mutants.”

My brows furrowed. “I thought you were best friends with Zasquash and Solo. They’re Doomsmen.”

“Sure. I love those two, but they’re fucking giants.”

Nero shot a smile at my sister, Anne,

who was following the conversation. Before he could talk to her, Shelly continued:

“I never knew you were into trade.”

“No? Hmm, it’s not as exciting as what you do. Did you by any chance invent time travel yet?”

“When did I ever say that I’d invent time travel?”

“You’re a genius. Do something useful with it.” He gave a charming grin.

Shelly didn’t seem to pick up on his joke and answered in all earnestness, “Well, I’m busy on so many other projects at the moment, but the thought of time traveling is fascinating. I’ve been reading all I can find on quantum mechanics and discussed with my

colleagues how, at least on a theoretical level, we should be able to reverse the direction of time.”

“Wow, that sounds impressive.” Anne’s eyes grew larger.

“Ah, don’t be impressed yet. So far, it’s just a thought, but I really think it would be possible to create a state that evolves in the opposite direction of the thermodynamic arrow of time.”

Nero was still smiling. “If anyone can do it, you can!”

With the way Anne kept smiling at Nero, I would have expected her to introduce herself to him, but it was like she had turned shy all of a sudden.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Nero,” I reached out my hand to shake his. “I’m

Jonah.”

He laughed. “Everyone knows your name. It’s an honor.”

“This is my sister, Anne.”

It was interesting to see how Nero straightened up, and cleared his throat before speaking in a deep tone. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Anne stumbled over her words as if he made her nervous. “What kind of trape, I mean trade do you do?”

I was puzzled why she had such a different reaction to Nero compared to the hundreds of Nmen she had met over the last few days.

While Shelly returned to meet and greet the people again, Nero answered Anne,

“A wide variety. Since your brother’s speech at the council, I’ve been buying up rights for previously published romance books. I had a feeling that it was just a matter of time before they would make them legal in the Motherlands, and I was right.”

“You saw the vote today?” Anne’s voice was soft and pleasant.

“How could I not? I’ve been waiting for this to happen.”

Anne smiled widely. “So much is happening on both sides of the border. The legalization of romance books is only the beginning. Actually, we have a celebratory dinner planned tonight. You should come.”

Nero looked at me and I read the

question in his eyes.

“I’m not her protector. Anne is a Motlander; she would never allow me to decide who she can hang out with.”

Anne’s laugh was melodic. “That’s right.”

Nero’s Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “But you want *me* to celebrate with you?”

“Why not? It sounds like you have plenty to celebrate yourself. Do you like to read romance books?”

Nero shifted his balance. “Sure, but to be honest, sometimes I skip to the sex scenes.”

“Ahh, impatient, are you?” Anne’s giggle made me exchange a look with Mila to see if she too noticed Anne’s

peculiar behavior. Fifteen minutes ago, Anne had been tired and complaining about her hunger but now she was laughing and teasing Nero like there was no other place she would rather be.

“Anne, maybe you can ask Nero to show you around the festival. I’m sure you’re tired of hanging out with me and Jonah so much, and you’ve been complaining that you haven’t seen much of the tournament.”

“Ooh, I’d love that.” Anne gave him a sweet smile. “If you have the time, of course.”

The way Nero’s face lit up was answer enough. “I would be more than honored,” he exclaimed with eagerness.

Mila placed her arm around Anne’s

waist. “Nero and I grew up together, I can vouch for him. He would never hurt you.”

“Hurt her? I would protect her with my life.”

Anne giggled some more. “Hopefully that won’t be necessary, but it’s still sweet of you to say so.”

“Nero, Anne was saying she’s hungry, will you make sure she eats?” Mila instructed him.

“Of course.” His eyes flew to Tristan as if to silently ask if this was a dream.

With a smack on Nero’s shoulder, Tristan told him, “You two have fun. We can catch up tonight at the celebration. Salma and I better get back to our meet

and greet.”

“No problem.” Nero was beaming with happiness when he returned his attention to Anne. “What kind of food do you like?”

“I’m open to anything, but I’ve seen people walk around with a dessert that I really want to try. It’s a long stick with ice cream on it.”

“Yeah, I know them. They’re called Tournament Toffees.”

“Toffees? But it looks like cake.”

“It is, but with a toffee filling. How about a burger first? They’ve got some amazing ones up at the comedy area.”

“I like burgers.”

“Then let’s do it.”

“Nero,” Mila gave him a sweet

smile. “Remember that Anne is a vegan.”

“Right, I figured. We’ll have to ask what vegan options they have.”

Anne was still showing her teeth in a broad smile when they began walking to the exit of the tent. “Do you mind if I hold on to your arm?”

“Umm.” Again, his eyes went to me.

My hands went up as I reminded him, “I’m not her protector. If Anne allows you to touch her, that’s up to her.”

“So, can I?” she asked and moved closer to him. “It’s just that it’s a little overwhelming walking around out there. I think I’d feel safer if I held on to you.”

“Of course... yes.” Nero looked like he’d won the whole tournament when

Anne slid her arm under his elbow and they walked to the exit.

Leo stopped them with a deep scowl to Nero. “What’s going on?”

“I’m taking Anne out for lunch.”

The tsunami of envious sounds and comments from the men in line made it hard to hear what Leo responded, but he asked Anne a few questions before ordering one of the largest guards in the tent to escort Nero and Anne.

“That went well,” Mila said with satisfaction when they were gone.

“You’re sure he’s a good guy?”

