

C A P Í T U L O

A stylized, cursive signature that reads 'UWU'. The letters are fluid and interconnected, with a light grey shadow effect behind the text.

My banged-up spoon scrapes the bottom of a barrel that should've held enough dried beans to last for three more months.

No, no, no.

There has to be more.

Sickness churns my stomach, and my knuckles brush against bare wood as I coax a handful of shriveled beans into a half-empty bag. I wipe dirty hands against my white trousers and ignore the sweat dripping down my neck. The kingdom of Inkasisa is in the middle of her stifling wet season. Even though it's night, there's no escaping the muggy heat.

"Something wrong, Condesa?" asks the next person in line waiting for their ration.

Yes, in fact. We're all going to starve. Not that I can say this out loud. It goes against everything I know to do as their leader: A condesa should never show fear.

I school my features into what I hope is a pleasant expression, then turn to face the long line of Illustrians waiting for their evening portions. Drawn faces stare back at me. White clothes

hang off gaunt frames, loose and big like the tents the Illustrians sleep in next to the keep.

My whole life, I've trained for situations like this: manage expectations, soothe people's worries, feed them. It's the condesa's job.

We're standing in the round storage building with the door propped open, allowing for people to crowd around as I sort through the provisions. Luna's light casts rectangular patterns on the dozens of empty barrels piled on their sides, while a rickety wooden staircase leads up to the armory housing swords, shields, and bundled arrows. All we could carry when we fled for our lives the day La Ciudad Blanca fell.

What would Ana, our general, want me to say? *Manage them. You're in charge. Don't forget what's at stake. We need to survive until we can take back the throne.*

I glance at the door, half expecting to find Ana's broad shoulders leaning against the frame, moonlight reflecting off the silver wisps in her hair. But she's not there. Ana left four days ago on a mission to chase a rumor about Atoc, the false Llacsan king—a rumor that, if true, guarantees our victory.

She promised to be back by yesterday.

An arm brushes against mine. Catalina, silently reminding me of her presence. The knot in my chest unwinds slightly. I forgot she was standing behind me, ever helpful.

"Bring me the wheat, por favor." I gesture toward the wall the barrels of rations are lined against. "And the cloth bags over on that shelf."

She obeys, grabbing the supplies off the shelf first and handing them to me, her dark eyes lowered. Then she darts toward the barrel.

“Condesa?” a woman asks. “Is this all that’s left?”

I hesitate; the lie waiting on the tip of my tongue tastes sour and wrong. My gaze returns to the dwindling piles of food at my feet: husked corn, a half-filled bag of rice, and an almost empty basket of bread. Not nearly enough.

A lie won’t feed all these people.

“We’re short on some supplies,” I say with a tight smile. “No beans, I’m afraid, but—”

Next to me Catalina stiffens, pausing in her attempt to drag the wheat barrel to my side. Normally it takes the effort of two people, but somehow she manages by herself. Which means *this* barrel isn’t full either.

The woman’s mouth drops open. “No beans? ¿No hay comida?”

“That’s not what I said.” I force my smile to remain in place as I come to a split-second decision—our best and only option. “We have to be careful with what we have. So here’s what’s going to happen: Starting immediately, everyone will receive less than half their usual ration, per family. I know it’s not ideal, but it’s either that or we starve,” I say bluntly. “Your pick.”

Voices rise up.

“Less than half?”

“Not ideal?”

Another woman shouts, “How can there be no food left?”

A headache presses against my temple. “We do have *some* food—”

But the woman’s words travel down the line, catching fire in the dark, until fifty people clamor for attention, wanting answers, wanting their rations. They wave their empty baskets in the air. Their loud cries boom like thunder in my ears. I want to

duck for cover. But if I don't do something, I'm going to have a full-blown riot on my hands.

"Reassure them," Catalina hisses.

"I can't offer what we don't have," I whisper. Catalina shoots me a meaningful look. A condesa should know how to maintain control of any situation. "I'm doing my job. You do yours."

"Your job is my job," she snaps.

The people's cries swell, bouncing off the walls and threatening to strike me down. "¡Comida! ¡Comida!" The crowd stomps their feet and pushes in, hot breath brushing against my face like heavy smoke. I fight the impulse to step back.

