

KAITLYN DAVIS



THE
GOLDEN
CAGE



**THE
GOLDEN
CAGE**
A Dance of Dragons #0.5



By Kaitlyn Davis

OBOOKO EDITION

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ALL WORKS BY KAITLYN DAVIS

A Dance of Dragons

The Shadow Soul

The Spirit Heir – Coming Soon!

The Phoenix Born – Coming Soon!

A Dance of Dragons – The Novellas

The Golden Cage

The Silver Key – Coming Soon!

Midnight Fire

Ignite

Simmer

Blaze

Scorch

To my family for their unconditional love,
my friends for their overwhelming support,
and my fans for their incredible enthusiasm.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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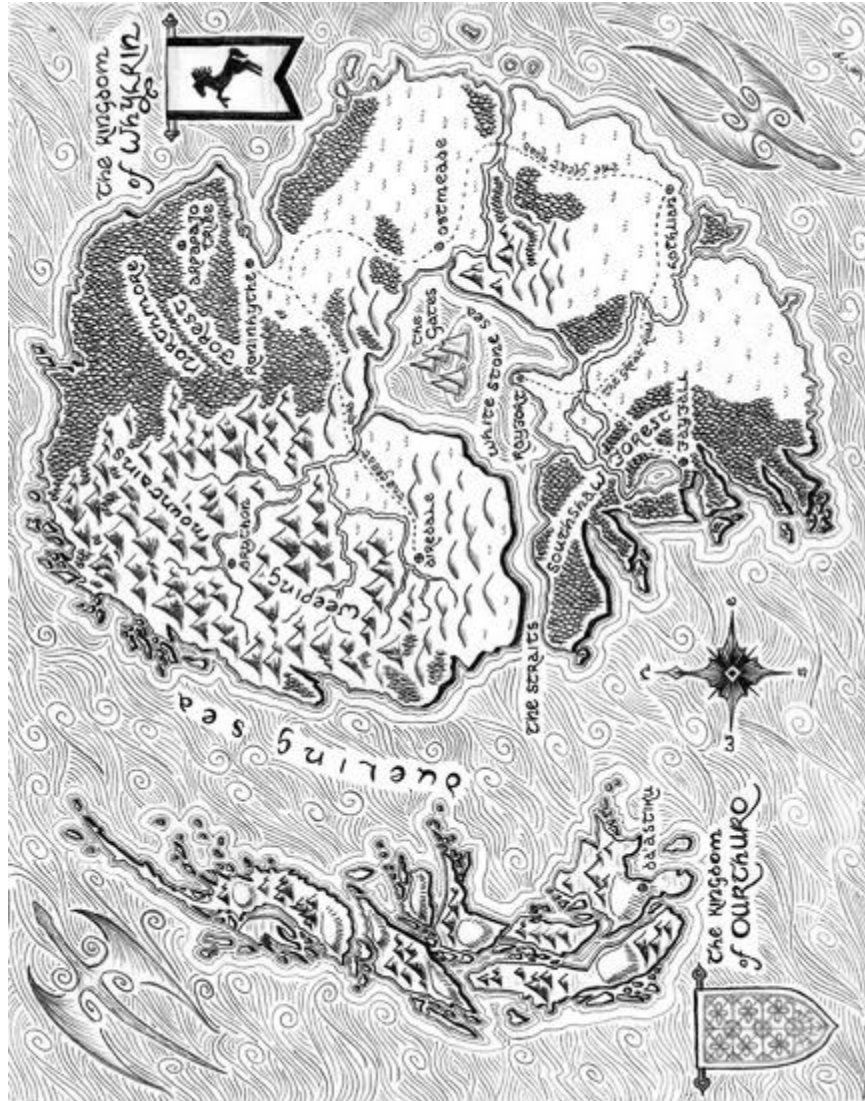
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ONE



Princess Leenaka was a flirt.

Resting on her gilded throne, face hidden behind a veil of golden links dangling from a jeweled crown, she held the attention of every boy in the ballroom. Her smile was coy, half lifted in mystery and half drooped in boredom.

Casually, she made eye contact with a young nobleman, piercing through the metal wisps of her veil and then shyly looking away. Repeating the process, she found another son of a noble house close to her age. Another wink. Another smile. Another victim.

It wasn't a game of ill will or even the whim of a foolish girl—it was survival. Her survival...their survival.

A hush settled over the crowd, pausing Leena mid-thought. It could only mean one thing. The King of Ourthuro had arrived with his son, her brother—the youngest of King Razzaq's children and the only male heir.

Leena spared a glance to her side, eyeing her sisters. They sat still on eleven petite thrones all lined up behind the main dais where the king, queen, and prince would preside. Like statuesque decorations in flowing golden dresses and jingling jewelry, their faces were hidden behind veils. A backdrop. Pieces of art to be admired.

Such is the way of the Ourthuri. Leena sighed. Of the twelve princesses, she seemed the only one uncomfortable with the whole display.

Returning her gaze forward, she watched as the royal family walked through the sea of guests and approached their stage. Her father was not an overly large man, but he was still imposing. The king's crown rested upon his head, shimmering gold and glistening with polished stones, making him seem a foot taller. His flowing robes, like the sun, seemed to produce a light of their own. And the only things in stark contrast to the gold draped over his body were the black tattoos elegantly circling his arms from wrist to shoulder, branding him undeniably as king.

Everyone in Ourthuro had tattoos, a gift from birth. Leena's were those of a princess, painted with images of flowers and jewels as they swirled up her skinny arms. The noble families were allowed images of their own choosing so long as they did not pass one's elbows. The upper arms were reserved for the royal family alone. And for the lower classes, a simple band of black was usually all anyone could afford.

It was another tradition Leena was unsure of. History taught her that it gave hope, that tattoos could always be built upon but never lessened, giving the common people something to dream of or aspire to. But everyone in Ourthuro knew that was not true. There were the unmarked—slaves and criminals whose inks had been forcibly removed. Really the tattoos were just another display, like a line of princesses at one's back, hiding something darker.

Leena's eyes shifted to the queen, who was adorned in a dress made of metal petals that seemed alive, seemed to move like fire in the candlelight. As usual when sighting the queen, Leena's thoughts shifted to her own mother. A woman she would never know but often dreamed of. A woman stolen from her at the moment of her birth. For the darker side to the display of princesses was the missing display of queens. In Ourthuro, a queen could only live if her first child was a boy, if she provided an heir.

But... Leena pushed her morose thoughts aside and smiled at her brother. *Finally my kingdom has a son.* A son who was turning five, a son with a birthday to celebrate.

Despite looking exactly like the king, Prince Haydar had a warm spot in Leena's heart. Perhaps it was his innocence, perhaps his jovial smile, his carefree attitude, his young defiance. Whatever the cause, she loved him.

Biting her lip to keep back a giggle, Leena watched as he walked forward—three steps for every one of the king's. His eyes furrowed in concentration, his small lips resolutely firm yet raised just slightly with a smile. He looked straight ahead, marching as he was taught, but still a boy, thankfully. He was not yet the man her father was pushing him to become.

Nonetheless, Leena saw a difference in him. Like a ghost before her eyes, memories flashed. Her brother at the age of four, of three, of two, of one. A baby with wide eyes, a toddler with an untamable laugh. He used to run wild through the halls. He used to visit her to play. He used to talk to everyone he met regardless of their tattoos.

But now, he was starting to learn the rules. Nod to the nobles. Do not speak with the servants. Never look down. Show no mercy. All laws of a future king.

Leena shivered.

It hurt her soul to watch him grow up, to watch the bars slowly build around him, a gilded cage. A cage invisible to everyone it seemed except her. But it was there.

Even in this ballroom, wide and open, she saw the bars. Columns built of stone lined the floor, surrounded its occupants—wide and immobile. The exits were plentiful but all guarded with soldiers. More displays of wealth and power. But everyone smiled except her, the only frown in the room. Luckily, her veil mostly hid her expression from the guests.