“I’m sure.” Mila took my hand. “You know what this means? We can have a little time for ourselves. I feel like I’ve shared you with too many people today.”

“Ditto.”

She lifted on her toes and kissed me, which resulted in a few whistles from the line of people.

“Let’s get some lunch, I’m starving.”

With our being married, the Nmen kept their distance from Mila as we walked through the festival. Many shouted comments to congratulate me and tell me how they’d hated the way I’d almost been kicked off the Council. I thanked them all for their support.

In beer tents that we passed, we saw fighters with black eyes, drowning their disappointment over lost fights. Street musicians were playing happy tunes and when we passed one of the fighting arenas, we exchanged another look of

understanding. Neither of us enjoyed violence, and we passed it without stopping. We only had two hours before we had to be back at the meet and greet tent, but it gave us time to enjoy some of the delicious street food, and visit the large dating tent that Mila had helped decorate.

It was stunning with the magical feeling it provided. Everything in here was in warm colors with strings of lights and chandeliers. There were enough small sofas and chairs in different colors and shapes around the tent to seat at least a hundred, but the large round tent had a capacity of three hundred. Colorful rugs on the wooden floor gave the tent a cozy vibe, and in the middle was a dance

floor.

“Oh, look.” Mila threw a nod to the couple on the dance floor swaying from side to side in a close embrace. “I hope they will be among the couples who marry at the closing ceremony.”

We got drinks and found a comfortable chair in the back corner of the tent that offered the most privacy. With Mila in my lap, I leaned my head against hers. “I can’t believe how lucky I am. You blind men with your sweet beauty, and most of them are unable to say anything intelligent in your presence. It still blows my mind that you picked me.”

Mila wriggled her behind on top of my crotch. “Same.”

“Hey, don’t do that. You’re making me hard.”

A mischievous smile made her dimples pop out. “This is a quiet corner and I’m wearing a dress.”

I scanned the room and saw only six other couples – two on the dance floor and the others in deep conversation in the other end of the tent.

“Mila, you’re not suggesting that we have sex right here, are you?” My heart was speeding with excitement and my erection felt like a second heartbeat counting down for a sprint.

Without words Mila lifted herself to the armrest and opened my pants. The lights were dampened and I figured we were well hidden in our deep chair, but

the risk factor was a major turn-on.

With her slender hand she freed my sprinter and let her hands stroke it up and down like a beloved friend.

“Ahh,” my voice almost broke with delight.

“It’s never gonna be as quiet in here as it is right now. I say we take advantage of that.”

She didn’t have to say that twice. Pulling Mila back on my lap, I lifted her dress up and pushed her panties to the side. The sweetest moan sounded from her when I slid inside her.

“Mmm, Jonah.” Her head leaned back on my shoulder as she moaned with pleasure.

Lifting her enough that I could move

in and out, I began taking my wife in a public place. From our first quickie in the entertainment room at the Manor to the other quickies we had enjoyed since then, this was by far the riskiest one. I was in awe of how daring she was and wondered how everyone could have gotten it so wrong about Mila.

“You know people think you’re sweet and innocent, right?”

Mila made another moan. “I’m sweet.”

“Yes. And amazing. But no longer innocent.”

“You ruined that.”

I was breathing hard from my movement and arousal. “Is that a complaint?”

“No.” The way she rotated her hips made me almost come. “I love having sex with you.”

Drilling my fingers into her hips, I rocked in and out while Mila leaned her head back against my shoulder.

The warmth of her inner walls surrounding me, her suppressed moans into my ear, and the view of the clueless people had me so fired up that I felt my balls hardening as they prepared to fire.

“Wait.” I kept her still and bit down on my lip hard enough to distract myself from the pleasure and excitement of having sex in this unexpected way.

Mila moved a little but stopped when I whispered, “Give me a second. I don’t want to come too fast.”

Our eyes closed as we indulged in slow and sensual kissing.

“Oh, heeey, we didn’t know you’d be here.”

My eyes flew open to see Anne and Nero coming toward us. There was no time for Mila to get off me but she sat up straighter and spread her dress to cover how we were linked.

“Why are you two in here when you aren’t dating? You’re already married.” Nero leaned against a sofa across from us while Anne sat down.

“Aww, look at you two all cuddled up. It almost makes me consider finding a husband myself.” Anne gave another of those giggles that I hadn’t heard from her since she was fourteen.

“We like this place. Mila helped design it and it’s nice and quiet.” I hoped it was too dark for them to see my red face.

“It won’t be quiet tonight. It’ll be packed.” Anne patted the spot next to her, gesturing for Nero to join her on the small sofa.

“You’ll have to get your drinks yourself,” Mila informed them and pointed to the bar. “They have both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks to choose from. You should go and check out their menu card.”

“Okay.” Nero had already turned and I was hoping Anne would follow him, but she nodded to Mila’s drink. “What are you having?”

“A sweet pear mocktail.”

“Can I try yours?”

“Sure.” Mila leaned forward to hand her drink to Anne, but to reach it she would have to get up from my lap and it was too risky. With a strong hand around her waist, I pulled her back in place and it was almost impossible not to moan from the exquisite feeling of her sliding down on me again.

Giving me a strange look Anne stood up and picked up Mila’s drink herself. “Why are you being so weird?”

“I’m newly married and can’t get enough of my wife, that’s all.”

Anne tilted her head. “Huh.”

“Is it too sweet?” Mila asked Anne in a slightly high-pitched voice, and

watched as she took a small sip.

“No, it’s delicious. Nero, do you think I could get one of these?”

“Of course.” With a smile he left.

“Aren’t you going with him?”

