



EVERGREEN



A Fantasy Romance Novel by
AUTUMN WOODS

EVERGREEN

EVERGREEN SERIES BOOK 1

AUTUMN WOODS

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Unless otherwise indicated, all the characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

*To anyone who ever hid pieces of themselves to feel safe. I'm
sorry, you deserve so much more.*

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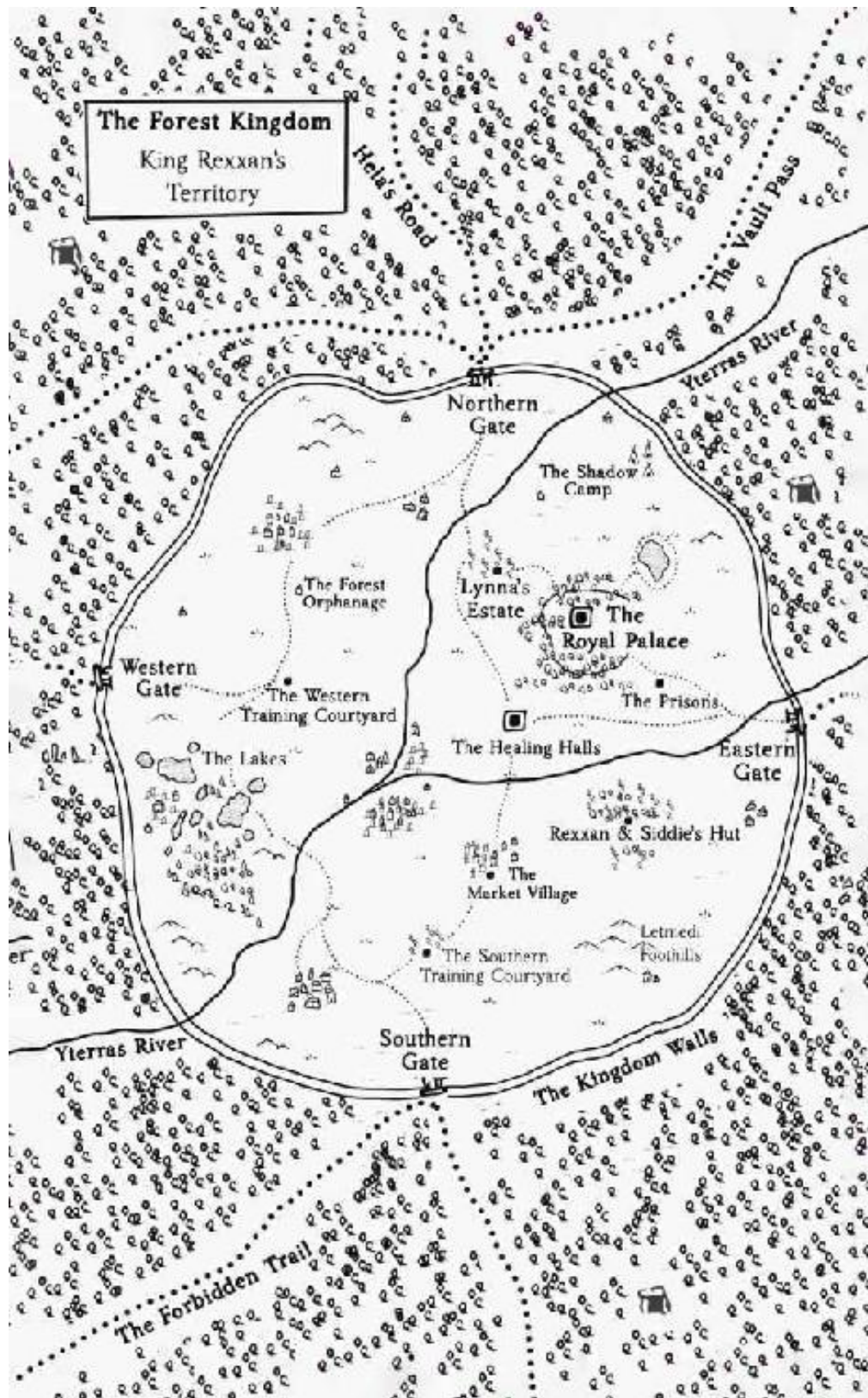
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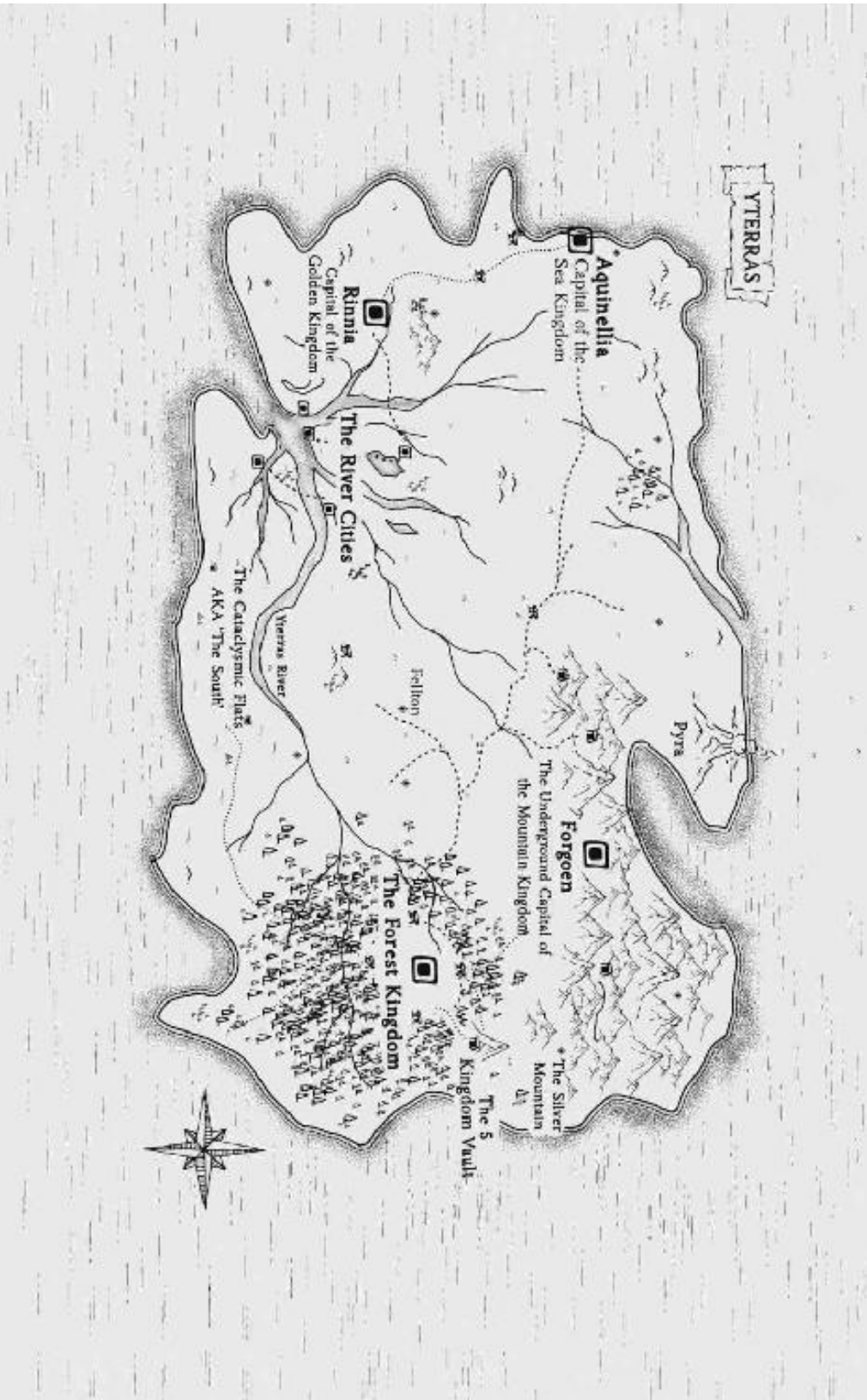
AUTHOR'S NOTE & CONTENT WARNING

I've written Evergreen as a romantasy novel for romance readers, and wrote the first chapter over two years ago now! It's very much a romance book in a fantasy world as opposed to a fantasy book with a romance sub-plot. From the first word, I wanted to focus on keeping the world-building easy to follow and understand whilst still having that fantasy feel.

Please note that the book is written using British English. It was also written with the intention of a NA/Adult audience and contains adult themes and content such as graphic violence, explicit sexual content, natural disasters resulting in civilian deaths, mentions of previous depression/suicidal thoughts, and the death of a character.

It is also worth mentioning that the FMC cannot have children. This does not form a significant part of the plot but if this is a particular trigger for you, please take note of that.





CHAPTER I

THE LOST INVITATION (REXXAN)

I'm on fire.

Searing flames dance over the right side of my body, burning everything in their wake. Their breath singes my eyelashes, evaporates the stubble on my jaw, melts the clothes that cover my chest.

I can't scream, my entire body held hostage by white-hot agony. Everything I am—my laughter, my joy, my character, my heart—is reduced to grey ashes that sit, unrecoverable, in the hollow shell that is my body.

I am going to die.

No, I *have* died. My heart may still be beating, but I am long dead.

“Rexxan?”

I open my eyes to see Lynna's delicate face staring back at me, creased with kind concern in the silver moonlight. Fuck. I place a hand on my heaving chest, trying to steady my thundering heartbeat. The dream fades, but the pain lingers on, corrupting every inch of my already-broken body. Except isn't a nightmare at all, it's a memory.

“Don't,” I grumble, shutting my eyes before she can try and start a conversation about it. “Just don't. Not today.”

“You need to start seeing healers again.”

“Just *don't*.”

I hear her sigh, and the soft sound of her arms dropping down to the duvet at her sides like she does when she's frustrated. "Then I ought to get up."

"No."

"There is much for me to do at the healing halls."

With an immaculately well-manicured hand on my chest, she leans over and presses a kiss to my cheek. Possessing her usual grace, she rises from the dark green silk sheets, golden-white hair spilling down to the small of her back as she walks over to where her gown lies neatly folded on my mahogany dining table across the room.

I watch her dress absentmindedly, twirling a knife around my fingers. Lynna and I have a mutual agreement that stretches back centuries. She has her own reasons for never wanting to marry me and I have mine, but I have come to grow very fond of her and I'd do a lot to protect her. The last man to disrespect her is buried six feet beneath his own house.

She steps into a satin ballgown, wearing plain white, as is customary for all of our healers. It does nothing to dull the glow that shrouds her; a mix of beauty and Evergreen magic. She and my personal healer, Talyn, run the Healers's Halls and have helped give my kingdom its reputation for groundbreaking medicine and research.

The diamond-encrusted clip she puts into her famous hair snaps shut, drawing me back to the here and now. I clear my throat. "I'll get Ascan to bring you a carriage." My Head of Staff will already be up, I don't doubt. He sleeps as infrequently as I do.

"I can walk. I quite like the walk."

"It's dark."

She lets out a quiet sigh and rolls her eyes ever so slightly, knowing very well that she is one of the very few people who can get away with doing that to me. I'd take great joy in plucking the eyes out of the others. "I very much like the walk, REXXAN."

Infuriating woman.

“Then take a guard. It’s dark.”

She smiles at me in the mirror as she pulls a few strands of white hair from the clip, letting them frame her face.

“You’re getting softer, my lord,” she quips, with a small smile. She’s teasing me, in her own sweet way. She’d say worse to me, I know, but it was drilled out of her in the years she spent at the most prestigious finishing school in Yterras. Everything she does is calculated and proper.

My father had these rules. Hers did too. I’d get the life beaten out of me if I did something as heinous as breaking eye contact during a handshake, placing my cup down with the handle at any angle other than three o’clock, or the ultimate sin; continue eating after the king has finished. Lynna and I both spent a part of our childhood being caned by our etiquette trainers for every step out of line.

“Soft,” I repeat, testing the word. It doesn’t sound right leaving my mouth, let alone being used to describe me. I flex my wrists, cracking my bruised knuckles. Every fibre of my body aches, which I imagine is the result of the hours I spent weight training in the courtyard with Frian yesterday. It’s pointless, really, given that my bloodline would allow me to never train again and still maintain my size. But I’d do anything to take my mind off the pain.

She wanders over to one of the glass windows in my room, peering out at the expansive gardens below, cloaked in darkness still. It is four in the morning; we’re both early risers. “I’m busy all of next week.”

“I’ll see you next week then,” I grumble, tossing the knife up and catching it in bed, watching her pick up her bag. “Tell Ellia I’ll see her this week.”

“She’ll be delighted, I am sure,” mutters Lynna, with a knowing look. “She’s already planning your wedding.”

“She’s not the only one.”

Gold-diggers. The bane of my life. At least Lynna isn’t subtle about the fact that she likes me for my money but doesn’t want the marriage. She’s my friend, I’m hers. I buy her

whatever she wants, she helps me cope with my pain. It's a good system we have going. And the best thing about her? It's never been love. It'll never be love. I vowed over the tombstones of my family that I'll never utter those words to someone again, and I don't intend to.

She gives me a warm smile, her eyes glittering with soft humour. "Have a good two weeks, Your Majesty."

I raise a finger in goodbye, lost in thought. I watch her delicate frame vanish through the tall arched doorway. Dark ivy crawls up the pale stone, slithering over shelves of ancient books and expensive wine. Sconces illuminate the walls, softly lit by my own Evergreen magic. Birds flit in and out of the windows, vanishing behind the leafy green canopy that carpets the vaulted ceiling of my bedroom. If I am forced to live in the palace and not the forest, I am making it a blend of the two.

Whistling splinters the quiet peace, echoing through the door that Lynna left open, and a blonde head pokes its way around the door. I groan into my hands. Just a moment of peace. Just one. It's all I ever long for.

"You didn't get much sleep last night," says Ellatar, bursting into my room with the grace of a bull in a china shop. "I heard you two from the staff halls."

I toss the knife at my bodyguard's head, watching it land in the warped wood of the door behind him, half an inch from the sun-kissed blonde waves of his hair. He lets out a satisfyingly high-pitched shriek, throwing it back and swearing in frustration when I catch it. "I'm sure throwing a knife at the King is considered treason, Ellatar."

He holds out two tanned arms, his wrists pressed together. "So cuff me, my lord."

"Gods above, rid me of my stupid staff," I mutter, under my breath.

"Don't pretend you aren't into all of that. Are you certain that you don't need another hour of sleep?"

A rough sigh escapes my lips. "The last time I slept well, Ellatar, sabre-toothed tigers and sorceresses still roamed the

woods.” I sit up in bed, running a hand through my hair and putting it into a trademark messy bun. In my eight hundred years of life, I’ve never been one for sleep. Not even as a baby, my mother used to tell me.

Under Ellatar’s impatient gaze, I quickly dress into some leather hunting gear and swipe a sword from my weapon room, ready to train for a few hours. Today, like every day, I will begin my morning in the palace training courtyard with Ellatar, Cetresar, and Frian; the three Royal Guards who command my army with me. They’ve been with me for centuries.

Ascan, my personal assistant and the Head of the Palace Staff stops me in the hallway to run me through my schedule for the morning. It’s dryer than the Desert Kingdom in August and I brace myself for yet another mind-numbing day. This is how they all go. It would be soul destroying, if I still had one left to destroy.

I have a busy month ahead. The annual gathering of the Five Kingdoms’ Kings and Queens is happening next week, and as the most powerful of the rulers, I am always the host. I mentally run over the plans for this as I fight guard after guard in the training ground. When they all look positively dejected, I lie down on a wooden bench, pushing iron weights above my chest until I can hardly breathe.

It’s a routine. A monotonous sequence I repeat day after day. I switch to lunges before lifting bags of sand until sweat drips down my face. I push myself harder, trying to drown out the pain in my chest with pain in my muscles.

It didn’t work yesterday. It doesn’t work today. It won’t work tomorrow. But like the despondent fool I am, I’ll wake up and try.

A strong pain relief potion and an ice bath do little to help either, but I keep myself busy and sit down in my study. I plan for each of the guests’ arrivals, writing all of them a rare personal letter to follow up on their invitations from the month prior.

Our world, Yterras, is split into five distinct kingdoms, the landscape battered and reforged by centuries of war and disagreements. We now find ourselves settled into some sort of equilibrium. My kingdom is the largest, situated in the east of Yterras.

To my north is the Mountain Kingdom, and Forgoen, its capital. To my west lies the River Kingdom, and to the west of that is the Golden Kingdom, or the Kingdom of Fields and Plains. Above that lies Aquinellia, the Capital of the Kingdom of the Sea.

Below the Forest Kingdom, which I have ruled for seven centuries, lies what is now called the Cataclysmic Flats, a huge expanse of barren wasteland. The enemy dwells there, breeding spies, wolves, and mutated trolls that they release into my forest to kill my people. The prisoners they take from our kingdoms are brainwashed and reforged into the most heinous of people. But the South has been quiet for a while now. Too quiet.

First, I write to Ocealia, Queen of the Seas, who like Lynna and Frian, is one of few people left on this earth as old as me. Her people live along the coastline and in the sea, her capital city nestled in the shallows of the Ocean. The water steers around it thanks to some clever magic from her grandfather, the God of the Sea.

Ocealia has long been my closest ally, and like mine, most of her population are Evergreen; immortal and possessing a form of energy that mortals consider magic. I too am Evergreen, for the most part.

I write to Hela and Holn, the Queen and King of the Mountains. I have a long-standing alliance with the Mountain Folk, and I'm not careless enough to lay waste to it, but it is true to say that they antagonize me as much as I do them. They and their people are all mortal humans, most of them dying before they reach their eightieth birthday.

I address a third envelope to Kelen and Lana, the young King and Queen of the Rivers. I haven't known them long, but I do know that I neither like nor trust them. They are mortal

too, aged in their twenties, and they believe themselves to be far wiser than they are, happy to ignore my counsel even though I have seen their entire lifetime forty times over. They're always scheming to inveigle money out of someone. Their people live on islands amongst the winding estuaries of the Yterras River, making most of their money from their skill in building.

The fourth and final letter I send to King Espan, the King of Fields and Plains. As the leader of the Golden Kingdom, he has the second-biggest realm to manage. For an Evergreen so young—not yet two hundred years old—he has a very level head on his shoulders, and I hope for Yterras' sake that he has a long reign. His father had been an imbecile.

Espan's people are largely Evergreen, with a few mortals residing amongst them. His territory consists of an impressive capital city named Rinnia, and a number of towns and villages scattered across fertile farmlands irrigated by the rivers to the east. His people grow a lot of crops and are responsible for feeding many of the other kingdoms.

I sign the final letter, my hand cramping.

I ANTICIPATE YOUR ARRIVAL IN TWO WEEKS,

REXXAN OBSIDIAN TSELLYX RELLYN HALLENIAN,

*KING OF THE DARK FOREST AND THE GREEN WOODLANDS,
GUARDIAN OF THE FIRE STONE, COMMANDER OF THE FIVE-
KINGDOM ALLIANCE.*



I WORK UNTIL MIDNIGHT, only considering stopping once stress is winding her fingers through my neck, tying knots in the muscles of my shoulders. I curse my father for the fiftieth time that day for having me, and for dying too.

Being King has been the bane of my life.

I sit and listen to the scouting review for the week, offering input here and there, but mostly my mind is empty. Mostly I just think about the pain. You'd think after seven hundred years I'd have learned to live with it. *Our pain never shrinks, we just grow around it*, my mother always said. And she's right, it hasn't shrunk, but I haven't fucking grown around it either.

"There's a rising threat in the far south," says Cetesar, delivering me my five hundredth headache of the day as his finger taps the Cataclysmic Flats on an old map that sprawls across the desk in my study. Bad things dwell in the south, but their evil litters itself across the earth like a festering plague that we can't rid ourselves of. Spies cross my borders every week.

When I finally finish my workday at one in the morning, Ascan appears in the hallway with a letter. "My lord—"

"What is it?" I snap, my patience fraying. I see my four-hour sleep shrinking before my very eyes.

"It can wait unt—"

"You've already bothered me, Ascan, so just read it out."

He blinks a little but squares his shoulders. It's been three hundred years since he joined the palace staff. He's used to my changeable moods and unlikeable nature.

"A messenger just delivered this. It's the Shadow Commander—they'd like to know whether their invite to the gathering has been lost in the post."

"Is that what they said?" Seems awfully polite for a Shadow Hunter, notoriously the rudest people on earth. Ascan blushes, handing me the small, dirty letter.

*Is my invite stuck up your arse
like the rest of your kingdoms'
heads?*

Yours,
-

R

*Commander of the Shadow
Hunters.*

I read it aloud, the temperature of my blood rising just a little.

The Shadow Hunters; otherwise known as the single greatest migraine on this earth. A mixture of Evergreen immortals and human mortals, they're a cocktail of outcasts and assassins that have formed some sort of alliance. They live and hunt where they choose; sometimes in the south of my Dark Forest, sometimes in the shadows of the Hela's mountains.

Credit where credit is due, they do far more than their fair share of killing evil creatures, but they more than make up for it by causing never-ending drama amongst the Five Kingdoms.

I can't remember who their current commander is. Between them usually being mortal, their dangerous lifestyle, and the fact that half of them kill each other, they change far too quickly for me to keep up with.

I dismiss Ascan, tossing the letter onto the dining table in my quarters and hurling a knife at a beam in the wall. I'm losing the will to live here.

I'm bored, and I don't mean in the short-term sense.

My entire life, my whole existence, is boring me. It doesn't matter if I'm out hunting, or in a meeting, or pulling someone's fingernails out in my dungeon, or working in my library; I'm bored whatever I'm doing. I feel like my world has been in black and white for so long now, I've forgotten what it is to see colour.

I pour a glass of rich red wine, my thumb running over my lower lip as I wonder who 'R' thinks he is, and how I am going to convince him not to come and cause trouble at the gathering.

CHAPTER 2

THE HUNTRESS (RENNA)

A large hand encircles my neck, pinning me to the creaky wooden wall of the dilapidated inn as hungry lips cover mine.

I let out a soft moan, running my hands up and down his arms, walking him back to the bed in the corner of the guest room I'd bought for the night. I regret parting with a silver coin for it, but I've got my eyes on the gold ring that's fighting for its fucking life on his swollen finger.

It'll auction nicely.

He flips us round, roughly tossing me onto the bed.

"Onto your hands and knees, whore," he grumbles, pulling my hair.

Fucking bastard. *Hold your tongue, Renna, hold your tongue.*

"Trust me," I whisper, kissing his neck as his hands run over my chest. "Let me be on top. You'll never forget it."

He grunts in agreement, rolling over like some kind of obese beagle. Though not a pretty sight, it grants me the time and space to straddle him, pinning his hands down beneath my knees. I slip the tiny glass vial from the black leather strap around my thigh, pulling the cork out with my teeth whilst ignoring his confused expression.

But like they all do, he realises too little and too late. In the blink of an eye, I slide a needle taped to the inside of my wrist

into the vial and pierce his neck, covering his mouth with both of my hands as he begins to choke on the poison.

I wait until his body is devoid of life beneath mine before removing my hands and wiping them on my thighs. A knock on the warped wooden door has it rattling on its flimsy hinges, disturbing me as I clean the tiny bead of blood off his wrinkled, sun-damaged neck.

“Are we good?” Comes a deep voice with an Aquinellian accent, from outside.

“We are good,” I confirm, standing up and shrugging my black top back on. “Come in.”

A huge, ever-protective hand settles on my shoulder, a striking pair of worried, yellow-orange eyes meeting mine. “Did he get far?”

“No, O. He didn’t touch me much.” I smile to reassure him, but I doubt it has the desired effect. He worries too much. He’ll fret himself into an early grave one day, I am sure.

“You know I hate this way of doing this,” he mutters, his square jawline tense. Behind him, Stell quickly cleans up any evidence of the poisoning, whistling to himself as he does it. Stellan has this omnipresent good mood. He’s seen so much, been through so much, and instead of beating him down, it’s made him grateful for each day he has.

I wish I was like that; I’ve tried and it’s not for me. I turn back to Onyx. “Well, it’s the least suspicious way. We do the job, we take the money, and we go.” That’s how it is, that’s how it’s always been.

“You know, if you ever get a husband he’ll have a heart attack if you keep doing this,” says Stellan, tossing the poisoned needle out the window.

“She’s not getting a fucking husband,” argues Onyx, at the exact same time that I do. Stell and Onyx laugh, but I don’t. I’ll never marry. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. It’s an odd thing, to grieve the loss of relationships that never existed. I’ll never be able to let someone close enough that they can see who I really am. I’ll never marry, never have a best friend that

isn't my brother. Even Annaliya thinks we're friends, but all that she knows about me is false.

“Fucking hell. Moment of silence for this ring. I didn't realise fingers could actually engulf a ring,” says Stellan, giving up on trying to wrangle it off the finger.

I laugh out loud because he's stolen the words straight out of my mouth, but mostly because I was desperate for a change of topic. I'd cut off his middle finger, but it'd be hard to play this off as an accident if I did that. Stell turns back around and throws me an exaggerated thumbs up, along with his famous boyish grin, his mood the complete opposite of Onyx's, as usual. The piercing in his tongue glints in the candlelight as he speaks.

“Good job, trouble. Ready to turn on the waterworks?”

I nod, taking a deep breath and, on command, bursting into tears. O and Stell make themselves scarce and I run down the stairs, sobbing into my hands and spinning the innkeeper an elaborate web of lies about how the man had a heart attack while we were making love.

Finally, Onyx appears, taking my hand and apologising to the innkeeper on my behalf. The barman eyes him warily. “You're her husband?”

“Her brother,” he replies, truthfully. “Adopted brother,” he quickly clarifies, when the innkeeper spots the obvious; his eyes are bright, glowing yellow—a clear sign he is an Evergreen, whilst mine are a dull brown, just a mere mortal. The man eyes Onyx sceptically but takes him for his word.

We collect payment for the assassination at another inn across the town so as not to leave an incriminating trail behind us. Another job done.

As we gallop out of the gates of the small township on the easternmost border of the River King's territory and begin our journey back to our camp, I wonder if there is something wrong with me. I never manage to feel any guilt. I suppose for what that man had done to his wife and children, I would've

killed him for free, but sometimes I imagine what life would be like if I didn't have to do this to earn money.

I wonder when the switch flipped in my life, when the animal-loving, happy girl became the thoughtless killer. I suspect it wasn't a switch flipping at all, more of a gradual rotting of my insides that left me filled with nought but ugly malice. But wondering is a waste of my time, and I drill that into my hunters as hard as I do into myself.

"The gods must truly hate me, to condemn me to a life with you two," mutters Onyx, as Stell and I reach our third rendition of the same song, dancing around our newly-built campfire in the middle of the mountains with a bottle of wine each. The song moves up an octave, and even I have to say the standard of our performance is nauseating. I sound like a cat with a throat infection and Stellan sounds worse.

We are halfway through the two-day journey back to Forests' Edge where we'll join our people for a day before gate-crashing the King's Gathering. I shriek with laughter as Stell swings me around, my toes just skimming the flames. Stellan and I are two alike; *clinically insane*. Without Onyx, I think we'd be long dead.

Flames cast dancing shadows over my brother's serious features. He says nothing, just staring into the fire with a haunted look in his eye. He is just a shell. Just the remaining fragments of the person he was before the world let him down. "Go to bed, you children. I'll keep watch tonight."

I smile, waving my brother goodbye for the night and vanishing into the tiny tent hidden between two trees with Stellan.



WE ARRIVE BACK to my people late the next day and I'm rushed off my feet immediately. I run the hunters through archery drills, hand out everyone's assignments for the week,

and get started on the contracts for the upcoming months. It's a good kind of busy, though.

We are a group of about two hundred and fifty, usually living in the mountains or the forest for a couple of years before moving on. Amongst us are people from all the different kingdoms, some mortals, some immortals. We all have our reasons for being here, but your past is forgotten the moment you arrive.

To become a Shadow Hunter is to be given a second chance at life.

It was a warm summer like this one, many years ago now, that I came here with nothing but my brother, a body full of scars and a secret I can never reveal. And it's almost fifteen months to the day since I became Commander by killing the previous one in a duel, and I like to imagine I'm a good leader. My temper may be unpredictable, but I've led this deadly group of assassins through many seasons and battles without complaint.

I've befriended Holn and Hela, the King and Queen of Mountains, and Espan, the Golden King. They regularly require our help clearing their borders of evil creatures, and we've amassed a fair amount of wealth because of it, contrary to most peoples' view of us as poverty-stricken criminals. As it transpires, we're rich criminals.

Anna and Onyx knock on the door of my tiny wooden treehouse that evening, distracting me from the letters I'd received while away. Alongside killing men triple my size, my job comes with a surprising amount of paperwork. Every season, we sign a contract, usually several months long, with one of the kingdoms.

I've never signed one with the River Folk, because approximately ninety percent of them annoy me, nor have I ever signed one with the Forest Kingdom because their army is almost exactly thirty-six times the size of mine. Translation—they don't need the help.

I've also been told by King Espan that I should avoid the Forest King because, and I quote, 'he's easily antagonised and

you, Renna, are an antagonist'. Espan rules the Kingdom of Fields, Deserts and Plains, but that's an absolute mouthful to say so we just shorten it to the Golden Kingdom.

"Come in," I mutter, after they'd already let themselves in and flopped onto my bed anyway. "Fucking take your shoes off if you're on my bed!" I yank Annaliya off the mattress and she hits the rickety floor with an alarming thud. She's indestructible though, like I am.

"I missed you!" She sings, throwing her arms around me. I laugh, subjecting myself to her sloppy kisses all over my face as we fall over from our sitting position onto the muddy wooden floor, howling with laughter when an ungodly snort comes out of Anna's nose. Onyx just shakes his head, exasperated.

Anna, Stellan and Onyx are all of Evergreen blood. Anna came here from the City of the Sea when she was one hundred years old, only *just* an adult, and Stellan's past is a complicated story. He lost his wife and son centuries ago, and he has no plan of ever finding love again. He was, is, and always will be besotted with her.

Evergreen people are considered adults at about ninety years old; they have a long and slow childhood and live forever. You can tell them apart quite easily, they stand taller than the rest of us, and their eyes are unnaturally bright.

I hear and feel heavy footsteps, and Stellan ventures in, bending his six-foot-five frame to fit in my half-broken doorway, his pale green eyes glowing. Tattoos decorate his brown skin, delicate swirls like smoke rising from his wrists, up his arms and over his shoulders and chest. His shoulder-length brown-black hair is usually up in a messy bun, the sides cut short to display the tattoos beneath his hair. Tattoos only last a few months on Evergreens, but the bastard spends half his money getting them re-done twice a year.

"Please do come in, Stellan. I cannot even remember the last time I had a moment of privacy." I'm ranting as I sit up. A dry, dusty leaf is stuck in my hair, a reminder I need to clean

the floor of my treehouse. Gods above, I need to get it together.

“You’re not in a good mood,” observes Onyx, usefully. He picks up a letter and squints at it.

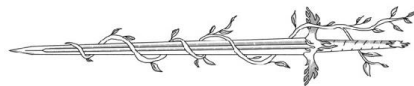
“It’s upside down, Onyx. Do you know how much easier my life would be if one of you would learn to read?” I say, glaring at my three deputies who all look sheepish, shooting glances at each other that say *help me*.

“I’m trying!” Defends Stellan, breaking the silence and throwing his apple core at my head. I launch it right back at him with lethal force, but he deflects it with a bruised fist, hitting Annaliya square in the forehead with it. She shrieks like a banshee, tackling him to the floor. I dive onto them both, gritting my teeth as I pin Stellan down so Anna can tickle him.

“Oh my gods,” mutters Onyx. “This has to be some kind of nightmare. What has my life become? Ren, *you* were the one that called us in here.”

“Shit, did I? I did.” I have too much on. I get up, the four of us sitting cross-legged on my single bed as Stellan taps a small wooden keg. Say what you want about the Forest Kingdom and their cantankerous king, but their ale and wine are second to none.

We start going through some paperwork, sorting letters and reading them aloud. Not many of my Shadow Hunters can read or write; they have no need to. I’m trying to teach some but none of them can sit still on a chair for longer than sixty seconds. As the orange sun sinks lower, caressing us with the last of her warmth, we finish planning the season ahead and Onyx leaves to go hunting.



“ARE you excited to meet the Forest King?” Anna asks me, her voice a hushed whisper early the next morning as we lie undressed on either side of a sleeping Stellan. Cold air ruffles

the leaves around us and waltzes through the open doorway. It kisses my cheeks and shoulders, but it's warm under the blankets.

I live for mornings like this.

My army has two little villages of houses. One is a small collection of tents and huts in the mountains, the other a collection of treehouses in a small copse near the Green Woodland. My treehouse is tiny, like the rest of the hunters' ones. I'd like to say that's because I'm a humble leader who puts themselves on the same level as their people, but truly they're just a pain in the arse to build.

Still, this little box high in the canopy of an ancient oak is the closest thing I have to a home. And I suspect it's the closest thing I'll *ever* have to a home, even if that sounds pessimistic. All of us here have no home—not in a conventional way, anyway. We've found a sense of home in each other. That's enough for me, usually, but occasionally there's an ache in my chest, a yearning to know what it feels like to belong somewhere.

Anna is looking at me expectantly and I remember her question. "No. Why would I be?"

"Because he is huge, Renna, and *beautiful!*" She squeaks, enunciating each syllable slowly as if I were a small child. Anna has been obsessed with the Forest King since I met her. There's a terrible drawing of him in her notebook. It's tragic, I know, but she's seen me cry over eating a biscuit and forgetting I ate it, so I hold my tongue.

"I heard he's an arsehole."

"Well, I heard he's absolutely beautiful!" She repeats, her life-long obsession with King Whateverhisnameis still going as strong as ever.

"Well, I heard he's an arsehole."

"You two are so young," mumbles Stellan, waking up and folding a huge arm beneath his head. Pale green eyes peek out from black lashes. "I've met him before—well, I've seen him."

“Is he nice?”

“Nice? Ha! Not so much.” He plants a kiss on Anna’s knuckles, and then my own. “He’s...different. He can chase the sun from the sky and replace it with the most violent of storms. He’s the single greatest warrior on the earth, don’t fight him. And don’t fucking hunt in his forest without his permission. He’s killed people for less. In fact, don’t spend too much time in close quarters with him at all. He’s easily antagonised and—“

“And I’m an antagonist, I know,” I interject, sounding like a petulant child. Maybe I am one, but I’m sick and tired of people singing his praises like he created the sky and everything beneath it. I don’t intend to spend any time close to him. If there’s anyone in Yterras who can’t find out who I am, it’s a king. “I have to get up, I have so much to do.”



IT’S ONLY ONCE we’ve made it through the treeline and are approaching the gates of the Forest Kingdom that we stop to rest, eating whatever we can hunt and cracking open the bottle of wine that Stellan has managed to carry all this way. Those two fall asleep in the trees, but I lie awake, staring at the stars between the gaps in the leaves of the tree canopy.

This forest is beautiful.

Fuck beautiful, it’s utterly *mind-blowing*. It’s just ethereal, like I’ve left Yterras and come to a different world entirely.

It is separated into two distinct sections, the Green Woodland to the north and the Dark Forest to the south, each one encompassing the Forest Kingdom, which is surrounded by huge walls, several metres thick and covered in ivy and vines. Four golden gates shaped like trees form the breaks in the walls, one to each of the north, south, east and west.

The Dark Forest is eerily quiet, the air thick with whatever spells the King casts over it. Everywhere you go, you’re on

edge, awash with the feeling that every step could be your last. But as I have always been, I'm propelled onwards by the quiet confidence that whatever danger haunts me will never be as dangerous as I am. The soft, damp floor is crawling with spies and wolves, and it is forbidden to come here unless you are a guard, so we stay hidden as we cross through.

The Green Woodland, however, is teeming with life; a rich tapestry of birds, beasts and plants in a thousand shades of green, yellow and orange. Stags roam the trees in quiet peace, foxes watching us with wary eyes. I've never seen anything like it, never seen colours so vibrant, and I know I need to explore a little more before we venture through the gates.

I wander through unknown territory under the blanket of nightfall, weaving in and out of trees to create a map of this forest in my mind. My already elevated spirits lift a little higher as I come across a small brook, water running down over rocks in the moonlight. Fireflies dance at the water's edge, painting a purple picture on the glossy surface, and I can't remember a time in recent memory when the world felt as serene as it does at this moment.

But the howl of a wolf piercing the reposeful silence reminds me exactly where I am, and that though beautiful, the Woodland King's forest is no place to be alone at night for too long. I begin the trek through the unearthly woods back to Stellan and Onyx. But I halt in my tracks when an odd feeling triggers my senses, sounding an alarm.

I'm being watched.

Adrenaline spikes in my blood as I veer into the thickets of the oak trees to my left. Loud footsteps follow me, making no attempt to be silent, and I think this might be worse than hearing someone trying to follow me subtly. Whoever this is, they're lethal enough that they don't need stealth.

The beat of my footsteps picks up but so does theirs, our little game of chase intensifying.

"Trespassing is forbidden." One of the deepest voices I've ever heard pierces the humid air, raising goosebumps on my skin. "Come out."

Shit. There's no way I'm walking into the moonlit glade to my right. I'll get murdered. I can't die now. Not while I have biscuits in my bag that I haven't even opened. It's just not right. I deviate further right, but the voice threatens me again. I dart past another tree, thinking I've got away with it until a sudden fire spears into my leg, burning pain radiating outwards.

Through blurring vision, I look down to see an arrow sticking out of my thigh.

"You bastard!" I yell, through gritted teeth. "I was going to come out!" *I wasn't going to come out.* I stomp through the trees, into a clearing, and I'm faced with...a human? A god? A troll? Trolls can't speak, can they? The calamitous figure opposite me is illuminated in a shard of moonlight, cloaked in black.

For the first time in a while, I'm intimidated.

His hood falls low enough that the top of his face is enveloped in darkness, but I see two glowing orange eyes burning into me, moonlight spilling over a tense jaw and sculpted lips. His incandescent gaze steals the oxygen from the air around me and it takes me a moment to form a solid thought. I hate him already.

One huge hand cracks the knuckles on the other, and I can't fight the haunting feeling that the huntress has just become the hunted.

CHAPTER 3

THE HUNTER (REXXAN)

The evening air is cool on my face as I share a bottle of wine with Ocealia on the day she arrives in my kingdom.

Ocealia has time for everyone. She has always been like this. After the exhausting six-week journey to get here, she came straight to my balcony to see me. We both became rulers at young ages after the Great Fires that saw the death of many thousands, almost seven hundred years ago. I grit my teeth as pain shoots down my chest at the thought.

She's beautiful tonight. She wears a brilliant blue dress that is at striking variance with her very dark skin. Matching blue shadow decorates her eyelids, her fingers dripping in sapphires and gold. Long braids reach her waist, each tiny one twisted with blue thread. She's the spitting image of her mother, but I don't tell her that.

"Alia's tree looks beautiful this time of year," she whispers, standing and peering over the edge of my balcony, cobalt eyes roaming the endless expanse of my gardens.

Centuries-old guilt threads its way through my conscience. "Hm."

"Rexxan." She says my name like I exhaust her, like she always has since we were young. Perhaps I do exhaust her, but I don't have it in me to care.

"What?"

"It is not your fault she died. How many times do we need to have this conversation?"

“She was out that day because of me.”

“She was out because she wanted to work.”

“Because I was so unpleasant for her to be around.” I was a terrible husband, but in my defence, my father shouldn’t have married me off as a teenager.