Someone in the crowd yells for El Lobo, and I tense, hoping no one else sings that stupid vigilante's praises. Every time something goes wrong, someone inevitably brings up the man in the mask. The trickster.

"El Lobo can help us—"

"He steals from Atoc's coffers all the time—"

"He's the hero of Inkasisa—"

Oh, for goodness sake. He's a man in a ridiculous mask. Even my niñera could prank that puffed-up idiotic pretend king. And she was eighty the last time I saw her.

"We want El Lobo!" someone shouts.

"Lobo! Lobo!"

"That's enough!" My voice rings out, sharp as the edge of a blade. "No one speaks his name in my presence, understood? He's a scoundrel who plays pranks on the false king. That kind of reckless behavior could get us killed. The vigilante is dangerous and not one of us."

Someone throws a rock at a window. Glass shatters, and

moonlight-touched shards fly everywhere. Faces blur as my vision darkens and I can only make out hints of mottled cheeks and flailing arms as the crowd bellows for the vigilante. They press forward until Catalina and I are almost backed against the wall.

“Condesa,” Catalina says, her eyes wide and frantic.

My mouth goes dry. The words don’t come. I glance at the empty doorway, willing Ana to appear. But more people push into the building.

“I need . . .” I begin.

“¿Qué? ¡Más fuerte!”

“I need you all to remain calm,” I say louder. “Shouting or throwing rocks won’t fix the—”

Their protests grow louder and louder until I can’t distinguish what they’re saying. My legs wobble, and it takes every ounce of will left in me just to remain upright. It’s not supposed to be like this. Ten years ago my people were the aristócratas of Inkasisa. But our way of life, our culture, is gone, like pages torn from a book. No more visits to the plaza to hear live music while strolling with friends in our long skirts and fancy leather shoes. Or walking Cala Cala, the prettiest path overlooking La Ciudad, where you can pick figs and peaches while enjoying the vista. Birthday fiestas are a thing of the past, existing only in my memory, but sometimes I can still taste my abuela’s torta de nuez, a rich walnut cake smothered in creamed coffee and dulce de leche.

Another rock sails toward a window, jarring me from my thoughts. Shards of splintering glass ring in my ear. My nerves threaten to eat me from the inside out. An empty feeling in the pit of my stomach makes my head spin.

Catalina touches my arm and steps in front of me. “What the

condesa means is that we have a plan to get more food underway. For now we have plenty. Everyone will receive the usual amount.”

I cut her a warning look, but Catalina ignores me. So does everyone else. Her words work like a balm over a blistering wound. The crowd quiets and holds out their baskets, mollified, shuffling around her like chickens clucking for feed.

“Why don’t you all step back in line and I’ll sort out the food? Have you on your way so that you can put your children to bed, and have something to cook for your families tomorrow, all right?”

They file into a straight line like obedient schoolchildren. I step away from Catalina, my shoulders slumping. They don’t want me or the bad news I carry. I can’t give them what they need, so I give them what they want instead—Catalina. Their friend.

Something I can’t be as their supposed queen.

She knocks the lid off the barrel at my elbow and scoops up a handful of wheat. “Who’s first?”

Catalina distributes heaping portions of wheat and bundles of husked corn until only a smattering of provisions remain. Then she reaches for the barrels that contain the last of our supplies—*for emergencies only*.

I stand off to the side, my fists clenched and my mouth shut. I can’t manage a polite smile even if I try. Ana normally leads undercover raids to La Ciudad to steal food, but since she’s not back, who knows how long it’ll be before we get more supplies? At the rate Catalina’s giving out rations, we have mere days left. And just who does she think they’ll come after when everyone discovers how close to starving we are?

Certainly not to their *friend*.

Catalina spares me a brief glance, then she picks up a small bowl by her feet filled with a handful of dried beans, ground wheat, and an ear of corn. Her own ration she set aside earlier. She hands it to the next person in line.

“I need air,” I say curtly. Without looking at her, I head toward the door. The remaining crowd parts so I can pass. Glass crunches underneath the soles of my leather boots. I avert my gaze from their watchful eyes, but I feel their disappointment anyway.