Anne shot a look over her shoulder to Nero. “Why? Do you think I should?”

“Yes. It’s obvious that being seen with you makes him proud.”

Anne sighed. “To be honest, I think it stresses him out. We were walking arm in arm and he kept getting strange looks from other men. At one point I thought he was going to get himself in a fight, but our guard stepped in and told the other man to get lost.”

“Where is your guard?”

“He’s right outside. With so few

people in here, it seemed like a good place to relax a little.”

“Why don’t you go and fetch him? There are plenty of seats for him to relax too.”

Anne frowned at me. “What’s going on? You’re being weird. Why would I go and tell a grown man what to do?”

I was getting desperate for her to give us a minute to get apart. “Well, then at least help Nero carry the drinks.”

Anne lowered her brow and looked hurt. “If you want to get rid of me you can just say so. I know I’m not your favorite sister after what I did, but I thought you had forgiven me.”

My shoulders fell in a long sigh. “No, Anne, that’s not it.”

Mila sunk her face into her hands for a second, before she admitted, “Sweetie, it’s not you. It’s us.”

“What do you mean?”

“The thing is that Jonah and I were kind of having some fun when you came and we’re still attached.”

At first Anne didn’t seem to understand but then her mouth dropped open and she whisper-shouted, “You were having sex? In here? In public?”

I closed my eyes with embarrassment, while Mila dealt with the situation. “Until you’ve been in love and felt the addiction to having sex morning, noon, and night, you don’t get to judge us.”

“Who’s judging you?”

I opened my eyes to see Nero come back. Handing a drink to Anne, he sat down next to her, oblivious to our predicament.

Anne's eyes were double the size, I was looking away, and Mila had crossed her arms.

“What the hell happened in the two minutes I was gone?”

None of us spoke.

“I see.” Nero stood up. “I'm sorry if I said something wrong or overstepped your boundaries, Anne. It wasn't my intention to upset you all.”

Anne reached her hand up and pulled Nero down before leaning against him and whispering in his ear.

His eyes flew to Mila and me and in

no time his initial surprise changed to an amused grin. “Who would have thought Motlanders capable of something that daring? Respect.”

“It’s a public place,” Anne pointed out with a raised eyebrow but that just made Nero smile even wider.

“Exactly. Every man’s fantasy!”

“You’re kidding.”

“Na-huh, most men here would give their left ball to be in Jonah’s shoes right now.”

“I doubt that,” I muttered.

Nero took a sip of his beer and stood up. “Yeah, well, except for the interruption of course. Come on, Anne, how about we give them a little privacy to finish off.”

As soon as she followed him, Mila lifted off of me so I could get my pants closed again. “That killed the vibe.”

“Yeah, having one’s sister catch you in a sex act will do that.”

My beautiful wife pulled me up from the chair and cupped my face. “Still, I liked the thrill of it in the beginning.”

I smiled back at her. “Next time, we’ll find a better place then.”

CHAPTER 32

Election Day

Mila

When election day finally came around on April tenth, Khan won by a landslide.

The News showed interviews with the losing candidates, who for the most part acknowledged that Khan was more beloved by the people than they were.

Khan's closest opponent, Edward Wolf, didn't go away so gracefully. In an interview he raised concerns that it had

been a rigged election and called people to unite against Khan's oppressive rule.

"Fuck him!" Mason flipped a finger at the interactive wall as he walked past us.

Khan shook his head. "And to think I showed that lowlife mercy when I could have killed him several times."

We were in the large ballroom with family and friends. Most were in happy conversations, but Pearl, Magni, Jonah, and I stood with Khan, who was curious to see his competitors' reactions.

"We should make him pay for saying shit like that. That's a serious accusation." Magni was frowning.

"Magni, calm down." Pearl nodded to the screen. "It's Edward's pride

speaking. Show some empathy; the man worked hard for months and is left with nothing but the feeling of rejection. He's miserable."

Magni elbowed Khan. "How about we end his misery? I'm tired of listening to him whining. It's not like anyone would miss him."

Jonah's eyes widened as he looked to Pearl and me. "He's not serious, is he?"

"No, of course not," I assured him and Pearl confirmed it.

"Khan doesn't kill his critics anymore." She gave Magni and her husband a firm gaze. "He's more civilized than that."

"Being civilized is overrated,"

Magni muttered and shot another scowl at Edward Wolf, who was shown drinking with around thirty supporters who all looked as disappointed as him.

“I fear that being a presidential candidate gave that fucker an inflated feeling of importance. I guarantee we haven’t heard the last of him.” Khan looked to Pearl, who answered him in a calm voice.

“Maybe not, but at least now his claims that the people would rather have him than you will fall flat. The nation has spoken and sixty-eight percent wanted you as their ruler.”

Khan pushed out his chest. “You mean President. They chose me as their President.”

We all smiled at the obvious pride that radiated from Khan.

“What’s so funny?” Finn came to join us.

“Nothing. It’s just that Khan is liking his new title as President.”

“Really?” Finn shook his head. “I don’t know, it doesn’t have the same ring as Ruler.”

Khan frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Lord Khan just sounded more badass than Mr. President.”

“I’ll be President Khan.”

“Still doesn’t sound as dark as Lord did.”

Pearl was quick to defend him. “It’s not supposed to sound dark. Khan isn’t

some old vampire king, he's a modern leader of his people."

Finn leaned back and with a mischievous smile on his face, he narrowed his eyes like he was studying Khan. "You sure about that? He's looking pretty old to me."