The royal family reached their seats, settling in. Her father paused for a moment, letting the tension in the room build as it always did before his speeches—a little knot of angst he loved to hold onto if just for an instant. No one was ever sure what would come out of his mouth, what new command he might speak, but that was how her father liked it. He thrived on their uncertainty, on their fear.

"Today we celebrate the fifth birthday of our most honored son, Prince Haydar," he began. Leena tuned him out, refused to give him her fear. But his voice, like always, seemed to drown her, to suffocate her.

So she searched for her solace.

There was a reason Leena was known as the court flirt. The more men she talked to, the fewer she was tied to. The more flirtatious she was, the less anyone thought she held a secret. It was a display, just like those she had learned from her father—a pretty front hiding a darker truth.

Hiding a forbidden love.

As slowly as she could manage, Leena let her gaze pass over the crowd. She continued to smile at a few boys, to meet their eager glances, to make them feel special for a quick second before releasing their hold. But all the while, her eyes were moving imperceptibly further away from the guests, closer to the shadows in the back of the ballroom, until finally her eyes met the one gaze they were meant for.

Beside the column, second to the left from the center, in his spot so Leena could easily find him, stood Mikzahooq—soldier, honored personal guard, true love. If the

palace was her cage, he was her trapdoor, her little glimpse of freedom. And the ache in her chest instantly released as he grinned slightly, letting her know he had caught her staring.

You were staring first, she thought, fighting back a smile. Then again, he was her personal bodyguard—it was his job to stare. But Leena knew the deeper meaning in his eyes. He watched because he wanted to, because he could not look away.

Leena could not look away either.

In his formal garb, chest encased with gleaming armor, arms firm and strong as they held a curved sword at the ready before his eyes, Mikza was so beautiful—a perfect statue. But knowing the gentle soul hidden inside those hard muscles made him all the more handsome. The deep rumble of his laughter echoed in her ears, a memory, a weapon to block out her father's voice.

But even Mikza could not block out the collective gasp of a hundred noblemen or the clang of a sword slamming on stone. Leena's head jerked to the noise as her mind fought to piece together what had happened.

A servant was splayed across the floor, head bowed down against the stone, his entire body trembling. A few feet before him rested an amethyst silk pillow, wrinkled from the fall. Before that, a sword, curved like the sun, inlaid with rubies, flickering with reflections of candlelight. A sword too small for a grown man but perfect for a little boy.

Leena closed her eyes slowly, taking a deep breath, dreading what would come next. It was Haydar's present. It had to be.

Now, instead of a sword, her brother would be given a new weapon. Power. Authority. This offense was not something her father would dismiss with the wave of his hand, not in front of the entire court, and not on a day meant to honor his only son.

Leena looked closer at the man, still shaking against the cold stone. His tattoos were gone, as she expected. In place of ink rested mangled flesh where his skin had been cut off, forcibly removed. An unmarked. A slave.

He would not be easily forgiven.

Her father stood quickly. The metal trinkets dangling from his ceremonial robes clanged together, oddly musical in the tense silence. Without a word, he stepped down from the royal platform until he was level with the crowd, closer to the unmarked man.

He stopped before her brother's sword.

"Pick it up," the king growled, kicking the sword by the hilt so it spun in circles closer to the servant.

The man did not move a muscle even as the newly sharpened blade smacked into his arm, drawing a thin line of blood. Only when the sword came to a complete stop did he place his fingers underneath it and rise slowly, eyes focused on the ground, hands raised above his head, presenting it as worth more than he. And to her father, it was.

The unmarked man was unflinching as he waited with one knee on the ground and head bent, following orders as he had been taught. But his breath came quickly, giving his fear away.

"Prince Haydar, retrieve your present," the king commanded.

Her brother eased off his throne, still too large for his tiny legs, which dropped almost soundlessly to the ground. But the light click of his boots was unmistakable against the utter silence. He shuffled down the steps, unsure, but needing to please his father.

Leena licked her lips, forcing her eyes to remain open even though she wished to look away, to find Mikza, to escape.

Please, she thought, he is just a boy. Please do not make him a man, not at only five years old.

But the hope was futile and she knew it. Her father often spoke of his childhood, of the lessons he learned from the former king—one more harsh ruler in the long line of Ourthuri royalty. He had only been seven the first time he killed a man—an unmarked he caught trying to escape the palace grounds.

It was difficult to imagine her father as an innocent boy, but it was more difficult now to watch her brother's innocence fade away, to watch his eyes harden and his tiny fingers wrap around the hilt of a sword, to watch him raise it and wait for a command.

"What punishment do you think befits this crime?" Her father asked, loud enough for all to hear but directed at the little prince.

Haydar scrunched his lips, flicking his eyes around the room in search of the correct answer. "I don't know, Father." He spoke slowly, unsure of himself.

The king knelt beside his son, dropping his weighty arm over Haydar's shoulder

and pulling him in closer. A loving gesture. A twisted one too.

From the back of the room, two soldiers stepped forward, making their way through the crowd. Her father's personal guards. They knew what was coming next.

"He dropped your birthday present, our fine gift to you. And look," he said, gently pulling the sword closer, inspecting it, "we think there is a scratch, right there on the hilt."

"I see it," Haydar agreed, but his brows knotted together. There was no mark.

"He was clumsy."

Haydar nodded.

"He ruined our celebrations."

The guards reached the unmarked and forced him down on the ground, bending him so his forehead pressed harshly against the floor. His arms extended to either side, held down by their knees.

"He dishonored us."

King Razzaq hugged Haydar closer, brows raised, waiting for a proclamation of punishment. Her brother squeezed the grip on the sword, eyes still clouded with confusion, growing clearer by the second. The entire room stared, wondering what sort of man their future king might be, expecting very little change.

And Leena held her breath, clenching her fists, waiting, hoping his gentle mind could not put the pieces together. Hoping everyone was wrong.

"He will..." Her brother paused, looking up at their father's face, searching for the right words. "He will lose one hand?"

Leena's heart dropped.

The king smiled.

"A good choice."

One of the guards holding the man down reached for his weapon, but the king raised his palm. Leena gasped.

He couldn't mean to...

Not at his birthday celebration...

"But a king must do more than just proclaim his punishment," King Razzaq continued, standing slowly. "Sometimes, he must carry it out as well."

And with that, he nudged Haydar forward.

The boy stepped cautiously toward the unmarked, whose scars were like a perfect target, circling his wrists. He tightened his hold and raised the sword above his head, tiny arms shaking with exertion, ready to draw his first blood.

Leena looked away, not caring if anyone saw how fast she turned her head or how quickly her eyes focused on the back of the room.

Mikza.

He was watching her, eyes saddened but not surprised. He had been waiting for her, and she needed his strength.

Leena tightened her grip on the throne, digging her fingers into its golden arms to keep from running across the ballroom. In her mind, she felt Mikza's arms surround her, felt him caress her hair and bring her head to rest in the nook below his shoulder, a spot that seemed perfectly designed just for her. He was holding her, protecting her, but also stopping her. Saving her from the thought of what she might do with her brother's sword, given the chance.

Blinking back blurry tears, she gritted her teeth, letting the pain take away the defeat, the hurt. Her father had won, as he always did.

Leena did not see Haydar's blade fall but she did not have to. The cries of pain were enough to make her flinch as they echoed around the room, as they were dragged farther and farther away, made fainter and fainter, until a full silence hung in the air.

And then clapping. The celebration of her brother finally becoming a man, becoming a prince worthy of being King of Ourthuro.

Leena never let go of Mikza's eyes, worried what she might do if she did.

TWO



Leena sat under the deep water of her private pool, safe in the muffled silence, letting the gentle hum ease away her fears, her worries. Looking up through the glittering shafts of light floating and filtering through the cool blue, the world felt miles away. Anger still clenched her fists, sorrow still gripped her heart, but here under the surface, drenched in sapphire, she could hide away for a little while.

