

A stranger I met.

They always came during the bluest of moons on the coldest day of winter. It would start with a scream and end with a choked gasp. In between were the clanking of swords and the sound of flesh meeting bone. We knew that the enemy would stand victorious, while our fathers and brothers would be reduced to rotting flesh on the ground. Always.

Our mothers never read us fairytales or sang songs of heroes and dragons. Their warnings were cold and sharp like the biting breeze from the North Sea:

Stay inside or die.

On this bluest of moons, my sister lay ill with a fever, and I had no choice but to leave the safety of our home to find the rare herbs that might cure her. Wrapped in a cloak as dark as the night, I ventured into the cold, my breath forming ghosts in the air. The village was eerily silent, with the usual tension of an impending attack hanging like a dark cloud.

Guided by the moon's blue glow, I reached the borderland where the herbs grew. I heard nothing but felt the edge of a blade on my neck. I spun around slowly and met deep-set eyes the color of the moon, framed by wild, dark curls like the waves of the North Sea.

He wore the cloth of our enemies, the Kinjani. I recognized the emerald jewels around his neck, reserved only for royalty. This was the enemy's prince. I tightened my grip on the herbs, watching him intently. His gaze was equally fixed on me, assessing and wary. His posture was relaxed yet poised, suggesting confidence and readiness like a lion about to pounce.

Neither of us spoke immediately. The silence between us was thick with mutual distrust. Finally, he put down his blade and nodded at the herbs in my hands. My knees almost buckled with relief. We shared a look of exhaustion as if both of us were trapped in an unending cycle.

A distant horn shattered the stillness. His expression hardened, and he took a step back, eyes flashing with urgency.

"They are coming. You need to go."

Without waiting for a response, he melted into the forest, leaving me alone with the herbs and the memory of our brief, charged encounter. I raced back to the village, the sounds of the raid beginning as I reached the safety of home. The prince was a fleeting presence, a ghost of a connection in a world forever at war.