“Rexxan,” she repeats, exasperated. Her hand rests on my forearm, gently undoing the gold cufflinks on my linen shirt and sliding the sleeve over my skin. White scars from ancient battlefields slice through the tanned skin of my arms, but they’re not what she’s looking for. Her glowing blue eyes land on the scars that cover the top half of my forearms. “Do they hurt today?”

They’re excruciating. Every single day. “A little. Yours?”

She smiles, but it’s resigned, and I know we’re both just lying to each other; worn down and wearied by a lifetime of lying to please others. “Rarely. Mine are ever so small compared to yours. I got off lightly.”

“No one alive that day got off lightly,” I grumble, removing her hand from my sleeve and rolling it back down. I still remember the screams the day that fire rained down from the sky. I witnessed my parents die, then my brother. I watched it happen right in front of me. I had a new wife too, and a newborn son. I couldn’t save her from the fire either, and as quickly as I had been married, I was widowed.

My marriage was arranged by my father to an Evergreen noblewoman I’d never met. I never loved her, but she was good to me. Alia gave me a son and volunteered as a healer in her spare time. Her death hit me hard, and I have always blamed myself. If my son had not survived, I’d have killed myself that day.

I shudder, trying to banish the visions of fire raining down over the entire earth, all caused by the actions of one delusional individual who saw fit to cause the eruption of Pyra, the giant volcano to our north. Ocealia lost her brother and mother, and so became Queen when she least expected it. We are united in grief, friends throughout the ages.

She straightens up, stepping away from the balcony. “I must rest. I’ve had a long month of travelling.”

“Of course,” I walk across the balcony to open the door for her. Retrya, a tall woman with a shaved head, brown skin, and biceps that rival Ellatar’s, gives me a warm smile and kisses my cheek.

“Rexxan, thank you so much for having us here.”

I kiss her back. “You’re both welcome here.”

They like it here, I know. My people are more relaxed, more accepting, perhaps, than those in her own kingdom. She may be the queen, but Ocealia has never found the courage to marry her long-time partner, worried about what her more traditional people will make of it. It is not my place to intervene, and they’ve always been happy despite not being married, but I know they feel they can breathe a little easier in my own kingdom.

Ocealia tiptoes up to press her lips to my cheek and smiles as she walks past me. “I wish you’d let the world see you as you really are, Rexxan. Goodnight.”

I don’t understand what the fuck that is supposed to mean. The women in my life love to make cryptic comments at me at the moment, and it’s wearing my patience down.

I only sleep a couple of days a week, thanks to my Evergreen bloodline and the fact that my grandfather, Xal, was the God of the Skies, so as the evening sky gives way to the pitch-black night, I head into my weapons room. I grab my lightest sword, a bow and some arrows, and shrug on a black cloak over my black leather hunting gear. I step into heavy dark boots, stalking out of my halls and down to the palace stables.

Beneath the cold, callous ruler, I am a hunter at heart. It’s what I had chosen as a career until I unexpectedly became king. My father had me and my brother trained and educated in everything under the sun. By the time I was ninety-five, I could heal to the highest standard, survive months in the freezing wilderness, speak every language, command armies,

play instruments, and even build boats. But it is in hunting that my heart has always been. I'd spend my life out in that forest if I could.

I whittle the night away out in the Dark Forest, hunting for spies and other foul creatures. It is not a safe place to be, but my magic weaves its way around the trees, and the animals don't run from me. This forest is an extension of my being, a part of myself in the same way that I am a part of it. I stride past trees that I knew as saplings, rivers that I knew as streams, centuries trodden paths that I myself created as a boy. I follow the giant tracks in the mud, tracking a wolf from the Cataclysmic Flats that I suspect has been sent by the enemy to kill my people.

It's no small task, but after three hours and a violent fight, I kill it and rip the tag off the collar, freezing with intrigue when I hear another rustle behind me.

I slip another arrow into my bow, listening carefully to the steady beat of unfamiliar footsteps as I turn slightly west. Through the trees, I catch a glimpse of a human form, hooded and cloaked. *Oh, joy. A fly in my web.*

"Trespassing is forbidden," I say, lowering my bow. No other human could pose a threat to me, so I let my arrow hang lazily at my side. "Come out."

Silence, save for the gentle breeze caressing the forest canopy. My disappointed sigh is lost in the humid air. "If hide and seek is the game you want to play, I'll gladly join." In the darkness, my fingers pull the arrow back. I watch the figure move through the trees, and I know they think they've got away with it. I almost laugh at the stupidity.

They think the confines of my palace end with the gates and the stone walls, but they're wrong. Every tree, every river, every cave. It's *all* my palace, and you cannot outrun a King in his own palace.

It's not usually like me to be merciful, so perhaps I am in a wine-induced good mood, because I find myself aiming to slow them down rather than to kill. I release my fingers, and a decisively female yelp fills the stagnant forest air.

“You bastard!” Comes a soft voice, shouting, but somehow delicate too. “I was going to come out!”

Shit. I’m glad I didn’t shoot to kill. She looks small. A figure stumbles out from the trees, hooded and cloaked in black. I can’t see her eyes, but a dark glossy ponytail creeps out the hood and down to her waist. She freezes a little when she sees me as if needing a moment to take me in. I’d take pity on her, but countless knives and daggers sit across her thighs, waist and wrists.

This is no lost traveller.

“Who are you?” Her voice is grumpy as she looks down at her leg and plonks down ungracefully on a mossy log at the edge of the moonlit glade.

“I could ask the same of you, but I haven’t got it in me to care.”

“Ouch! That one hurt my ego,” she says, laughing out loud at my comment, a small hand pressing over her heart. “Cheer up, will you? I’ve had my share of grumpy men for one day.”

She’s laughing.

At herself? At me? I’m not sure. It is such an unexpected reaction, I’m not sure what to say back, so I opt for my favourite conversation of all; silence. I watch as she snaps the arrow in her lower thigh, putting the wooden shaft between her teeth and pulling the rest of it out with a muffled yelp.

“Did you poison the arrow?”

“What?”

She looks at me as though I’m slow, and points to the arrowhead on the floor. “Spiky stick on floor. Spiky stick called arrow. Was arrow poisoned? Poison is like a—“

Should’ve aimed for the neck. “I know what a fucking arrow is, and no.”

“Well, the thigh is a terrible place to aim, and you didn’t shoot very hard.”

I dislike her already. “If I was shooting to kill, you’d be dead and buried by now,” I tell her, more than slightly pissed off by the hooded figure. Her head raises in the darkness as I step out of the shadow of the treeline, and I hear a slight gasp.

“Holy fuck! How tall are you?!”

“Six foot eight.” If I had a coin for every time I was asked that, I’d be rich. Rich-er, in fact.

“Ah. An Evergreen? Still, you’re the tallest Evergreen I’ve seen. You’re still a fool for shooting me,” she grumbles, holding a cloth over her thigh, applying pressure to stem the bleeding. Perhaps she isn’t a spy after all.

She doesn’t know who I am, which is very interesting. I’m being factual, not egotistical, when I say that I am the most well-recognised face on Yterras. This tells me that she cannot be from my kingdom, the Sea City or any of the field or desert cities. They know me very well there. “Show your face.”

Ringed fingers tug her hood off her face with easy confidence. Sultry, cat-like eyes gaze up at me in the moonlight, brown freckled skin flawless over delicate cheekbones and a slightly upturned nose. She’d be beautiful, if she wasn’t insufferable immediately. I spot her small frame and her dull brown eyes.

“A mortal,” I observe. Disappointing. “From?”

“The River Folk.”

I know when people lie to me, but for some reason, I don’t press her just yet. “Trespassing this close to the Kingdom Gate carries heavy punishment.”

Brown eyes glitter with mischief. “Aren’t you trespassing too then, Mr Hide and Seek?”

I ignore her new nickname for me, but for some reason, I like that she’s fiery. “I have a right to be here.”

“You work for the King?” She asks, dark eyes narrowing at me.

“I do indeed.”

Her features relax a little. She's tempting, and naive too, if she thinks I'm not going to punish her. "Thank the gods it was you and not him. I heard he's an asshole."

Charming. "I heard so too."

Her cheeks pale. "Oh, *no*."

"Oh, *yes*." I shoot back, as realisation sets in on her face.

"You fucking bastard!" She yells, outraged, looking at me as if I'm a complete and utter imbecile. Her arms flail around her as she starts berating me. "You can't just shoot people who come to your kingdom! What if I had been seeking help, or what if I'd just escaped kidnappers?"

"Have you?" I snarl, pissed off by her attitude. The novelty of this creature has worn off quickly. She's attractive, objectively, but she's annoying.

"Maybe!" She protests, stomping a black boot. She goes to move away from me, but my arm darts out to catch her, gripping her hard and pulling her closer. Her eyes snap up to mine as if she wasn't expecting me to touch her. I can smell her from here; an intoxicating mixture of honey and smoke. My eyes linger a little longer than necessary on the soft curve of her neck. I resist the urge to feel the warmth of it, and drag my thoughts back to professional. Her pupils dilate a little, and I want to laugh. She's just like the rest of them.

"What, did you think we'd become friends?" I ask, sweetly.

In one slick move, I turn her around, pulling a rope from my waist. She growls in frustration, slamming her head back into my chest to try and knock me back. Her foot hooks behind my knee and she spins out of my grip with lightning speed. I catch her wrist just an inch before the dagger she'd grabbed plummets into my abdomen. Fuck me, she's fast and strong for someone of her size. I hope she isn't too young, or I'd feel guilty for imprisoning her.

"Are you an adult?" I ask, tying another knot as she struggles against me. Lynna will never let it go if I imprison a

child. The struggling stops and she remains in stunned silence for a brief moment, before resuming again.

“I beg your pardon?” She snarls, trying for her knife again. Oh, she’s *pissed off*.

“How old are you? It’ll affect your imprisonment.”

“That’s none of your business!” She takes a deep breath, her chest rising. “Onyx!” She screams, at the top of her lungs, her husky voice reverberating off of the gnarled trees that surround us. I finish binding her hands behind her back, which buys me a chance to admire her. She is not thin but strong, her body toned and her soft skin a golden warm of brown.

I turn to see a tall figure come out from a tree, stalking towards us with a long steel broadsword twirling round his hands. “Take your fucking hands off her,” he warns me, in a voice laden with malice. The strange creature standing in front of me shakes her head.

“Drop the sword, Onyx.”

He assesses her for a moment, eyebrows knitting together in a frown, before doing as she asks. He drops his sword to his side, clearly not happy about it, and moves his hands above his head. “What happened?”

“He shot me,” she mumbles, nonchalantly.

“He *what?*” Bites Onyx, his hand shooting straight back down to the blade at his feet.

“Don’t! Don’t! He’s the King,” she pleads, finally losing her cheerful, unbothered demeanour.

I like to identify people’s weaknesses, and she’s just given hers up to me so easily. It’s him, whoever he is. I take a lazy moment to take him in. He is an immortal, given away by bright yellow-orange eyes. Tousled sun-kissed curls sit atop his head, and a short brown beard lines his jaw. I want to know his relationship with this mortal beneath my hands.

“Your Majesty, I can only apologise on her behalf,” he says, graciously. “She has behavioural issues. We’re working

on them. I'm so sorry. If you could please let her go, I'll make sure to give her an earful myself."

Naive, just like her. "And what do I get out of it?"

"What do you want out of it? I'll happily do it, my lord."

I wonder how these two are friends. I hope that is all that they are, for some reason. He seems the polar opposite of her, calm and respectful.

"She's your...wife?" I ask, wondering again why I am so keen for him to say no. Mortals never marry immortals, for obvious reasons.

"My sister, my adopted sister. She's only twenty-one; she's a mortal, so that's only a hundred in our years."

He thinks I'm an idiot. "I know how mortals age." Just like I knew when his sister told me she was of the River Folk, I can tell he hasn't told me the full truth. No parents would adopt an immortal child if they were mortal, and vice versa. They're liars, the both of them, and I will get the truth out of them sooner or later.

"My apologies, Your Majesty. My point is, she's young. She's getting in all sorts of trouble and putting her in prison won't do her any good."

This Evergreen is tall and muscular, and he looks like he'd make a good warrior. He also doesn't seem as irritating as his sister. I've known her for all of five minutes and I already know that the most agonising punishment for her would be to see her brother suffer. So suffer he will.

"Our guards are stretched thin this week. You'll do manual labour for one of my guards for the week in return for her life."

That fucking mouth drops open, and I watch it for a moment too long before I realise she's complaining again. Five minutes with this woman and I'm already craving silence more than I've ever craved it. "What? You can't make him—no! I'll do it—"

Her brother silences her with a furious look. “Done, my lord. She won’t trouble you again.”

I turn the feisty huntress around, her brown eyes meeting mine. I break the eye contact first. I don’t entertain lust anymore, not with strangers. She’s young, and I don’t sleep with mortals. At all.

But this temptress is determined to test me. “Annaliya was right. You are beautiful,” she whispers, eyes wide. “Such an awful shame about the personality,” she adds, her voice turning slow and seductive.

“Ren, for fucks sake. Your Majesty, please just ignore her. It’s a personality disorder at this stage.” Her brother clamps a firm hand over her mouth, stopping her talking.

“Two weeks of manual labour,” I decide, jaw tense. I’ll ruin her brothers life if it’ll make her cry. Her eyes widen in protest, but her insults die inside her brother’s palm. She’s annoyed I’ve found her weakness, but she shouldn’t have given me so much ammunition. I keep them both tied and drag them back to my palace, not letting them say a word.

“Friar, assign these two to a room each and do not let them leave,” I bark, shooting them both an arctic look as she shrugs her dark velvet cloak off her shoulders, draping it gracefully over her forearm to reveal a tight black top with a deep neckline.

White teeth sink into her bottom lip like she’s fighting a laugh. She’s trying to seduce me, and she’s making no effort to hide it. It’s irritating. If sorceresses weren’t long extinct, I’d think she was one. She’s wound some kind of spell through the air, the atmosphere between us thick with tension. Her brother, whatever his name was, vanishes into his room with three stoic guards standing outside. One of them slides a heavy bolt across the door.

“Goodnight, handsome,” she purrs softly, a mischievous grin on her face.

I can’t entertain her shameless flirting, as much as I’d like to. I like women, but not as much as I hate newspaper

scandals. Instead, I give her the same cold, emotionless glare that I give anyone else, despite the intrigue she has stoked beneath. “You can thank your brother that you’re not in a cell tonight. Don’t trespass again. I can give my guards orders to kill you if you do.”

“If I’m in here, and there are guards outside stopping me from leaving, is it any different than if I was in a cell?” Her lips caress each soft word, her eyes imploring me to join her flirting. Imploring me to meet her in the middle. I watch my orange eyes flash with anger in the reflection of her own, and take a calming breath to lower my heart rate. *Who is she?* Delicate freckles dot her nose, her lips soft and pink. She looks innocent, but looks mean nothing.

“Goodnight,” I say, shutting the door in her face and bolting it.

I let out a heavy breath as I stalk the palace halls back to my quarters. I plunge myself into an icy barrel of water in my bathroom before dressing and uncorking a bottle of wine in my library. My library is the serenity in my otherwise bustling world. Trees and vines border the bookshelves, a few birds flying overhead. Under the warm light of the sconces between the walls of books, I start to read through a recent healing journal written by Lynna and Talyn.

But the blissful twilight silence is fragmented by the noise of the stained-glass window beside the wine cabinet shattering. I take a deep breath and stand, watching a satin-black metal arrow clatter to the floor beside me. My blood heats with anger, flooding every corner of my veins with a desire to ruin this woman’s life. I immediately know who is responsible, but I pick it up and turn over the tiny note attached to the fletching anyway.

*You shoot at me, I shoot at you.
Hide and seek is my favourite game.*

Some guards are getting fired tonight, that is for sure.

CHAPTER 4

A POTION (RENNA)

I never expected the Forest King to look like that.

He looks younger than I thought he'd be. When Anna said he was beautiful, I pictured some symmetrical mannequin of a man, but REXXAN is different. He is huge, both in height and in breadth, with auburn-orange eyes, dark messy hair and a lightning-like scar that runs down his face, over his defined jawline, plummeting down into the top that hugged the dense muscles of his chest.

I wonder how far the scar goes, and where he got it. He looks simultaneously beautiful and rugged, like he's faced all the horrors of the world and come out on top. And for whatever reason, he's determined not to entertain his curiosity with me.

But my love-in with the Forest King ends with the physical, because he is up there with the most detestable people I've ever met in my life. I'd have more than happily spent the night in his bed if he could've conjured up even an ounce of personality. Plus, he needs to review his guards if they are that easily seduced. One run of my fingers up the doorframe, one bite of my lip, and one low-cut top and I was out of there.

Perhaps I should've stayed in my room, but confinement is just not for me. Been there, done that, and I still live with the nightmares. Onyx isn't speaking to me, and with good reason. It's been three days since I escaped, and he's returned to our inn injured and absolutely dripping in sweat every day. The

King's guards are working him to the bone to pay for my behaviour.

“O.”

“I'm not in the fucking mood.”

He stomps past us, the wooden door threatening to fall off its rusty hinges as he slams it in my face. Stellan rolls his eyes, stuffing some bread into his mouth. “Come on, Onyx, she's said she's sorry.”

“I fucking know!” He yells back, and I hear the sound of his boots being hurled at the door. Onyx is scary when he's angry. He's never angry.

I press my forehead to the warped wood of his door. “I have to go to this meeting with the Five Kings and Queens. Please can we talk later? I swear I'll behave at the meeting, O. I know when to be serious for the good of our people.”

“Yes, we'll talk later.” I hear him sigh, footsteps approaching. The poor battered door swings open once more, and his exasperated face stares back at me. He places a soft kiss on my forehead, the gentle giant that he is. “I love you, even if I don't always like you,” he says, on a tired exhale. I shut my eyes, my head resting on his chest. He is all the family I have left in this world; I don't want to fight with him.

I have to do better for him.

I dress in black hunting gear, tugging some black leggings over my hips. Knives and vials of toxins cling to my thighs. I step into black boots, tying the laces with fingers covered in rings. As an afterthought, I put an expensive black velvet cloak around my shoulders, my own feeble attempt at fitting in with the Kings and Queens. I brush out my waist-length dark hair, winging my eyes out with black liner, doing a long point at the outer edge and a tiny one at the inner corner.

I look good.

I twirl my favourite knife between my fingers, heading out the inn with a quick salute at Onyx and a wink at Stellan. Under the baking sun, I ride to the palace, showing them my invite to the King's and Queen's gathering. I think King Espan

had to sell his left kidney to bribe the Forest King into writing one of those for me. Espan is the single kindest person I know; one of those people who makes you feel like a terrible human being because they're so disgustingly nice.

I am led up pale stone steps by a guard in gold and red armour. This palace is devastatingly beautiful; an oasis of natural life. The courtyard is a large stone circle surrounded by ancient trees. Every door, every table, every column, they all add to the feeling that I am in a forest and not a palace.

The very second I enter the courtyard, I'm swept into a warm hug by King Holn of the Mountains, who I haven't seen for a while now. His hair is greyer than the last time I saw him, the lines around his eyes a little more prominent. He must be in his late forties, now, but he's still handsome. He holds me at arm's length. "You get more beautiful by the day! You're not ageing at all. What's the secret? Hela, come and look at her."

I laugh as the Mountain Queen picks me up with just as much ease as her husband and spins me around. "Oh, my dear. It's lovely to see you. You know how much we worry; your lifestyle isn't safe!"

"Let the poor woman breathe, Hela," scolds Holn, as his wife squeezes the ever-loving daylight out of me. I pull away, genuinely smiling. They have a wonderful relationship, and I bury the grain of envy that materialises in my chest. I'll never know what that's like, but I'm accepting that.

Hela introduces me to a breathtaking woman in a sapphire-blue ballgown. The dark skin of her face is interrupted by a stripe of pale blue paint that runs over her bottom lip and down her chin. I've seen it on people before at formal events in the Sea Kingdom. She smiles at me warmly and somehow it's not condescending despite her being over a head taller than me.

An immaculately manicured hand extends towards me, glittering in gold and sapphires. I take it as she talks. "Ocealia, Queen of the Sea."

"It's an honour," I say, meaning it. I've heard so much of her and what a great Queen she is. "I am Renna, Commander

of the Shadow Hunters. I'm not a Queen, but I feel my attendance here would be beneficial to us all."

"I do not doubt it for a moment. I'm glad you've come," she says, with genuine conviction.

I meet the King and Queen of Rivers, who I instantly dislike, before catching up with King Espan. His hugs are warm and homely, and I unashamedly bury myself further into his chest. He is the only one other than Onyx and Stell who knows snippets of my past. He knows things about me that he could ruin me with, but he never has, and for that I owe him everything.

"Did you see my guard wrote to you about work in the summer? We need you."

I nod, pulling away. "I did. I replied and accepted. Listen, before King REXXAN arrives, I have to warn you that I had a little run-in with him and—"

"What are you doing here?" A deep voice silences the courtyard.

Fuck. I turn and offer him a smile. He stalks towards me, and I understand the things that are said about him in that moment, because having King REXXAN coming at you with a murderous expression is fucking terrifying. I rub the back of my neck sheepishly. "Um...hello."

"What are you doing?" He bites out in a venomous tone, one second away from tossing me out of this tree-palace hybrid.

"I am Renna, Commander of the Shadow Hunters."

I don't know what reaction I was hoping for, but he doesn't give me it. He betrays no emotion whatsoever, and it's frustrating. I could swear his gaze drops to my lips for just a second, but then again I am a narcissist, so maybe I am imagining that.

"You'd better take a seat, then."

Espan pulls out a chair for me, his gentle hands lifting the cloak off my shoulders and draping it over my chair. Espan is

a gentleman; raised right. He knows his morals in and out, and he'll never stray from them. His kingdom sees the lowest crime levels, and he gives all his spare money away.

I must look tense because he shoots me a reassuring smile. "You belong at this table, Renna. I'll support you in ensuring your people are respected."

"Thank you."

We look over a map, scrawled with notes in the Forest Tongue; the most commonly spoken language in Yterras. Rexas meets my gaze through his long dark lashes, and I suddenly feel too warm. His gaze is hot on mine, and I get the sense that he controls this room and everyone in it.

"Do you read, Renna? I can have the notes read aloud if not."

"I can read, thank you for checking."

"And would you prefer if we stay in the Forest Tongue?" Asks Oecalia, her eyes kind. I like her.

"I speak Forest Tongue, Aqualua, Naztan and Golden Tongue, but I can't speak the language of the River Folk or any of the languages across the western plains." I'm rambling. *No one asked for a summary of your linguistic skillset, Renna.* "Forest Tongue is perfect," I manage, eventually.

"I'm impressed," says the Queen of the Sea. "I was always under the impression that Shadow Hunters don't read or write?"

"We don't really, but I had to learn to get paid work for my people. I'm not good yet. My spelling is appalling."

"So is mine, to be fair," grumbles Holn, between two frankly impressive burps. I laugh, mouthing him a thank you.

We sit in that room for three days, leaving only briefly to sleep and eat, and to say I'm dying of boredom would be the understatement of this entire age. I underestimated Rexas. I've never met someone so intelligent. He may be irritating and aloof, but he has so much information in his brain, and the

other rulers are clinging to every piece of wisdom he has to share.

I want to know *him*. This here isn't him. He hasn't said a word outside of business, hasn't even hinted at a smile. He doesn't seem like a real person. I want to see him lose his composure. I want to see a crack in his facade. I want him to crumble under my flirting like everyone else does. But he is not like the others.

On day five, I am finally presented with a chance to plead my case. I'm determined to do it well, given the torturous meetings I've had to sit through to earn it. I accidentally called King Kelen of the Rivers a wanker yesterday and had to spend twenty minutes convincing he and his wife that they'd misheard.

He is a wanker, though.

Taking the seat beside REXXAN, I run through extensive numbers of how many enemy commanders we've killed, wolves we've slain, and spies we've trapped. I remain focused on the task at hand, despite the stifling tension. There is no way he doesn't feel it too; the burning curiosity that weaves its way through our mutual dislike for each other.

"We get nothing in return. It's at the expense of my people's blood that your borders are safer. I know it's the lifestyle we have chosen for ourselves, but I come to you asking for fixed shelter in the mountains and the forest for my people, as well as hunting rights, and commission every time we stop an enemy from entering your lands."

"You're asking for a free place to live, *and* money?" Asks REXXAN, cocking an eyebrow.

Gods, he's marvellous. Veins snake up his thick forearms, his giant hands worn and rugged—*back on track, Renna. Back on track.* "Not a free place to live, but to be able to sleep in your forest without the threat of your guards killing us."

He holds out his hand and I frown. He wants me to hold his hand? Maybe he is tempted by me after all. It's unexpected, but I go to do it anyway.

“Your notes,” he states, but there’s a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. *I hate my life and everything in it.* I whisper a prayer to the god Xal to zap me with lightning, but he doesn’t deliver.

I pick up my page of notes, stuffing it into his oversized hand and trying not to crawl under the table and just fucking die. Graciously, he doesn’t tease me anymore, he just reads in silence, one ringed index finger stroking his bottom lip.

“We can come to an agreement, I’m sure. I’ll have Ascan put a talk in my diary tomorrow.”

“Who is Ascan?”

“My Head of Staff.”

“So he’s an assistant to you?” I ask, making conversation.

He scrapes his chair back and stands, tucking both mine and his paperwork under his arm. “If you wish to discuss the roles of my staff, Commander, I’m sure they’d be more than willing to speak with you.”

“Fucking rude,” I mutter, itching my eyebrow with my middle finger.

As ever, no reaction, just a curt nod by way of goodbye and he is out the door, ducking slightly to fit his frame beneath the arches. He hasn’t punished me for the arrow stunt, only Onyx, and I see why now. I’d sooner be fainting from exhaustion in the King’s training courtyard than having to watch my brother go through it.

Rexxan the Ruthless. The nickname is beginning to add up.



I WAKE up the next morning in my room in the palace, and instantly I know something is off. A familiar hum whirrs throughout my body, my fingertips warm, and it’s not because I’m seeing the King again.

It's worse.

On cue, Onyx knocks, coming in with a brown bag in his hand.

"Bloody hell, O, it's the middle of the night!" I whisper-shout, squinting at him in the dim light of the guest room.

"It's five in the morning."

"I said what I said."

He comes over, examining my face as Stellan stirs in bed beside me. "Your eyes are glowing slightly. It's time."

My stomach drops, plummeting through the floor with a horrible sinking feeling. "Already?"

"I'm sorry, Ren," he says, the canvas bag clinking as he places it on the bed. Stellan lets out an obnoxiously loud yawn and stands to shrug on a shirt, bolting my bedroom door and standing next to it so no one comes in.

"I hate this," I grumble, sipping some water from the skin in my bag. I hate this. I *hate* this.

"It's three days of sicknesses every few weeks in return for a lifetime of peace," says Stellan, telling me what I already know. "Just don't die today."

Useful advice. "I've lost count of the times we've done this, and I've not died yet."

"You've come too close," whispers my brother, his brow creased. Onyx has always struggled with study and academia, but he spent months of his childhood learning how to do this for me. He stole from apothecaries at night for me. Onyx spends his life doing things for other people, for me more than anyone. One day I hope I can repay him.

"You look sweaty," observes Stellan. He's brimming with intelligent wisdom this morning.

"I've been lifting weights since three," Onyx replies, carefully dropping a few drops of green liquid from a vial into an amber flask being heated by a candle. I watch in dread-filled silence for half an hour as he carefully measures tens of

different liquids, grinding leaves and infusing the vial with Evergreen magic that flows from his and Stellan's fingertips.

After forty-five minutes, he hands me the glass of thick green-brown liquid that I have drunk every month of my adult life. Whether we've been in the ice desert, up a mountain, or in the palace of the Forest King, Onyx has always found a way to make it happen.

"I'm going to have to tell the King that you can't make it today," he says, packing everything away.

I freeze with the glass hovering at my lips. Fuck. "Wait... no! I forgot. I *have* to meet him. I have to get this deal for our people."

"Renna, your eyes are starting to glow. I'll tell him you're sick and ask him to see you in a few days."

"Do you know how hard it is to get his time? I stayed on my best behaviour and listened to Queen Lana talk about her digestion issues for three hours in a meeting room to impress Rexxan. Digestion issues, Onyx. Digestion. Issues. *Three hours*. If I cancel, he won't give me a second chance."

"We have no other choice," Stellan interjects, already eating his second bowl of fruit of the morning. "Unless you want to not drink this?"

I have no choice. "I'll do it," I snap, turning away from them both. *I hate them*. I don't. That's not true at all. I just hate that they're right.

"Rennalya," cajoles Onyx, gently turning me to face him. "You know this is for the best. But, if you change your mind and you want to live differently, I'll spend my life protecting you. I'll support you in all of your decisions. You're my little sister, Ren. I'll do what it takes."

I start to down the drink, but it scorches my throat, tightening my airways and leaving nothing but foul disgust in its wake. Onyx plucks it out my hand, muttering something along the lines of *I hate doing this*, before forcing the rest of the drink down my throat and clamping a huge hand over my

mouth. I choke on it until it is all down, and Stellan wipes my watering eyes with his thumbs. “We’ll look after you.”

I nod, standing in his embrace for a moment. A pained cry fills the air, my vision swims, and then I’m doubled over in agony, fighting for consciousness.

CHAPTER 5

UNKNOWN CAUSES (REXXAN)

I scowl at Ascan, but it doesn't scare him off. Gods, I hope I'm not losing my touch.

He walks over to my desk and I resist the urge to slip a shot of sedative into that stupid glass of water of his just to grant myself an hour of silence. "My lord, the Shadow Commander's brother is outside your halls."

"And you're telling me this...why?" I ask, tired of my staff bothering me when I tell them not to.

"He says it's urgent."

"Everyone says it's urgent. Send him away."

"Yes, my lord. Your afternoon is free, the Shadow Hunter can't attend your meeting."

Oh, little trespasser. She's pressing my buttons today. "*She* can't attend?" I don't know what possessed me to be generous enough to even give her the time, and now she's the one cancelling?

"Onyx says she's sick."

Hungover, I imagine. She's sure as fuck not getting a deal for her people now. "Send Onyx in here."

"Really?"

"Ascan, I don't pay you to question my decisions."

"Of course. I'll send him in, my lord."

Onyx bows as he enters, dressed already in hunting gear despite the early hour. I've not met many people who are as serious as I am, but Onyx must be close. He has the build of a warrior, his hands battered and bruised, and I wonder what he's been up to every night since he's been here. I've had all of their rooms watched, and he hardly sleeps.

"She's sick?"

"She is, my lord. She says she's very sorry."

"Then you can meet with me in her stead."

"I'm sorry, my lord. I don't know her plans well. I can't read or write. She's the brains, I'm the brawn."

Bad leadership. What if she died today? What would her people do then? "What kind of sickness?"

He pauses, his eyes giving nothing away. "I don't know, my lord."

"Is she coughing?" Mortals often get sick with things like flu and plagues. They don't affect Evergreens in the same way.

"I don't think so. Why...why do you ask?" He asks, and I stifle a cold-blooded smile. He thinks I care about her.

"Because I have sixteen high-profile mortal guests staying in my palace, including two kings and two queens. If your sister has some kind of infectious sickness, I'll keep her locked in her room so she cannot wreak any more havoc on this week."

"I don't think it's—"

"She'll be seen by my personal healer. If he thinks it's a plague then she'll stay in her room for a week."

A flash of worry crosses his golden eyes. "No, my lord. That's not necessary."

"Excuse me?"

He clears his throat, straightening his broad shoulders. "I meant...I meant thank you for the offer, but I wouldn't waste your healer's time. Stellan is with her."

“Stellan?”

“He’s her—well, he’s her deputy, but he was a healer once.”

He talks even more bullshit than my son does when he’s drunk. “She’ll be seen by my personal healer. Shut the door as you leave.”

I spend the rest of my day with King Espan, discussing trade and inter-kingdom relations over a twenty-mile horse ride. When I finally finish work, I leave with Friar, my head guard. Every week, we climb for two hours, swim five miles, run for an hour and then fight for two. By the time I return home I can hardly walk, but it keeps my mind off the pain in my chest, even if it’s fleeting.

“What did Talyn say?” I ask, drying my hair with a towel as Ascan stands, ever-present in the doorway.

“He’s not returned. He passed on a message that she was sicker than Onyx let on.”

“He’s still there?” I turn to face him. “Send him here,” I order, ignoring the worry in my chest.

I don’t care about this mortal. I *can’t* care about this mortal. I just need to know she isn’t infectious to my guests. I distract myself by finalising a trade agreement between my kingdom and another city in the west whilst I wait for my healer.

A shadow caresses the mahogany of my desk as Talyn’s thin frame enters the doorway, bowing to me. “My lord?”

“Is she a risk to other mortals in the palace?”

Talyn is one of the most intelligent people left on this earth. Much like Lynna, what he doesn’t know about healing isn’t worth knowing. We’d trained in healing school as children together with Lynna and my late brother.

“I’m utterly baffled, my lord. I just don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” I don’t think that I’ve ever heard those words leave his mouth.

“She is very sick. Onyx described her as ‘under the weather’, but she looks like she’ll hardly last the night.”

My pulse skips a beat. “What?”

“She looks very unwell, my lord. I have no idea what’s causing it. It’s similar to poisoning symptoms, but she hasn’t eaten. She’s not hot either, so it’s not a fever.”

Even away from me, she’s giving me grief. “I’ll keep her locked in the room for the week. If she passes it on and kills a king or queen in my palace, I’ll never forgive her.”

“Of course, my lord. I’ll check on her overnight and, in the morning, with your permission?”

“Fine.”

“And you, my lord? Your scars?” He asks, looking down. I realise I have my hand pressed firmly against one side of my chest. I drop it down quickly. “Fine.”

“Bad today?”

“Bad this whole week,” I sigh, refilling my glass with strong red wine and standing to leave to go to bed. Talyn says nothing, biting his tongue, no doubt. He and my closest staff think I drink too much, which I do. But if they’d been through what I had, they’d do it too.

I haven’t slept in seven days. So why, *fucking why*, am I awake and staring at the wall when I should be sleeping? And more bafflingly, why am I thinking about the Shadow Commander? Is she better? Is she *dead*?

And just like that, with my legs being propelled by some external force, I find myself walking through the halls of my palace towards the guests’ quarters, letting myself into her guest room. Magic-lit lamps cloak the room in a warm glow, and everyone in here is awake anyway. Onyx is stood at the foot of Renna’s bed, worriedly biting his already-bitten nails.

Talyn is talking to Renna quietly, and an immortal I haven’t seen before is gently holding her hair out of her face. He is huge, even bigger than Onyx, with brown-black hair in a messy bun, piercings decorating his ears and nose. His lashes

are stained black with charcoal makeup, his feet in heavy combat boots. His brown arms and the side of his head are covered in tattoos, and I find myself pissed off at the way his hands touch her.

My focus, however, is on the small figure in the bed, her head over a bucket. “Please just leave me alone,” she whispers, to Talyn and Onyx. “I just need to sleep.” She coughs over the bucket, blood trickling down her chin.

“I’m here to help you, my lady,” explains Talyn, calmly.

“Well I don’t want or need it!” She retaliates, tipping her head to the side to rest it on the rim of the bucket. Her eyes land on mine, and the last of the colour drains from her face.

So I haven’t lost my touch.

“No. Not him too,” she whispers, turning her face away from me. The immortal with the tattoos gently tilts her face up to his, wiping blood off her lips.

“Pretend they aren’t here, beautiful,” he says, with her head in his hands. Who the fuck is this Evergreen? Are they... they better not be lovers.

“Talyn, we’re very grateful—“ starts Onyx, but the other immortal cuts him off immediately.

“Are we? No, not really. You just barged in here even though we asked you not to,” rants the dark-haired one, between bites of a pear. “It doesn’t take a genius to see she’s exhausted and needs sleep.”

I’ve had enough of him already. “Do not speak to my healer that way. He’ll remain in this room until I see fit for him to leave.”

“Why shouldn’t I speak to him that way? You treat us with no respect and rest assured, my lord, we will return the favour,” he hisses, pale green eyes glaring into mine as he squares up to me. I bite back a laugh.

“Stellan, stop it,” whispers Renna, before coughing up more blood. “Just stop it for five minutes.”

“I’m not going to let him fuck you over, Renna.”

“Stellan,” warns Onyx, his eyes blazing orange. “We have the offer of the greatest healer on this earth, and we are happy to accept it, aren’t we?” He grits his words out, his eyes carrying some other emotion.

They’re hiding something.

“No. We’re happy to accept some sleep!” His friend argues back. Renna takes his hand, pressing his knuckles to her lips, her eyes meeting his.

“Stell, take a walk. Get outside for a while. I’ll be alright.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“You’re getting worked up. Please go out and let off steam.”

Stellan turns to face Talyn and me, pointing a tattooed finger in our faces. “Fuck you, and fuck you too. If you even *think* about keeping her locked in here, I’ll cut off your tiny —“

Onyx clamps a hand on his shoulder, shoving him out the door with a furious expression. Instantly, I can hear them arguing outside in the hallway, but that’s not my concern. Renna turns away from me and Talyn. She looks small in the bed, and despite my aversion to this creature, I feel for her. She is clearly in a lot of pain, her small hands gripping her sleeves with white knuckles.

Gently, I rub her tanned shoulders. The heat from her skin warms my fingers as she struggles to breathe through whatever pain she is in.

Something, somewhere, is amiss. One of them, or all of them, is lying.

I can’t be having that.

CHAPTER 6

TRESPASSING ONCE AGAIN (RENNA)

I hate the way my skin lights up beneath his touch, the way his fingers leave fiery heat in their wake. And the way that when he's in a room, there's no room for anything else.

He's a giant, in stature but also in presence, and it's all-encompassing. I want him out of here, but his hands gently hold my hair, soft words coaxing me through the worst of the hallucinations.

I hate this. And I hate lying too. I reel off lie after lie after lie after lie. They slip off my tongue with the same ease as truths. Going through this is hard enough without having the King and his healer grilling me for an hour.

Eventually, the fever that wracks my body drags me down to the unconscious, and I think I pass out because I don't wake up for two days. But as it does every time, the sickness vanishes as quickly as it comes and by day three, I'm up and walking again.

"Holy fuck," I mutter, catching sight of myself in the mirror. My hair is at all angles, and my shirt is half hanging off. Not even in a sexy way, either. More in a I'm-incapable-of-taking-care-of-myself way. It's not a good sight. No wonder no one is in here with me, I look like a banshee. A banshee who needs to put some underwear on.

I wash my hair with the rose and honey soap that is the only luxury I allow myself when I'm on the road. Stellan's is

expensive wine, Anna has weird portraits of ‘lovely men’, and Onyx says he has no need for luxuries in life.

Cracking my bruised knuckles as I dress in front of the mirror, I put two small braids in my hair, fastening them with iron rings. Then I toss the whole lot into a long, straight ponytail because today, I’m in the mood to kill something in the forest.

My plan is cut short, though, by a guard at my door who informs me that I am not to leave my room until the week is over. He also tells me that in the two days since I’d left Stellan unattended, he has been arrested and imprisoned for punching three guards. I flop down on my bed and sigh. Despite all my efforts, I cannot tame him. He makes enemies everywhere he goes.

Still, I have absolutely no doubt that this is King REXXAN punishing those two just to get to me. I hate it, and I hate him. I hate that I have to bite my tongue around him just so I can earn safe passage for my people.

I’d heard the King wasn’t warm, but he is colder than I could’ve imagined. Even after seeing how sick I was, he has refused to see me, and I haven’t been invited back to meet the Kings and Queens either. He has locked me in this room with guards outside, and I don’t do well in locked spaces.

