



MOMENT OF CHANCE

By

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## Chapter 1

*In Year 2027, I became queen. Five months later, I became a mother. Now, in my twenty-fifth year as both, I will spread the truth about my life, and pray forgiveness for my lies.*

*I was born in Watauga, an arid, dry wasteland with a penchant for beginning wars it could not finish alone. My father had been a great general for the king and upon his death I was welcomed into the palace. Though I did not know it, I would be treated as a daughter, and a pawn. In my twentieth year, I was betrothed to King Ulrik of Tanasi and was sent away from the only home I had ever clearly remembered to marry a man I had never met. Accompanying my party to the capital city was a scout named Simeon Fane.*

Simeon Fane ran. He carried a stock pulse laser across his chest, the shape of the gun similar to the old-time shotguns now seen only in museums. Its technology rivaled that of all other guns in Tanasi, specifically crafted for the king's scouts, of which Simeon was a proud member. His hands held the gun at the ready in the event he was taken by surprise while he ran. His shoulders swished back and forth as his feet hit the earth, his breath coming in even pants, his eyes scanning the wooded terrain around him. He could see the royal traveling party from his perch on the ridge. They were traveling in an old creek bed, he and the other scouts of King Ulrik flanking them. The pink hues most of the royal party wore did nothing to camouflage the foreigners from the rebels known to inhabit this section of woods, and Simeon's eyes were open for any kind of disturbance.

King Ulrik had chosen Simeon for this mission strictly because of his knowledge of the region. Simeon had grown up in this stretch of woods, had played together with his brother Sinjon, his childhood home less than two miles from the former hunting

cabin of King Ulrik's father Manin. The men King Ulrik now considered rebels against his throne were the same boys that Simeon and his brother Sinjon had played with during their childhood before their mother sent them to the capital city. But Tanasi had been different under King Manin's reign, and Simeon could understand the peasants' reactions to a man like King Ulrik, a man so different from his beloved father.

A broken twig echoed through the seemingly dead forest and Simeon stopped his forward progression, his eyes trained on the royal party he was assigned to protect. His mission was a simple one: meet the party and escort them through the woods to the capital city. Simeon had not known when he agreed to the mission that the royal party consisted of Raina of Watauga, King Ulrik's betrothed, six of her handmaidens and four Tocquian guards. He considered it an honor that his king felt him worthy to protect the future mother of his heirs. The party trudged toward the capital city; oblivious of the peril their lives could be in. He shot a glance at the opposite ridge to his scouting partner and after a series of hand signals were exchanged, the eight scouts converged on the royal party.

"Forgive me, Highness," Simeon said to the tiny woman in the middle of the Tocquian guards, her body fully covered by a pale pink sheath, almost the color of her skin. With a curt nod as he dropped the gun across his shoulders, its barrel pointed away from the royal party, he stepped toward King Ulrik's betrothed, Raina, and the guards sandwiched him immediately. Anger rose within him. He would have fought against them if not for the feminine hand on his left shoulder.

"Is there a problem, Scout?" the woman questioned, spinning Simeon away from Raina and the guards. Simeon turned to the voice; a spiteful retort building in his mind, but when he looked at the woman, all anger and spite left him. She was dressed in a sheath similar to Raina's but hers was a darker hue of pink, almost magenta. Her skin was pale, making the emerald color of her eyes stand out, and Simeon stared at her open-mouthed, struck by her beauty. "Is there a problem?" she asked again, several of the handmaidens giggling behind Simeon. He glared at them over his shoulder and they stopped at once.

"I must speak with Raina of Tocqua."

"I speak for her," the emerald-eyed woman responded. "What is the problem? This is delaying our arrival at the capital city."

"These woods are full of rebels, those that oppose King Ulrik's rule," Simeon began.

"Why would they oppose the king? Hasn't he been on the throne many years?"

"He has." Simeon acknowledged with a nod, signaling to the other scouts to return to their posts in the woods. He directed the royal party to continue, and he took a place beside the emerald-eyed woman. "Rebellions do not stop simply because another king is on the throne."

"The new king should make a better effort to discover the true heart of the rebellion. Perhaps then, he could quash it."