It had been a long night of pretending, of smiling, of hiding everything she truly wanted to say. After her brother's performance, Leena had done her duties as a princess. Dancing and making conversation, then leaving as early as was politely possible for a princess to do, keeping the tears to herself until she was hidden behind the thick walls of her suite.

Mikza would find her, he always did. He always came to comfort her, to kiss her. At that moment, she knew he waited outside her doors, guarding the entrance as was expected, waiting until it was dark and the halls were empty before slipping inside.

But she wanted him now.

Usually the water was enough of an embrace to calm her rushing pulse. Not tonight. Not when it felt as though someone she loved had died, or worse, disappeared before her very eyes as though he had never existed. Perhaps her brother had always been vicious, like their father. Perhaps she had misled herself, believing he could be different, thinking that someday things might be different.

But she remembered cradling him in her arms as a baby, the little spittle drooping from his lips while he giggled, the time she taught him to blow kisses, the way he wrapped his tiny fingers around her thumb.

Leena released the breath she had been holding, watching the air bubbles float before her face and drift higher, disappearing into the glare of the candlelit room up above.

Water had always been her friend, there for her even before Mikza. Her eternal

escape. Her secret hideout. Some might call it magic, but to Leena it was as natural as breathing, sitting in those cool depths for hours without needing to fill her lungs, knowing she would never drown no matter how long she stayed below the surface. As a girl, she thought maybe her mother had gifted her with the powers, letting the pool provide a warm embrace since her nurturing arms had been stolen away.

Now, Leena did not know what to think. Dreams of her mother seemed childish, but she had no other explanation for the gift. She could not manipulate the water, could not move it, or produce it from thin air. It was more like a close friend. A place she could cry without fear of discovery. A place she could dream and pretend she was somewhere else.

For tonight, a place she could remember an innocent, beautiful little boy without facing the realities of her world. It wasn't his fault, she tried to remind herself, not really. Haydar was just becoming what he was groomed to be, what he knew, what he was taught. But still, it cut her deeply.

A shadow fell overhead, interrupting her thoughts and casting a dark circle through the water.

Leena looked up, smiling, as a memory flashed before her eyes. Two and a half years ago, on the day of her fifteenth birthday, the same thing had happened. Only then, it was met with fear instead of excitement...

Leena knew it was time to get out of the water. Her maid would be there any second to primp her for the party—for her party. Fifteen. It didn't feel so old, not really, but it was old enough for her father to take notice—to present her to the men of the court.

She never talked to boys, never spoke with them, and never showed any interest. She was happy in her solitude. In her freedom. Leena did not want anything to change. It was too fast.

Her hands shook, making bubbles in the pool, a drift of fizz that floated to the top of the surface, a trail of nerves.

She really should get out. But her limbs felt too heavy to move, so she continued to sit and ruminate, hidden from the world.

A sound made its way to her ear. A muffled noise she could not make out, something very loud for it to travel all the way down to her, breaking the silence.

Leena looked up and gasped, accidentally swallowing water.

A shadow looked down on her, a person, someone she could not recognize through the ripples.

Frozen. She was frozen in place. No one knew her secret. Not even her sisters.

Suddenly white blinded her, a splash and then a crash as a body hit the water, breaking it apart, sinking closer.

Where could she run? There was no place to hide—she was discovered. And now even this secret had been stolen from her.

Time seemed to stop as the body swam closer, as two brown eyes grew more distinct in the blue, a reassuring face that seemed to tell her it would be okay. Leena did not struggle as the man wrapped his arms around her waist, tugging, pulling her up and up, until her head broke the surface and she took a long gasping breath, shaky with fear.

Silence trapped her tongue and she did not speak as he lifted her from the water, laid her gently down, and cupped her cheek.

Words, but she was too distracted to listen. It was not a man but a boy, a boy who had to be hardly older than she, his olive skin tanned and his muscles firm as they held her. She had never been so close to one before.

"Are you alright, Princess?" He repeated. She didn't know how many times he said it before she finally found the courage to pay attention. And when she did, the entire situation came barreling forward into realization. She jumped from his embrace, stepping backward on unsteady feet.

"Who are you? How dare you manhandle a princess of Ourthuro? I demand to know your name."

He stood abruptly, moving his hands into a fist behind his back, squaring his shoulders and stepping his feet perfectly together.

"I am Mikzahooq, your new personal guard assigned by King Razzaq, my Princess."

"Oh," she exclaimed, surprised, interested, trying to ignore the flutter of her heart as he said the word princess. He was older than she had thought but gentler than she expected a soldier to be. "Well, please do not barge into my rooms unannounced again."

"I won't, my Princess." He paused, squinted at her. "Only, may I ask what you

were doing? When you did not respond to my knocks I grew worried that you were hurt. I saw you in the pool, and I feared, well, the worst, my Princess. I only ask so I can better protect you."

"I..." Leena bit her lip, shuffling uncomfortably on her feet. "I was swimming of course. I dropped a ring and I needed to go find it." She held up her hand, defiantly presenting him with the emerald band circling her finger.

"Of course, my Princess." He could not hide the smirk on his lips, the knowledge that she was lying, but he did not press. And Leena silently thanked him for that respect, a respect very few ever graced her with—one not out of duty but out of kindness.

"You may go," she said, covering her giggle as he jumped into action, suddenly realizing that she was in her undergarments and clearly safe from any harm.

Leena followed him to the door, shutting it gently when he left and falling back against the metal, biting her lip, thinking how fun fifteen might be.

Leena remembered that night so clearly—it was the night her reputation as a flirt first began. Throughout the ball she danced with every boy, remembering no faces because she pictured each with the same features, Mikza's features, imagining she danced with him, her accidental savior.

It had taken months for her to break down his walls, to make him talk to her so openly again, but it had been worth it. He was a man of duty and of honor, a soldier with rules to follow, but love was strong enough to weaken those barriers. Eventually, Leena had told him the truth about her magic, which was why he had now learned to wait for her to rise from the waters on her own.

With one shove of her feet, Leena pushed off from the tile floor, swimming up through the blue until his face became ever more clear. As he had done a hundred times before, Mikza reached both of his palms below the surface, holding her gently and pulling her from the water so she stood in his arms.

Staring into his deep brown eyes, glittered by the candlelight, Leena finally felt relaxed. Mikza lifted a warm palm to her cheek, using his thumb to brush away the water masking her tears, concerned.

But Leena did not want to talk about her brother. Not yet.

"Do you remember the first time we met? How you tried to save me?"

Mikza grinned, nodding as he slipped his hand to the back of her neck and ran his long fingers through her dripping hair.

"I remember the seven other times you made me save you, too, before you finally confessed your secret."

"What secret?" She teased, opening her already large eyes even wider, feigning innocence.

"That you love having my arms wrapped around you," he whispered.

"I don't think that was ever a secret."

Her hands drifted further up his chest until they found his shoulders and pulled him slightly down, just enough to meet her lips.

Immediately, her heart fluttered as though airborne in her chest, lifting her closer to Mikza, making her arms squeeze him tighter. His touch was soothing, comforting, but still burned a slow fire in her belly—a heat she hoped time would never take away. His kisses were the only thing she feared she might drown in, so she clung to him.

Mikza's arms wrapped firmer around her waist, lifting her to the ends of her toes. He was tall and lean, but strong and perfectly fit to her body. They molded together like water, with a fluid grace. As he moved, so did she.

When Mikza pulled his neck back, she tried to follow, but Leena knew that move. He rested his forehead against hers, breath unsteady in the small space between them, leaving an unbearably long inch between their lips, and an even longer pause. She waited for the words she knew would come, the ones she hated for ruining their perfect slice of happiness, but also ones that needed to be said.

"Leena..."

She dropped back down so that her heels came to rest on the floor and stepped back, escaping for a few seconds longer. Mikza watched, waited, but Leena kept moving, running.