On the sixth day, I am going insane. There is only so much exercise you can do inside before you lose it. Press-ups, skipping, stretching, lunges, pull-ups. I repeat this over and over but it’s not enough to keep me distracted, and I know I need out of here.

I should regret blowing a sedative dart into the two guards’ necks, but I don’t. They’ll be fine in a few hours. In fact, with the hours REXXAN has them all working, they’ll probably thank me for the extra sleep. Convincing myself I’m being a philanthropist, I step over them and sneak out of my room. In stealthy silence, I climb up the ivy-blanketed stone walls of the palace, crawling along the ceiling rafters. I pull myself up higher so I’m hidden in the shadows, grateful for the years of strength I’d built into my body.

I have a map of this palace ingrained in my brain, but I spend an hour expanding it. I creep like a monkey along the ceiling beams. I pass the grand wine cellars—Rexxan seems to be in a love affair with wine—and the Great Hall where events are held. Onto my map I add Rexxan's private training courtyard, the guest halls, the business halls, the trade rooms, and three different libraries.

I wait hidden in the ceiling for a few minutes until the guard shifts change, granting me five seconds to cross the threshold into a heavily guarded hallway. Only when I get halfway down the familiar arched corridor do I realise I've strayed into the King's Halls, which I'm quite sure is punishable by execution. I need to get out of here, but holy fuck, do I love things like this. Adrenaline spikes in my blood and I feel *alive*. But my hands and feet freeze on the rough wooden rafter as I slink into a side hallway, hoping it'll be empty.

It's not.

My limbs aren't listening to me. *Why aren't my limbs listening to me?* Is this how frustrating it is for Onyx when I don't listen to him? I will myself to move but I don't. The King is with a tall blonde in the hallway, the two of them talking in hushed voices as he leans against the polished stone wall. He whispers something in her ear that makes them both laugh.

I should really move now. I should *definitely* move. But fuck, I'm mesmerised. Dumbstruck at seeing the Forest King doing something other than scowling at the other rulers and shouting at the staff. Spellbound by the sheer beauty of this man. He's not beautiful like spring flowers, or like the sunshine on a quiet stream. Rexxan is catastrophically beautiful, like the first bolt of lightning that shatters the midnight sky. Like crimson blood spreading over soft white cotton. The kind of beauty where you cannot help but stare and wonder how anything else is ever to feel beautiful again.

The blonde tiptoes up and for a fleeting moment I think she's going to kiss him, but he pulls away just a fraction, preventing her lips from touching his. Instead, he leans round

her to undo the latch on the bedroom door and cocks his head slightly as though to invite her in.

But then he looks up. Panic and exhilaration slice through my chest like a hot knife through butter as his eyes meet mine. *Fuck*. Even now as he finds an assassin crawling along the ceiling of his home, there's not a glimmer of surprise or anger on his face, as if he knew I was up here all along. Amusement glitters in his terracotta eyes and he makes no move to tell the guards I'm up here. One huge hand wraps around the waist of the blonde.

Two of his fingers slowly move her hair from her neck, and with eyes never leaving mine, he places a slow, soft kiss on her neck. I don't know what kind of spells he's woven through the air, but I jolt slightly because I feel his lips on my neck too. Even the heat of his breath brushes my skin, the feel of his hand hot on my waist.

A soft breath leaves my lips, my knees pressing together slightly up high in the ceiling. He pulls away to open the door for her, and with one quick wink at me, vanishes into the room.

CHAPTER 7

THE VAULT (REXXAN)

Over a thousand years ago now, the Gods began to argue.

In the end, they decided it would be more sensible to pour all their power and influence into five stones. That way, if one of them was killed by another the world would still function on. And so the five Vault Stones were forged.

My grandfather fashioned the red Stone of Fire, and I am its guardian. Lynna's grandmother created the green Earth Stone, owned now by Holn and Hela. Ocealia's grandfather, the God of the Sea, created the blue Sea Stone. For generations, it has belonged to her fathers and grandfathers and now to her. Espan is the guardian of the white Air Stone.

I want all five stones for myself. Not for selfish reasons, but to closely protect the world order. Because now King Kelen and Queen Lana, a twenty-two-year-old couple with less than an ounce of brainpower between them, are responsible for the grey River Stone, and I hate that.

The stones all sit in the Five Kingdom Vault, a small room built deep into the side of a mountain. Only the Kings and Queens can access the room, not even the guards that protect it. There are ten doors to get through before you make it in, each one a puzzle to solve. The Stones protect the equilibrium of the elements in Yerras, and removing the Earth Stone would cause city-crumbing earthquakes. Removing the White Stone would see the air becoming unbreathable.

Only once has a stone ever been removed, and I lost everything that day.

No one attempts to get into the Vault, because anyone who would is against world peace, and regardless of what Kingdom they're from, they'd see the death of everyone they know. So it is odd, then, that for the first time in five decades, someone attempted to breach the first and second doors into the Vault today.

Someone wants us all dead.

Consequently, I find myself with a to-do list about eight times longer than it was yesterday. I have doubled the security, calling the Kings and Queens for an urgent gathering, but beyond that, all I can do is shout at my guards for letting whoever the intruder was outrun them in the forest.

I didn't sleep with Ellia tonight. I don't understand *why* I didn't sleep with Ellia tonight, but I didn't. It had been my intention to. To chase a kind of lust that isn't directed at a certain dark-haired assassin.

That fucking huntress. What am I going to do about her? I'm distracted, even now with a beautiful woman beside me and far greater issues to worry about. What the fuck was she doing hanging from my ceiling? How dare she betray my orders? And how did she get past the guards outside her room? She wants to push my buttons, then I'll push hers twice as hard. I'll make her brother's life a living hell if it will get her in line.

But most concerningly of all—is the arrival of the Shadow Commander and the attempted Vault break-in purely coincidence? She's mischievous, yes, but is she downright *evil*? The thought eats away at me all evening.

I have bigger fish to fry now. The world order has been threatened, and unless she is the one responsible, I need her out of my hair.

"You're so distracted today," murmurs Ellia, pulling my hair out of the small bun it was in. I don't even know why she's still here. I've just sat and done paperwork all evening. I

swat her hand away. Was she always this frustrating? She's outdoing herself today. She begins tracing a manicured finger down the scars that trickle down my forehead, over my right eye, all the way over my jaw. "Does it hurt?"

"No," I snatch her hand away, gripping it in mine, which I am sure she mistakes for affection. "Don't fucking touch it."

I stand up, grimacing. My arms and chest are on fire after six hours of training. I'm not seeing her again. They always get the wrong idea. Only Lynna understands; probably because her hand in marriage is just as widely desired as my own. I've been seeing Lynna both in private and in public for long enough now that my people have finally realised that I have no intention of making her my wife.

A knock disturbs us. The curse of being king; I can never have an hour off, although I am grateful to escape Ellia, for some reason. I usually don't mind her. "Yes?"

"It's Cetresar."

"Is it urgent?"

"It's about the Commander."

"She escaped her room, I know. I'll deal with her tomorrow."

"She shot a sedative dart into two of the guards, my lord."

I swear to the gods, I'm going to kill her.

"Who is this about?" Asks Ellia, her face pale. I ignore her, already standing up and pulling on some dark brown trousers. I yank open the door, shirtless and enraged.

"She shot my guards with darts?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Find her and her brother. Arrest them both and take them to the prisons, I'll deal with them."

"Her brother is very apologetic. He hasn't left his room."

"I don't care."

"Yes, lord. I'll have them arrested now."

“Come back. Deal with it later,” begs Ellia, softly.

“I’ll get a guard to walk you home,” I snap, fastening gold cufflinks on my shirt sleeves, walking out before she can reply. At first Renna’s bad behaviour was almost endearing. After five minutes it became annoying, and now it’s crossed the line into infuriating. I am stretched thin enough already, and I have half a mind to leave her in prison for years, to see the mahogany strands of her hair fade to silver in a way that mine never will. It’d keep her out of trouble, at least.

The guards at the prison gates open their mouths to greet me, but they must catch sight of my thunderous mood, because not a single one of them speaks.

“You’ll rot in my dungeon, Renna,” I hiss, storming into the cell where she sits beside her brother.

“Oh, but I’d escape. And then you’d have to chase me again, and we’d be tired of it all by then,” she says, with easy confidence. She looks amused, but her brother looks like he’s about ready to kill her. He is dressed casually for the first time, in a rust-coloured linen shirt and brown riding trousers. His unruly light brown curls are messy, and I can tell he’s been dragged out of bed to be here. *You and me both, Onyx*. His head is in his hands.

“Commander, if you wanted to watch me fuck someone, you could’ve at least asked me nicely.”

“Can I watch you fuck someone?” She asks with a sweet smile, but the lust in her eyes tells me she’s half-serious. Fucking hell, she’s going to be the death of me. She is it; the ultimate test of my willpower. Onyx’s fingers tense up around his head like he wants to just disappear. She claims to love him, but she makes his life a living hell in my opinion.

“What do I have to do, Renna? Torture you? Is that what it’ll take to make you behave like a normal human being?” I ask, tired of it all.

Onyx’s eyes snap up to meet mine, blazing with rage. “You will do no such thing to her.”

“You have no power over me,” I state, bored. He’d be dead before he drew his sword.

“Torture me, if you want to torture one of us,” he offers, in an attempt to diffuse the asphyxiating tension between me and his tyrant of a little sister.

Renna’s eyes widen as if only *now* taking the situation seriously. “You won’t lay a finger on Onyx. He’s done nothing wrong!”

I grip her shirt around her neck, my eyes burning into hers. I’m furious that she snuck into my halls. I’m furious that she has spied on me. I’m furious that she keeps me awake at night. I’m furious that she sedated my guards, and more than anything, I’m furious that she lets that other immortal touch her.

“What were you doing in my halls? Hm?”

At lightning speed, she brings her elbow down onto my wrist, bending my arm, arching her back, and rolling under it to escape my grip. Credit to her, she almost does, but I grab her again, twice as hard. She yelps in surprise, and Onyx slams his way between us, orange eyes alight with ill-controlled ire.

“My lord, I have the utmost respect for you, but harm my sister and I will see you harmed worse.”

How sickeningly sweet. I wave a hand at the guard in the doorway. “Take him away, restrict his food and water.”

“No!” Protests Renna, shaking her head. “He did nothing wrong! I’m sorry. I was just exploring!”

“This all sounds rather familiar,” I mutter dryly, as they drag her brother out. Twice now, I’ve caught her ‘exploring’. Once in my forest, and now outside my bedroom.

And then she starts clapping. A slow, sarcastic clap that bounces off the cold stone walls around us. Her brother wasn’t kidding when he said she had personality problems. “Congratulations, Your Majesty, you remember as far back as last week.”

That's it. I'm done with her. I turn back to the door, pulling a rough rope from the hook on the wall. "*Oh my*—that was a joke. Lighten up. Look, I'm sorry, okay? Don't punish Onyx. Don't leave. Let's talk."

I turn back to her with a long sigh. Might as well piss her off too. If I have to have high blood pressure, so does she. "Do you know why you're here, darling?"

"Call me darling again and I'll cut your dick off."

I tug some slack into the rope so that she'll still be able to move her arms, tying each of her wrists to two hooks on the stone bricks. Leashed to the wall up and in a locked cell, surely she won't be able to break out of here. "Will you, sweetheart?"

She growls in response to the nickname and I make a mental note to keep using them—anything to get under her skin like she does mine. She's tugging against the restraints, and holy fuck do I like her tied up.

No, REXXAN. Not now, and not with her.

"The last time someone snuck into my rooms, I killed them," I say, tying a second knot around her wrists. She sits down with an exaggerated sigh, giving up, and in a turn of events more shocking than anything I've ever had the fortune to witness, she remains silent for a short while.

"What's your favourite food?" She asks, out of nowhere.

She's a complete waste of my time. "What?"

"I'm bored. We can talk, you know? You don't have to just stare at me in silence. What's your favourite food?"

She's absurd. "Why would I tell you that?"

"Because I know absolutely nothing about you."

"Let's keep it that way."

"Was that your wife? Earlier? I didn't know you had a wife."

"No. Are you interested?" I ask as I take a chain and padlock off the wall.

She laughs, her expression brightening. “Very, Your Majesty. When can I start?”

“As soon as you stop giving me migraines.”

She gives me a comical grimace, sucking air in through her teeth. “I don’t think this is working between us. It’s not you, it’s me. I just need to work on myself right now.”

“You really fucking do. Get a counsellor whilst you’re at it.”

She nods her agreement, mimicking sliding a wedding ring off her finger and dropping it to the floor. She’s lost her mind. “We need a divorce, REXXAN. I can’t do this anymore. So what is that woman to you? Your favourite person?”

Gods, she genuinely does not shut up. “And you care because?”

“I want to get to know you. The real you, not the King.”

As I thread a chain through the bars of her cage, I pause for a moment. It has been a long time since anyone has said that to me. In fact, I don’t think anyone has. I let out a cold laugh because the real me is buried so deep beneath the King that I’m not sure he’s even there anymore.

“You don’t. There’s always another reason for you. You’re always scheming. But if you really wish to know, my son is my favourite person, sweetheart.”

“You’re a father?” She looks stunned, and it’s nice to be the one shocking her rather than the other way around.

“It’s the only job I prioritise over being King.”

“How old is he?”

“About seven hundred.”

“Wow. That’s old.” She frowns, and I see her running the numbers in her head, realising that I had my son when I was the Evergreen equivalent of a teenager.

“You had him so young. Where is he now?”

“I’m not talking to you. I’m not interested in getting to know you.” That’s a lie. I want to know everything about her. “And I’m not interested in you knowing anything about me or my son. You harm my guards, I’ll punish you. You don’t learn? I’ll kill your brother. I mean it.”

“How long will you keep me in here for?”

“However long it takes.”

“I have to return to my people this month.”

“You didn’t think about that before you—“

“I’m sorry!” She protests, her eyes going big and childlike. She’s manipulative, dangerous one minute, and innocent the next. “Free Onyx and Stellan. Please? Please, please, please, please, please, please—“

“Fucking hell, I’ll think about it.” And since when had I been so soft? I allow myself a long, lazy look down her body. She’s athletic, with a small waist that gives way to the gentle curve of her hips and strong, toned thighs. Her top is low cut, revealing miles of tanned skin. She smells the same as the day I met her, like roses and honey.

“Want to try again and be a little more subtle?” She asks, once my gaze lands back on her eyes.

“Not particularly, no.” What in the name of all that is holy am I doing? For someone with famous self-control, I’m not doing a good job of it now. But I need to touch her. I tuck some hair behind her ear, her gaze locked on mine. She is quiet for once, brown eyes looking up at me.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she whispers, but she leans in closer to me, her tongue darting out to her lower lip for a split second.

“I’m not looking at you like anything,” I reply, my hand snaking up her waist. I have a terrible feeling that now I know what it is to have my hands on her, once will never be enough. I run a gentle hand over her throat, watching goosebumps rise on her beautiful skin.

The air is so thick with desire that I could pierce it with a knife. Long black eyelashes flutter shut, her head tipping back. Something about that action has me aching with want for her. I want to show her what I could do to her, to help her find her limits for pleasure and pain. To give her an outlet for this pent-up energy that is overflowing from her every vein. I want to bask in the Shadow Commander and all the sacred air around her.

“I could drive you insane, Renna,” I murmur, my fingers running down her waist on the other side now. “I could make you forget everything else.”

She says nothing in return, but her body presses further into mine, her chest rising and falling a little harder now.

“Why can’t you behave?”

She sighs, her head dropping forward in defeat, and the moment is lost. I step back, and cold air whooshes in to replace the scorching heat between us.

“I’m working on it.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I had an unconventional childhood.”

“How?”

“You’d never believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

She looks tempted, but just sighs again, her dark hair falling in front of her freckled face. “My father hit me.”

“That’s not the full truth.”

“It’s part of it.”

“When did they adopt Onyx?”

“A few years before they died. I was young at the time.”

“And who raised you?”

“Onyx stole and begged and worked where he could. He put food on the table for us both. But I’m not sure I was ever

‘raised’...it’s why I am why I am. But I’m working on it. I can’t keep disappointing Onyx. I have to change.”

I am silent for a beat, stunned by her candid honesty. “And you killed the Shadow Commander?”

“I didn’t want to, but I found out he was planning on killing Onyx. I killed him and inherited the title of Commander. I know I’m immature and I know I’ve been exceptionally stupid, but I’m good at my job. It’s why I’m here. I’m just not built for this.” She waves a small hand around us. “For indoor spaces and doors and meetings. It’s new to me.”

“What is your relationship with King Espan?” I ask, sitting opposite her in the cell. Why, I’m not sure, but I cannot remember the last time I felt actual emotion towards anything or anyone. I am enjoying this conversation, for the first time in years.

“He’s almost been like family to me, or a close friend, perhaps. He is so patient with me, so understanding. He met me first when I was a child.” She grins, her eyes lighting up. She’s so transparent, every emotion she feels is visible on her face. “He said I was the terribly behaved sister he never had. He provided me with food and shelter for a few weeks while Onyx and I got back on our feet.”

“And the other one? Stellan?”

“He’s my hunting partner and deputy. He’s our best warrior.”

“Anything more?” I ask, and her eyes widen at me in a delighted expression before she lets out a loud laugh, her head tipped back in sheer joy as her shoulders shake with laughter. “Oh my word! You’re jealous!”

“I’m not.”

She raises an eyebrow like she thinks I’m spewing bullshit at her. *Maybe I am.*

“I’m advising you that relations between mortal and immortal are a bad idea.”

“I don’t need you to parent me.”

“Clearly you do,” I snap, regretting the words as soon as they leave my mouth. The regret intensifies when her shoulders slump instead of fighting back.

“This is why I don’t open up to people,” she mumbles, staring at her small feet.

Fuck, do I know how that feels, and I hate that I’m the one responsible for giving her the feeling that I loathe so much. In a hundred years, I don’t think I’ve properly talked to anyone about anything remotely personal.

“I’m sorry, Renna. I didn’t mean that.”

“You did.”

“I didn’t. But there’s a reason mortals and immortals don’t mix. What if you had a child and the child was immortal? You’d die of old age while it was still a toddler.”

She shrugs, saying nothing. She’s shut off, and I don’t like it.

“Renna,” I say, tenderly tipping her chin up. “I’ll free your brother.”

She nods, intense relief crossing her expression, but she has gone quiet. I gently untie her hands, rubbing the deep welts where the rope had bitten her skin. “Please behave while you’re in here, Renna.”

She nods once more, her eyes big and brown. Part of me doesn’t want to leave her in here, but she’s committed two imprisonable offences and she’s under investigation for attempting to break into the Vault, so I cannot have her roaming free. I cannot risk the safety of my people just because I want to sleep with her.

But holy shit, do I want to sleep with her.

CHAPTER 8

APPLE PIE (RENNA)

Rexxan is untying me. Is it strange to say I'm a little disappointed? But I'm glad I'll have freedom to move around in my cell.

This encounter with Rexxan in the prison cell has only confused me more. I've seen so many personalities from him that I can no longer decipher what is real. Knowing what he is like, I imagine none of them are real. He thinks I'm stupid, but I'm fine with that.

An underestimated woman is a lethal weapon.

He finishes untying me and turns me back around to face him. My pulse hikes against my will every time my eyes land on his. They're spectacular, deep orange with flecks of auburn and gold, and his lips...I lean in closer, wanting to be nearer him for reasons I'm not even going to try to understand. Copper eyes meet mine, running down my face slowly.

Holy *fuck*, the sexual tension in this cell is insane. But we can't. Not just because I'm not an immortal, but because it wouldn't work logistically. I'm five foot five, he's whatever he is, and probably two hundred and fifty pounds. It can't happen. But I'm only human, blessed with an overactive imagination, and I do love to imagine how it would feel to be taken by him.

"Are you going to kiss me?" I pause, in denial that that sentence I'd just heard had come from me. Did I just say that? I *did* just say that. *Nice*.

He laughs, but it's cold, and I'm suddenly being spun around by two giant hands. He pulls my body flush with his

and all I can do is hope and pray that he didn't hear the quiet moan that escaped my lips.

"I don't like to be gentle, Renna. You have me all wrong."

My brain is scrambled. One giant hand snakes around my neck, forcing my head back to look at him as my back presses harder into his chest. I'm at his mercy, a puppet in his hands. I need him. I need *this*. Finally, after days of imagining, I'll know what it is to have his lips on mine.

"Apple pie."

"What?" I breathe, confused. This conversation has taken a disappointing U-turn.

"Apple pie. My favourite food. Behave, Renna, or I'll put your brother's corpse in this cell with you."

When I turn around, he's gone and I am locked in a cell once more, kept company only by my racing heartbeat and the lingering scent of leather and red wine.



SLOWLY, I watch the days turn into weeks. And as they slip through my fingers, so does my composure, the rope that tethers me to my sanity fraying at the edges. I've been locked up before, and this brings back haunting memories of a small dirty child hidden away in a wardrobe.

Onyx visits me every single day, pleading my release with the guards, trying to meet with the King, who we are told is busy solving some kind of big issue. My dislike grows for him each day that I spend counting the fucking bricks on the wall.

"No." I whisper, as Onyx arrives one day having smuggled a metal bottle in his cloak. "No, Onyx. I'm not doing that in here."

"What do you want me to say? I'm spending twelve hours a day trying to get you out of here, but it's not working."

“I can’t do that in here,” I repeat, backing away from him until I feel the thud of my back against the stone bricks behind me. He grasps my face in his hands, tipping my head from side to side, inspecting me closely.

“Your eyes aren’t glowing yet. We can wait another day, but you know that’s not wise.”

“I can’t do it in here. There are no healers.”

“I don’t want you to do it in here either, but what is the alternative?”

This isn’t like me. I’m normally so composed, but I’m going insane here. And now this. I hold the metal bottle, staring at the green drink that I love and hate so much. It does so much for me, but it strips so much away.

“Please, no. I’m not drinking it this time.”

“Do you mean that?” He asks, gently.

I have no choice. I have never had a choice, only the cruel illusion of one. Tantalising and tempting, but an illusion all the same. I shake my head, pulling the cork once the guards on shift have passed on patrol. Onyx forces the last of it down my throat and I lie down on the stone bench in my cell with a wooden stick between my teeth to keep me quiet.

I bury my face in his cloak as agony shoots like arrows through my abdomen, my limbs on fire. He clamps a hand over my mouth when I scream, gently talking me through it.

“Time to leave,” says a guard, appearing at the door as the evening draws near.

“What the fuck? I still have ten minutes,” argues a furious Onyx.

“Well, my shift ends now, so it’s time for you to leave.”

“No,” I whisper, grabbing his cloak. “No.”

“Renna, I have to go.” He prizes my fingers off him. “We cannot upset the King more or you’ll never get out of here.” He squats down opposite me, whispering with eyes flooded with worry. I’ve never done this alone before.

“I’ll try and get in here later. Just...stay alive for me. I’ll see you in the morning as well, okay?”

I nod, my knuckles white.

“She’s sick,” he says, standing and turning around. “She needs a healer. She needs pain relief.”

“The healers come at eight. I’ll send one then.”

“No, she needs one now!” He shouts, towering over the guard.

“They come at eight.”

Onyx spits in the guard’s face, stalking straight out of the cell and kicking over a tall rack of spears out in the corridor. I imagine he is heading straight to try and see the King, but I can hardly formulate a coherent thought. Agony shreds its way through my insides, my head threatening to split into two. Blood trickling out my nose, ears, and mouth.

I can’t breathe.

I need Onyx and Stellan. Minutes feel like hours until time becomes an unfamiliar concept. Four o’clock turns into nine o’clock, and I see no Onyx and no healers.

I’m going to die in this cell.

I’m going to die the same way my mother did.

CHAPTER 9

THE BATHROOM (REXXAN)

My week has been nothing short of atrocious. Three days I spent on the Forest border, forced to fall behind on other work to support my guards killing wolves and spies on my borders.

My son has been badly injured in a battle near the Sea City, and I'm too far away to help. My every waking moment is spent trying to find out more about the incident at the Vault. The other Kings and Queens are all shitting themselves over it. I'm the only one acting like a fucking adult. And the Commander's brother, Onyx, whatever his name is, is a thorn in my side. He offered today to pledge his life as a guard to me if I'd let her out.

But something he said has been echoing in my mind over and over.

She's had a difficult past, my lord. She doesn't cope with being locked up at all. It's harder for her than for others.

Who is this woman? And what has she been through? She's so young to have seen so much, and that pisses me off for some reason. Her brother's words have infiltrated something I'd forgotten I'd had; my conscience.

I've stayed away from her for weeks for many reasons. I don't fully trust that she isn't the person who tried to get into the vault. Secondly, I cannot keep having her trespassing around my Kingdom, endangering herself and others. And thirdly, she's lying about something. Hell, she's lying about

everything. All that she's told me about herself is a lie. I know women like her, and they're dangerous.

But like she has all week, she makes it impossible to focus on anything.

I have to check on her.

"My lord, I didn't expect a Royal visit today," says one of the guards at the prison gates.

"I wasn't planning one. I need to see the Shadow Commander."

"The...the Shadow Commander is in the prisons?"

I nod, walking past without another word. He scurries after me with a set of keys. "What does he look like?"

"*She* is small. Dark hair."

"Her? *She's* the Shadow Commander, my lord?" He says, handing me four keys. I ignore him and leave the foyer, walking along arched lantern-lit hallways. Racks of spears line the walls, the air thick and heavy. It's gone midnight, and each cell is pitch black.

The Shadow Commander's cell is easily identifiable. It has three extra chains binding the door shut. No one trusts her, and she picked the locks on the first one despite an extensive search showing no sign of any tools on her.

"Renna," I say, rattling the door before unlocking the first padlock. I can see her shadowy form sleeping on the floor in the dark. She looks small. "Renna," I say, louder now, as I pull the first chain off the bars, moving onto the next padlock. The chains rattle loudly but she doesn't move. "Renna," I call for the third time.

I pull the second chain off and toss it into her cell. It hits the ground beside her head, but she doesn't so much as move. Concern creeps down my spine. I remove the third thick chain, unlocking the door to her cell and pushing it open despite the hinges arguing in protest.

"Renna." I stand in the doorway. She doesn't move, and in a sickening moment, I realise that I can hardly see her

breathing in the dark. I flash my hand over the lamp on the wall, whispering an incantation that floods the cell in a dim warm light.

My heart skids to a halt.

She's fucking dead. She can't be dead. An unexpected shard of icy dread prickles my spine.

I clear the space between us in a fraction of a second, turning her over. Blood runs out of her mouth, nose, and ears, pooling on the floor beneath her. I put two fingers on her neck, finding a pulse, and I swear to the gods I've never felt relief like it.

"Renna," I say, sitting her up against the wall. "Renna, fucking wake up." Taking her chin in my hand, I open her mouth with two fingers, letting blood flow down her chin.

She chokes awake with a startled jolt, opening an eye. "I—I'm dead. Am I dead?"

"No, not dead. Fuck, Renna. What happened?"

"I'm sick ag—again," she whispers, closing her eyes once more.

"No, stay awake," I order, putting her elbows on her thighs and sitting her forward to open her airways. "Cough again, gently."

She chokes, and I angle her head differently until steady breaths start leaving her mouth. "How long have you been sick?"

"I don't know what day it is," she mumbles, quietly.

"Wednesday, early morning."

"Twenty hours?" She offers, fighting consciousness. Dark lashes flutter shut. "I need Onyx and Stellan. They know what to do."

"Fuck, Renna," I whisper, my chest tight. My pulse is thundering, and it feels alien because it's been years since anything or anyone has been able to elicit that reaction from me.

I pick her up and sit her on the bench, covering her face with her hood. I leave the prisons, ignoring questioning looks from the guards as I slide her onto my horse and ride us back to the palace. Thankfully it's the middle of the night, so I am granted a reprieve from the crowds of the public who usually follow my every move.

"Stay awake," I murmur, my lips against her temple as I carry her up my private stairway into the palace and over the threshold into my halls. I put her down on my bed, calling for Talyn and Onyx. The other one of their little trio, I just cannot stand.

Onyx runs in not ten minutes later, skidding through the doorway. He must be one of the few people who gets as little sleep as me. He's awake and already dressed in black leather training gear.

"Ren," he breathes, rushing over and taking her hand in both of his. He looks downright terrified, tilting her face up to check her bleeding. "I tried to come and see you. I fucking tried, I swear. The prison guards wouldn't let me in."

"I'm okay," she whispers. She's not lying to look tough, I realise. She's lying to protect her brother's sanity. "I'm okay."

Lynna breezes in, shrouded in a silvery glow in a long white ballgown. Her infatuated bodyguards follow behind her and lift the iridescent white cloak from her shoulders. She slides all her diamond rings off her fingers, handing them off to Threnne, the head of her security, who pockets them for her. As ever, she likes to make an entrance, but I cannot resent her. Bright turquoise eyes meet mine and she smiles slightly. "Talyn is coming. He's on his way from the Western Lakes."

I nod by way of response as she accepts a gold hair clip from one of her guards, putting her hair up out of her face. "I don't know why you call me here, Rex. You can heal as well as I can," she says, in an ancient form of Forest Tongue that few left on earth can speak. She washes her hands in a bowl, stepping over to Renna, a warm smile on face.

"Hello, Commander Renna. My name is Lynna," she explains, her tone soft. Her pale skin glows beside her white

hair, and by the look on Renna's face, she is enraptured. She raises a dark eyebrow, her eyes wide with awe, like her sickness is now long forgotten.

"Holy shit. I think you might be," she pauses for breath, "the most beautiful person I—I've ever seen in my life. Do you just...*look like that*? Is that what you look like when you wake up? Or is today just a particularly good day for you?"

Lynna lets out a bright laugh, rows of straight white teeth on show, and I swear to the fucking gods I see Renna fall in love with her.

"That's very kind of you to say, Commander Renna. I do in fact spend an awful lot of time on my appearance. But more than that, I am in charge of healing in this kingdom. I'm going to help you, even if it's just reducing your pain. Is that alright with you?"

Renna nods, shutting up for once. Like the rest of Yterras, she's fallen under Lynna's bewitching spell. It's getting boring now.

"And you are?" My healer asks, looking up at Onyx, with a hint of appreciation, if I'm not mistaken. She could do worse than Onyx. Annoying though he is, no one could doubt his loyalty.

"Her brother," he says, his face as stony as usual. She entrances everyone except Onyx, it seems. "I was adopted," he clarifies, quickly.

This is a detail of their past I cannot understand. No mortal parents would adopt an immortal child. It makes no sense. Lynna just nods, giving him a reassuring smile. "Do you mind if I touch your neck, Renna?" She asks, her voice soft. Renna just shakes her head, staring up at her in wonder.

Lynna examines her carefully, and I know that her thoughts mirror mine. Something is amiss here. She gently wipes the blood from Renna's nose and lips, examining it.

"You found her like this?" She asks me, in our ancient dialect.

“In the prisons, yes. She was like this a few weeks ago also.”

“Was she really?” Lynna frowns. “It cannot be an infectious sickness then, can it?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so.”

“You think she’s being poisoned,” states Lynna, flatly. She abuses her godly bloodline to read my mind, but I cannot resent her for it because I do it right back.

“She is an assassin for a living. I’m sure she’s racked up more than a few enemies.”

Lynna hums in thought, tipping Renna’s head back and opening her mouth gently. “I’ve not seen anything like this, I don’t believe.”

“What are you speaking?” Asks Renna, looking up at me.

“It’s an extinct form of Forest Tongue.”

“Whatever floats your boat,” she says, sleepily. She stifles a yawn, and it’s very sweet. “We have our own language too.”

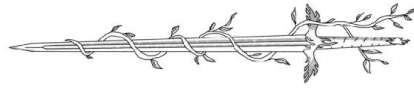
“I know. I speak it,” I say, switching to her native tongue.

Her eyes widen. “How?”

“I speak all of the languages, Renna.” Sounds impressive, but it isn’t. I think anyone who’d been alive eight hundred years would’ve picked them up.

“So you like languages and apple pie,” she summarises, weakly. My eyes snap up to her brother. I don’t like people knowing details about me. “It’s fine, he doesn’t speak it,” she reassures me, closing her eyes. “He speaks only Forest Tongue, and some Golden Tongue too.”

I cannot have Renna. I cannot be with her. But I know in that moment that I’d have my healers find both the cause and the cure to her sickness, whatever it takes. I cannot send her away knowing that she’ll continue to live in this pain.



BY FRIDAY, she is strong enough to stand when I return from a five-mile swim.

Diffused sunlight streams in from the archway out to my terrace, painting her in golden light. She's in my bed still, but not in the way I would like her to be. I watch her bare feet touch down on the sandstone floor, holding my arm as she wobbles. I raise a suggestive eyebrow at her as her fingers tighten on my bicep.

“Finding any excuse to touch me?”

She grins, releasing my arm and twirling on the spot with no issues. *She fucking was, as well.* She laughs at my expression. “I can stand just fine, I just wanted to see if these were real.” She pokes my arm again. “You never sleep.”

“Very rarely.”

“Neither does he,” she whispers, pointing her little finger at her brother. “I dare not speak loud in case I wake him.”

“He is protective of you.”

“For as long as Onyx lives, I'll always feel safe.”

I nod in agreement, saying nothing as I head into my dressing room to change my shirt.

“Is *Lynna* your wife?” She asks, making my fingers pause over the dark green linen for just a second.

“You really think I have a wife?” I ask, walking back into my bedroom as I fasten the second-to-top button.

“Well...you have a son, so...,” she shrugs as I put gold cufflinks into my sleeves.

I choose to ignore the downright inappropriate look she is giving me as I adjust my collar. There's probably a portrait of Renna under the word ‘brazen’ in the dictionary. “I have a son,

yes. My wife died when I was about one hundred. I never remarried. That's common knowledge."

"Alright, sunshine. Do you think I sit around and learn facts about you in my free time?"

"Yes. What else are the women of Yterras meant to do?"

"You're a nightmare, REXXAN, did you know that?"

"Yes. And I preferred you when you were sick," I hit back, even though it's absolutely not true. "Onyx got you some clean clothes."

"I need to go back and have a bath."

"I have one."

I point to two colossal double doors at the end of my room, each one ten feet tall and four feet wide. She tiptoes over, scepticism written over her delicate face. I'm struggling to come to terms with the fact that I like having the little tyrant in my space. I enjoy coming home from work to her in my room.

Lifting the leaf-shaped gold handle and twisting it, she pokes her head through the doorway, before shutting it again.

"Oh. My. Gods." She states, opening it an inch again, peering in and shutting it once more, her face pale. "Is that *real*?"

I open the door fully for her, letting her step inside. My 'bathroom' is my prized possession; a huge rectangular pool of turquoise water, thirty feet long. Steam rises from the surface, the air warm and thick. There is no ceiling, but instead a forest canopy; a tropical paradise of trees and vines that shroud the pool in total privacy. It's a door to a jungle from another world. She yelps with joy, sprinting across the marble floor towards the water's edge.

I watch as she launches herself impressively high into the air, backflips twice, and plummets, fully clothed, into the pool. Lynna appears at my side, laughing as we watch Renna vanish below the waterline.

"I came to check how she was feeling, but I'm not sure I'm needed."

My finger runs over my lower lip. She just doesn't seem human. I'm entranced by her. Enthralled by her. *Bewitched* by her. I hate her, yet I want her to stay. It's staining my black and white world grey. "I don't understand her at all."

"Do you want to?"

I do, and that's a problem. "I must get rid of her."

Lynna's eyes meet mine. "You're beginning to like her?"

"I cannot like her."

"The heart wants what it wants."

"My heart was frozen long ago."

"I don't believe that Rex, but falling for a mortal ends in an eternal lifetime of heartbreak for you."

"I'll get rid of her. I'll free her friend Stellan if it means I'll get rid of her."

"I like her."

"Not a useful comment, Lynna. Go." *Fucking women.* Why do they say these things?

She laughs and kisses my cheek, leaving the room in a blur of diamonds and expensive white satin. In the single greatest display of willpower in human history, I leave a soaking-wet Renna alone in my bath. I hope the gods are watching because I'm on my best behaviour.

Instead of indulging in my curiosity about her, I trudge back to my study and do what I should; instruct my spies to follow her and her brother around.

White-hot pain strikes the centre of my chest, sporadic at first and then constant. It plagues me all day and keeps me up when I go to bed. It stops me from drifting off most nights these days, and I'm sick and tired of praying for the solution that will never arrive.

Giving up on sleep for the tenth night running, I drag myself out of bed at one in the morning, change into training gear, and stalk into the pitch-black training courtyard. Dusting my hands with chalk, I hang from the pull-up bar and haul

myself up over and over until my arms betray me. I plummet down to the cool stone tile and switch to lunges with heavy weights on my back. It's exhausting, but the pain in my muscles is not enough to quiet the fire in my chest.

"Why did you free Stellan?" Comes a soft voice, as I move into my second hour of weight training alone in the courtyard. I can't see her, but hiding in the shadows is what she is good at.

"So you'll leave quicker," I retort, giving her the honest truth.

"Oh. You want me gone?"

"I've wanted you gone since I shot you in the woods."

"Oh." She sighs, her chest falling a little as she steps into the courtyard. Instantly the atmosphere changes, charged with some kind of electricity that Evergreen magic alone cannot explain. I want her more than I've wanted something in a long time. But one look at her reminds me that she is not all she seems. Every inch of her is plastered in weapons, poisons, and unfamiliar gadgets, a hood covering her face.

The ring of steel pierces the tranquil quiet as she pulls a sword from her back, standing opposite me. "Fight me?"

She's worse than having a toddler was. "No."

"Please? I'll go away after."

I kick up my sword and catch it, starting to fight her. The first swing of my blade is intercepted by both of hers, her back arching as she rolls under them both. I underestimated her. She'd beat many of my guards. What she doesn't have in size she makes up for in agility, obnoxiously backflipping over my sword as I sweep it at her legs. It's second nature to her, swinging them around her in a perfectly choreographed dance with her ponytail flicking across her face.

"You're an accomplished swordswoman," I say, once she is too breathless to carry on, both of us stopping for some water.

“Really?” Her face lights up. “I’m an archer at heart. How did you get so good?”

“I’m old. I’ve fought in sixty wars,” I tell her, putting down my sword. I cross my arms across my chest, standing opposite her. “Renna, I’ll acquiesce to your request for permission to stay in my forest, subject to limits. You can only hunt in the western section, you cannot fight with my guards, and you must do your fair share of hunting goblins, soldiers, spies, and wolves. I’ve drawn up a contract, it needs your signature.”

She lets out a heavy breath, nodding. “Thank you, REXXAN.”

I like it when she says my name. I’d rather she was screaming it, but I’ll take any scraps of this curious creature that I can get. She shoots an arrow into a target, watching it pierce the tiny black dot at the centre. “Then I’ll leave first thing tomorrow.”

“And decline Espan’s offer of being his date to the Five Kingdom Ball.”

“How did you know about that?”

“I know about everything that happens between my borders.” Except for the fucking Vault break-in. My mood plummets. Who did it, and how did they get past the first wave of guards?

She smiles, but it doesn’t quite touch her eyes. “He’d understand, I hope. I’m wise enough to know when I’m not welcome, and I’m not welcome here.”

She *is* wise, for someone so young. Is she even that young? She lies so often; I don’t know who she really is. Whatever this is between us, it’s confusing. Like we don’t like one another but we’re utterly fascinated by each other.

“How old are you?”

“Truthfully... I’m not sure, exactly. My mother died when I was young, and my father died a few years later. I have no memory of my age and they left no record of me. Onyx

doesn't know how old I am either. He doesn't even know how old *he* is."

"How did your mother die?"

"Of the flu."