Simeon laughed, regaining his composure quickly. "An interesting notion, my lady, and one I am certain King Ulrik has considered many times. Still, we must be on watch for those rebels who could harm the future queen." He nodded at Raina in the midst of her towering guards.

"Indeed, Scout," she agreed. "We should speed our progress to the capital city. The less time spent in these woods, the better."

*Ulrik was a great king, though not as great as his father in the eyes of many of his people. King Manin had brought Tanasi to greatness, had led his subjects to the brink of a golden age. With King Manin's death, turmoil swept his kingdom. Ulrik and his uncles fought for control of the kingdom, each man believing his right to the throne was the true path. Blood spilled onto the streets and it was a rebellion that lingered in portions of Tanasi, especially where Simeon and his brother Sinjon lived.*

"What is your name, my lady?" Simeon questioned as their pace hastened. He held the stock pulse laser diagonally across his chest, aimed into the woods. His finger

itched against the trigger and he found it increasingly difficult to scout the terrain while walking with the emerald-eyed woman.

"My name is Mayda," she replied, an air of regality washing over her. "I am chief handmaiden to Raina of Watauga. What is your name?"

"I am Simeon Fane," he replied with a curt bow. "One of King Ulrik's scouts."

"Your king favors my lady with such a skilled guide. We have no reason to fear any rebel with you in our camp."

The well-placed compliment fell on Simeon's warm cheeks. He nodded again, stepping away from Mayda's side. She affected him more profoundly than he would like, than any scout should allow. This was not the appropriate time to become attached, especially when the woman was a member of his new queen's inner circle and his primary goal was to ensure the safety of the entire party.

"Tell me about your homeland," he inquired, hoping he would be able to scout more effectively if she controlled the conversation.

"Watauga is nothing like this place," she began, Simeon noticing at once the level of emotion coursing through her words. Were he not in Tanasi, he would miss it and be saddened at having to leave his home. Believing Mayda felt similarly, he did not interrupt her reflections. She continued to speak and Simeon allowed her voice to drift into the back of his mind, his eyes keen on the ridges, his stock pulse laser at the ready.

He heard the crackle of pulse fire seconds before a group of rebels charged from the woods into the ravine. "Divide," he shouted, tucking his gun underneath his arm as he captured Mayda's hand with the other. She fought against his grasp but Simeon over-powered her easily, his hand wrapping tightly around her thin wrist. Pulling her away from the dispersing royal party, he fired at the rebels in front of him, Mayda's tiny scream echoing in his ears.

Smoke and feminine screams filled the ravine yet they did not slow their escape. Simeon did not stop to assess the situation and attack. He did not return fire or engage any rebel that did not stand in his way. He continued upward, the toes of his boots digging into the soft earth as he pulled Mayda up the ridge. Upon prior agreement

should they be attacked, the scouts were to grab members of the royal party and abandon the ravine. No one would look back. No one would pause. From there, each scout would continue to the capital city alone with his charge. Pulse fire flashed at their backs and Simeon now questioned this action, the plan he had devised and suggested.

*Death was not an option to my own naïve mind. I believed I would be saved and I believed that Simeon would be the man to save me. He was an interesting man, a true man of the earth. My mind understood he was beneath me in class stature. Had I already been the queen, he could have been put to death simply for looking at me. As I was to him then a lie, Simeon could feast his eyes, hands, lips and body upon any part of Mayda he chose.*

"We will move into the capital city under the cover of night," Simeon whispered when he released her. Mayda fell to her knees, dirt attaching immediately to her damp skin and sheath. Simeon stood beside her, his senses still on alert, willing his mind not to think of those who may have been killed in the rebel's strike.

"I need a bath," Mayda announced, turning her emerald eyes up to Simeon. Dirt caked her entire body but did not mar her beauty or diminish his newfound attraction for her. Once he took hold of her hand in the ravine, he had not released it nor slowed his pace. Though she may have been frightened, Mayda did not hinder him, did not object to his abrupt treatment of her.