Walking past her private pool, she stepped into the night air, onto the balcony outside her bedroom. It was cool, prickling her moist skin and bringing an instant chill to her body. But the cityscape below provided the distraction she needed, the one she searched for.

Da'astiku. The capital city of their island kingdom, Ourthuro. The golden palace

belonging to her father sat at the top of the mountainous city, and each level below degraded slowly down in class, from the glimmering silver coated plateau of the nobles to the bronze plateau of the merchants, all the way down through iron and rock until one reached the sea.

Many loved the beauty of Da'astiku during the day, the way the sunlight bounced from metal roof to metal roof, but Leena found those glares too harsh, too blinding. The moonlight was more beautiful, it made the jagged rock look gentle, the ferocious waters look calm. Even the roofs sparkled, not enough to make her wince, just enough to glisten like diamonds, mirroring the shimmering surface of the water.

Ourthuro was a hard place. The islands were steep with cliffs, with edges that cut. The rock they lived on was relentless, filled with metal ores that made their people rich in coins and jewels but left room for little else. Their land could not grow food, could not nurture plant life. The hunger and the heat had made their citizens tough. But in the night, under a bed of stars, Leena could sometimes forget that her home was an unforgiving place. Under this silky sapphire, she thought maybe there was room for love.

Mikza stepped beside her, dropping his arm over her shoulder and pulling her in close. Heat billowed from his skin, warming her, melting away the harsh exterior of an Ourthuri princess until she was just a girl, hurt and lost. Leena relaxed into his embrace, bringing her arms around his waist, using his sturdiness as her strength.

"He is just a boy," she whispered.

"I know." His deep voice was soft and soothing.

"I don't think I can do this anymore," she said slowly, hardly believing herself. But it was the truth.

Mikza's heart paused. She felt the beat stop in her ear, heard the shock in his chest. "Are you...?"

He drifted off, letting the breeze speak for him. But Leena understood. They had spoken about this many times before, always with her ending the conversation, saying she could not abandon her little brother, could not leave him to this fate.

But time had worked against her. He was already beyond her reach.

"I want to leave." Leena arched her neck up, resting her chin on his chest so she could see into his eyes.

"When?" He asked.

"As soon as possible. In little more than a week, Fayrih will be wed and then my father will turn to me, his next youngest daughter. We've both known for a while that my time is running out. I'll be matched soon, and once that happens, there will be no escape for us."

Mikza brought his hands to her cheeks, cupping Leena's face. His deep brown eyes bored into hers. They always grew darker when his passions were high. Now, they seemed almost black.

"Are you sure you want this? A life on the run?"

His gaze explored her face, searching for the truth. Leena slipped her hands from his back, bringing them over his, holding him, squeezing just slightly, emphasizing her truth.

"I love you, Mikza. I could never want a life that did not have you in it, and so we will run if that is the only option we have."

"I will have nothing to offer you. I will be disgraced. There will be no fancy clothes or luxurious baths or servants to help us."

"I don't care," Leena urged. "The way we feel is richer than this golden palace to me."

A war raged in his mind. Leena could see it. His entire life was about saving hers—always a soldier, always looking to protect her, always putting her needs before his own. In a way, it made her love him more. But in another way, she worried it was the one thing that would ruin them.

If he thought she would be happier married to a noble lord, living in Da'astiku for the rest of her life, raising a herd of children her father would turn cruel before her eyes—if he really thought that fate would be better for her, he would do it. He would sacrifice. But Leena would not let him decide for her.

"Mikza," she sighed, "please trust me. If I stay here any longer, I will die. Perhaps not my body, but my soul. I can already feel it slipping away, hardening. That is what this place does to people, that is what my father does. We must fight it. I need you to help me fight."

He dipped his head, gently pressing his lips against hers, holding onto the

moment. This time, Leena was the one who pulled back, who implored, who forced him to speak.

"My Princess," he sighed, lips lifting ever so slightly. Leena's heart followed with them. "Such a handful. Yes, let's do the impossible. Let's defy the king. Let's find our sliver of forever."

Before he finished speaking, Leena had jumped into his chest, trusting him to catch her. Burying her head in his neck, she smiled, wider than she ever had before, happier in that moment than any time she had ever known—as though her heart would burst, unable to contain the mounting joy.

Mikza caught her, held her high, and laughed carefree with her, mad with love. He spun her around, letting the water on her dress fly off into the night air, spatter around the room, each droplet a little beat in their song.

We'll do it. We'll escape.

Leena had faith. Love was the only thing her father did not understand, so she had to believe it was the only thing he would not suspect. Love, after all, was not the Ourthuri way.

But it was her way.

Their way.

Their freedom.

THREE



Marriages were supposed to be happy things, but Leena could not remove the ribbon of panic knotting her insides. With every passing hour, she was brought closer and closer to her father's attention. And in a few short minutes, all eyes would be on her.

Her sister's wedding had taken place that afternoon in the garden terrace with the sun god playing witness as well as most of the city. It had been beautiful, not that Leena paid much more attention than sitting silently with a smile on her face, a mask covering her growing neurosis, her tumultuous and distracting emotions.

During the ceremony, her sister had been the center of attention. But now, the celebrations were about to begin. Tonight, every lord in Da'astiku would approach the king, asking to wed his son to the newest available princess of the kingdom. Unfortunately, Leena was next in line—a shiny gold coin they would now all want to own.

The same thing had happened to Fayrih. In less than four months after their elder sister's wedding, she was engaged to a wealthy noble house, chained and bound to this city forever.

Leena vowed never to share that fate.

She glanced in the mirror, confused by the woman who stood before her. Pale skin from a lifetime spent pampered indoors, naturally olive, begging for the sun. Dark ebony hair that fell down in curled tresses, uncut for most of her life, now twisted and spun into an overflowing knot atop her head. Large eyes, too large for her petite face, with golden accents painted all around, bringing out the honey in her irises.

A princess.

But it was not how she saw herself. This girl was weak, demure, meant for nothing other than a life of birthing sons. Leena wanted so much more for herself. She was stronger than that fate.

"Almost done, my Princess," her maid said. Leena smiled her consent—she was

used to these preparations. A few more metal trinkets in her hair and it would be complete.

She stared into the mirror, looking behind her face and toward her bed. Hidden underneath, scrunched among her dress boxes, was a small suitcase, almost filled.

Mikza had gathered peasant clothes for both of them, dried food reserves, and weapons just in case. Leena had stolen gold coins and a few pieces of jewelry from her vast collection. Not enough to go unnoticed in this palace, but enough for some people to live off for a lifetime.

There was only one more item they needed in order to leave. One Mikza promised he could find tonight.

"Time for your veil, my Princess."

Leena refocused her gaze, watching as elegantly woven chain-link gold was dropped over her face. So odd that so much time and effort went into beautifying her features, only to have them covered up and hidden from the world.

"Stop," Leena said, lifting a hand. "I will do it myself. Please leave, I would like a few minutes alone."

Mikza waited outside her door, guarding it, as was his duty. But she wanted to see him just for a minute without metal hanging over her eyes, slightly obscuring her vision.

"As you wish, my Princess."

Her maid turned and left, closing the door softly behind her. Leena stood, eyes still on the stranger before her. The dress was new, sewn especially for this occasion. Her sleeves were open and translucent, revealing the tattoos that painted her arms. The golden silks flowed around her narrow frame, elongating her legs. An ornate belt cinched her waist, sparkling with diamonds, matching the coins around her ankles. Every time she stepped, she jingled slightly.

What would it be like to wear dull brown garments, roughly woven so they scratched the skin? To be able to dress herself? To show her face, rather than cover it with lotions and powders and veils?

To be with Mikza in the daylight, surrounded by other people without fear of discovery?

Would she ever feel so free?

The knot squeezed tighter. Leena took a deep breath, pushing her stomach against her belt as far as it would go, trying to calm her rising nerves. For some reason, she could not shake this feeling of dread rising inside her.