Khan brushed his salt-and-pepper-colored hair back. "It's that damn lowlife Edward Wolf. I swear this election aged me three years in three months."

Finn clapped his hands together; his smile grew to a grin. "Then it's a fucking good thing that it's over. What do you say, Mr. President? Are we going to stand here all night and admire your new title or should we turn off that screen and

get this party going?”

Khan's straight posture relaxed and with something close to a boyish grin, he spread out his arms. "You're right. It's time to get drunk."

It was rare to see Khan intoxicated, but that night he didn't hold back. I saw him on the dance floor swirling Pearl around and laughing in a way that made him look ten years younger.

"Look at my little sister." Jonah nodded toward Anne, who stood surrounded by Nmen. "I asked her if she wants to go back to the Motherlands with us tomorrow but she is having the time of her life."

"I wouldn't go back if I were her either. Arson is a serious thing and she

would be spending time in a place of reflection for what she did.”

“Do you think your family would let her stay a while longer?” Jonah asked me.

“Of course, but I have a feeling she won’t have a hard time finding a protector and roommate if she decides to stay.” I nodded toward Nero, who stood in conversation with Tristan but kept sending long glances in Anne’s direction.

“They’ve been dancing a lot.” Jonah had only just said the words before Anne broke free from the five men surrounding her. With a courteous smile, she excused herself and walked over to Nero.

“Aww, look at them.” I felt my heart

flutter when I saw my old classmate and sister-in-law smile at each other like no one else in the room mattered.

“You think she’s in love with him?”

I gave Jonah an ‘are you blind?’ look. “Of course she’s in love with him. The two of them had an instant attraction from the moment they were introduced. It was the same way I felt when Hunter introduced me to you.”

“Yeah, but with us it was just friendship.”

“No, to you it was just friendship. I always wanted more.”

Jonah cupped my face. “Why didn’t you tell me then?”

“Because I didn’t want to ruin our friendship and I never thought you saw

me as anything but a friend.”

“I’m so sorry that I was slow to understand what was going on. It was new territory for me.”

“You really should have gotten the clue when I asked you to teach me how to kiss.” I laughed when Jonah shook his head with regret.

“Jonah.” Anne was approaching us with Nero by her side. She smiled at us both. “Nero and I will take a walk in the park.”

“Oh, okay, you want us to come with you?”

I elbowed Jonah the second he said it.

“Auch...” He gave me a confused look.

“You two go ahead. Your brother forgot he just promised to dance with me some more.”

Nero shot me a grateful smile before they turned and walked out of the ballroom.

“Didn’t you see that they were trying to be alone together?”

“Then why did they invite us to come?”

“They didn’t! She only told you where she was going.”

“Why?” Jonah raised his brow. “I’m not her parent.”

“I’m sure it was because Nero insisted that she tell you. He’s a Northlander and finds it unnatural that you’re not more protective of her.”

“But you said he was a good man. I trust your assessment and I’m sure Anne wouldn’t appreciate me dictating what she can and can’t do.” Looking toward the door where Anne and Nero had left, Jonah pondered.

“Do you think they’re going to make out somewhere in the castle?”

“It’s not a castle and they’re probably just going to talk. Maybe hold hands a little.” My convincing expression didn’t hold long before I smiled. “Or kiss.”

Leaning closer, Jonah whispered in my ear, “Wanna go spy on them from the balcony?”

I nodded with eagerness and like two naughty children we held hands and

moved through the room to the balcony overseeing the garden.

As soon as we opened the door to the outside, we saw Finn, Khan, Boulder, and my dad swaying from side to side with their arms around each other's shoulders. They were singing with deep low baritone voices and sounded drunk.

When Magni saw us, he stopped singing and asked with his speech slurred, "Oh, hey, Vanilla Bean. You're not going to bed now, are you?"

"No, we just wanted a bit of fresh air. You men look happy."

Finn's eyes were unfocused. "Why wouldn't we be? This year has been one long fucking party." He counted on his

fingers. “First there was Raven’s and Leo’s wedding on New Year’s Eve, and then there was your wedding party, and now, we’re celebrating that the Northlands finally has the best president in the world.”

“That’s right.” Boulder swayed a little. “Best in the world... and then some.”

Khan lowered his brow and spoke with slow deliberate words like speaking was difficult. “Hang on. There are no other presidents in the world and what do you mean, ‘finally’?”

Finn was having a little difficulty scratching his nose because his finger kept landing on his cheek. “Mila. Jonah. Don’t you think Khan is the bestest and

most impress... impressive president ever?”

Jonah and I grinned when Magni broke into low laughter. “Shit, Finn, you’re so drunk that you can’t even speak without stammering. You should go to bed before Athena sees you. She’s going to be sooo pissed.”

“No she’s not. Athena is the best. She loves me.” Finn placed his arm around my dad again, swaying a little more in the process. “She knows how fucked up I am, but by some mira... miracle, she still loves me.” His eyes teared up. “She knows, man... she knows everything.” My dad and Finn leaned their foreheads together and squeezed each other’s neck. I knew they

had met in school and that Finn had been severely bullied by a teacher that my dad had ended up protecting him from, but I didn't know the details since none of them ever spoke about it. The bright aura of love between these two lifelong friends had me tearing up myself.

“Athena is fucking amazing.” Boulder muttered, “and so is Christina.”

Khan took one of the glasses of beer standing on the balcony railing and raised it in the air. “To our wives.”

Boulder, Finn, and my dad reached for their glasses and cheered.

“I fucking love my wife,” Finn said and hiccupped. “Athena should be president.” His nose wrinkled up when he realized what he had just said, and he

quickly added, “In the Motherlands.”