"There is no time for such pleasantries, my lady. We will find water to drink, rest and be on our way to the capital city. The journey will not be long, a day's time at most." She stood to her feet but did not look at him. "There is a small spring not far from here."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because my home was in these woods," he explained as he walked through the underbrush toward the hidden spring. She followed without his prompt, and Simeon continued. "When my brother and I came of age, my mother took us to the capital city and apprenticed us. I became a squire for the king and my brother entered the church."

"A soldier and a clergy," she said as they crossed a fallen tree, stepping to the water's edge.

"There was little choice who would be the soldier and who would be the cleric. My brother is too intelligent to hold a pulse laser. A collar does not enhance my appearance."

"There is always a choice."

"Did your queen have a choice when she left Watauga?" he questioned, kneeling at the water's edge. He cupped his hands together, allowing cool spring water to fill them, carefully bringing them to his lips.

"She did not," Mayda replied, the sadness in her voice obvious. "I will bathe now."

"There is no time, my lady," Simeon argued, standing from his crouch, settling his gun into his damp hands once again.

"This is *my* choice, Simeon." She turned to face him as her dirty sheath fell to the ground, revealing more of her pale skin to Simeon's hungry eyes. Stepping out of the sheath and into the water, he watched her nipples peak, cool shivers dancing across her skin. Her pale pink skin seemed to glow in the reflection of the water. Internal impulses urged him after her, to rip off his uniform and drown her in passion. His soldier's training kept him stationary on the shoreline, his erection straining against the inside his trousers. For all of his training, he was unable to look elsewhere.

When she was waist-deep in the spring, she turned back to shore and lowered herself completely beneath the water. She reappeared moments later, her opalescent skin glistening as the water ran off of her body. She slowly retraced her steps back to the shore, deliberately taunting him. Droplets of water caught on her eyelashes, her fingertips, her rosy nipples, the soft curls between her thighs. His heartbeat accelerated with animalistic urges and he gripped his gun in an effort to quash his need.

"Tanasi's water has...never looked more inviting," Simeon spoke through gritted teeth, watching the water lap around her thighs.



"How do you mean?" she questioned, backing away from him, her feminine curves hidden underneath the water. "Explain yourself."

"You are very beautiful, my lady, and your presence has affected me." He watched her eyes widen for a split second, a mischievous smile dancing across her coral lips.

"Now I give you a choice, Simeon Fane. Remain on the shore or join me in the water."

*One moment can change a life forever. It is a phrase I have spoken many times during my reign – to my husband, my people, my children. I believe it with my whole heart, my whole soul. The moment that changed my life forever was the moment I met Simeon Fane.*

Hiding his gun beneath the fallen tree and underbrush, Simeon pulled his jacket and protective wear over his head. He removed his boots and unbuckled his trousers, allowing them to fall around his ankles. His erection sprang forward and he exhaled as he grew to his full length, thankful to no longer be bound by his uniform.

Plunging into the water, he found her body open and ready to receive him. Surfacing, he pulled her into his arms, pressing his lips against hers. Her skin was cool and soft, as perfect as he had imagined. She clung to him while they treaded water, her curves aligning neatly against him.

Carefully, he placed her on top of his hardness, gently easing her down its length. Fully shrouded inside her feminine folds, Simeon held her body tight, absorbed in the look of passion clouding her emerald eyes. He began a gentle friction between them, unable to remove himself completely from her. Water sloshed between their bodies, waves cresting to and fro in response to their joining.

Their friction increased, water rippling off of their simultaneous gyrations. Simeon's thick hands palmed the sides of Mayda's body, his thumbs teasingly pressing into the sides of her breasts. He watched as a chill ran across her skin. She shivered, her soft body relaxed against him.

A final thrust triggered his release, and he fought for the strength to remain above water. Placing his hands on either side of her rosy cheeks, he pressed a kiss to her lips. "There is a cave not far from here just across the ridge. We can seek shelter there for the night."

"We cannot journey to the capital city?"

"Creatures more dangerous than rebels prowl these woods at night," Simeon admitted as they began their swim for the shoreline. "And you may wish another bath before the morning." He smiled at her, beginning slowly at first, his stoic façade cracking with each passing curl of his lips. He kissed her before she could protest then released her to swim to shore.

