

A Shattered Reign Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: A week or so after the book ends

Marieke

Marieke carried the moment in the orchard in her heart as they navigated the overwhelming fanfare that accompanied their arrival in Taronon. Between councilors and regional representatives and even elven ambassadors, she could barely keep track of who she was supposed to be meeting at any given time.

Zev had it even worse, moved from meeting to meeting as everyone wanted to discuss their most treasured policy areas with him. Only very occasionally was the topic of enough interest that he actually chose to give Marieke all the details later.

One such meeting had been requested by an enterprising shipwright who wished for support to expand his activities. He wanted to build open sea vessels large enough to reopen trade routes with Providore.

“Do you think it’s possible?” Marieke asked, when Zev recounted the request to her. “At the academy we were taught that the kingdoms of Providore cut us off at the time of the coup with the threat of armed conflict if we attempted communication.”

“That’s my understanding as well,” Zev said. “I suppose the monarchs of Providore’s kingdom didn’t want to risk their people getting any ideas. But the shipwright thought that with a reinstated monarchy, we might be received differently.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Marieke said. “It would be fascinating to renew communication and trade with all those kingdoms.”

“It might help us learn more about heartsong, as well,” Zev said. “It could be very beneficial to compare the experiences of the two continents. The shipwright had done his research. Apparently he’s been haunting the academy library learning all he can about Providore. He brought a scholar from the academy to support his cause.”

Zev gave a wry smile. “Although, I think the scholar was actually more interested in the opportunity to pursue his own area of interest, which is heartsong.”

“Yes, I understand that it’s fast becoming a new favorite area of research,” said Marieke. She grinned. “Lucky you snagged a position of authority when you did, or we might end up with the humans inflicting the fate on us that Rissin wanted, and I don’t like the idea of becoming the subject of endless experiments.”

“No, I have better things to do with my time,” Zev agreed. “But I did find the scholar’s comments interesting. He said he thinks heartsong is probably much less developed on Providore because—as far as we know—the royals haven’t been separated from their rule. His theory is that ruling the country is the simplest and most natural outworking of the heart power that connects a

royal bloodline to the land, and it was only the removal of that avenue that caused heartsong to take on an entirely different life. But he's only speculating. Communication with Providore would give us more insight."

In light of that conversation, nothing could have been greater than their amazement the following day when they were approached by a flustered looking council employee. Marieke could see her own annoyance at the interruption reflected in Zev's eyes. It was the one moment in the entire day they'd managed to spend in each other's company, and they'd been very fortunate to manage even that, given the bustle and chaos of preparation for the following day's wedding and coronation ceremonies.

The man bobbed an awkward bow before addressing them. "Your Majesties."

"Not until tomorrow," Marieke pointed out.

"But go on," Zev encouraged him.

"We've just received a contingent of guards from Port Taran," he said. "The head guard asked to see you."

"Certainly," said Zev, following the employee back the way he'd come.

Intrigued, Marieke kept pace with them. They stopped when they reached the entranceway to the former castle turned council building. Half a dozen guards were standing in the space, forming a loose circle around another two people.

"Sir." One of the guards stepped forward and bowed to Zev.

"What's going on?" Zev asked.

The man cleared his throat. "These two individuals were just intercepted arriving by boat in Port Taran."

"Yes?" Zev prompted, when the man paused.

"Yes." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Reports are that they came up the coast from a southward direction, and that they appeared to both be using songcraft to locate the landing point."

"So they're both singers," Zev said. "Is there a reason their presence is being reported directly to me?"

"Yes, Sir." The guard's expression was stoic. "They were in a type of vessel none of us have ever seen before. They claim to have come from Providore."

Marieke let out a small gasp, her eyes flying to Zev's. He looked down at her, startled.

"We sailed from the kingdom of Vadolis specifically," chimed in a cheerful, feminine voice. "Although I'm guessing that doesn't mean much to you."

Marieke leaned around the head guard, curious for a better look at the pair in question. They were young, not much older than her and Zev by the look of them. The girl had fiery red hair, a freckled face, and skin as pale as her companion's was dark. They were a couple, most definitely. There was no mistaking the watchful look in the man's eyes, or the way he shifted his weight when the woman moved, placing himself always in a position to defend her if necessary. Besides which, closer inspection showed wedding bands on their fingers.

That didn't fully explain the curious magic that seemed to connect them, however. Marieke had never felt anything quite like it. Subtle but pervasive. They were linked together magically in a way that she couldn't decipher.

“The name Vadolis doesn’t mean anything to me, I acknowledge.”

Zev’s voice was deep and calm, but Marieke could detect the undercurrent of excitement. This was too fortuitous. Had the task of reopening communication with Providore just come within their reach? What new possibilities and prosperity might be about to come to Aeltas through it?

“Understandable,” the girl went on. “We don’t even know the name of this country.”

“It’s Aeltas,” said Marieke numbly. “You’re in Aeltas.”

“Thank you,” the other young woman replied.

Her companion was frowning between Zev and Marieke. “What is your position in Aeltas? We asked to speak to whoever is in charge.”

Marieke hid a smile. They’d undoubtedly expected someone older and more impressive.

“You are speaking to King Zevadiah and Queen Marieke, the first in the line of the royal house of Heartsong,” said the head guard severely. “And you will address them with respect.”

The title sat strangely in Marieke’s ears. King Zevadiah had a ring of rightness to it, but she wondered if she would ever get used to hearing herself referred to as queen. And she wasn’t the only one taken aback by the guard’s words.

“King and queen?” The redheaded girl’s eyes widened in shock. “I thought...we understood that the kingdoms—that is, countries—of the Reviled Lands no longer had monarchs.”

“The what lands?” The head guard was clearly affronted. “You are intruders in the Sovereign Realms, and in your tenuous position, I would advise you against insulting language.”

“And I would advise you against threatening my wife.” The stranger’s tone was mild, but the warning in his low, rumbling voice was clear.

“It’s fine.” His companion waved him down, her face bright with excitement and no sign of either fear or offense visible. “This is no time to bring out the boar, he’s quite right to correct me.”

Marieke exchanged a look with Zev. Bring out the boar? Who in the world were these two travelers, and what were they talking about?

The woman turned to the two of them. “I meant no offense.”

“We would be unreasonable to take offense,” Marieke assured her. “Your understanding was correct—it technically still is correct until tomorrow. Aeltas has had no monarch on the throne since the time our lands ceased contact with yours. The royal line is only very recently reinstated. And Oleand—the country to the north—remains without a monarch or any intention of having one.”

It was time for the other couple to exchange glances, clearly fascinated by this flow of information. It was once again the woman who spoke.

“I can only imagine that we have a great deal to learn from each other, if we’re all interested.”

She bobbed a curtsy that was graceful enough to make Marieke wonder if she’d brushed shoulders with royalty before.

“King Zevadiah and Queen Marieke, we are glad to meet you and grateful to be received into your country. My name is Ember, and this is my husband, Haiden. We’ve been waiting a long time to come and find you.”

For Ember and Haiden's story, check out *Island of Secrets and Sacrifice*, a standalone YA fantasy romance that takes a sweet and light approach to the maiden-sacrificed-to-a-monster theme.

And if you've yet to discover the fairy tale adventures of the land of Providore, check out *The Singer Tales*, a completed series of six interconnected standalone fairy tale retellings featuring the magic of singers.