“Athena for president,” Boulder cheered along, but then he looked to Jonah. “Shit, wait, if Athena is president then what about Jonah?”

Finn squinted his eyes. “That’s right... Jonah should be the president. Athena doesn’t have time anyway.” Elbowing Boulder he grinned. “I’m keeping her busy, you know.”

Boulder nodded and patted Finn’s shoulder. “I’m going to check up on my wife. I bet she’s missing me.”

They all followed inside and as Magni passed us, he kissed me on the cheek. “You look beautiful, Mila Vanilla.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

As soon as they were gone, Jonah and I hurried to the railing of the balcony and looked down. “Do you see them?”

“No.” The park was dark, but the area around the terrace below was lit up.

“Maybe they went to the amphitheater. We should try the other balcony.”

“Wait.” Jonah grabbed my arm and pointed to the corner of the Manor, where two people came into view. From the height difference it was clearly a man and woman and they were walking closely together.

“That has to be them.” I squinted my eyes to see better. “Yeah, it’s them.”

“I think they’re holding hands.”

“Aww.” The romantic in me couldn’t stop smiling and when Anne and Nero stopped and turned to each other, I held my breath. It was like watching a movie.

“I wish they’d come closer,” Jonah whispered and as if they had heard him, they began walking again. The sweet giggle from Anne reached us and made Jonah and me smile.

“Shhh...” Jonah placed a finger in front of his lips gesturing for us to be quiet now that Nero and Anne were within hearing distance.

“I’m serious, Anne. You could pick any single man in that room and he would fall at your feet and ask you to marry him. Why do you not believe me?”

She shook her head. “I believe you

but the thought is absurd.”

“Why?”

“The only thing they like about me is the way I look. One of them even told me he thought my actions toward Jonah and my family were despicable.”

“Do you disagree?”

She was quiet for a few seconds. “No, but if you all feel that way toward me then why do you want to be around me?”

We couldn't see their faces but Nero's words flowed to us on the balcony. “I can't speak for the others but I feel you spoke in ignorance in those interviews. You were condemning things you didn't understand. I'm sure we're guilty of doing some of that too when it

comes to Motlander things that we find strange. You had never had beer before, had you?”

“Actually... I had. My accusations were more about acting out when I felt excluded and unwanted by my family. We talked about it with a mediator and I feel awful about the things I said and did.”

“Hey.” Nero moved close to her. “We’ve all said and done things we regret. If your family has forgiven you, maybe you should too.”

“I’m trying.” Anne sighed. “We’re going home tomorrow. It will give me some quiet time to meditate and reflect. Maybe then, I’ll find forgiveness for myself.”

“When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know. Now that the election is over, I’m not needed any longer.”

“Yes, you are. I need you.”

Anne gave a little laugh. “You don’t need me. You didn’t even know me until less than a week ago.”

“But now that I’ve met you, I need you.”

“Why?”

“Because... because...” Nero’s head fell forward. “I don’t know how to say this without sounding like a loser.”

“Just say it.”

“I can’t stop thinking about you, Anne. I get physically ill when I see you talking with all the other men who are desperate for your attention. The thought

that you might like one of them more than me is enough to make me...”

“Make you what?”

“I don’t know, but I feel it here in my chest. Like I can’t breathe right.”

Her voice was soft. “I don’t like any of them better than you.”

“Anne, do you understand what I’m telling you? I’m in love with you and I want to be your man.”

She was quiet.

“I just don’t know how to go about it. You’re not in a tournament so I can’t fight for you. You’re not in the Couples Matching Program either.”

“Would you fight for me if I was in a tournament?”

“Of course.”

“But what if there were Doomsmen?”

“Even big guys have weaknesses.” He paused. “The question is, if I was one of the five champions, would you pick me?”

Her answer came fast. “How can you ask me that? Haven’t you noticed how I’ve been rejecting men all evening so that I could dance and talk with you? I’ve literally met and greeted thousands of Nmen. They’ve all been charming and kind to me, but no one makes me feel like you do.”

“Yeah? Are you picking me now? Do I have your permission to take this to the next level?”

Anne played with her hair. “Sure,

but what is the next level?”

I almost gave a small shriek of joy when Nero pulled Anne in and kissed her.

“Shhh... Mila,” Jonah whispered when I couldn’t control my excitement anymore.

“Who’s there?” Nero was looking up at the balcony and we had to come clean.

Waving at them, Jonah called out. “Sorry, it’s just us. We didn’t want to disturb you two.”

“Were you spying on us?” Anne was staring up at Jonah.

“Nooo... Jonah wanted to come out here to make sure you were safe,” I defended my husband.

“Why wouldn’t Anne be safe? She’s with me.”

“No, you misunderstand. We weren’t worried about you hurting her, but you know how Jonah and I were attacked in the park recently. We were just worried about you two being alone out here.”

“Ahh, I see.” Nero relaxed his stance. “Well, as you can see, we’re fine.”

“Good. That’s... ehh... good.”

Anne had her neck bent all the way back. “Would you mind if I don’t go back with you tomorrow.”

Pretending that we hadn’t eavesdropped, Jonah gave a look of surprise. “Why not?”

“Because Nero and I would like to

spend some more time together.”

I spoke up. “But Nero, don’t you live on the East Coast?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you were going home tomorrow. How will you have time together with Anne if she stays here at the Manor?”

“Well, I’m hoping that Anne might want to come back with me.”