*We journeyed to the capital city as planned, my arrival three days late. It was truly love for me; from that first moment Simeon's lips touched mine in the cold, blue water to the last time he made my pulse race in passion, I would never love another as I loved him. I knew the moment I stepped out of the forest I could never return; no matter how much I loved Simeon or how he begged. I was taking with me all I would ever need. I was taking Simeon's child.*

He moved effortlessly through the underbrush, nary a sound alerting human or creature of their movements. The cave was hidden in the forest, making it the perfect place for their overnight sojourn.

"Did you play here as a child?" she questioned when Simeon offered his hand in assistance."

"I did," he replied, a shallow smile appearing on his face. "Many battles were won and lost in this cave." He reverently touched the cave walls then drew her further away from the cave opening and into the cave's interior. "I cannot build a fire-

"We shall need other ways of warmth, I suppose," she suggested, her delicate fingers looping through the clingy sheath, exposing her breasts to him while he watched.

"Mayda, this isn't proper," Simeon argued, his gaze following as she allowed the dusty magenta sheath to pool on top of her feet. "You are a member of royal court--"

"Do you not desire me, Simeon?" Mayda questioned, kicking the sheath aside and walking toward him.

"I do. I have never desired a woman more." He froze as she pressed her palm to his groin, surprise illuminating her green eyes. Closing the minute distance between their bodies, she tightened her fingers around the width of him, teasingly pulsating her palm against his shaft.

"If we become dirty," she whispered, her fingers inching into the waist of his trousers, "another bath will be in order."

\* \* \*

"Do you regret your life?" Mayda asked as they lay together on the cave floor, a thin sheen of perspiration blanketing their naked bodies. Simeon held her body tightly, one arm resting comfortably on the curve of her hip, the other absently running down the length of the arm she draped across his chest.

"My life would be different had I remained in these woods. It is possible I myself might have been a rebel, perhaps even the rebellion's leader."

"To rebel against the king is a dangerous thing."

"To fancy the queen's chief handmaiden is also a dangerous thing." He rolled onto his side and faced her, unable to resist palming one of her breasts. The nipple came alive in his touch, the recognition of this fact stirring his groin. "Could I see you when we arrive at the capital city?"

"And what if we do not travel to the capital?" She reclined, allowing him full view of both of her breasts. "Could we survive in these woods, this cave, for the remainder of our years?"

"Aye," he groaned, falling onto his back. "We could, but your queen needs you. She will need your companionship in this unknown region."

“King Ulrik needs your leadership and strength, your strategic mind. You are an asset too great to lose.”

“This shall be our moment,” Simeon whispered, pulling her body on top of his. She straddled him with ease; their bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces. Her light hair fell around their faces like a curtain as she lowered herself to kiss him.

“Give me one moment more,” she whispered, their lips tenderly brushing.

Wrapping his arms tight around her curves, Simeon eagerly granted her request.

*I arrived at Ulrik's stronghold looking and smelling like a peasant. My sheath soiled and stained, my hair disheveled, my appearance certainly not that of a queen. Ulrik tenderly took my hand and kissed it, my handmaidens circling in his shadow. I felt Simeon's shock as he learned my true identity and it bruised me to my core. Ulrik thanked Simeon as was customary, then proceeded to lead me to my chambers and away from Simeon. When Ulrik's personal physician discovered I was with child, I was forced to confess my moments with Simeon. Had I known what was to come, I would have kept the truth to myself.*

## Chapter Two

Sinjon Fane sat. His forehead perspired, his crimson robe tightening around his neck. Clanging metal and heavy footsteps reverberated down the corridor and into the room. Sinjon recognized the gait and timbre of the footsteps immediately. There was no doubt in his mind his brother Simeon approached.

He stood when Simeon entered the tiny meeting room, waiting until the jailer closed the door. It was time he needed to collect his thoughts. His once proud brother, a King's Scout, stood before him with his arms and legs shackled like a common criminal. "Simeon," he began then paused, unable to determine what his next vocalization should be. One of counsel? One of scorn? His collar tightened again and he dipped his fingers underneath the starched material, praying for a reprieve.