"And your father?"

"Onyx stabbed him in the heart."

Fuck. "Why would he stab his father?"

"Because our father beat us." She explains, calmly. "I smashed a window, and Onyx took the blame for me, but my father didn't know who to believe, so he splashed boiling water on us both. I think it was the final straw. He killed our father in his sleep that evening. I'm a monster, REXXAN. Killing comes easily to me, and unaccompanied by guilt. But Onyx... he's not a killer. Sure, he's fucking good at it, but every death haunts him."

Holy shit. That's heavy. I sit down beside her on the courtyard wall, the Kingdom quiet, save for our heavy breaths. I've never known anyone like her, and I don't imagine that I ever will again.

She's fascinating, an enigma I'm desperate to solve, and though I should leave now and go back to my rooms, I don't.

CHAPTER 10

AN ERROR IN THE HALLWAY (RENNA)

The Forest King has done nothing good to me, nor has he been warm and kind, so why do I want this so badly? It's just lust, nothing more.

His fingertips skate along my jawline, dark lashes long and thick as he gazes down at me, unreadable. He doesn't know me, and he doesn't know why I'm really here, either. The Ruthless King is dangerous, and I'm playing with fire. But fire is what I do; I could burn his world to ash if I choose to.

A dangerous part of me is hoping he kisses me just so I can rid myself of the fascination, stop thinking about it, and move on. His hand runs up the back of my neck, his fingers burrowing into my hair before curling into a fist, pulling the dark strands hard. I let out a gentle sigh, raising my fingers to the beginning of the scar on his forehead. It runs viciously over his eye and I'm surprised he didn't lose it.

I'm unhurried and unspeaking as the pads of my fingers skate down his face, because to rush touching King REXXAN would be the greatest of injustices. I wonder how many people have ever touched this scar. Somehow I doubt that it's many, given that he's holding his breath like I might just abuse the trust he has given me. But I don't, because I see the pain behind the stone facade. My fingers don't stray from the pale line of the scar.

"I'm blind in that eye." His deep voice cracks through the comfortable silence, answering my thoughts.

"What happened?"

“The Great Fires.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“How can you not know what that is?”

“I never went to school. I live in the wilderness. I don’t know what anything is.”

“Over half the population of Yterras died that day.”

Oh, shit. Now I feel ignorant. “Is that how you lost your wife?”

“I lost my brother, my mother, my father, my uncles, my wife, three of my best friends, and gained the title of King all in one day.”

Holy fuck. That’s horrible. No wonder he’s so unhappy. “How old were you again?”

“One hundred and four. About nineteen in mortal ages. My son was one, still a newborn in your years. I stayed alive for him.”

He raised a son alone at that age? I can’t imagine him as a father. He never smiles—not once in the six weeks that I have known him. For some reason, I imagine that he and his son are not close. He lets out a weary sigh, his huge, tanned hands scrubbing over his handsome face.

“I’m sharing things that I’ve not spoken aloud for a long time.” His gaze burns into the sky, so intense I’m surprised the stars don’t flee in fear.

“I’ve done that too,” I whisper, placing my small hand over his enormous one, trying to ignore the way his touch ignites sparks that dance their way through the veins beneath my skin. I fight the seductive urge to melt into his touch. I don’t like him, but gods above do I want him. “But you don’t show me who you really are, REXXAN.”

“I do.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. You’re so cold. So cruel.”

“It’s who I am,” he says, shoulders tensing.

I shrug, keeping my mouth shut. He is clearly not happy to have this conversation with me, and for once, I will not push his buttons.

“Renna.”

“Yes?”

“Do not marry Stellan, and be careful with him.”

I am losing the will to live with this man. I lift up my cloak, looking underneath it before turning round and peering down over the wall.

“What are you doing?”

“Sorry, I was just trying to see where you find the audacity to make comments like that at me.”

He snorts, rolling his eyes at my shit joke. “I mean it.”

“I have no plans to, not that it’s any of your nosy, over-entitled business.” I’ve never considered marrying Stellan before, but I sure as fuck am tempted to now, just to spite the Forest King. Stellan would definitely play along.

“Do you *want* to?”

Fucking hell. Clearly not enough people have told this man he’s an imbecile. I vow to make it my mission to make up for lost time on that front. “I’m not sure. I don’t think I’d make a good wife.”

“Why?”

I instinctively laugh out loud and gesture at my general being. “Just look at me, REXXAN.”

“I can’t stop looking at you these days,” he states, his dark gaze staring at his sword as he twirls it around skillful fingers. He says it not as a flirtatious compliment, but as an angered confession, like he’s given this fact too much thought already.

Everything he does is inherently attractive, and I wonder if he knows that. I feel the attraction. Attraction is an understatement—he has kept me up most nights—but I didn’t realise it was quite so mutual.

I have to get out of here. The closer I get to him, the sooner he'll realise the other reason that I'm here. Or worse still, who I am. "I'll come and read and sign this agreement, and you won't see me again."

He nods, and like the taciturn grump that he is, says nothing. I wish I could see even a slither of the real him. All I see is the eerily clever, ice-cold brute of a warrior who doesn't say one genuine thing. He says that *is* the real him, but I see in both Ocealia and Lynna's eyes that they adore him like family. Could they love him so much if he were really that cold?

I shake my head to stop myself from thinking about him, and then realise that to REXXAN, I look like I'm having a twitching attack. Could I play it off as a sneeze? A cough? Fuck me, what has he done to me? I'm supposed to be *the* most dangerous woman on this earth.

"I should go," I declare, freeing my hand from his touch. I feel pulled to him like a magnet. It's unexplainable and it's throwing me off my usual ruthless schedule. Cold floods my skin from the loss of contact, and I miss the feel of his rough, hot hand against mine. He always seems to feel like a furnace, and now I wonder if it's caused by his burns.

I pick up all four of my knives, my two swords, my bow, and my arrows, giving REXXAN a bright smile. "Sweet dreams?"

He says nothing, his face emotionless as I turn on my heel to leave.

"Left." His husky voice breaks the silence, halting me in my tracks.

"Huh?"

"Left. The way to your room is on the left."

"Err..." *shit*. This area of the palace is a maze. Didn't I come from the right? Or was that the way to the libraries? No, that was the way to the meeting halls. "Left. I remember. And then..."

"Left, down past the Great Hall, right through the golden doors, through the sixth door on the left and down the hall."

I nod, remembering now. “Goodnight, REXXAN.”

He stands, still twirling his sword. He’s so astronomically massive that his weapon is almost as long as I am. That did not sound right, and now I’m blushing again because I have the mind of a teenager. “Something on your mind, Commander?” He asks, his thumb rubbing his jaw as he arches an eyebrow at me.

“Your genitalia,” I clap back, and he almost chokes as he shakes his head at me in ill-conceived despair.

“I’ll walk you back. I don’t want you and your horrific sense of direction getting lost.”

“I remember now, so you don’t have to. Or are you that desperate to follow me around like a sad puppy?”

His reply comes without hesitation. “I’m desperate to follow you around.”

I’m laughing as he steers me left, walking beside me as I half-jog to keep up with his giant strides. I spoke at length with Lynna, his...lover? Friend? I don’t know what she is to him, but I do know that she is so attractive that I failed to form a full sentence in the first five minutes after meeting her. She told me that his grandfather was one of the gods, and was seven feet tall, so his size makes sense now.

“Where is your son?”

“He’s at sea at the moment. He is a free spirit; he’s never here. He works as a scout mostly.”

“I think that’s the most you’ve ever said in one go about something that isn’t work.”

“This is work. Conversations with another people’s leader? This is nothing but business.”

Forget anything nice I said about him. “Is this personality a new development for you? Or were your first words out of the womb ‘I hate you’?”

He snorts. “The latter.”

I say nothing back, slowing down slightly so I get the pleasure of walking behind him. Sweet fuck, he has good legs, ridiculously long and stacked with muscle. Have I always been a leg woman? I sure am now. Said legs turn down my hallway and one weathered hand opens my door for me.

“Let’s not pretend you’re a gentleman, Rexxan. You’re not fooling anyone.”

“I’ve claimed many titles in my life, Renna. A gentleman is not one of them.” He narrows those blood-orange eyes at my bedroom setup. “You’ve pushed the bed up to the wall.”

“Err...yes. I was practicing acrobatics in here earlier. I can do a backflip off the bed. Do you want to see?”

“Not particularly, no.”

I laugh out loud. He does seem to make me laugh, even though he’s not funny. It’s an odd thing, to dislike someone so much and yet be well aware of the fact that they are probably misunderstood. “Fair enough.”

My eyes meet his, his expression unreadable, and I’d kill to know just one of the thoughts in his head. The air between us is thick with unspoken words and untaken actions. The quiet buzz and hum of the palace quiets into insignificance as his eyes leave mine and drop down to my mouth.

He’s going to kiss me.

The gentle rise and fall of my chest increases in pace, my breaths falling into time with his. His head dips a fraction of an inch, the muscles of his jaw relaxing with a steady exhale. I’m encapsulated in him; in the smell of red wine and fresh rain on a still forest. The heat of his burns warms my skin as his solid body presses my back further into the wall, caging me in like if he’s going to kiss me, he’s going to do it right.

I know this isn’t the smartest idea, but I’ve craved his touch from the second I met him. One touch, one *kiss*, and I’ll leave him alone. My breaths come hot and heavy as his hand holds my jaw, his gaze serious through thick black lashes. Just as the tension gets so palpable that I can hardly breathe, his face dips, sculpted lips hovering over mine. Every point of

contact between my body and his burns with desire as I teeter on the precipice of the ultimate sin.

“Oh, wow. *Oh, wow*. Can I join in?”

I turn my head to see Onyx and Stellan stroll around the corner, each of them skidding to a halt with a dumbstruck expression. Stellan’s eyes light up like a dog that has found a treat. Cool air swirls its way through the gap between REXXAN and I, taking any remnants of our desire with it.

But it’s not Stellan I am worried about. Onyx says absolutely nothing, just unlocking his door and calmly going inside without a glance in our direction. Stellan blows each of us a kiss and breezes into his room, laughing hysterically through the apple between his teeth. “Oh, Ren. You’ve outdone yourself this time. Sleep well...or don’t!” He calls, locking his door.

I tip my head forward, burying it in the King’s chest. “Fuck.”

“We’re a bad idea, Renna,” he says, returning my feet to the ground. I groan into my hands. Onyx will slit my throat for this. Whilst I have no shame in indulging myself in the bedroom sense, I have always kept it professional. Being seconds away from tongue-tangling with the Forest King in the hallway? Not professional. He must sense I’m internally melting down because the conversation takes a swift pivot.

“What’s your favourite food, huntress? I’ve told you mine.”

“Strawberries and chocolate,” I whisper.

“That’s two.”

I roll my eyes with an exaggerated sigh. “Together, dipshit. You eat them together.”

For the first time since I have known him, a hint of a smile crosses his lips. It’s spectacular, like the first shard of golden sun that pierces a rain-laden sky. “Stay for the ball in three days, then leave. Don’t turn Espan down. But I swear to the gods that made me, if he touches you in front of me then I’ll happily deal with the war that starts after I kill him.”

I nod like an idiot, lost for words and drowning in a need that I just cannot explain. I despise this man. I repeat this over and over as Rexxan shuts my door and leaves without another word. I bury my stupid, incompetent head in my pillow and rattle off every swear word I can think of before heading back out and knocking on Onyx's door.

“O, it's me.”

He opens the door, drying his curly hair with a towel, freshly bathed. “Rennalya.”

Full name. *I am officially fucked.*

“Before you say anything, that was the first and last time that has happened with him. We didn't do anything—“

“I don't care. Do what you want.”

“Onyx, please. I'm sorry.”

“There's no need. I don't care.”

“Well, evidently you do!”

And then for the first time in years, I fight with my brother and spend the night in guilty tears.

CHAPTER II

AN ERROR IN THE FOREST (REXXAN)

I have officially lost my fucking mind.

That is the only explanation for what I did last night. I'm eight hundred years old, and I'm behaving like I'm eighty. The only reason Renna isn't in my prison just to keep her out of my way is the memory of finding her half-dead in her cell. I cannot remember ever wanting someone so much, or so intensely.

I've been hard since she stepped foot in my palace. But she's everything I need to avoid. She leaves a trail of trouble everywhere she goes. I *will* get rid of her, because the only thing that burns hotter than my desire to be inside her is the intensity of my dislike for her and the web of lies that comes out of her mouth.

Ascan escorts her into my study, and the temperature of my blood rises instantly. Will I always feel this drawn to her? Like there's some otherworldly magnet that's making me desperate to touch her, to feel the heat of her skin beneath my touch. I want her crying out my name. Fuck that, I *need* her crying out my name. It only worsens when I look up at her.

The legs that plague my nocturnal thoughts are clad in black hunting trousers. Three differently sized blades strap against the athletic curves of her thigh. Her waist is cinched by a black leather belt, her hair loose and glossy down to her hips. What looks like blood from a wolf splatters her neck and face, but it could be human for all I know. I've been having her closely watched, and she gets up to all sorts of shady activities whilst the world around her sleeps.

“I’ve just got back from the forest,” she says, by way of explanation. Unashamed, her eyes roam over my arms and shoulders in my shirt, biting her lip to control a smile.

“Trespassing, which is an imprisonable offence, as you well know by now,” I say, coldly.

She pulls a *what-can-you-do?* face, shrugs, and takes a pear from the bowl in my study. I am not going to imprison her. *I need this woman as far away from me as possible.* I open a drawer, laying out a contract in front of her, and she squares her shoulders like she means business. It’s sweet.

I spend an hour going through it with her, ensuring she understands each step. She’s far more intelligent than she lets on, and I realise that this is deliberate. She’s underestimated and it gives her the upper hand. Even the fact that she speaks multiple languages is odd, given she was never educated and is only in her twenties.

She scrawls notes across the contract, and after three and a half hours of negotiation, we reach an agreement. Even more incredibly, despite the stifling tension between us, we make it through the meeting without me laying her over the desk in front of us and eating her like I’m starved.

I am starved.

She signs both copies, taking one for herself and reading it through once more. White teeth nibbling on a fingernail draw my attention to her mouth, and I continue the perpetual fight to keep my thoughts professional around her.

“This will work for us, REXXAN. My people will be happy.”

“Good. We’ll revisit this in six months. If I’m not happy with how it is working, this will be null and void.”

She sighs, rolling her dark, dark eyes but nodding her agreement. I don’t miss the word *megalomaniac* whispered under her breath, though.

“I have a healer looking into your sickness.”

Beautiful but deceitful eyes meet mine and for a split second there’s a flash of panic, but it’s gone as fast as it came.

She's a liar and an assassin, so whilst I'm not shocked by the constant falsehoods that leave those intoxicating lips, they still disappoint me every time.

"That's not necessary, REXXAN."

I stretch back in my chair, crossing my legs and interlacing my fingers. "Call it curiosity, then."

Yes, Renna, I'm onto you. She lets out a shaky sigh, saying nothing in return. She is quiet today. Something is bothering her, but she doesn't tell me what, and I don't press. I don't ask her whether she is leaving today or staying for the week, because I shouldn't care.

We speak very briefly about the threats of war over the Vault break-in and the rising threats in the South. Once again, I am struck by how wise she is for someone so young. She stands up, and for the first time since I'd met her, bows to me.

"My lord," she nods her goodbye, her voice unintentionally seductive. "Thank you for your time."

She leaves with Ascan without another look in my direction.



I HAVE a problem saying no to Lynna. That is why the two of us sit on opposite sofas in one of my libraries, deep in conversation. I'm glad she's the only woman in my life because I cannot handle another. Why do they analyse every detail of every conversation?

"So what, you almost kissed her? I think you're being much too hard on yourself. That woman is...there's something about her. She's more beautiful than anyone I've ever met. Who can blame you? I would kiss her if I could."

This conversation should've ended half an hour ago, but I'm bravely soldiering on because there's still wine left in the bottle. "Why are we still discussing this?"

“Because it’s good for you!” She protests as I fill her glass with the wine that cost me more than the diamonds in her ears. “It’s healthy, Rex.”

“I never make mistakes like this. She’s a mortal, and I cannot disregard the fact that she likely has something to do with what happened at the Vault.”

“Well, you didn’t marry her. I don’t think you need to be as worried as you are if it meant nothing to you?”

“It meant nothing,” I affirm, repeating the same phrase I’d told myself over and over today. *It meant nothing*. But I can’t rid my thoughts of the ruthless assassin with a happy laugh and a love for strawberries and bad jokes. My hand tightens around my glass, threatening to shatter it. I have to stop thinking about her. I cannot act on this unexplainable lust.

“Will you tell the people what happened at the Vault?” Lynna asks, freeing her hair from its clip, letting long white hair tumble all the way down to the sofa she is perched on. I’m grateful for the change of topic.

“No. They’ll panic. Whoever it was only got through the first doors before they ran off. There’s no need to tell them.”

“And if the South is trying to disturb the Vault Stones?”

“Then I’ll take them to war. There is no other option. The South will not get in the Vault. Not while I have breath in my lungs.”

“I do not doubt you,” she says, softly. “We’re preparing to stockpile healing supplies for emergency use.”

“Good. I’ll issue more formal guidance to you and Talyn this week.” I take a deep breath and sigh. “And if *she’s* behind it?”

“Renna? Behind the Vault break-in? REXXAN, she’s morally corrupt, but she’s not any more morally corrupt than you. She wouldn’t dream of throwing the order of the elements off.”

“Or she’s got us all fooled. Frian is interrogating people about her as we speak.”

“When was the last time you took a day off?”

She's so nosy, but I cannot fight her on it. Lynna, Cetresar, Ellatar, and Frian are the closest thing I have to friends. "Last year."

"That's bad, Rex."

"I have no reason to take a day off."

"Well do, because all of us who love you are worrying about you. You used to take every other weekend off."

Ignoring the use of that four-letter word that I despise so much, I take a deep breath. "I'm not the man I was then. I've seen too much. Been through too much."

She nods in resigned agreement and hovers her hands above my chest. I flinch involuntarily, my abdomen tensing as she places a porcelain hand over the scarring across my chest.

"They're bad today," she says, her fingertips starting to glow with magic. She whispers Evergreen spells under her breath, spending an hour desperately trying to cool them. It doesn't work. It rarely works.



THE WEEKEND WAS A BAD ONE, even by my standards. By midday on Saturday I had lost my voice from screaming into and passed out sometime shortly after, surrounded by healers. Now I've woken up and it's Monday, two hours from the ball.

I've taken so much pain relief I feel sick, my vision blurred from the pain across my face and chest. But I have to go. And as I have always done, I will wear a blank expression through the agony and bear it.

I don't want to go, but as much as I resent losing my evening of hunting in the forest, the ball signifies the end of a month of royal visits and other boring duties. I'll attend together with Lynna, as I have done at every event this decade to save each other the torture of going with anyone else.

“Perhaps Renna’s brother will be there,” I goad her, raising an eyebrow. Her pale cheeks flush a little and she smiles shyly.

“He has no interest in me. He expresses no emotion, and just stands watch of his sister like a hawk.”

This is a first; Lynna’s interest in someone being unrequited. “Not that I’m interested,” she adds, far too quickly. I raise my eyebrows a few times at her, and she punches my abs weakly. “Don’t you dare mention anything to him!”

I smile like a fool because this is so unlike her. It’s like being in our past again, before the cruel jaws of life chewed us both up, spat us out, and left us to deal with the consequences. It is sweet, and though I like to pretend I care for no one, I’d cut off my left hand to see Lynna happy one day. I doubt Onyx is as immune to her as she thinks.

I take her arm, leading her down to the Five Kingdom Ball with our bodyguards behind us. As ever, we silence the room as we arrive, and we’re immediately sucked into unbearable conversation with the noblemen and women of Yterras.

“Turn around,” Lynna whispers, eyes wide. I turn to see what has ensnared her attention. My blood catches fire, heading directly south until I’m forced to adjust the way I’m standing. Beside King Espan, in his usual gold crown and pale cloak, is a sight that I imagine will be burned into my retinas for the rest of my life.

Renna is in a dress that I can only describe as *scandalous*. A slit runs up her thigh, ceasing at her hip, the low-cut dress held up by the thinnest of gold chains. She’s barefoot. Miles of tanned brown skin is on display, interrupted only by a gold cuff on her bicep. She wears no other jewellery and her hair is free of clips, loose down to her waist.

That *fuckin*g hair. I wonder how many times I could wrap it around my hand. She’s a vision in satin, and I don’t understand how the rest of us mere men are supposed to cope. The rest of the room is stunned into half-disapproving, half-awestruck silence. I believe that she could be arrested for leaving the house in a garment like that in the River Kingdom.

She says something to Espan as they begin the descent down the stairs and he lets out a loud laugh, his hand nestled on the curve of her waist. I'm struck with a sudden desire to declare war on the Golden Kingdom.

Fuck inter-kingdom peace, I just want Renna.

"Who...is that? She's...wow," whispers one of the noblemen I am standing with. I shoot him a glare so venomous that his mouth shuts closed immediately.

"If you don't finish what you started with her tonight, I'll be bitterly disappointed," murmurs Lynna, her breath brushing the skin beneath my ear as I accept a drink for us both from one of my staff. "Where does one even buy a dress like that? Where do I buy a *waist* like that? Black satin as well? I love it."

"Can you pull your head out of Renna's arse long enough to eat dinner, Lynna?"

She laughs, lacing her arm through mine as I lead her to the Royal Table. "Rex, I honestly don't know that I can."

The table consists of all the Kings and Queens, as well as fifteen other high-profile lords and ladies. My mood dips, watching the way some of them drool over Renna, hanging onto her every word. I remain quiet, tired of everyone trying far too hard to impress me.

Lord Wornen, sitting to Renna's left, moves his chair further away as if she has a disease. Renna just rolls her eyes at Lynna, mouthing the word *wanker* at my healer. The Shadow Hunters are intensely hated in some areas, the River Kingdom more than any. As Renna has said, many of her people die defending other people's borders. She has written me an extensive report—over fifty-five pages—on the number of Shadow Hunters who die to help other kingdoms. It is staggering, and I'm comfortable in admitting that I've been ignorant of it until now.

"Is there a problem?" I ask Wornen, as he moves his glass and cutlery further away from Renna.

“I’m surprised you’ve let one of them at the table, even if she is the company of King Espan.”

“One of them?” Asks Friar.

He nods and his friend snorts in agreement. “Shadow Hunters. They’re dirty, my lord. They live outside.”

I open my mouth but the Golden King beats me. “I’d urge you to watch your tone,” Espan is calm and kind as usual. This is why he gets nothing done.

“Espan, it’s fine, really,” says Renna, quietly. “Just ignore it.”

“I’m surprised you know how to use cutlery,” comments Wornen’s friend, as the food arrives.

Renna says nothing, clearly trying her hardest to behave. I hate it when she causes trouble, but I think I might hate it even more now that she’s quiet and subdued. Over the course of the next hour, the comments get worse and worse, criticising her appearance, her etiquette, a scar on her shoulder, her dress, as well as constant comments about her race.

The only reason I haven’t intervened is because she doesn’t need me to. No one else noticed her slip a white pill into Wornen’s drink, but I did, and now he looks a delightful shade of green. But when he tells her she has no place in the world and goes to poke a scar over her eyebrow, my thoughts shift from angry to murderous. “Do me a favour, Wornen,” I say, breaking my silence to stand and place a hand on his shoulder.

He scrambles to his feet. “Anything, my lord.”

“Leave.”

“Uh—e—excuse me?”

“You’ll leave before you can make one more comment about my guests,” I say, beckoning a guard over with two fingers. Renna swivels in her seat to face him and my gaze drops to her sculpted legs. “And one little favour for me, darling,” she purrs, a dark, seductive gaze landing on Wornen.

She’s perfect for me.

“What would that be?” He spits out, looking down at her with disgust.

“Suck my cock,” she says, enunciating each word slowly and clearly. She gives him a quick wink and swirls around back to the table, prompting a mixture of laughter and shock from the rest of the guests.

“Marry her!” Mouths Lynna, looking at me.



ONCE I’VE REMOVED Wornen and his friend and killed them both for disrespecting Renna, amongst other things, I can’t find her. “Where is she, Lynna?”

“Rexxan! What’ve you done?”

“I didn’t like him anyway, it’s been on my to-do list for years. Where is she?”

“You have to stop solving issues like that!”

Is she suffering from hearing loss? “Where is she?”

“She left and asked Espan not to follow her.”

“Did she look upset?”

“No, she didn’t look anything. She just said she was tired of all the...,” Lynna winces, agonised at the idea of swearing, “...of the bullshit and left.”

“Should I go?” I have no idea what to do with an upset woman. All I know is that Lynna likes hot water bottles when she’s bleeding and diamonds for every other problem. I have no experience of comforting women.

“Yes, go,” advises Lynna, and I do, but I can’t find Renna. She isn’t in her room, nor is she in my bathroom, which I’ve found her breaking into twice since I’d shown her it. I thought I’d find her in the training courtyard, but she isn’t there either.

“She’s in the forest.”

Ellatar stands in the hallway, arms across his gold-plated chest.

“How would you know that?”

“Because I just saw her collect her swords and leave heading east.”

A frisson of jealousy pangs in my gut. “Paying close attention to the Shadow Commander, Ellatar?”

A slight smile graces his lips. “Doing my job, REXXAN.”

Fuck him. “Fuck you.”

He laughs as I stalk out the hallway. If he wasn't my friend, I'd have fired him last century. But I am wise enough to know that the most valuable thing a King can have is a friend that keeps his ego in check.

I don't know whether to follow her. I have no reason to follow her. I tell myself I'll follow her because she shouldn't be alone in the forest, but Renna is a force of nature. She'd be just fine.

But I am worried now that Wornen's words will bite her as ferocious as any wolf could. So, for reasons far beyond my own wisdom, I ride out of the palace grounds, along the eastern road, and through the gate into the woods. I leave my horse beside hers at the gate and allow myself to sink into the blissful dark of the forest. *My home.*

I'll give it to her; she's good. It takes me an hour to find even a trace of her. But I could find and ensnare a specific butterfly in this forest and the Shadow Commander is no different. I weave my way through the trees above, watching down on her as she walks through the forest in that. Fucking. *Dress.* I slink from branch to branch, wordless and silent as she slashes the branches in front of her.

“Egotistical men,” she says, into the soundless night. “They always think they're one step ahead, but truly they're not.”

I jolt out of the way as an arrow pierces the air, rocketing up through the tree canopy and skimming my chest and face. I

plummet down to the forest floor, a knife at her throat before she can even breathe out my name. My face is so close to hers that I can feel the heat from her skin penetrating the cool air.

“We must stop meeting like this, Commander.”

“Oh, but we have *so* much fun out here,” she breathes out, one ringed finger brushing a lock of hair from the nape of her neck. The same finger hooks under the tip of my knife at her throat, gently trailing it upwards and over her chin, settling it at the little indent in the centre of her bottom lip. The look in her eyes isn’t fear, it isn’t annoyance, it isn’t affection. It’s pure unadulterated lust.

She wants me to kiss her. Gods above, I think I’d sacrifice my fortune for one brush of my lips on hers. But she is not just any woman, she’s addictive in the most toxic of ways. Before I can act on any of my treacherous thoughts she snatches the blade of the knife between two straight rows of teeth, pulls away, and sprints into the trees around us.

I sprint after her, wondering how my evening plans morphed so quickly from fake conversation over caviar to chasing an inappropriately-dressed criminal through the woods. Her laughter echoes around the trees, glimpses of satin evanescent behind gnarled tree bark.

Somehow, I lose her. The forest is silent. Eerily silent. This is what it feels like to be the Shadow Commander’s prey. I pause to catch any sound of her, but I should’ve known better. A knife flies out of the bushes at a breakneck speed. It lands with a thud in the tree between my thighs. *Fuck*. At least I got one child out.

I yank it out, my blood temperature rising to an insufferable level. “And here I was thinking you wanted me in that way,” I call, as she darts through the trees again. She moves like lightning, but I am faster, and I throw the knife at her with everything that I have. Her yelp pierces the quiet air as she realises she is pinned by her dress to the tree behind her. I clear the space between us in seconds, bracing a hand either side of her head on the rough trunk of the tree.

Her breasts brush my chest with each heavy breath she takes, her eyes fixed on mine. She's got a dangerous glint in her eye, like she really does not give a shit. The cool metal of her blade bites at the skin on my own throat now, but my knife kisses her neck too. "One push. One push of my hand and the great Forest King will bleed out at my feet."

"Doesn't bother me, Commander. I've made my peace." I wrap a hand around the steel blade, forcing it down.

"What do you want, REXXAN? I'm leaving soon, before you tell me to. And if you ask me to apologise to Wornen, I'll put this knife somewhere a whole lot more unpleasant than your head."

"Wornen is in three separate pieces in a hessian sack. I'm here to ask if you're alright, Renna."

She laughs, dropping the knife altogether. I return the gesture. *We're getting somewhere.* "Don't pretend you care, REXXAN, it's patronising."

"I do." *I really do.*

"This is just business," she snarls, quoting my own words to her. She's emanating rage from every pore of her body.

"What he said isn't true."

"Isn't it? You said yourself you want me out of your kingdom as soon as possible."

I do, because for some reason, being around her makes my chest ache, wanting for things that it should not be wanting for. "I see. I understand your frustration."

She laughs coldly, tipping her head back in agonised exasperation. The shadows of the trees over the starlit sky reflect in her eyes. "You're a shell, REXXAN. No personality. Just the same, monotonous responses that you give to everyone else. Do you? Do you *really* understand my frustration? No, you don't, but you just chose a response from your default list of six sentences. You have no idea what it is to be me, or to be any of us hunters."

“You have no idea what it is to be turned away at every door, and for what reason? Because my parents didn’t care enough to give me a chance in life? You’re the same as the rest of them, whether you think you’re better or not, you’re just the same. You’ll let us live on your borders, but only in return for the bloodshed of *my* people!” She shouts, eyes burning with fury as she points at her chest.

I go to speak but she isn’t finished; the embodiment of feminine rage, arms outstretched wide as she berates me. Her eyes glitter with unshed tears, but they are not sad. They are angry. They are incandescent. They are *exhausted*. “I travelled weeks to get here, just to ask you all for one ounce of respect. And now I’m supposed to smile and thank you all for the privilege and the opportunity? So fuck you! Fuck everyone in your counsel who thinks that the blood in my veins, in my brother’s veins, in my *hunters’* veins, is disposable!”

She’s yelling now, heating the air around us with her anger. She swings her two blades at me, the whoosh of steel through the air serving as my only warning as she tears the skirt of her dress to fight me. I catch them with just enough time to stop her from slicing my head off my shoulders and our swords clash with a deafening ring of steel.

She is agility, but I am strength. She spins away from my sword, and in the time it takes me to blink she’s behind me. But I know every trick in the book, so I turn and jump the blade that slices at my legs. Her swords clash against mine in the air above us and I flick my wrist to pull hers down. My sword is an inch from her chest, the only thing between the blade and her skin is the thin silk of the dress that I’ll remember for the rest of my days.

“Surrender,” I say, my eyes burning into hers. I turn my sword so it’s horizontal over her chest, allowing me even closer to her. The forest is dark, I can see every freckle, every eyelash, every delicate movement of the pulse in her throat. It’s stifling, this tension between us. It has been from the second I shot her. It steals the breath from my lungs and floods every vein in my body with desire.

“Over my dead body,” she whispers, her words brushing my lips.

“It will be, in a minute.”

She leans forward, and in a horrible moment, I do believe my sword is going to pierce her chest. But Renna moves faster than the lightning that illuminates the sky, and all my sword gets to taste is the cold air around us. We fight for five more minutes. It’s enraged, and it’s unnecessarily violent. She’d give a hurricane a run for its money; utterly relentless. Tired of it now, I swing my sword at her with everything I have, watching both of hers clatter to the ground as she falls to her knees from the impact.

She is defeated, but she is not broken. Her chest rises and falls with heavy breaths, still in the show-stopping dress. I drop to my knees in front of her, tipping her chin up. Dark, winged makeup lines her eyes, sultry and seductive, but the brown eyes beneath it are laden with emotion.

“I shouldn’t want you like I do, Rexxan,” she whispers, honest as ever. Her fingers trace the scar on my face, and it feels like she’s committing my features to memory before a goodbye. “Does this hurt?”

“Every minute of every day.”

She’s so close. *So close*. Breathing life into the fire within me that I thought long-extinct. “I don’t believe I should want you like I do either, Renna.”

“But you do,” she murmurs, her eyes snapping back to mine.

Her face is elaborately painted with silver moonlight and black shadows, and in looking at her eyes I feel something I haven’t seen for a long time; empathy. “But I do.”

“I should go.”

“You should go,” I agree.

She doesn’t move.

Neither do I.

CHAPTER 12

OLD SCARS (RENNA)

Rexxan is on his knees in front of me, shrouded in darkness in the forest that he and his fathers created.

I don't understand why he came out here, I don't understand why he chased me, but I needed it. I'm out of breath. Why, I don't know, but the air between us is so hot and heavy that my blood feels like honey. "You haven't moved," he observes.

"Neither have you."

A slow smile caresses his sculpted lips, and like everything he does around me, I don't fucking know what it means. But I have no time to dwell because in one split second, he snatches my face between both hands and kisses me like I've never been kissed, dragging a rough inhale through his nose. It's all-encompassing, leaving no space in my head for anything else.

He swears into my mouth, his voice agonised as he leans in so my back presses against the tree. He's burning with intensity, surrounding us in the heat that seems to follow him around like a shadow. His tongue traces my lower lip, coaxing me into opening my mouth like I'm all he needs to survive. I let out a quiet moan, my hands landing on his burly arms as I give him what he wants.

"That's it, beautiful," he murmurs, kissing my neck now, a hand on my jaw tipping my head to the side. "I've been fucking useless all week. This is all I've been able to think about."

My whole body lights up for him, my skin buzzing with desire. *Fuck. This is not good.* This wasn't how it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be bad and disappointing. This is skillful, passionate—essentially everything but bad.

His hand grips my hair roughly, so hard it's skirting the line between pain and pleasure as he whispers words in a language I don't speak. I moan again, needing more. Needing *him*. My hands are all over the contours that make up his body, his all over mine. We are slaves to the desire that rules us, and in this moment, I just do not care.

"Renna." He says my name like both a prayer and a curse, kissing me again.

I can't reply, too breathless as I run my hands over his chest and kiss him back just as hard. I cannot remember the last time I felt so...on fire. I have no time to consider the stupidity of this mistake. He gives me no time to think. "I want you *so* badly," I confess, splaying a hand on the tree behind me to try and ground myself before I float away in a cloud of lust.

"You couldn't," he murmurs, his huge hand gripping my thigh like he's as desperate for this to happen as I am. "I know better than to hurt you."

"But you know it would be earth-shattering between us."

There is nothing more intoxicating to me than witnessing this man's composure unravel and knowing that I am the one that knocked the first domino.

"Gods, Renna, stop. I'm on my knees already. What more do you want from me?"

I opt for honesty. "I want everything you're willing to give me." I want him. No strings, no feelings. Just one fucking night to end the torture of wondering if we'd be as good as I think we would. He rakes a hand through his tousled hair, a tortured look in his eye like he's seconds away from abandoning his rules.

But the not too distant howl of a wolf tears his gaze from mine, and the air around me no longer feels like syrup, a chill

on my skin that feels too cool for it to be summer. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Well, aren’t you going to offer me your jacket?”

He grins, looking far too young for his age. He’s a different man out here, the ominous shadow that follows him around seems quiet. “For your underwear, yes.”

Oh my word. “Are you joking?”

“No.”

“What do you want with them?”

“What do you want with my jacket?”

“It’ll keep me warm. What do you want with my underwear?”

Mirth dances in those bronze eyes. “It’ll keep me warm.”

Well, I lost all my pride the day I thought he wanted me to hold his hand in a meeting, so I slide the black fabric down my legs. He drags me to my feet, draping his jacket around my shoulders. “Your end of the deal, Renna.”

I pin his prize to the tree beside us with a small throwing knife and he smiles, his eyes never straying from me. “Go.”

“I could kill that wolf with my eyes closed.”

“I don’t doubt it, but you’re in a dress. Go back, follow the trail to the gate.” Some kind of warm mist floats from his hands to the ground in front of me, forming a path leading into the shadow-clad night. His grandfather’s magic, I imagine.

“Fine, but only because I never got dessert and I’m still hungry.”

He actually laughs, placing my knife under the strap of my dress to hold it in place. “Goodnight, Commander. I’ll kill you if I find you trespassing again tonight.”

“Goodnight, Your Majesty. Thank you for playing chase.”

He stalks into the darkness, raising a finger in goodbye. “Chase recently became my favourite game.”

I do as he says for a change, escaping the cool twilight air to return to the warmth of my palace guest room. I sit down on the bed and stare at the wall, my mind running at a mile a minute. The kiss was not a success. REXXAN is even more on-my-mind than he was this morning.

I've been back ten seconds already and Stellan hasn't appeared. That's odd. As I stand to see if he's in his room, I shriek as the door bursts open, the handle falling clean off as he bursts through my door like an excitable puppy. He may be the most vicious killer in my army, but he loves nothing more than gossip. He holds up a bottle of wine, jumping into my bed. "Tell. Me. Everything!"

I rub my hands over my cheeks. "I don't know what just happened," I say, falling backward onto the huge bed and staring at the ceiling.

"How was the ball? How were *his* balls?"

I whack a hand over his mouth. "You should be in jail for that one!"

"So tie me up!"

We're cackling like children. "Well, I had a great catch-up with Espan. He's going to travel back some of the way with us, and he's asked to hire us—"

"If you start talking finances now, I'll cry."

I laugh out loud. "Okay, okay. And then...well, some of the people at the table were insulting our people, and the King made them leave. I think he killed them. He chased me through the woods and we kissed. And he stole my underwear."

Stellan sips his wine, his eyes alight. "Fuck. I think I need a night with him too."

I nod in agreement. "I'll pitch it to him."

I breathe out a curse, starfishing on the bed. REXXAN has lodged himself deep in my brain, along with his huge forearms, auburn eyes, deep voice, talented mouth, deeply buried sense of humour, and the trace of a heart he let me see

for just a second. I let out the world's longest sigh. "You have to get out of here first thing."

"So do you."

"I have one more thing to do here."

He shakes his head no. "And when REXXAN catches you? How will you talk yourself out of this one? I've told you Renna; this isn't a good idea. You won't win over the River Kingdom, no matter what you do for them."

"A good leader would try anyway. We're a small group of two hundred and fifty. We can't afford to have a whole kingdom on the verge of declaring war on us."

"A *good* leader wouldn't risk the wrath of King REXXAN."

"REXXAN will understand." He won't, but if I tell myself it enough, maybe he will. In any case, it doesn't matter because he won't find out.

"REXXAN doesn't have an understanding bone in his body, Renna."

"All I can do is what I think is best. We need to at least bring our relationship with the River Folk back to neutral."



WHEN DAWN BREAKS over the horizon, Stellan leaves to join Onyx and the rest of the Shadow Hunters on their route to the Forest border.

"You'll leave as soon as you can, yes?"

"Promise," I say, hugging him hard.

He swings up onto his black horse, squeezing my shoulder. "Behave."

"Coming from you!" I hiss, outraged. He laughs as I blow him a kiss and ride back to the palace, but I don't go to bed.

Silently, I shrug off my outfit and pull on my black hunting trousers, complete with hidden knives and poisons in every possible space. I pull my top over my head and cover my face with a black hood, pocketing a black mask to put on later. And when I complete my look by sliding my feet into heavy black boots and lacing them up, I feel unbreakable. Whistling a quiet tune, I swipe my steel swords from the windowsill, swing on the frame out of my room, and slam into a rock-solid, bad-tempered giant.