The condesa has let them down.



When I want to escape, I head to the top of the northernmost tower in the keep, the massive fortress that once housed the legendary Illustrian army before it was destroyed by Atoc’s supernatural weapon. After the revolt, we sought refuge within this stronghold of massive stone towers and high arches. Mountains envelope the rear of the fortress, and abysses several hundred feet deep encircle those. It’s as if our fortress stands on a floating island. A single bridge allows entry, enchanted by Ana’s magic. Only Illustrians can cross.

But that hasn’t stopped Atoc’s priest from trying.

Outside the storage building, mosquitos buzz and toads croak in the sweltering night. The heat of my torch sends rivulets of sweat dripping down my face. The air hangs heavy with the smell of cooking fires drifting from the long rows of tents next to the keep. The scents are of simple dishes, beans over white rice, and nothing at all like how we used to eat in La Ciudad: plates piled high with silpancho or salteñas, grilled choclo and fried

yuca, and then washed down with toasted cane sugar, ginger, and mango juice. Overhead, a full moon adorns the night like a bright jewel. Luna's looking her best.

I pass the stables and spot Sofía practicing drills with her mother's blade. A gift for her eighteenth birthday. Ana was so proud to hand over her most prized possession. That blade had saved us during the invasion. Now her magic saves us day and night. Ana is everything to everyone on this side of the bridge.

General and mother. Mentor and friend. If she's in danger—or worse—how long can we survive without her?

I open the double doors to the great hall, a square room filled with long wooden tables and a fireplace. Above the dirty fireplace is a shield that belonged to an Illustrian queen who ruled Inkasisa hundreds of years ago. Our battle cry *Carpe Noctem*—"Seize the Night"—is etched along the upper arch. The ceilings are tall, and tapestries I've woven over the years decorate the stone walls. Shooting stars are stitched across the length of them. Some with puffy clouds that look real enough to float away. The skies and heavens, moon and stars, Illustrian pride.

I climb the tower's spiral staircase, trailing my fingers against the rough wall. My boots thud against the stone. At the top, a small round room waits for me, empty except for a basket of white llama wool and a sturdy wooden loom, a gift from my Llacsan niñera. I haven't seen her since Atoc drove us out of our own city.

Ten years ago. A lifetime.

The loom sits near an arched window, close enough to bathe in Luna's moonlight, but not close enough for the heights to make me queasy. The room is far removed from everyone else,

making it easier to weave without any distraction.

My fingers twitch. I want to weave. No, I *need* to.

With my heart thudding, I grab a bundle of the snow-white wool and tie knots on the top and bottom pegs. Once the loom is properly warped, I gather more wool. I start at the top, threading the strands over and under to create diamond-shaped lights peppering the evening sky.

As I work, moonlight glints around me, growing brighter, as if peering over my shoulder to watch me work. My fingers blur as I move from left to right and back again. When I finish dotting the tapestry with twinkly lights, it's ready for my magic thread. The one only I can make.

The one made of moonlight.

My fingers tingle, and I reach for a ray of silver light. Feel it glide over my hand, like putting an arm through a sleeve. The moonlight slants, turning supple and smooth, bending and twisting as it lengthens.

My breath catches. No matter how many times I use Luna's rays to make thread, it always manages to surprise me—the shimmer of magic courses through me, delighting the fabric of my soul.

I work the incandescent thread, over and under again, building a scene of the night sky. The moonlight turns to moondust as I weave, fluttering to the stone floor like falling snowflakes.

In what feels like minutes, a new tapestry winks back at me. A glittering silver work of art that lights up the small room. Pools of moondust gather at my feet, as if I've wandered into winter. My neck and shoulders stiffen—a telltale sign that I've once again lost track of time. The pain is worth it. While I weave, life's troubles melt away: worry about Ana, our lack of food, and the

infernally Llacsans. I pick up the strand to finish the bottom row.

Footsteps shuffle behind me. I stiffen, bracing myself for the fight I know is coming.

