

A Splintered Land Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: During Chapter Nine

Azai

Azai turned to his parents as soon as Zev was out of the room.

“Surely you’re not going to allow him to go to Oleand with the group from the collective?” he demanded.

To his irritation, neither his father nor mother seemed to share his sense of outrage. His mother continued clearing up the glasses from the cider while his father methodically rolled up the sleeves of his shirt in preparation for returning to his interrupted work.

“Zevadiah is a grown man, Azai,” his father said. “It’s not for us to forbid his movements.”

“But surely you don’t approve!” insisted Azai.

His father sighed, taking a moment before meeting Azai’s angry eyes with a calm gaze. “I won’t pretend to like it. But Zev has a good head on his shoulders. If he sees reasons for joining the expedition that we don’t see, I’m not going to discount them out of hand.”

“I know the reason,” Azai said impatiently, frustrated by his parents’ obtuseness. “She’s got a long, dark braid and a deadly voice.”

“Do you really think Marieke is the reason Zev wants to go to Oleand?” his mother asked, pausing her activities to pin Azai with a shrewd eye. “What makes you think so?”

“You saw what he was like when she was here,” Azai said. “He lost his head over her.”

His father’s lips twitched. “That seems a bit of an exaggeration. Saving her life when he found her dangling off a cliff was the minimum any decent man would do. And your mother is the one who pushed him to take her back to the capital.”

“It was more than that,” Azai insisted. “He even took her to his orchard.”

“Well, that is a little more compelling,” his mother acknowledged. But she still seemed maddeningly unperturbed. “But I think you’re making a fuss over nothing, Azai. As Zev said, he’s unlikely to encounter Marieke in a southern farming collective if she’s settled away in the north in their capital.”

“A lot of unlikely things happen to Zev.” Azai couldn’t quite restrain the mutter.

His father frowned thoughtfully, seating himself once again beside his youngest son. “Is there something you need to get off your chest, Azai? Something that goes beyond all this?”

Azai shook his head, not pretending to misunderstand the words. “I’m not jealous of Zev, Father. Truly. I don’t want to go through life carrying the weight of a phantom crown I’ll never wear.”

“If things had been different, even without wearing the crown, your life would be much more privileged,” his father pressed.

Azai smiled wryly. “Don’t worry, Father. I’m not sickening over some dream of what could have been if fate had been different. I don’t want to live in opulence. I like working the land. I may not have those strange moments Zev does, where he claims it speaks to him, but I’m tied to this land, too. Zev likes the orchard because it lasts longer—I like bringing out new crops with every turn in the seasons. I like feeling how the land responds to me, how it yields its fruit under my hands in a way it doesn’t seem to for our neighbors.”

His father gave an approving nod. “You are indeed tied to the land, Azai. And there’s no doubt you have power of your own over it.”

“No doubt at all,” his mother chimed in. “Don’t think we don’t see all you do, Azai. Don’t think we don’t realize how much of our farm’s current prosperity is attributable to you.”

Azai sent her a small smile, mollified in spite of himself.

“You probably don’t want to hear it,” his father said with a touch of humor, “but you’re a lot like me, Azai. All my life I’ve felt that I was precisely where I was supposed to be. This land—not just Aeltas, but the holding my family has worked for generations—is in my blood. It’s an oasis, away from the corruption of the Council of Singers and their lies.”

Azai nodded his agreement with this sentiment. “I don’t mind being like you, Father,” he said. He flashed his father a grin. “Much as it might shock you to hear it.”

The older man chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder as he stood. “Well, I can’t help but think that Zev’s life will be easier if he can find the same peace you and I have here. But he carries a burden you don’t fully comprehend. I’ve carried it all my life, and truth be told, I don’t fully comprehend it either. If he has a different road before him, it’s not for any of us to deny or curtail. Perhaps he’s destined to write a different page in our family’s history.”

Azai waited until his father was out of the room before adding in a mutter, “Or, perhaps he’s chasing a pretty face that’s turned his head.”

His mother chuckled. “I don’t think Zev’s head will be easily turned.” She made a comical face. “He’s far too serious for that, more’s the pity.”

Now Azai couldn’t help laughing. “He is a bit of a dull dog,” he agreed. “Which is why this latest jaunt seems so alarming. Who is he?”