A knock sounded. Two fast followed by one slow. Their sign.

Her anxiety lifted slightly as she walked to the door, opening it to let Mikza inside.

"I found it," he said, excited as he entered and quickly shut the door behind him. He pulled a small jar from his pocket, holding it so Leena could see. There was no label, but she knew what it was.

A very expensive lotion. A lotion created to perfectly match her skin-tone. Thin enough to easily slide over her arms, but thick enough to hide the black swirls branding her as princess. In a country where tattoos meant class and everyone spent the days with arms uncovered in the heat, this lotion was her only ticket to freedom.

And it had cost a fortune.

Mikza had found a merchant used to working outside the law, a man he would normally have arrested, but instead paid very well to procure this ointment for them.

Leena ached to try it, to cover her arms and run that very instant, but instead she covered Mikza's hands with hers and kissed him quickly.

"We should leave tonight, after the celebration," she pleaded. The knot in her stomach was lessening now that she knew they had everything they needed. "Everyone will be resting, probably drunk and not at all on guard. The palace will be quiet."

"I agree," he said, and she released a heavy breath, forcing the tension from her body. Tonight. She had a timeline now, a countdown to freedom. She was almost out of her father's grasp. "Keep this with you, in case anything happens. Is there anywhere you can hide it?"

Leena looked down at her gown. The jar was smaller than her fist, but there were no pockets, no folds that could hold it.

"I will have to keep it here," she said and pulled the glass free from his grip. Their bag was sandwiched too far under her bed to retrieve now, but there was nowhere else she trusted the vial to remain hidden.

Her clothes belonged to the maids that dressed her. It was their job to rifle through

her drawers. And the topside of the bed belonged to the servants who snuck in every morning to carefully pull her sheets back into place and fluff the pillows. Even in her room, nothing truly belonged to just her.

Nothing, except...

Leena jumped into action, remembering the one thing no one would dare touch. On the lower shelf of her bedside table rested a jeweled box, just large enough to hold her shoes. But it held something much more precious. A lock of her mother's hair, a strand of her pearls, and the note she had written her unborn child in case it was a girl and they would never meet. Even in this place so devoid of love, the servants knew to leave those possessions alone.

Careful not to wrinkle her dress, Leena knelt down and slipped the little jar into her mother's box, hoping an angel would protect it.

Mikza dropped a hand on her shoulder. She felt his skin through the thin layer of her dress, warm and inviting. Leena stood, meeting him, sharing words without needing to speak. He brushed his fingers along her cheek, careful not to smudge her makeup, just light enough to make her skin buzz.

Leena did not need to be so cautious, and she gripped his arms, never wanting to let go, wishing that if she just held on strong enough he could carry her away.

"I should leave," he sighed. They had been too long already. He started to turn away, but Leena would not let go.

"If this is to be my last ball, I want to dance with you. Just once, I want to be all dressed up, staring at the man I love, smiling and not pretending."

His eyes softened and his hand fell to her waist, gripping her ribs just above her belt, a little higher than was proper. With his other hand, he traced the length of her arm, searching for and eventually finding her fingers.

"Just once, I will be the man you are dancing with," he whispered, "instead of the man watching from the shadows."

There was no music, but at the same time, Leena felt she heard strains of a melody on the breeze. A secret song meant just for them, a beat they both stepped to, swayed their hips to. The coins around her ankles sounded like bells, beautiful and melodic as she followed Mikza's lead. Leena wished to let her head fall against his chest,

to pull him close, but she could not risk damaging her carefully created face, not if her father actually did choose tonight to finally notice her.

So instead, she let the feel of his muscles shifting below her fingers, coiling and releasing, lull her. The perfect curve of his smile brought one to her lips, the twinkle in his eyes, she was sure, did the same.

Time seemed to stop, and then he pushed her away, spinning her in a wide triumphant circle, only to pull her close again, laughter adding to their song.

Leena could stay like this forever.

But they both seemed to sense when their time drew to an end.

"Tonight," Leena whispered, like a prayer.

Mikza nodded, reaching for the door, but before he got there, the knob moved, twisting, scratchy and rough in Leena's ear.

Her jaw dropped, eyes widening, and Mikza jumped to the side just as the door swung open. His body was still visible, a thin shadow cast along the floor, but he was mostly hidden behind the now open frame.

"Leenaka?"

She couldn't breathe. It was her elder sister, Yasmine, dressed up for the ball.

"Is someone else in here?"

Leena found her voice, rushing toward her sister to keep her from stepping any farther into the room.

"No, of course not. I was just singing to myself. Are you ready to go?"

"I did not see your guard, is he not supposed to be here as your escort? Even in the palace, your safety is not assured."

Leena rolled her eyes, trying her best to look exasperated. "Yes, I know. I have heard the same lecture before, but I sent him off early to the ball. I was hoping for a few minutes alone."

"Nervous?" Her sister smiled, putting up a display of nicety but only to hide the sinister undertone of that statement. They looked similar, but Leena had no foolish notions of affection from Yasmine. Siblings, especially twelve girls, were not encouraged to love one another, not in this family. Each had their own mother to mourn, their own marriage to secure, their own ploys to gain the attention of their father. No, competition

was the Ourthuri way, not love.

Yasmine was older, married, and a mother. But that did not mean she would not rat Leena out to their father if she thought it might gain his favor.

"Of course not, why should I be?" Leena shrugged, innocently widening her gaze and raising her eyebrows. "It is my turn next, though I guess someone as old and wise as you barely remembers what it was like before you were engaged. I bet you can hardly recall the rush of having suitors begging for a dance."

Her sister's smile faltered. "Yes, the foolish whims of teenage girls are behind me. Are you ready to leave? I will walk you, so you do not dishonor this house meandering the halls alone."

"Thank you, Yasmine. I trust you always have my best interest at heart. I will just need a moment to put on my veil."

Leena stepped backward, hoping her sister would not follow, unsure if Mikza was well enough hidden for scrutiny. But Yasmine just waited in the doorway with arms crossed, a slight scowl dirtying her otherwise lovely face.

Quickly, Leena grasped her veil, fixing the crown in the bed of her hair and slipping in two gold clasps to keep it steady. She kept her eyes on Yasmine as best she could, watching her sister's gaze travel around the length of her room, searching for some secret. But her expression never changed to one of victory. Her cool stance never lightened. And before she could look any further, Leena turned back around, ready to face the party.

Sparing just one quick glance at the door, wishing she could say goodbye and look into Mikza's eyes one more time before the ball, Leena followed her sister outside.

FOUR



For what felt like the one hundredth time that evening, Leena reached out her hand, accepting an offer to dance.

This time it was Lord Padmir, a wifeless and childless bachelor far too old for her. At least she hoped her father wouldn't actually consider him. While hunched shoulders and a rotund belly wouldn't concern the king, the man's falling fortunes would likely be enough to remove him from the list.

A leer spread across his lips, sending a shiver down Leena's back. She spared a glance over her shoulder, searching for Mikza. Still in their spot, he watched on, lips pressed in a tight line. Normally that move was made in anger, but by the slight glimmer in his eye, Leena thought he might be holding in a laugh.

Glad someone is enjoying himself.

She rolled her eyes, turning back to the lord, trying to keep her small dinner firmly in her stomach.

He bowed.

She curtsied.

Then the music began anew, and he pulled her from the sideline into the center of the ballroom, gripping her waist tighter than was comfortable. Luckily, it was frowned upon to talk during a dance, so Leena just had to smile and step, two motions that came naturally to her.

After a few spins, Leena found herself in a daze. Eyes glazing over, she began to picture Lord Padmir as Mikza. Young, handsome, in love with her. It made her giggle to imagine people's reactions—the shock that would spread around the room if a soldier walked out with the princess and put all of their dancing to shame.

Because the two of them would have done just that.

They would have blazed, setting fire to the room, blinding everyone with the force of their passion. No one would be able to look away. All would stand transfixed,

jealous, and curious, in awe.

