



THE COTTAGE

A PRINCE'S ASSASSIN NOVELLA #3.5

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The Cottage, Prince's Assassin #3.5

Ariana Nash ~ *Dark Fantasy Author*

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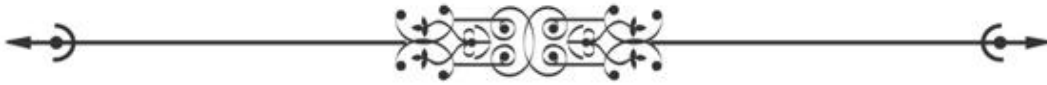
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CHAPTER 1



Vasili

VASILY RAISED his glass and paused with the drink teetering at the edge of his lips. The Whispering Pearl's background chatter, the barks of laughter, and even Yasir's twittering across the table from Vasili, faded to a dim humming. Through the doorway, at the bar, stood Nikolas. His silhouette was unmistakable. Vasili would know the shape of his firm ass hugged by linen trousers anywhere. Broad shoulders framed a back Vasili had become rather well acquainted with of late—mostly beneath his mouth and between his teeth. Nikolas's loose Seranian silk shirt bunched at his waist and stretched at his biceps, giving mere glimpses of his naturally honed physique.

Nikolas lifted his hand, signaling for the tender's attention, unaware of Vasili's gaze from the outside terrace.

Yasir finally fell quiet. He glanced over his shoulder, spotted Nikolas, and straightened in his chair, eyebrow arched at Vasili in suspicious query.

Averting his gaze, Vasili took a generous sip of his drink and used his fingers to crane his cup over the table, keeping his eyes downcast, away from the bar area—*away* from Nikolas.

"You still haven't talked to him," Yasir said.

"What is there to say?" Setting the cup down, he folded his hand around it. He didn't need to look up, didn't need to see Nikolas through that

doorway. What good would it do? Nikolas had said he'd be otherwise engaged this evening after Vasili had asked if he was *available*. Like he'd said almost every night for the past few months. Always busy, always doing something for someone else, never for Vasili. But what had Vasili expected, really? Nikolas was never meant to be tied down, much to Vasili's vexation.

"Well, you could start by asking him where the fuck he's been these last couple of months?" Yasir said.

He could, but that might come off as too desperate, too needy. They were both grown men with free paths ahead of them. Vasili had no wish to hinder Nikolas's freedom like his own had been hindered for so long.

Yasir's huff had Vasili looking up at his friend. Briefly, their gazes met, and the fears Vasili had recently expressed thanks to too much spice were between them again. Yasir motioned to stand. "I'll talk with him."

Vasili quickly pressed Yasir's hand to the table. "Don't."

Frozen at the touch, Yasir huffed once more and slumped in his chair. "Probably for the best. I don't want to have to knock him on his ass."

The idea of Yasir landing a punch on Nikolas and having it actually slow Nikolas down was a laughable one and brought a smile to Vasili's lips. Vasili had felt the weight of Yasir's right hook. The captain wasn't without strength. But Nikolas would take the colorful silk merchant by the scruff of the neck and hang him out to dry. Yasir had regaled many a Whispering Pearl patron with the tale of how Nikolas had fought off a band of Alissand's pirates singlehandedly to save Yasir's modesty and his life. To some who didn't know Nikolas, the tale might have sounded far-fetched or embellished. Vasili knew it to be true.

Shaking his head, Yasir sighed, "It's not right, Vee."

Yasir's words almost killed Vasili's smile, but the pet name had it clinging on, despite the circumstances. Varian, Vasili. *Vee* prevented slipups, especially as Crown Prince Vasili Caville was a name spat from the lips of Seranians.

He didn't say what they'd both thought but had never gone so far as to say during their recent spice-induced evenings: Nikolas was seeing someone else. And Vasili wasn't surprised. Nikolas had a magnetic aura of attraction but was also woefully unaware of his own appeal. He blundered through social situations, missing the obvious, and somehow still came out the other side smiling. His naïvety was one of the many things Vasili loved about him. Like now, at the bar. One of the male servers had inserted

himself between Nikolas and the woman Nikolas wouldn't have noticed. The server, however, absolutely had noticed Nikolas. Lean, pert, and willing, the young man struck up a conversation, and it wasn't long before his light-fingered touch found its way to Nikolas's arm.

A vicious barb of jealousy struck Vasili's chest. A new sensation for him. As Vasili Caville, he hadn't wanted for anything, besides freedom. Then Nikolas turned his world upside down, against his will, and made him want things he had no right to covet. Things like freedom, like love. Made him want a man he'd vowed to use, a man who was to be his tool and his assassin. Made him want a life he had no right to, the kind of life he hadn't sought out since Alek and his farm. Made him *dream* of better things. But such dreams were invariably ripped to shreds.

It had begun well enough with Nikolas. After the fall of Loreen and the flame, Vasili had adopted the new identity of Varian Adino. Those weeks with Nikolas compliant and agreeable in bed, with just enough resistance from the ex-soldier to heighten Vasili's insatiable desires for the man, were a blur of endless bliss. They'd shared their rings, promised themselves to each other, shared their bodies. But it hadn't lasted. As Roksana demanded more of her nephew, and the city of Seran and its people had taken Nikolas in as one of their own, Nikolas's visits to Vasili's chamber tapered off until Vasili spent his evenings alone. He saw more of Yasir than he did Nikolas, even though the merchant was mostly at sea.

Still, it was Vasili's fault Nikolas had caught the eye of another. Vasili didn't know how to be the man Nikolas needed. The *good* man. Oh, Nikolas had denied he'd wanted such a man, but Nikolas had always fallen for the gentle types. The poets, the heroes, not the villains. Of which, Vasili most definitely was. So, those first few months had been thrilling and remarkable and breathtaking, and more than Vasili deserved. And now it was over, and Vasili would let him go. He could at least do *that* good thing for the man he loved.

Nikolas pushed away from the handsy server with a dark chuckle. Drink in hand, his gaze speared into Vasili, holding him still as he carved through the tables and people, approaching his target.

"Yasir." Nikolas clapped a heavy hand on Yasir's shoulder, prompting him to splutter and smile up. "Back in Seran already?"

"I haven't actually left, which you'd have known had you been—"

Vasili shot him a look and Yasir cut off, grumbling into his drink.

“Varian,” Nikolas said, a little more restrained, it seemed, to Vasili’s ears. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Clearly. Vasili’s thin smile was reflexive, like producing a blade when threatened. Tension crackled between them. The same kind of tension that hadn’t existed since Vasili had ordered Nikolas into his service. He’d thought this distance between them bridged, but he’d clearly been wrong. If Nikolas didn’t expect to see him here, then who was he meeting? It seemed unlikely Nikolas would meet a secret lover in their favored inn, but this was Nikolas. *Clandestine* wasn’t something he was proficient at.

“Were you meeting someone?” Yasir asked, plastering a broad grin on his face while deftly ignoring Vasili’s glare.

“Oh.” Nikolas’s gaze darted. “I... Some manual work, for Roksana... I was just arranging goods.”

An obvious lie.

Vasili looked away before Nikolas could see the crack in his carefully placed mask. The jealous barb in his chest twisted, turning spiteful. Maybe he could have Nikolas followed and the other man *persuaded* to leave Seran. Which was, of course, a terrible thought and not something Varian would do. Vasili, however, was not above such methods. He shifted uneasily and swallowed the bitter taste on his tongue. No. He’d maneuvered Nikolas enough. He was free to choose his fate, and Vasili would not interfere, not anymore.

“Vasili—” Nikolas began, speaking his real name softly.

“What?”

Nikolas winced as though the single word were a dagger landing in his heart. But the wounded expression didn’t last. He soon rebuilt his armor, his lip beginning to curl. When pushed, Nikolas pushed back. “I’ll see you later?”

Vasili waved a hand, neither committing nor denying. If Nikolas could dally, then he didn’t see why he should have to make himself available at Nikolas’s beck and call. On a whim and without a thought, he said, “I’ll be sailing with Yasir in three days.”

Yasir’s darkly lined eyes widened, then narrowed. Yasir hadn’t asked Vasili to go with him, but he didn’t have to. The invitation was always open.

Nikolas didn’t see Yasir’s accusatory glare. He was too busy glowering at Vasili, as though none of this was his fault. “Fine,” he grumbled, then

dropped his heated glare to Yasir, who was quick enough to recover some modicum of nonchalance.

“Uh, yes.” Yasir scrambled for an excuse, clearing his throat. “We’ll be traveling to the south seas with a substantial load of *special* cargo.” Any mention of special cargo was sure to deter Nikolas from asking any further questions. He disapproved of Yasir’s illegal spice-running activities.

“Then have a safe voyage, Yasir.” Nikolas turned on his heel, set his untouched drink on a random table, and disappeared inside the inn.

Yasir groaned and covered his eyes with a bejeweled hand. “Aura, save me.” Vasili swallowed the urge to apologize, and then Yasir was on his feet, his gestures sharp. “Don’t give me that look, Varian.”

“What look?”

Yasir circled a finger around his own face. “The innocent look. All you had to do was ask if he’s fucking around.”

“And have him lie to my face again?”

Yasir thrust a finger toward Vasili. “You have three days to sort this out. You’re not getting on my ship until you do.” He left in a dramatic swirl of blue silk cloak.

Oh, well, Vasili had managed to push away both his friend and his lover. Pushing others away was, of course, precisely what Vasili excelled at. But he didn’t remember it hurting his heart like this before.

CHAPTER 2

Niko

VASILIS WAS GOING TO SEA.

Niko paced a dark, quiet corridor in the Yazdan house, his limping gait more pronounced as his leg began to ache.

He had expected it. Despite Vasili's insistence that everything was fine between them, Niko often found him gazing toward the ocean from the balconies. Vasili had been imprisoned too long by his name, the Caville crown, and Loreen. Of course he'd want to go back to sea with Yasir. What else could a bored ex-prince do? Rattling around the Yazdan house wasn't fulfilling, and he'd refused a position on the council, saying he'd rather drink poison than return to politics. Niko had tried to keep him happy, keep him distracted, but despite their many, many days and nights tangled together, there was still a thin but impenetrable barrier between them, and no matter what Niko did, he couldn't find a way through it. The truth was, he couldn't give Vasili the sense of freedom he so desperately wanted. But Niko had a plan... A plan he was determined Vasili not discover. The man's mind was too damn sharp, so Niko had kept his plan from everyone, including Yasir.

It was going to be a surprise.

But now he only had three days to finish it. Three days wasn't enough.

He didn't want Vasili to go. Just the thought of having him hundreds of miles away on the treacherous sea made Niko want to rage at the prince, demand to know how he could have tied Niko's heart up in a thousand knots and then *leave*.

Maybe he'd been a fool to think Vasili would ever be content with just him. The man was blisteringly intelligent, and for all Niko's strength, smarts weren't his specialty. And Vasili had... desires. The silk ties were just a hint of all the wants in Vasili's eyes when they were intimate. They hadn't discussed it, but Niko had not forgotten how Vasili enjoyed other, more unusual aspects of lovemaking. Niko had begun to anticipate and enjoy the silk ties, the way the cool fabric licked across his tongue, so like Vasili's tongue. Gods, his cock was warming at merely the thought of that silk, of how Vasili looked at him in those moments, as though he were the prince's whole world. He loved that look. It made his heart swell and his chest ache. He loved him, loved him so hard he'd do anything for him. Anything to *keep* him. Including letting him go to sea.

He had to let him go. And Yasir was trustworthy, mostly. He was forever making lewd, suggestive comments, but that's all they were. He wouldn't... seduce Vasili. He knew how much Niko loved the prince, didn't he? Niko and Yasir were close, but in a different way to how Yasir and Vasili were close. Their relationship had always been softer. Vasili relaxed around Yasir in a way he didn't around Niko. Probably because of the spice, but... in the bar, Niko hadn't missed how Vasili's hand had rested over Yasir's. They'd only broke apart once he'd approached.

Gods. He stopped pacing. These foolish thoughts were killing him. He couldn't allow such distractions.

There was a chance, one slight chance, he could make everything right. But it would take him away when he knew he should be here for Vasili. And what if he had it all wrong? What if the surprise wasn't good enough? What if he didn't want it? It had to be enough. It was all Niko had left to convince Vasili he was loved, convince him that he was Niko's everything and that he'd always have a home by his side.

CHAPTER 3

Vasili

ADAMO CHOMPED ON HIS FEED, nose buried in a bucket, as Vasili brushed his coat down. The horse was always content when distracted by food. If only ex-soldiers were so easily satisfied.

Despite Nikolas's "see you later" and Vasili's efforts to have their bedchamber suitably warmed and softly lit, Nikolas hadn't made an appearance, leaving Vasili to finish an entire bottle of wine alone and wake with an atrocious hangover in a cold bed.

Nikolas hadn't returned at all.

Clearly, he'd found himself a warmer bed.

Now the voyage at sea couldn't come quickly enough. He might ask Yasir if they could depart earlier.

"If only men were as reliable as horses."

Adamo snorted and nosed over the bucket, then kicked it away, disgusted he'd reached the bottom while still ravenous.

Chuckling, Vasili refilled the bucket. "Nikolas will not be impressed should you get fat." Or perhaps Nikolas would no longer care what happened to Adamo, now he had other things to occupy his heart.

Vasili should never have fallen in love with the man. He still didn't know how it had happened. Attraction was one thing. That had always been there, driven mostly by Nikolas's rage and how his dark eyes had tried to

skewer Vasili with every glance. He still looked at Vasili like that sometimes—like he wanted to pin him down, fight him, and fuck him raw. Or he *had* looked at Vasili like that, until he'd grown distant. But love? It had snuck up on Vasili somehow. In Nikolas's silly habits, his willful ignorance, his open and honest heart. In the darkness of the Caville palace, Nikolas had been a piercing ray of light, even as he grumbled and grouched his way into discovering the painful truth about Julian. Then Nikolas would do something so monumentally stupid that Vasili almost convinced himself his actions were all a ruse to have Vasili unable to look away from his blundering. But Nikolas didn't think like that. He didn't scheme, and he didn't manipulate, and he didn't lie. Until now.

"Ah." Vasili puffed his hair from over his eye and regarded the saddle on its stand, ready and waiting. "What say you, Adamo? A little ride through Seran?"

The horse lifted his head and his velvety nostrils fluttered. He nudged Vasili in the shoulder.

"That settles it." Vasili got to work tacking up and trotted Adamo out of the Yazdan stables sometime later. He wasn't dressed for riding, but the heeled boots tucked neatly into the stirrups, and Adamo liked nothing better than a trot about Seran, where his stocky build and pure-white coat could be admired by many. Not so much a charger now he'd been retired to pet, but still powerfully handsome. Did Adamo miss the clash of battle, the sudden noise and bursts of speed? Did Nikolas miss the thrill of combat? The companionship of soldiering? The brutality of killing?

Vasili snarled and shook his head free of Nikolas. The man did not have to consume his every thought.

Adamo's heavy hooves clopped down Seran's dusty streets. High terrace houses kept the relentless sun at bay and the shadows long. They passed carts, other riders, those dressed from the more prosperous area of the city, and many dockworkers, taking a break from the midday sun to browse the noisy market stalls. Color and noise and life and light, so unlike Loreen, so typically Seran. It left Vasili breathless and giddy, his head buzzing and heart pounding.

His breath hitched.

Nikolas leaned against a red brick wall, his head bowed, talking and smiling to the man at his side. The canopy slung over them almost hid them from Vasili's high perch atop Adamo. Almost. The man was young, perhaps

early twenties, with *two* bright blue eyes and floppy dark hair, and handsome, with a wholesome, joyful look about him. Like Julian.

Nikolas reached out and deposited something in the man's hand, which seemed to please his companion enough to grip his forearm firmly. The man then pulled Nikolas toward him, their heads bowed together, and for a horrifying moment, they clearly meant to kiss. A cart and rider jostled Adamo. He startled and whinnied. By the time Vasili had wrestled Adamo back under control, the mysterious man had vanished in the crowd, and Nikolas was tentatively approaching, his hand reaching to soothe Adamo.

"There..." he crooned, and Adamo, the traitor, nuzzled him. "Settle now."

"I know how to handle Adamo!" Vasili snapped at the reins, jerking Adamo's chin down and away, making him prance.

Niko had the nerve to look surprised. "I—"

Vasili dug in his heels. "*Yar.*" Adamo sprang forward, breaking into a canter that scattered the crowd. In seconds, he carried Vasili out of the street, but not far enough away to escape the fracture cutting through Vasili's heart.

CHAPTER 4

Vasili

“YASIR?”

“Here...” The captain left his cabin, took one look at Vasili with the bag at his feet, and sighed.

Vasili wasn’t about to tell him how his heart was breaking. Or how he couldn’t stand another second in Seran, knowing his Nikolas was with another man. “We’re leaving on the next high tide.”

“Vee, I can’t just depart. I have stock to—”

Vasili pursed his lips. The hurt hadn’t gone away. If anything, it was getting worse. He needed to leave. Now. But waiting until the high tide would have to do. “Yasir, please.” Gods, he hated to beg. Only Nikolas had managed to pry a begging tone from his lips, usually with his lips wrapped around Vasili’s cock. And now that was over.

The captain—his friend—nodded. “All right. Stow your bag. You know which bunk is yours. I’ll have us underway soon.” He clapped Vasili on the shoulder and offered up a sorry smile. “Some time away will be good, for the both of you.”

CHAPTER 5

Niko

EVERYTHING WAS READY.

Three days. It shouldn't have been possible, but he'd done it. Now he just had to find Vasili and probably grovel—a lot. It would be worth it. It had to be worth it. Vasili was clearly mad at him, and he couldn't blame him. He was rubbish at keeping secrets, and Vasili made unpicking them an art. He'd known Niko was lying. Being direct was by far the easier route.

Vasili wasn't in the Yazdan house, and none of the staff had seen *Varian* all day. The stable grooms hadn't seen him either, and Adamo was happily pulling up grass in a field, so he hadn't ridden him since the altercation in the market. There was no doubt Vasili had seen him meeting with the blacksmith—Niko's replacement at the forge now the council took up all his time. He'd paid the man for some finishing touches on Vasili's surprise, items Niko had no time to finish himself. In the noise and burble, Niko had missed Vasili's arrival. Almost missed his presence altogether. Something had clearly infuriated him while there. Niko should have gone after him, but there had been no time. And now... Where the fuck was Vasili now?

He should have checked the docks first, should have *known* Vasili would act. If threatened or in any way cornered, Vasili lashed out. But this time, he wasn't cornered. He was free to leave, and as Niko stood at the edge of the dockside, he watched the familiar cut of *Walla's Heart's* sails as

she sailed out the bay. An unmistakable shock of blond hair stood out like a beacon aboard the ship. It was all the confirmation he needed. Vasili had left him.

CHAPTER 6

Niko

THE NEXT MONTH passed in a blur of council meetings, construction work on the old town, and a rapidly descending mental spiral at the Whispering Pearl's bar. He'd vowed not to let it hurt, not to let it get to him, but nobody shook Vasili Caville off. Vasili got under the skin, into the veins. And besides, Niko didn't want to let him go.

He quit going to the bar when the server's incessant pestering became too much. And when it became clear the drink just made his mood more foul, he took up his sword during every free minute and used it to murder the practice dummies in the Yazdan training courtyard.

Naturally, that was where Roksana found him.

Drenched in sweat and with the beginnings of a headache thumping down the back of his neck, probably from dehydration, he surrendered the win to the dummy and stomped to the side of the yard where Roksana had been waiting. She made no attempt to hide her frown. She'd cut her dark, wavy hair jaw-length and wore a billowing purple silk blouse. Pearl earrings glinted against her dark skin.

"I may understand women better than men, but I can see when someone is trying too hard to hide their pain."