"She lied. She told me her name was Mayda." Simeon all but fell into the chair and Sinjon caught the momentary look of relief on his face as his body melded onto the uncomfortable wood.

"Surely you recognize the security protocol. A foreign queen traveling to meet her future husband. Of course doubles would be used," he replied, sitting opposite his brother at the small table. He stopped himself from continuing. As it was, his emotions frenzied within him. Sinjon wanted, *needed* his mind to be clear for this meeting.

"I didn't think," Simeon admitted. Sinjon watched with curiosity as his brother's entire demeanor changed before his eyes. Depression no longer claimed him. His cheeks flushed, his blue eyes coming alive. "I must see her," he whispered, suddenly breathless.

"Are you not curious of your own fate?" The words flew from his mouth before he took the time to consider them. Their new queen possessed his brother, bewitching him to the point of nonchalance. This knowledge frightened Sinjon and made him want

to meet his queen, his brother's mistress. "We are all that remains of our family. I do not wish to lose you, Simeon, certainly not like this."

"Then bring Mayda to me. We can escape."

Sinjon suppressed a groan. "Her name is *Raina* and she is your Queen. Guards are stationed with her at all times, even when she sleeps. Were I able to see her and bring her to you, your escape would not be as easy as you predict."

"Ulrik does not share her bed?" His brother's interest did not go unnoticed by Sinjon. "Were I in his place..."

"But you are here," he reprimanded, fanning his arms outward to each corner of the room. Focusing directly on Simeon, he continued, "Here is where you will stay until Ulrik decides your fate."

"He has not decided then."

"You are an excellent Scout, one of Ulrik's best," he said, his voice strong with truth. "I hope he remembers you are a Scout first and his wife's lover second when he passes his judgment."

"When you speak to May -Raina, tell her I request to see her. It could be my last request." The guard bounded into the room, his weapon hoisted on top of his broad shoulders. Sinjon stood slowly; wishing he and Simeon had more time to speak with each other, more time to simply be together.

"I cannot promise you that." Sinjon shook his head and pulled his brother into a tight embrace. Unable to fully forget his cleric's duties, he whispered a small blessing for his brother should they not meet again.

\* \* \*

The queen's receiving room was bare with minimal decorative fixtures adorning the walls or floor. It was a sharp contrast to her predecessor, Ulrik's mother Velora. Sinjon had met with Queen Velora regularly, in counsel and in friendship. It was

Queen Velora who had summoned he and Simeon to the palace to employ them for King Manin. An interesting and intelligent woman she had been.

"My lady will see you," a petite servant announced, stirring Sinjon from his memories. He stood and waited to meet Queen Raina for the first time.

She entered the room slowly, almost as if her feet did not touch the ground. Long drapes of gold trailed behind her; the same drape wound around her shoulders and down the sides of her cream robe. She maintained eye contact with him the entire length of the room, and sat on the large settee beside the large-pane window Queen Velora had always favored. "Please sit," she requested, her tone strong yet pleasant. Sinjon nodded and complied with her request.

"I am -"

"You are Simeon Fane's brother," Raina interrupted, glancing over her shoulder at the lone servant. Sinjon followed her line of sight, watching the servant leave the room, the door closing behind her. "Tell me of Simeon," she requested, her previously strong voice now full of desperation. "I know you have seen him. Is he well? Does he want for anything? Is he...hurt?"

"He is well, my queen," he replied, lowering his eyes to the floor. He had not expected their admiration and heartache to be identical. Something more than just an affair had happened between his brother and his queen on their journey to the capital city.

"Does he ask of me?"

Sinjon paused and raised his eyes to meet hers. Their green color like nothing he had ever seen on Tanasi, unique solely to the queen. "How should I answer you, my queen?"

"Speak freely, Sinjon. I request information about Simeon, *truthful* information." He hesitated and she continued, "You are in no danger within these walls. Of that, I can assure you."

"Simeon requests to see you, my queen."

"Can you arrange such a meeting?" she questioned, almost breathless, while leaning closer toward him. "Could I see Simeon?"

"You are the queen, my lady. You may see whomever you choose."

