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bestselling author of
THE PRIORY OF THE
ORANGE TREE

**NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLER**

A
DAY
OF
FALLEN
NIGHT

A NOVEL

SAMANTHA
SHANNON

BLOOMSBURY

A DAY OF FALLEN NIGHT

For my mother, Amanda

A
DAY
OF
FALLEN
NIGHT

SAMANTHA SHANNON

BLOOMSBURY CIRCUS
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Prologue

Unora

Her name was Dumai, from an ancient word for a dream that ends too soon. She was born in the last glow of the Sunset Years, when every day poured soft as honey in the city of Antuma.

One spring, a young woman stepped through its gate, brought there by a forbidden wish.

She claimed to remember nothing of her past – only that she was called Unora. No one could have guessed, from her dusty clothes and callused hands, that her father had once held the power to set the whole court fluttering in his wake.

No one could have guessed what she was in the capital to do.

In those years, it was hard to farm the dry interior of Seiiki. Since the gods' retiral, long droughts had afflicted the island. Away from its shrivelled rivers, the ground thirsted.

Had the Governor of Afa been like other men, he would have lamented his post in a dust province. Instead, he laboured every day to channel water to its fields. Each time he returned to court, Empress Manai deemed him more inventive and hardworking. She gave him a mansion in the capital, where he placed his daughter, Unora, under the care of a nursemaid.

But Empress Manai had long been unwell, and her ailment did not ease. She renounced the throne before her time and retired to Mount Ipyeda, leaving her only child to be enthroned.

Though Prince Jorodu was still young, he had learned from his mother. In his first act, he summoned the Governor of Afa and made him River Lord of Seiiki, overlooking all others in his favour. For a year, he was the most trusted and beloved of the boy emperor.

So it shocked no one when he was suddenly banished, accused of having roused a god to make his province thrive. One family surrounded the emperor, and they allowed no one else close. Not for long.

Their servants found Unora and flung her into the dark street. At nine, she was left a destitute orphan. Her nursemaid stole her back to Afa, and for ten long years the world forgot them.

Unora worked the fields once more. She learned to bear the sun. Without her father, water no longer flowed. She planted millet and barley and wheat, folding seed into dry earth. She lived with a burning throat and a dull ache in her bones. Each night, she walked to the shrine on the hill, the shrine for the dragon Pajati, and clapped.

One day, Pajati would wake. One day, he would hear their prayers and bring rain to the province.

Over time, she forgot her days in the capital. She forgot what it was like to hear a river, or to bathe in a cool pond – but she never forgot her father. And she never forgot who had destroyed them both.

The Kuposa, she thought. *The Kuposa undid us.*

In her twentieth year, death came to the settlement.

The drought lasted for months that year. The fieldworkers pinned their hopes on their well, but something had tainted the water. As her old nursemaid vomited, Unora stayed at her side, telling her stories – stories of Pajati, the god they all willed to return.

The villagers took the body away. They were next to die. By the sixth day, only Unora was left. She lay in the stubble of the crop, too thirsty to fight, and waited for the end.

And then the sky opened. Rain touched the ground that had long been a deathbed – a patter that became a downpour, turning the dry earth dark and sweet.

Unora blinked away droplets. She sat up and cupped the rain in her hands, and as she drank, she laughed for joy.

The storm left as suddenly as it had come. Unora stumbled towards the Creaking Forest, soaked in mud from head to foot. For days, she sipped from leaves and puddles, finding little she could eat. Though her legs shook and an old bear stalked her, she kept on following the stars.

At last, she came to the right place. Behind the trickling remains of a waterfall, the white dragon Pajati slumbered – Pajati, guardian of Afa, who had once granted wishes to those who paid a price. Unora sought the bell that would wake him, faint with hunger and thirst.

Now she would leave her fate to the gods.

Deep was their slumber in those years. Most had withdrawn into undersea caverns, beyond human reach, but some had gone to sleep on land. Though Seiiki grieved their absence, disturbing them was the highest of crimes. Only the imperial family had that right.

Unora found she had no fear, for she had nothing left to lose.

The bell was taller than she was – the bell that would wake the guardian, not to be touched on pain of death, green staining the bronze. Unora approached it. If she did this, she could be killed. If she failed to do this, there was only sickness and starvation.

I deserve to live.

The thought came like a thunderclap. She had known her worth since the day she was born. Exile had beaten her into the dust, but she would not stay there. Not one day more.

She struck the bell. After centuries of silence, it tolled the night in two.