A grunt, he gave her that much, then balled up the shirt he'd earlier discarded and used it to wipe his chest.

“He’ll be back,” she added.

“Back to Seran, yes.” But not back to Niko. He’d fucked up. Somehow. He wasn’t even sure how. He’d been trying to do the right thing. He loved the man, and he’d thought Vasili loved him in return. So why had he left without even saying goodbye?

“He’ll be all right. Yasir will look after him.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” He wasn’t, not really. Maybe a little. Yasir was Yasir. Full of fancy talk, but he had a kind heart. And wandering hands.

Roksana’s dark Yazdan eyes narrowed. “I’ve known Captain Lajani longer than you. He’s a cad, but he won’t touch another man’s lover.”

Niko knew that. But in the absence of understanding any of this, his mind leaped to any conclusions. The main one being that Vasili had been upset about something, and instead of coming to Niko, he’d run to *Yasir*.

Roksana half smiled. “He knows you’ll break his fingers.”

“It’s not his fingers I’ll break.”

His aunt chuckled and slapped him on the shoulder. “Any relationship worth fighting for will survive a few weeks’ separation. Vasili will come around.”

He wished he had her faith.

CHAPTER 7

Niko

ROKSANA GOT word that *Walla's Heart* had been spotted a few miles off the coast and was making for the harbor. At the news, Niko's guts twisted around all the things he'd been bottling up. Guilt for something he'd done but didn't know what. Fear that it really was over and Vasili would reject him. That Vasili wanted a different life. He could pick any now, so why pick a life with Niko? Anger too. Niko might punch Yasir for taking him.

Riding one of the Yazdans' bay horses, he reined Adamo alongside, all tacked up, and waited at the dockside, twirling an oxeye daisy between his fingers like a fucking idiot. In the war, he'd spent weeks entrenched in mud on the front line, nights buried up to his eyeballs in filth and blood, waiting for elves, but he'd never felt nerves like the ones churning in his belly now.

Walla's Heart docked with a groan. Yasir's crew tossed the ropes onto the dockside and tied off the huge ship. The gangplank came down. Yasir emerged first. He spotted Niko atop the horse and walked down the plank, smile growing with every step. "Is that flower for me?" Eyebrow arched suggestively, the captain bit into his bottom lip.

"Fuck off, Yasir."

Yasir's laugh loosened some of the horrible knots in his guts. He flounced off, then barked a command at his men when one of them dropped a crate.

And then Vasili appeared on deck, in his knee-high boots, crimson sash, a white shirt two sizes too big, and his hair braided in multiple chaotic tails.

Fuck. He wasn't smiling. But damn, he looked fine. Windswept and wild. The sea and the sun had tanned his face and bleached his hair platinum. The difference between Vasili now and the cold-hearted ice prince he'd met at the Caville palace was like the difference between day and night.

Niko's heart tried to fight its way between his ribs. In that moment, Niko didn't care what had happened or that he'd left. So what if Vasili had fucked Yasir? Didn't matter. Niko just wanted him back. His whole body ached to pull him close and breathe him in and kiss him like they were the only two souls on Etara's earth. Vasili was a piece of him. He couldn't damn well function without the prick. He *needed* him.

Vasili leisurely walked down the plank, every step fresh torture, wringing emotion from Niko's heart.

"You brought Adamo."

"I hoped you might ride with me?" His voice creaked somewhere in all of that mangled growl. Gods. In an effort to save himself from Vasili's icy glare, he offered him the daisy. If the flower didn't thaw Vasili, nothing would.

Vasili's hard jaw clenched, its line sharp. The wretched moment dragged into forever, the flower all that stood between them. Niko should say something, but what? Vasili didn't care for silly compliments. He never had. "Take the fucking daisy," Niko snarled.

Finally, thank Aura, Vasili's smile broke through his ice. He plucked the daisy from Niko's grip and tucked it behind his ear, then grabbed Adamo's reins and swung into the saddle. Patting the horse's neck, he leaned in and told Adamo how much he'd been missed. Of course, no mention of missing Niko.

Niko huffed. Jealous of a horse. A new low, even for him.

Finished preening Adamo, Vasili straightened in the saddle, his shoulders a hard line and chin up. The smile was gone again. "Lead on, Nikolas."

"Your bags?"

"Will stay aboard. For now."

The meaning was clear. He was returning to the ship, not their bedchamber. The heated burn of anger and frustration almost had Niko

demanding right there on the dockside in front of Yasir's crew and everyone exactly what he'd done to drive Vasili away. But if he launched into a tirade now, Vasili would clam up. Might even stomp back aboard and leave again.

Niko clicked his tongue and walked his horse away from the docks. Adamo's heavy hooves clopped behind, confirming Vasili followed, so Niko didn't have to glance behind him every few corners to check Vasili hadn't left him again. He did glance a few times, though, and met Vasili's sizzling glare every time. It had been a long time since Vasili had looked at him as though trying to decide where to shove a dagger for maximum damage. Niko's back crawled with that look now.

Apparently, a month at sea hadn't changed much between them.

Once out of Seran's narrow street, with the roads widening, Vasili trotted Adamo alongside Niko's bay, and they settled into an easy but silent walk. Butterflies flitted from flower to flower at the roadside, crickets chirped, and all Niko could hear was his pounding heart. He desperately wanted to ask him what had happened and tell Vasili that whatever it was, he'd change it, fix it, make it better, just so long as Vasili didn't go away again. Unless the problem was Niko himself. He couldn't change who he was.

This wasn't any better. Vasili was here, beside him, but miles away too. His heart was probably still at sea. Their destination was an hour's ride away, and the quiet, the sun, the clop of hooves, it was breaking Niko down. He couldn't squirm in silence any longer. Something had to give.

"Keep up," Niko said with more growl than he'd intended. He tipped forward in the saddle and kicked his ride into a trot, then a canter. The roads were wide enough, the ground soft, and the traffic light. Vasili never could resist an insanely dangerous gallop.

"Yar!" Vasili and Adamo bolted by, with Vasili flinging a catch-me grin over his shoulder.

Dammit. Niko couldn't let him stay ahead. He needed to steer him off the road ahead, but if he was determined to race, then so be it. His bay's stride lengthened into a gallop, chasing down Adamo and Vasili's disappearing outlines. Vasili's white hair blazed under the sun, his white shirt billowing. Adamo could run like the wind, and Vasili rode that horse like he meant to ride to the ends of the world. The road dipped, taking a long right-hand turn. Adamo hugged the brush and galloped on, his hooves scooping up earth and throwing it behind. Niko's horse was lighter, but the

rider was not. Still, the bay was in the chase now, its head down, nostrils snorting and ears back.

The road rose over a hill and, at its crest, suddenly veered left. Adamo jumped the stone wall that rose seemingly out of nowhere, making it look effortless. Niko hadn't known the corner was there, hadn't expected to be met with a wall of stone. The bay leaped. Hooves clipped the top stones, but the animal held the landing and kept its stride.

Adamo would tire. Hopefully. The junction they needed to take was coming up. A flatbed haycart blocked the road, its wheel crooked and sleepy horses munching on the verge.

"Yar!" Vasili's shout startled the doubled-over driver. Adamo darted right, around the cart, leaped some brush, and galloped into a field.

At this rate, Niko would never get him back on the right track.

"Come on," he growled at his ride. "Can't let him win." A few whips from the reins and the horse renewed its pace, gaining on Adamo's white tail and the flash of his steel shoes.

Niko drew up alongside, both animals panting hard. The wind tore at Niko's hair and shirt, the ground blurred by beneath them. Vasili tossed him a grin, the wild, untethered kind of grin, full of joy. Niko's heart tripped to see it.

"Yar!" Niko reined left, searching for a landmark he knew, spotted the beginnings of the lush valley, and galloped the bay across the field, taking the fence in an easy leap. Sure enough, Adamo was slowing some, but he took the fence behind Niko effortlessly.

Slowing to a trot, Niko aimed the bay in the general direction of where he needed to be and picked up the trail. A glance behind revealed Vasili's grin had stayed, his blue eye alight with silent laughter. The sight of his flushed face and dazzling eye eased some of Niko's concerns. Whatever happened between them really didn't matter, just so long as Vasili had more moments like these, where his true self could shine—the honest man hidden beneath all those complicated layers. This was the barrier, the gap Niko hadn't bridged, and maybe that was because only Vasili could close that distance between them.

The track wound deeper into high vegetation, full of thick-leaved banana plants and enormous ferns. The tinkling of a stream sounded through the twitter of birds and rhythmic cricket chirps.

"You appear to have a destination in mind," Vasili said.

Niko kept his gaze ahead. "Just meandering."

"Hm."

As the track opened into a small flower meadow, Niko filled his lungs with sweet air, steadied his heart, and fixed his glare on the red stone cottage as it came into sight, tucked among lush vegetation. The thatched roof was obviously new, but half the walls were old, the rest recently rebuilt. He waited for Vasili's comment but dared not look behind him, too afraid he'd see a snarl.

A small stream bubbled under a quaint rustic footbridge. Niko dismounted and looped the bay's reins around the branches of a bush. Still, he didn't look. Couldn't look. What if he knew why they were here? What if he was horrified?

"Someone you know lives here?" Vasili asked, sounding intrigued more than enraged.

Niko made a general sound of agreement and patted the bay. In the corner of his eye, he watched Vasili dismount and tie off Adamo. The prince sauntered toward the footbridge, *drawn* to it. The moment Vasili's back was turned, Niko plucked the small pair of tongs from his pocket, scooped up Adamo's front hoof, and quickly twisted off the nails holding the shoe on. The nails took some wiggling but finally let go. He quickly tossed the shoe into a bush and straightened, heart thumping. Vasili leaned against the bridge's rail, peering down into the shimmering waters.

Gods, his heart was going to give out if he kept this ruse up much longer. He wasn't made for subterfuge, especially trying to fool Vasili. Anyone who had dared manipulate the prince in the past had usually met their end at the point of Vasili's daggers.

"Adamo has lost a shoe," Niko announced, wincing at his forced tone. He really was terrible at lying.

Vasili slowly pulled his gaze from the stream and glanced over. "No, he hasn't."

Niko spread his hands and shrugged. "I'll see if the owner has some nails and a hammer."

Vasili's frown gathered like thunderclouds. He left the bridge and approached. "He hasn't lost a shoe, Nikolas. I'd know."

"Front right," Niko grunted, instinctively backing away as Vasili ran his hand down Adamo's foreleg and lifted Adamo's hoof by the fetlock.

Vasili stilled. Just a moment. Then dropped Adamo's leg and threw a scowl at Niko. "Very well."

Puffing out the breath he'd been holding, Niko stomped over the footbridge and up the cottage path. The cobbles had been freshly laid. The door freshly painted in deep green. Niko stared at it and its heavy iron knocker. Well, now there was no going back. He took the knocker and rapped.

CHAPTER 8

Vasili

THE DELIGHT at seeing Nikolas on the dockside with Adamo had rapidly turned to worry. Nikolas had been quiet on their ride, lost in his own head, and prickly enough that Vasili had let him stew. The gallop had helped—Nikolas had gripped the bay's reins so hard he'd whitened his knuckles—but now they'd dismounted in this curious place with its field of wildflowers—someone's quaint cottage—and Nikolas's behavior had become unsettling again. He was lying, *again*, but why?

All the weeks at sea, all the nights on deck spent wondering if Nikolas looked up at the same stars and thought of him, if Nikolas felt relieved at Vasili's leaving? Not even the spice had taken away the growing ache of absence. With every passing day, the emptiness inside had gotten worse. Until Yasir had taken matters into his own hands, snapped something about cutting his voyage short, and had his crew steer *Walla's Heart* back toward Seran.

Vasili shouldn't have left. Yasir had been right in that and told him so every night until turning the ship about.

For the first time in Vasili's life, he'd fled instead of standing his ground. And to make it worse, he'd fled from Nikolas. Something he'd vowed never to do. Only Nikolas Yazdan could make him break his own creed.

Seeing Nikolas waiting at the dockside, his face carefully guarded but not guarded enough, Vasili's heart had soared, then dropped like a stone. The tiny lines at the corners of Nikolas's eyes, the tight press of his lips, and the flicker of a muscle in his cheek—he had been furious, but with who wasn't entirely clear. Vasili, certainly, but perhaps also himself. And then he'd produced a daisy. Of all the things he could have said and done, the daisy struck at some unknown vulnerable part of Vasili and ripped away all his defenses. He'd stared at it, wondering if he had it in himself to guard his heart against Nikolas.

Sharp knocks at the cottage door pulled Vasili's thoughts back to now and the baked meadow, the burbling stream, and the fluttering butterflies. Nikolas clearly knew who lived here, and he'd been steering Vasili to this very location. But why? It was peaceful here, miles from Seran. The cottage had undergone work recently. The mortar was fresh, the wild garden trampled in places. Whose home was this? Whose *life* was this? If it was Nikolas's lover's, Vasili might have to kill the man.

Adamo pulled up a mouthful of flowers. "Hm... I don't believe you should be eating those." The horse grunted, as obstinate as Nikolas. The missing shoe was a surprise. Adamo must have lost it nearby or Vasili would have felt the hitch in Adamo's gait before they'd arrived.

"Where are you going?" Nikolas called out.

Vasili turned on the path. The cottage door lay open, Nikolas's hand on the handle. "Looking for the thrown shoe. Is someone home?"

"No," he groused, then ducked inside.

No? But Nikolas was comfortable enough here to help himself inside. Vasili eyed the dwelling carefully. It was small. The main door was flanked by two windows on the ground floor and three above. No smoke from the stack. Curious, Vasili abandoned the hunt for the shoe and strode up the path, then braced a hand on the doorframe and peered into the dark, giving his sight time to adjust from the sun's glare. A small entrance hall split two ways, into a living room and kitchen, with stairs rising in the middle.

The brick fireplace, the hand-hewn chairs, the thick wooden table. A rug, so new its Seranian colors glowed against stone floors. The walls were all crooked and rustic, the wooded furniture hand-carved, bricks all hand-laid.

He knew then. Knew *everything*.

A small noise like a gasp escaped his lips.

Vasili stepped back, almost stumbling in his haste. A rush of heat prickled his skin, his heart suddenly galloping. Oh... the onslaught of feeling hit him like a kick to the chest, making him reel and stagger back down the path. This was where Nikolas had been these last few months. But more than that, he hadn't just spent time here. He'd crafted every inch of the home with his capable hands.

"Vasili?" Nikolas's shadow filled the front doorway. "Are you—"

Vasili whirled away, hiding his face. "Fine. I'm fine."

"Wait." Boots crunched on gravel, signaling Nikolas's approach.

Vasili *moved*. Didn't run, that would have been foolish, but he briskly walked back down the path to the footbridge. He just... He gripped the rail and stared at the shimmering water... Just needed to get control of himself before he fell to his knees and wept for his own stupidity in the face of Nikolas's large heart. It was all... too much. A laugh bubbled free, which was better than crying, he supposed.

"Shit, gods-damn it..." Nikolas had followed. "I was trying to do something, but somehow it all—"

"No," Vasili said—*snapped*. He hadn't meant to, but Nikolas was going to explain all this, and Vasili suddenly, violently, didn't want him to. Not yet. He wasn't ready to hear it. If he did, he'd break right there, on the wooden bridge Nikolas *had made*. The wood beneath Vasili's hands was warm. Each chiseled stroke left in the wood put there by Nikolas. "No, it's fine. I just... The heat, being at sea. Some water, I think?"

"Yeah?" The hopeful tone almost dropped Vasili to his knees a second time. "I can do that."

Oh, this man. This brilliant, heartwarming, wonderful man. Vasili bit into his bottom lip, igniting a tiny spark of pain. Nikolas strode back up the path, and seeing him there, surrounded by all the things he had made, knowing this was what had him so distracted, Vasili didn't know whether to go to him, grab him, shove him against the wall and kiss him, or turn on his heel, climb back on Adamo, and gallop away. Instead, he did nothing, just watched Nikolas return to his cottage.

Did he believe Vasili wouldn't notice the similarities to his burned cottage in Loreen? The bricks were red, not grey, and the roof was straw, not slate. But the style, the crooked little windows, the hand-sawn door. All of it. It was so thoroughly Nikolas.

His own cottage in a meadow.

It was... remarkable and stole all Vasili's ability to form words to describe it. Like the man who'd built it had snuck beneath all his defenses and stolen his heart.

Vasili bowed his head, bracing his forearms on the bridge's little wooden rail, and focused on breathing. He'd manipulated a court of Cavilles, he'd survived eight years in hell, he'd battled for ownership of his very soul, and this little cottage in a forgotten meadow had nearly brought him to his knees. He laughed, but when the sound threatened to twist into a sob, he swallowed it.

Was Nikolas returning with the water, or was he waiting inside for Vasili to go to him? He hadn't reemerged, which suggested Vasili would have to go back inside.

If Vasili rode away now, it would save Nikolas the trauma later when he realized Vasili couldn't be the good man he needed. If he left now, this remarkable thing they had would end before it could turn sour, like everything turned bad after Vasili touched it.

He swirled the Yazdan ring on his finger.

But he didn't want to leave. Selfish, perhaps. But even knowing Nikolas could do so much better, Vasili wanted this—all of it, the little garden, trampled and muddy now, but just enough to tend. Wildflowers sprouting in chaotic places. And the stream, its burbling so peaceful. But all of that would be worthless without Nikolas to share it with. He should walk away, save the man from himself, but selfishly, he couldn't.

His body overrode his mind, and he drifted back to the house, finding Nikolas in the kitchen, swearing at the basin.

"Problems?"

"The pump—I'll get it," he muttered, then left via the back door to pump water into a bucket. Vasili leaned a hip against the chunky wooden worksurface and regarded the sprawl of tools scattered among kitchen cutleries. It was chaotic and messy, unfinished and rough, and Vasili's fingers itched to tidy and organize. The last time he'd done such a thing in Nikolas's old cottage, Nikolas had growled at him.

Nikolas returned, grumbling about pipes and water. He dunked a tankard into the bucket and handed it out, sloshing water over the sides. "It's fresh."

A smile tried to crawl onto Vasili's lips, but he worked it back. He took the cup and muttered his thanks. It was surely obvious to Nikolas that he

could not keep up this pretense of the house not being his for long. A few questions, thrown at Nikolas like knives, and his lies would come tumbling down. But he was clearly trying so hard to conceal the truth, it would be cruel to dash his ruse so soon.

Nikolas propped a hip against the kitchen basin, folded his arms, and looked everywhere but at Vasili. Cupboards still needed fixing. Nikolas scowled at them.

How long had he been working on it? He couldn't have done so much in a few short months? Unless he had help. Ah... the man in the market. The meetings at the Whispering Pearl. Oh, by Aura, Vasili was a fool. Nikolas had made him a fool. His mind had clutched at the worst possible scenario because it was all Vasili knew. Only Mother had shown him kindness, and that... well... she had been the one light in his life, before the dark had consumed it all. In his life at the palace, nobody cared enough to ask Vasili how he felt. Nobody cared that the eldest prince might have feelings, so Vasili had made it so he stopped caring. It had seemed the easiest way to survive. Birthdays came and went, unmentioned. Talos was too lost to the flame, Mother was sick, and Carlos and Amir hated him by then. Even when he'd returned from eight years of torture, nobody once asked him if he was well. There had been Julian, but... Well, his affection had been cruel lies. And then Nikolas... caring for him in the cabin in the woods. Nikolas, with his steady, strong hands and his murmured concerns. Nikolas, who *cared* when nobody else ever had. In the face of such kindness, Vasili was lost at how to respond.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you, Nikolas. For meeting me at the docks."

"You're welcome." And then quieter, he added, "I missed you."

