

“Not here.” Raji easily pulls me past the servant women, who part like the sea as we pass. They dare not object to my leaving, now that Raji demands it. It feels good to have this power over them. We run down the hallway towards the door. I look back at the women clucking behind us like judging hens.

“But I must finish dressing her,” I protest mildly, “and then there is bacon to fry.”

“Those pigs are dead. You are alive!”

We run out the door. Raji races up the tree with the doll. I follow, not for the doll, but because I am drawn to him, a nurse to her convalescent, a healer to a wound, a giver to a taker.

I climb the Jacaranda again, only this time I am like a puppy from the stables nipping sunshine in tall grass. It is in our friendship to run, not to compete, but to play and roll in our aliveness. And so up I follow, past the robin asleep on her blue speckled eggs, past the tightly bound Jacaranda blossoms, which seem far away and unimportant to me now that Raji is here, and finally into my precious hideaway, my treehouse.

A wooden table and chairs greet me, my teacups still lain out from my last affair. Our names, Raji and Tali, are carved into the trunk. The smell of fresh branches and tiny buds envelops me, but I barely have time to inhale as Raji reaches for my hand to sit. I pull away, like from flame, and instead run my fingers along the carved letters of my name in the trunk of the tree. It had taken us hours to carve them just so, and had gotten dark before I realized how late it was. I remember most from that night the fear in my father’s eyes when he had finally found me.

“Why are you here?” I ask Raji, not wanting to know.

“I need you to,” he says softly.

“But now? I should not.”

“But I need it.” I know what he wants, but I can still try to convince him otherwise for a little bit.

“Tell her your dreams have not come yet. Tell her there is still time. You are yet young.”

“Tali...”

“I cannot keep doing this,” I object, meekly. I look down, my cheeks burning with the difficulty of saying no. This game is the only power I have over him, but even so, I am not good at it.

“Look at me,” he demands, but my eyes remain cast downwards. If I look up now, our game will be over. He must sense this too, because he continues. “This morning, my mother shall arrive at church for the Reading in all her pomp and circumstance. She will ask me a question about my future in front of the entire Kingdom and I will be expected to answer. Correctly. As a Seven. Without you, I cannot. You know that.”

“But what can I do?”

“Precisely. You must come with me.”

My heart flops in my chest. “What?” I whisper. I thought Raji wanted me to lay hands on him here, like we always do. Then he returns to his mother and tells her my answers as if they are his own.

This is our secret game.

“But you do not normally attend Readings,” I stammer.

“It is the anniversary of my eighth one. As the Prince of Abyrrth, and one of the most highly evolved souls in the Kingdom. I should be flourishing with wisdom by now.

My people wait for my dreams, guidance from my devas. They do not know I see nothing, that I feel nothing, that I am useless without some misfit like you. How shall I lead my people if I cannot show them I am being guided from beyond?"

Raji tugs at my sleeve again and this time I sit with him, cross-legged on the floor, his words stinging, misfit, misfit, misfit, turning my head every which way, but I swallow this hurt like bitter medicine and try to keep it from showing on my face.

"You must help me," he demands. "It is your duty to the Kingdom."

"Perhaps you can speak frankly with your mother. Tell her you are a late bloomer, tell your visions have not come yet, but they will, in time, I am sure of it," I say, although I crinkle up my nose at this last thought, not quite sure of it at all.

"I have already been giving her insights for years through you."

"But I cannot control it. I do not know what it will show me or what future it will take me to. The only one time I have ever seen someone's number was with that sick child and it wasn't even clear. What if, when the time comes, I cannot do it? What happens when the whole Kingdom watches and I have nothing?"

"You will have something. You always do."

I close my eyes, take a breath and try to think this through properly.

"Even if I say yes, I cannot leave these quarters. It is against my father's rules."

"Ah. I've thought of everything!" He says quickly, apparently having waited for the tiniest opening from me to announce his scheme. He pulls a blanket off the floor and wraps it around him. "We shall hide you in my cloaks, like so. I stand regally by the altar. My mother enters, and sits on her royal throne. She asks me the question, and your hands come out from my robes and onto my temples." He pulls my hands through the blanket to

show me. “Everyone will think these are my hands. We are the same age. Our hands are similar in build. We shall be far enough away. You receive the answer, and whisper it to me in my ear underneath the cloak. Look,” as Raji forms a hood from the folds. “There is fur around it. No one will see your head moving. Then I give your answer to my mother. We stand quietly and wait for the ceremony to be over. You know how my mother wants to leave these things quickly?” I nod vigorously, though I don’t know in the slightest. “She will go, then you and I shall return right here, safe and sound. No one will ever know. I promise.”

I sigh, if my father knew what I was contemplating, and for the Queen’s son no less. “But my father will be right there. He might sense me. He is the Seer, after all.”

“Nonsense. He can’t see through clothing, can he? Besides, don’t you want the chance to get out of here? Don’t you want to see the world? You are a prisoner.”

“I am not,” I object.

“He cannot keep you locked up in the servants’ quarters your entire life,” he counters.

“I am perfectly happy here,” I retort. “And I love my father dearly. If he thinks it best I remain in the servant quarters, than so be it. Those are his rules.”

After all, I think to myself, there is something special about me. My number is unknown to everyone. I do not know why, but it is not my place to know. Sometimes when I cannot fall asleep, I have to will my hand not to go up to my forehead and trace the outline of my number with my finger. Sometimes I want to know so badly what I am, but I have never, ever dared act on this feeling.

“Your life is a bore,” Raji interrupts my thoughts. “Your best friend is a tree. You spend your hours tending to a robin and her eggs,” he taunts. His candor hurts, though I know he does not mean it to. He has always spoken simplistically and bluntly, and it stings because it comes from a place so deep that concerns only himself. I know this, and yet I am continuously willing to get hurt at my expense. Why do I do this? Even the doll he brought me, I muse, was only because he wanted something from me in return. Oh, and how he does manage to make my life seem small and pointless! His words take the poetry out of my days. They build a wall, hard as rock, a blank reflection where I cannot see myself, no matter how hard I look. His words, his words, they lower me.

“Is there anything wrong with caring about my tree and my birds in my courtyard?” I finally ask, meekly.

“And besides,” Raji continues as if I had not spoken, “if you do not come with me, I shall tell your father that you followed me out to my Reading party and I found you in the main palace eating sugar frosted Seven cakes.”

“You wouldn’t!” I cry.

“I would. Then I will never be allowed to visit you again and not only shall you lose your one friend but you will be punished in some very un-Anu like way.”

I think long and hard. How can I say no to Raji? And he will make sure I return here safe and sound. He is the Prince after all.

“Come, we haven’t much time,” he says, peering out at the sun.

“Well, I suppose...” the words spill out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Grand!” Raji grabs me before I can even finish my sentence. He certainly does not delve deep into dark corners like I do, pressing for answers in the gap of uncertainty.

He cannot live in ambiguity. For him, face value is all there is. It is black or it is white.

There is no grey.

This is another part of why I like him.