"But can you get me past the guards?" A scowl crossed her face, and Sinjon knew she had understood his odd attempt at humor. Not only was Queen Raina beautiful, she was intelligent. In Sinjon's mind, her intelligence surpassed her beauty as the quality he most admired in the short time of their acquaintance. "And make certain Ulrik does not learn of this visit?"

"That I do not know," Sinjon admitted. "Ulrik's guards are loyal to him."

"Simeon was loyal and we both know what will become of him."

Bristling at such a frank comment, he pushed the unpleasant thought to the back of his mind. He would meditate on Simeon's fate when he was alone, not in front of the being who had caused the death sentence.

"He has proposed to escape."

"Escape," she questioned, unable to mask the fear in her emerald green eyes. "Why would he want to escape?"

"To be with you." She stood and moved toward the window, her fingertips tracing delicate circles on the panes. Sinjon stood as well, unsure what action to take, knowing comfort would overstep his bounds as a cleric.

"That can never be," she whispered. "My life is here, in this palace. Though I may not want to remain here, I cannot leave. I cannot go with Simeon."

"I will tell him," Sinjon replied, stepping away from the queen to make his leave.

"I still wish to see him," she called, halting Sinjon in his tracks. He turned toward her, his brow furrowed as his mind struggled to fit the pieces together. "Please make this visit possible. I beg you. I *need* to see him."

She stepped away from the window, her hand resting lightly against her womb. With a flash of light, Sinjon understood her desperation – Raina was carrying Simeon's child.



The drab coloring of the cell wall did not hold Sinjon's attention for long. Simeon's guards had been receptive to the idea of allowing Sinjon and a female meet with the prisoner, thanks in part to the extra bank credits Sinjon had supplied. His cleric salary could not afford vast wealth but his minimal expenses did not bankrupt him. Since both his brother and the queen desired this meeting, he was willing to overlook his own opinions and hesitations, and his meager earnings. The queen at his side, they both rose to their feet when Simeon entered the tiny meeting room.

"The shackles are not necessary," the queen instructed, pointing to the irons that bound Simeon's wrists and ankles.

"They *are* necessary," the guard refuted as he shoved the prisoner into the room. "He is a flight risk."

"The shackles are vile, sub-par treatment for one of the King's Scouts."

"A former Scout," the guard argued, "guilty of treason. The shackles remain."

Sinjon saw the queen's high cheeks flush with color, her mouth open for another reply. With a touch to her shoulder, he whispered quickly, "Do not press him, my queen. He may forget the oath my money bought and alert the king of this arrangement." He stood rigid once again, his eyes sweeping from the queen to his brother to the guard.

"Please leave us," she said, arms folding neatly across her sheath. A curt nod and the guard closed the door, leaving the three of them in relative peace.

The moment the door latched, Raina and Simeon were in each other's arms. Simeon's shackles proved no hindrance to their impulses, Sinjon watching their feverish kisses, iron clanging against the cold floor.

"I will leave," he offered quietly when their kisses showed no signs of slowing and no decrease in their passion, bowing his head as he started for the meeting room door. Something other than a trivial affair had happened between the queen and his brother on their journey to the capital city. If he had ever doubted their affections before, the scene before him quashed those doubts indefinitely.

“You cannot,” Raina countered, inhaling while Simeon’s mouth ate at her throat.  
“The guards will be suspicious.”

“What am *I* to do? I serve no part in this...reunion.”

“Turn your back and meditate,” Simeon replied, his palms already disappearing underneath the hem of Raina’s sheath.

## Chapter Three

*Nervous energy coursed through my veins as Sinjon and I journeyed to the dungeon to see Simeon. I covered my face at Sinjon's instance, though as we entered the darkest portion of the compound, I was not certain a mere drape across my face would protect me. We reached the meeting room quickly and I hurried inside in an effort to escape the tormented calls that had signaled my arrival. It did not matter to the prisoners that I was the queen; it only mattered I was a woman, and they could smell my approach. I cringed at their coarse language, the most rudimentary phrases bandied about to describe my body. Part of me was thankful Simeon would never be reduced to their level of degradation. Ulrik would kill him, or he would escape.*

Simeon Fane stood. His wrists and ankles bound, two Wataguan guards flanking either shoulder. He stepped from the darkness into the amply lit meeting room, unable to still the swell in his trousers as Raina stepped from behind Sinjon, lowering her cowl onto her shoulders. She wore a long magenta sheath, almost the exact color of the dress she had worn when she journeyed to Tanasi, his sole responsibility to ensure her safe passage to the capital city. She looked elegant, and even more beautiful than Simeon's dreams could conjure.