Vasili's heart froze in his chest, his thoughts and body trapped. Yes, Vasili was a wretched fool for thinking his Nikolas would be so dishonest as to conduct an affair with someone else. Vasili only knew dishonesty. But he should not have assumed the worst. He should have *known* Nikolas better, should have... talked with him. Vasili clearly did not deserve him.

He sipped his water, avoiding Nikolas's heavy glare. In the absence of the flame, he'd begun to feel everything in brighter colors than before, and there was no more powerful a feeling than the one he felt for this man. Nikolas had a hold on parts of Vasili he'd never let anyone see before, not

even Alek. Being so exposed, falling into the unknown, it was... terrifying, but also freeing. "This house is delightful."

Nikolas exhaled, shoulders deflating. He closed his eyes, soft black lashes on Seranian-tanned cheeks, then flicked them open and met Vasili's gaze. One large step across the small room brought him suddenly close to Vasili. Not quite touching, but close enough for the heat of his body to simmer against Vasili's.

"I don't know what the fuck I did, but I'll fix it, change anything you want, if you'll stay?" His words began strong, fueled by anger, but tapered to a whisper at their end.

Vasili carefully set the cup on the countertop. Nikolas loomed, as he did so well, but the ex-soldier wouldn't push. Sometimes Vasili wished he would.

Sliding a hand up his chest, he caught Nikolas's whiskered jaw and held it firmly between his fingers and thumb, then straightened and leaned close, shifting his right leg to capture Nikolas's hot thigh against his own. "Before you, I was always in control. Before you, I played those around me like the fools they were. Before you, there were no surprises, only those of my making. You make a fool of me, Nikolas Yazdan."

Dark, Seranian eyes widened in puzzlement. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I." He kissed him quickly. A skim of the lips, a gentle probe at the tip of his tongue, just enough to tease Nikolas out of his own head.

Nikolas struck, suddenly pressing into Vasili's chest, his body a hard wall of muscle, his right leg a wedge between Vasili's. The kiss broke apart under Vasili's gasp. He turned his head away. Fragments of memories tried to needle apart his breathless rush of lust, but Nikolas's firm hand on Vasili's jaw stopped those flickers of the past from ruining the present, sweeping them away beneath his firm grip. Only Nikolas could hold him this way, only Nikolas could touch him so freely. His mouth came in for a second kiss, this one deeper, and it was all Vasili could do to kiss him back feverishly, tongues sweeping, taking and demanding, rocking together like Vasili was still at sea, trying to find balance in stormy waters.

Heat and sensitivity filled Vasili's cock. Nikolas's brutal strength and rough hands conspired to free Vasili of all thought and leave only sensation behind. Gods, yes. When Nikolas was angry and frustrated and hurting—when Nikolas wanted to hurt Vasili in return—his bites were sharper, his fingers rougher, his cock relentless. This was the wild Nikolas, the

bloodthirsty Nikolas, the man who had played elves at their own vicious game, and Vasili needed to fuck him more than he needed anything else on this earth.

Thick fingers cradled the nape of Vasili's neck, leaning him away. Nikolas's mouth branded Vasili's jaw, suckled and nipped downward, skimming his collarbone.

"Hm, you taste like the sea."

Vasili deliberately dropped his hand between them and captured Nikolas's hard cock, rubbing him through the trousers' fabric. Nikolas's grunt was pure animal. "No talking." *Just fucking.* It had been months since they'd been intimate. He'd missed Nikolas's throaty laugh, his mouth *on* his throat, missed how Nikolas's undivided attention burned him up inside and turned all the nightmares to ash.

His insistent cock prodded Vasili's crotch, already as hard as steel. Vasili's cock was rapidly matching its partner's. Vasili ground his need against Nikolas, summoning a possessive growl. Nikolas was more than capable of throwing Vasili against the counter and holding him there. He had done just that in the Stag and Horn when they'd first met. Before breaking Vasili's wrist, the weight of him then, the fierceness with which he'd attacked, had sparked a visceral passion, making Vasili hard right there as the half-wild ex-soldier had threatened him.

Vasili captured Nikolas's face in his hands, kissed him hard, and sucked on his lower lip, teasing it between his teeth. The shudder that spilled through Nikolas translated through Vasili and pulled at his cock.

Nikolas suddenly withdrew, then stepped back and turned his face and body away.

Vasili's hands fell to his sides, his body rapidly cooling. So, what was this then? The moment Nikolas turned away for good, the moment he finally realized his mistake and left? Was this the moment Nikolas revealed he'd brought Vasili here, to his special place, to end it between them? Of course, it had to happen, because all the good things in Vasili's life were torn away.

Vasili slammed the shutters down around his heart. He would never be ready, but he was prepared. Vasili Caville did not deserve good things, and this was always going to be their end.

CHAPTER 9

Niko

HIS DICK WAS OVERRIDING his brain. The way Vasili came undone in his arms, gods... it made Niko wild, made him crazy, muddled his head, and made him forget why he was here. This wasn't about sex, despite what his dick clearly wanted. And the rest of him wanted, to be fair. Vasili had always hidden in an icy shell, but slowly, he'd emerged, and now when Niko kissed him, the prince became wildfire. No longer afraid of touch, thriving under it instead. He so desperately wanted to turn around and continue kissing him. He'd slide his tongue down his chest, take his cock in his hands, and... but if he did that, he wouldn't stop there. And this was not how he'd planned this. It was supposed to be special. Not a fuck in the unfinished kitchen, surrounded by tools and dirt.

"Just say it then, Nikolas," Vasili said, his tone soft but underlined with a thin tremor.

"Say what?"

"What you've clearly been leading up to by bringing me out here."

Gods, Vasili was... angry? This was all wrong. It was supposed to be a happy moment. He'd dreamed of riding up to the gate with Vasili on Adamo. Niko would have taken his hand, helping him dismount, and walked him up the cottage path, then unlocked the door and said, "*Welcome home, Vasili.*"

But instead Vasili had left, and Niko had abandoned the cottage for a while, unable to stomach returning to finish all the little jobs. And now it wasn't perfect. None of it was perfect or good enough. Vasili was a Caville. He hated his ancestral home. This cottage was supposed to be better in every way. But Niko just seemed to fuck it all up, and he still wasn't sure how. He'd asked Vasili to stay. And Vasili hadn't replied. Vasili's silence said everything Nikolas needed to hear. He didn't want this cottage. Or Niko. He wanted the sea, and maybe Yasir.

Vasili's sigh was the loudest thing in the room, and then he abruptly left, boots clipping the floorboards until they crunched on the gravel outside.

"Fuck it..." Niko snarled, then stomped after him. Vasili breezed down the path, the sun on his hair. If this was it, if he was going to leave, Niko had to know why. "What did I do?"

Vasili stopped dead. Butterflies flitted across the path around him, and the sunbaked grasses swayed in the breeze. "Nothing, Nikolas. You did nothing." His shoulders fell. "It's all me."

That was a lie. If it were all Vasili, wouldn't it be Nikolas doing the leaving? Damn him, Vasili could leave, but not without looking Niko in the eye and explaining why.

Vasili stayed still on the path as Niko approached and circled around, blocking his exit over the footbridge. Of course, Vasili's stubborn jaw and his cool glare defied everything about this moment. If he had a dagger on him, which was highly likely, he looked as though he was thinking up where best to shove it should Niko get too close. This was the old Vasili, the guarded man afraid of anything he didn't control. This wasn't the real Vasili but a mask he wore to protect his heart. But he didn't need to wear it anymore, not for Niko. So why now?

"What happened to us?" Niko asked.

"I happened." The words cut the air between them. "I warned you, Nikolas. This isn't going to work. I can't..." A hitch in his voice tripped him.

"Warned me about what?"

Vasili tried to step around him. Niko caught his wrist, the same wrist he'd repeatedly broken in the past. Vasili snapped his head up, mouth falling open, but the backhanded slap Niko expected never came. Before he could wrench himself free, Niko yanked, pulling Vasili off-balance and into his arms. His bolt-like stiffness eased the second Niko's mouth claimed his,

and Vasili arched, molding his lithe body against Niko's. For all his sharp words and denials, he wanted this, wanted Niko. His half-hard cock didn't lie. It was stiffening again, persistent in its press against Niko's thigh. Niko would fuck him then, if it bought more time to talk.

Vasili's hands frantically roamed Niko's chest, ruffling his shirt, seeking skin. Niko tore his shirt free, and the prince's cool fingers stroked over his abs, then one slipped behind, claiming Niko's back as Vasili's mouth and tongue skimmed over Niko's in their haste. His body was more than interested, so where was his head at? Why was he fighting this?

Niko walked Vasili backward while trying to untie his fiddly shirt laces. His big fingers fumbled it. Then Vasili's thin, light fingers skimmed the bulge in Niko's trousers, making his cock leap at the prospect of having those quick fingers rubbing over it. Gods, they weren't going to make it back inside. But fucking Vasili outside, on the cottage path, seemed all kinds of... wrong.

"Dammit..." Niko drew back again, gasping from the kiss.

"*Niko.*" Part whine, part scolding, Vasili looked ready to drive a dagger home now.

"Wait?" It was supposed to be a demand, not a query, so of course, Vasili took advantage of his momentary weakness and grasped Niko's cock through the trousers, and all his attempts to stop this fizzled to dust. An involuntary jerk of the hips drove his cock deeper into Vasili's grip, and the prince smiled his sly, wicked smile. Then, like the sin in male form he was, Vasili dropped to his knees, made impossibly quick work of Niko's pants ties, and freed his member, right there on the cottage path. Vasili's smooth, tight lips devoured him whole, from crown to balls in a sudden gulp, and Niko maybe swallowed his own tongue as he tossed his head back, freeing a strangled sound. He wasn't strong enough to fight this. With his hands gently cupping the back of Vasili's head, Vasili then withdrew, keeping his lips tightly sealed, and sucked the sensitive tip over his tongue, back and forth, the shallow depth a constant tease, building a hungry ache to thrust deep and hard into Vasili's mouth.

"Vasili." The name tumbled from his lips, over and over. Gods, he'd missed him, missed this too, but mostly missed him. Even this—whatever it was—was classic Vasili, fucking with Niko's head. Made him want to yell at the prince, made him want to pin him down and do wild, terrible, wonderful things to him just to hear him moan Niko's name.

Pleasure was a burning lick down his spine, delivered at the mercy of Vasili's vicious mouth. Niko freed his grip on Vasili's head and deliberately pulled himself out of Vasili's captivating suck. Vasili threw a startled, questioning look up at him that almost had Niko backing off, but damn him, this was happening, and whatever bullshit was going on in Vasili's head could wait.

Niko hauled him up by his floppy shirt, off his knees, earning a snarl that only made Niko want to kiss him harder. "Get inside, prince." He shoved him toward the cottage door.

Vasili's quick hands shoved pathetically at Niko's hold, and for a moment, the vicious desire to fuck him raw faltered. What if he was wrong, what if Vasili really didn't want this?

"Look at me."

Vasili did, his fierce, single blue eye a mirror for everything in the man's soul. Oh, and it was sharp and full of rage and bitterness, but there was more to it, more Niko saw, now that he knew him. He caught him by the neck, hauled him close, then hovered his mouth over Vasili's. Freeing his grip, Vasili teetered, breathing fast, able to pull back if he truly wanted. Their breaths shared, Vasili's glare told the world how he despised everyone and everything, but mostly Nikolas. Then he lunged, kissing Nikolas like he could swallow his soul. He already had, long ago.

Niko scooped him up, earning a startled gasp. Vasili's arm fell over Niko's shoulders, holding on, as Niko carried him over the cottage threshold. He'd have taken him upstairs, but the staircase was narrow, and they'd never make it without breaking something.

Opting for the living room instead, Niko unceremoniously dumped Vasili into the chair beside the unlit fireplace. The startled prince landed half on his side on the chair cushions, hair hiding his face. He twisted, puffed his hair from over his eye, and laughed.

Well, that laugh was it then. Niko was never letting him leave. He braced both hands on the arms of the chair, fencing Vasili under him, and the viperous prince blinked up at him as though he were the picture of innocence and virtue—things he'd never been. Vasili Caville was born with fangs, and Nikolas fucking loved him for it.

"I'm done playing whatever mind game you have going on," Niko snarled. "This is your last chance to escape, prince."

His pale lashes fluttered, and his smile slipped to one side. “Won’t the owner of this fine house be alarmed to find two men fucking in their favorite chair?”

Niko narrowed his eyes. Vasili knew. He knew Niko had built this house, and the bastard was smiling at him because he’d figured it out. How long? Had it just now occurred to him, or had he known the second he’d seen the cottage? Dammit, Niko couldn’t keep a damn thing from him. But Vasili couldn’t know one thing, the most important thing. He didn’t know Niko had built the cottage *for* him. The prick.

“Who’s doing the fucking?” Niko growled. “Because in another few seconds, you don’t get a choice.”

Vasili’s lips parted, making way for the sharp intake of breath—a good sound, a very good sound.

“Stay,” Niko warned, and at Vasili’s cocked eyebrow, hastily retreated into the kitchen, searching the boxes for agreeable oil, cursing his disorganized work space.

By the time he’d returned, Vasili had settled comfortably in the chair, arms on the chair’s arms, knees spread, still fully clothed, although if Vasili’s cock—the bulge very prominent—had its way, it wouldn’t be tightly wrapped behind fabric for much longer. Gods, he was a feast, every course poisoned, and Niko would die devouring him.

“Turn the fuck around.” Niko shucked off his own already loose pants and stepped out of them.

Vasili’s gaze flicked from the bottle of oil in Niko’s hand to the erection he’d recently had his tongue wrapped around. Niko’s cock hadn’t waned. If anything, the prince’s gaze had the damn thing leaping with joy. Traitorous dick.

Vasili didn’t obey the order. Niko hadn’t really expected him to. Niko stopped in front of the prince, between his spread knees. Vasili lifted his chin, like a king on his throne, like he had all the power here, despite Niko towering over him. That gaze was full of fight. It simultaneously made Niko want to kiss him and cradle him and tell him he was loved, but also hold him down and fuck him like he deserved the ferocious pounding.

No other man had ever tied Niko in knots like this one.

“What are you waiting for, Nikolas? My appraisal or my submission? You’ll get neither by standing there.”

What *was* he waiting for? Niko tore off his own shirt and threw it away. A chill whispered across his skin, sprinkling goose bumps over his nakedness, or perhaps that was Vasili's gaze appraising him. How long would he sit there before acting? His cock clearly wanted Niko, and Niko knew Vasili's complicated head also desired his body, so how long could he resist the inevitable?

Done with his visual assessment, Vasili sighed through his nose. His fingers tightened on the chair's arms. Oh, the wait was killing him too. Good.

Niko grasped his own cock and stroked, shuddering at the sudden deluge of pleasure. Vasili managed to resist looking for a few seconds, then he dropped his gaze, soft lips parting as though he recalled where his mouth had been moments ago. The tip of his tongue teased over his bottom lip.

Niko nudged the prince's knees together and straddled his thighs. Vasili tipped his head up, inviting the kiss that Niko had already broadcast in his own breathless panting. Now he had Vasili under him, trapped in the chair. He kissed him hard, rapidly losing his mind.

Vasili's hands brushed up Niko's thighs as his mouth absorbed—and quickly returned—Niko's lavish kiss. Although his prince was bracketed beneath him, utterly at Niko's mercy, Vasili held all the control. He always had.

Niko rocked into Vasili's touch, the kiss losing all its edges, their touch blurring. When Vasili's fingers encircled Niko's straining cock, his gasp encouraged Vasili's smile against Niko's mouth. "Ugh, fuck..." Niko murmured against his mouth, and now Vasili had him caught by the cock, the prince flicked his thumb over the sensitive head, gathering precum to oil his grip, increasing the pace of his strokes. Gods, Niko was going to come and Vasili was still fully dressed, his cock untouched. Fuck no, that wasn't happening.

He tugged at Vasili's pants laces, yanking them hard enough to lift Vasili ass off the chair, prompting him to chuckle into the sloppy kiss. Oh, gods, not the laugh. The laugh would undo him quicker than the hand on his cock. "Stop... shit... gonna come." Vasili's grip switched from pumping menace to a hard, vicious pinch at his cock's head, delivering a bite of pain like a slap to the face.

"*Sonofawhore!*" Niko skittered backward, fell off the chair but somehow managed to land on his knees. With vengeance on his mind, he

swooped in and finally freed Vasili's cock. Leaving no time for Vasili to think, he pushed Vasili's thighs open, grasped his length, and sucked him deep. His reward came in the form of a spluttered curse and Vasili's fingers spearing into his hair. His cock twitched over Niko's tongue, its thick girth a feast. He'd wanted to fuck Vasili into the chair, but this was just as good, better even. Feeling him writhe, hearing him groan and pant, the needling of his fingers and the thrust of his hips. He *loved* Vasili like this—loved him in all ways, but lost to lust was one of his favorites.

Niko sucked off the end of his cock with a slurp and lifted his gaze to Vasili's flushed face.

"Seeing you like this, Niko—"

Niko stroked his tongue from the base of Vasili's cock to its tip, keeping his gaze on Vasili's face. The prince's lashes fluttered. His gasps smothered whatever he'd been about to say, the eloquent prince suddenly speechless.

Niko wasn't going to fuck him, no. He was going to watch him come, like this. He sucked deep again and stroked, using his tongue to press the cock to the roof of his mouth, running the head over its firmness and then down his throat. Garbled instructions fell from Vasili. His hips stuttered their warning, lifting off the cushion, and then with a shout from Vasili his cock pulsed its seed over Niko's tongue. He withdrew a little to keep from gagging and swallowed the spurts of salty seed, ignoring the pain from Vasili's nails in his scalp.

Only now did Vasili's glare lose its razor's edge, the post-sex glow finally thawing him. Abandoning his spent cock, Niko crouched on his heels, dragging his hands down Vasili's trouser-clad thighs. He was still fully clothed. Niko may have been hasty in getting him off, but it was worth it for the soppy look Vasili gave him now, like he'd been wrung of all his poison, leaving him harmless.

Leaning forward, Vasili reached for Niko's erection. "Let me—"

Niko knocked his hand away. "Oh, trust me, I'd like nothing more, but we have to talk."

"You're naked and hard, and you want to talk?"

"It seems to be the only way to stop you..." Niko trailed off as Vasili's eye narrowed.

"Stop me what?"

"Running," he said quietly, fearing it was already too late to stop himself from fucking this up all over again.

Vasili turned his head away, looking into the empty fireplace. "I'll get some logs." He shoved from the chair, tucked his cock away with an easy sweep of his hand, and slipped by Niko's shoulder. Niko humphed at the empty chair and his own insensitive idiocy. At least Vasili was coming back this time.

Reluctantly, he pulled on his pants, loosely tying the fly closed, and ran a hand through his ruffled hair. Outside, daylight had begun to fade, stretching shadows across the wild garden. Adamo was still devouring all the grass he could reach, confirming Vasili hadn't taken the opportunity to leave.

Ducking out the back door via the kitchen, he found Vasili stacking logs into the crook of his arm, trying to balance too many at once. Three toppled off. Vasili cursed, then gathered them up again. Giving him space, Niko left him to it to prepare the paper and kindling in the kitchen stove and the living room fireplace. The heat of the day would soon fade. Nights could get cold in the valley.

Vasili reappeared with his balanced armful of logs. Niko took several for the kitchen and left him to light the living room fire alone. Once the stove was blazing, he popped a kettle on to boil and fell into an old routine of preparing vegetables for supper. Using a wickedly sharp knife, he peeled the already washed potatoes.

"Hm," Vasili purred from the doorway, startling Niko.

The knife slipped, skimming past his skin, almost taking his thumb with it. "Fuck."