“It’s beautiful,” Catalina says from the doorway. “One of your best, I think.” Her voice turns wistful. “And that’s saying something. The moon thread—”

I turn to face her. “Is the food all gone?”

She shakes her head as she steps into the room.

“How much do we have left?”

She avoids my gaze. “Enough for a few days.”

I suck in a breath and hold it for a long moment. It forces my anger deep within me. A trick Ana taught me to keep my temper in check. She always keeps calm and thinks of practical solutions. I admire the way she handles bad news, however ugly. If it were me, I’d hit something with my loom. Preferably a Llacsan.

I let out my breath slowly.

Catalina bends closer to study the tapestry. The silver light flickers across her face. People say we look like sisters. Same wavy hair and dark eyes, olive skin and thick, arched brows. Some days I like to pretend we are. But right now I want to stay mad at her for putting us in the most impossible situation. Three hundred displaced Illustrians live near our fortress in rows and rows of tents. Their homes cover the grounds, leaving little room for growing food.

I sigh. I know her heart. She means well. But *coño*.

“We’re going to starve, Catalina.”

“I appreciate everything you’re doing,” she says in the same soothing tone she uses on overwrought children. “I really do. But you need to trust me—”

I throw my hands up, because really, I can't do a damn thing to fix our plight.

It's not my place. I'm not the real condesa.

Catalina is.

"You're the one in charge," I say. "I'm only *pretending* to know better." I grab the leftover wool and furiously wind the long strand into a tight ball.

"Ana will come back, and she'll lead another foraging mission into La Ciudad. You'll see. She'll steal enough to feed us for several months. I know what I'm doing, and you ought to trust her. She's always looked out for me. For both of us."

"Then where is she? Ana said three days. It's been four. You should have let me go after her, or at the very least let Sofía go." I raise my voice. "Maybe Atoc's priest got ahold of her. Did you think of that?"

"Stop it," Catalina says. "Just stop it. This isn't helping, Ximena."

Goose bumps flare on my forearms. I rarely hear my real name said aloud. When Ana first brought me into the keep ten years ago, she switched me with Catalina behind closed doors.

Back then, her protective parents limited public outings and kept her social circles centered around family. But they all perished in the revolt. When Ana had dressed me in the Condesa's fine clothing, Illustrians never questioned my identity. They believed I was their heir, their last hope to reclaim the throne, safely hidden from Atoc.

That's when Catalina became Andrea. Only Ana's two children, Sofía and Manuel, know the truth, and as a form of habit, they call me the condesa like everyone else.

“Atoc’s priest keeps trying to cross the bridge with his underlings,” I say. “You can’t give away our emergency reserves. That’s what they’re there for—in case the Llacsans manage to cross, we’ll have to wait them out.”

Catalina’s lips thin into a pale slash. “Keep your voice down. Everyone will hear you. Ana’s shadow magic will hold against the priest.”

As long as Ana’s still alive. I slump forward on the stool, my fingers tangling in my hair. When Ana told me about her plans for this undercover mission to La Ciudad, I was against it. The city is crawling with Atoc’s guards, and Ana isn’t as young as she used to be. But rumors swirl that his greatest weapon—the Estrella—has gone missing, and if they’re true, there won’t be a more opportune time to finally strike the Llacsans.

I wanted to go with her, but she refused. It’s an old argument. I already have a job. As a child, being the condesa’s decoy seemed easier than living on the streets among the people who’d killed my family and ruined my home. But I didn’t realize then what I’d be giving up—my very identity.

It’s an honor to protect Catalina. To give up my life for hers should it come to that. And despite my duty, despite the long years of living as somebody else, I love her. As a sister, as my future queen.

Sometimes, though, that kind of love just isn’t comfortable.

I send a silent prayer to Luna, asking for Ana’s safe return. If the Estrella’s missing, someone has to look into it. Ana knows the city better than anyone, aside from Manuel, who’s off traveling to the ends of Inkasisa to secure allies. They are few and far between. Most tribes are loyal to the false king, and the

ones who aren't don't dare rise against him. But still, Ana sends Manuel to every corner of the kingdom. She's stubborn that way. It's a trait that has kept us alive all these years.

Catalina is right. Ana will come through. There simply is no other option.