Tonight.

The word had become her prayer for the evening. Repeating it soothed her, snipping the nervous threads coiling through her limbs. Tonight she would be gone. Tonight she would be free. And she would never have to pretend for any man ever again. Mikza would be hers and she would be his, and everyone they met would know it.

Tonight.

The music began to wind down and the vision faded, replaced by graying hairs and a too wide smile that made Leena flinch.

"Enjoying ourselves?"

She stiffened, feet halting immediately. Leena knew that voice.

"Of course, my King," Lord Padmir rushed, bowing so quickly that he almost toppled over.

Leena moved more slowly, cautiously. Her father had paid her no attention all night, but it seemed that gift was finally gone. Standing behind her, he looked as commanding as ever. Off the throne, but still graced with the crown and an air of arrogance, King Razzaq knew how to impose. And at that moment, his umber eyes glimmered with intelligence, putting Leena on edge.

What did he know?

"Yes, my King," she said, forcing a smile through her teeth, trying to calm her suddenly racing pulse. "Who could do anything less than enjoy such a wonderful party, especially in honor of the wedding of my dear sister?"

"Who indeed?" He smiled, too sweetly. Eyes flicking to the lord, he said, "Leave us."

Leena gulped, resisting the urge to find Mikza, to make sure he was all right. Looking at him now would only encourage her father's suspicions, would only endanger them both.

"You seem happy tonight."

"Of course, Father," she answered, mouth suddenly dry. "I am only excited that it is now my time to be matched."

"Do not lie to me, girl," he said, gripping her wrist tight enough to bruise. To an

outside observer, it might look like a touch of affection. But his eyes were furious. "I have heard it all before. Do not forget that I had sisters, and there were other daughters before you."

"I'm not sure what you mean, Father." Leena fought to keep her voice even, but the pain in her wrist only mirrored the fear in her heart, both making her body shake.

"Enough," he growled, pulling her in close, digging his fingers into her arm. "You will share one more dance of my choosing and then retire for the evening. Understood?"

Leena nodded, not trusting her voice. His rings were scraping her skin, chafing it raw, so she closed her eyes against the hurt.

Somehow, he knew.

Yasmine. It was the only explanation Leena could think of, but they had given nothing away.

Mikza?

Leena forced her neck still, fought to keep her head from jerking to the side, from finding him. Moments ago she had seen his smile, was it possible he had so quickly been taken? That things could so quickly change?

"Good," the king sneered, releasing Leena and stepping back. Placing his hand at her back, he pushed her forward. Not forceful enough to be noticed, but with power. Leena could not run, she could only step where her father wished, feeling like she marched to her grave and not to a dance partner.

"Lord Biitar," her father called, voice suddenly jovial. The old lord turned, Leena recognized him.

"My King," he said, bowing informally in greeting. No surprise shone on his mature face. This moment had been planned, Leena was sure of it. "May I introduce my son, Amosaan. Amo to our closest companions, which I hope you will soon become."

A young man stepped forward, skin firm with hardened muscles. Tattoos of curved daggers and harsh waves decorated his forearms. His face was pleasant, jaw square with soft lips and eyes a muddled hazel, unusual for the Ourthuri. She knew him, of course, but couldn't remember interacting with him before. Something about his smile seemed too kind to be trusted.

"Our daughter, Princess Leenaka," her father said, shoving her closer to the boy.

She curtsied and offered her hand. He lifted it gently, placing a soft kiss on the backside of her palm. Fighting the urge to scream and run, Leena let her hand fall slowly back to her side.

"We think you should share a dance. The two of you certainly make a fine," King Razzaq said, then paused, eyes shifting to Leena, grip tightening just enough to make her listen, "match."

Leena caught the gasp before it slipped past her tongue, but the triumphant look on her father's face was enough to tell her something had been given away. So this was the boy he wanted to match her with, the man he wanted her to marry.

"Princess?" Amo said, offering his hand to lead her to the floor.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

Her mind protested, but under the watchful eyes of her father, Leena could do nothing but smile and accept. Amo led her out, placed his hand on her hip, and confidently began the steps.

Shorter than Mikza—that was what she noticed first. He had none of Mikza's grace, none of his fluidity. This boy was stone where Mikza was water. His movements jerked her around, pulling instead of leading, commanding instead of sharing.

He was a son of Ourthuro.

He was everything she wanted to escape.

Tonight.

Leena tried to calm herself, but the prayer wasn't working. As she spun, her eyes shifted around the room, spotting Mikza unharmed and still standing guard.

Safe.

He was still safe.

But for how long? Her father had to know something. Or hinting at her match would not have been so satisfying to him, so sinister. Like a ghost, Leena still felt his grip on her arm, felt the rings of a king taking hold. He would never let her go.

The room began to blur. Heat built under her skin. The columns circling the dance floor seemed to expand, to close in, a beautiful prison, a golden cage. The laughter in the room grew unbearable, the candles blinded, the colors grew so saturated that she could hardly make out one person from the next. Suddenly her father's face seemed to loom in

the air, to grow larger, an image she could not escape.

"Princess?" Amo said, breaking her trance.

They had stopped without her realizing. The room felt silent without music, empty, everyone seemed to be staring at her.

But they weren't. Leena looked around, her anxiety becoming too much, but no eyes met hers. No one had been watching, not really.

"I apologize," she said, voice hoarse. Leena took a deep breath. "I suddenly do not feel very well. I think I will retire to my rooms."

Amo tugged on her arm, and in her weakened state, Leena fell forward. His hands caught her, just as her fingers landed on his chest, trying to find her balance. Just like a young couple in love might look, as though her father had planned it himself.

"If we're to be matched," he whispered, voice low, tone like iron, "I demand more respect than you have shown tonight. My wife will know her place, one way or another."

And then he released her, warm smile back on his lips. "Are you all right?" He cooed, settling her back on her feet, lightly running his hand from her shoulder to her elbow before letting go.

Leena could not think of a word to say. Her dry lips seemed glued shut. Her body trembled, and she felt as though she might faint. So without a response, she turned and walked slowly out of the ballroom, into the shadows, the cool night, wondering how long she could hide before someone would find her.

Fearing who that someone might be.

FIVE



"Leena?" Mikza's soft voice called, breaking her reverie.

She had found her way onto the balcony outside the ballroom, seeking the comfort of the moonlight. The stone floor was lined with shadows cast by the candlelight inside the room, creating stripes as the beams broke through the spaces between each towering column.

"Mikza," she breathed, hating how weak she sounded. Maybe she was that princess after all, that girl with no backbone, the girl who hid instead of fighting.

"What's wrong?" he whispered, just loud enough to be heard. Standing four feet away, still in the doorway, he seemed a lifetime from her. But he could come no closer. They were still in public, still surrounded by her father's guests, and a guard was not supposed to talk to his charge.

Leena kept her gaze focused on the rippling ocean below, letting the rolling waves and the sound of his voice soothe her. If her father suspected Mikza, he would be locked up by now—maybe dead already.

"I met my match."

He sucked in a pained breath, one so loud she could hear it cut through his lungs, a knife in his chest. "Already? So fast..."

"I think my father suspects something. Not you, but that my heart already belongs to another, that my dreams lay outside of his hold."

"But we've been careful."

"Have we?" She asked, sparing a glance his way. Mikza had unconsciously stepped closer, within a foot of her body. She could feel the heat of his skin on her arm, a magnetic pull teasing her to close the gap.

He met her eyes, dark and downcast, before stepping back into the light of the ballroom, across the invisible barrier.

"We're so close," he murmured, more to himself.

Leena cast one more glance over the edge, down the steep cliffs, all the way to the crashing splashes of water below. *So close, but so far.*

"Let's go now," she whispered, turning quickly around, saying goodbye to the night. "Let's leave before the ball is over. Everyone is here. Everyone is occupied. No one will know."

Indecision stopped him. Leena could read it. He was no longer sure what was best for her.