“Yeah, we’ll figure it out.” Anne waved at us and began walking. The last thing I heard before they were out of earshot was Nero saying, “I have a really nice place with a view of the water. I think you’d love it there.”

Rising up on my toes, I hugged Jonah. “I’m afraid your little sister might

never move back to the Motherlands.”

“If Nero makes her as happy as you make me, then you won’t hear me complain.”

Kissing his soft lips, I whispered into his mouth, “I love you so much, Jonah.”

His arms wrapped around my waist and he pulled me close. “I love you even more.”

Epilogue

The Picnic

Two years and two months later
June 2451

Jonah

“Why did we have to go on a stupid hike?” Mason had a stick in his hands and was swinging it at the vegetation along the trail.

I laughed at his sulky expression. “Mason, you’re thirteen. You should love being outside.”

When the moody teen didn’t answer, our mother did it for him. “He does, but not with his family. We’re not cool

enough.”

Mason rolled his eyes and hit a bit harder. “I didn’t say that.”

“Why don’t you run ahead to Dina and Aubri? They look like they’re having fun.”

Mason didn’t react to Laura’s suggestion, so I tried striking up a conversation with him.

“Are you excited about Raven’s party tonight?”

“I guess.”

“Hopefully, you can find some more enthusiasm than that. Raven has worked her butt off for the last four years and now we get to celebrate her being the first fully trained female police officer in the Northlands. Her indomitable spirit

is inspirational.”

Mason frowned but gave me a sideways glance. “What does indomitable mean?”

“Unbeatable. Haven’t you noticed how Raven doesn’t take no for an answer and doesn’t need pep talks. She’s got a core of strength that she pulls from, one that’s bigger than any others I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m strong too and I can take Raven in a fight any day.”

Magni chuckled next to me. “Yeah, you are strong, Mason, but there are different kinds of strength.”

“Is that why you got that stupid tattoo on your arm? I liked the bear better.”

Magni grabbed his son by his neck,

and gestured for Mila and Laura to bypass us. “I’ve told you what this tattoo represents.”

Only sounds of annoyance came from Mason.

“I like your dad’s tattoo,” I said in support.

“It’s a joke.” Mason didn’t have the courage to look Magni in the eye when he said it.

“You know what’s a fucking joke?” Magni’s tone had turned sharp. “A disrespectful teenage boy thinking he has figured out life. I had a roaring bear on my forearm when I thought being strong was about being lethal, but I had no idea what real strength was, and neither do you.”

“Let me go.” Mason broke free from his father’s hold and jogged off to get away from us.

“I remember being thirteen and moody,” I said to lighten up the mood as Magni and I began walking again.

Magni snorted. “The worst part about being a parent is recognizing your worst sides in your kid. Mason is so much like me at that age.”

“Then chances are he’ll turn out fine.”

“Don’t say that. I’ve done a shitload of stupid stuff out of pride and a sense of immortality. I don’t want him to end up like me.”

“Why not? I mean, you’re still crude and loud, but the accident gave you a

sense of humility that wasn't there when I first met you.”

Magni groaned. “Nothing will humble a man as much as coming face to face with his own mortality. Accepting help from people around me was the hardest thing I ever had to do.”

“Huh. I would have thought flying again would be the worst part.”

Magni shrugged. “I'm a soldier.”

“And?”

“Fear is our constant companion. We Nmen learn early on that cowering in the face of danger is far worse for your soul than killing with a pure heart. Fear will destroy a person completely.”

“Are you saying that you're never afraid?”

“Of course not. When I was a child, I fell from a tree and broke my arm. I’m happy my dad forced me up that same tree as soon as I was healed. It’s how we do things here.”

“Still...”

“I’m not saying it’s easy, but remember how I insisted that you and Mila walk in the park the day after you were attacked? It’s the same thing. Fear will paralyze you if you let it. When I was twenty-three, I followed a lead on a group trying to overthrow my father. I walked into a trap and was tortured for five days before Khan and the Huntsmen saved me. My mom begged my dad to reassign me to something less dangerous, but I forced myself back out on patrol a

week after the attack. Not going would have destroyed me.”

My eyes widened. “You were tortured. Geez, Magni, I’m so sorry to hear that. I can’t even imagine. You must have been terrified going back out there.”

Magni nodded. “The fear that was created from the attack was beyond measure, but I had to face it and I did.”

“You’re so brave!”

“Ha.” Magni looked ahead and lowered his voice. “I wouldn’t admit this to just anyone, but the truth is that I shook and threw up every time I was getting ready to go out.”

“And you still went?”

“I had to. After a few days I

managed the fear, then overcame it. Any combat soldier can tell you that courage isn't living without fear, it's overcoming it."

"I can't even imagine," I repeated.

"I'm not expecting you to." After a few moments, Magni asked me, "Do you fear death?"

"No, but I fear missing out." I nodded ahead to where Mila was walking with Laura. From behind the bump on her belly didn't show, but just this morning I had kissed it ten times.

We were expecting a younger sibling to our first, Faith, who was a year and a half and sleeping in her hover-carrier next to Mila.

"Me too, and I'm grateful for each

day I get with my family.”

When I first met Magni he had resented talking about his emotions. I was proud of how much he had opened up to me over the last few years. “There was a time when even your family wasn’t enough to cheer you up.”

Magni gave me a sideways glance like he didn’t appreciate my bringing that up. “You’re talking about the time after the accident when they put me on suicide watch, aren’t you?”

“You know I would never judge. You were grieving the loss of your old identity. I get that.”

“I never feared death. My dad had this famous author that he always quoted, Lee Rineheart, do you know him?”