"I need to read the stars," Catalina says. "Maybe there will be something about Ana."

I force a smile. She needs every bit of encouragement. "Buena suerte. I'll be there in a minute."

After she leaves, I finish weaving the bottom row of the tapestry. I tie off the strands so my work won't unravel, then hang the tapestry on the wall. Next, I straighten up the place. The leftover wool goes back into my basket; the scraps go into my pocket. I scoop up the moondust shed from my weaving and dump the whole shimmering mess into a canvas bag I keep handy. When inhaled, the powder brings on a heavy, dreamless sleep. Sadly, I'm immune to it.

I sigh and head to the room I share with the condesa. We don't have much furniture in the keep, and what little we do decorates our room: a narrow bed and dresser, one nightstand, and a pillow. The white paint on the stone walls has faded to a dingy gray.

Catalina is leaning—practically falling—out the window, a dented bronze telescope in her hands. She leans out farther, and I suck in a breath, forcing myself to remain silent. She'd only laugh at my worry. Illustrian magic—magic from the heavens, the night sky—manifests in different ways and at different ages. For some, the magic is slight, like the ability to stay up all night. Manuel's Moonsight gives him clearer vision when the sun dips into the horizon. Sofía can illuminate darkened rooms. Others

are masters of tides. Many who fight in our army become fiercer at night, dangerous like the creatures that hunt by the moon.

Mine is weaving with moonlight. But Catalina *reads* the stars, the constellations hanging miles above our heads. Deep in the night sky, she can see shifting, glittering lines. A trained and capable Illustrian seer can decipher each new message written in the heavens, but it takes years of dedicated learning and plenty of favor bestowed by Luna.

We used to rely on the seer's guidance for every major decision. The last person who could accurately read the stars died in the revolt. Now we have only Catalina left to guide us.

And her predictions rarely come true.

"Any luck?"

"Maybe." Catalina squints into the night. "I don't know. It's probably nothing."

That's a no, then.

She glances at me, her eyes drawn. "Why is this so hard? Even when I see something that might be useful, I'm too scared to share. What if I'm wrong?"

I lean against the arched doorway. "It'll get easier."

She wipes her eyes, yawning. "How do you know?"

"Because everything does with practice." I jerk my chin toward the door. "I think you've done enough tonight. Let's get some sleep. I brought you moondust."

Catalina tucks the telescope under her arm and smiles gratefully.

I plop onto the bed. "I'm sleeping in. Don't kick me in the middle of the night."

Catalina laughs and curls up beside me. "You always steal the blanket."

“You have the only pillow in the entire keep.”

She nudges my shoulder sharply. I quickly snatch the pillow from underneath her head and smack her face with it. Catalina lets out a peal of laughter as she ducks away from my next hit. “Give me back my pillow, peasant.”

I scoff and land another blow. Catalina grabs the pillow back with a dramatic huff and tucks herself under the blanket, pretending to be annoyed. Anything to forget about the roles we play. I’m not the only one who can’t go by her own name.

She flings her arms wide, and I resist the urge to shove her off the bed. We settle into companionable silence. The pair of us staring up at the ceiling, lost in thought. I can’t get the image of empty food baskets out of my mind.

“You’re right,” she whispers. “It’s strange she’s not back yet.”

I turn toward Catalina and grab the small bundle of moondust from my pocket. “Try not to think about it.” I hold up the bag. “Are you ready for it?”

“Don’t waste it on me. I can try to sleep without it.”

I give her a look. “It’s not like I can’t make more.”

“How much time will you have to weave when you’re managing what we’re going to eat?” She refuses to meet my eye.

“Catalina . . .”

“I’m sorry.” Her voice cracks. “I know I messed up. I just think the rations are paltry. Lo siento.”

I understand how tempting it is to offer comfort in some way, however small. She can’t *be* the condesa—not in public, anyway—so she makes up for it by helping and speaking for me, giving as much of herself as she can.

I throw my arm around her shoulders and squeeze. I don’t

have the answers, but at least I can help her sleep. “Why don’t you try to rest? Use the moondust.”

She nods.