“Wow. You’re hard,” I blurt out, before covering my mouth with my hands. *I want to die.* “Not like that...not...I just meant you’re in good shape.”

He’s laughing at my mortification. “Go on, Commander, keep stroking my ego. Going somewhere?”

Fuck. This doesn’t look suspicious at all. “Um...yes. I’m on my way to sleep with one of your guards.”

“Do you enjoy winding me up?” He asks, his hot gaze firmly on me.

“Immeasurably, my lord,” I say, with a curtsy. His eyes are fixed on my lips. Heat rises up my body, warming my face. I cannot explain the chemistry between us, or how the air feels thicker than honey when we’re in it. I shake my head, trying to break the spell.

“Tell me where you’re going.”

“I’m going hunting.”

“And why would that be? You were supposed to be leaving today.”

“I *am* still leaving. And why does anyone do what they do? Because they want to. Have you always been this slow or is it something that’s come with old age?”

He grabs my arm, pulling me through a door in the hallway. The temperature of the air around me plummets, my only source of heat the constant stream of warmth that radiates from REXXAN’S chest. I tilt my head back to see that we are in a huge wine cellar, plastered with wide oak shelves and barrels of red wine from floor to ceiling. The green stained-glass

windows are lined with vines and ivy and I sigh. Everywhere here is mesmerising. “Wow. Is this yours? I’ve had this down my hallway this whole time? I mean, I’d heard you were obsessed with wine, but this is truly—“

“Renna.”

“Yes.”

“Stop talking.”

I open my mouth to tell him he’s an asshole, but he seals it with a fiery kiss, his hand closing around my jaw. He takes a slow, steady inhale through his nose, a low grumble in his throat as if this has been on his mind all night too. My soft moan gets lost in his mouth—forget that, I think *I’m* lost in his mouth. I run my hands up his chest, but as the solid muscle beneath my fingertips tenses, his breath catches in his throat.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says, his jaw gritting once more, and for a split second I think he’s just going to leave me here. I unbutton the top button of his shirt, and like yesterday, he shakes his head.

“Why? You’re insecure?”

He laughs as if that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever said, disbelief encompassing his features. “No, huntress. I’m not insecure. I just can’t be bothered to answer your questions right now.”

My frown makes him roll his eyes and for once he gives up the fight. He lets me undo his shirt, and I try to focus as my slightly shaky fingers thread each button through its hole. His skin feels scorching beneath the wine coloured linen. Not just warm, actually *hot*. I push the shirt off his sculpted shoulders and the air leaves my lungs. The same lighting-like scar that runs over his face also covers the entire right side of his chest and runs down to his ribs on that side.

“Fuck, what happened to you?”

“You cannot possibly imagine everything that I have survived, Renna.”

“Fuck,” I repeat, unintelligently. I’m just not sure what else to say. Miles of his skin is scarred. It’s strangely beautiful, but I can’t begin to imagine how much he has suffered. The fact that it hasn’t vanished tells me all I need to know. Evergreens do not scar unless the cause of the injury has inflicted such deep emotional pain that it never heals. “Was it...was it a volcano? Or—“

“I don’t want to have this talk right now,” he says between kisses on my neck. He kisses me like he *needs* me, like he’s just as aware as I am that our time together is ending. He shifts his thick, hard thigh between my legs, prompting another groan from my lips. I feel his arrogant grin against my neck. “Desperate, darling?”

“Does alliteration usually work for you in the bedroom? It won’t on me.”

He lets out a husky laugh, his lips moving down my neck. “Not normally, no. Let me make you feel good, Renna, please,” he asks, switching to the language of my people.

When I nod, two hands land on my waist and sit me on one of the endless wine shelves. My leggings join my top on the pile of barrels on the floor. As he rakes a blistering gaze over my exposed legs, his eyes genuinely glow a little brighter like embers stoked by a breath. He looks like the statues I’ve seen of the gods, hewn from stone.

I *love* making bad decisions.

This is definitely one, but I appear to be doing it anyway. His smell invades my senses, and I’m lost in a cloud of red wine and dark wood as I tip my head back against the cold stone wall of the cellar, completely at the mercy of his expert mouth between my thighs.

The next word he breathes against my skin is in the language of the Shadow Hunters. “Asanalyia.” *Breathtaking*.

I have no doubt that I am probably the fifteenth woman he has said that to this week, but at this moment, I can’t find the resolve in me to care. I have been called beautiful by men and women alike, but REXXAN does it without words, looking at me

like I'm the one brick that could bring that stone facade down. With a shaky exhale, he casts his eyes up to the ceiling as if asking the gods for forgiveness for what he is about to do.

"Fucking hell, Renna." His deep voice travels down to my bones, his thumb running over the piercing in my left nipple. "Spread your legs wider."

"Is this what you're like? Bossy in the bedroom?"

A warm kiss lands on my inner thigh, his voice gravelly and thick. "You have no idea. Wider for me."

"Rexxan, I want to make one thing clear. Nothing I ever do is for you."

"I beg to differ."

Oh, *fuck him*. "You hold an awfully high opinion of yourself."

"And you will too, in half an hour."

"Like you could last half an hour around me."

"Are you going to behave, or should I get some rope?"

"Don't threaten me with a good time," I rebuke, moving my hands to his chest. He straightens up and moves them down away from his burns quickly. He doesn't like me to touch him, which is sad, but I respect the limits he has set. I move my hands down, running my hands lower and lower and lower—is that... *oh, no*. This is why my kind shouldn't be with immortals. "That'll never fit! Oh, shit!"

"We're not going to do that."

Thank fuck. I need to be able to walk correctly for my job, being an assassin and all. He's laughing at me still as I finally do as he asks, letting the distance between my goosebumped thighs grow. He leans in, the glow from his eyes illuminating the pale skin splintering like lightning over his right eye and down his jawline.

"This is beautiful," I whisper, careful not to touch it as I trace my finger beside the jagged lines. He clearly doesn't want to discuss it, busy kissing his way back down my

abdomen. His stubble tickles my skin as he whispers in a language I don't know, every word quickening my pulse. I don't have to understand the words to know that what he is saying is utterly filthy. His kisses and his tongue dip between my legs and I let out a mangled version of his name, my hands falling to his shoulders.

"No touching," he orders, returning my hands to the rough wood of the shelf. *Control freak*. He brushes his lips across my inner thigh again before gently sucking my clit, his breath hot between my thighs. "Renna, you're intoxicating. The heat of you, the *taste* of you. I'm drunk on it all."

But I am too much of a dissolving mess to reply, my legs trembling. My vision is fucking blurring, the heavy thud of my heart centring between my legs as ecstatic pleasure diffuses its way around my veins. I don't know what he's doing or where he learned it, but I can't think straight. Whatever I said about wanting to be with him so I can forget about it and move on was bullshit, because Rexxan is so deep in my conscience now that he'll never escape.

I cover my mouth with my hand as his name escapes my treacherous lips, but a firm hand tears it right off again. He does this without looking up, like he's been starved of me for so long that now, even to pull away for a brief second would be agonising.

"Out loud, Renna. Let the guards know exactly who makes you feel this feral."

For someone who regularly brags to Stellan about my ice-cool composure, I'm not doing well. But true to his reputation, Rexxan is ruthless and does not relent. And then I'm tumbling. Toes curled, back arched, head tipped back as I plummet over the edge, blinded by white light. He silences my cry by gently putting two fingers in my mouth. "Taste yourself, love. Taste how much you long for me."

Oh, for fuck's sake. Every time I start to like him. "No one likes a narcissist, Rexxan," I mutter, before he kisses me again, harder this time.

“Evidently, you do,” he lets out a low hum of approval, “because you’re so wet for me.”

“Not for you. Never for you.”

He just laughs. “Whatever helps you sleep at night. You did so well. I could watch you come all day.”

“Is that an empty offer? I’m free if you are.”

He’s fucking smiling at me, like he’s as invested in ignoring his hate for me as I am in ignoring my hate for him. “I can cancel a meeting or two.”

I vehemently take back what I told Stellan last week about REXXAN being the human equivalent of blank white paper. He’s not fucking boring. He’s...*celestial*. It hits me there and then that leaving this kingdom tomorrow is going to be more disappointing than I thought it would be.

CHAPTER 13

KILL, LIVE OR DIE (REXXAN)

For as long as the gods decide I will live, I will never tire of watching this woman come.

She claims to hate me, but she does moan my name an awful lot for that to be true. Her toned brown thighs tremble as she sits on the shelf, her head buried in my neck. She's a storm, a violent blizzard of power, but it's times like this where she's so vulnerable where I could see myself falling into her traps so easily. Her cheeks flush a little as she rests her cheek on my chest.

"I want you."

She's going to be the death of me. I'm so hard it hurts, but I'm neither stupid nor blind. "No."

"I want you so bad, REXXAN."

This is torture, penance for all the cruelty I've done in my life. If she touches me now, I'll probably explode. Just thinking of her after I've gone to bed at night isn't enough. "Not a good idea."

"Please," she whispers, her teeth grazing my ear. "I'm *aching* for you."

"Remember you asked for this," I mutter, my self-control finally joining my pride in shattered pieces at my feet. I pick her up, wrapping her legs around my waist and lying her on the table. Her legs will be my downfall. "This will hurt."

"Hardly."

"I mean it. Do you ever take anything seriously?"

“Do you ever *not* take anything seriously?” She retaliates, imitating my deep voice.

To a layperson, she looks as she usually does. But for reasons I cannot make sense of, I’m attuned to her like I’ve known her for an age, and I see the subtle widening of her eyes. I see the breath of trepidation that escapes those lips, as much as she tries to hide it. Gently, my hands massage her shoulders, her heated gaze on mine as I stretch her with first one, then two fingers.

“Stop holding your breath, huntress. Breathe,” I instruct, holding her hips still. She takes a calming breath, holding the edge of the table as I edge half an inch inside her. Half an inch, and I can already tell she feels incredible. Half an inch, and I know I could have her for a lifetime and never get bored. But her eyes are screwed shut, her lips pursed. I move my hips forward an inch and she yelps in pain, shuffling back away from me.

“Nope!” She snaps her thighs together, wagging a stern finger in the vague direction of my cock. “Nope! No, thank you. You are never going near me with that! You’ll ruin me for everyone else!”

She’s deadly serious until a chuckle escapes her lips through her fingers. I try not to laugh, but then we’re both cackling like idiots. My shoulders shake with laughter as I rest my forehead on hers.

“Oh, my word. I am so embarrassed, REXXAN!” She shrieks, through her laughter. Only with her could this be so hilarious rather than awkward. She rolls around the table, burying her head in her arms. “Oh, *gods*,” she mumbles, into her hands. “Ask your grandfather to swallow me up or strike me with lightning or something.”

I pull her sweet hands from her blushing face, kissing her gently. This has quite possibly been the most entertaining, agonising, and torturous twenty minutes of my life. “Don’t be embarrassed.”

“I am!”

I place the softest of kisses onto the softest of lips. “Do you want to go and eat food in the library instead?”

She grins, wiping her tears of laughter from her reddened cheeks. “Yeah, I do, if you’re not going to panic about what we just did and run away.”

‘*Panic and run away*’ are not the correct words. ‘*Somersaults of joy*’ springs to mind. “I can’t make any promises,” I quip, opening the door for her.

But she wriggles off the sofa the second we arrive in the library, dropping to her knees in front of me. I shake my head at her and she frowns. “Do I not do it for you, or something? I mean...I know I look nothing like Lynna, like...no one can compete with *that*, but...I’m not bad looking—“

She thinks I’m not attracted to her, and the thought is almost laughable because I would kill, live, or die for this woman. Whichever one she asked of me. I cut her off before she starts rambling for hours. “Renna, you’re the most entrancing creature I’ve ever seen in my life. I want you so badly it’s killing me, but I can’t cope if you start this now and stop.”

“I won’t,” she says it like a dark confession, catlike eyes peering up at me as she runs her sweet tongue across her lower lip.



THE MOST DANGEROUS woman on this earth is currently asleep on my chest, and there’s a smudge of dribble on my shirt. She’s tired, and so am I, to be honest. I didn’t know not having sex could be quite *so* much fun.

She stirs as I turn the page of my book, sleepily opening her eyes. “Hello,” she whispers, quietly.

I smile, dropping a kiss on her knuckles. I don’t know what we’re playing at here, but it probably won’t end well.

“You fell asleep.”

“Not my fault all the books in your library are boring, Rexxan,” she says on a yawn. “Ooh, what’s that? Is it from the kitchens?” She asks, looking at a small paper box on the table.

I nod, gesturing for her to open it. Small fingers untie the string around it, her eyes alight with childlike excitement. Inside it sit six chocolate-covered strawberries and a slice of apple pie. She laughs in delight, her mood instantly picking up. “I feel like you’ve poisoned this, but I’m going to eat it anyway.”

She ungracefully shoves two berries in her mouth whole, looking like some sort of deranged squirrel. Her eyes roll back and she lets out a tortured moan that has me adjusting myself where I sit. She picks another one up and hands it to me with beguiling eyes.

How can someone be so dangerous yet so sweet?

“Thank you, sweetheart,” I murmur, eating it right out of her hand and letting my teeth graze her small fingers. Her gaze turns lascivious, her thighs pressing together slightly. I carefully put some apple pie on a fork, holding it towards her. It smells incredible, better still for being mixed with her smoky honey scent. When she leans in, I take it back and eat it.

Oh, my. It *is* incredible. Sweet and cinnamony and warm. It takes me back to my childhood. When was the last time I had apple pie?

My cloud of orgasmic culinary bliss is burst by a feral growl that comes not from a wolf that’s made its way through the gates but from the little sprite beside me. She has a slightly alarming, unhinged look in her eye as she launches herself at me, her hands grappling for the box.

“Insult my people, beat me in a fight, put me in prison, but do *not* mess with my motherfucking food!” She shrieks, her voice echoing off the shelves of age-old books around us.

And now I’m laughing. Genuine, shoulder-shaking laughter at the sheer seriousness of her tone and her tragic

attempt at being scary. She grins, eating some of the pie off my fork. “You look beautiful when you laugh, Rexxan. I still wouldn’t go near you with a ten-foot pole, though.”

I roll us over so she is lying on her back on the roof, my body pressed into hers. “Is that right?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I have a ten-foot pole you can have,” I say, and she howls with laughter like that was the last thing she expected to come out of my mouth. Fuck, it’s been so long since I’ve been... myself. We eat the food in companionable silence, and I wonder perhaps if this’ll be one of the last times I ever see the Shadow Commander.

I frown as she eats the last mouthful, a question materialising in the back of my mind. “I didn’t ask if you were on preventative.”

“Ah...well, we didn’t anyway so....”

“Are you?”

“Yes, so it doesn’t matter.”

Liar. “Interesting. There is no preventative effective on mortals, only Evergreens,” I say, tightening my grip on her hand. As much as I don’t like to admit it, I feel hurt. Hurt that even in the softness and the vulnerability of our moments together today, she doesn’t even breathe a word of truth in my direction. I feel her entire body seize up as she realises her mistake.

“So tell me, Renna, which is it? Are you lying about who you are, or are you trying to trap a king with a baby?”

Her head snaps up to mine, her face a picture of outrage. “You think I’m one of those?”

“Wouldn’t be the first to try, or even the second or third.”

She tries to separate from me but I hold her hands tighter in mine. “Which is it?” I know the answer. I know it’s the former, but not one of my spies or my staff can find a single detail about her. I’m not going to know anything about who she is unless it comes from her lying mouth.

“Get off me.”

I release her hands and stand, shrugging on my jacket. “I swear to the fucking gods, Renna. *Every word*. Every word that has left your mouth since I met you has been a lie.”

“That’s not true.”

“Tell. Me. The truth.” I’m trying to slow my breathing, trying to control my famously uncontrollable temper for her.

“Drop it!” She yells, her calm demeanour vanishing with the same quick ease as mine. We are too volatile to share a room together, I don’t know what I was thinking. She turns away, pulling her weapons on with unnecessary force. I let her leave without a word, but I ask a guard to follow her from a distance.

I storm out of the room, confused and pissed off. I choose to spend the remainder of my night and the following morning in my dungeons. I have some people from the south down there who need a bit of extra encouragement giving up some information I need about the Vault break-in. It is a fleeting distraction from the huntress that fills my thoughts, but as I wash the blood off my knuckles and bin my blood-soaked shirt, she is there again, at the front of my mind.



MY HEAD IS STILL RIDDLED with confusion as I wash, dress, and sink down into the chair in my study the next day. I’ve never met someone so conflicting. Everything in my life has been black and white, but Renna is an orchard of colour. I sigh with my head in my hands as I ignore the overdue letters on my desk.

“It’s me,” comes a soft, seductive voice outside my door. “But you’re busy so...goodbye?”

And now I’m grinning at my paperwork like a fucking buffoon. She’s *so* put together, composed even with a knife at

her throat, but around me she gets flustered. It's sweet. I stand and walk out of my study, watching her walk down the hallway for a beat longer than is necessary. She looks incredible. She's trying to kill me. Is this how she gets all her victims? Just walks in front of them in black leggings?

“Renna.”

She twirls around, blushing. I like that her anger has cooled since last night, because mine has too. I like that neither of us is being petty about whatever it was that happened yesterday. “I'm leaving. I just thought I'd say goodbye, given I might never see you again and all that...and I want to talk about yesterday.”

I lean against the wall, extending one arm out from my side. She laughs, running over and launching herself into my open arms with alarming force. I bury my nose in her honey-scented hair, taking a hit of my new favourite drug.

“I don't really like you, but I think I'm going to miss you,” she whispers, as I carry her into my room.

“Charming as ever.” I'll miss her too, and I never expected that to be the case. But she's a liar and a mortal, and she'll be dead in the blink of an eye. I cannot let myself get close to her, but when she's laughing in my arms it's hard.

She picks up my knuckles, battered and bloody. “What now?”

“I can't tell you that,” I say, pressing my lips to her jaw gently. I do a lot of the things on behalf of the other rulers whose morals are too strict to do them. But more than that, I can't be bothered to tell her because I need to be kissing her. A quiet moan leaves her throat, letting my tongue tease her own. I want her. I want her before she goes. I cannot fucking bear the thought of never having had her. Not when we've grown oddly close.

“I have to tell you something, but I don't want you to ask questions,” she whispers, and I frown. Renna is a joker. Nothing serious ever leaves her mouth, but she looks very serious now.

“Tell me.”

“I can’t have children.”

I push myself off her, sitting upright. My heart thuds in my mouth, the look in her eyes telling me that she is speaking the truth. She said no questions, but I can’t do that. Because I have two.

“Did someone do that to you?”

She nods, and my nails leave crescent-shaped cuts in my hands as I clench my fists. “And are they still alive?”

“No,” she whispers, big brown eyes looking up at me. I take a shaky breath, trying to be calm. I want to know more. I want to know who did it to her, but she doesn’t want me to know. I have asked her to respect my scars, now she is asking the same of me. I can do that. But now I don’t know what to do. All I know is that I want her more than I’ve ever wanted anyone else.

“Please, no more questions. I just want you,” she begs, her thoughts clearly mirroring mine. Feverish and wanton, she pulls her top over her head whilst I do the same. A string of curses fills the air between us. Will I always have this visceral reaction to her? Goosebumps decorate the light brown skin across her perfect breasts, the muscles in her arms flexing as she shuffles to be underneath me.

“You’re a work of art,” I tell her, in a language she doesn’t even know. I roll her unpierced nipple between two fingers, my tongue caressing the pierced one. I want to touch every square inch of her. My spoilt fingers explore the contours of her toned stomach; crafted into the perfect killer. The breathy moans coming from her mouth are going to be my undoing.

Death by Renna.

There are worse ways to go.

I am violently torn between knowing I need to be careful with her and the fiery need that is pulsating, animalistic and primal, in my veins. Her talented fingers make light work of my belt buckle as I do the same to the black leather that wraps around her small waist, her hunting gear clattering to the floor

beside us. The contact between our skin lights those little sparks in the tips of my fingers, her touch electric.

She's everywhere. *I'm* everywhere. It's too much and it's not enough.

I kiss her harder, trying to convey to her how deliciously infuriating she is. Black painted nails rake down my back in time with her heavy breaths, my sanity just a hair's breadth away from unravelling. I can wait no longer. I've been starved for too many nights. I hook my arms beneath her toned thighs and roll us over, lifting her onto my face in one quick motion.

"Ooh! That was really clever—oh, *fuck!* Yes, like that!"

She's funny, but I'm not in a laughing mood. Not here, and not now. My low groan vanishes into her inner thighs, and I swear I'm in heaven, lapping up a divine reward that I have not earned. And as she breathes out a curse in her own language, I show her with my tongue just how highly I think of her.

"I like you between my legs, REXXAN," she says, as I bring my mouth back up to her face.

I flip her over so she is on her hands and knees, the muscles in her back flexing as she rolls her neck. Everything she does is seductive. "I want to try this again, Renna."

She nods in agreement, and I slap her behind, hard. She lets out a muffled moan into the dark green silk of my bedsheets, and it's music to my ears. "Harder, please."

I give up. She's fucking perfect.

I repeat it harder now. Of course she loves this. She's an enigma. Leaning over her, I take a vial of oil from the table beside the bed, making a point of showing her it to relax her. She nods, her hand holding the sheets. I cover us both in it, gritting my teeth. If she stops us now, I'll just lie face down on my lawn in the rain for the rest of my life. This is all I've dreamt of for weeks. I thrust an inch into her and she is silent. "Okay?"

She nods, but I can't see her face. This is my favourite position, but with her, it feels too far away. I want to see every

expression on her face. I want to know how this is for her. I flip her over so I'm on top, kissing her far too softly for a man like me. "Shall I try again?"

"Okay," she whispers, her finger tracing my scar, her eyes full of wonder. I thrust into her while she's distracted and she cries out, sitting up so her head is in my neck. Fuck, this is intimate. I don't think I've had this feel so close before.

"Stop, stop. Don't move," she asks me, her voice hoarse. She breathes slowly, her vice-like grip on my arm finally loosening after a few agonising seconds. "Okay. Go."

This time, I bury myself inside her, covering her quiet curse with a kiss. She's empyrean, I swear. "Sorry, love," I murmur, brushing my lips to her forehead. I stay still, almost shaking with the effort it takes. Slowly her hips start to rock, her gasps of pain turning to those of pleasure, and I know as my eyes meet hers that in some strange way, I'll remember this until my last breath.

"Please. Please move," she begs, wide eyes on mine. So I do, because I don't want to deny this woman anything she wants. And I'm almost speechless, because with her it is completely different. I've been with many women in many places, but Renna feels like home.

"Ren, you feel like you were made for me."

Her eyes cast upwards, her hands hanging onto me for dear life. "Oh, gods. It's overwhelming."

"Need to stop?"

"No," she says, pinning me with a look that says *if you stop, I'll kill you*. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me deeper and sending unstoppable waves of ecstasy over me. She's warm around me, soaking wet, mumbling incoherent nonsense in the Shadow language. In return I whisper sinful promises in her ear, rolling my hips in a circle which has her shouting my name into my shoulder. An involuntary grin spreads across my lips. *Note to self, she likes that.*

“Oh, gods, REXXAN. Yes,” she hisses, tightening around me a little. It almost kills me off. She feels so good, too good. Scandalously good. *Sinfully* good. Her nails sink deep into my back, her body squeezing my length as I move faster.

“I’m going to come.” Her voice is strained, desperate for more. “It’s never felt like this.”

“Never,” I concur, my voice rough. She screams my name into the scarred skin of my shoulder as she comes, her whole body shaking violently, and I can wait no longer. I hammer into the goddess beneath me, my lips on her neck as I explode inside her, coming so hard I forget I’m supposed to hate her. I’m blinded by white-hot pleasure, collapsing onto my forearms. My chest is heaving as I press my forehead to hers, her beautiful body glistening with sweat. That was...I’ve never come like that. Never *felt* like that.

“You don’t have to say it,” she whispers, her face earnest, “I felt it too.”

“You did so well,” I tell her, placing a quick kiss on her cheek.

Somehow, I muster the will to push myself up onto my hands. Her expression is suddenly shyer, the blanket all the way up to her nose. I stand, rolling my wrists and cracking my knuckles before grabbing a warm flannel from the bathroom to clean her up with. She looks sated and sleepy and I don’t like the idea of her leaving now to start a several week long journey back to wherever her army is.

I pull on some casual pants and a shirt, sinking down onto the mattress beside her and tracing her jaw with my thumb. I’m ready for round two, but she’s likely hurting. “Stay an hour, don’t leave right now.”

“Bold of you to assume I could even sit on a horse right now.”

I chuckle. My ego likes her. I roll over to face her and she does the same. She’s giggling. *Giggling*. I didn’t even think the Shadow Commander could make that noise. Fuck violins.

Fuck waterfalls. Fuck wind through the trees. Renna giggling is the most relaxing sound. “What’s so funny?”

“This is domestic.”

I laugh too, because even the notion of either of us marrying is the most ludicrous idea I’ve heard all year. She quizzes me about events that happened long before she was born, shuffling nearer to me every now and again. And like she is so fond of doing, she keeps my self-esteem in check by falling asleep while I’m talking to her.

A knock wakes me up, and I realise we both fell asleep. When did I last sleep in someone else’s company? If she is here to assassinate me after all, I’m making it easy for her.

“My lord?”

Renna’s eyes light up at the sound of her favourite guard. I don’t exactly want my staff knowing I’m in bed with the Shadow Commander, but Ellatar probably fucking knows already, nosy idiot. I wait for Renna to pull some clothes on and call him in.

Ellatar enters in his gold armour and the deep red cloak that identifies him as a Royal Guard—one of just forty amongst the army of seven thousand. Bright green eyes drift to Renna and a glint of delight crosses his eyes, but he is on duty and so he keeps his prattling mouth shut.

“Hello, Ellatar!” She says, as if he created the world himself. My mood dips.

His face softens with fondness. This fucking woman has all my guards wrapped around her fingers already. “Commander Renna, how are you today?”

“Good, thank you! And you? Was your father okay in the end?”

His expression brightens. “Yes, he just overworked himself in the garden.”

“He sounds lovely.”

“Done obsessing over the parents of my staff?” I interrupt, and she gives Ellatar a knowing look.

‘*Hormonal*,’ she mouths at him, jerking a thumb in my direction. Oh, fuck this. I twirl my finger at Ellatar to tell him to get on with it.

“King Kelen and Queen Lana are here to see you.”

Renna tenses beside me. I’m aware of her more-than-strained relationship with the River King and Queen. “Is it urgent?”

“Lana seems a little distressed.”

“When does she not?” Say Renna and I, in perfect unison.

She holds her fist out for me to bump with my own and that is the final straw in pushing me to the conclusion that our age gap is far too large. I shake my head at it and she morphs it into a middle finger. Ellatar clears his throat, dragging me back to the situation at hand. I sigh, sitting up and running a hand over my bare chest.

“Wait here, Renna. I’ll say a final goodbye to you when I get back.”

She nods, flopping back in my bed with arms outstretched. How am I supposed to walk away from that view?

“Can Ellatar stay? So we can talk about palace gossip? Please?”

“No.”

She scowls at me as if I’ve just done something horrendous as I step outside where the River King and Queen are being escorted down the hallway, flanked by two of my guards and four of their own. “Kelen. Lana.” I look down at them with a curt nod.

“Have you seen that little woodland nymph?” Asks Kelen, his voice gruff.

“The filthy Shadow Huntress,” adds his wife.

“Renna? I’m not sure why you’re asking me.” *Other than the fact she’s naked in your bed, Rexas.* “Is there a non-bullshit reason you’re here?”

“We’re leaving tomorrow, but I wanted to tell you that my guard saw her running away from the Kingdom Vault last night.”

Alarm creeps up my spine and it’s nauseating. I had my suspicions, but never did I genuinely believe that they could be true. Friar appears behind them, the subtle look in his eyes telling me that it’s urgent. I dismiss them quickly. “Friar.”

“Under the floorboard in her room.” He hands me a scroll of parchment.

I crack the black wax seal, unravelling the stiff paper. My stomach plummets through the floor. It’s instructions written in her messy handwriting. Ten boxes fill the page, and in the second one are thirty-two arrows in horizontal, vertical, and diagonal directions. I know this code by heart. It is the solution to the second of ten doors into the Five Kingdom Vault. Even to have written this down is punishable by execution.

“Her?” I whisper, staring at it and wishing it would just disappear. She’s had us all fooled.

CHAPTER 14

THE MONSTER (RENNA)

The second I get myself out of this situation, I'm going to buy the four most expensive knives at the blacksmith just so I can lodge them deep in the eyeballs of the River King and Queen.

Rexxan slams the iron door to a dungeon cell shut, leaving me alone. I draw my knees up to my chest and rest my chin on them in the cold darkness. I don't know why he hasn't killed me yet, but I've been ready for death for a long time now. There is nothing he can do that will scare me.

After a silent and anxious hour, Lynna arrives with Espan, who looks distressed as usual. His long blonde hair is tied up in a bun, a line forming between his brows. He speaks first. "Renna, what did you do? I've seen the grid you made, I know what it is."

"It's not what it looks like. Well, I know it looks like the password to the Bolted Door in the Hall of the Gods, because it is, but I swear I'm not trying to murder everyone in Yterras."

He unlocks my cell and sinks to his knees to be at eye-level with me. With a warm glance, he takes both my hands in his soft ones.

"Renna, answer me honestly. Was it you that broke into the vault last month?"

"No, I swear."

He nods. "And was it you who tried to break into it last night?"

“Yes,” I whisper, telling the truth.

“You know what those stones do. For you to break in and even cause a ripple in that pool would end in many deaths.”

“I know!” I’d never have done that.

Now it is Lynna’s turn to sit opposite me. Her expression is grave but it doesn’t detract from her beauty. She’s calming, and I’m glad she’s here.

Until she speaks, that is.

Because when she speaks, what she says sends the pillars of my entire existence crashing down.

“Renna, this potion you take, I know about it. I need you to look me in the eyes and tell me that you’re a mortal.”

“I’m a mortal,” I say, without having to think.

“Good. Say it again,” my mother would say.

“I’m a mortal.”

“And again!” She’d shout, snapping her belt.

“I’m a mortal!” I’d scream, until my voice was hoarse.

I shudder, haunted by the ghosts from my past who bedevil both my nights and my days. Lynna scrubs her face with her hands. “Please. Do not lie to me.”

“It’s all I can say,” I whisper.

“It’s all you can say,” she replies, her eyes imploring me to say more. “That doesn’t mean it is true.”

“You have to understand, Lynna. It’s all I can say,” I insist, and Espan nods his agreement.

Lynna’s eyes meet his, a delicate frown crossing her soft features. “You know?”

“It’s not my place to pry in Renna’s past,” says Espan, squeezing my hand. “But I met her as a child, and that was many decades ago now. Of course, I pieced it together a long time ago, but I know Renna, and she wouldn’t hide something if she didn’t need to. So I have guarded her secret for a long

time, but you can hide it no longer, Renna. You've run from it for too long."

I bury my head in my knees. This *cannot* be happening. The secret that Onyx and I were beaten into keeping is one step closer to coming out. What do I do now? Deny it all? Or tell them I'm immortal and hope they never find out the *real* truth? I cover my face with my hands but Lynna gently prizes them off. She doesn't press me further, only wraps me in a warm embrace. "Whatever we're dealing with here, we can help you. Rexxan will understand if you're honest with him."

"I can't."

"What are you so afraid of?" She asks, brushing my hair from my face ever so gently, basking the dark cell in her pale light.

I shake my head. "You don't understand."

"I know we don't," says Lynna, her expression one of genuine compassion. "We really don't, and truthfully, we may never understand what it is to be you. But we can be here for you."

Despite my best efforts, the tears I've been holding escape, and I cover my face with my hands and sob. I sob for the child who wished on her birthdays that she could never have been born. I sob for the children that I'll never have. I sob for everyone I've lied to. But mostly I just sob for Onyx who has had his life ruined by it all. I'm a monster, infecting everything I touch with lies and deceit.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Lynna takes a slow steadying breath; she means business. "Commander Renna. I am going to tell you exactly what I know. You're taking a dark green potion once every four weeks. It makes you badly sick, so sick you could die. You risk it, nonetheless. I watched your brother make it through a keyhole. Into it, he put the roots of goldenseal, dried leaves of blackthorn, ivy oil, and Ashhal leaves. He then boiled it for six hours and placed a Delsk charm on it.

“That potion suppresses the magic powers of whoever takes it for a month—powers such as those belonging to immortals. It dulls their eyes, makes them sick, and weakens their magic to the point it’s untraceable. So I’m going to assume you’re an immortal. You’ve not told me that, but I’m going to take it to be true. I don’t know why you’re hiding who you are but if you’d consider being honest then we can all help you, including REXXAN. If you’re running from someone, they will be no match for him.”

She’s onto me.

I shrug. I can’t bring myself to say I’m an Evergreen out loud. It’s technically untrue. “I’ll go and talk to him,” sighs Espan, standing and leaving in a flash of pale brown clothes and golden hair. Lynna sits down beside me, probably dirtying her pristine white ballgown. The white waves of her hair brush the floor beside my hand.

“Are you hurt?”

I shake my head, just wanting to be alone. But she gently tilts my head to the side, examining a graze where it had hit the wall when REXXAN put me in here. “And do you feel dizzy at all?” She asks, now in full healer mode, gently wiping the injury. She examines my pupils, checking my neck for swelling, or whatever it is that healers do.

“Lynna, I’m fine. I ran seven miles last month with an arrow sticking out my arm. I summited a mountain with six broken fingers. I’ll cope.”

She laughs softly and nods, finishing cleaning the cut. “Renna,” she says, her voice turning uneasy, almost distant. “Are they scars on your ears there?”

“No,” I snap, quickly. Too quickly. Lynna is more than clever, and I can see her solving puzzles in her head. My fingers flex.

I have to kill her. I have to kill anyone who knows.

“Did someone cut your ears, Renna? Were they...it cannot be...you cannot be a—“

In a fraction of a second, I slam her against the wall, my hands at her throat. My face is an inch from hers, my eyes carrying a calamitous warning. “Think wisely about your next sentence, Lynna. It could well be your last. Say it out loud and I swear I’ll kill you.”

Her turquoise eyes meet mine, steady and unwavering even as my fingers flex around her delicate neck. “Who told you that?”

“Told me what?” I hiss, hot tears trickling over my cheeks. I want to die.

I don’t want to kill her.

I have to kill her.

I don’t fucking want to kill her.

I *have* to kill her.

“Who told you that you have to do this?” She continues, so close that the turquoise glow of her eyes illuminates my face. “To kill people who know who you are? Was it your parents? Was it them who cut your ears too?”

“I *have* to kill you,” I grit out, tightening my fingers. She shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes now too. I know her well enough now to know that she is not crying for her life. These tears are not forged from fear. They’re liquid empathy trickling over her pale face.

“You don’t, Renna. I haven’t said it aloud. I don’t know what you are yet, not until I go and do some reading in the library. You don’t have to kill me.”

“You swear you won’t tell REXXAN?”

“I can’t promise that, Renna. He is my best friend and my King. I’d lose my job and possibly my life.”

“Then I have to kill you!” I shout, my sanity fraying at the edges. This is the monster my mother created. She’s here now; laid bare for Lynna to see. Once more, the grip of my hands on her neck constricts, my parents’ voices urging me on. She shakes her head as much as my hands allow.

I tell my body to snap her neck, but it does not comply.

“You don’t, Renna. Don’t let them win. I’ll walk out of here now, and I will not rest until Espan and I get you out of this cell and out of this kingdom. What I tell Rexxan after that won’t matter because you’ll be far away.”

“No one can know!” I scream. I’m going insane. No, I’ve always been insane, but now the mask is slipping.

“I think I know what you are.”

“Don’t fucking say it!” I shout, crying harder as she desperately fights for air. She doesn’t fight me back, even though I know that she has the power of the gods in her blood.

Badly timed as ever, Lana and Kelen appear at the door and Lana screams for some guards. I release Lynna, who immediately bends over, frantically drawing air into her starved lungs. In a split second, I drag King Kelen through the doorway, snatching the dagger that is attached to his belt. I slam him so hard into the wall that I know he’s seeing stars.

“This was your plan all along, wasn’t it, you snake,” I whisper, my lips against his ear as Lana shrieks like a cat in a bathtub. Kelen twists in my grip, hitting my face hard, but there is no pain that can stun me now. I am unconquerable, and his hit doesn’t penetrate the pain in my mangled heart. The dagger in my hand draws a red bead of blood at his neck.

“Renna, you know what killing a King would do to the world order. Think about it,” begs Lynna, trying to de-escalate all of this.

I release Kelen, digging my heel into his back and shoving him forward just as the guards arrive. His betrayal is a bitter pill to swallow, but the revenge will be oh-so-sweet when it comes.

“She was trying to kill the Lady Lynna!” Screeches Lana, at the three guards in gold armour.

“She did no such thing,” says Lynna, calmly. There is no doubt in the guards’ eyes. They believe anything Lynna ever says, like everyone else in Yterras. “Commander Renna was simply distressed about the way she has been treated today.”

“She tried to kill Kelen!”

“There’s not a scratch on him,” states Lynna, softly. “She made no attempt on his life. The only person hurt here is Renna,” she gestures to the blood that I can feel dripping out of my nose and over my mouth. I lick my probably-bloodstained teeth, grinning at the river king as the guards hold me back. “Your days are numbered, Kelen. When the last breath leaves your lungs, I swear I’ll be there to watch.”

Lynna pinches the bridge of your nose. “Renna, stop that. Please remove these two, Hallen.”

The guards leave with the River Monarchs in tow, and her eyes flick from me to the door. “Don’t run. The King’s guards are famous for a reason. You’d be dead before you stepped out that door.”

“I can’t stay.”

“What happened with Kelen and Lana?”

I let out a heavy sigh, blood running down my chin now. If my nose is broken, I’ll lose my mind. I’m too pretty for all this shit. Why I didn’t just settle down and marry is beyond me. “They came to me a couple of weeks ago and said they had a job for me, and that it was a good opportunity to repair the rift between our peoples. They said the Vault break-in was making them worry the security wasn’t tight enough.

“They wanted me not to break in, but to see how easily I could work out how to get in there. I should’ve seen it was a trap, but the money they offered was a lot, and they paid me upfront. It was enough for three months’ worth of healing supplies for my people. Clearly, it was just a set-up to get guards to catch me snooping around the Vault. I’m so fucking stupid.”

She nods in understanding. “Let me talk to REXXAN.”

“What if he hurts you?”

She laughs out loud. “He wouldn’t lay a finger on me, Renna. Not in a million years. Stay here. Don’t cause trouble.”

“Can’t I clean my face up?” I ask, lukewarm blood trickling down my chin and onto my neck.

“No. It may work in your favour. REXXAN is more protective of you than he lets on,” she informs me, vanishing out the door, a vision in ivory silk and glossy white hair. She’s more than I deserve.

Near midnight, guards arrive and haul me to my feet, cuffing my hands. Even the handcuffs here are expensive, gold-plated and fashioned to look like vines and thorns wrapped around my arms.

“Do you need a healer for your face?” One asks, his eyes kind. This seems to be the general theme amongst the King’s guards. They’re nice to me, but they’d kill me in a second if they were asked to. I shake my head as we walk up the stairs out of the prisons that look more like a forest than they do a prison. Everything here looks like a forest. Even REXXAN’s palace looks like some odd hybrid between an immeasurably huge tree and a building.