“Yes, Freya shared one of his books with me.”

“Anyway, he said that being alive is only a temporary state and to fear its end is like fearing the sunrise. In my experience, people who fear death forget to live and it’s fucking sad because we’re all going to move on at some point.”

“You talk a big talk, Magni, but don’t you think that all the trauma of your past might explain the issues you had with explosive anger in the past?”

“It’s possible. I’m more alert, jumpy at times, and I get very irritable in certain situations, but you know what? For every year we have peace and I get to go on nice hikes like today, I heal a

little.”

I gave a single nod. “Nature will do that to you. What about nightmares, do you have those still?”

“It’s been a long time since I dreamt about the crash. After I got back to flying, it’s almost gone.”

“Interesting.”

“I think nightmares, a racing heart, and paranoia are symptoms of a failure to face one’s fears, and as I said, that will destroy a person.”

We walked on in silence for a while, before I asked. “Can I see your tattoo?”

Magni showed me the arm that looked so real that I sometimes forgot it was robotic. “Mason is right, it’s not as impressive as the roaring bear you had,

but I like it.” I studied the sea squirt on his skin.

“This fucker can regenerate its entire body from just tiny blood vessel fragments. After losing my arm and both legs, I find that far more impressive than long teeth and big claws.”

“I was impressed when you told Mason that true strength isn’t about being lethal, but now I’m curious. How would you describe it then?”

Magni shrugged. “Truth be told, it can be boiled down to resilience and persistence. You know, the sheer ability to overcome whatever shit life throws at you and go on.”

“Like I was saying about Raven and her indomitable spirit.”

“Yeah, exactly, I’m sure it hasn’t been easy for her. Many men underestimate her because of her gender.”

“It’s something I can relate to.”

Magni frowned at me. “Why? You’re not a woman.”

“But I’m a Motlander man and according to many Nmen that’s almost the same thing.”

Magni slammed my shoulder and laughed. “You’re right. We do think of you Motlander men as feminine, but you’re different, Jonah. There’s a protective warrior in you. You’ve even packed on a lot more muscle from all the workouts with me and Mason. Now we just need to teach you how to fight.”

“I’m not different. There are many like me. You just need to open your eyes and see that men in the Motherlands are just as much men as you are.”

Magni gave a snort. “Right. Except they’re not.”

“Just because we don’t care for violence doesn’t make us any less manly.”

“Ah, come on, you people are way too soft and that’s why the Northlands will never fully integrate with the Motherlands. We’re bringing some fucking balance to all the kindness shit you have going on.”

When I opened my mouth to speak, Magni held up a hand. “I’m warning you, if you’re going to lecture me about

human rights again, don't!"

I stopped and stared at him. "Magni, for all the growth you've done as a man and human being, don't you ever feel guilty about all the men you've killed?"

"No. And neither should you. We do what we have to in order to protect our loved ones. We talked about that."

"Yes, I know, but what about the men who weren't pointing a gun at someone you loved. The men you killed without a trial because you suspected them of treason? Do you feel remorse about that?"

Magni stopped too and crossed his arms. "What would that help? Didn't you hear Pearl in her speech that night Khan won the democratic election?"

“Which part?”

“She said, you can’t judge the past through the lens of new morals.”

I let the words sink in. “Yes, I remember, but it’s impossible not to. For instance, now, with all the regained freedom in the Motherlands it’s hard to understand why we didn’t rebel against the rigid laws sooner.”

“Are you coming?” Dina came running back to us. “Mom and Mila are setting up the picnic and Mason is being rude.”

“Tell your brother that I’ll kick his butt if he isn’t nice to his mother and sisters.”

“That’s what Aubri said.” Dina, who was tall for a seven-year-old, gave a

grin that revealed she was missing a few teeth, and then she sprinted back to the meadow up ahead where Mila and Laura had stopped.

Magni and I were carrying the majority of the food and cold drinks in our backpacks. By the time we got there, the sun had half cooked us and it was nice to sit in the shadow of a big tree.

“Did you hear about Willow’s new role?” Aubri asked me.

“No?”

“They are making the forbidden book into a movie and Willow might be playing the leading role. She’s so excited about it.”

“But what about Nora and Jackson? Does she have time for that with two

young kids?” Magni reached for a large tuna salad sandwich.

“Dad, she’s not their only parent. They have a father too, you know.”

“But Solo is busy.”

“So is Jonah, but he’s still there for Faith.” Mila gave me a soft smile.

I smiled back at her. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“I’m just saying that children need their mother,” my father-in-law muttered and it made Laura caress his face.

“Mila is right, Solo and Willow are good at working together. And they have us if they need help.”

Aubri was peeling an orange. “I hope she gets the role as Deidra. I want to see that movie so bad.”

“Me too, I love that book.” Mila sighed. “I’ve read *Forbidden Letters from the North* at least four times – well, seven if I count the times, I’ve listened to Jonah’s recording of it.”

“Oh, wow. Then you must know it all by heart. What’s your favorite passage in it?” Laura asked while Magni handed me a beer and took one for himself.

Mila’s eyes looked up to the sky as she thought about it. “Hmm, obviously, I love all the letters and the love scenes, but there’s a part that says, ‘For decades we’ve villainized our neighbor for being different from us. Each side of the border has felt superior to the other and shown no interest in listening or trying to

understand. Like two stubborn giants with our feet tied together, we've been leaning away from each other and have fallen to the ground. It's time to realize that the only way to get back up is to link our hands and work together.”

Laura nodded. “I like that. The thought of a world with men and women at war with each other is depressing.”