I blow a pinch of shimmering dust in her face. The effect is almost instant. Catalina’s eyes shut as she snuggles deeper into the pillow.

She looks so young when she sleeps. I inch the blanket higher until it tickles the bottom of her jaw, and then I close my eyes. Thoughts of Ana and our low supplies crash around in my head, and I wish for the millionth time moondust worked on me. We depend on Ana for so much: to lead our resistance, to protect our fortress, to keep our people alive. And she’s counting on us to keep things in order until she gets back.

It feels like my eyes have barely closed before a sharp knock jerks me awake. Next to me, Catalina sits up, rubbing her eyes. The heavy wooden door opens and Sofía pushes in, dressed for battle in a long-sleeve tunic and thick leather belt that stows her sword. On her feet are scuffed leather boots that I know hide slim blades in secret pockets.

“I hope you brought coffee,” I mumble. “Lots of it. Con azúcar.”

“We’re out of sugar,” Sofía says.

Of course we are. “Why are you up at dawn? Is there a training session I don’t know about?”

Sofía motions toward the window, her face grim and serious. “The enemy comes. They’re on the other side of the bridge.”

CAPÍTULO

dos

I jump out of bed, flinging the sheets aside as if they're on fire. "How many are there? Have they crossed the bridge?" Has Ana's magic—

Sofía holds up her hand. "The Llacsans aren't warriors. They're asking permission to cross the bridge because they have a message from Atoc."

"Permission?" I ask.

In the years since the revolt, not one Llacsan has ever asked permission to enter the Illustrian stronghold. They've demanded entry, or Atoc's priest has tried to cross over with his blood magic, hoping to force an unsuspecting Illustrian to show him the way.

"Condesa, what do you want to do?" Sofía asks.

I open my mouth to reply before realizing she isn't talking to me.

Sofía is looking at Catalina.

My jaw tightens. I don't make the decisions. I simply uphold them. Catalina's voice is the loudest I hear in my head, governing what I think and sometimes even what I feel. I understand the

role I play down to my bones, but that doesn't mean it's not hard. I want to be heard too. Sometimes, when my temper gets the best of me, I'm secretly pleased. That's the real me breaking through the mask.

Catalina's hands tug at the corner of the blanket. "Has your mother come back yet?"

Sofía's eyes darken. "Not yet."

I frown. This is bad. Really, really bad.

"No word from Manuel?" Catalina asks in a hopeful tone.

Sofía shakes her head. "My brother hasn't written in months."

"This is ridiculous. We need to send people to look for her— for *them*," I say. "How many went with her?"

"Four. I already gave the order to send out a search team."

Sofía runs a hand through her dark hair in a gesture that mimics her mother.

"All right." Catalina takes in a deep breath. Her fingers drop the edges of the blanket, and she sits up straighter. Her voice doesn't waver as she speaks. "Take their weapons. Let them over the bridge. We'll hear their message, and when Ana returns, we'll decide what to do next."

"Are you sure?" I ask. A million things could go wrong. We've never let a Llacsan across the bridge. What if it's a trap?

"I want to hear that message." Catalina raises her eyebrow at Sofía. "Better to know what Atoc wants, right?"

Sofía nods. "There's more of us than there are of them. I think it's what my mother would do."

Catalina's expression clears at the mention of Ana. "See to it, then."

Sofía leaves at a full tilt and without a backward glance.

The idea of talking to the Llacsans twists my stomach. If the roles were reversed, Atoc would turn us away at the castillo gates. Or worse. Many Illustrian spies have perished in his dungeons. Death by hunger, loneliness, and darkness. No message is worth the risk of bringing them across.

But the condesa ordered it.

“Pick out what you want me to wear,” I say. “Nothing too frilly.”

“I wish I could meet with the messenger.”

I consider pricking the condesa with one of her hairpins. “And unravel years of careful planning? I’m your decoy.”

As soon as the words are out in the open, a flicker of unease sweeps over me. It *is* dangerous. That’s true for her, but also true for me.