Pajati answered its call.

As Unora watched, the god emerged from the cave, all the many coils of him. He was white all over, from his pearly teeth to the gleaming pallor of his scales. She let her knees give way and pressed her forehead to the ground.

‘The star has not yet come.’ His voice rushed like wind. ‘Why do you rouse me, child of earth?’

Unora could not sign her words. No one could. When Pajati offered his tail, she grasped it with shivering hands. His scales were like wet ice.

It was not for her to ask gifts of the gods. That was the privilege of empresses, of kings.

‘Great one, I am a woman of your province. I come from a village stricken by drought.’ She clung to her courage. ‘I beg you for rain, king of the waters. Please, send us more.’

‘I cannot grant that wish. It is not time.’

Unora dared not ask him when the time would come. It had already been too long. ‘Then I ask for a way to enter the shining court of Antuma, so I might beg the emperor to save my father from exile,’ she said. ‘Help me move the Son of the Rainbow to mercy.’

Pajati showed his teeth. He was the brilliance of the moon, his scales the milk and tears of night.

‘There is a price.’

It was no small price to pay, where water and salt were so precious and rare. Unora closed her eyes. She thought of her father, the dead in her village, her solitude – and even though her lips were cracked, her temples light from thirst, a drop seeped down her cheek.

Snow Maiden wept for the great Kwiriki, and he understood humans had goodness in them, her nursemaid had told her. Only when she wept for him could he know that she had the sea in her, too.

The warning from her childhood beat within her. It urged her to accept the death that waited in her wake. But the god of her province had already spoken:

‘One turn of the sun it will last, and no more.’

He gave her a tear in return, dropping it into her palm like a coin. She lifted the silver glow to her lips.

It was like biting into the blade of a sickle. That drop swept a decade of thirst from her throat, utterly quenching her. Pajati took her tear with the tip of his tongue, and before he could tell her the whole of the bargain, Unora fell to the ground in a faint.

The next day, a messenger found her still there. A messenger from the shining court.

The women of the palace looked nothing like her. Their hair trailed almost to the floor, the fishtails of their robes some way behind them. Unora shrank from their stares. Her own hair was cropped to sit on her shoulders, her hands roughened by a decade of toil. Whispers chased her to the Moon Pavilion, where the Empress of Seiiki waited in a wide, dark room.

‘I dreamed there was a butterfly asleep beside those falls,’ she said. ‘Where did you come from?’

‘I don’t remember, Your Majesty.’

‘Do you know your name?’

‘Yes.’ Her name was all she had left in the world, and she meant to keep it. ‘I am called Unora.’

‘Look at me.’

Unora obeyed, and saw a pale woman about her own age, with eyes that put her in mind of a crow, curious and shrewd beneath a crown of whelks and cockles. Two crests adorned her outer robe. One was the golden fish of the imperial house, her family by marriage.

The other was the silver bell of Clan Kuposa.

‘You are very thin,’ the Empress of Seiiki observed. ‘You have no memory of your past?’

‘No.’

‘Then you must be a butterfly spirit. A servant of the great Kwiriki. They say his spirits fade if they are not always close to water. Your home must be here, in Antuma Palace.’

‘Your Majesty, my presence would shame you. I have nothing but the clothes I stand in.’

‘Fine garments, I can have made. Food and drink, I can provide. What I cannot give is the wit and talent of a courtier,’ the empress said with a wry smile. ‘Those things must be learned with time, but that I can give, too. In return, perhaps you will bring my family luck.’

Unora bowed to her, relieved. This Kuposa empress had no inkling of who she was. If she was to reach the emperor, she would have to ensure that none of them did.

Unora bided her time. Time had been a rare gift in Afa. The courtiers spent theirs on poetry and hunting, feasts and music and love affairs. These arts were unknown to Unora.

But now she had all the food she could eat, and all the water she could drink. As she healed from the long chew of poverty, she grieved for those left in the dust, while the nobles soaked in private baths, helped themselves to water from deep wells, and rode in pleasure boats along the River Tikara.

She meant to make things better. Once she reached her father, they would find a way.

Everyone at court believed Unora was a spirit. Even when the handmaidens ate together on the porch, when it was impossible not to discuss the beauty of Mount Ipyeda, only one of them – a kind poet, round with child – ever spoke directly to her. The others just watched, waiting for evidence of powers.