“He’s the Zev he’s always been,” his mother reassured him. “And being even-tempered isn’t dull, you know, Azai.” She tweaked his cheek in the way she’d done when he was a small child, earning a half-hearted batting at the offending hand. “It wouldn’t do you any harm to cool that hot temper.”

Some part of Azai knew she was right, but he didn’t find that a night’s sleep softened him any to Zev’s determination to go to Oleand. None of his arguments moved his brother in the slightest, and it was in a disgruntled temper that Azai greeted Ramsey the following day, when he arrived to give Zev the promised details of the trip.

“Zev’s washing up,” he told his eager-faced contemporary. Ramsey was his age, but had always been far too cheerful for Azai’s comfort. They were friendly, but not close. “He’ll be out shortly.”

“Excellent.” Ramsey folded his hands behind his back, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “I’m so excited he’s coming. Are you sure you don’t want to join, Azai? It’ll be such an adventure!”

“I’m very sure,” Azai said dryly. “I can’t imagine that any Oleandan farming region has anything to offer that our Aeltan one doesn’t.”

“That’s because you have no imagination,” said Ramsey without malice. “My mother assures me that I have too much, and Oleand is unlikely to be as interesting as I expect.” He grinned. “But if I listened to everyone who said discouraging things like that, I’d never go anywhere outside our own area.”

“Which would be a terrible trial,” Azai said with a false politeness he knew Ramsey would see right through.

As expected, the other young man’s grin widened. “You’re such a stick in the mud, Azai. I always thought Zev was the overly serious one, but you’re becoming even worse in your own way.”

“I resent that,” Azai protested. “I am not and have never been worse than Zev.”

Ramsey raised his eyebrows in good-natured challenge. “Then why is it he can see the possibilities of a trip to a whole new country and you can’t?”

Azai snorted. “Zev isn’t expecting the Oleandan countryside to be anything interesting.” His thoughts darkened as he dwelled on the point that had continued to irk him since the day before. “Unless the local girls are counted in the scenery.”

“Local girls?” Ramsey leaned an elbow on the fence post next to which he was standing. “Now this really is becoming interesting. Tell me more about these local girls.”

“Oh, they’re prettier and more appealing than our Aeltan girls in every way, of course,” Azai said, the sweetness of his tone laced with derision.

“Well, I don’t know what’s bothering you,” Ramsey said, eyeing him, “but I’m certainly not against keeping an eye out for any pretty girls.”

Azai refrained from muttering that Ramsey wouldn’t be the only one. As annoyed as he was with his brother, he didn’t actually want to discuss Zev’s fixation on the Oleandan singer with Ramsey.

“Ramsey, good to see you.”

The words heralded Zev, who came striding out of the farmhouse with his usual reserved smile. Azai narrowed his eyes as he approached, still affronted that Ramsey had said he was becoming worse than his solemn big brother.

Zev glanced over at him and caught his expression. “What’s got you in a foul temper?” he asked mildly.

“Our upcoming adventure, of course,” Ramsey said cheerfully. “Can we go inside to talk details?”

“Of course,” said Zev. He raised an eyebrow at Azai, silent questions in the glance. “Want to join us, Azai?”

“No thanks.” Azai pushed off from the fence against which he’d been leaning. “I have things to do.”

Zev shrugged. “Suit yourself.” With a backwards glance that told Azai to be more guarded, he led their visitor into the house, Ramsey’s eager chatter carrying across the yard until the door closed behind them.

Azai frowned after the pair, genuinely troubled by it all. His mother’s words the day before hadn’t been unmerited—compared to the stoic Zev, Azai did have a tendency to be a little

hotheaded, and he knew it. But on this particular occasion, it was hard to swallow his brother telling him, however silently, to be cautious. This time, it was Zev who was throwing to the winds every rule they'd been taught, leaving their native land and venturing onto foreign soil on a mere excuse. And all, unless Azai was mistaken, in pursuit of a girl who was dangerous by her very existence.

It seemed Zev was no longer the responsible and serious one. And Azai wasn't sure how he felt about that.

It wasn't like him to be given to overblown sentiment and premonitions—again, that was more Zev's province. But Azai had an uneasy feeling that Marieke's entrance into their lives had started a change that might prove impossible to wind back.

A change that, if both of them weren't careful, could pull his and his brother's paths too far apart for them to converge again.