Catalina folds her arms across her chest. Deep down she knows every precaution matters. When the Llacsans overran La Ciudad, the usurper ordered a search for the last Illustrian royal that stretched the whole of Inkasisa. But by then Ana—captain of the Queen’s Guard—had locked Catalina inside the fortress, hidden from prying eyes, Llacsan and Illustrian alike. Back then, Ana didn’t trust anyone. We were all too desperate.

Anger courses through my veins. Atoc murdered Catalina’s aunt—the Illustrian queen—along with my parents, by creating a powerful earthquake that destroyed the Illustrian neighborhoods of La Ciudad. Then he’d used the Estrella to summon *ghosts* who’d gone on a rampage. Illustrians died by the thousands, screaming, begging, helpless. The horror of the massacre hasn’t dulled with time.

I want the condesa on the throne. I’ll do *anything* to make it happen—fight, steal, lie, or kill. I’m not above it. Not if it

ensures Catalina's future. Not if it brings me that much closer to the life I want, which involves something far different from pretending to be the condesa and swinging around my blade during training. I want to weave tapestries, learn how to cook, and explore Inkasisa.

Only Atoc stands in the way.

Catalina studies me, her head slightly tilted. "You look like you're about to kill someone."

"What do you mean?"

"You look . . . feral. What is it?"

I shake my head. I need to focus on today. On protecting our future queen.

Her dark eyes flick to mine. We've never talked about the cost of switching places, because I'm afraid of what would come out of my mouth. Does she know the anger I keep trapped inside?

"Wear the white skirt and woven belt." She sighs.

"I promise to tell you everything," I say. "Every word, every detail. But I need you to stay out of the way. You can go over your notes on the constellations. Perfect your craft—"

"Funny thing about my craft," she says sarcastically. "I sort of need it to be nighttime."

I search for something else. "Then think about ways to lure El Lobo to the keep?"

Catalina's eyes light up, and I sneer. Even she falls for that overhyped act. If the masked vigilante is on our side, why haven't we received a visit from him? For all I know, he's merely having a laugh at the king's expense. That's very different from the revolution we're planning. The revolution I've trained for every day of my life.

I change out of my trousers and knee-length tunic and pull on Illustrian-white garments. Catalina clasps a silver beaded necklace around my neck. I wrap the leather laces of the only sandals I own tight around my ankles.

The condesa turns me around so I face a chipped full-length mirror. She narrowly gazes at my reflection, the corners of her mouth turned down. I examine what she sees: unruly wavy hair, face clean of any makeup, shoulders slightly hunched. I try to imagine what I'd look like if I wore the simple clothing Catalina usually wears as Andrea, helpmate to Condesa. The person I might be if I weren't her decoy. Whoever that is.

I quickly wind my hair into a knot on top of my head, pinch my cheeks, and turn to face her. "This is the best it's going to get."

"You're not going to brush out the knots?"

She says it like I'm suggesting I greet Atoc's messenger naked. "It's already up."

I grab my sword propped against the dresser. It's not that I don't care about my looks—it's that I feel ridiculous dressing up. Maybe one day I'll be able to put on a skirt without trying to be somebody else. Maybe one day I'll look like myself.

I move toward the window to check on the progress of the messenger. The faded curtains whip in the breeze, and a smattering of rain sprinkles my face. The usual pull in my belly flares as I lean out of the window. We're three stories high and I feel every one of them.

I shield my eyes from the drizzle. The messenger rides a dapple-gray mare, flanked by twelve guards. I grip the handle of my sword, the weight a comfort in my palm. The group gallops confidently toward our fortress, an arrogant set to their

shoulders, as if they own the land and the people on it.

Catalina stands next to me, hands on her hips. “What do you think he’ll say?”

“Well, he’s not inviting us to tea,” I say dryly.

“At least Atoc didn’t send the priest,” she says, relief palpable in her voice.

The messenger and his companions ride through the iron gate and into our courtyard. They stop next to the fountain with exclamations of delight. The group dismounts their horses and creeps closer to the fountain, which is fed by an aqueduct carrying water from our coveted mountain spring. Ana destroyed the aqueduct’s path to La Ciudad after the revolt. Because of her, all the fountains in the city dried up, contributing to the water shortage crippling the region. Her hope was to hit them where it would hurt most. Then cut them down at their weakest.