"Mikza," she pleaded, "I am leaving, tonight. With or without you, but I cannot stay. I refuse to be married to that man."

He nodded, not certain enough to bind it with words, but that was all she needed.

Taking the long route, Leena stepped between the shadows, letting the light flicker over her, disappear, only to illuminate her again. Mikza watched from behind as she finally stepped back into the outskirts of the room. He followed from a proper distance, the way a bodyguard should—emotionless, detached—death with a sword to any who might mean her harm.

Leena spared no glances toward the interior of the room. There was no one she wished to see again. Prince Haydar would be her only regret, that she could not save him, that she was giving up on him.

The halls were quiet, almost eerie, causing goose bumps to rise on her skin. Unease curled her stomach, quickened her pace, and she could not shake it. The emptiness seemed to whisper in her ear, *it is too calm, too easy.*

No one seemed to be around, even the guards normally kept at the doors. Leena could not remember the last time they had left their posts. Some of them she had actually wished to see, friends, guards that had helped keep their secret, people she wanted to thank and say a hasty goodbye to.

When they reached her room, Leena stopped. The royal quarters had never been so abandoned. Holding up her hand, she signaled Mikza to halt, to not follow her inside. Just in case someone watched, he needed to keep up appearances for as long as possible.

Heart in her throat, she turned the knob.

The door swung open.

Leena broke.

Everything she had, every hope, every ounce of strength, every dream, seemed to rush from her body, leaving her empty inside. A shell of a person.

Their bag sat ripped apart on the bed, empty, contents splayed across the ground. Their clothes, their food, torn apart. Weapons broken to pieces. Jewels and coins scattered.

And behind it, her father stood with his personal guard, waiting for her arrival.

Hate coursed through her veins.

Pure.

Strong.

The sort of loathing that built over time, waiting for the right moment to take hold, waiting for this moment when she had nothing but that one feeling to give her the strength to carry on, to fight.

"Father," she growled, muscles clenched.

"Will you deny it now, Daughter?"

Leena said nothing. Did not even move.

"You do not know this, but every time you attend a ball, I send my guards to search your room. You and your unmarried sisters. I've seen it all before." He was calm, standing straight and tall, soldiers at his back, all the power in his hands. "You are not the only one who has tried to run, but you are the first to be so well prepared, to have men's clothes also packed for the journey."

Still Leena remained silent, refusing to give anything away, to give him any information he did not have. Defiance was not something the king was used to. Leena tried to picture any of her older sisters trying to run, but she knew them, in her position they would have already fallen at his feet, groveling to be forgiven.

The image only gave her more strength to fight.

"Is that all?" She asked, voice as cold as she could make it, hard like an Ourthuri.

In a flash, her father was next to her. Before Leena could anticipate the impact, she was hit. His hand slammed into her cheek, and she could not help but cry out as she fell, landing cushioned by the clothes he had destroyed. Her veil was ripped from her head by the blow, and it landed beside her with a deafening ring.

"Who is he?" The king demanded.

Gripping her cheek, Leena looked up from the floor, fearless. Mikza was the one thing the king could never have. Love could not be slapped away, torn out of her heart by soldiers. Her love would burn no matter what he did.

"I will never tell you."

With a roar, the king leaned down, gripping her throat. "You will tell me now. Do not think I won't harm you. There are worse fates than marriage, girl, far worse."

"I welcome them," Leena choked out the words, coughing as his grip tightened and her airway seemed to close.

"When I scar your pretty face, maim you, make you unfit for the public so you must live in the shadows. What will your love do then?"

"He—"

"It was me," a soft voice interrupted.

Leena gasped. "No!"

But Mikza walked into the doorway, head bowed in surrender. He knelt down, removed his sword from his waist, letting it drop to the ground with a resounding clang, and placed his hands behind his head. All the while, he refused to meet her eyes.

Leena fell back to the ground as the king dropped her, turning his attention to a new conquest.

"Mikza," she murmured, voice cracking as her chest burned, as her eyes blurred. Why? Why didn't he let her fight? It was her father, her battle. He had no right to take that away, to save her when she wanted to be the one to save him.

But it was too late. The king had a hunger in his eyes, a feral gleam. There would be no escaping him now.

"A soldier in our own household," the king said, his tone sadistically light. Leena closed her eyes, trying to erase the pictures zipping to the front of her mind. Her father was going to enjoy this. "Take him away."

At those three words, words she had heard over and over again in her nightmares, Leena snapped. Invaded by some animalistic spirit, she sprang from the ground, jumping on her father, ripping the crown from his head and using her arms to strangle him. She screamed, cried, fought with everything she had.

Like a fly, he swatted her away.

It took no effort at all to throw her back to the floor, where one guard came to hold her down. Try as she might to break his grip—pulling, biting, scratching, pinching—nothing would loosen his grasp. For the first time, she realized how much strength Mikza had to control, how gentle he had truly been with her.

And that thought broke her in a different way.

It stilled her.

Slowed her.

Made her eyes rise, watching as he was led through the door, slowly out of her room, disappearing in the night never to be seen again. Her body shook, a tremble that grew more violent with each passing second. A wave of cold splashed over her, stealing her thoughts, vanishing her strength, and she collapsed in a ball.

Sobs wracked her body. Sobs that sounded less than human, as though her soul was being ripped from her chest. Sobs that even a soldier could not bear to hear.

"Princess," a warm hand landed on her arm, caressing her, trying to soothe her. Through blurred eyes, Leena looked up toward the sound, barely recognizing the figure as a man, let alone a specific person.

But his features gnawed through the numbness—she remembered them. Childlike almost, as though he had the body of a man but the innocent face of a boy—plump cheeks with dimples and round eyes. Mikza's closest friend, a friend who had always risked much to help their doomed romance.

"Tam?" She questioned, hushed and weak. "What will they do to him?"

"I don't know, Princess," he shook his head. Hurt was written across his face. Hurt that he had been a part of the capture. Hurt that he had not been able to keep Mikza safe. Hurt that he could not help her. Leena saw each thought flicker across his eyes, like an apology, one she did not want from him.

"Tam, you need to go to him in my place. I will not run, I promise. I will not break your trust. But you have to go and pull him back from the brink of death, which is where my father will surely leave him."

Her voice did not waver, did not break.

"I will, Princess. And here is my promise to you. When he is safe, I will bring you to him. I will give the two of you a proper goodbye."

Tam squeezed her hand, then dropped it, gently releasing his hold on her body. With one glance back, he left and closed the door behind him. Like a strong tide, her heart went with him, sucked from her body, pulled free.

Leena walked emotionless across her room, throat raw, limbs weak. Then she stepped off the edge and sunk deep into her pool, letting its warm waters embrace her, not sure if she would ever surface again.

SIX



Time ceased to exist underwater.

Had it been hours? One day? Two days? An entire week? Leena did not know, and she did not care. Her stomach growled, but she ignored it. Her limbs ached for their weight, but she continued to drift, to float, ambivalent.

Down here, it was easier to pretend. To let her memories take over, to let her dreams unfurl. Sound was muffled. Light was softer. The world seemed far away and out of reach.

Leena was happy to leave it that way.

Without Mikza to save her, Leena could just drift until the end of her days. No one else dared enter her quarters without permission, not while she was inside. He had been the only one willing to save her, to ignore protocol. The servants might inform the guards of her silence, the guards might inform the king of his daughter's deep mourning. When she started to miss events, balls or dinners, he might be angry enough to intervene.

Leena almost hoped her father would be the one to discover her, to see her at the bottom of the pool. Maybe he would think her drowned, defiant until the end. Maybe then she would be free of him.

As if reading her mind, a body slid under the surface, distracting Leena, tearing her eyes open for the first time in she didn't know how long. Arms encircled her, and for a moment, she let herself dream it was Mikza, let her heart soften and her body curl into the warm chest.