"The shackles are not necessary," she instructed, pointing to the irons that bound Simeon's wrists and ankles, drawing Simeon back into the present.

"They *are* necessary," the guard refuted, shoving Simeon forward. He stumbled but quickly regained his footing, not before noticing the panic that flashed across Raina's and Sinjon's eyes. "He is a flight risk."

"The shackles are vile, sub-par treatment for one of the King's Scouts."

"A former Scout," the guard argued, "guilty of treason. The shackles remain."

Raina's cheeks flushed, her mouth parted to reply. Simeon watched his brother touch her shoulder then whisper quickly into her ear. He did not strain to learn the

message passing from his brother to his queen; Sinjon's calm demeanor told him all he needed to know. Of all the room's inhabitants, Simeon knew his brother was the most logical, the one least likely to move on impulse. Simeon loved his brother in that moment, loved the fine logic he had often ridiculed when they were children.

"Please leave us," Raina said, arms folding neatly across her sheath. She stared at him through hooded eyes, and Simeon felt his shaft quicken under her scrutiny. The guards could not leave them soon enough.

The moment the door latched, Raina flew into his arms. His shackles proved no hindrance to their impulses, and he pressed his lips to hers, anxious to claim her body. He had never felt such eagerness during their time in the forest. He wondered how he had survived these few weeks without her touch.

"I will leave," Sinjon offered quietly, his head bowed and eyes closed as Simeon's tongue danced across her throat.

"You cannot," Raina countered, her body writhing against Simeon's, her need equally as fierce as his own. "The guards will be suspicious."

"What am *I* to do? I serve no part in this...reunion."

"Turn your back and meditate," Simeon replied, his palms creeping higher underneath the hem of Raina's sheath. Her skin was warm to his touch, a keen reminder of their passionate moments in the forest. A shiver of desire washed over his body, his thoughts momentarily lost in the forest, in the spring, in the cave. He pulled Raina flush against him, grinding his erection into the apex of her thighs. She inhaled sharply and their eyes locked.

Both instantly fumbled with the other's garments, Simeon's trousers dropping to his ankles as Raina's sheath lifted and hung about her shoulders. Her body looked enchanting, as enticing as it had the moment she revealed herself to him while arguing in favor of a bath. Sliding his throbbing erection into her, he gave an audible groan, not concerned with his brother's presence. He was going to enjoy Raina's body, for it could be his last enjoyment of her in this lifetime.

*Meran's birth was difficult, though cause for great celebration in Tanasi. My husband had an heir, though his closest advisors knew who Meran's father truly was; I had a piece of Simeon I vowed to nurture until the time for him to shine on his own. Struggling with the knowledge of Meran's true parentage, knowing he could never know the truth, I imagined my confession in varying degrees. For my son to know his true father in such a crude manner as this pains me. While Ulrik lived, Meran was his son; when Ulrik died, it was necessary for Meran to remain his son, to protect us all.*

His favorite guard escorted him through the blackened corridor to the meeting room. Tonight would be his final moments in Tanasi; tomorrow, his execution would be held in the public square. The trial had been swift and just. He knew his crimes against Ulrik; many solitary months had made those supposed crimes completely obvious. If it were a crime to love his queen, he would certainly take his death.

Wanting to be alone with his memories of Raina his final night alive, Simeon had initially refused any visitor. When Jarqo assured him it would be a visitor he would not refuse, Simeon believed Sinjon had returned. The brothers had spent the afternoon together in the meeting room, laughing and conversing, as they had not in many years. Their stations within the Tanasi government had restricted their communications but for that one afternoon, they were mischievous boys, pretending to lead the rebellion against King Manin, making their mother first sigh in frustration then howl in laughter at their antics.