Vasili glided in, looped his arms around Niko's waist, and plucked the knife from between his fingers. "Let me." The words tickled Niko's ear, and his cock was suddenly interested all over again, which would have been less alarming if Vasili's hands and the knife weren't within reach of Niko's perky member. With the prince plastered against his back, Niko breathed in the salty, sunshine smell of him and watched him make quick work of skinning the potatoes.

He wasn't surprised by his skill with a knife, but he hadn't expected Vasili to be able to peel a potato in a few seconds, like he'd done it a thousand times. "Spent long in the palace kitchens, did you?"

"Hm."

The steel-like press of Vasili's chest against his back reminded him of the last time Vasili had been bent over him, his tongue flicking his ear, his

cock buried deep inside Niko's ass. It had been months ago now.

"Alek's mother insisted I help prepare dinner if I was to eat with them as often as I chose."

Ah, Alek. Vasili's first boyhood love and the reason he knew anything about simple living outside of servants and palace conveniences. Niko tried to picture the young prince in a modest kitchen, like this one. He'd be dressed down to blend in, might even have smiled more, would certainly have laughed more.

"It's hard to imagine you domesticated."

Vasili's soft laugh was over too soon. "I was different then."

The boy prince riding atop his charger, untouched by war and betrayal and the flame. Niko had looked at the princes so far away in their towered palace and assumed they had riches and freedom and everything they could ever dream of. How wrong he'd been.

The veg prepared, Vasili set the last potato aside, and Niko twisted in Vasili's arms. Vasili cocked his head, then brought the knife up and pressed its cool edge to Niko's whiskered jaw. A wild little thrill unexpectedly tightened Niko's balls.

Vasili skimmed the flat edge of the knife toward Niko's chin, flicked it free, and then pressed its edge against Niko's throat. Now, he froze. The flat edge was one thing, but the blade's edge against his skin? Even fooling around, as they surely were, it was dangerous. So why then was his cock harder than ever? The damned thing had a mind of its own.

Vasili shifted his stance, leaning in, and wet his lips. He couldn't fail to notice Niko's cock painfully clamped between them.

Niko swallowed, felt the blade bite, and freed a small gasp. By Etara, Vasili's gaze darkened like it used to, not with the flame, thank fuck, but with his deep-seated desires. The same desires that had him breathless at the sight of Niko tied with silk.

"Did you bring me here to end us?" Vasili suddenly asked, his voice thick.

"What the fuck—no. Is that—" The blade dug deeper, silencing him.

"You deserve more, Nikolas."

Oh, this again. Was that what all this had been about? He thought Vasili had moved on from his self-hate but should have known it would take more than a few weeks of love to alter his perspective, make him see the truth about himself.

“I thought...” Vasili swallowed and tried again. “I thought you were seeing someone else, and I wanted that for you. I wanted you to find someone good but hated that you had. I wanted to let you go but also considered tracking the bastard down, and... well, I have many creative ways of eliminating threats, especially from those who take what’s mine.”

Niko couldn’t help the twitch of his lips. Vasili had thought he was having an affair? Fuck. No wonder he’d reacted like he had. It was a wonder Niko still had his balls attached.

“Am I amusing, Nikolas? I have a knife at your throat. I suggest you don’t piss me off.”

Ah, but it was all Vasili’s posturing, revealing his fangs, doing all the things predators did when threatened. And now it was a relief too, because suddenly his behavior made a whole lot of sense. The long, drilling looks from a distance, the rage at seeing him with the man in the market, the fact he had *fled* with Yasir. Honestly, it was remarkable he hadn’t done worse than walk away, like threaten the blacksmith whose only crime was to complete a few door hinges.

A bubble of laughter rumbled up Niko’s throat. He managed to swallow it, but Vasili still saw the humor on his face.

He frowned and withdrew the knife. “Yes, thank you. I am aware of the fool you’ve made me. I’m... unaccustomed to all this.”

“You were jealous?”

Vasili’s hand dropped, and suddenly Niko had a knife at his erect cock. Not so long ago, such a thing would have turned his insides to ice and had him wrestling Vasili off. Now, he rather liked the way the prince was eyeing him, like he could peel strips off Niko. Gods, more heat surged into Niko’s eager cock, even though it was perilously close to dismemberment.

Bracing his arms either side of him, against the countertop, the angle had him leaning back some so he could just make out his own tented pants and the shining blade pressed against his cock. Now it was Niko’s turn to wet his lips. “You going to use that? Because the second you take it away, I’m going to ravish every inch of you until you beg me to suck you dry.”

Vasili’s chin jutted, and Niko was sure some wicked insult was about to be flung his way. Instead, the prince said, “You’ll have to catch me first.” Then, with a whirl of white hair, he bolted out the kitchen doorway. Niko made a grab for him, fingers sailing through his hair, and dashed into the small entrance hall, right on Vasili’s tail. The prince darted up the stairs but

not fast enough. Niko grabbed a heeled boot. Vasili dropped onto his chest with an ungainly oomph and flung a grin over his shoulder. Niko should have known to expect a trick. Vasili wasn't so easily caught. The second Niko smiled back, the kick toward his face was all it took for Vasili to get free and scamper out of sight. Niko swore, grateful Vasili's sharp heels had missed his chin, and then pounded up the stairs after him. He made it to the small, split-landing, doorways on either side leading to bedrooms, deciding on the left, and caught a flash from the right. Raising an arm did nothing but offer Vasili an anchor to shove. Niko's back hit the wall. Vasili's smile flashed. The blade was somewhere in all of this, but then Vasili lunged, and Niko couldn't risk it being for a kiss or to sink the knife home. He caught the prince's arm, bent it down, twisted, and sidestepped, throwing Vasili face-first against the wall. He grunted, wriggled under Niko's weight, and grinned over his shoulder. "Shame you forgot the oil."

Oh... Niko ground his cock deep between Vasili's ass cheeks. "Wretched tease." At that, he sank his teeth into Vasili's shoulder. Vasili's cry was more pleasure than pain and made Niko curse the fact he had, in fact, forgotten the oil. Who remembers oil when they have a knife at their cock? Clearly, Vasili did.

"Where's the knife?" Niko demanded.

"Hm."

"Vasili..."

"Find it."

"You're testing me, prince."

"And you love it."

He buried his face in Vasili's hair, breathing in the scents of salt and Vasili, and nuzzled his neck. "I do." *Love you*. Gods, this man had pinned down his heart, and no matter what he did, Niko would forgive him. "If I were fucking the blacksmith in the market, would you have killed him?"

"Yes." He answered that too fast, having clearly thought it before now.

Gods. New delicious shudders whipped down his back. "Did you and Yasir fuck?"

Vasili's snort was cruel. "What if we did?"

"*Bastard*." He dug his cock against Vasili's ass again, punishing him. "You didn't? Tell me you didn't." Please, gods. He'd forgive him, even that, if it meant he'd stay. Yasir, though, that treacherous peacock would be in for a whole world of pain.

“We didn’t, Niko. *Never*. It’s always been you.”

He hadn’t realized how much he’d needed to hear it until now. The relief was almost tangible as it lifted off his soul, making him lightheaded. Sweeping Vasili’s hair back, he found the daisy, all tangled up in his pale locks, and pulled it free, tossing it aside. “Ah...” Vasili frowned. “I liked th —”

Niko spun him around and slammed him back against the wall, making Vasili bare his teeth. “I’ll find you another, right after we fuck.”

The knife was back, suddenly at Niko’s throat again. “Bed,” Vasili ordered. “And I didn’t forget the oil.”

Niko had believed he preferred to top, but when Vasili topped, there was a whole new depth to their closeness, and he ached to have him like that again now. To have Vasili fill him to bursting. “You going to cut me as you fuck me, Vasili?”

The prince’s icy blue eye flashed. “Perhaps I will, Nikolas.”

Maybe Niko wanted him to. That idea was new and thrilling and insane. Vasili shoved, backing Niko through the bedroom door. His gaze darted about the room, seeing it for the first time. The bed, the rug, the window, the copper tub. Vasili’s kohl-lined eye widened, like he couldn’t believe he was here. “Your house is a wonder,” he said softly, and meant it.

“It’s yours.”

He stopped, heels planted, and lowered the knife. “What?”

Uh-oh. Not again. Just when things were being resolved and getting interesting, Niko had spoiled it by blurting the wrong thing. “Nothing. I didn’t say a damn thing. Put the knife at my neck and let’s fuck.”

But it was too late. Vasili bowed his head, eyebrows pinched.

Niko cursed his own stupidity. Vasili had misunderstood everything. He’d hate that he’d made a mistake, hate himself for being *the fool*, and hate this moment. It would be too much for him. Niko had gone too far, too soon, when Vasili was still adjusting. Dammit. Niko wished he could just grab him and pull him close, and somehow that would be enough for him to know none of it mattered, just Vasili’s happiness.

Vasili looked up. His eye glistened with unshed tears, and Niko’s heart broke open.

CHAPTER 10

Vasili

THE KNIFE CLATTERED to the floor.

It's yours.

No, no, no. He couldn't have this. He'd killed countless people. He'd murdered in cold blood. Some of his victims he'd sucked the life out of for the dark flame, others he'd just eradicated because they were inconvenient. Some deaths had been necessary, some he'd *enjoyed*. He'd lied, manipulated, cheated, crossing all lines.

But one death...

One haunted him the most.

Suddenly crushed under the weight of his sins, he fell to the bedroom floor and buried his face in his hands. Niko's solid arms closed around him, hauling him close, but his embrace made it *worse*. He did not deserve to be forgiven. He hadn't earned any of this. He should be dead. Why was he alive and better men were not? He hadn't saved his people. He hadn't stopped the flame. Nikolas had done that. It had all been for... nothing.

"Shh..." Nikolas crooned. "It's over."

Gods, if only that were true. It wasn't over. It still played in his head. He saw Yasir again now, standing in front of him, the sights of his long gun locked on Vasili. Vasili had stopped the flame from taking him but not from

taking Yasir's lover. He hadn't stopped Liam's death. Could have. Perhaps. And didn't.

Nikolas pulled Vasili into his lap, and Vasili went, curling into his arms as though he could fold himself into something small and hidden. "Come to bed with me." Just like before, at the cabin, Nikolas smelled of wood smoke and horse, and when Nikolas tucked him close like this, it was the only place Vasili truly felt safe. Nikolas didn't care he was a mess. He didn't even care that Vasili had gotten everything so wrong and nearly ruined the wonderful thing they had together. He'd laughed. *Laughed*. Only Nikolas could laugh at the wreck Vasili was.

"I'm taking you to bed," he said again, in a voice that left no room for argument.

Warm, steely arms scooped him up and set him down on the bed. Vasili curled inward, hiding... Hiding from it all. The bed dipped, creaked, and Niko's warmth soaked into his back. A heavy arm tucked around his waist and hauled his ass into Niko's crotch. He sobbed for all the wrongs he'd caused and couldn't put right.

When he woke, sore and aching, the angle of the light in the room had shifted around and brightened. Morning. Nikolas was gone from the bed, but the clattering from downstairs suggested he hadn't gone far. With no mirror in the room, Vasili had no idea if his appearance was as rough as he felt, but he could imagine he'd perhaps looked better. Steering his thoughts from last night's display, he washed up at the washbasin, brushed his teeth with one of two toothbrushes, and wet his hair, detangling it between his fingers.

By the time he padded barefoot downstairs, the cottage smelled of bacon and coffee. He followed his nose into the kitchen and observed the big ex-soldier, a man who was more than capable of killing elves with his bare hands, adjust some wildflowers in a tiny vase in the center of a fine breakfast spread.

Struck dumb, Vasili froze. He was perfect. Half of Vasili wanted to push Nikolas away for his own good, but the other half wanted to kill anyone who dared try and take him. Shame made his gut tighten. Nikolas was clearly trying desperately to make this work, and Vasili had turned his surprise into a disaster. "I'm sorry—"

"Shit!" Startled, Nikolas knocked the vase. It toppled, spilling water and flowers across the table. "Fuck!"

Vasili grabbed a towel from the nearby worktop and soaked up the small flood, stopping the worst of it from damaging the breakfast. Nikolas hastily righted the vase. One of the flowers drooped. He snarled at it.

“It’s fine.” Vasili settled a hand on his, if only to stop him grabbing the vase and tossing it out a window. “The breakfast looks delicious. Shall we eat?”

Breakfast began stiffly. Vasili’s emotional undoing still lingered between them, and Niko was clearly anxious. But once half the coffee was gone and the plates cleared, Nikolas forgot his mood. Through the open back door, Vasili watched Adamo happily chomping grass with his new bay friend in the backyard. Now Vasili’s belly was full, and Nikolas was calmer, there seemed no better moment to *talk*. Yasir had made it sound simple. *Just talk to him*. But Yasir talked about anything and everything to everyone. Stopping the captain from talking was more the challenge. The notion of talking to Nikolas about feelings and needs and how insanely stupid Vasili had been was clearly a good idea, but also... terrifying.

“I should have told you about this place.” Nikolas leaned back in the chair and sipped his steaming coffee. His eyes downcast, he said, “I wanted it to be a surprise, but I see how it looked.” Flicking his dark eyes up, he added, “I wasn’t around when you needed me. I kept things from you, which wasn’t fair.”

“I should have trusted you.”

Nikolas smiled, but it didn’t stretch far. “You see things I don’t. It didn’t cross my mind that I was hurting you. It should have. I’m sorry. It was not my intention to drive you away. The opposite, actually. I found this old place, derelict for years and on Yazdan land, and bought it off Roksana for a few weeks’ work. I thought I could—” He cut himself off and set his cup down. “That time we had... before. I wanted that again for us.”

“The cabin?” Vasili asked softly.

“Yeah. It’s foolish. But back then, I wanted to stay there, with you. Just the two of us. And you told me to build a place, so...” He shrugged, making light of it all. “I did.”

“I told you to build a life with a good man.” Nikolas gestured at Vasili, as though it was done. Vasili sighed. “I can’t be that man.”

Nikolas narrowed his eyes and leaned in, his demeanor turning combative. “Bullshit. You already are.”

“You are kind and honest, Nikolas. You’re one of the few good souls left in this world. I’ll drag you down.”

Shaking his head, Nikolas glared out the doorway, cheek twitching. “You think I’m good? Have you forgotten where I came from? You wanna compare battle scars? Tell me how you killed someone because you wanted to, and I’ll tell you how I tortured elves just to hear them scream. There’s as much blood on my hands as there is on yours. You call me good like you don’t know me, Vasili, and that’s a lie. When I had the flame, I was one twitch away from embracing it. You know exactly who I am, and it ain’t good.”

Vasili winced and tapped his fingers against his mug of hot coffee. The fact Nikolas had the flame at all had been Amir’s fault but could so easily have been Vasili’s doing. That part of his manipulative plan to control the Yazdan bastard, he’d failed to act on.

“You’ve built up some perfect idea of me to push yourself down, but we aren’t so different. If you don’t think I’d pick up a sword tomorrow and kill every bastard that’s ever dared hurt you, you’d be wrong. And I wouldn’t need any more reason to kill a man. So let’s just agree right now that we’re both fucked up and deserve each other.”

Perhaps he could agree to that, even if he didn’t fully believe it. “Very well.”

“Good.” Nikolas’s eyes narrowed. “Why do I feel as though that was too easy?”

“Perhaps because I’ve never done this before.” He waved vaguely between them. “So I don’t know what I’m agreeing to.”

“Breakfast?”

Vasili gave him a droll look. “A relationship. One that’s based on honesty and feelings, not lies or some means to an end.”

“Feelings,” Nikolas echoed. He’d schooled his expression, but Vasili heard his little comical lilt all the same.

“Are you going to listen or laugh?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“I’m listening, Vasili. I’ve always listened.”

Vasili swallowed the small hitch in his throat. “I’m aware I can be difficult.”

Nikolas’s lips twitched. Gods, the man was impossible.

Vasili sighed through his nose. "I'm aware I have some unusual tendencies."

"Like holding a knife to my cock?"

"Yes," he relented. He'd enjoyed that, especially the way in which Niko's cock had responded, not by wilting but by visibly stiffening. "And I'm obviously going to expect the worst and thus plan for it. I can't suddenly forget my past or who I am."

"I'd never ask you to, because I love who you are," Nikolas spoke softly but with conviction. He stared at Vasili, daring him to argue.

"Love?" Vasili asked.

Nikolas had lost his humor now. Vasili was the center of his attention. "You don't think you deserve it."

Not a question, but Vasili nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Do you believe I'd let any man hold a knife to my dick?"

"I hope not."

He chuckled. "You're everything, Vasili. And the fact you don't even see how fucking brilliant you are makes me love you more."

Clearly, Nikolas was allowing his heart to guide his head. Again. "What you call brilliance, others might call madness."

"I don't care what others think. I love your mind, even though I can't keep up with it. I love your soul, wounded as it is. I love your laugh—fuck I love that laugh so much. And your smile—not the *I'm-about-to-fuck-you-up* smile, the other one, the soft one. I love that one, when you finally show it."

Vasili showed a little of it now as an unexpected warmth began to swell around his heart.

"I love the way your fingers play over my skin. I love that I can feel your gaze in a crowded room. I can't get enough of your mouth on my cock, and everywhere else, but mostly there, because I know how vicious that mouth can be."

Gods, heat flushed Vasili's face and had his cock filling. He blushed, like the fool for Nikolas he was. "Stop."

Nikolas grinned and plowed on. "I love that look you give me, the one where you're so pissed you want to fuck or stab me. That look gets me hard like that." He clicked his fingers, and his tongue swept across his lip. When he next spoke, his voice had dropped to a dangerous growl. "I love that you will go to the ends of the earth for what's right, no matter the cost or who you fuck up on your way. I love you, Vasili. The bad and the good."

“You’ve loved before...” It was a pitiful argument, but he was rapidly running out of reasons why Nikolas should leave him.

“Not like this.” He leaned back again and laid his hand on the table, fingers tapping.

“Marcus?”

“Was a kind man who died too soon. I loved him, but not in the same way I love you.”

“The poet you mentioned, from the front line.” Vasili recalled every one of the past relationships Nikolas had revealed. He’d dissected what he knew of these past lovers and determined he was nothing like them. Thus, Vasili was not Nikolas’s type.

“Not so much love as company.”

Carefully, Vasili asked, “Julian?” Nikolas had cared deeply for Julian. So had Vasili.

Nikolas sighed. “When I returned from the front, I had nothing. The old me was long dead. I didn’t know what I wanted. I thought loving Julian was what I needed. Maybe he would have been if nothing had changed. But I wasn’t the same boy who left for war. I was wrong.”

“Had he not turned out to be a flame-riddled lying bastard, would you have built a cottage for him too?”

Nikolas closed his eyes, thinking it over, then fixed his open eyes on Vasili. “No. You were already in my head long before the truth of him was revealed.”

“Hm. I recall our first kiss in the farmhouse field while you were still with Julian.”

“The one where you tried to kill me with your tongue?” Nikolas chuckled and adjusted his stance on the chair, hand fumbling under the table. Hopefully to adjust his erection because Vasili’s own had become quite the distraction.

That kiss in the field had been careless and rage-filled and had startled Vasili as much as it clearly had Nikolas at the time. Some things even Vasili didn’t plan for. “We do make a terrible pair,” Vasili admitted with a chuckle.

“In all the right ways.”

They finished their coffees in contented silence. Vasili helped tidy the table, discreetly tidying other things in a way that wouldn’t look as though he was trying to control Nikolas’s space.

“I have another surprise,” Nikolas said sometime later, with the kitchen cleared and the stove stoked to last the day. He shrugged a messenger bag over a shoulder and nodded toward the back door. He must have caught Vasili’s hesitation and said, “It’s not as heavy as the whole—” He waved at the kitchen around them, suggesting the cottage. “Will you trust me this time?”