Our guards draw their swords and surround the Llacsans. The messenger, dressed in a vibrant striped vest and black trousers, tips his head back and peers up toward our window. I sidestep out of view, pulling the condesa with me.

“He looks like a brute,” Catalina says.

“I’m going down. I’ll send for you when it’s safe.” I dart around her and shut the door behind me. I don’t want to see the forlorn expression on her face.

My feet somehow carry me down the two flights of stairs and toward the great hall. I keep my steps light on the stone floor, ignoring the sting from the leather laces wrapped too tightly around my ankles.

My heart thrums wildly. What does Atoc want? He doesn’t have designs on peace, that’s for certain. I take a deep breath,

trying to slow my racing heart. The last thing I want or need is to reveal any weakness.

I straighten and push the double doors to the courtyard wide open. Droplets of rain patter softly onto my shoulders.

Everyone hushes at my entrance, Illustrian and Llacsan alike. Sofía steps aside so I can face the Llacsans, but signals for our guards to press closer, forcing the enemy into a cramped circle. Their spears lie at their feet in a neat pile. Every one of them wears sandals and loose-fitting tunics under brightly hued vests. None are dressed for battle. Thankfully, the courtyard is closed off to the rest of the Illustrians. Sofía's doing, more than likely. She doesn't have much patience for pesky questions.

Archers stand in the windows of the twin white stone towers guarding the entrance of our keep. I've never climbed to the top, but Catalina says that from them you can see La Ciudad in the distance.

Sofía comes to stand by my side. "Condesa." She nods and I return the gesture, thankful she's present.

The Llacsan standing at the front of the group steps forward.
The messenger.

"Buenos días, señorita," he says. "King Atoc, His Majesty of the upper mountain and lower jungle and everything in between, sends you his greetings—and a message."

He pauses, eyebrows raised expectantly. He looks past me, toward the doors, as if he wants out of the rain and to relay his news within the keep. I scoff. I'll die before I let a Llacsan cross our threshold. Next he'll be wanting to see our mountain spring.

"Well? What is it?" I say, careful to keep my voice emotionless.
"His Royal Highness, the wondrous Lord of all the land and—"

“Spare me,” I snap. “What’s the message?”

One of the Llacsans murmurs disapprovingly. They throw uneasy glances at the Illustrians watching their every move. Some begin to whisper in their old language.

I don’t care un pepino what these people think about me.

The messenger’s brows slam together. “You’re to be his wife.”

I laugh.

Outrage erupts among our guards. They all step closer, snarling and cursing. Sofía glares at the Llacsan messenger and raises her sword until the tip is level with his heart. Another guard notches her arrow and aims it at the tallest Llacsan in the group. I can’t help but glance over my shoulder to our bedroom window, hoping she heard that outrageous proposition. Though I probably shouldn’t have laughed. It’s the kind of behavior she disapproves of.

“You’ve traveled all this way for nothing,” I say. “I’ll never be his wife.”

“That’s not the entire message. You’re to report to the castillo by sundown. Alone. Should you refuse, the Illustrians we’ve rounded up will be executed, one by one.” He leans forward and adds conversationally, “I believe you’re missing a certain general and her fellow soldiers?”

Ana.

The pain in my chest makes it hard to breathe.

My eyes snap to Sofía. She presses a fist against her mouth and lets out a high keen.

That bastard. I clench my fists, blinking back tears. “Where are they?”

“In the castillo dungeons. Or the prison. Or tucked away in

some remote estate.” The messenger shrugs. “I honestly couldn’t say. They are out of your reach, that’s all I know. But their lives will be spared the moment you become His Majesty’s wife.”

The messenger turns to leave, signaling his companions to pick up their weapons. Our guards move out of the way to let them pass, but the messenger pauses. He looks over his shoulder at me and smiles again—catlike—his white teeth gleaming.

The smile snaps me back.

The words rip out of me. “Kill them all.”

The Llacsans barely have time to register the command before the guards start hacking. I turn away, Sofia at my heels, and stride to the double doors, the sounds of clanging steel and horrified shouts bellowing in my wake.

I wish I could’ve given the order twice.