I am led to a spectacular hall, the roof and columns crawling with green leaves. Trees sway through the windows, birds flitting in the ivy-covered ceiling rafters. Like everywhere in the King’s home, it’s spectacular. There are worse places to die, I suppose. They push me onto my knees on the floor in front of the King.

“What happened to her face?” His voice is arctic with fury, at everyone, I imagine. He’s busy enough without all this. “Did one of my guards hit you?”

“We did not, my lord.”

“Renna, is that true?” He asks, long fingers flexing around his sword.

“Yes, Your Majesty, it’s true.”

He dismisses the guards, but I still don’t look up. “The potion you take. Tell me what it is.”

I meet Lynna’s eyes where she stands beside his throne and she shakes her head. She hasn’t told him a word. She’s told me on many an occasion that REXXAN is the most intelligent

person in this kingdom. I have no doubt that he has worked this out on his own. I shake my head too. "I cannot say."

"Why?"

"I just can't, my lord."

"Who has a hold on you?"

"No one, I promise."

"You've lied about everything, Renna. But lying about who you are is a on whole other level. How many conversations did we have about you being mortal?" He says, tipping my chin up with the tip of his sword, his voice soft so only I can hear.

"I'm sorry." I genuinely mean it. I like REXXAN a lot. I don't know why I'm still breathing. I just hope he doesn't torture me for long.

"I don't believe you."

REXXAN sits down on his throne, surrounded by trees and hanging vines, seemingly with no intention of hurting me. He cracks his knuckles, the muscles in his huge forearms rippling. Orange eyes gaze down at me through thick black lashes. "Twenty-seven years ago, Espan took an arrow to the chest to save my son's life. He's cashing in his favour in return for your life."

I give him a tight smile. "Good to know you equate the value of your son's life with the pleasure you'd receive from killing me."

"Renna, stop," warns Espan. *Whoops*. That one came out accidentally.

Annoyance flashes in those spectacular auburn eyes, but he continues. "Your release is subject to you coming clean about everything. Espan has told me what happened with Lana and Kelen and I will speak with them separately."

"I can't," I whisper, my voice hoarse. "It's all I've ever been told."

“Tell me who you are, Renna, or I will make this very difficult.”

My eyes meet his, unyielding and unwavering. My next four words are spoken loud and clear. “You don’t scare me.”

“Oh, but I could.”

How much therapy do I need? More than I thought, clearly, because my overriding feeling in this room is one of sexual tension. “I take the potion every month to make myself appear mortal.”

“Why hide the fact you’re an immortal?” He asks, crossing an ankle over one knee.

“Rexxan, when I first met Renna, she was a child, in a state I can only hope no child ever has to endure again. She didn’t read or write. She only spoke the same three words, over and over. *I’m a mortal*. It was all she could say. And beside her was Onyx, another child in terrible condition. He growled at the healers whenever they tried to touch Renna, he shouted at them when they asked her any questions. “

Bloody hell, Espan. Spill my entire life story why don’t you? I don’t want or need pity.

“...my point is, Rexxan. Whatever reason Renna is hiding her past, it isn’t malicious, and it isn’t because she’s a spy. I’ve known her since she was a child and there is nothing in her heart but good. Let her leave with me. She will not come near you again.”

“Keep her hands cuffed until she’s across my borders,” instructs the King, as guards pick me up and drag me away, out of the hall that houses his throne.

An hour later, with the wind whipping past my ears, I gallop out of the forest. I vow never to return, never to see King Rexxan again.

CHAPTER 15

NOT A DUNGEON (REXXAN)

If that huntress ever steps through my Kingdom Gate again, I'll kill her.

But as I lie awake under the stars on my balcony, it's not my anger at Renna that's keeping me awake, it's a different anger entirely. I hurl a knife at the wall, get out of bed, and ride to the mansion of the only person who can give me the answer I crave. With my spare key, I unlock Lynna's front door.

"Lynna, it's REXXAN!" I shout, walking through the marble grand foyer of her home. A twelve-foot tall, white stone statue of a goddess stands in the centre between the two staircases. In one hand, she holds a sword, in the other she carries a real bunch of flowers. Lynna's estate contains so much art that it is worth more than the entire City of Rivers.

I walk up the right staircase, pink flowers winding their way up the banister. As the granddaughter of the Goddess of Nature, she has enchanted all her flowers to never die. I walk into the grand upstairs hallway, past the marble carving of a mother feeding her newborn child, past the portrait of me and my parents, past the life-sized statue of a woman on her knees, red blood pouring from her chest. Lynna's home is a shrine to femininity in all its forms.

"Lynna," I whisper, outside the door to the master bedroom, a room I've spent many nights in. I crack open the door, but she is not in there. Only a decisively male form sleeping in the bed beside a female form with jet-black hair.

Of course she is still awake working at this hour. “Lynna,” I say again, outside her study.

She jumps, a jewelled hand on her chest. “Rexxan, I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Who hit her?”

“What?”

“Renna. Who hit her? She wouldn’t tell me.”

“She didn’t want you to know, Rex.”

“Lynna,” I warn, shooting her a look that has most people bursting into tears.

She sighs wearily, putting her white quill into its holder and neatly folding her hands on her lap. “She had an altercation with King Kelen. She dragged him into her prison cell, and he hit her.”

My voice drops to a deadly soft volume, a vision of his hands on her clouding my mind. “So, just to reiterate, because you know I *love* to be clear. Kelen hit Renna. Yes?”

“Rexxan, don’t kill him.”

I don’t answer her. I won’t kill him, but I will make him beg to be killed. “Are you aware two people are asleep in your bed? How do *you* get to keep the angelic reputation, but I don’t?”

I look down at her notes as she laughs. She is studying the Delsk Potion; the one Renna takes. My mind is not the only one plagued by her, it seems. “Lynna, forget her. She’s not worth our time.”

She shrugs ever so slightly, her aqua eyes glowing in the dark. “She is a puzzle to be solved.”

“She’s nothing but trouble.”

“She has a heart of gold.”

“You hardly fucking know her!” I retaliate, before pinching my nose. I don’t snap at Lynna. The day I raise my voice at Lynna will be the day I’ve lost my mind beyond all

hope. She stands, her fingers hovering in front of my eye to feel the heat from my face. “You’re in so much pain today.”

I gaze down at her. She’s so fucking beautiful that there are books about it. She’s unnaturally clever, raised for life in the public eye, trained in royal etiquette. She’s funny and she’s kind. Wise and empathetic. So why, *fucking why*, in seven hundred and fifty years of friendship could I never feel for her the same fire that I feel for Renna?

“She feels for you too,” she breathes, reading my mind as aquamarine eyes search mine.

“It doesn’t matter what either of us feel. She’s a criminal. She’s a liar.”

“She’s a hunter. One that protects her people with a level of loyalty that I have only ever seen before in you. She’s a sister who loves her brother more than anything. She’s someone who, despite her childhood, hasn’t lost the fun and wonder she had as a child. She is special.”

“Why are you saying this?”

“Because I’ve never seen you like this with anyone. She is in your head, and you are in hers. Did you sleep with her?”

“Bloody hell, Lynna. Have you *any* boundaries? Nosy woman,” I mutter, ignoring her question.

“I’ve seen your sex dungeon, REXXAN, and *you* want to talk about our boundaries?” She shout-whispers, eyes flicking to the door.

“It’s not a fucking dungeon, for the four hundredth time. Yes, Lynna, I slept with her. It was a mistake. I’m not talking about this with you.”

“Was it different? Did it feel unlike it has ever felt with anyone else?”

Yes. “No.”

I turn and leave, my heart weighed down with an emotion I can’t even explain. Perhaps getting some revenge on Kelen will cheer me up, but somehow I doubt it.

I bonded with someone for the first time since I was a child, and it was all a fucking lie.

CHAPTER 16

COMMUNITY SERVICE (REXXAN)

Standing before a large golden gate, with miles of wheat fields behind me, I reread the letter from Espan again, written in code.

RUTH,

SOMETHING HAS COME UP AT THE BLACKSMITH. IT'S BAD, AND I HAVE AN IDEA OF WHO LIT THE FIRE.

THEY'RE SHORT ON METAL SUPPLY.

SEE YOU SOON,

GOLDIE.

Translation—he has an idea of who was behind the first Vault break-in, and he thinks they're near him. I tuck it into my jacket and ride through the gates of Rinnia, the capital city of his Kingdom, after a two-month journey to get here. It has been seven months since he left the Forest Kingdom with the Shadow Commander in tow. I push the thought of her out of my head for the tenth time today.

Lynna rides behind me, with nine guards and one other healer joining us as we breeze through the well-kept streets and gold-gilded rooftops of Espan's capital. Excitable crowds line the roads to welcome us. I'm popular here, and Lynna too. I sign three notebooks, shake a couple of children's hands, and leave my staff to greet the members of the public, more concerned with the potential impending doom of Yterras.

Espan stands atop the grand steps into his palace. It actually *looks* like a palace, unlike mine which looks more like

a forest. A gold crown sits atop his blonde head and he nods at me as my horse halts in front of him. I like Espan, but I'm desperate to grip him by the shoulders and tell him to toughen up.

Espan pulls me into an unwilling hug, and I begrudgingly slap him on the back in return. "Something to tell you—"

"Is it about the Vault?" I interrupt.

"No."

"Then discuss it later. I only want to hear about the Vault now."

"Always straight onto business," he mutters gloomily, as I sling my bags onto my back.

He looks behind me over my shoulder and I snort. "She's not going to fucking marry you. Give up."

"I wish she would."

"She's not interested in marrying a King."

"I know," he says, sighing as we walk down the hall. "But I would not be a normal man if I didn't imagine it from time to time. Although, I'm in no rush to marry."

"Sensible. I was married and a father as a boy—much too young. Tell me all you know," I reply, sitting in his library and uncorking a bottle of red wine.

We do not leave the room until three hours later. Mine and Espan's spies have done well. Traitors from the Cataclysmic Flats have managed to get a copy of the key to one of the ten doors to the Vault. This leaves two questions. How do we get it back, and who is the rat who helped them get it? There's a hell of a lot of money floating around these people at the moment, and it plants a bad thought in my head.

Someone powerful is helping them, and it has me looking around the table of mine and Espan's most famous guards and advisors, questioning everything that leaves everyone's mouth. Shit, I can't even rule Espan out, that's how dangerous this is.

"Who found the hidden cave?"

Espan sighs. “That’s what I wanted to tell you earlier. It was Renna and Onyx. Don’t go flying off the handle. Her army has taken a few months of work spying for me, and she’s the best I’ve had.”

I ignore the way my heart rate spikes at the mention of her name as we walk out of the palace grounds. She’s crossed my mind every day for months, but the Renna that I know is nothing more than an act.



I AM awoken at four in the morning by searing pain in my chest. As I struggle to regulate my breathing I know that all hope of any more sleep is long lost. Instead, I plunge into an ice bath and walk down to the training ground to lift weights, borderline grinding my teeth into dust at the agony. The distinctive noise of an arrow whipping through the air and hitting a target greets me, and I stand at the top of the steps.

She is here.

Of course she is here. She just had to be here. She sprints across the empty courtyard, swinging on a rope and launching herself onto a platform not one foot wide. From there she leaps up to catch a wooden bar, pulling herself up. I watch the way her muscles flex, the way her body moves and bows with unexplainable grace and power. As I witness her split an arrow in two with another arrow, I see that there is no way she could’ve ever been a mortal. She has been training like this for a *long* time.

Bruises and knife cuts decorate her exposed arms as she plummets to the stone floor, wipes the sweat from her face, and starts collecting arrows. I let out a frustrated exhale at seeing her. I should’ve known she might be here. I can’t keep watching like a stalker.

“Good morning,” I chirp, my voice a little too sweet and dripping in sarcasm.

“It would be, if I hadn’t just seen you,” she says, pulling her final arrow out of the target with a little extra force. She’s painfully beautiful, her skin a warm shade of brown and her body sculpted from hours in this courtyard. She looks healthy.

“Grow up, Renna.”

“Go fuck yourself, REXXAN.”

And with those kind parting words, she vanishes into the night.

When I return at sunrise, Espan is waiting for me outside my bedroom, looking creepy. “I don’t fuck men, Espan. Find someone else.”

He chuckles. “Very well.”

“Why are you here?”

“I told Mary you’d help her out for a few hours this morning.”

“Fine,” I say, walking past him.

Mary runs the orphanage. I always pay it a visit when I come. I’m not sure why. Perhaps because children are my biggest weakness. Perhaps because I lost my parents quite young, or because my son very nearly lost his parents too. Had we not been in the Royal Family, he would’ve been in an orphanage too.

A few years ago, I attended a charity gala in this very palace and every high-profile guest there sponsored a child at Mary’s orphanage, paying for their food and education until they’re grown up. Mine was a baby girl called Anpopeia, or Poppy, who I hope has now found her family.

When I arrive, I spot Renna leaning against the gate, eating a pear. I stop in my tracks. “Espan, I swear to the gods, if this is a fucking set-up—“

“It’s time you two buried the hatchet. At least be neutral with her. You both love volunteering here. Patch it up. Make it work, for the children.”

I'm going to cripple his Kingdom's finances for months, I swear. I'll cut off his fucking wine supply, that'll do it. Renna looks up, beautiful brown eyes meeting mine. She frowns immediately, and I hate that that's how she feels around me. She beams at every other man like they put the sun in the sky. "What are you doing here?"

Nice to see you too, Renna.

"I could ask you the same," I reply, walking right past her.

"I'm...helping?"

"As am I."

"Well, you don't seem like the volunteering-at-an-orphanage sort."

I rattle off my usual answer. "It's good publicity."

"That seems on-brand for you," she remarks, in a venomous tone. She's pissed off. Good. I am too. She should be dead for what she did. I head inside, not waiting for her. I'm too annoyed to be here.

"You comed back again?" Says a tiny voice, and my heart sinks to my stomach, my anger fizzling into thin air. *Poppy*. I've been here three times in the last seven years, and this little girl has never found a home, even though the littlest ones are usually the first to go. She peers out from behind a doorway, just one big eye looking round.

Evergreen children grow slowly, so she's the size of a mortal two-year-old, but she's twelve, so her speech is much more developed. She's a sweetheart but she's shy. She gets scared and angry, and she won't talk to anyone, especially not strangers. I squat down to her level, not approaching too near. "Of course I came back."

"You...come to see me?" She asks, her voice quiet and high-pitched, still not coming out from behind the door. She hasn't grown much, small for her age because of how badly malnourished she was when she arrived.

"I did. I wanted to see how my favourite future artist has been doing!" I say, aware of Renna watching us from the

doorway.

Poppy pokes an inch more of her tiny face out, a second anxious eye appearing. Her short blonde curls stick up around her head. “I am okay. I had an apple for a snack.”

I laugh at her executive summary of the last twelve months of her life. “Wow. I could do with an apple now too!”

She giggles but her eyes snap up to Renna, widening in trepidation. She quickly vanishes again, out of sight once more. I sigh and stand, spotting Mary who dashes over and bows to us both. “Your Majesty! And Commander Renna. Welcome to the madhouse! Poppy will be ever so pleased to see you.”

“I’ve just seen her. She’s not found a family?”

“She did. They sent her back after a week. It’s knocked her already brittle confidence.”

Gods, maybe I do have a heart after all, because it’s fucking hurting.

“You’ve been here before?” Asks Renna.

Mary nods. “He’s here quite often. Pretends he’s scary, but he’s a big softie!”

A growl rumbles in my throat, but Mary pays no mind. She claps her floury hands, a small white cloud of flour puffing into the air and settling on her red nose. “I thought you two could help them plant strawberry bushes together.”

Fuck me. This is going to be the longest day of my life.

CHAPTER 17

A REUNION (RENNA)

“Noooooooooooo!” I shriek, as Atlas, a tiny boy with frizzy hair and a few scars on his dark skin stabs me with a wooden sword. I tumble to the floor, letting the army of children pile on top of me.

I have not been successful at the gardening part, but I have kept half of the children entertained while REXXAN digs a hole in the dirt for the strawberry bush to go into. A toddler sits on his shoulders as he does it, letting the other half of the children help him dig.

“You’re staring at the big man again, Renna,” says one of the girls.

I feel myself blush. I may hate REXXAN, but my ovaries aren’t on board with that yet, and seeing the evil, conniving, six-foot-nine brute let a girl put a flower in his hair is doing things to my body that I cannot explain. His dark brown hair is up in a messy bun, stubble covering his square jawline, and I’m just mush.

If masculinity had a physical form, it would be the Forest King. The same violent hands that can scare lightning out of the sky now tie the laces on a toddler’s shoe. His dark brown riding pants hug his muscular thighs...and I’m staring once more. This girl has a point.

ESPAN doesn’t know about my situation, and he would never have meant harm, but spending the day here is hard; a constant reminder of my love for children and the fact that my

chance of being a mother was cruelly stripped away from me by my own.

My downward thoughts are gratefully interrupted when Mary calls all forty of the children inside for dinner, and REXXAN and I scoop up the four babies that are too young to walk or crawl. Mary smiles over at us, wiping her hands on her pinstriped apron. “You’ll make a wonderful mother one day, Renna.”

And just like that, the words she’d meant so kindly feel like a twisting knife to the chest. When I open my mouth to formulate a reply, nothing appears.

“You do want children, don’t you? Oh, it’d be such a waste if you didn’t! They just adore you!”

“Mary, you couldn’t get me a glass of water, could you?” Asks REXXAN, flashing her a smile that no woman in Yterras could possibly say no to. She’s a puddle on the floor at the sight, stopping to stare at him for a split second before she leaps into action, scurrying off. REXXAN turns his eyes to me. “Renna.”

I hold up a hand. “Just don’t.”

“Fine,” he acquiesces, opening the door for me with a baby on each hip. I sit opposite him at the middle of the long table with bench seats, spooning stewed apples and porridge into a baby’s mouth. I was supposed to be killing a murderer today, but this’ll do.

“You’re very pretty!” Says a girl. “REXXAN, isn’t she pretty?”

“Very pretty,” mutters REXXAN, busy helping another child who has managed to get porridge actually *into* his nose. How do they manage that?

“You didn’t even look!”

REXXAN looks up, and the fire in his eyes is enough to make my breaths come a little faster. Lazily, indulgently, he runs his gaze up and down my body in a manner that is far too inappropriate for this setting. His eyes set alight as he rolls up his shirt sleeves as if he is suddenly too warm. I’m rendered

speechless. “She’s very, *very* beautiful, Mia,” he says, but he doesn’t rip his gaze from mine as he says it.

He pokes her in the ribs. “Happy now?”

Mia squeals in delight. “You’re gonna marry her!”

“What is it with you women in my life!” He says, exasperated. “You remind me of my mother! She was always mentioning marriage.”

“Is she dead too?”

“Yes, both my parents are,” he tells her, stealing a carrot off her plate. He leans back on the bench, checking on the same girl for the hundredth time that day. A tiny, too-thin, blonde toddler is sat on her own, her food untouched. He swivels around, too large for all of this normal-sized furniture, and stalks down the line of children. He swings her onto his hip and walks her back to us. His hands lower the girl onto the bench, dropping down next to her.

“Not hungry, Poppy?”

She shrugs, her huge eyes too big in her head. She is heartbreakingly sweet. She’d not let go of his sleeve all morning. She eyes me nervously and I give her a hopefully-warm smile. “Good afternoon, Poppy.”

She buries her face in REXXAN’S shirt and he turns her back around slowly. “This is Renna. You can trust her.”

“You...friends with her?”

REXXAN pauses, not knowing what to say. Friends feels somehow too much and not enough. Friends doesn’t explain the hatred I feel for him. Friends also doesn’t explain the intensity of the desire I feel when he is around. *Friends* is not the word, but I don’t know what is.

“They’re getting married!” Shouts Mia, and REXXAN slaps his palm to his forehead.

“Who’s getting married?” Yells another child, chaos erupting. They barrel towards us like an army of fun-sized hunters, asking us if it is true, and before long, REXXAN and I

are in hysterics, fending off little children who are asking us to read our wedding vows.

“Oh my word, REXXAN, help!” I yell, through uncontrollable laughter as fifteen children pile on top of me. Gods, I definitely cracked a rib fighting Stellan yesterday. I wince as another one jumps on. REXXAN is trying and failing to look serious.

“Stop!” He shouts, and the children all fall silent, frozen in place as they look at him for instruction. “Bring her down!” He yells, and they all go ballistic, attacking me with stuffed toys and wooden swords.

That *bastard*.

When the golden evening sun is stepping aside to give twilight her turn, we finally escape the orphanage. I take a step outside the rusty old door and let out the longest, most exhausted sigh of my entire fucking life. I reach my hand into my bag. “Do you want to go and split this bottle of wine by the lake?”

“Want isn’t a strong enough word,” he says, surprising me. I’m grinning at the floor for some reason as we walk to the nearby lake. We’ve not spoken much today, but I feel like we’ve come to understand each other better. Neither of us is the cold, heartless fool that the other one thinks we are.

“I watched you in the training ground,” he says, as we sit on the riverbank and hide amongst the reeds so we don’t attract a crowd. “It was impressive, if not stupidly dangerous.”

I smile, watching his tanned skin glow in the evening sun. The smoother skin of his scars stands slightly paler than the rest of his face, and in a twisted way, it’s really beautiful. “Thank you. I’ve always loved acrobatics. Combining it with fighting has got to be *the* most enjoyable thing ever, even if it’s pointless.”

He’s silent, and I realise how that sounded. I mean, it’s not *the* most enjoyable thing ever. Oh, no. Now I’m picturing other fun things. I’m blushing. *I know I’m blushing*. He raises an eyebrow, probably reading my mind with his stupid magic

fucking abilities. I shriek, hiding my face in my cloak. “Stop reading my mind! Stop with your wizardry!”

“If you shake your head hard enough, I can’t read it.”

“Really?” I say, my voice shaking together with my head.

He grins and it makes my knees weak. “No, but you look like such an imbecile right now.”

“Oh my gods. Fuck you!” I say, cackling with laughter. I’m such an idiot sometimes. “Stellan once told me that if I hung from a bar for long enough, I’d grow three inches taller. I hung until I dislocated my shoulder.” REXXAN is laughing too now, absentmindedly skimming stones over the water’s surface.

I feel so free when I’m with him. I can’t explain it. People often say that when they’ve found the right person they feel free to finally be happy. But it’s not just that. With REXXAN, I feel free to be sad. To be anxious. To feel unsure. Free to wear my troubles on the outside without judgment, and that means so much more.

He uncorks the wine—of course he has a corkscrew in his pocket—and takes a long swig, handing it to me.

“About what happened—“

“Renna, it’s fine.”

“No, I should explain. What happened with Kelen, it wasn’t a questioning of your authority, and it absolutely wasn’t an attempt at disturbing any of those stones in the Vault. It was an attempt at repairing my relationship with the River Folk for the good of my own people. I was doing what I believed a good leader should. I never meant for any of it to end that way.”

“I understand. Kelen won’t lay another finger on you.”

“He was just angry. Wait—what did you do to him?”

“Let’s just say...,” he drums his ringed thumb on his thigh as if he is bored of talking about it, “...he has fewer fingers to be able to lay on you.”

Did he...he didn't. Did he? He cut off another King's fingers for touching me? Why is that making me aroused? He's reading my mind again, I know it.

"Are you okay?" He asks, looking at me like he's worried I'm going to implode.

I nod, clearing my throat and feigning nonchalance. "Just surprised. I knew you were ruthless, but you seemed quite forgiving to me."

"Only to you," he replies, his deep voice caressing my skin like butter.

We sit in comfortable silence for a short while, watching the birds. These non-awkward silences are new to me. With Rexxan, I don't feel the need to fill them. He's so deep in thought all the time, that it always seems a shame to disturb him.

"It was my mother," I say after a silent five minutes, surprising us both. "The reason I can't have children."

His gaze never leaves the last of the red sunlight dancing on the water, and it makes me feel more comfortable. "How?"

How? It's an interesting question. Most people want to know why. But how? "It was some yellowish potion, my mother performed a spell, I was sick for weeks. I was shivering. I don't remember it too well."

He nods like that's all the information he needs. "I know of it. It's a spell—a curse, almost."

"You do? Do you think...I mean...does it work? Is it unliftable? Is it effective?"

He nods again, not saying anything but confirming what I already know. I'll never carry a child. "Was it hard? Being a single parent?"

"Yes. I was very depressed," he replies, brutally honest as usual. "Not because of him, but because I'd just lost my family. It felt hypocritical to tell my son to be happy when I didn't know how to do it myself. But we stumbled through, he's turned out more than fine, and we're close with each

other. He's so old now that we're friends rather than father and son. We're two of the oldest people left on earth."

I smile. I like the way he talks about his son with such pride. "Is Lynna here? In Rinnia?"

He nods, passing me the wine. Encapsulated in light from the red evening sun and then the purple twilight, we spend four hours ironing out our arguments, getting heated in places but eventually settling on common ground. I like that we can do that. I like that we can listen to and empathise with each other. He stands, pulling me up. "I ought to get back. I'm meeting Espan first thing."

I rest my head against the muscles of his chest, feeling the warmth of his burns beneath his shirt. In this moment, life feels so serene. Like maybe, in some fucked up way, we'll both find happiness one day. Not in each other, unfortunately, but somewhere. He tips my chin up with the side of his index finger, planting the gentlest of kisses on my lips. "I missed how you taste."

I smile, kissing him again while his hand snakes down my back, squeezing my curves. "It's wrong of me to ask, but I have to," he whispers, between kisses. "How many men have known the paradise between your legs since you last saw me?"

He always knows when I lie. I opt for the truth. "None."

"And why is that?"

"You're a real arrogant bastard. Does anyone ever tell you that?"

"Often. Tell me why, Renna."

I strongly dislike him. "Because it won't feel how it felt with you."

"Where are you staying?"

"Split between my tent at the Shadow Camp and my room in Espan's palace."

"Let's go back to the palace," he says, injecting so much seduction into that sentence that we are all but sprinting back to our horses.

We tumble through my bedroom door, clothes flying all over the place. His breath is hot on my neck as he walks me forward. He's as starved of me as I am of him, and that only makes this sweeter. "Gods, Renna, I want to make you forget what it is for me to not be inside you," he whispers, pushing me back onto the bed.

I wriggle my hips against his erection and he hisses through gritted teeth, the weight of him crushing me in the best way. I drive him wild, and I love that.

"You're fucking feral," he says, as I rip a button off his shirt in impatience.

My hurried fingers undo his belt, tossing it across the room so hard it cracks the mirror. I raise an eyebrow at him. "Doesn't that mean we'll have bad luck?"

"You're my bad luck, Ren, not the fucking mirror," he states, as I desperately undress his lower half. I pull him down to me, wrapping a leg around his solid waist.

"Already?"

"Yes," I say, blushing. I just want him. Tears sting the edges of my eyes as he sinks into me. It's a blissful sort of pain that I'd happily feel for the rest of my life.

"Okay?" He asks, as we're almost nose to nose. His thumb brushes my cheek and I nod, lost for words, because I haven't felt like this with someone before.

"I'm okay," I promise, my lips brushing his. Wicked delight glitters in those eyes, and he grabs my ankle, hooking it over his shoulder. Renna is ever a man of his word, and he fucks me until I'm not even certain that the words leaving my mouth *are* words, and only the sounds of our ragged breathing fill the bedroom.

"One more time, for me," he murmurs, kissing the inside of my foot.

I'm glistening in sweat. He is too. But every move of his hips makes up for a day we spent apart. Every sentence in my ear erases the memory of a night alone, wondering if he hated me and wondering why I even cared if he did. His leg hooks

beneath mine and before I can blink, he's rolled us over so I'm on top. A shudder wracks my aching body; at this angle he feels overwhelming. One rough hand grips my thigh as I ride him, winding higher and higher with him beneath me. I long to touch him but my hands are ensnared tightly in his free hand and I'm left feverish and desperate like an addict that can never get enough of him.

The lines of his jaw tense and I know he's right on the edge with me. A word in another language leaves his lips and he drops my hands to clamp both of his around my waist, the muscles in his arms straining as he holds me still and pounds into me so hard that I swear I forget who I am or what I'm even doing here. Every muscle in my body tightens and then releases as he sits up and holds me to him, my moan lost in the tortured way he says my name as we both explode together.

Holy fuck.

He kisses my breasts and hums in satisfied approval. "You always make me proud, do you know that?" His lips brush mine and he stands to get a cloth to clean me up. I understand now that he keeps my hands constrained because he thinks I'll hurt his scars, but I'd love for him to trust me more. I suppose I haven't given him good reason to. He was right a few months ago. All I had done was lie to him, but I would like that to change.

I don't have the energy to speak, my body floating in a serene calmness that I haven't felt for a long time. Huge hands massage the aching muscles in my back, his lips finding their way there every now and again. I smile into the linen pillowcase as sweet words in his low grumbly voice tickle my skin.

I don't know what we're pretending to be here, but I'll play along happily. Sleep hovers over me like the temptress that she is, and when I can resist her no longer, I take her hand and let her drag me under.

I wake up in darkness. My face is boiling, and I realise that's because it's squished against REXXAN'S bare chest. I grumble, rolling over so he is spooning me and realising he is

reading a book over my shoulder, the pages illuminated by moonlight and the faint orange glow from his eyes. I pluck it out of his hands and turn it over to read the title.

“The Application of Carnivorous Ferns in Medicinal Herbology and Apothecaries. Sweet mother of fuck, REXXAN. You’re a real bag of laughs, you know that?”

He snorts in amusement, giant hands snapping the book shut. “Go back to sleep, huntress.”

“What time is it?”

“Three in the morning.”

I rub the sleep out of my eyes. “Gods, I have to get up. I’m on an assignment for Espan today,” I croak, trying to keep my eyelids open.

He hums, kissing my neck. “Up you get then, love.”

As I dress, there is a tentative knock at the door. “I’ve got it,” I call to REXXAN, hopping as I pull on one of my black boots. I open it with a hair tie between my teeth. Glowing in the doorway, as beautiful as ever, is LYNNA.

“We need to talk.”

“LYNNA. Now isn’t the best time. I really want to catch up with you though! I’m just running late, and—“

“RENNA, I’m serious. We have to talk. You have to tell him.”

I slip my indifferent mask on. “I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

“RENNA, tell REXXAN or I will have to. I cannot lose my job over this. We’ll protect you. No harm will come to you.”

I feel guilty, but I have to close the door on her before the conversation goes too far. I need time to figure out what to do about all of this.

I don’t deserve him.

I hurry out the door and down endless hallways until I’m out of Espan’s palace and riding out of the city gates.

CHAPTER 18

THE TRUTH (REXXAN)

“Are you weelly going to marry Renna?” Asks Poppy, as I put on her little white socks and muddy boots.

“Gods, give me strength. Not you as well.”

She shrinks back, her eyes widening as she scrambles away from me. “I’m sorry!”

Ouch. There’s an ache where my heart would be if I had one. “Anpopeia, you’re not in trouble. That was a joke.”

She says nothing, and I know my slight comment has bashed the insubstantial trust I’ve built between us. I’m more used to my own son, with his ironclad confidence and complete lack of fear. No one knows what had happened to Poppy before she came here, but I wish I could fix her.

I take her on a walk and a picnic every time I come to Rinnia. She loves the outdoors, and once she’s out of her shell, she’s got a little attitude that I value so much. I remember her question and let out a tired sigh. “I’m not going to marry Renna, no.”

“But *why*?” She whispers, as I sit her on my hip.

“Why? So many reasons, Poppy. She doesn’t want to be a Queen. I don’t want her to be a Queen. She can’t sit still for more than an hour and she hates living inside. She’s not very honest with me, and she can’t behave. She has her own people to lead, and on top of all of that, we don’t like each other.”

“But *she* likes you, and you likes her!” Poppy says, gesturing with tiny hands and looking at me as if I am stupid.

Maybe I am stupid.

“She does not!” I deny, carrying her out the front door. We sit under a tree to escape the light rain, sharing a slice of apple pie. I broach the subject that I have avoided, just in case she wants to talk about it. “Mary told me you went home with a couple.”

“A cuddle?” She asks, holding her apple pie as if I might snatch it off her at any moment.

“A couple. A man and a lady.”

She nods. “But they send me right back. They swapped me for Benny.”

Ouch again. My heart sinks. “You know, you’ll find someone who is perfect for you.”

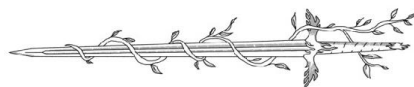
She shakes her head. “I am called a difficult case.”

I don’t like to hear her talk like that about herself. That’s an overheard sentence if I’ve ever heard one. “Did Mary say that to you?”

“I heard her say it to Juno,” she says, blinking big eyes at me. Every other child I’ve met has asked me if I’ll take them home with me, but never Poppy. Not once in all the years I’ve known her has she asked me if I can adopt her. I don’t know if it’s because she’s scared of the answer, but I wish she’d find a patient family.

After we finish our food and she finishes showing me all her best drawings, I take her back to the orphanage, swapping her old, tattered boots out for the new ones I’d got her.

As I leave down the battered wooden steps and into the scorching midday sun, I whisper a silent prayer that the next time I find myself in Rinnia, I don’t find her here.



FOR THE FOURTH night in a row, I hammer my fist on Lynna's door. I don't know where she's been staying this week, but she's been hiding from me. Tonight, however, a slither of warm light illuminates the floor beneath the door. "I'm coming in."

"No, don't!"

"I'm coming in, so cover up if you're undressed," I warn, before slamming my shoulder into the door so hard that the iron lock flies off the frame, clattering to the sandstone floor of the hallway. Lynna is in her default position; kneeling on the floor in an eye-wateringly expensive dress, surrounded by thirty open books and endless pages of notes.

She stands gracefully, gesturing at the broken door. "Rexxan, for heaven's sake!"

"You weren't opening the door."

"Yes, for a reason! For such a clever person, you truly..." she shakes her head, exasperated. "What is it?"

"You've been avoiding me."

She blushes, and I look down at the endless papers that cover every inch of her floor. Every ancient book, every faded journal, every dusty research paper; the same topic. Sorceresses. My eyes snap up to meet hers. *It cannot fucking be.*

"Lynna, they were wiped out hundreds of years ago."

Lynna says nothing, tears welling in her eyes, and I see it. She thinks Renna is one, and I doubt I'll ever live to see the day that Lynna is wrong about something like this. I remember them, and suddenly it falls into place. Why Renna would go through such pain to hide it, why her parents had stopped her ever having children, why she's smaller than those around her. That sense I've had from the very second I laid eyes on her that she is something completely different than the rest of us. Every little detail makes sense. Every puzzle piece snaps together.

Chills dance over my skin, my heart rate picking up. This will shift the dynamics of the Kingdoms. *Everyone* will want a

piece of her.

Sorceresses were a possession so coveted by everyone that they were captured, sold, bred, and traded into extinction. Wars were held over sorceresses. The enemy captured them in droves, abusing their powers for their own benefit. Slowly, they died out, most dying in childbirth or from malnutrition.

The very last sorceress was a Fire Sorceress, Ember. Kings fought bitterly over her until one day, she was lost. She lived in hiding for many, many years until she was found dead at a farm in the west. They were not so different from Evergreens, contrary to the legends that paint them as flying, fire-breathing fairies. But their coloured tears were considered a prize by many; a potent elixir that would give the consumer incredible powers. It's all horseshit, but people believed it.

“How could you possibly think this to be true?”

Lynna sinks back against her bed, looking defeated. “I know it sounds impossible. I know how this looks,” she runs a hand through her white-blonde hair. “She has faded scars on her ears, and...good heavens, REXXAN, I don't know. There's just something about her. I know you see it too. She's not a mortal and she certainly doesn't seem like an Evergreen either. Where is she?”

“Out assassinating someone because Espan is too scared to do these things himself.”

Lynna nods. “Does Onyx know that we know?”

“No. He's about to,” I say, and she follows me down the hallway where I open Onyx's door. He looks up and spots me, his expression turning hostile before he looks straight back down and continues loading arrows into his quiver. “Onyx, we know,” I say, leaning against the doorway. “We know what she is. You don't need to hide it.”

“A sorceress. Please don't deny it,” adds Lynna, when he clearly does not believe us. A hundred emotions cross Onyx's face before he hurls himself at me with such force that my back slams against the stone wall. *Shit*, he's strong. I shove

him off me with one arm and he shoves me right back, his fist meeting my mouth.

The metallic taste of blood coats my tongue, and I hit him back harder purely to stop him from pummeling the life out of me. Lynna is begging us to stop, but Onyx's face is two inches from mine, his eyes blazing with ungovernable wrath.

"You work out what she is, and suddenly she goes on some trip for Espan for several days now? You expect me to believe that's a coincidence?" He pushes me again, but I hold my ground. "I know what Kings like you would do to have a sorceress in your possession. I don't have to look hard in the history books to see what people like you do to them. Tell me what you've done with her!"

He's screaming in my face now, blinded by crippling dread on behalf of his sister.

"I haven't done anything with her," I snap back, twisting out of his grip and holding him against the wall by his throat until he is struggling for air. "But if you carry on attacking me, Onyx, I won't hesitate to kill you. So take a deep fucking breath, and work with me here. We'll find her."

"Will we? And why do you want to find her? Has it anything to do with your recent discovery?" He spits between us, seemingly unfazed by my hand around his throat. "Kill me if you wish, but let these be my dying words. Keep your hands. Off. My. Sister."

Lynna places a gentle hand on Onyx's shoulder, trying to diffuse the tension that threatens to explode between us. "Onyx, all three of us want the same thing here. Your sister safe."

"So you can sell her," he says, yellow eyes not leaving mine. I shake my head. "I have no interest in selling her. I have no need for any more money."

"I don't believe a word you say."

"Onyx, please. Don't fight him, it won't end well," says Lynna, her angelic voice worried and desperate. "Let us help her. Let *me* help her."

“Why would you care?” He says, his gaze finally moving to Lynna.

“I like your sister. She’s funny, she’s kind, and she’s one of the first people I’ve met who likes me for me. She doesn’t care for my titles. I want to help her,” promises my healer, prizing our hands off each other and stepping between us. “Please. Let us focus on what is important.”

Onyx steps back, his eyes lingering on Lynna for a split second longer than is necessary. “I’m leaving on the Sundance Pass to find her. Send for me if she comes back,” he says, slinging his bow and arrows over his shoulder and jogging out of the room.

Lynna lets out a gentle huff, her chest deflating with relief that we haven’t killed each other. “If you were more like Espan, my life would be a whole lot more relaxing, REXXAN.”

“And a whole lot more boring, I imagine,” I tell her, as we walk back to find Espan.

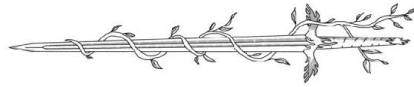
Our heads turn to the sound of the door opening and there she stands, leaving me wondering if she was quite that beautiful when she left. Her hunting clothes are slightly torn, and her hairline, neck, and ear are caked in dried blood. She limps over, and as she gets closer I can see the shadows of exhaustion beneath her eyes and the injuries littering every exposed piece of skin I can see.

My eyes meet Lynna’s and for once we are on the same page. Now is not the best time to tell Renna that we know.

She tosses an iron key on the table in front of us, the metal clattering along the polished wood and skidding to a halt in front of Espan. The key. She has the key. *Fuck*, I know how violent the fight must’ve been for her to get that, and she looks half-broken. Physically, I mean. Renna has an unbreakable spirit.

“It’s done,” she says, her voice hoarse. She’s hurt. She wouldn’t be hurt if she’d done the sensible thing of taking Onyx and Stellan with her, but I understand now why she ran away in such a rush.

Even the thought of anyone discovering who she is must be terrifying for her.