Vasili revealed one of his rare soft smiles, just for Nikolas. “Then surprise me.”

CHAPTER 11

N_{iko}

VASILI DID NOT LIKE SURPRISES. That was clear, and something he'd avoid in the future, but this next one, he was certain Vasili would enjoy, and it would get him out of the cottage, which after the previous evening and Nikolas's monumental fuckup in declaring he'd built Vasili a whole house and kept it a secret, would probably help the prince relax.

They tacked up and mounted the horses. Vasili had Adamo walk behind Niko's bay in a leisurely stroll, and together they followed the brook upstream, where it widened and slowed.

Having Vasili come apart in his arms had been one of the most painful experiences of his life. As the man had sobbed, all Niko could do was hold him. It hadn't felt like enough. He'd meant what he'd said, he'd kill to protect him, but swinging a sword couldn't protect Vasili from himself. Maybe this surprise would help.

The early morning sun had yet to make sweltering temperatures, and the grasses glistened wet with dew. Sweet pollen scented the air, and with the clop of hooves and the chitter of birds, he hoped Vasili could find some peace in all of this. A glance back revealed him quietly smiling to himself and admiring some distant part of the landscape. He *would* like this, Niko was sure.

Vasili caught Niko watching and said, "I told Yasir I'd be back at dusk."

Niko tightened his hold on the reins and fixed his gaze on the bend in the stream ahead. “He probably spent the night passed out under the Whispering Pearl’s bar. He won’t even have realized you’re gone.”

“Still, I should get word to him.”

He shouldn’t be jealous of their closeness. He knew that. But was, all the same. Vasili had probably told him of Niko’s wrongly assumed affair, which would explain Yasir avoiding him of late. It hurt some to think they had both thought so little of him that he’d fuck around with another man.

But he wasn’t about to let it ruin this morning’s ride.

They passed where the stream joined its source, coming upon a wide, slow-moving river that had etched its way through the red Seranian rock over the centuries. Niko steered his horse away from the river for the last part of their walk and had it climb a track. Vasili made no comment about the hidden path, but his raised eyebrow revealed his intrigue.

They crested a bank, and below, on the other side of the hill, a small waterfall fell into the turquoise waters of a tropical basin. Vasili reined Adamo up alongside, his gaze skimming the oasis below. “I take it this is your surprise?”

Niko’s heart fluttered at his hard tone. He’d screwed up again, somehow. Maybe this was too much like the pool at the cabin in the woods. Maybe he wanted to go back to Seran, to Yasir.

Vasili suddenly tossed him a wide, sparkling grin and clicked his tongue for Adamo to begin the descent down the bank toward the beach made of red sand.

Niko exhaled. All right, so he hadn’t done so bad.

He plodded his bay after them and dismounted on the beach, leaving the bay loosely tied at some brush. The sound of the falls drowned out all the small sounds, and when he turned, he found Vasili had already discarded his boots and was ankle-deep in water. Niko opened his mouth to suggest he remove his clothes—for purely practical reasons—but Vasili waded in, steepled his arms, and dove straight under the water, barely pausing to check the depth.

Niko drifted toward the pool’s edge. There had been another fall like this one that they’d encountered on their first trip to Seran, and Vasili had lost his inhibitions in that one too. The memory of seeing him soaked and grinning had Niko rooted to the sand, heart pounding, caught between diving in after him and enjoying the view.

The prince broke the surface, gasping, facing away. He swept his hands over his hair, plastering it back, then turned, searching for Niko. He smiled, and that smile hooked into Niko's heart, yanking it halfway out his chest. He must have found a shallow area, because where he'd broken the surface, he didn't need to tread water. The rippling surface lapped at his shoulders. His fingers freed his shirt ties, and with swift ease, he tugged the garment off, balled it up, and threw it onto the beach a few feet from Niko. Chuckling, he ducked his head again, then swam a few strokes back toward the beach, stalling a few strokes out. "Did I smell that bad that you had to bring me all the way out here for a bath?"

"Well..." Niko cleared his throat. "I didn't want to say—"

Vasili dipped his hands, withdrew the sodden pants, and threw them at Niko. Niko had a second to realize they were incoming and react but given how his thoughts were currently wrapped around the fact Vasili was naked beneath the waterline, he didn't move. The pants slapped him in the chest and slopped to his feet, and Vasili laughed loud and free. Gods, he was so damn perfect. With his hair swept back, the angles of his face were all the more prominent. A fine nose and sharp jaw, both aspects that had worked well for him at court but made him too damn pretty for normalcy. He was doomed to be noticed, even when he didn't want to be.

Wet lashes fluttered and his gaze dropped.

The last time Niko had watched Vasili bathe in a pool like this one, he'd retreated to hide his cock's want. This time, he didn't bother trying to hide what his cock thought of the prince in the pool, and Vasili didn't seem to shy away from staring either.

Slowly, Vasili returned his gaze to Niko's mouth, now parted suggestively. The tip of Vasili's tongue skimmed his bottom lip, and a rush of lust had Niko breathing like he'd just run here from the cottage.

Vasili swam closer and waded from the water. Each new step revealed more skin, softly tinted gold by his time under the sun at sea. The water lapped down smooth shoulders, firm biceps, two neat pecs crowned by tiny pink nipples. The scars had mellowed some, now his skin wasn't so pale, but they were still a feature, laddering the ripple of abs. One scar was fresh, the deep one Niko had given him that almost took his life. Niko's heart tripped to see it.

Vasili's waist narrowed, hips framing the delicious V pointing toward the hard, princely cock, stiffly proclaiming its interest.

Niko didn't know whether to drop to his knees like he'd said he'd never do for a Caville and suck that prick off—or lick every bead of water from his glistening body.

Vasili stopped a stride away, a hand on his cocked hip, head tilted questioningly. “You appear to be wearing too many clothes, Nikolas.”

The words spurred him into action. He tore off his shirt like the damn thing was on fire, then dropped his hands to his pants ties and made a step forward. Vasili stepped back, grinning like a bastard. He jerked his chin, silently demanding the pants gone.

Fumbling in his haste, Niko shucked them off and tried to stumble out of them, but he'd forgotten his boots, and everything became snarled up around his ankles. “Fuck.”

Vasili laughed, turned on his heel, presenting his smooth back and firm ass, and sashayed back into the water like some nymph from old fairytales, one that would lure Niko to his death in that pool.

After snarling, swearing, and growling at his fucking boots and finally yanking the pants off, he waded into the pool without finesse, causing a bow wave to slosh toward Vasili.

Vasili laughed, and the tinkling sound of it echoed over the sound of the tumbling water.

Diving under, Niko powerfully kicked, swept the water aside, and rose, shaking his hair close enough to Vasili to have him turning away. Niko caught his jaw and sealed a kiss below his ear, at his neck, suckling a little, drawing the warm skin between his teeth. Vasili gasped, no longer laughing. His fingers slipped around Niko's waist and skimmed his lower back, pulling him close, and suddenly they were together, skin to skin, cock to cock, wet and warm, soft sand beneath their feet holding them up.

When thinking up his idea to get him here, he'd foolishly planned to go slow, to admire him for longer, to enjoy the pool with Vasili in it, but any notion that he could refrain from touching him was long gone, buried beneath the raw desire to feel and taste and hear Vasili and bury himself in the sensation of loving this precious man.

He kissed a messy line down his neck, still holding his jaw to keep him from kissing back. Vasili's body twitched. His cock slid against Niko's belly, and with a sudden jerk of his hips, their cocks were wedged between them, thrust tightly together. This was too perfect. Absolutely everything Niko wanted and needed. More, really. They'd had the chamber in the

Yazdan house, had nights lost together between its sheets, but not like this. Vasili had always held an edge, as though he still expected treachery around every corner.

Here, he was free.

Niko pulled his face around, stalling with their mouths close. Vasili's shudders and his short, rapid breaths revealed his want, but his absolute surrender inside Nikolas's arms felt different from all the times before. Niko wanted to say something to express what this meant, but words failed him.

Vasili's gaze flicked over Niko's face, then slowly, gently, he skimmed his lips over Niko's, bridging the unknown void that had existed between them. All Niko's notions of restraint came tumbling down. He fell into the kiss like he'd been starved of feeling. Vasili molded against him, his warm, supple body plastered to every inch of Niko's chest, waist, cock, and thighs. And still, it wasn't enough. The depth of need overrode all thought. Niko roamed his hands down the prince's back, and Vasili dropped his hands to Niko's ass, cupping and spreading, applying just the right amount of pressure to keep their bodies locked together. Vasili's rhythmic tilting of his hips rocked his cock against Niko's, wringing ripples of pleasure down his shaft. Gods, he was going to come just by rutting against Vasili.

"Niko," Vasili breathed his name against his cheek, the plea within it so damn raw, as though he'd exposed some of his soul by begging.

A shiver danced through Niko, tearing a groan free and fizzling his cock with the kind of eye-rolling pleasure that had him locking his hands on Vasili's slim hips to ease him back. "I won't last."

"Do I care?" Vasili still had his hands on Niko's ass, giving him purchase for a fierce thrust that had Niko trembling. His mouth on Niko's throat, he said, "I'm going to spill, and you're damn well coming with me."

Oh, fuck. He had no chance of holding on now, and under Vasili's merciless grinding, all Niko could do was hold on and free fall until there was nothing but the sound of Vasili's breath in his ear, the thrust of his cock, and the cresting pleasure that all too quickly snapped free. He came so blindingly hard that without Vasili's fingers digging into his ass, he'd have dropped to his knees.

Vasili's filthy grunt and the irregular thrusts signaled his release. Niko fancied he felt its pulsing hotness against his belly before the water swept the seed away. He held him closer, if that were even possible, cradling him, breathing him in, as his body spent its pleasure. There was nothing in this

world more perfect than this beautiful, precious man, and this one, precious moment that Niko never wanted to end.

CHAPTER 12

Vasili

SOMETHING HAD CHANGED BETWEEN THEM. It was subtle, and might have all been in Vasili's head, but as he rode his orgasmic aftershocks with Nikolas clutched close, there was a difference. Maybe it was this place, with its isolation and sheltered waters, but it was more likely to do with the man whose heart was currently pounding so loudly Vasili could feel it against his own.

Thick, rough fingers skimmed down Vasili's spine. Niko's whiskered chin nuzzled Vasili's neck. "Hm, give me ten minutes and we'll do that again," he mumbled. "Maybe slower."

His man had no idea the impact he had on Vasili's head, his heart. Before, his head had been full of cruel necessities, and his heart, well, that had been a crushed husk of a thing barely worth considering. Now, Nikolas filled both to brimming, which most lovers would probably appreciate, but the shift in mindset had Vasili reeling. And vulnerable. So painfully vulnerable. He liked that it left him exposed, possibly... Gods, he wasn't sure. He did, didn't he? How could he be so thoroughly terrified while also so absolutely in love?

And he hadn't once recoiled from Niko's touch, hadn't even flinched as Niko's chest had brushed the scars. It felt like the final victory over his past,

like he'd shelved that horrible part of his life out of reach, where it could no longer hurt him. It hadn't gone, it would never be gone, but it was over.

Niko's nibbling kisses found the corner of Vasili's mouth. His tongue invited itself inside, and Vasili surrendered, sucking on Nikolas's lip and meeting tongue to tongue in a slow, sensuous kiss now their raw lust was sated. This softness was new too. To echo its gentleness, Niko's fingers traced lazy circles over Vasili's lower back, on the edge of tickling.

The kiss naturally ended, and Niko pressed his forehead to Vasili's, his dark Seranian eyes full of emotion. His love was there, and Niko had been right. Of course, Vasili didn't deserve it, but perhaps he could be persuaded, given time. Time he wanted with him here, and at the cottage. Time alone, away from the world and Seran and its council and the scars of war.

Niko's thumb came up and brushed over Vasili's cheek, beneath his damaged right eye. He clearly wanted to ask something but didn't.

Vasili slipped his hand in Niko's and guided him from the pool. Once out of the water, Vasili freed him and settled on the sunbaked sand, one leg bent, propped on his elbows. Nikolas lingered at the water's edge, stunning in his nakedness. It wasn't often Vasili was blessed with a full view of the ex-soldier's body. Usually, he'd come to his chamber at night, but the lights were always low, shadows many. Now, sunlight had the fine hairs across Nikolas's chest glistening with their captured droplets of water. The same wet drops glittered over powerful thighs.

He snorted at some thought in his head, plodded to Vasili's side, and sat his bare ass on the sand. "It's a good thing I'm spent, or I'd be forced to fuck you into the beach, prince."

Vasili raked his fingers through his wet hair, then flicked sand off his chest. "We have all day, do we not?"

Niko rolled onto his side and propped his head on a hand. His cock lay half-hard against his hip. Admiring their differences, Vasili marveled at how his skin was so much darker than Vasili's own. Vasili's legs were slim, more suited to the sport of fencing, whereas Nikolas's were stocky, like he'd easily lift a hoe and plow a field. His examination had made it all the way up his body to Nikolas's face before realizing he'd been thoroughly appraising the man's every inch of skin while Nikolas watched. There was something sexually stimulating in taking the time to admire his nakedness while being watched in turn. Titillating enough to bring a touch of heat to Vasili's face.

“Blushing, prince?”

Lacing his fingers behind his head, he lay back and stared at the endless blue sky. Was Aura watching over them from above? “Another first in my repertoire of discoveries since meeting Nikolas Yazdan.”

“There’s a repertoire?”

Now he’d ask, and maybe Vasili would tell him all the surprises he’d given him as the sun warmed him and the falls rumbled and Nikolas lay close. “Yes, a terribly long list of all the ways Nikolas Yazdan vexes me like no other.”

A snort, followed by a dark chuckle that had Vasili’s cock reawakening.

“Tell me one thing from the list.”

“Very well...” There were many to pick from. Like the way he lost a measure of his own intelligence every time he witnessed Nikolas naked, like the way Nikolas derailed the simplest of plans, like the way Nikolas just had to look at him and it stirred all manner of lust in his body, a body that had been a cold husk for over eight years. “You have me reveal things I’ve successfully hidden from everyone.”

“Such as?”

He turned his head, resting his cheek inside his bent arm. “Such as right now. I fear I’d tell you anything. All you’d have to do is ask.”

“Anything?”

“Try it. Let’s see.” *Ask me anything, Nikolas.*

“The silk ties—You want to do more when we’re intimate? Tell me what more you want.”

Ah. He swallowed and stared at the warm, red sand between them. Swirling a finger through the grains in sweeping, circular patterns, he asked, “Do you really want to know?”

“I do, but you don’t have to tell me.”

He looked up, sand-circles forgotten. “Yes, I want more, but it’s not necessary, and only if you’re comfortable with such things.”

Nikolas didn’t turn away or wince. If anything, his face was open and intrigued. “Such things like what?” he asked.

Gods. Vasili’s cock definitely liked this conversation. Its shaft shifted against his hip, warming and filling under the sun. Nikolas had yet to notice, his attention thankfully on Vasili’s face.

“I’m not inexperienced in those ways,” Niko said, stating the obvious. “I haven’t had as much chance to be as *adventurous* as you. Doesn’t mean I

don't want to."

Vasili snorted the beginnings of a laugh that didn't quite turn into one. His adventures were new to him too. Before being taken, he'd fooled around with Alek, but they'd both been young and knew very little other than a few fumbblings to get each other off. The knife play and other desires had emerged since his return from captivity, since... he'd whipped Julian the first time, as punishment, and discovered how much he'd liked it. "The knife, last night... would you be interested in more encounters like that?" Lifting his gaze, he caught Nikolas's widened eyes, but also the way his pupils dilated. If Vasili glanced down Nikolas's body, he'd likely have his answer. But what a man's body wanted and what his head desired were sometimes different.

"You mean do I want your knife at my cock again? I think you already know."

He couldn't resist looking a second longer, and sure enough, Nikolas's thick shaft was erect and rejuvenated, its intention clear. Vasili placed a hand on Nikolas's shoulder and pushed him onto his back. Kicking a leg over Niko's relaxed body, he straddled his thighs, their cocks at full mast between them. A wonderful sight, having Nikolas beneath him. And all at once, Vasili wished he'd brought the oil. He fell forward, hair flopping over his shoulder, and delivered a hard, rough kiss on Nikolas's mouth. Warm hands came up, brushing down Vasili's arms, raining hot sand. And with their cocks together, it quickly became clear the sand was going to be a problem.

Nipping at his lips drew groans from Nikolas. His hips bucked, cock seeking friction. Vasili lowered his ass to trap Nikolas's member beneath him, but the movement also deposited more sand between them, turning the burning friction painful.

"Agh, fuck," Nikolas grumbled, wriggling.

Gods, his writhing had more parts of him brushing up against Vasili. "Mm, want to."

"I figured." He chuckled. "But all the oil in the world won't help with the sand."

Vasili smothered the next words over his mouth and his complaints. "Want to slide my fingers inside and open you wide." Nikolas's accommodating grunt almost had him doing exactly that. But he was right, this wasn't happening on the beach.

Nikolas's hand scrunched in Vasili's hair and his knuckles pressed to the back of his head. "Beach... bad idea," he mumbled between their messy kisses.

"No." Vasili planted a hand on one side of him and cupped his face with the other. They were both covered in sand now. Red freckles marred Nikolas's face. One eyebrow was dyed red with sand and much of his hair tinged too. "This is perfect." He kissed him, drawing out the kiss, and whispered, "You are perfect." The sand in his mouth, however, was not at all desirable.

Niko's hands gripped Vasili by the shoulders and shoved. "Water. Now."

A flutter of lust at his accidental roughness had Vasili's cock jerking. He rolled off and laughed as Nikolas saw the twitch and growled like a beast. Nikolas bolted for the water with barely a limp from his damaged leg and dove right in.

Vasili breathed in, centering his thoughts and control and deliberately delaying what they both wanted. He scooped up his clothes he'd earlier discarded, tossed them in the water to clean them off, and distracted himself with the task of wringing them dry while Nikolas washed the sand off himself.

"Come wash off," Niko finally called over the noise of the falls.

Vasili slowly laid the clothes out to dry on a boulder. Tugging at their corners, making sure to pull out any creases, while Nikolas's glare simmered against his back.

"You're killing me here," Nikolas added.

He'd waited long enough. Vasili—painted red by sand—made for the pool. His erection had lagged some, but the demand in Nikolas's glare had it returning with enough sudden vigor to have the lap of water spilling shivers through Vasili.

"Here," Nikolas ordered. He'd found the higher spot in the pool where they could stand while still surrounded by deep water. "Turn around." Did he know how his order had Vasili's flighty heart racing? Tipping his head, he did as Nikolas ordered and gasped as the man's arms encircled him, pulling him back against the heated wall of muscle. His shaft rode the upper valley of Vasili's ass, balls grinding. Then Nikolas's hand wrapped around Vasili's cock, and suddenly there was no thinking what came next, just doing.

“That time... at the Stag and Horn...” Niko panted, still pumping his hand while also now fucking Vasili’s ass crack.

Vasili tilted his head back, resting against Nikolas’s firm shoulder. Arching his spine tilted his hips, seating his member deeper into Nikolas’s relentless fist. Nikolas’s free hand skimmed his hip and danced upward. He pinched a nipple. Pleasure startled a moan from Vasili.

“I shoved you against the bar.” *Thrust*. “You liked it.” *Thrust*. “Wanted to fuck.” *Thrust*. “Say it.”

Oh, gods, he knew how their first encounter had turned Vasili’s veins to molten heat? And he wanted words now? Maybe, just the one. “Yes,” he snarled.

Niko’s pace quickened, hand pumping faster. Vasili was at his mercy, held on the edge of a blade, thoughts skimming far from everything but the feel of Nikolas.