And then they broke through the surface, and the dream shattered. Noise jerked her senses, unwelcome after all the silence. The roar of waves, the tinker of metalworking, the hum of human voices screaming from below. The sounds of her city infiltrating her peace.

The sun was bright, painful, and its heat stung her cold skin, sizzling the water droplets away.

"He said you would be in the water," a soft voice said, and he gently placed her on the ground.

"Mikza? He's alive?" Leena turned over, rolling up from the ground to face Tam. She recognized his caring voice, but his face seemed older, somehow aged since the last time they had met.

Tam nodded, but held something back, words he seemed unable to bring himself to say aloud. "Come, Princess, there isn't much time. He is to be moved from the palace dungeons in a few hours."

Leena needed no other prompting. Despite her protesting muscles, soft from so much time spent unused, she stood and then raced into her bedroom for dry clothes. Within minutes, hair unpinned and face free of powder, Leena met Tam outside her quarters. Mikza wouldn't mind. He preferred her this way, simple and uncovered, more like the girl she wanted to be instead of the princess she was.

"Follow me, my Princess," Tam whispered.

Leena noticed that there was no new guard stationed outside her door. Maybe Tam had inherited the honor, or maybe he had bribed someone away for an hour. Leena did not question, she was beyond her area of expertise.

The palace might be her home, but it still seemed foreign in many ways. And the farther Tam led her down the open corridors, the more she realized just how small her life truly was. These were halls she had never walked.

There was an entire world outside the palace, but aside from a few trips to silver levels or maybe even to the bronze merchant plateau, she had never seen it. The ocean lay just outside her balcony, but she had never dipped her toes in the cold currents. Never stepped foot on the docks at the base of her city. Never ventured to any of the other islands in their kingdom, let alone to foreign shores.

But today was a start, and Leena followed Tam down to a part of the golden palace that the sun did not illuminate, a place where cages did not pretend to be anything but prisons, and chains did not masquerade as jewelry.

The place Mikza had been damned to because of her.

"Tam?" A dry voice whispered. A voice she remembered as clearly as her own.

"Mikza," Leena sighed, searching for him in the dark. Tam had come to a stop

outside a gate, and inserted a key into the lock.

"My Leena," his deep voice sighed, pain etched in the words. "You should not be here."

"I had to see you," she said, reaching for Tam's torch. But he stopped her and walked deeper into the cell, leaving Leena at the entrance.

With every step, she waited for Mikza to come into view, his strong legs, his soft eyes. Tam continued, not pausing, not searching, until he reached the back wall and placed the torch in a socket. Then his head shifted, his gaze slid across the stone to the corner of the room.

Leena gasped, her hand automatically rising to catch the cry on her lips.

Mikza was there, huddled in the corner, covered in dry blood. His back was striped with deep lines, marks left over from who knew how many lashes. His cheeks were swollen, enlarged enough to almost close his eyes, red and raw.

But the worst were his arms.

His unmarked arms.

Mikza's tattoos had been removed. His skin had been cut deeply, burned and shredded apart so it still bled just a little around his wrists.

Leena stepped forward, but he flinched away. Too proud to want her to see him in such a state. But Leena cared little for his pride right now.

"Why?" She asked softly, continuing to move closer. "Why did you have to confess? Why couldn't you let me fight? I don't care about my face. I don't care how deep my father would have cut me. It would have been better than this. Oh, Mikza, I love you. Why did you give that away?"

Leena knelt down, hand floating an inch beside his wounded cheek, unsure if it would only bring more pain for her to touch him. He didn't need to answer, she knew the truth already. He would never let anyone hurt her. He would give anything to protect her, to keep her safe.

And he had.

"I am no longer Mikzahooq." His words contained no bitter edge, only the emptiness of defeat. The unmarked had no name. No identity. No individuality. With their tattoos, so went everything about their former lives. They were less than human in

the eyes of the Ourthuri.

"You will always be Mikza to me." Leena caressed his face with the back of her fingers, and despite the wounds, Mikza leaned into her touch. "We can still find a way. I'll leave tomorrow, I'll go wherever you want. We can figure something out."

He pulled away.

"You must forget me, Leena. You must move on with your life. I want better than this for you. I want you to be happy. So..." he paused.

Leena's throat caught. *What have you done?* A mounting sense of dread filled her chest.

"I made a promise to your father."

"No." Leena winced, gripping his arm. "No, Mikza, what did you do?"

"He didn't want to kill me. He said it was too quick—not enough of a punishment for me and that it would only make you more defiant. Instead, he did this, and he is sending me away. I don't know where, very little was explained, just that I am to be gone from Da'astiku on a ship leaving in a few days time."

"I will come," Leena interrupted, eyes shifting across his bruised features, trying to read the emotions on his swollen face. "I will find you."

"No." He shook his head, wincing. "No, Leena." He gripped her hand, moving slowly to entwine their fingers one last time. "I promised him that I would let you go. That I would never return. That I would never speak to you again. And if I defy him in any way, break that promise—"

"He will kill you," Leena finished his sentence—solemn, stuck.

"No," Mikza squeezed his eyes shut, letting one wet tear slide free. "He will kill you."

I am already dead, Leena thought but kept silent. It would be no use. Mikza had already sacrificed everything for her, and she would not let him know it was in vain. The girl he knew was dead, and Leena could only guess at the woman she was about to become.

"I love you," she whispered. That was the only certainty left in her life, a truth she would hold onto and let guide her into the future.

"I love you, too."

There was nothing else that needed to be said, not then, not in their final minutes together. So Leena sat back against the wall and pulled Mikza's head into her chest. Running her hands along his limbs, she tried to soothe his pain, to pour out all her love so the memory of this moment would last.

He hugged her close and they stayed like that. Intertwined. Not moving. Barely breathing. Just being.

But in the silence Leena's mind spun. She had a promise of her own to make. A promise to never stop fighting until her father was in the ground, buried, dead, unable to spread any more cruelty into the world.

If he was the hard rock of their island kingdom, she was the water crashing into their shores, slowly breaking it down, slowly chipping the stone away until there was nothing left. If he believed that love had weakened her, he was wrong. If he thought this would break her, he was wrong.

Leena felt strong for the first time in her life.

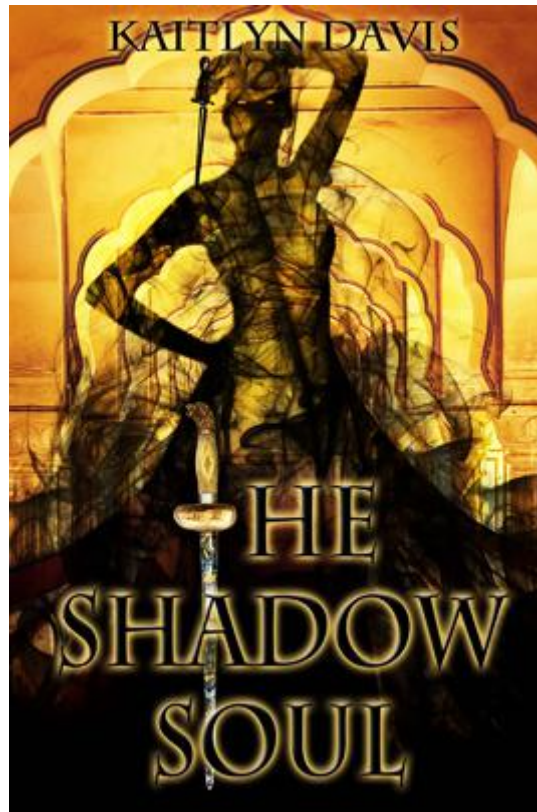
Empowered.

Love was her weapon.

Love would bring the king to his knees.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kaitlyn Davis graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Johns Hopkins University with a B.A. in Writing Seminars. She's been writing ever since she picked up her first crayon and is overjoyed to share her work with the world. She currently lives in New York City and dreams of having a puppy of her own.

Connect with the Author Online:

Website:

KaitlynDavisBooks.com

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