“REN?” I ask, gently knocking on her door.

“Yes?”

“Lynna and I are here.”

“How can I help?” She asks, quietly.

“No, love. We’re here to help *you*.”

The door unlocks a little, and a beautiful dark eye peers around. She shuffles back, letting us in.

“I thought I could help heal your wounds, Renna,” says Lynna, eventually.

A sorceress. Can it really be? People in Yterras grow up hearing about them as a thing of myth or legend.

I tie her impossibly long dark hair up in a braid, wincing at the arrow wound in the back of her shoulder. Renna doesn’t make a sound as we stitch the wound closed, disinfecting all her smaller cuts. It’s the stab wound to her thigh that has Lynna and myself switching languages like we do when we’re working together in the Healing Halls, working a little faster now. She’s pale from blood loss.

I feel her forehead. She is shivering violently but not cold, and I think she’s just dehydrated and exhausted. I’m not used to feeling like this about someone, but seeing her in this state is making me...sad? Angry? Some kind of cocktail of the two, I think.

“You’re very strong,” I say, kissing her as Lynna sizzles her skin with some disinfectant chemical. I mean it. I’m in awe of her. She falls asleep as I run my fingers through her hair, but I stay exactly where I am for an hour. I like just *being* with

her. Just coexisting beside her. It's nice. I'll miss her when I go home.

But contrary to what romantic books would have me believe, sitting and watching a woman sleep for hours is incredibly fucking boring, no matter how beautiful, so I get up and make myself useful. Renna brought a prisoner back with her, and as Espan is anti-torture, I spend the night interrogating him for information. It's funny how much people tell you when they think you'll spare their life. But the kill doesn't relieve my tension, not tonight.

I trudge up the stairs out of the dungeons, the steps smooth and well-worn from centuries of use, and my sour mood only spoils further. This is my fault. She's up there in that state and I feel like it's my fault. If I'd given her more opportunity and more safety to open up to me, she wouldn't have run away on her own like that.

"She wants you," says Lynna, coming out of Renna's room and wiping her hands with a white cloth. The trail of her white ballgown pools at her feet, long sleeves tumbling down to the floor beside it. Her skin glows in the dim hallway, and somehow, she looks immaculate, despite the stress and blood of the last few hours. I, however, am splattered in blood. My face, my arms, my shirt. It is everywhere. Lynna does not look surprised.

"How is she?"

"She's in bed. She can't get back to sleep, despite her exhaustion. She wants you to sit with her."

Why is my chest glowing with pride? She wants me there with her. *Me*. It's an honour. I knock and creep into her room where she lies in bed, her whole body covered by a night dress that is far too big for her.

"I can't sleep, and—holy fuck, did you take a bath in blood or something?"

"Something like that," I mutter, cryptically.

"I don't want you to touch me. I hurt."

“That’s alright,” I say, stretching over her bed to get a book off the shelf. I sit on the chair, beginning to read aloud until she finally drifts off, her lips a little pouted in her sleep. Gods, she’s actually quite sweet when she’s not actively trying to ruin my life. Her long lashes paint shadows across her delicate face, and I am hit once again by that unfamiliar warm feeling in my chest.

I don’t know how to make that feeling go away.

CHAPTER 19

THEY KNOW (RENNA)

I fall asleep to the rich timbre of REXXAN'S deep voice and wake up to the very same.

"Morning, angel," he says, his scorching gaze on me when I open my eyes.

Waking up to REXXAN'S arms and shoulders—what a treat. I should get injured more often.

My breath catches in my throat in agony. My shoulder hurts. Shit, my thigh hurts even more. Note to self; don't get shot and stabbed in one day again. *Maybe split them over a few days next time, Ren.*

"Stay still. You're hurt," he orders, looking at the cut on my back, letting warm Evergreen magic flow from the tips of his fingers into my skin.

I'd rather not have my love—no, *like*—interest seeing my wounds but he doesn't seem to care and he's impossible to argue with. As gentle hands roll me over, the peaceful silence is splintered by the sound of the door nearly smashing off its hinges. Onyx stands in the doorway, for once looking freshly showered and rested. He doubles over with sheer relief, his hands on his knees. "Renna. Gods, Ren. I've died a thousand deaths."

"Onyx," I whisper, overcome with emotion all of a sudden. He runs over, wrapping two huge arms around me and it shatters me into pieces. I cry into his chest, heartbroken for him and everything I always put him through. I say I'll

change, but I never do. And I just wish his path never had to cross with mine, because I've ruined his life.

"Don't cry. Please don't cry. Are you hurt? I'm so fucking sorry, I should've been there. I let you down. I was so scared I'd lost you," he chokes out, and it only makes me cry harder because I knew he'd blame himself.

After a couple of minutes, I pull myself together and wipe my eyes on the blanket, sniffing. Onyx looks up at Rexas as if he'd just realised he was here, and his expression hardens into hatred. "What are you doing here?" He grits out, turning towards him.

"She wanted me here."

"How many fucking times do I have to tell you to stay away from her!" He shouts, his fist flying towards Rex.

Oh my word. Onyx never shouts or turns violent. What have I missed? The King catches my brother's fist in his palm, stopping it in its tracks. *Oh, no.* Onyx is strong, but Rexas could tear him in two. I swear in pain as I leap up to stand between them. "Stop it! Onyx, you're so stressed," I pull him down and press my forehead to his. "I asked him to be here. You need to go and take a walk."

An angry grumble vibrates in his throat, but he heads for the door. "I'll come back in a few hours," he mutters, resentfully. "I love you. You come straight to me if he's bothering you. Straight to me."

Lynna enters just as he leaves and gives him a very slightly flirtatious smile. "Would you like to get some air? I can give you an update on your sister over a walk?"

"O, you should go. It'll do you good," I say, encouraging him. He looks like he wants to go, but gazes at me, and then at Rexas, mistrust written all over his face.

"Thank you for the offer, Lynna, but I have to decline. I'll be in my room, Renna. If you need anything, you just come and find me or send someone."

I sigh sadly, nodding my agreement as he leaves. I let out a strangled curse. I love him, but he is so draining.

A small smile crosses REXXAN'S beautiful face, his arms folded across his chest. I swear his biceps are the size of my head. He perches on the edge of my bed, careful not to touch me, and I frown as all trace of pleasantness vanishes from his expression. "Renna, there's something you should know."

Oh no, are we having a baby? No, that's not possible. And how would he know that anyway? *Calm down, Renna.* "What is it?"

"Lynna and I, we know. We know what you are."

My ears ring, my heartbeat drumming in my head. I can see him talking, vaguely mentioning the word sorceress, but I can't hear his words. His lips move in slow motion. He knows. They know. *They know.* My heart thuds in my ears. High-pitched alarms pierce my brain.

They know.

You remember, my sweet daughter, if someone knows, you kill them. If lots of people find out, you kill yourself. It'll be less painful for you that way.

"Renna? You're not breathing." I vaguely hear REXXAN trying to bring me back into the present, but he sounds so far away.

Run? Stay? Kill him? Kill *me*? Deny it? Hide? I don't know what to do. This is everything I've spent my life trying to avoid. Is this why REXXAN wants me? To sell me? To possess a jewel so valuable that the other Kings would fall at his feet more than they already do? I scramble to my feet and bolt for the door, my injuries agonising, but he catches me and the reality of my fate crashes down on me. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Let me go!" I scream, pushing him off me.

"I have no interest in capturing, selling, or hurting you. You have to stop running, Renna. You cannot run forever."

"You'll just cage me and sell me," I say, backing away from him. I remember the books I've read. I know how the monarchs of this twisted earth treated my forebears. He shakes his head adamantly.

“No, love. I have no need for any more money or reputation. I just want to help you.”

I eye the door behind him, and he puts his hands above his head, kicking his sword across the uneven floor away from us both. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

Oh, gods. I’ve spent hours every day thinking about the moment someone might find out, and now it’s here, I feel so horrifically unprepared. “Renna, you’re hyperventilating. Sit down.”

“Oh, no. *Oh, no.* Oh no oh no oh no.”

“Renna, breathe with me,” he pleads, as my vision goes blurry. I’m going to faint. I beg my body not to betray me because I am sure I’ll wake up in a cage. My heart beats so fast that it’s almost a buzz, a nauseating sheen of sweat prickling my skin.

I don’t want to faint. I’m scared. I desperately try to breathe, try to focus on his voice, but everything goes black.

CHAPTER 20

THE POOR HEADBOARD (RENNA)

I wake up groggy and dazed, a cold cloth being pressed to my forehead.

The lingering stench of smelling salts wafts beneath my nose. Lynna and Aanen, another of the King's healers I recognise, are looking down at me with concerned expressions. So I'm not in a cage yet. "You gave us a little fright, Renna. Your breathing went very weak."

I blink to try and focus my vision, not sure if I can trust them. "Rexxan?" I whisper.

"He had to leave to help with an attack on the city. He'll be back any second now," explains Lynna.

Is Rexxan alright? I hope he's alright. Why do I even care? Recent, yet confusingly distant memories flood back to me, and dread wraps her evil hands around my neck. Rexxan knows. *Lynna* fucking knows. What will she do with me? She collects rare things, right? My eyes widen, flinching away from her touch. She takes her hands off me, frowning down at me with a worried expression.

"You know," I whisper, once we are alone.

"I do, Renna, but I will not utter a word of it to you, or to anyone else unless you have brought it up. Neither of us will."

Rexxan comes back as she finishes her sentence, ducking to fit his oversized body through the door frame. He looks devastating in leather armour that hugs every muscle of his body. His hair is in a small, tousled bun, a dark strand escaping and hanging over his eye. *I'm weak for him.*

“Is that deliberate?”

“Is what deliberate?”

“The hair over the eye?” I ask, and he looks genuinely baffled. I scowl at him. He doesn’t look real. I currently look like I’ve been put through a meat grinder and then reassembled, badly. He leans his sword against the wall, pulling leather wraps off his wrists and coming straight over.

“I was worried about you, love.”

I’m coming to terms with the fact that I don’t hate that particular nickname. “I’m okay.”

“Thank the gods,” he says, tucking some hair behind my ear.

“No, thank Lynna,” I correct him, and Lynna smiles graciously. She’s so beautiful, it’s depressing. She doesn’t look real either.

Rexxan gazes down fondly at me, his eyes shining with some unnamed emotion. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“You’re a real softie beneath that hard exterior, you know that?”

“Tell anyone and I’ll skin you alive.”

I smile, not having it in me to laugh. I have to tell him about my brother. I ask them both to sit.

“Onyx...Onyx was adopted by my parents from an orphanage when he was fifty years old. At this point, my father had been beating me and my mother relatively badly, and she feared for her life. My mother was Ember. The last sorceress. She was taking the Delsk Potion that made her look mortal like I do now. She knew the chances of her conceiving a sorceress with a mortal were less than one in a thousand, so she didn’t worry when she accidentally fell pregnant with me.

“But when I came along, born with bright orange eyes unlike his or my mother’s, my father believed the father was not him. He despised me; a reminder of his wife’s supposed indefinitely. He hit her into being weaker and weaker, which

meant the potion sickness got worse and worse—do not be fooled into feeling sorry for her. She was even more of a monster than he was, twisted and mangled into something horrible by the way she had been treated by others. She adopted Onyx, and hit him and hit him until the only thing he knew was to keep me safe.”

“That’s awful,” whispers Lynna, a haunted look in her eyes.

“Onyx was adopted, but not out of love. My mother used him to save me. What better way to ensure your child has someone to watch over them forever than to adopt a tall, broad, immortal child? It’s all he’s ever known. Then one day, my mother took the potion. It made her sick as usual, but she just...never woke up. With her gone, my father finally saw his chance to kill me, but Onyx killed him first.”

Rexxan runs his thumb over his short beard, deep in thought about everything I have said. Lynna’s eyes are lined with unshed tears, like my own. My guilt over Onyx’s existence crushes me daily. I never asked for him, but I have him nonetheless. I wish I could make him happier, to make him pursue his dream of settling in one city and being a guard, but I can’t because my parents told him that he could never do that.

“I don’t want to talk anymore,” I whisper, lying down once Lynna leaves. Everything hurts.

My eyes explore every inch of Rexxan’s face as he lies opposite me. Every curve of his sculpted lips. Every fleck of gold in the orange eyes that have been witness to so much horror. Every long, dark eyelash. The shape of the defined jawline that, usually tensed, is relaxed for once. I touch the tanned skin of his face, interrupted by a lightning-shaped scar that strikes over his eye. As his eyes close gently, like he might really trust me, my fingertips dance over the dark brown stubble that is longer than usual.

“Can we pretend that you never found out what I am? For now at least?”

He nods as we lie opposite each other on the bed that's far too small for us both, my fingers running over his scars. Sunlight trickles in through the curtains, painting us in her golden light. She kisses our broken and battered bodies with her warmth as if to tell us that it's all going to be alright in the end.

“What are you looking at, Renna?”

“You,” I whisper, smiling like a fool. “What're *you* looking at, Rexxan?”

“You.”

Oh. Warmth spreads in my veins, restoring and mending as it goes. I know this is bad. I know I'm falling for him, but I'm not able to stay away either. I'll take an unhappy ending with Rexxan over no Rexxan at all. “You never let me touch you,” I say, my face a few inches from his.

A frown creases his face slightly as though it's a surprise to him that I'd even want to. “Touch away, sweetheart,” he replies, unbuttoning his shirt and sitting up to pull it off, his abs flexing. It's a sight for sore eyes. “Be gentle on the burns.”

I swallow. This feels like a huge privilege and I'm nervous. I run shaky fingers over his chest, feeling the heat of the scars beneath. I run them up and down his arms, so big that they belittle my hands. I skate them over his huge shoulders, over layers of muscle. I trail them down his abs, tracing the V of his abdomen. He's a work of art, sculpted by centuries of dedication and gruelling training. Only when he sucks in a sharp intake of air do I realise how aroused he is.

“Sorry.”

“It's fine. I'm not sure there'll be a day where you don't have this effect on my body.”

I'm blushing. Why the fuck am I blushing? “Did you think of me? When we were apart?”

“I fucked your underwear, Renna,” he says, with a nonchalant expression that makes it impossible for me to know if he is serious. Could he have done that? Did he do that? Surely he didn't do that. *Did* he do that?

I pinch the neckline of my dress and pull it a few times, trying to cool down. Why is it so fucking hot today? REXXAN needs to turn the sun off. I can't let that go. Did he do that? And why do I wish I could've watched? I clear my throat. "Uh...did you do that?!"

"You didn't think of me?"

Don't ignore the question, REXXAN! I feel my face warming even more. "Maybe a little." Every night, without fail.

He grins. "To occupy even a slither of your mind is all a man can dream of, Renna."

My face blushes where it lies gently on his chest. "Ruthless—"

"Don't call me that."

"I thought you liked that nickname? You are ruthless."

"Not to you. I don't want to be ruthless to you."

"Sorry," I say, clearing my throat, "REXXAN Obsidian Tsellyx Rellyn Hallenian, King of the Dark Forest and Green Woodland, Commander of the Five Kingdom Alliance, Guardian of the Fire Stone."

"That's better. You should *only* be calling me that in bed."

I laugh out loud. He's secretly quite funny when he wants to be. "Are there many others? That can change the weather as you can?"

"Just me. Three of us with bloodlines from the gods remain. Well, four, actually. Lynna's father is alive too, but he ignores those powers—he does not care for flowers and animals like she does, only riches and power. I haven't seen him in a long time. Ocealia can bend the tides of the sea. Lynna can grow vines and plants from nothing, revive dead flowers, and enchant them to live forever. That kind of thing."

"Of course Lynna can do clever flower shit," I say, on a sigh. "Espan isn't one?"

"No."

Interesting. I could spend a hundred years with REXXAN and learn something about him every day. I meet his orange gaze with a serious expression. “I want you. I’m sure, before you ask.”

He’s laughing at me, and I have no idea why. “Never any flirting with you, Renna, you just get right down to business. It’s good to know my role in your life, at least,” he says, one huge forearm appearing to the left of my head as he holds himself over me. I need him, and I can see he feels the same.

His lips plant a searing kiss on mine, and another on my neck. Doing this with him, it’s different. He leaves no room for me to think of anything else, flooding all five of my senses with a whole new world of colour. But I don’t think it’s *just* because he’s criminally good at it, I think it’s the bond we’ve formed too.

“Oh my gods,” he groans, looking down and letting his eyes drink in my body. I laugh, my face warm. Every time he sees me, it’s like he hasn’t ever seen me before. He’s very good for my ego.

His hot tongue swirls my pierced nipple, one expansive hand holding me still when I arch my back and gasp a breathy version of his name. A dull drumbeat of pleasure starts in my core, desperate and wanting, but he is in no rush. “So many ways I could take you, love. Give me a year alone in this room with you and it still won’t be enough.”

“Please,” I whisper, his words caressing my skin like satin. He rains his divine attention on my breasts, using his knee to part my legs a little wider, careful not to touch the healing cuts and bruises on my legs. His kisses dip lower, each one accompanied by a word in a language I don’t know. I’d love to know what it is he says to me while we’re doing this. My fist tightens around the bedsheets as one, then two fingers slide inside me. Over my whimper, a curse leaves his lips.

“Always so desperate for me, Ren.”

His eyes lock on mine as his tongue lazily circles my clit. He’s going to be the death of me, but I’ll take this sweet, salacious demise over any life without him in it. I swear into

my hand, screwing my eyes shut as I surrender myself to the hurricane that is the Forest King. A rough hand grabs my jaw, tilting my head downwards. “Watch me worship you.”

Pleasure blooms in my lower stomach, my toes curling deeper into the mattress. Still, I hold his gaze, watching him pleasure me like it is the only thing he was born to do. He arches his fingers slightly, his tongue moving a little faster. Holy *fuck*. My heartbeat doesn't feel like it's in my chest anymore but somewhere else entirely. I gasp out a moan, teetering on the edge as he moves his fingers in and out. The fingers on his other hand curl around my thigh, digging into the curves of my tanned skin. “Rexxan!”

“Louder, Commander. Louder, and I'll make you come.”

“Rexxan!” I'm half-shouting this time, overwhelmed by pleasure and frustration.

The corner of his mouth lifts a little as he looks at me. ‘*Good girl,*’ he mouths, his thick fingers tipping me over the edge.

Maybe I do like praise, after all.

My whole body shakes as I come violently, mumbling words in my native tongue, unable to form a coherent thought as his fingers keep going, slower now, prolonging the wave of pleasure that rolls me over and over like a breaking wave. He grins, crawling up my body like I am a mouse in his trap.

Perhaps I am, but if this is his trap, I don't ever want to be set free.

I don't know what does it for me more; the sight of his arousal as he runs a hand over himself, or the sight of my own arousal glistening on those soft lips. I really don't know and I really don't care. Releasing my bottom lip from between my teeth, I tug him down to touch his lips to mine. “You taste so good, Ren.”

He kneels up between my thighs, running the tip of his length over me. “Open wide for me.”

“Nothing I do is for you,” I whisper, repeating my words from our first night together all those months ago.

A fond smile graces his expression as if he gets the same warm feelings that I do when I think back to that week. Brick-red eyes focus like a hawk on the spot between my thighs, like he might drop dead if he looks away. I love how intensely he wants me, and I love how brazen he is about it too. It is visible in every tense click of his jaw, every bulging vein, every ragged breath. A slow smile spreads across his lips, and as his hand grasps one of my ankles, he spits on my clit.

Gods above, give me salvation from this man. I think I'm too far gone for them to save me. "Rexxan, you are disgusting."

"And yet you love it," he breathes, collapsing down onto his thick forearms so his face is an inch from mine. "I want to see your face up close whilst I do this."

Copper eyes search mine as slowly, ever so slowly, he flexes his hips, burying himself inside me. I shut my eyes, my mouth hanging open at the potent combination of pain and pleasure. This feels significant. This feels like we're... something. This feels like *more*. I've never had anything like this with someone, but I don't voice any of my thoughts aloud. For now, I'd rather stay where it's safe.

"I can take it," I tell him, worried he'll treat me like I'm made of glass. My chest rises and falls even harder than before, a sheen of sweat glistening across my skin. Slowly and deliberately he pulls out, taking his sweet time to torture me with a smug expression on his face. Fuck. Maybe I shouldn't have told him that I'm immortal, because now he knows that we have forever.

Just as I'm about to tell him that he fucks like a sloth, he slams into me, hitting a spot somewhere deep inside me that forces an involuntary moan through my lips. He repeats the motion, over and over until it's his name that continually cascades from my mouth.

The evening sun beats down on us, spilling over his back like molten bronze as my nails rake down his muscular shoulders. He's close, his orange eyes glowing that little bit brighter.

His rough, callused hand holds my jaw as he fucks me, building me higher and higher. I twist my head to the side and graze his finger between my teeth, wrapping my lips around it just to taunt him as hard as he taunts me. It has the desired effect because the Forest King looks at me like I'm all he ever needs. Like he could die right here and call his life fulfilled. "You are the promised land, Renna. No man is worthy."

He carries on, hard and deliberate, every thrust carrying sentences whispered into my ear that are so filthy they'd even have Stellan blushing. But slowly his control cracks, his pace increasing as he pounds me into the bed. I feel myself tightening around him and he shakes his beautiful head, dark hair tumbling in front of his eyes. "No, my love. Not yet. I want to come *with* you."

Sweat glistens across his shoulders and veiny arms, his hips moving faster. Pieces of disheveled hair tumble in front of his eyes, ragged breathing escaping those parted lips. I try to wait for him, but it's all too much, my vision going dark as I come around him. He stills, a muscle in his jaw ticking. "Didn't I tell you to wait?" He asks, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "I'm still going to come with you."

"Oh, gods, REXXAN. You're a nightmare," I say, my legs shaking.

"So you're saying I've got into your head," he says, with a boyish grin as he grinds into me. I'm a lost cause, clinging onto him for dear life as if I might fly away in this cloud of pleasure. "See what I do to you, Renna? See how incredible we are together?"

"REXXAN," I repeat, his praise like a soft blanket coating my skin as he drives into me again. Any remnants of control he had left shatter, the headboard slamming into the wall. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," he repeats, his voice rough.

I snap my eyes to his. "Give me everything," I breathe, in a trance-like state as his fingers entwine with mine.

I'm too lost in him. This is so much *more*.

“Anything, Ren. I’d give you anything,” he states, like it’s the easiest thing in the world. The sheer need in his voice has me tumbling over the precipice again. With two more rough thrusts, my name leaves his lips in a forbidden prayer. I love that he’s vocal. He stills, his forehead dropping to mine as I feel him shatter inside me for what feels like both forever and not long enough.

Our chests heave in perfect time. I have no energy to speak, but I don’t need to. I know that was as good for him as it was for me.

“Rexxan!” I whisper-shout, sticking my finger in a huge crack across the wooden headboard. I slam a pillow in his face when he gives me a very pleased-with-himself grin, looking far younger than his years. How I’m going to explain this one to Espan, I’m not sure. I don’t have the energy to think about it. All I have the energy to do is fall asleep buried in his arms.

CHAPTER 21

'BUSY' (RENNA)

“I don’t like that he spends nights in your room, Renna,” grumbles a particularly fractious Onyx, sharpening his swords once I’d run a hundred of my hunters through some archery training. I ache, and it’s nothing to do with the mountain climb.

Two weeks. Two glorious weeks since the day Rex found out what I was. Fourteen sensational nights filled with unspeakable sins with the Forest King. Yesterday Onyx suggested I get Lynna to examine my leg injuries again because I was limping slightly when I woke up.

I didn’t tell him why I was limping.

“Onyx, we’re adults.”

“I know, but all the Kings in the past were obsessed with the idea of having a sorceress in their bed. Why the sudden interest now he knows who you are?”

Better not tell him I fucked REXXAN long before he knew what I was. Onyx would kill REXXAN, and then me. And then himself, probably, just to erase that knowledge from his brain. “You know, it’s possible that someone might just like me for who I am.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“He’s just looking out for me.”

“But I could do that for you.”

“I want you to be able to relax for once,” I say. I can see it in his eyes, finally understanding now. He’s lost. If he isn’t

watching me or working, he's not sure what to do. Now REXXAN spends more time with me, Onyx isn't sure of his purpose. "Why don't you walk with Lynna when she asks you?"

"What am I supposed to do with her?" He asks, flipping his sword to sharpen the other edge, pale orange sparks flying over his battered hands.

"Walk? And talk? Tell her about yourself and let her tell you about herself. She has some amazing stories, Onyx. She's survived all the ages."

"I'm not much of a talker, and what's there to say, anyway?" He states, as if it's not really a question. A frown mars his handsome face as he twirls his sword around his huge hand, slashing it round him. "She's more interested in Stell."

"She isn't! Use your brain," I plead, standing on my tiptoes to shake him by the shoulders. Stellan grins, watching our exchange with a huntress practically hanging off each arm.

"To be fair, O, when I took her on a walk she asked me about three questions about myself and then fifty questions about you."

Beside me and the stupid smile on my face, Onyx shows no emotion. "I don't want or need distractions in my life."

My heart sinks from its position in the clouds, landing with a splat on the stone ground beneath us. I don't know how I'll ever get him out of this. I wonder sometimes if I had just died fifty years ago, his life would've been so much better.

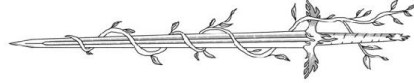
Sometimes, when it's just us, I see the real him. He's so sharp, and funny too. He's clever. Astoundingly clever, in fact, but it gets overlooked just because he doesn't know how to write. But I see the real Onyx less and less nowadays. He doesn't even speak of his dreams to be a guard and a father anymore.

"Onyx, you are coming to the inn with us tonight, and you are having a drink."

"No."

“Please!” I say, twirling around him with Stellan. We look like two massive crabs having some sort of dance-based emotional breakdown, but it works.

A small smile crosses my brother’s face. “One drink.”



3 PM Onyx was very naive. 3 am Onyx is fucking hammered.

Onyx, Stellan, Anna, and I stumble out of the party at the inn in the early hours. I am loosely sat atop Stellan’s shoulders, Anna sitting on Onyx’s beside me.

“Stellan! You’re leaning to the right!” I screech, nearly falling off. This is how I’m going to die. Not in an epic battle like I always imagined, but drunkenly toppling from the shoulders of my promiscuous best friend.

“Am I? Feels like I’m upright to me!” He shouts, the four of us cackling like toddlers. *Fuck me, we’re all beyond hope.*

“You alright up there?” Asks Onyx, looking up at Anna.

She grins, giving him a thumbs up. “Let’s go, O.”

“Go O. Go O. Go O. Sounds funny,” slurs Stellan, walking way too fast as I try to ride him. No. That didn’t come out right. I’m not *riding him* riding him, just riding him. My head is fuzzy.

I am letting them all crash in my room so that we can have a breakfast cooked by Espan’s chef delivered in the morning. “If we sneak in this way it’s so much quicker!” I yell, not intending to yell, as we creep through the opulence of the Royal Accommodation Halls.

Oh dear. I am much too drunk for this. Stellan takes his hand off my thigh for a second and I scream, half falling off. Onyx bends over to laugh, forgetting Anna is on his shoulders. She plummets in a blur of dark skin and white braids onto the stone floor. In my drunken state, it becomes the funniest thing

I've ever seen in my life, and I'm grateful that the alcohol dulls the pain as Stellan and I slam to the floor beside her.

A slither of light from an opening door bathes us in a soft glow, and REXXAN steps out of a library, spotting the four of us shrieking on the floor.

I want the ground to swallow me up.

He says absolutely nothing, so I panic and decide *I* should. "You're upside down," I observe, cleverly. *Nice*.

"And you're catastrophically drunk," he notes, with an arched eyebrow.

He holds out a hand to me, pulling me to my feet and steadying me when I wobble, one warm hand on my waist. Once I am reassuringly upright, he crouches down and extends a huge hand to Annaliya. She tentatively takes it, letting him pull her to her feet. She wobbles, her hand on his bicep, and he steadies her with orange eyes on hers. "Can I let go? Are you steady?"

"Wow...you're...big."

"Okay, that's enough, Anna," say Onyx and me, prizing her off him. I am filled with something that feels suspiciously like jealousy. Blame the wine, Ren. Blame the wine.



REXXAN'S MOODS switch so quickly. Just a few days later and he is unrecognisable. He's in the worst mood ever. *The* worst mood ever. He has successfully shouted at everyone today, stalking Espan's palace like a wolf sulking outside its den. The staff are in hiding. Hell, even I am in hiding until I finally muster the courage to talk to him. "Are you...err...."

"Am I what, Renna? Spit it out," he snaps, not looking up.

"Okay? Are you okay?"

“Fine. Busy.” Everything about his body language screams *fuck off*, but to me, he just seems sad beneath the angry.

“Well, is this you finished for the day? Do you want to have dinner with me?”

“I can’t tonight.” His voice is harsh, but if I didn’t know him better, I’d have missed the regret in his eyes the second he said it. Something is eating away at him.

“Okay,” I say, raising my hands in defeat. REXXAN and I have a healthy relationship with each other here, despite the chaotic stress of our jobs. We’re two people who prefer to be alone when in a bad mood, and I can respect that.

I make plans to go out with Annaliya instead. She finishes putting her braids into a bun, posing in the mirror. “Shall we invite the other one? The really pretty one?”

“Lynna? We could invite her. She works about eighteen hours a day though,” I twirl a knife around my fingers absentmindedly, walking a few hallways down to Lynna’s private apartments here. Lynna and REXXAN are talking outside her door, and I open my mouth to make a joke but something stops me. It’s the look on REXXAN’s face, I think, like he’s one step away from snapping.

I don’t know why, because I would—and do—trust Lynna with my entire life, but a hint of betrayal swirls in my stomach. I’d like to imagine that neither of them would do anything, but the younger, more irrational part of my brain wins over.

“I think Lynna is...busy?” Mumbles Anna, as we watch Lynna and REXXAN disappear into her apartments.

“Yeah. Busy.”

CHAPTER 22

A JOB OFFER (REXXAN)

Renna sure does put up a good fight. I like that in a woman. No, actually, I like that in *her*. Slowly obliterating her headboard over the course of two weeks has been the joy of my lifetime.

After refusing to speak to me for four days—the longest fucking four days of my life, by the way—after telling me to ‘go fuck myself with a barbed mace’, she finally lets me into her room when I threaten to punch my way in through the outside window. It’s a chaotic relationship we have, but I’d die for her six times over.

“What is it?”

“You’re going to tell me why you’re grumpy, my sweet, beautiful, kind, caring lover.”

She doesn’t like my compliments. “Cut the bullshit. You know why I’m grumpy.”

“Because you saw me walk into Lynna’s halls?”

She gives me a long, slow clap. Shit. I’ve experienced jealous women a thousand times before, but never from someone I actually care about. Lynna doesn’t care what else I get up to. But Renna does, and I don’t know how that makes me feel.

“Do you want to know exactly what I did with Lynna in her library last week?”

Her fingers pinch her delicate nose in sheer frustration and *holy fuck*, I want this woman. And I don’t just mean in the

bedroom sense.

Why this calamitous realisation is hitting me now, during our first ‘normal-people’ domestic, is beyond me. She’s yelling at me again, and I decide that for the sake of my balls, I should tune in. “Why do I even bother with you? No! And for future reference, most women won’t want to know what you did with your lover!”

“She’s not my fucking lover, not since I met you. Ask me what I did.”

“No, because I don’t care.”

She’s pretty. “Evidently you do, Renna.”

“I don’t care what you did with her! I care because you punch and threaten to kill any man who even lays his eyes on me! Where is the equality in that? No double standards, Rex, or I’m out of here. And yes, maybe I care a little.”

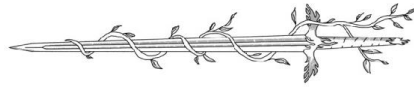
“When you’ve cooled off a bit, and when you want to know, ask Lynna what it is we did in her library last week,” I whisper, taking her deceptively sweet face between my hands and kissing her forehead gently. I don’t want her to find out my weaknesses, but Renna has bared all hers to me. It’s fair I start to do the same.

She just flips me her middle finger and storms out, slamming the door.

As much as I enjoy staying here and fucking around with the Shadow Commander, I will always be first and foremost a king, and I have to get back to lead and reassure my people through these uncertain times.

Begrudgingly, I start to prepare for the two-month journey home. I could leave tomorrow, hypothetically, but I’m not going to. I’m staying for some royal dinner event at the end of the week. That’s what I’m telling myself, anyway. It has nothing to do with the fact that that’s four extra days with Renna.

Gods above, I’m even lying to myself.



SHE FINALLY COMES BACK to speak to me two full days after our argument, and I loathe that we have wasted so much of our limited time left together. But I like that she takes no shit from me, or anyone else. It makes her the good leader that she is.

The door to my study opens as I work at my desk, signing a contract that secures my kingdom another five years as the supplier of weapons for Espan's army. She leans against my doorway in a low-cut black dress, dark shadow winging her eyes. My Ten is a sorceress. That hasn't sunk in yet. She's not really mine, but we're not seeing anyone else, so perhaps she is mine?

She can't be mine.

I half-wonder if she realises how seductive she is, or if it is subconscious. She never wears dresses, but she suits them. "So I spoke to Lynna."

"Good."

"I'm sorry I reacted that way. I should've let you speak. Has she always done that for you?"

"No, Talyn does it, but he's not here."

"I didn't realise they were so bad," she says, softly. She pushes off from the doorframe gracefully and shuts the door. My mind is running to all manner of inappropriate places right now. I want her on this desk. I want her so hard on this desk that it moves to the wall on the other side of the room. I want her screaming my name.

"She said they get so bad you can't talk or move."

My thoughts of fucking her fizzle into thin air. She knows how to kill a mood. I take her small hand and press it to the burns beneath my shirt. A frown mars her pretty face. "There's nothing they can do to fix them?"

“They’ll never go. On Monday, I was in so much pain that I couldn’t talk. Lynna sedated me, and that’s the last thing I remember. I have no desire for anyone but you,” I say, honestly. No one captivates me like she does.

She chews that tempting lower lip for a brief moment before her face brightens, as if she is remembering something. I can’t hide my smile. She’s almost childlike in that sense; every emotion that goes through her is visible. It’s the opposite of me and it’s refreshing. She produces three papers with today’s date on.

I sigh on instinct as I spot them. Gossip papers and newspapers; the bane of my life. My mood dips a little lower but Renna is giggling as she flicks through them, and it’s hard to be grumpy around her when she’s in a good mood. “These made me laugh so hard. Apparently this season you’re favouring darker clothing, *and* they think your thighs look excellent in riding trousers.”

“Do they?” I ask, and she nods enthusiastically. She tosses the beige coloured papers onto my desk and I put down my quill to pick the first one up. There is a double-page spread about my upcoming attendance at the Royal Dinner. I raise an eyebrow, tossing it into the bin.

“I paid for that!”

“You can get the gossip straight from the source,” I say, my voice low. She bites her lip, walking around my desk. Forget about *my* thighs, her thighs will be the end of me. The way the curves of her body are hugged by this dress feels like a reward I don’t deserve. I pick up the next one, reading the headline.

***WHO** WILL THE WORLD’S MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELOR, KING REXXAN, BE TAKING TO THE GOLDEN BALL?*

I dip my quill in ink, writing five bold letters beneath it.

RENNA.

She laughs, and it’s genuinely filled with joy. And just like that, she’s injected a little of her sunshine into my thundery mood. Then when she straddles my lap and sits down, I’m

internally jumping for joy. I shut my eyes as she straddles me, praying for my poor blood pressure. I was already hard, now it's painful. Mischief glitters on her face as she wriggles her hips a little.

This. Woman.

"I hate those kinds of events," she whispers, her sultry brown eyes on mine.

I kiss her neck, my breath hot on her skin. "And if I told you the meal being served is your favourite?" I ask, my lips caressing the sensitive spot beneath her ear. Her body shudders against mine, and the ache in my groin intensifies. She's killing me here.

"Chicken pie?"

"Mmhmm."

She pulls away, her face lighting up. "Oh, that does sway me, actually. What's dessert?"

"Trifle, I think."

Her shoulders slump, bottom lip making an appearance. "Find another date then."

I nuzzle my face in her neck. Gods, I have missed her smell for the last two days. Honey and vanilla and smoke from her campsite. "And if your date could abuse his power and pull some strings to make dessert something else, what would you choose?"

She's grinning at me like I'm the best thing ever, and the ache where my heart should be eases just a little. "*If* he could do that, I'd choose apple and cinnamon crumble, but if there wasn't vanilla custard on the side, I'd tell him to go fuck himself."

I laugh out loud, my lips brushing hers as her hips rock against me a little. The air is thick with tension. "Is that a yes?"

"What do I get out of it?"

The cheek of this woman. “Other than a date with the ‘world’s most eligible bachelor’ and changing the menu for the entire ball of three hundred people?”

“Other than that,” she says, beaming. *I am bad at women.* I have no idea what they want. Lynna just wants expensive dresses and gold. “I’ll get you a dress and jewellery to wear?”

“A new dagger?”

My girl isn’t after dresses. Noted. “Of course. Extra sharp. Extra pointy.”

Her laugh makes me feel twelve feet tall. “I’ll come with you,” she says, a giant smile on her face. “You can forget about the gifts, I was joking. I’ll just come with you.”

I’m already smug about the idea of having her on my arm, and for the first time in a while, I’m actually willing to go to a social event. I kiss her, my hands snaking down to her behind as I stand with her legs around my waist and carry her back to my bedroom for the rest of the day.

As the sky turns a warm shade of yellow, we lie on the chaise on my balcony, basking in the evening sun. Her head rests on the unburnt side of my chest as small fingers gently trace over the scars across my skin. If peace could be a place, it would be here, now.

We haven’t spoken for a while, both deep in thought. I didn’t know sex could be like this. It’s so much more than just physical with her. She lets me see her so vulnerable, hands over control to me in the trust that I’ll look after her. And I always will, even if I have to leave. I’ll always be here for her because I want her to be happy.

But above us, the sun sinks lower, just a soft orange glow over the golden rooftops of Espan’s city. It’s a reminder that another day has passed and this is soon to be over. “Ren,” I say, tipping her chin up. Dull brown eyes meet mine, and I find myself wondering what they really look like. “I’m leaving in a few days.”

“What? No, stay longer,” she replies, sitting up.

I fight to keep my gaze above shoulder level. *Fail*. My eyes roam over full, tanned breasts, giving way to her toned waist. I shamelessly flip her over, wanting to see all of her. The sunshine paints her sculpted thighs gold, and I kiss the smattering of stretch marks that stand a little paler than her brown skin. She's been crafted by the gods just for me.

"I have to go back. I am the King of the largest Kingdom in Yterras at a time when the enemy is absolutely relentless; it's a busy time for me."

This makes her frown. "I know...I just...I guess I won't see you again? Or not for many years at least."

I don't like that thought, and I don't know what to do with the fact that I don't like that thought. To be honest, I feel fucking miserable about it. In all my seven hundred adult years, I've never felt as willing to wake up and get through the day as I do when I'm with her.

But I am a King, and she a Commander. These are the sacrifices we must make. *She* is the sacrifice I must make. I could ask her to leave her position and come home with me, but I wouldn't do that to her. Renna is a good leader, and she wouldn't abandon her people for a man she likes.

Her, and I, we are blessed to know what our happiness is, but cursed to never have it.



LYNNA, Ellia, Illyana, and Silvassa love it when I spend money on them. Renna? Not so pleased. I thought she'd be happy about the gifts I've bought her, but she's yelling at me, and I'm not really listening.