“I’d have fucked you in the ass then, prince.” Grunts accompanied his thrusts. Water sloshed. “Had you just asked.” It was a fantasy, one Vasili had dreamed of. That night they’d first met. In his dreams, he hadn’t ordered the guards—Julian among them—to take Nikolas to the dungeon, he’d let Nikolas fuck him against the bar, in front of Julian. To spite him. To spite them all. The fantasy had been his secret, and it had persisted but morphed into more about Nikolas brutally fucking him and less about Julian watching. Now Nikolas’s words had suddenly cracked that fantasy wide open, and Vasili fell over its edge, spilling a cry as his cock spilled its seed.

Nikolas moaned like he was breaking apart. His wild thrusting abruptly lost its ramming motions and stuttered as he came against Vasili’s back in uncoordinated jerks. He mouthed over Vasili’s shoulder, tongue swirling. “Gods, yes. You taste so good. Feel so good.”

Capable of only voicing nonsense, Vasili mumbled, “I want...” He gasped at Nikolas’s gentle touch on his cock, still coming down, still reeling and untethered.

“Yes?”

“Take me like that time we first met, Nikolas.”

Nikolas’s kisses climbed his neck and tickled beneath his ear. Hot, heavy hands held him pinned close. Yes, he wanted what he’d suggested, wanted it since they’d met, but he hadn’t been ready then. The past, the pain, it had all been too close, too real still. But he was ready now. Only for Nikolas.

“Hm, sure?” Nikolas mumbled, nuzzling.

“Don’t tell me when,” Vasili said tersely. “I’ll fight you. *Just do it.*” Those last three words came out raw.

His quiet suggested he was considering it. Then, “Fuck.”

A chuckle tickled free of Vasili’s throat. “So eloquent, Nikolas.”

“Hm, but you love me for my tongue.” The warm, wet tongue helped suck Vasili’s earlobe between hard teeth. “And this.” The hard press of cock dug against Vasili’s back. Etara, Aura, and Walla, yes. All of it. All of him.

“I do, Nikolas...” Vasili laughed. “I love all of you.”

CHAPTER 13

Niko

THE COTTAGE WAS DRAPED in soft evening light by the time they returned. Niko's soul hummed pleasantly, especially as every time he glanced at Vasili, he found he was already being watched. The prince's pink lips would tick and he'd look away, cheeks heated. The prince's little blushes were killing him. This was... remarkable, and everything he'd hoped for. Maybe they could stay here forever and never return to Seran. A foolish thought, really. There was the council to consider, and Vasili would surely grow bored. Still, there was no harm in dreaming it.

With the horses turned out in the yard, Vasili drifted about the cottage, stoking fires and closing windows to keep out the cold. Some of the vegetables that had been forgotten from the previous evening were salvageable for supper, and Niko set about the task of cooking soup. He'd be more prepared next time and have some bread and wine ready. Make the place more comfortable and less... unfinished.

Supper was pleasant. Vasili spoke of his mother from the days before *everything*. She'd clearly been the one good thing in his life. Niko returned the tale with one of his own mah, a woman who he now often wondered if he knew at all. But she'd always been loving and kind, and if not for the war, he suspected she would have told him everything once he'd come of age. War had taken both Niko's and Vasili's young lives too soon.

To lighten the mood, Vasili made some remark about Niko clearly inheriting his father's smarts, or lack thereof, then snickered at his own humor under Niko's mock glare. He caught Niko's glower and fought some of the grin from his face, leaving a little to tease behind.

They cleared the table, washed the dishes, and Vasili put everything away in studious fashion, making sure each item had its place. He was so consumed by the task that Niko left him there for the living room and tossed a few more logs on the fire. Settling in the chair, he stretched out his stiff leg and rubbed at the soreness.

"I want to thank you, for today." Vasili sauntered in. The sway of his hips and the flick of hair over his shoulder broadcast a message that Niko might have been daft enough to miss if Vasili hadn't immediately gone to his knees in front of him and danced his fingers up Niko's thigh. The prince poked his tongue into his cheek and rapidly flicked open Niko's pants ties.

They'd indulged multiple times in the pool, so many times that Niko still tingled from multiple bites and tiny fingertip bruises. But any fears he may not be able to summon the energy quickly vanished the second Vasili's cool fingers levered his half-hard cock out and the prince's blond head dipped toward his groin. His tongue lapped, firing a dart of lust down Niko's back and into his balls, hardening him off. "Ugh." The attack had been so sudden that a grunt was all he could manage. He'd wondered if their next time might be the demand Vasili had made, to fight him and fuck him fast and hard like he'd wanted at the Stag and Horn. He still wasn't sure what to make of it, or even if he could do such a thing. But he could do *this*.

He grabbed for Vasili's hair and received a warning look from the prince. Ah—this was one of those *look-don't-touch* times. Niko planted both hands on the arms of the chair and watched, wide-eyed, as Vasili's head bobbed, eliciting ripples of eye-rolling pleasure that had him half leaving his body for some other place in his head where nothing else existed but the feel of Vasili sucking his cock.

A sudden, startling succession of raps at the cottage door had Vasili recoiling with a splutter, his hand instantly sliding toward his boot to free a dagger. He headed for the door.

Reeling from being sucked off one second and cruelly abandoned the next, Niko shoved to his feet and almost toppled on his ass when his leg seized. "Shit." He hastily packed his hard cock away, or tried to, barely

managing to tie it behind the pants ties when he heard the door creak open. He glimpsed up and saw Vasili's back, then the familiar floppy feather-topped hat of a loud silk merchant.

"Oh, praise Aura. You're hard men to find!"

Niko pinched the bridge of his nose and counted backward from five, just so he didn't immediately grab Yasir and kick him over the footbridge. Really? The captain had to arrive now?

"Oh, this is cozy." Yasir shuffled by Vasili and breezed into the living room. "Niko!" A greeting slap on Niko's back and Yasir was whirling again, taking in the room. "When you two didn't show at the Pearl, I said to myself, '*Yasir, they probably haven't murdered each other, but what's a good and decent friend to do if not double-check?*'"

"Maybe keep his nose out of private business?" Niko suggested, but Yasir was already whirling back toward a half-smiling Vasili.

"I asked around," he breezed on with hand gestures and various storytelling embellishments. "Was told Niko had been frequenting this side of the valley, then met Roksana—who, by the way, does *not* like my recent increase in prices. She has my balls in a vise. So, we're still negotiating that—but anyway, she told me our Nikolas here has been rebuilding a quaint little cottage in the middle of nowhere, and here you both are—still very much alive!"

At least Niko's cock had lost interest. He couldn't blame it. Yasir waffled some more, Vasili's smile grew, and now they were three. Stomping in the kitchen, he boiled water in the kettle and filtered a pot of coffee. It wasn't just the interrupted blow. This place was his and Vasili's. They'd been here a day. It was special. Amazing. Yasir was a friend, a good friend. And his reasons for being here were valid, but still. Niko preferred he wasn't here at all.

Sighing, he fixed the mugs of coffee and returned to the living room to find Yasir had started up some tale of how he'd tracked them down by meeting a cart owner who'd had the misfortune of nearly being trampled under the hooves of a white charger and his galloping bay companion while he'd been trying to fix his cart's broken wheel in the road.

"And..." He dug inside his cloak and presented with another flourish a rounded unmarked glass bottle. "I brought rum. And your bags, Vasili, but mostly rum. Bought from the market from a woman who assures me it'll make us cross-eyed enough we won't remember a thing in the morning."

Could have been worse, could have been spice. Niko had half a mind to retire to the bedroom and leave them to their carousing. He doubted he'd make good company.

"That is, Niko, if I'm welcome here the night?"

"Yeah," Niko grumbled without effort. He wasn't about to throw him out in the dark. "There's a guest room. I'll make it up." Relieved to have an excuse to leave, he made an effort not to stomp up the stairs like a disgruntled fool. He loved Yasir, like a brother. Putting him up for the night was the least he could do. And Yasir would be welcome here, just... he'd have preferred the man had waited a few days. Now all he could hope was that the sea and Yasir didn't lure Vasili away again.

CHAPTER 14

Vasili

ON THE ONE HAND, Vasili was delighted to see Yasir on the cottage doorstep. On the other, Niko was clearly furious and making no attempt to hide the fact from their friend.

“More rum.” Yasir didn’t wait for the agreement before sloshing more into Vasili’s cup. Aboard *Walla’s Heart*, they’d drink and partake of spice until one of them passed out. Usually Yasir, he didn’t have quite the same level of resistance Vasili had built up over the years. But the cottage wasn’t *Walla’s Heart*. Things were different here. *Vasili* was different here.

The fire crackled, its glow warm and comforting. Yasir’s personality filled the room, and Niko still hadn’t returned from making up the guest room.

Vasili couldn’t deny Yasir’s appearance had dampened the mood somewhat.

“Well?” Yasir shuffled forward in the chair, leaning over to keep his voice low. “This is nice. So what happened? You both figure it out?”

He didn’t want to do this now, or here, but he had promised Yasir he’d return to the ship and hadn’t, so the man’s sudden appearance was also half Vasili’s doing. He owed him something of an explanation. “I was a fool, jumped to the wrong conclusions. We’re fine.”

Yasir’s gaze lingered. “Really?”

“Yes. We both had some issues, but we’re dealing with them.”

“Hm.” He leaned back and sipped his rum. “Then why is he sulking upstairs?”

“Because, before you knocked, his cock was firmly between my lips.”

Yasir either breathed or swallowed at the wrong time because the rum spluttered back up. He jolted, spilling his drink over his hand, and then laughed like a loon, igniting Vasili’s deep chuckle.

“Gods, Vee. Warn me before you fill my head with such stimulating images.” He dashed for the kitchen, found a rag, and cleaned up the spill. By the time he settled, leaning against the crooked mantle over the fire, Vasili’s rum was half-gone, which Yasir took as a sign for it to be refilled. At this rate, they’d both be sloshed and without Niko. Which didn’t seem at all fair.

“I’ll go find him,” Vasili said.

“I’ll go.”

“No.” Holding out a hand, he passed Yasir by. “Not if you don’t want him to plant you on your ass.”

“Fair ’nough,” he slurred, then grimaced at the rum bottle in his hand. “What potency *is* this?”

Niko was in the guest room. One little candle illuminated him slumped at the end of the made bed, staring out the tiny window.

Vasili propped himself against the wall beside the window and folded his arms. “Come downstairs.”

“I’m not good company.”

Vasili half considered finishing the job he’d started earlier, but Niko’s mood had turned sour and any advances would likely be shrugged off. Still, moody and prickly such as he was had Vasili’s desires itching to niggle and provoke him. Their day had been breathtaking, and if Yasir hadn’t arrived, Vasili would surely already be in Nikolas’s lap in an effort to continue this newfound carelessness this place had cultivated in them both.

“I can tell him to leave?” Vasili suggested.

“No!” Softer, he repeated, “No, it’s me, not him. I just...”

With a sighing breath, Vasili pushed from the wall and planted himself between Nikolas’s knees, forcing him to peer up. His eyebrows lifted questioningly over soft, emotive eyes.

Threading his fingers through Nikolas’s dark locks, Vasili cradled his head against his own thigh, tucking Nikolas close. His ex-soldier with a big

heart. "Come drink rum with us. You may find you enjoy it."

"It's not my place to get between you."

"Nonsense. Yasir is your friend as much as he is mine. Come." He stepped back and ignored Nikolas's emotionally manipulative sad eyes. Flicking Nikolas's chin up, Vasili bowed low, cupped his rough jaw, and grinned. "Drink with us now and I'll reward you handsomely later." He stroked his right hand down Nikolas's chest and dropped it to his thigh, giving it a sharp squeeze.

"Sexual favors, prince?"

"Anything to get what I want, and what I want is you, Nikolas Yazdan."

Suitably bribed, Nikolas relented and joined their drinking. His mood lightened after a few glasses and once Yasir was spinning one of his filthier tales about a bard from some faraway land who'd taken a shine to elves and wanted to lure one to his bed.

Yasir passed out first, and with much grunting, stumbling, and drunken curses, Nikolas managed to scoop the leggy captain up the stairs and into bed.

Finally alone, and with no risk of Yasir waking, Vasili kicked their bedroom door closed with more force than was necessary, startling a stumbling Nikolas. Nikolas turned at the end of the bed, but Vasili had already crossed the floor. He shoved him hard, dropping him onto the bed. Before Nikolas could voice whatever resistance was on his tongue, Vasili planted a knee on either side of his waist and kissed him hard, practically mounting him. Nikolas rocked, absorbing the attack, only to give it right back with a snarl. His fingers of one hand tore at Vasili's collar while the other hand groped Vasili's ass.

Arching, Vasili tilted his head and closed his eye, inviting Nikolas's mouth on his neck. He was everywhere suddenly, mouth and teeth sucking and biting. The shirt vanished up and over Vasili's head, yanked clean off, and then Nikolas mouthed over the ridges of tiny scars. The sounds of wildness that left Vasili's lips weren't words so much as growls. Their antics earlier in the day at the falls hadn't lessened his desire. If anything, his need for Nikolas had sharpened into a vicious, almost painful thirst.

He caught his face in his hands and had been about to kiss him like he could crawl inside his soul, but the softness in Nikolas's gaze had him hesitating, breaths shared, bodies still rocking as one, cocks grinding

through their trousers. Nikolas was about to say something, something powerful. Vasili's heart thumped, his body ablaze.

"I love you, Vasili."

He meant it. He meant it so much it almost hurt him to say it.

"Don't leave me again," the big ex-soldier whispered.

Vasili kissed him, if only to stop more of his words from breaking him open. "Never," he whispered, smothering kisses along his jaw. Nikolas fell back, taking Vasili down with him. Gods, he wanted to make love to him, to feel himself inside him and feel Nikolas moving to meet him, like they were one and the same. He shoved up Nikolas's shirt and mouthed down his chest, swirling his tongue around a nipple. Fingers twisted in Vasili's hair, but then the hold shifted, fell heavily, and Vasili lifted his chin to find Nikolas looking down at him with sleepy eyes.

"S'hold you," he mumbled, clamping a heavy arm around Vasili's back and hauling him up his chest. Nikolas's kisses skimmed his forehead. "My prinsh, so preshioush." But then his kisses faded, his head flopped back, and moments later, his heavy breaths turned to light snores.

Vasili patted him fondly on the chest and tucked himself against Nikolas's side, curling a leg over his thigh. He breathed him in, his wood smoke and male scents summoning pleasant memories of safety and contentedness. Yes, he rather liked this bed, and this room, and this cottage. And he rather liked the man beside him, the only man he'd ever imagined spending the rest of his life with. The one who made him begin to believe Vasili Caville could be the good man he so desperately deserved.

CHAPTER 15

N_{iko}

NIKO SNORTED awake and blinked at the ceiling. He lay sprawled on his back, half undressed on top of the bed, with no Vasili beside him. Ugh. His tongue tasted like he'd been licking the floor, and a horrible dull ache thumped down his neck, suggesting it would turn into a raging headache sometime soon.

Rum.

Yasir's rum.

He was going to kill the captain.

After washing himself down and dressing in fresh clothes, he padded downstairs to find Vasili in the kitchen. For the first time since its construction, the kitchen was clean. Everything had been allocated a place and neatly put away.

Vasili handed him a cup of water without him having to ask. "There's peppermint in it, for the headache."

How did he know? Wait, peppermint?

"From the garden," Vasili explained. "There's a small patch of herbs. I had to dig around a bit to find it."

This was all too much for his pickled head. "How are you so chipper?" Vasili had drunk the rum too, Niko was sure of it. Or had he nursed just the one cup all night as he and Yasir finished off the bottle between them? Ugh,

Yasir and his crude stories that Niko couldn't scrub from his head. "Where is Yasir?"

"Outside, trying to keep his insides inside."

"Bad rum," Niko muttered, rapidly swallowing a few mouthfuls of minty water. Vasili smiled coyly, leaning a hip against the basin. He was fairly certain Vasili had been atop him, but he had no memory of how that had ended. "Did I... fall asleep when we...?"

He snorted. "My pride can take a few knocks."

Niko groaned and silently cursed Yasir's rum all over again. Yesterday had been special, and he'd ruined it by passing out while Vasili had tried to seduce him. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Vasili shrugged. "You're even more honest when intoxicated."

His grin was worrisome.

Niko groaned. "What did I say?"

"Nothing of importance."

Yasir loomed in the back doorway, looking grey. "I'm going to hunt that market-hag down and make her drink her own foul concoction."

"Yasir," Niko said meekly. "I apologize for my frosty reception last night. There was no excuse for it—"

"No," he lifted a hand. "No need. I've taken up enough of your time. Niko, thank you for your hospitality, and I apologize for my, er... interruption. I shall take my leave. My ship's belly is still full after we made this unscheduled stop." A pointed look at Vasili. "Will you be joining me at sea, Vee?"

"No." No hesitation. Niko's heart soared a little, carefully, tentatively, like a fledgling uncertain of its course but finding its wings. "I'll be staying here a while." Vasili met Niko's gaze. "If Nikolas is in agreement?"

"It's your home," he said quietly, adding a lilt of hope while hoping he didn't sound too fearful of his reply.

Vasili glared like he might be about to fling a knife or fuck Niko against a wall. Really, the expressions were too similar to separate.

Yasir slapped his hands together, snapping the sudden rise in brittle tension. "And that's my cue to leave you two emotionally stunted lovebirds to your own devices. I'll be back around in a month or so, with a decent wine this time, and I had better find you living the life of fucking bliss, or I'll tie you both to those chairs in the living room and leave you there to

stew in your own drama.” He swept his hat off his head in a melodramatic bow. “Farewell, darlings.”

Like the path of destruction left by a desert tornado, Yasir’s absence left a hungry void. The kind of pregnant silence that suggested there was more chaos to come. Vasili watched through the window as the captain mounted his horse and rode out, but Nikolas only had eyes for Vasili. The man’s lean figure was surely put together by the gods to torment Niko personally. There was no other explanation for why the tilt of his hips and slant of his shoulders conspired to have Niko salivating like a crazed animal.

Vasili glanced over his shoulder. “Upstairs. Now.”

Oh, fuck. Niko’s old soldiering habits had him wanting to obey the order, but a second, more powerful instinct wanted to tell Vasili to shove his princely tone and manhandle him upstairs himself, if that was where he wanted him. Niko wasn’t his fucking doulos.

“There will be ropes.” Vasili’s featherlight lashes fluttered against his soft cheek.

Oh, well, fine. Why hadn’t he led with that?

Pretending to grouch and drag his feet, he made for the stairs and received a startling slap on the ass, one that left the sizzling print of Vasili’s hand behind.

“Faster, Niko, or there will be consequences.”

Perhaps this punishment was the result of Niko falling asleep on him last night, and admittedly, he liked where it was headed. He took the stairs two at a time and dove into the bedroom.

“Undress.”

Vasili rummaged through his bag and removed two lengths of plaited silk, each about three feet long. He flicked a silk scarf free of his bag too. Niko arched a brow.

“Did I not tell you to undress?” His sharp look was absolutely Caville. The shudder it delivered went straight to Niko’s cock.

Niko stripped like his life depended on it, then straightened to face his vicious prince. Vasili met him eye-to-eye, his pale brows pinched with concentration. “If you’re at any time uncomfortable, I want you to click your fingers.”

“Why can’t I just—”

A finger at his lips silenced him. And then Vasili’s lips replaced that finger and his tongue flickered over Niko’s breaths, and it was all Niko

could do to remember his own name.

“Click your fingers,” Vasili whispered.

Niko clicked his fingers and chased the promised kiss, but Vasili took a step back and drove a slip of silk between Niko’s lips instead of his tongue. Vasili circled behind him, quickly kneeling on the end of the bed, and tied off the silk scarf, then was back in front of Niko.