Magni leaned in and kissed her. “I agree.”

“Seriously, do you two ever stop kissing? It's disgusting.” Mason, who was sitting on the edge of the large picnic blanket, rolled his eyes and looked away, but Laura was quick to pull her large son in and plant kisses on his hair, which made us all laugh.

Mason was scrunching up his face, but he didn't fight it. It made me think that maybe he didn't mind as much as he wanted us to think.

“One day you'll learn that kissing is a secret super power that holds magical healing properties.”

“I don't need any girls to kiss me.”

“That's what I used to think, Mason.” I gave the boy a sympathetic smile. “But then I met Mila, and things changed.”

“Take it from us old and wise people,” Laura said with a mock serious tone. “Men and women need each other, and one should never be above the other.”

Magni held his beer to his lips and

chuckled. “Ha, that’s some weird shit to say when we both know how much you like me on top of you.”

“Dad!” Mila rolled her eyes and Laura threw some grass at Magni.

“You knew what I meant.”

“I thought you were talking about positions in front of our kids, which is unusual.” He winked at Laura.

Mason’s twin, Aubri, spoke up. “I think what Mom meant was that everything is better if there’s balance.”

“That’s right, Aubri. Thank you.” Laura gave her daughter a proud smile.

I lifted my beer with a satisfied nod. “Isn’t that the simple truth? Balance is key!”

“To balance,” Mila shouted.

“And beers,” I chimed in.

Magni raised his own beer up high, “Fuck yeah, and freedom!”

“And kissing,” Laura shouted and elbowed Mason with a grin, which only made the boy roll his eyes even more.

“Seriously, Mom.”

Clinking our glasses together, we all erupted in laughter knowing full well that one day he would agree.

“I want to drink to friendship,” Aubri said.

“Me too,” Mason added. “Friends are better than family.”

“Oh, come on, Mason, why not pick something important like world peace?” I asked but he just scoffed at the idea.

“And how about you, Dina darling?”

Laura turned to her youngest. “What do you want to drink to?”

The girl thought for a second, before she gave a sad shrug. “I don’t know.”

“You can do it,” Mila encouraged her sister and let a finger play with a lock of Dina’s hair. “It’s like saying what you wish for.”

“Okay.” She looked cute with her small front teeth that were growing out. “In that case I wish Mason would love me.”

The teenage boy stiffened. “What did you say?”

Dina leaned against Mila’s shoulder. “You said that your friends are better than your family. I’m family, but you never want to hang out with me

anymore.”

Mason looked pressured. “That doesn’t mean I don’t love you. Of course I love you. You’re my sister.”

“But you love your friends more.”

Swallowing hard, Mason took her hand. “Dina, you are my friend.”

The seven-year-old lit up. “Then... now I don’t know what to drink to.”

“You can still drink to love,” Mila said and I was quick to support that idea.

“That’s right. Love is the most powerful thing in the whole world, Dina.”

“More powerful than my dad?”

Magni caressed her hair with a proud smile. “More powerful than any man.”

“Or woman,” Laura added.

With another round of clinking glasses, we all cheered out loud, “To love.”

This concludes The Pacifist – Men of the North #10

It also concludes this series.

Thank you so much for coming with me into the future. Writing Men of the North began as a thought experiment and developed into something more.

I hope you liked Mila’s and Jonah’s story and it would truly mean the world to me if you took a second to review the book. Here are links to make it easy for

you.

[Amazon.com](#) – [Amazon.uk](#) –
[Amazon.ca](#)

[Goodreads](#)

What's next?

The Pacifist was my 20th book.
Check out my website for a full
overview.

www.elinpeer.com

Now, before we leave the Northlands
for good, there's one last thing, I want to
share with you.

We've heard a lot about the Forbidden
Book, and I for one, would like to know
the story behind it. Wouldn't you?
My next book, Forbidden Letters will be
a prequel to Men of the North. It will
take place 200 years before The
Protector.

You can read the blurb on the next page.

ELIN PEER

MEN OF THE
NORTH

#0.5

FORBIDDEN LETTERS

Forbidden Letters

Curiosity has the ability to turn the smartest person into a reckless fool.

“Few dared live as close to the border as us. Not even the long-standing peace treaty between our two nations could make people forget how the savage Men of the North used to hunt down and kidnap women here.”

If only Devina hadn't been so damned curious by nature, she would have never picked up that letter thrown across the Northern wall. Now, she is horrified to see that it's from a teenage girl who is only weeks away from being auctioned off in a bridal tournament. With no time to waste, Devina is determined to help

the girl escape, even if it means putting herself in danger.

Forbidden Letters is a stand-alone prequel to Elin Peer's wildly popular dystopian romance series, *Men of the North*.

Download this book today and see why readers are raving about the masterful dialogue and unexpected plotline.

About the author

With a back ground in life coaching, Elin is easy to talk to and her fans rave about her unique writing style that has subtle elements of coaching mixed into fictional love stories with happy endings.

Elin is curious by nature. She likes to explore and can tell you about riding elephants through the Asian jungle, watching the sunset in the Sahara Desert from the back of a camel, sailing down the Nile in Egypt, kayaking in Alaska, river rafting in Indonesia, and flying over Greenland in a helicopter.

After traveling the world and living in different countries, Elin is currently residing outside Seattle in the US with her husband, daughters, and her black Labrador, Lucky, who follows her everywhere.

Want to connect with Elin? Great, she loves to hear from her readers and you can find her here: [Facebook](#), [Goodread](#), [Amazon](#), or simply send an email to: elin@elinpeer.com