The loneliness ached most on summer nights. Sitting in the corridor, the handmaidens combed their hair and spoke in low voices, skin kilned by the heat. Empress Sipwo would often beckon Unora, but she always shied away.

She could not ask a Kuposa for succour. Only Emperor Jorodu could help.

Summerfall came and went. As autumn reddened and gilded the leaves, Unora waited for the emperor, who seldom emerged from his quarters in the Inner Palace. She needed to speak to him, but only once had she caught a glimpse, when he came to visit his consort – a flash of collar against black hair, the dignified set of his shoulders.

Unora kept biding her time.

Empress Sipwo soon grew bored of her. Unora could not sew with cloud or spin a handsome prince from sea foam. Pajati had given her no power she could touch. She was sent to the other side of the Inner Palace, to a cramped room with a leak. Though a servant kept her brazier full, she could not shake the cold.

In Afa, people had danced to keep warm in the winter, even when their bodies protested. It was time to start again. The next day, she rose before dawn and walked to the roofed balcony that enclosed the Inner Palace. The north side faced Mount Ipyeda.

Unora stood before it, and she danced.

The Grand Empress had gone to that mountain. Unora craved the same escape. If she failed to reach the emperor, she would have to find some other way to save her father – but she had no idea where to begin. For the time being, she would escape into this, her winter dance.

Now change had come, it would not stop. One night, a note slid under her door with two white leaves from a season tree, both impossibly perfect.

*Sleepless, I wandered before sunrise
hopeless and forlorn, before I saw
a maiden spun from moonlight, dancing.*

*Entranced, I dream and walk past nightfall
waiting for first light, when I still hope
to glimpse her as she dances, laughing.*

Someone had seen her. It should have been embarrassing, but she was so lonely, and so cold. She told the messenger to return, asking for an inkstone, a brush, a water dropper.

Water could not be squandered on ink in the provinces. It still filled her with guilt to use it, but her father had taught her to write, scratching characters into the earth. Her brush mirrored the ebb and flow of the first poem, and she found that it was effortless.

*Restless, I dance before each sunrise,
cold within my skin. I never saw
my witness in the shadows, writing.*

*Haunted, I shy away from morning
wondering who sees, yet I must still
go dancing in the snowfall, smiling.*

When it was done, she tucked her poem under the door, and the messenger took it away.

At first there was no answer. Unora resolved not to think of it, but the longing, once woken, was hard to press down – longing for someone to see her. A second poem rewarded her patience, the evening before the Day of the Sleepless. Unora held it to her lips.

Snow fell over the city. More poems arrived, often paired with gifts: fine brushes, a gold comb adorned with a seashell, fragrant wood for her brazier. When two of the handmaidens passed her new lodgings, smiling at her apparent misfortune, Unora smiled back without bitterness, for she knew that love papered the floor of her room.

When he came to her, she invited him in. From the way he was dressed, he could have been anyone. She led him across the room, to where moonlight fell across the floor. His slender hands, untouched by toil, made short work of her sash. When he felt her eternal chill, he tried to warm her fingers with his breath. She smiled, and he smiled back.

That was the first of many times. For weeks, he came to her at night, tracing verses on her skin. She showed him how to foretell the weather. He

read her tales and travellers' writings, an oil lamp wavering between them. She taught him how to stitch and weave, sang him work songs from her village. They lived in shadow and by firelight, never seeing each other in full.

He kept his name a secret. She called him her Dancing Prince, and he called her his Snow Maiden. He whispered to her that it must be a dream, for only in dreams could such joy exist.

He was right. In the story, Dancing Prince had dissolved after a year, leaving Snow Maiden alone.

The morning before Winterfall, the servant set a meal before Unora. She lifted the bowl of hot soup to her lips, tensing before it could touch them. The steam carried the scent of the black wing, a leaf that grew wild in her province. She had tasted it before, by choice.

It stopped a child from taking root, or hollowed out the womb.

Unora held her stomach. She had been exhausted and tender of late, and retched over her chamber box. Someone else had guessed the truth before she had known it herself.

There was only one man whose children could pose a threat to the way of things. Now understanding dawned on her, he was away from court. It was too late to ask him to pardon her father. It was too late for anything. All she could do was protect their child – the child she decided, in that bittersweet moment, that she was going to keep.

She poured the soup quietly into the garden and smiled at the servant who came for the bowl.

That night, Unora of Afa left court. She walked towards the sacred mountain, taking nothing but a gold comb and her secret. If anyone had seen her, they would have said she was a water ghost, grieving something she had lost.

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