Before thinking, Niko had grabbed for his hips. Vasili snatched both his wrists and held them out, putting himself tantalizingly close but making sure Niko had no means of touching. Until Vasili shifted his hips and brushed against Niko’s pert cock. Tingling shudders had him groaning around the gag.

Dropping Niko’s hands, Vasili tapped him on the nose. “Be good for me, Nikolas.”

Good? He was going to burst if Vasili kept this up for too long.

“Back up on the bed. Spread your arms.”

Niko scrambled backward, scooting up the bed, his cock a fucking tentpole for all things Vasili. He made it to the headboard, then froze, concentrating on breathing through his nose as Vasili wickedly teased his own shirt off and dropped it beside him. Bare-chested, his hair ruffled and loose, Vasili was a vision of slim, masculine beauty.

Niko jerked his chin and grunted, suggesting the prince might like to take his trousers off too, but Vasili wasn’t the one following instructions. That was Niko’s position.

Vasili walked to Niko’s right side, caught his wrist, and used the silk braid to tie it to the bedpost. He calmly did the same with Niko’s left wrist. “Click your fingers now.”

Niko clicked.

“Good. Remember, click if you want to stop.”

He nodded and tracked Vasili’s walk back across the room to his bag of wonders. He didn’t hunt long for his next prize and straightened, removing the sheath around a curved, black-handled dagger. Oh, fuck.

Instinctively, Niko writhed against the restraints, suddenly exposed. His heart thumped, pounding hot blood through his body. Vasili approached the end of the bed, admiring the dagger, not Niko. The absence of his gaze gave Niko time to settle himself. He didn’t fear the knife, or Vasili. The man was deadly without a blade. With one, he was a fucking nightmare. But Niko

wasn't afraid. There was no other soul he trusted more with his heart, his mind, and his body.

"Nikolas, look at me." But it was Vasili who looked up. "Something has only now occurred to me, and I'm ashamed I didn't think of it earlier. My apologies, but we can't proceed."

What the fuck. He grunted at the prick and jerked his hips, making it clear he was entirely into the game.

Vasili pressed his lips together and set the blade down on the washbasin, then sat on the bed and reached over to untie the gag.

The second the silk left his mouth, Niko snarled. "Is this part of the game, because I'm more into the knives than you getting cold feet."

"I..." He huffed through his nose. "Your past," he said, then glared, like he did so well. "With Amir and Julian. In circumstances like these."

Something unpleasant and slippery tried to knot around Niko's insides. Old memories. Bad memories. They had no place here. And these circumstances were not the same. Here, Niko had given consent and could take it away again with the click of his fingers. Back then... Niko shoved the past aside, not allowing it purchase. "Did I click my fucking fingers, Vasili?"

"No."

"Then why are we talking?"

Vasili's chin lifted. Lips twitching, he said, "Very well." He leaned over again. A waft of soap and sweetness that was entirely Vasili danced over Niko's tongue. The gag cinched back in place, and Vasili was gone again, retrieving the knife. Niko watched the delightful play of muscles down the man's back, following it to where the pants rode his ass. Gods, he was weak for him.

A new glint of danger sparkled in Vasili's eye the moment he turned and met Niko's gaze, the dagger back in his hand. That look—Niko made an effort to slow his breathing, not sure he succeeded. Especially when Vasili stopped at the foot of the bed, pressing the tip of his dagger into his opposite hand's forefinger, and smiled like he'd just found his new favorite pet to torture.

Vasili's dark trousers had molded around his thick cock, but Vasili ignored his own arousal. Niko's mouth watered, wanting to wrap around its length and get him off. Swallowing around the gag, his efforts to calm himself failed entirely as Vasili climbed into the bed and prowled up, over

his legs, until he was on all fours, poised over Niko. Rising onto his knees, he planted his ass on Niko's thighs and gathered up his locks of blond hair in one hand, draping them over his shoulder.

Niko didn't know where to look—at the dagger, Vasili's lascivious grin, his chest, the bulge in his pants—so he looked everywhere, devouring the feast with his eyes. Involuntary twitches had him half-heartedly tugging at the silk rope. He *needed* to touch him, more so because he couldn't. He'd always hungered to touch Vasili, but being denied the freedom had sparks of anger mingling with the rampant lust scorching his veins. The combination was a potent one, so maddening it made him want to roar and curse around the gag.

“No sudden movements.”

Cold steel kissed Niko's neck. The prince's fathomless blue-eyed stare pinned Niko to the bed. Vasili tilted his head and set his tongue to work close to where the blade pressed in. The contrast between cold steel and warm, wet tongue had Niko squeezing his eyes closed and praying to Etara that the second Vasili touched his cock, he didn't instantly lose his seed. Vasili trailed his kisses and the edge of the blade lower, over his pec. Niko dared not look. Vasili's lips suckled his nipple, then the blade kissed it, and, fuck, Niko twitched, prompting a warning hiss from Vasili. Shit, he might have almost lost a nipple.

“Be still, Nikolas,” Vasili chastised.

Still. Gods. Vasili's slow journey south had the waist of his trousers brushing over Niko's desperate cock, and the pathetic whimper that leaked from around the gag was the kind of sound Niko had never made before. Gods, he wanted to make it again. Wanted to tear the gag free and demand Vasili fuck him. Wanted to grapple with the prince, but at the same time surrender. It was glorious, and terrible, and so fucking Vasili that Niko threw his head back and gave himself to the love of his life.

CHAPTER 16

Vasili

THE ROPES WERE ONE THING, the knife play entirely another. Vasili hadn't believed Nikolas would ever let him go this far, but as Nikolas lay spread beneath him, sweat clinging to the fine dark hairs on Nikolas's chest, his eyes wide, pupils shot, body a mass of tremors, Vasili couldn't be sure he wasn't dreaming. He'd planned to test him, to take it slowly, see what he liked, but the man's whimpering, panting, and the twitching of his leaking cock demanded more and more. What was Vasili to do but oblige?

The thin skin at Niko's hip dimpled under the tip of the blade, threatening to break. Vasili lifted the blade and puffed softly over the pinprick left behind. Niko grunted, hips jerking. Vasili tutted and chided, "Still, Nikolas." The answering whimper was all begging and had Vasili's cock throbbing. He ground his arousal against Nikolas's leg, biting his lip to keep from voicing his own groan. The idea was to bring Nikolas to the edge, then take his cock between his lips and finish him that way. But he'd been so receptive so far, Vasili was mentally reshuffling his plans. Typical Nikolas.

Shifting lower and lining himself up with Niko's undulating navel, Vasili dragged the blade's edge toward his main prize, skittered around his thick shaft, and dropped the knife beneath his balls. The animal grunt from Nikolas and the way he finally listened and froze had Vasili's own cock

leaking in sympathy. Niko had stopped breathing. Vasili smiled, lowered his chin, and licked Nikolas's cock from base to top, adding a torturous flick over its slit, lapping up his salty precum.

Niko swore—the word garbled behind the gag.

Vasili removed the knife. Niko exhaled hard. He proceeded to growl and curse Vasili's name, some of it no doubt colorful, but he hadn't clicked his fingers.

Vasili climbed off the bed—careful not to fall in his haste and ruin the tension—earning Nikolas's silent glare. He was furious. So much hate, but all of it good.

Vasili shucked off his trousers, grabbed the oil from his bag, leaving the knife behind, and climbed back onto the bed. Nikolas's glare still burned, but with far less frustration now he had some idea where this was headed. Vasili had not planned to penetrate him, but his reception to the game meant Vasili really couldn't resist.

Wasting no time, he spilled oil on his fingers, braced an arm at Niko's side, and slid his touch beneath Nikolas's balls, descending into the tight warmth to find the sensitive, puckered hole. A quick glance, Nikolas nodded furiously, and Vasili eased in, gently widening the entrance. Another muffled curse. Nikolas's knees lifted, his body instinctively accommodating. By Aura, he was so damned beautiful. His wide chest heaved, muscles twitching. He'd soaked the gag, teeth bared, and his cock was so flushed, Vasili had to fight not to wrap his lips and tongue around the head and tease him some more. But the time for teasing was over.

Making quick work of oiling himself, Vasili hitched Nikolas's ass up some, adjusting the angle, grasped his own oiled cock, and eased it into Nikolas's forgiving tightness. Vasili lifted his chin, mouth open, possibly muttering something foul as the tight passage swallowed him, then caught Nikolas's intense glare, daring Vasili to fill him. Vasili spread his cheeks and sank deep, briefly losing his mind somewhere in the feel of Nikolas's sucking, gripping sheath.

Vasili fell forward, between Nikolas's thighs, and keeping one hand under his ass—the angle just right—he withdrew an inch, then stroked his cock deeper, watching Nikolas's lashes flutter. There was nothing Vasili loved more than seeing all the thoughts on Nikolas's face. He wanted it hard, he wanted to be fucked, and it was pissing him off that Vasili was moving too slow—all of this was driving him insane. Fully slicked, Vasili

thrust his hips, suddenly, deeply seating himself. Nikolas spluttered behind the gag. His restrained hands clutched at the air, needing to squeeze and grab. Pleasure had Vasili rolling his eye. Going slow wasn't going to work for either of them. He thrust again, baring his teeth. "You're mine."

Nikolas had lost his voice somewhere. He panted and glared, his expression making the demands he couldn't speak. Then Vasili took Nikolas's neglected cock in hand and pumped in time with his own fierce thrusts, each stroke undoing the wonderful man beneath him. He lived for this, for feeling Nikolas all around him, beneath him, inside his patched-up soul. Nikolas came with a thin yell through the gag, spurts of creamy seed slickening Vasili's fingers. Knowing he'd be oversensitive, Vasili let go, captured Nikolas's thighs under his forearms, and fucked him fast, chasing the cresting pleasure. It didn't take much to tip him over the edge. He spilled, lost in the high, lost to Nikolas, and when he blinked back to himself, Nikolas's stare captured Vasili's, heavy with meaning.

Nikolas waited a moment, giving Vasili time to come down, then clicked his fingers. After withdrawing with a shudder, Vasili crawled up his body and freed the sodden gag, tossed it aside, and collapsed on Nikolas's sticky chest, cheek to the man's thudding heart. Hm, he could stay here, spent and filthy, perhaps forever.

"Untie me," Nikolas ordered in a rough voice.

Vasili clambered to one wrist, tugged it free, then moved to the other and quickly did the same. Instantly, Nikolas's arms bracketed around him and pulled him down so they were chest-to-chest once more. His leg hooked around Vasili's, and all at once, he was surrounded by Nikolas, clutched close, listening to his heart, his head full of fluff and the taste of Nikolas on his tongue. Hm, yes. He liked this, liked who he could be here, in this place and time. With Nikolas. Liked this life a lot. But still, behind it all, a tiny flicker of fear niggled him. The fear that Vasili Caville ruined everything he touched. Eventually, he'd lose it all.

CHAPTER 17

N_{iko}

“WE NEED TO TALK.”

Vasili lifted his head off Niko’s chest, and for the briefest of moments, he looked so terribly afraid of what Niko might say that Niko almost kissed him, just to banish whatever thought had him so terrified. Then the fear vanished with a flick of his hand as he swept his hair back, and Vasili smiled, like Niko had imagined it. “About?” he asked smoothly.

“Your bag of erotic surprises and why you had it with you on Yasir’s ship.”

Vasili’s laugh rumbled through him and into Niko. “Hm.” His fingers traced lazy circles around Niko’s nipple—the one he’d earlier almost lost at the edge of Vasili’s blade. “It’s merely some knives and a few silk ropes I braided when not helping the crew.”

Niko spluttered. “Of course, Your Highness. Just some harmless daggers and hand-woven silk ropes. I’m sure all pirate princes carry those items in their traveling luggage.”

Vasili flicked his nipple. Niko hissed and, without thinking, rolled him over, trapping Vasili under him. He leaned in for a kiss, but Vasili had turned cold, his body like stone. Even his breathing ceased. His blue eye stared through Niko, seeing something far away...

Oh, shit.

Niko scrambled off. "Sorry." He'd put him on his back, and clearly the position had triggered him. Dammit, Niko knew better. He just... Vasili had been so free, so happy, Niko had forgotten his trauma, like the idiot he was.

"It's fine," Vasili replied in a voice that was hollow and clearly not fine. He just... lay there, staring up. Should Niko reach for him? Would that help? Or was he better left alone?

"I'll draw a bath," Niko muttered, taking himself away before he caused any more damage.

Keeping Vasili in the corner of his eye, he busied himself by swearing at the plumbing and eventually getting the rattling pipes to splutter water into the tub. At least the water was hot, heated by a boiler behind the kitchen stove. Vasili moved a little while later, methodically retrieving the ropes and gag and tossing them in the bag. Still naked, he braced against the wall beside the window, watching something in the distance outside the cottage.

"Perhaps I should go with Yasir." He said it so quietly and the plunging water from the faucet was so loud that Niko gritted his teeth and pretended not to hear. He sloshed the water instead, keeping his face turned away.

Clearly, the ocean offered Vasili a freedom Niko could not. "Maybe you can make more use of your ropes and tie *him* up. He surely needs a gag."

He regretted it as soon as the words left his lips. Vasili's razor-sharp glance cut him to the bone.

Niko winced. "Fuck." He just had to say the dumbass shit that entered his head. He couldn't keep his damn mouth shut.

Vasili had stilled and was either on the edge of bolting or using those knives for their originally intended purpose. Then, wholly Vasili-like, he slithered from the window and approached the bath. Dipping his hands in the bathwater, he apparently decided the bath was ready and gracefully stepped in, lowering himself shoulder-deep in the steaming water. His hair fanned out like molten silver. He relaxed his arms on the edge of the tub and regarded Niko with the kind of haughty look Vasili Caville excelled at.

"Comfortable?" Niko asked, afraid any more words would fail him.

"Reasonably."

"What would make it more to your liking, prince?"

"You."

"Very well." Niko wasted no time stepping into the tub. His ass hit the jutting hot faucet, almost toppling Niko into Vasili's lap. He caught himself with a snarl, but the sudden shift in weight sloshed water over the sides.

“So graceful.” Vasili snorted.

Knees tucked to his chest, Niko cursed the fact he hadn’t installed a larger bath. “Your long legs are hogging it.”

Vasili clearly found his discomfort amusing. The prince went to the great effort of stifling his laugh, but it still silently rippled through him. Only when he was satisfied Niko had suffered enough did he lean forward and stand, then flicked a hand, urging Niko to stand with him. Niko was up in an instant, facing the naked Vasili. Steam rolled in clouds. Rivulets snaked down Vasili’s chest, demanding to be licked.

His pale lashes fluttered, and his coy little smile kicked Niko’s heart into a gallop. “Behave,” he said, then took Niko by the hips and guided him around to the end of the tub without the faucet. A gentle shove and Niko settled his back against the sloped edge of the tub. Vasili turned, presenting Niko with an eye-level view of his pert little ass and smooth back. And like he didn’t know how crazy that view made Niko, he took his time gathering his hair over his shoulder. Before Niko could decide whether to kiss or bite those peach-like buttocks, Vasili knelt between Niko’s spread knees and leaned back into Niko’s waiting arms.

Oh, gods. Vasili shamelessly rested his head against Niko’s shoulder, caught Niko’s hands, and placed one at his chest, the other at his hip. A little wiggling of his hips and he lay flush against Niko, ass snug against Niko’s groin, his body perfectly enclosed by Niko’s thighs and arms. Niko hummed his approval and stroked his fingers over Vasili’s warm, soft skin. His cock was rapidly filling again. The damned thing was a whore for Vasili. Ignoring it was impossible, but so was trying to think of anything but the man lying relaxed in his embrace.

Vasili’s lithe body shifted, probably to allow room for the rod at his back, but all the friction did was flood Niko with tiny lightning bolts of pleasure. On reflex, he reached for Vasili’s cock, finding it half-hard and rapidly filling under his fingers.

“Hm.” Vasili hummed. “Do that and most of this bathwater will be all over your floors.”

“Our floors.”

Vasili tensed, but Niko kissed him softly on the shoulder and sucked his skin between his teeth, adding a tiny bite. Vasili hissed. His cock—now hard—twitched in Niko’s grip.

“This was...” A stroke and Vasili briefly lost all his words. Niko chuckled and sucked the back of his neck. “To be... relaxing,” he rasped out.

“Are you not relaxed, prince?” He loosely pumped, feeling every tick and twitch sail through Vasili’s body.

“I think”—he began, pausing to breathe—“preferred you—when you believed—I’d cut off—your cock.”

Niko’s laugh rumbled through the room. “You love it too much to do away with it.” To emphasize his point, he tilted his hips, driving his erection hard against Vasili’s back.

Vasili arched and his shoulders shoved against Niko’s pecs. His body was a hot, writhing, muscular tease rubbing Niko in all the right ways. Niko quickened his rhythm, ruthlessly building Vasili to his climax, and licked, sucked, bit along Vasili’s shoulder, up his neck, hard enough to leave marks. He could go slower, could draw it out, but the sound of his gasps and the way he bucked, trying to fuck Niko’s fist—it was too good to draw out. He still couldn’t believe this man was all his, that they’d somehow survived all the shit thrown at them, and they were here, in a bath, in a cottage that was theirs.

Vasili came hard, body jolting. He spilled, cock shuddering in Niko’s firm hold as Niko suckled his neck. If there was a paradise for them, this was surely it. He wanted to beg him to stay, to throw a thousand promises at his feet, if he’d just be Niko’s, but he still hadn’t said whether he wanted all this or if it was too much—if he’d go back to the freedom of the ocean—and pushing him for a commitment would just make him run again. So Niko kissed him and stroked and teased, lavishing him with love in a way that none of Niko’s words could convey.

CHAPTER 18

Vasili

THE MORNING PASSED by in a leisurely blur, from the bath, to brunch, to tending the horses and Nikolas fixing a fence in a small pasture, so Adamo and his nameless friend had somewhere to graze safely. Vasili helped saw lengths of wood, quickly working up a sweat under the sun and earning a few blisters. But it was worth it to watch Nikolas putting his body and hands to work, crafting and building. His limp was less pronounced once distracted by manual labor, and he looked delicious, stripped to the waist, Seranian skin glistening under the sun.

By early afternoon, a ridge of dark clouds had crept closer, threatening a storm. It didn't often rain in Seran, but when it did, the skies opened and Aura and Walla dumped half the ocean onto land.

Vasili was thinking up an evening of hunkering down in the cottage, the fire blazing and rain hammering at the windows, when he spotted the lone rider cresting the hill and making their way down into their valley. As the track terminated at the cottage, they could only be here for them.

Sure enough, Roksana's upright Yazdan posture gave her away. She wore a dark riding cloak, expecting bad weather.

Vasili put down his tools, leaving Niko hammering a post into oblivion, and hastily crossed the footbridge to greet the woman he had a complicated relationship with. Roksana had saved Nikolas from Alissand's final attempt

at taking his life, and for that, he'd be eternally grateful, but trusting her was another matter. He suspected the distrust was mutual.

"Vasili," she acknowledged, dismounting.

Vasili took the reins from her. "Shah Yazdan."

She snorted and tugged off her riding gloves. "No need to be so formal. Looks like rain. Shall we talk inside?" She made for the footbridge.

Vasili sidestepped into her path, making her halt. "That depends on the conversation."

She was here to take Nikolas back. Some council matter, probably. Nikolas was well-respected, his military and practical opinions sought-after, and while there was no indication of any threats on Seran, the city had been caught unaware before, and Roksana was making sure it didn't happen again under her watch.

Her finely lined eyes narrowed before softening with understanding. "Just a word. I won't keep you long."