He stepped into the meeting room, his eyes pooling with tears, and was surprised to find a woman waiting for him. Her head bowed, her face covered by a pale pink cowl. She was dressed in the manner of Raina's handmaiden; he wondered immediately if she had come to relay a message. "Speak," he said, as Jarqo closed the door behind them. "If you come from the queen-"

"The queen sends her most beloved handmaiden in her stead." She raised her head and lowered the cowl, emerald green eyes staring back at him.

"Raina." He stirred at the sight of her, his mind recalling the last moments they had spent together in this room.

"There is a plan, Simeon," she whispered while stepping across the room toward him. He caught her scent and his erection swelled. Just her nearness was intoxicating. Clearing his throat, he backed away to put distance between them. He needed his head to be clear when they spoke. His impending death could do nothing but cause more harm to her, and Simeon did not wish to be at the center of any further heartache.

"A plan for what, my queen?"

"A plan for your escape. Tomorrow, you will be kidnapped and taken to the forest of your youth. You will be unable to ever return to the capital city. You will live the remainder of your days with the brand of the rebellion." She paused, and Simeon knew she waited for his response. When he could give none, she continued, "It is not ideal, I know, but you will be alive."

"And branded as a rebel against my king."

"You were sentenced to death for *treason*, Simeon. Any life, even one in hiding, is better than death."

"To your mind." His jaw twitched and he could not control the elongated sigh that escaped from his lips. "What you are suggesting is madness. I was tried and sentenced. My life in this life is over."

"That is not true," she countered, her strong voice echoing through the room. "There is always a choice."

\* \* \*

*I love my son, and my daughters. Meran is a fair man, and will be a just king for all of Tanasi. His parentage did not change my love for him, so too is true of the love I feel for my daughters, Ulrik's true heirs. Our lives have been blessed by Meran's presence, the gods knowing what was best above our will and supposed desires. As he steps into his worldly*

*inheritance with a clear conscience, I step toward a place I thought I could never return, my heart beating a rhythm long buried.*

The two scouts stepped cautiously through the wood, stock pulse lasers across their chests. Raina continued without delay, her feet swift for a woman of her age. Still beautiful, her emerald eyes shined with new life the further she descended into the woods and away from the capital city. He would be upon her soon; she could feel the reverberation of his footfalls underneath her soles. Within moments, he would overtake them.

“State your business, Scout.”

She spun toward the ridge, untouched by time. He stood atop it. The man she had first seen twenty-five years ago – Simeon Fane. His face weathered ever so slightly, he too was untouched by time. She felt inadequate in the way her body looked, but only for a moment. When their eyes met, she saw the affection time had not altered reflected back.

Carefully fingering the small blade she had stolen from her Meran’s collection of ancient regalia, she pulled it from her pocket already drawn. Aiming back and forth between the scouts, she lunged for them in a show of courage. “Leave me!”

“We are sworn to protect you, my queen,” the younger scout argued, narrowly escaping the point of her blade. Confusion crested on his features, and Raina smiled. She had counted on their confusion, hoping it would add accountability to their report.

“I am the queen no more,” she insisted and sliced toward them once again. “Leave me. Tell my son I am dead.”

“But you are not dead, my queen.”

“She soon will be,” Simeon offered, his slender fingers closing around Raina’s throat. “As will you if you do not run.” Her gaze darted from Simeon to the scouts, men who so clearly wanted to uphold their sworn duty to protect her.

“Run!” she screamed, her shrill tone echoing through the seemingly empty ravine. The scouts obeyed her, their boots kicking up decaying leaves as they ran out of her sight.

“You have returned, I see,” Simeon replied as he released her neck, his arm winding down her back to her waist. Pulling her tight to his body, he pressed his warm lips to hers. “You have lied to me yet again.”

“What?”

“You lied. You said you would not come back to these woods, and yet, here you are.”

“My son has ascended the throne,” she admitted, eyeing the ridge, remembering the hidden spring just beyond the hill. “I am no longer queen. There are no duties to attend to, no reason for me to remain in the capital city.”

“What brings you to the home of the rebellion, my lady?” he questioned, a mischievous smirk dancing across his lips.

“If you must know, Scout, I am in need of a bath.”