Fat drops of rain tapped on the baked ground, lifting dust into the air. Vasili glanced at the cottage. Nikolas was in the backyard, out of sight, still hammering, oblivious to his aunt's arrival. A few carefully chosen words from Vasili and he could see to it Roksana left. The desire to do just that was almost too much to resist, probably because its source came from fear. He suddenly, desperately, didn't want this to end. The cottage, the life, Nikolas all his. He only now realized—with Roksana about to end it—how he'd been waiting for this interruption, for something to come and ruin it. The only surprise was that the source of this dream's demise hadn't been Vasili himself.

"Vasili?"

But he could not make Nikolas's choices for him. Nikolas was needed elsewhere. He suddenly understood why Nikolas was uncomfortable around the notion of Vasili going to sea. Jealousy, fear, uncertainty. Gods, was this how Nikolas had felt at Vasili's leaving?

Roksana huffed. "Look, I know I told him he could take as long as he likes, but some issues have arisen in the old town, and we—I need his input."

"It's fine." He stepped aside to tie her horse and waved her off. "He's in the yard."

He didn't need to know the details, didn't want to. He'd had enough of ruling other people and their lives, and he'd failed at that. Nikolas, with his

easy manner and patience, was better suited to such things. Horses secure and sheltered from the impending storm, he returned to the cottage and set the kettle on the stove just as the rain began to fall in earnest, and Nikolas and his aunt dashed in through the back door. Already deep in conversation, they continued without acknowledging Vasili, taking themselves into the living room.

The rain came down so hard it turned the world outside dark and hammered on the cottage roof. Vasili lost his thoughts in watching all the droplets chase each other down the windowpanes.

“Vasili,” Nikolas said from the doorway, startling him out of his reverie.

“Hm.”

“I, er...” His gaze fell, then flicked back up, but the dip was telling. “There’s an issue—”

“It’s fine. Go.”

“But I—”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Nikolas’s lips tilted in a restrained grimace. “You don’t mind?”

“Why would I mind?” He shrugged, ignoring the tiny cracks twitching through his heart.

“I just...” He hung his head. “I was going to tell her no, but if you really don’t care—”

“I don’t.” Those cracks twisted, becoming sharp. Two sides of him warred at once. He wanted to take the sharp words back and beg Nikolas not to go, but he didn’t beg. Begging was weak. And weakness killed. He had to guard himself and his heart from exactly this pain. To protect himself. “We’ve dallied long enough in this place. It’s time to return to Seran.” *The dream is over*, as he knew it would be.

Nikolas hesitated, half turned in the doorway, caught between his duty and whatever kept him coming back to Vasili when he shouldn’t. He just needed one additional shove to make his choice.

“Perhaps I’ll go to sea after all.”

And there, the pinch of his brow, his mouth falling into a silent O. Nikolas turned away, and Vasili heard their murmuring in the adjacent room. Well, it was for the best. Something was always going to rip this dream to shreds, it always did. Like Alek’s farm... It was better *not* to dream, thereby saving himself this wretched disappointment and heartache.

The cottage door clunked open, more hushed voices, ending when the door clinked closed again. Nikolas wouldn't have left without saying goodbye, but that was clearly coming. Vasili steeled his heart and watched the rain again. The seeds were sown. Nikolas would rage, but he'd relent, eventually. All good things must end.

He caught movement in the corner of his eye, saw a dark blur. Hot, rough fingers clamped the back of his neck and shoved, driving Vasili hard against the counter. An involuntary gasp left him. He tried to get his hands between him and the kitchen worktop to lever himself back, but Nikolas was suddenly an immovable weight at his back.

"Trying to fucking manipulate me into leaving you?" The words swept viciously over Vasili's ear. "You think I don't know your ways?" His breath burned the back of Vasili's neck where Niko had marked him that morning. Nikolas's hand twisted in his hair. Fear chased through Vasili's veins. He couldn't push free. Nikolas was too big, too heavy, too strong, too everywhere.

His free hand snagged Vasili's wrist and yanked it back. An elbow dug into Vasili's back, pinning him still. "Unhand me!"

"Is that what you really want, prince?" Nikolas spoke directly into Vasili's ear, and like the snapping of a too-tight restraint, lust whipped down Vasili's back, instantly and painfully arousing him. He grunted some incoherent noise and earned Nikolas's full weight pressed against his ass, including an impressively hard erection. Vasili's thoughts spiraled, his tremors twisting into ripples of pleasure, far away from fear. Oh, this... this wild man, this rage and strength, this was what he wanted.

Nikolas's hand in Vasili's hair yanked, exposing the line of his throat.

"What did you... tell her?" Vasili filtered the words through teeth.

"That I wasn't going anywhere until I'd fucked some sense into my man."

Vasili's laugh choked off the second Nikolas freed his grip from his hair and forcibly thrust his hand into Vasili's pants to grab his cock.

"There it is." His rasping breaths burned Vasili's cheek. He still had hold of Vasili's wrist, but now his free hand was gone from his cock and roaming again. His fingers hooked over the rim of Vasili's trousers and yanked, exposing Vasili's naked ass to the cool air.

Thunder rumbled outside, so near and loud it rattled the cottage windows. Vasili's awareness of the storm vanished the second Nikolas's dry

fingers plunged into his entrance. Needles of pain had him jerking away, then the fingers found that sensitive pressure point and Vasili rolled his eye. “*Fuck.*”

“Very well, *prince,*” Nikolas snarled. Some shuffling and adjustment from Nikolas. Vasili tried to get a look behind him, but as he twisted, the warm, wet push of cock at his hole had his instincts jerking him away. Niko had found some oil in the frantic moments, but his push was still startling in its strength.

Nikolas’s grip on his wrist tightened, just like it had in the Stag and Horn when he’d had Vasili pinned against the bar. Pain frolicked with pleasure as the pushing tip of Nikolas’s cock stretched Vasili wide. He couldn’t think to respond, to fight, he just knew he needed this and needed it now.

Stretched wide and filled to the brim, Vasili let out a small, whimpering sound of need.

“Fuck, yes, Vasili. Beg for it.”

An elbow dug into Vasili’s back, bending him over, and Nikolas thrust deep. Had he not been oiled, the assault likely would have been too much. Vasili took it, yet wanted more. Head turned, he snarled at Nikolas watching him, his face serious. “Bastard.” Nikolas thrust again, and Vasili bared his clenched teeth while his body rode the shudders every plunge of Nikolas’s cock delivered.

Then he stopped, cock almost all the way withdrawn. “Beg, prince.” Nikolas’s mouth twisted around the words, his tone so cruel it had Vasili’s toes curling.

Vasili licked his lips. “You beg *me.*”

Nikolas’s dark chuckle had Vasili’s cock jumping. Then the bastard withdrew completely. Vasili gasped, about to demand to be fucked, when Nikolas’s free hand thwacked him hard across the ass, leaving a sudden burn behind.

“Beg, Caville, like I know you can.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not this time.” Nikolas’s heat smothered Vasili’s back. His oiled hand grasped Vasili’s cock and rapidly jerked. Calloused fingers rode over Vasili’s swollen need, tipping him toward coming.

A small moan fell unbidden from Vasili’s lips. “*Niko—please.*”

The grip vanished, leaving Vasili panting, then the pressure pushed in, filling him hard and fast, having Vasili almost gulp his own tongue. Gods, yes. “Niko, yes. Ugh—*harder. Fucking harder, you wretched Yazdan bastard.*”

Nikolas grunted. “Quit talking. Or I’ll co—”

Vasili clenched his ass, strangling Nikolas’s cock, cutting his words off. Then there was nothing but the sound of skin slapping skin and their ragged, irregular breaths sawing out of them. Vasili was too damn close to spilling without his own cock being touched—he choked around the plea to hold off—and Nikolas’s thrust drove him against the worktop. Pleasure blinded him, and he spilled so hard and so violently, then his own shout echoed somewhere far off in his head.

Nikolas’s vicious curse chased the sound until his cock pulsed, coming deep inside Vasili. Nikolas’s shackle-like grip on Vasili’s wrist finally relented, and Vasili slumped over the worktop, wondering if he’d ever be able to prepare vegetables here again without getting hard. There were more elegant ways to fuck, but none had Vasili coming so fast and hard in his life.

Nikolas’s fingers swept Vasili’s hair away from his neck. His sudden, soft, almost chaste kiss just below Vasili’s ear had Vasili’s shivering.

“Love fucking you,” Nikolas whispered.

Vasili snorted a laugh. “I admit, I’m also rather fond of you fucking me.”

With a playful growl, Nikolas rolled his hips, cock still embedded. Vasili sucked in a breath, wincing.

“All right?”

“Hm, good.” He liked that he’d be feeling Nikolas’s mark for a while. Even after he’d left for Seran, going back to his life on the council. “Are you going with your aunt?”

Nikolas gently withdrew, and using a cloth he’d found from somewhere, he quickly and efficiently cleaned the wetness from Vasili’s ass and thighs. “Are you going to sea?” he asked, wiping himself down before tucking himself away.

Vasili pulled his trousers up and flicked his hair from his face. “I may...”

Nikolas lifted his head, his eyes wide with hurt. “What are we doing, Vasili?”

He leaned back against the worktop now, folding his arms so Nikolas didn't see his hands tremble. What were they doing? How was it they could be so thoroughly in love, as they both knew they were, but somehow still not have it work? It wasn't Nikolas. He hadn't done a damn thing wrong. Vasili knew exactly whose fault this was. "I need to know something, Nikolas."

Nikolas tossed the rag to the floor to clean up later and ran a hand through his ragged hair. He puffed a heavy sigh. "Anything."

"I can't do this, any of this, without knowing why."

"Why what?" He dropped into the chair by the breakfast table, spent in more ways than just physically.

He was hurting, and that too was Vasili's fault, but Vasili didn't know how to stop it from happening. He didn't know how to hold on to Nikolas without hurting him.

"Why have you done this?" Vasili gestured at the kitchen—the cottage—and quickly folded his arms again. "Why did you build this? Why do you keep pulling me back? Why are you still here?"

Nikolas frowned, going from hard bastard to soft, open, and emotional Nikolas in a matter of seconds. "I feel like I've fucked up but don't know why or how. I don't understand what you're asking."

Gods, he did know. He had to. Vasili flung his gaze to the ceiling and clenched his jaw.

"Whatever it is," Niko began quietly, "we beat the flame, we can beat this."

"No, Niko. You beat the flame." Vasili lowered his gaze and blinked. "Why me, Niko? Why do you love me? Through everything that's happened, why didn't you just walk away? I keep giving you opportunities to go, and you refuse to take them. Why? I don't understand it. I don't understand you."

"Because I love you." He spread his hands, still confused. "I made a vow to never leave you, and I never will, unless you truly want me to."

"Maybe I do want that," Vasili mumbled.

"Bullshit."

He was right, of course. It was bullshit. With his ass burning, his neck sizzling, and the ache in his wrist, all from Nikolas, he couldn't stand there and deny he loved this man. "I don't understand what you see in me," he whispered. "Why you've done all this."

“When it comes to yourself, you really don’t know you at all, do you?” Nikolas was up and moving. He laid his hands softly on Vasili’s hips and brushed his nose over Vasili’s, leaving Vasili helplessly meeting the man’s beautiful eyes. “You’re not just the bad, you’re the good too. You’re kind to animals, you’re intelligent, and when you smile, it’s like there’s nothing else brighter in the world. Despite everything you’ve been through, all the hate and hurt, you always try to do more, to be better. You’re beautiful. What will it take for you to see yourself the way I see you?” Nikolas asked.

“I don’t know if I can.” Every time he looked in the mirror, Vasili Caville looked back.

“Well, I’m not leaving you. Push me away all you like, but I’ll still be here for you. I’m not going back to Seran or the council. That’s what I told Roksana. I’m staying here, and I want you to stay with me.” His fingers gathered up Vasili’s, holding them to his chest. “Let’s make this our life. We deserve it after all the shit we went through. Don’t you think?”

“You de—”

Nikolas’s soft, warm mouth skimmed Vasili’s, cutting off the denial. Opening to him, Vasili tasted his lips and teased his tongue, kissing and surrendering to this man who refused to follow any of Vasili’s plans or listen when he was told to leave for his own good. This brutal, beautiful, honorable man, too stubborn by far. Maybe Vasili could allow himself to love him, fear and all. He truly wanted nothing more than to live this life with Nikolas at his side. He needed it to fill the void in his soul, but he’d been too afraid to take it. Vasili ended the aching soft kiss and admitted, “Everything good in my life is taken away.”

“No force in this world can take me from you. The gods themselves cannot take me from you. Do you hear me? I will fight for this life, for us, and I’ll never surrender, Vasili.”

He believed him, and with a breathless titter of his heart, he understood then that this truly could be his.

“Live with me,” Nikolas said, sensing some breakthrough. “We’ll plant crops, maybe breed horses. Yasir will show up like a whirlwind, with all-new tales, and he can stay too, if you wish it. I’ll finish the kitchen and fix the pipes. You can grow more herbs, make a garden.”

Vasili almost looked away but couldn’t. Not from the promises in Nikolas’s eyes. If anyone could make such a wonderful dream real, it was Nikolas Yazdan. “Truly?”

“Truly. This is all new to me too. But I’ll do anything for you, Vasili. I’ll make that life for you, because you deserve it.”

Vasili closed his eye and sighed, his soul suddenly light. “I think—” Opening his eye again revealed a grinning Nikolas. “I know I can make this work.” He loved this man so much it hurt him, but in a good way. “I want this, I want you. I want this cottage you’ve built, this life you’ve made. It’s everything I’ve ever dreamed of.” Vasili touched his face, his smile, tracing his lips beneath his fingers. “When I allowed myself to dream, those dreams were always of you.”

Thunder grumbled away outside, and the rain eased, pattering gently against the window.

“No more dreaming,” Nikolas said. “It’s real, and it’s yours. I’m yours. Just say yes.”

“Yes, Niko.” He threw his arms around his shoulders and buried his face against Nikolas’s neck. “Yes!”

CHAPTER 19

Niko

THREE YEARS Later

ADAMO PRANCED along the fence line, throwing his head and his mane like the thoroughbred beast he was. On the other side of the fence, the pure-white foal kicked and frolicked in the long grass, trying to imitate his sire's brilliance as his father watched on. The foal would eventually equal Adamo. And he'd be a wild one. He'd need the right care. Niko couldn't get near him. Vasili would have to break him in—he had a way with the horses.

A bark of laughter rolled across the meadow. Niko snorted and left the foal to his frolicking. Only Yasir's presence broke the serenity of the cottage, though he didn't mind hearing the man's laugh. It signaled that time of year for celebration.

Approaching the cottage, the long table nestled among patches of wildflowers and carefully clipped lawn paths came into sight. Coffee steamed and colorful salads overflowed their platters. Purple grapes and plums tumbled from a huge bowl, both brought by Yasir from somewhere across the sea. The man was currently grinning and nodding while somehow managing to pour his own wine and eat the grapes cradled in his other hand, all at once. His violet shirt lay half unlaced, revealing a hint of a

tattoo. His name entwined with Liam's. The man seated beside him was nothing like Liam. Graham was bigger than Yasir but just as quick to grin, with a shock of red hair. Yasir had apparently found him at the docks and romanced him so hard he was back at their gathering for a second year. Graham was clearly a keeper. Niko had taken to liking the man the moment he'd put some cad on his ass for insulting Yasir—even though the insult had been entirely accurate.

"Ah, Niko!" Yasir waved him over. "Thought we'd lost you in the meadow! Sit, eat."

"Already comfortable, Yasir?" Yasir and Graham had arrived that morning and made themselves at home. Then Roksana and her wife, Joellanne—Anna—had ridden in at midday. Where Roksana was all sultry, dark Seranian allure, Anna was lightness and sunshine. Blonde hair cropped short framed her sweet, smiling face. Her politeness and poise made Roksana look like a ruffian in a way Vasili probably made Nikolas look like a half-wild bear too.

The four of them chatted animatedly, getting louder and rowdier as more wine was consumed. Niko veered from the table, down the backyard path that Vasili made sure was manicured to within an inch of its life, and ducked inside the kitchen.

"Hm, Niko. Here." Vasili thrust a bottle of wine into his hands. "Take this. And this." The plate of cheeses was thrust next. Vasili carefully scooped up the cake he'd been working on since the early hours. He caught Niko's gaze and paused, his little smile slowly growing. "Yes, Nikolas?"

In loose pants, shirt sleeves rolled up, with flour dusted halfway up his arms and icing smeared across his cheek, Vasili looked good enough to eat. It was a good thing Niko's hands were full, or he'd have scooped him up and licked every inch of him clean.

Vasili's gaze sharpened. "Be good."

"I am... just thinking how delicious you look." The sentence fell into a growl, utterly betraying his intentions if his cock hadn't already.

Vasili scooted by him and out the door, quick on his feet. He threw a knowing glance over his shoulder that Nikolas would surely collect on later that night.

"Ah, the infamous cake!" Roksana announced. "The first year we got together like this," she said to Anna, "I had Niko promise Varian hadn't poisoned it." Anna looked horrified, then laughed and tapped her wife

playfully on the arm, thinking the tale a jest. Niko caught his aunt's glance and smiled. He had, in fact, promised her that Vasili had no intention of poisoning her and he was genuinely being nice, as hard as it was to believe. Now the fancy cake, like the gathering, had become tradition.

As Niko set the wine and cheeses down, Yasir produced a bottle of dark rum, caressing it suggestively. "I've been assured this will, at the very least, not kill us."

"Then you drink it first, Yasir," Vasili suggested, taking his seat. "And we'll watch for your twitching corpse."

Yasir rolled his eyes all the way to Graham. "So dramatic. He forgets how I can handle my drink, unlike him. I once found Varian passed out on the shitter, trousers around his ankles."

A bread roll smacked Yasir on the forehead, followed by Vasili's laughing. "You did not, Yasir. You fiend."

It was entirely possible. Yasir spluttered, mock reeling from the well-aimed impact. Niko chuckled along. The food was served, the cake cut, and portions handed out. The rum and wine flowed, and as the sun slowly made its way across the sky, dipping into twilight, they talked and laughed, shared tales and dreams and successes, their bellies and hearts full.

Niko raised his glass, briefly silencing the chatter. He swallowed the small lump in his throat and looked at each friend in turn. He'd wondered, when the times had been bad, whether any one of them would see the light of day. And not all of them had. Yasir's tattoo was testament to that. But the people here, they meant the world to him. They'd made it through, together. And that was surely a miracle worth celebrating. His gaze fell last to Vasili, and the little lump in his throat was back. "To new families."

"And living our dreams," Vasili added, slipping his hand beneath the table to lock his fingers with Niko's. He'd never looked happier. Niko had promised to set him free, and he believed he had. He was just grateful the wonder that was Vasili had chosen to be free with him.

"Living dreams!" they cheered, glasses chinking.

Vasili's hand tightened on his, and the prince's gaze lingered only on Niko. He leaned in, brushed his lips against Niko's ear, and whispered, "Love you, Nikolas Yazdan."

Niko turned his head and kissed him, not caring they had an audience. He kissed him like they were alone and at any moment Vasili would crawl into his lap and kiss all the breath from his body.

Yasir cheered. Roksana laughed, then launched into the tale of how Niko had once kissed Vasili in full view of her crew, managing to instantly silence one of the rowdiest bunch of men and women on Walla's seas.

Vasili's smile ended the kiss. Niko stroked his cheek, marveling at its softness beneath his thumb.

"You're a lucky bastard, Nikolas Yazdan," Vasili purred.

"And I know it." His heart swelled to bursting, because finally, Vasili knew his worth, and it was priceless. This love, this life, this was what they'd been fighting for, and now, finally, they'd found their happy ending. The prince and his assassin. Together. Forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born to wolves, Rainbow Award winner Ariana Nash only ventures from the Cornish moors when the moon is fat and the night alive with myths and legends. She captures those myths in glass jars and returning home, weaves them into stories filled with forbidden desires, fantasy realms, and wicked delights.

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