"...fucking hell, Rexas! I was joking! This is like... more money than I've ever fucking owned! I'm not a gold digger! I feel like a gold digger! I don't...," *huge sigh*, "Rexas. I don't need any of this! It was a joke!"

“It’s a gift,” I offer.

“I don’t need a gift! I was joking!”

“Try it on, sweetheart,” I say, and watch her self-combust for a while until she eventually strips naked in front of me.

Okay, today is looking up.

“Turn around! You can’t see me in it!”

“We’re not getting fucking married, Renna.”

“Turn around, you old bastard,” she shrieks, and I huff, suppressing a laugh. I treat myself to a last look at her perfect body and swivel on the chair, straddling the back.

“Don’t sit like that!”

“What now?”

“Don’t sit like that! Don’t sit backward on the chair. You *know* I can’t resist you when you do that.”

“Do I?” What is going on? “Renna, are you bleeding?”

“Yes!” She says, throwing a pillow at me. “And don’t ask a lady that!”

I grin, my head in my hands. I like these moments with her. Not the group dinners in Espan’s palace, the hours we spend discussing military tactics in a library, or the evenings fighting in the training courtyards. It’s moments like when we’re getting dressed beside each other in comfortable silence that repair the cracks in my heart the most.

Renna is suspiciously quiet. The last time she was suspiciously quiet I found a snake in my pillowcase as a ‘really funny prank’. I blame her behaviour on the fact that she had no proper childhood. “Well?”

“Well...well, it’s beautiful, REXXAN,” she whispers, behind me. “It’s just....”

“What is it?”

“I’ve never received a...a gift before. Not unless I was sick. I’m not sure how to react.”

“Pretty much any way except how you’ve just reacted,” I say, but she doesn’t laugh. She looks genuinely bewildered, and an ache forms in my chest. My voice softens. “You don’t have to react, Renna, just keep it and repay me by wearing it at my side tonight.”

Two more nights. That’s all I have with her.

“Okay, thank you. Wow. My tits look great. You’re really lucky,” she whispers, making me laugh out loud. She sighs with relief like she can breathe at last. “You can turn around now, I’ve taken it off.”

I disappointedly watch her dress again before rattling through my meetings for the day, finishing with a meeting with Lynna and Aanen on the success of their two-week training course with Espan’s best healers. When we finish, Aanen leaves, but Lynna stays to give me that look that women do when they want you to do something but won’t say what.

“You’re seriously going to leave Renna in two days?”

“I absolutely am,” I say, not looking up from my notes as I write up the uses of different Evergreen enchantments on mortal illnesses.

“Don’t let her get away.”

“I’m not ‘letting’ her do anything. She has her people, I have mine. She has her life, I have mine. Neither of us can leave our jobs, Lynna. I would not ask her to become less than what she is now. We’ve had our fun and it’s over.”

Lynna sighs, brushing hip-length white hair over her shoulder. “It’s not just *fun*, Rex, is it? What we did was *fun*. Look me in the eye and tell me that what you have with her is the same as what you had with me.”

She’s doing a tremendous job of twisting the knife. “It’s the same. We fuck. That’s it.”

“If you leave her now, you’ll always wonder.”

I put my pencil down with more force than is necessary. “And what would you have me do, Lynna? Have her leave her

dream as the Shadow Commander so she can come home and be a trophy wife in my palace? Renna is not made to be a Queen. She is not made for public appearances and smiling in a dress on a balcony. She is built for bigger and better things. Her and I are nothing, and we cannot be anything more than that.”

“Just try, REXXAN. I’ve never known you meet an impasse you couldn’t resolve.”

And with that irritatingly cryptic comment, she leaves with her bodyguard in a blur of white satin.

In the blink of an eye, I realise I have spent two hours at my desk. I send a messenger for Renna, and she comes through the door in no time at all. She looks bloody and bruised with cuts raking across her chalk-dusted hands, and I suspect she has had a long day at work. I break the silence before she does, for once.

“Have you signed your contracts for autumn and winter yet?”

She slips two blood-stained documents out of her black jacket, unfolding them. Everything Renna owns is just covered in blood. Its disturbing. “I’m undecided on which offer to take. You’re good at finances and numbers, aren’t you? Help me choose?”

“Who wants you?”

The corner of her tongue pokes out her mouth as she reads the two. She makes my heart feel better. “Ocealia—sixteen weeks of work for the whole army. Pays more than Espan, but Espan has offered twenty-four weeks of work, *and* he pays for all our food, healing, and rooms in inns for anyone who needs one. I’ve had an offer from Hela too, but I declined it because the mountains are so cold in winter.”

I take a third document out of my drawer. “I know this makes your decision harder. I want to put an offer in too. Twenty weeks, and you’ll have safe accommodation in a camp near my Eastern Gate. You’ll be supporting my army and

working as spies and scouts. I want you as one of my advisors on the Royal Counsel too.”

Her eyes widen, reading the contract. “Rexxan, this is a lot of money.”

I hope it’s enough. “I can’t help you choose, Renna. Read them all, read the nature of the work, discuss it with your army, and then decide.”

“I... I need a few days,” she whispers, folding all three. “Why? Why now? You haven’t wanted my people, ever.”

I could tell her five hundred reasons, but I don’t. “Think about it,” I say, standing. “And I’ll pick you up from Lynna’s room at seven.”



NONE of the words in all of the languages I speak can adequately describe the way I feel when Renna steps out of Lynna’s bedroom door. Nothing comes close. Nothing does her justice. The dark green satin dress I’d chosen shows off every curve of her body. Renna is a lethal weapon, honed and crafted into the perfect killer, but in this dress she could kill for a whole different reason.

I’m struggling to think straight as I take her in. The vague outline of her nipple piercing is visible beneath the fabric. Her hair is free of its usual ponytail, hanging loose and glossy by her waist. The off-the-shoulder sleeves expose her flawless skin, the soft swell of her breasts, the contours of her collarbones. Her toned arms are free of jewellery, save for the gold and emerald bracelet I’d chosen for her.

She’s just beautiful. Beauty in its purest form. I’m captivated by her eyes, ever my favourite feature of hers, so dark and full of mischief. Black liner runs along her eyelids in a sharp point, her lashes stained black. A blush creeps across her cheeks when I don’t say anything and I can tell she is a

little nervous. She's not dressed up this much before and the look in her eyes is begging me to say something.

"I'm no better than all those other men, because I'd kneel at your feet for the rest of my fucking life."

"You look...um...good," she squeaks, her face red. She's flustered, for once in her life. Cute. I look down at my satin shirt, tailored to fit me and made from the same material as her dress. "Why are you always so well dressed? Do you have a stylist?"

"Three," I say, watching her laugh at me for that. I grin, pleased that my honest confession appears to have blown away her nerves. I haven't even told her about the tailors and personal shoppers. Best not scare her off. She takes my hand and I look down toward the polished marble floor.

"Bare feet?"

"Well, I only have my combat boots and I draw the line at anything with a heel on," she lowers her voice to a whisper. "Plus, sorceresses never wore shoes."

I smile at the gesture to her bloodline, leaning down to kiss her. The size difference is a slight issue. "No shoes it is."

I've taken a number of famous women to these events, and I don't remember ever receiving so many envious looks from those around me. Even Espan looks jealous. Whilst I was worried about Renna's behaviour, she's been perfect. She's not stabbed anyone, *even* the annoying ones. She's fucking funny, and I never thought I'd like that in a woman.

My hand sits comfortably on her waist, and when she shuffles her chair to the left so she can put her head on my shoulder, that feeling floods my chest again. She looks up at me like I'd hung the moon in the sky when apple crumble and custard appears in front of us all. Contentment settles comfortably on my shoulders as she eats it happily, laughing with some of her new friends from Espan's army. Her hand runs up my thigh beneath the table, brushing my already hard cock.

“Keep this up, Commander, and we’ll be giving the rest of the guests quite the show when I fuck you over this table,” I whisper, kissing her cheek beside her ear. I slide my hand beneath the slit of her dress. “So wet, Renna. What have you been thinking about?” I murmur, so only we can hear.

“Apple crumble,” she whispers, her thighs trembling.

“I don’t believe you,” I say, letting a husky breath tickle her neck.

Renna stands abruptly, her face flushed as the legs of her chair scrape across the polished floor. “I’m...a little cold. I’m just going to get my cloak,” she announces, and every man at the table stands and offers her theirs. I give them all the most unkind look I can muster and take her hand.

“I’ll escort you to collect it, Commander Renna.”



IN THE NEAR pitch-black of the supply closet, I stand her up, smoothing down her hair. She looks thoroughly well-fucked. Her sinful mouth lets out a disbelieving laugh, big bright eyes blinking a few times.

“That was...hot.” She reaches for a cloth and I put a heavy hand on it.

“No.”

“What?”

“I want you to go back out there and feel me on your thighs. Look Gilen in the eyes while he flirts with you, knowing what’s dripping down your legs.”

“Rexxan!” She gasps, flabbergasted as I lead her out the door. So she *can* be stunned. “You’re supposed to be royal!”

Lynna shoots me a knowing look across the table as we return and I itch my eyebrow with my middle finger. Renna sits unnaturally slowly down beside me. She needs to work on

her poker face. She looks exactly like a woman who's just been bent over a table and fucked in a supply closet.

But no one else seems to have noticed, so maybe we *did* get away with it.

“Forgot the cloak?” Asks Friar.

Ah, fuck.

CHAPTER 23

RAPTURE (REXXAN)

The concept of missing someone is an odd one.

I always thought it to be fictional. An ostentatious display of emotion by an overly emotional person. I've never 'missed' anyone, even when Lynna travels. When my son is away, I know I'll see him soon and that he's pursuing his dreams. But as Renna crosses my mind for the fifth time since I tried to fall asleep, I know that I shouldn't have left without her. Every morning starts with this.

Is this what missing someone is?

I hate it.

In the five months since I last saw her, I've been as stressed as I've ever been. I don't understand the enemies' plans but they have been relentless. Wolves, spies, and soldiers alike have been marching on every one of the Five Kingdoms in droves.

They've not managed to come within a mile of my Kingdom Gate but it's hard work for my army, and the Healing Halls are constantly full of injured guards and soldiers. My scouts are injured too, so we're scouting less than we should. The other Kingdoms are in an even worse position than mine.

I've been in a five-month bad mood. Even Lynna and Friar avoid me when they can.

"My lord," says Ellatar, outside my study.

“Come back later,” I snap, my hand on my burns. I don’t hear his footsteps leave. “Is there a reason you’re still standing outside my door?”

“There are over two hundred Shadow Hunters at the eastern gate,” he replies, eventually. “I’ll start identifying them for background checks and sending them through the gate, but did you want to speak with them?”

“Send them into the eastern training courtyard,” I order, standing with a glimmer of hope in my chest. “I’ll meet them there in three hours once they’re all in.”

True to Ellatar’s word, in three hours the eastern courtyard is flooded in a sea of black. Neat rows of hunters form immaculate square ranks. Every one of them is dressed in dark leather hunting gear, a heavy black hooded cloak, and a charcoal stripe painted across one cheekbone, a mark that I’d seen on Renna before. At the front stand Annaliya, Onyx, and Stellan on three black horses, and dread swirls in my stomach.

Where is she?

I slide off my horse at the top of the steps, and the army of hunters bows in perfect time. Onyx kicks his horse slightly, riding forward to meet me and dismounting. Charcoal stains strands of his golden-brown hair black, and black gloves cover his hands. Onyx even *looks* deadly. He produces a document from the inside of his cloak. “We’re here to fulfil your contract if it still stands.”

Where the fuck is she? “It does. Twenty weeks?”

He nods, and I turn a few pages, looking for what I’m after.

ON BEHALF OF THE SIX RANKS OF MY ARMY, AS WELL AS MY DEPUTIES, STELLAN HELANETH, ONYX, AND ANNALIYA AELENA, I ACCEPT THIS OFFER, SUBJECT TO THE TERMS AS DETAILED IN SECTIONS TWO TO NINE IN THIS CONTRACT.

SIGNED:

*Rennalya, Commander-in-~~Chief~~
~~Chief~~ Chief of the Shadow Hunters.*

I smile at the signature. I like Renna, but the woman cannot spell for shit. I turn the page to check the date and a low grumble forms in the column of my throat. Of course she signed it the very day after I left. She could've fucking written to me to let me know. I'm pissed off now. "Rennalya."

"Her full name, my lord. She hates it."

"She's here?"

"We were ambushed on the Hallin Pass," he says, and my dread becomes suffocating. "We had fifteen badly hurt. She's helping carry the injured to your healing halls."

I need to get a hold of myself. I haven't felt relief like this since my son woke up from a particularly bad head injury. "Fine. I have a busy diary today, I'll have to brief you all later," I beckon over ten guards. "Cetresar and his company will show you to your accommodation. Food and medicine will be provided. Take three days to recover from the journey and then you'll get started. As for you, there's a meeting now that you'd find useful to attend."

"I'll attend, but it'll be my first meeting."

"Just listen and observe. Can you read and write?"

"Not well, my lord. A little. I'm learning."

"It's a weekly summary of the enemy's activity within my borders, so it is relevant to you."

We start, and Onyx enters a short while later. Like me, his six-foot-four frame is too broad for doorways. Two swords and a bow are still on his back, his arms crossed across his chest. A few of the lords around the table raise an eyebrow, impressed, probably by the sheer size of him.

"You must be the Shadow Commander," says one, extending his hand.

Onyx looks at it for a second like he's not interested in making any new acquaintances, but eventually shakes it. "She's on her way. I'm her deputy," he grumbles, shaking ten more hands.

"Your name?"

"Onyx."

"That's unusual. Is it a nickname?"

"No."

"Onyx...? What is your surname? I might know you."

"Don't have one."

"Where are you from?"

"Golden Kingdom."

"Myself too. Were you born in Rinnia?"

"Don't know."

Once Onyx has finished solidifying his position as the only person on the planet less talkative than me, we continue our business. He remains silent, and I can tell that meetings are his worst nightmare.

"Hello everyone! Sorry I'm late!" Comes the most cheerful voice I've heard in weeks, and I swear my heart fucking stops. By the slack-jawed, drooling expressions on everyone except Onyx's face, I know it is her at the doorway behind me.

I turn my head, seeing her eyes shining with delight and looking at absolutely no one except me. Her hair spills loose and glossy to her hips, her skin a light brown. She looks happy and healthy, and it is a relief. Warmth floods my chest. *She's mine, and she only has eyes for me.* She winks at me before saying a quick hello to everyone in the room. She knows a few of them already from her adventures to every corner of the earth, and cheerily introduces herself to the others.

"A woman? I'm surprised," says my Head of Scouting, and she gives him a bright smile.

“Most people are. It’s good to meet you.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Commander,” he says, all eyes for her. *Fuck this guy*. I have other people who can take his job. I add making sure he has nothing to do with Renna to my mental to-do list.

Fuck. No. She wouldn’t like that. I have to find some compromise between my need for control and her need for freedom. I don’t want to put her in a cage.

Another lord introduces himself, slipping in a comment about how he didn’t expect her to be so beautiful. Both Onyx and I shoot him a look so dangerous that he shuts up for a full hour. She sits at the other side of the table, too fucking far away. She’s even more beautiful than when I last saw her, and she’s a breath of fresh air in this room of old men.

By the time we are done, she has somehow won over everyone in this room, an intoxicating cocktail of intelligence and charm that has them all lining up to talk to her on their way out. She perches on the edge of the table opposite me. “I’ll meet you back there, O.”

“Really?” He says, clearly not happy she wants to be alone with me.

“I won’t be long.”

Onyx huffs his disapproval but leaves—not before shooting me the most fiery of glares. Renna grins at me across the table. “Do you not get bored of them all sucking up to you?”

“I got bored of it eight hundred years ago,” I say, my eyes drinking in every sweet detail of her. She holds my gaze for a few silent seconds before laughing with genuine joy. In true Renna fashion, she jumps a supernatural distance over the four-foot table, catapulting herself across the wood and into my arms, almost sending us flying off the chair. And just like that, the heavy weight that has burdened my shoulders for five months disappears.

“I missed you so much!” She says, laughing into my chest as we wobble on the chair.

“Longest fucking five months of my life,” I whisper, holding her close. With a deep breath, her body melts into mine, like she’s needed this as much as I have. To go without each other for so long is a curse inflicted on us by our jobs, but I’d endure years without her to have this sweet reward at the end.

As my teeth gently tug her lower lip, the atmosphere between us switches, the air temperature rising. In the time it takes me to blink, her quick fingers have unbuttoned my shirt, pushing it off my shoulders. I’m smiling as I kiss her because the nagging question at the back of my mind about whether or not she still wants me as much as I want her has been answered.

This woman will be the death of me, and I’ll embrace it when it comes.

Fire is the only thing I’m scared of in this world, yet when she floods every corner of my being with it, it feels divine. It feels like one day, I may yet be stronger than my past. I run my finger along the gold emerald necklace at her neck, possibly my biggest expenditure of the year. “You still wear it.”

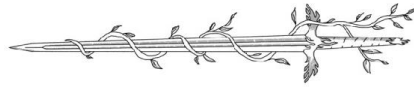
“Haven’t taken it off since that night,” she replies, letting out a breathy moan as my finger circles her clit. I’ve missed this. I’ve missed *her*. The air between us is almost crackling with electricity, a strange spell in the air that seems to only be produced when I am near her. She is breathing my broken body back to life and she isn’t even trying.

Rapture. She has me completely enraptured.

A thought hits me. *I need to show her my downstairs bedroom.* Maybe not now, REXXAN.

“I’ve been so excited to see you,” she whispers, burying her head in my neck between quiet moans.

“Eia cerelanié,” I whisper, in her native tongue. *You make me whole.* She does. She is a pleasure far too great for a sinner like me, but I take everything she gives me all the same.



RENNA IS BACK in my bed, and all is right in the world.

“You could’ve told me six months ago that you wanted to come here,” I say, pulling away from where my body spoons hers as my earlier annoyance at her resurfaces.

“Now, where’s the fun in that?”

My displeasure grows. “I’m serious.”

She gives me a loud round of applause. “Congratulations on being the first man in Yterras who is equally as grumpy *after* getting his dick sucked as he was before.”

Damn her. I laugh, against my will. Maybe she has a point, I don’t want to scare her off me as soon as she’s come back. I like her as my lover.

She smiles at me fondly, a little apology in those pretty eyes. “I didn’t tell you because my army hadn’t decided when you left. When we signed the contract I figured it’d take a messenger three months to arrive anyway.”

“I didn’t think your people would choose to come here.”

“They chose here because they love seeing new places. Plus, the money was too good to pass up for them, and your offer to train them all in basic healing was one we’d never had.” She sighs. “Everyone thinks I’m mortal, so soon I’ll have to leave and find a new life before they realise how slow I’m aging. My role isn’t just to lead my people, but to put them in the best position for the next Commander. So you offering to train all of them in basic healing? It’s an offer I’d never refuse.”

“You don’t have to leave. Tell them you’re immortal.”

“And when they question why my eyes don’t glow? And why I have no Evergreen magic in me?”

I could put a bit of Evergreen magic in you. I leave that one firmly in my thoughts. “Then stop taking the potion.”

“Then how would I explain the fact that I have the powers of a sorceress?”

My chest aches for her. It’s a horrible position to be in; to hide who you are or come clean and risk your life. “Have you ever let them come forward?”

“No, and I don’t intend to. I’ll be captured, tortured, and traded before I can blink an eye.”

“Sorceresses are not so different from powerful Evergreens. Once you have your magic under control, you won’t be very noticeable, especially given your ears.” I say, but she’s disengaged. She’s not willing to try. “So you leave. And then what? You start up a whole new life as a peasant or a housewife, stay there for seven or eight years, and then just vanish?”

“That’s my plan. It’s all I have.”

The idea of Renna living as someone else’s wife sparks a fury in my soul. Not just because I want to be the only one to touch her, but because it’s so...*not her*. She’d be moulding herself to fit in a box that was not made for her. It’s not happening.

“And Onyx will follow you willingly,” I say, pushing on her weaknesses. It’s what I do.

“I don’t ask him to!”

“But he will, Renna. Own who you are. Stop hiding from what you are. Stay here as Commander, and I’ll ensure you’re safe. Fuck your one, two, and three-month contracts, I’ll give you a ten-year contract. Then Onyx can live as he chooses.”

“How can you say that when there were wars over sorceresses?” She says, shouting now, her face wrought in emotion. “The enemy finds out I am one, and they’ll stop at nothing. You’d put the lives of your entire army at stake to protect some woman you fuck? Because that doesn’t sound like good leadership to me.”

She shakes her head and sighs as if she is giving up. “Look, Rex, I don’t want to keep ruining Onyx’s life. I mean it when I say that nothing would make me happier than him living out his dreams, but I have tried and tried to get him to give up protecting me but he won’t. He’s scared, I think, of what he’ll become if he isn’t his sister’s bodyguard. It’s all he’s ever been.”

“I could open him up to the idea of work as a guard here.”

“You’d do that? You hate him.”

“We don’t get on when it comes to you, but he’s what I look for in my guards. Nothing fazes him, he’s strong and trained in battle. If he’d learn to read and write I’d consider hiring him.”

“Really? You could talk to him about it?” She asks, a bright spark in her eyes; it’s hope. Hope that she could see her brother happy. I’d have done this a while ago if I’d known it’d make her face light up like that.

Shit, I’d find a way to rearrange the constellations in the sky if she asked me to.

I’m a lost cause.

CHAPTER 24

BAD JOURNALISM (REXXAN)

The waning days of September and the whole month of October are gone in a blur, and why I haven't hired the Shadow Hunters before, I do not know.

I see now why Espan raves about them. Anytime there is an attack on my gates, they are straight there. They scout my borders, work with my guards, and Onyx and Annaliya have just made it back from a two-week mission to assassinate another high-profile enemy commander. They've eased the workload for my army and for myself.

For her casual attitude to life, Renna runs a tight ship, and I didn't appreciate before quite how hard she works. She's awake in her guest study working late into most nights. The rest of the nights she spends with me in my bed.

It's good. It is incredible, in fact. But truthfully I don't know where it's going, and I don't want her to get hope when there is none. I cannot love. I'll never love. I cannot let her believe otherwise.

As I sit at my desk surrounded by papers and try and envision any way we *aren't* going to have to head to war this winter, the head of my army knocks twice and enters.

"Friar," I say, in greeting as he strides to my desk with newspapers in hand.

He holds them up. "Want me to shut these down?"

I give him my usual answer. "Unless they're about Siddie, no."

He tosses them onto my desk and they slide to a halt beneath my nose. I glance down to read the headlines printed in dark green ink, and I realise that Renna and I have not been careful enough.

HAS THE KING FINALLY CHOSEN HIS NEW WIFE? IT CERTAINLY LOOKED THAT WAY WHEN THEY HUGGED IN THE TRAINING GROUND!

RENNA, SHADOW COMMANDER, WILLING TO STOOP AS LOW AS SLEEPING WITH THE KING TO GAIN FAVOUR FOR HER PEOPLE.

SHOULD WE START PLANNING A WEDDING? KING REXXAN SEEN LAUGHING FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS, OUT WALKING WITH COMMANDER RENNA.

HAS QUEEN ALIA BEEN REPLACED AFTER 719 YEARS? LET'S HOPE THE KING HAS SOUGHT HIS SON'S APPROVAL THIS TIME!

IS RENNA TRYING TO WIN OUR KING'S HEART, OR JUST HIS MONEY?

With a sour taste in my mouth and a heartbeat drumming too hard in my chest, I pick one up and turn a page, reading a random sentence. *She seems a rather odd choice for the King who could easily take his pick from Ellia, Illyana, Lynna, and Silvassa. For those who haven't seen her, the Shadow Commander is five foot four, a brunette—and did we mention she's a mortal?*

My heart sinks with every word I read, and I know my relationship with Renna has gone too far. They'll pick her apart. I've given my people hope of a new Queen when there is none. Some of the articles are kind about Renna, but most of them are riddled with envy.

“My lord?”

Fuck. I hand him the papers that weren't cruel about Renna. “Shut these papers down.” I hand him the last three. “Shut these entire businesses down.”

I draw the line at people printing shit about her like that. That's too far. I'm fucking furious as Friar leaves. I hope he can get rid of them before she sees any.

She's doing press-ups on her balcony when I find her, dressed only in a black vest and some scandalous black undershorts. She hasn't noticed me. "Renna."

She shrieks in terror, flopping onto the stone floor face first. "Rexxan, you wanker! I nearly shat myself! Is my nose broken?"

"No. We need to talk."

She frowns, running a towel over her glistening skin, breathless. The muscles in her arms flex as she tosses it over the stone, ivy-covered rail. "Everything alright? Is it about the scouts we sent west?"

"No."

"Okay, well, are you going to keep me guessing?"

I take a seat on the balcony. "What exactly is the nature of our relationship for you?"

There's a little V between her eyebrows as she sits opposite me. "Oh. Well, we're lovers, aren't we? And friends. Best friends. And we're...."

There's something she's hesitant to say, like she's scared of saying it, and maybe I am too.

I don't like this. The atmosphere between us feels almost awkward. The air between Rennalya and myself has felt many things over the last year or so; rage, betrayal, lust, friendship, humour, agony. But never awkwardness.

If I was someone else, and if she was someone else, I'd have put a ring on her finger last year. But as she has told me, being a Queen is her worst nightmare. Her being Queen is the public's worst nightmare. And having another wife who is unhappy because I can't give her enough time is my own nightmare.

"So why are you here? You don't want to see me anymore?"

“Of course I want to. If this was different—if *we* were different, if I were a blacksmith and you a healer, we could do as we choose. But we’re not, and you have to focus on your people and I have to focus on mine. This entire fucking world is at stake, we can’t get distracted now.”

She shrugs as if it’s no bother to her. But I know it bothers her, because it bothers me.

“We just have to keep things...in line.”

She lets out a shaky exhale. “Then that’s just too bad, Rex.”

I don’t like where this is going. “And why is that?”

“Because I’m falling in love with you,” she says, frankly, as if she’d just dropped a weight that had been on her shoulders for months.

But that weight comes tumbling out of those small hands and crashing down onto my own shoulders, and now I feel like I’m sinking. Plummeting to the bottom of the ocean because the weight is too much for me to overcome. To love me is to be condemned to death.

When I don’t reply, she presses the heels of her hands to her eyes as if I am the most annoying thing in her life. Maybe I am. “I’m falling in love with you! Fuck, REXXAN, I fell for you a year ago. And if you aren’t too, then you’re right, I do need to stop this going further. But whether you’re ready to acknowledge it or not, I really think you feel the same for me.”

Fuck, I’ve hurt her. An admission of my feelings for her will do nothing more than make this worse. “Then I’m genuinely sorry.”

“Is this about the newspapers?”

“You’ve seen them?”

“Of course I’ve seen them. No one gets to say I’m five foot four and get away with it. I’m five foot five and a half.”

“I don’t have space in my life to...” fuck, I hate this word, “...*love* right now. There’s too much on my shoulders already. Nothing needs to change, Ren, we just can’t run away with our

feelings. It would be unwise to do that whilst the world is looking to us for guidance and stability.”

She sighs, nodding her agreement and walking off the balcony.

CHAPTER 25

AN ÚLTIMATUM (RENNA)

I slip out of REXXAN'S bedroom at half past midnight.

I don't know what we're doing anymore. We're just colleagues who sleep together, I suppose. No real conversation, just sex. Good sex. Great sex. Fine, it's mind-bending sex. But I miss him, even though I still see him most days.

I'd just never see him again, but a girl has needs and I'm not willing to sleep with anyone else, and neither is he. And there's a piece of me who'd rather just have a fraction of REXXAN than none at all. We've not argued again, nor have I asked him any more questions. It's not bitter between us, it's just not sweet anymore either.

As I trudge out of the forested palace gardens with the ever-present weight on my chest and thundery cloud around my mind, I weigh up whether I actually feel any better than I did when I arrived two hours ago. Maybe I should stop seeing REXXAN altogether. But I don't want to do that. A shadowy figure outside the palace gardens makes me jump out of my skin.

"Onyx, fucking hell. Let's not sneak up on women when they're alone at night, yes?"

Orange-yellow eyes illuminate the black night as we stand beneath the shadows of the trees. "You could kill any man, Renna. What is he doing to you?"

"Who? Rex?"

“Yes.” He says, arms crossed and stance wide like he’s ready to fight someone for me. “He’s clearly doing something to you.”

Tonight he met me in his weird downstairs sex lair and fucked me so hard that I almost cried, but somehow I doubt Onyx will appreciate that little snippet information. “Um... he’s—look, when a man and a woman like each other *very* much—”

“I know you’re lovers, Rennalya. I’m not fifty. What has he done to you that has you leaving his bedroom at all hours of the night?”

Hold on. He is supposed to be elsewhere. “Thought you were at the party.”

“I left because I was worried about you.”

I growl in frustration. “You left another social event because you are worried about me. What’s that, the two hundredth one? Stop stifling me and start having fun, for fuck’s sake. Do something for yourself instead of just following me around,” I snap, glaring at the sky above me in despair.

I can hardly wash myself in peace. I can’t sleep in peace, or work in peace, or even fucking breathe in peace. Onyx remains three feet away, silent and irritating. He should get that tattooed, actually.

Gods, that was harsh. I take a slow breath and open my eyes. Onyx stands there, no emotion on his face. Not even sadness. It’s *that* that scares me. Even when I’m awful to him, he doesn’t react. “I’m sorry, O. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine. I know you’re here out of kindness. Just...I need a few hours to myself.”

“I’ll stay out of your way more. You won’t know I’m here.”

“Alright!” I acquiesce, frustrated. For a moment, and it’s the most fleeting of moments, his stoic bodyguard mask slips.

His eyes flicker with something that chills my spine; guilt.

“Renna, I...I’m sorry,” he falters, his voice uneasy. “I know...I know you don’t like having me around you. I just wouldn’t forgive myself if something happened to you and I wasn’t there to help.”

That sentence crashes into me like a ton of bricks, knocking the air from my lungs. “Onyx!” I croak, warm tears spilling out my eyes, stinging my wind-chilled face. “You think I don’t like having you around?”

He shuffles uncomfortably, his hand rubbing his neck. “You say that, sometimes. But if I’m not watching you...I’m just sitting somewhere torturing myself imagining bad things happening.”

I clear the few paces between us and press my forehead into his chest, the salty taste of tears bleeding onto my tongue. “I never want to make you feel like that. I’m sorry. I love having you with me so, so much. You’re my big brother, O. My best friend in the whole world! I just get grumpy when I feel like you’re treading on my toes.”

“Would it help if I talk less?” He asks quietly, which only makes me cry harder. He’s breaking my heart here. He talks so little already.

“No! Please don’t talk less.” Oh, gods. I feel like my heart is splintering in two. Onyx is my entire world, and I hate that I’ve made him sad. He comes first. He always comes first, but I haven’t let him see that very well.

“If I stood further away? You wouldn’t see me so much,” he says, his golden eyes big and lost, like he’s not sure what to do.

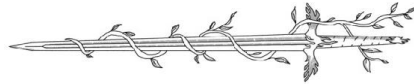
“Onyx, I just want you to take a week off. I’m strong and I am more than capable with swords, knives, and arrows.”

“I know you are. I don’t guard you because I think you can’t defend yourself. I guard you because...because...”

“I know why you do it,” I’m sobbing harder, burying myself further into his arms. He does it because he’s been broken so many times by so many people that guarding me has

become his life raft. His lighthouse in a dark and lonely sea. He squeezes his arms around me, enveloping me in his warm presence as he has always done since I was too small to even reach the door handles. I'm not really a crier, but Onyx is my weakness.

I love him so much.



A WEEK AGO, Onyx highlighted an issue. A week ago, I wasn't worried. Now, as the days and hours go by, I realise this could be a big issue. The biggest issue of my life.

Twenty-eight hours spent in both of REXXAN'S forests lead me to nothing that helps my problem. I slash through the bushes, enjoying the sound of my sword singing through the air despite the dread that trickles, hot and uncomfortable, down my spine.

How I've gotten myself into the position where a man has control over my moods, I don't know.

But REXXAN isn't just a man. He's...utterly indescribable.

I turn east and wade through a river, running my hands through the reeds on the forested riverbank. But I find nothing of what I need. *Nothing*. Less than three days. I have less than three days to fix this. I've spent the last few years in Espan's Kingdom; a Kingdom that makes its money from growing and harvesting plants and crops. I never struggled to find any plant I needed.

Now I am in REXXAN'S Kingdom; who's wealth is built in gold, wine, warcraft, and weapons. In a depressing moment, I realise that I have to go to Lynna with this. Dejected and slightly damp, I turn back to the gates. Onyx is waiting outside my tent back at camp. "At least tell me if you're going to vanish for two days, Rennalya."

"Wasn't supposed to be that long."

Concerned eyes meet mine. “Nothing?” He whispers, his eyes darting around us.

“Nothing.”

“You have to go to REXXAN with this. He’s the only person in this kingdom that knows that forest inside and out.”

“I’ll go to Lynna, and if she can’t help, I’ll think about it.”

“And if *no one* can help?”

Dread prickles my scalp. “Then I have to run, Onyx. You can’t come with me this time.”

“The fuck I can’t,” he snaps, angrily. “It’s you and me, Renna, no matter what. Stellan is ready to take over the hunters, we’ve warned him it could happen for years. Go to Lynna.”

REXXAN’S palace doesn’t look much like a palace. It’s a work of art; the doorways are arches, naturally formed by branches of wood. The walls are pale stone. Vines creep up every column and doorframe. His throne is made of trees and golden leaves. When you’re in it, it feels more like a forest than a palace.

But the Healing Halls are exactly what I imagined his palace would be like. They are colossal; a huge stone building of turrets, towers, and grand double doors. It has hundreds of rooms and hundreds of healers working there, and the libraries alone are five stories high.

I watch Lynna work, calm and in control as usual as she directs everyone around, quickly heading into a room to check on someone. Aquamarine eyes brighten with fondness as she spots me, handing a file over to another healer. She quickly holds up a finger to tell me to stay there, washing her hands in a bowl as she gives instruction to a group of trainees. Her lips turn up into a warm smile as she arrives, and I’m actually speechless. That’s how breathtaking this woman is. “Renna, how are you?”

“Very good,” I say, distractedly. I don’t even know why I’ve come here. Lynna is busy enough as it is.

She frowns down at me. “Is everything quite alright?”

“Yes, fine,” I murmur, as Lynna examines a cut on my arm that I didn’t even know was there and brings me into her research study. A pale oak desk sits in the centre, piled with neat stacks of notes and a vase of white flowers. Shelves of books, medicines, and dried herbs line one wall. Two chairs sit opposite her desk. In one corner is a single bed where she told me she ends up sleeping half the time when she’s busy at work. In the other corner is a white mat with wooden children’s toys and picture books.

“Please, take a seat,” she says, doing the same. “What’s wrong?”

“Can I borrow some Ashhal leaves?”

She cocks her head. “They don’t easily grow in this part of the world, nor do we particularly have any medicinal use for them. You might have some luck in the forest, but it’s not likely.”

“So you don’t have any here? Not in the supply cellars?”

“No, why do you ask?” She asks, before her eyes widen. “Oh, no.”

“Yeah.”

“How long do you have?”

“Two days. One and a half, in fact.”

“We’re not going to get it in that time.”

I feel like I might be sick. “We have to, Lynna.”

“It won’t happen.”

“Then I have to quit my job and run.”

“Ask for REXXAN’s protection.”

“I don’t want anything from him.”

She sighs. “What happened between you two? I haven’t seen you together for days.”

I shrug. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

Her depressingly symmetrical face frowns slightly. “I’m offended you’d think I’d laugh at anything that’s upsetting you, Renna, but tell me only if you’re comfortable.”

“I told him I was falling in love with him.”

She nods, processing for a moment. “That’s very brave of you, Renna. That must’ve been hard, considering you’ve never felt this way about someone before. He didn’t return the sentiment?”

I laugh out loud. “That’s putting it lightly.”

She runs a hand through her glossy blonde hair, diamond rings glittering on her fingers. “Rexxan has a very complicated relationship with love, both as a word and as a feeling.”

“That’s not my problem to fix. I’m worth more than that. I *deserve* more than that.”

“I know you do. This is Rexxan’s issue to work through with himself. He has been a bear this week. He’s so angry with everyone.”

“You’ve seen him this week?” I ask, a shard of worry moving down my spine.

Her face softens with realisation. “Not in that sense, Renna. Only for work. He hardly looks at another woman these days.” She produces a key from a drawer, walks to a different drawer, and puts it into a lock. Only once she whispers some kind of spell does the key turn. “Did you know that sorceresses need sunlight just like they need food and water?”

Wow. That explains a lot. I always feel weaker when I haven’t been out. “No, I didn’t.”

“And that whilst immortals stop aging at the mortal age of about twenty-nine, sorceresses stop aging at an equivalent of age twenty-three?”

“Really? No, I didn’t. Is that why people tell me I’m immature?”

She smiles kindly. “Never let people tell you that, Renna. Just because you haven’t lost your ability to have fun like the

rest of us, it doesn't make you immature. There are other things you should know in there too. Like that sorceresses only have a low chance of surviving childbirth."

A huge jigsaw piece of my life clicks into place. "That's why my parents...."

She slides two pages of neat notes across the desk towards me. "It's more than likely, but it doesn't excuse what they did, at all. At all. I made this for you. It's a guide to who you are."

I know this gesture is the summation of months of Lynna's free time being spent in old libraries, and that I should be thanking her. But it's not gratitude that's lodging my words in my throat.

It's dread.

As my eyes roam the paragraphs, the reality of what is going to happen to me seeps into my veins like poison. For the first time in a long time, I feel scared. Not scared like I have to give a speech or fight someone bigger than me. This is genuine terror that shakes my core. "I have to get out of this kingdom. You have to help me get out of here without being questioned."

"I like you, Renna, but I'd never go behind REXXAN's back on anything. You have to accept that this is happening. If you want to announce it to your people, or just not mention it, that's fine. But in a week's time, your life won't be the same as it is now. I'll support you, and I'm asking you from the bottom of my heart not just to take off and run again."

"It's all I can do," I say, my stomach sinking. I love every single one of my hunters. I love Stellan and Annaliya with every fragment of my being. I love Lynna, and Friar, and Talyn, and Ellatar. And REXXAN...I swallow the lump in my throat. I've said a lot of goodbyes in my time but this one feels like a burning hot poker in the chest.

On REXXAN's desk, I begin to write a note and leave enough money to buy out the remainder of my employment with him.

Something came up, and I had to go. I'm so sorry.

Onyx will do just as good a job as me. Look after him until I return.

R.

I hurry into the bathroom of my palace room, sweeping an arm across the shelves to put the few possessions I own into my bag. I'm crying as I do it, because I know Rexxan will hate me for this. But the dislike he can feel for me will pale in comparison to the sheer loathing I have within myself.

As I run through the list of people I've encountered in my life, I struggle to identify one that I haven't hurt. I struggle to identify one that wouldn't be better off if I'd never met them. I slap a hand over my mouth to muffle the sob that threatens to leave my lips.

I don't know when I last broke down. I tell myself I am fine. I tell myself to hold it in until I'm alone later, but when I see the colour of the tear that hits the white tiled floor, I sink to my knees and fall apart.

CHAPTER 26

TRUE COLOURS (REXXAN)

I stare at the note on my desk in sheer disbelief, wondering how she could do this. To me, to Onyx, to Stellan, to her people.

She's fucking gone, and why, I do not know.

In the back of my mind, I'm worried it's because I didn't tell her how I felt about her, but that's not Renna. She's tougher than that. She could walk through fire if she had to. That cannot be the only reason.

A year and a half of nothing but her, and I've lost her.

"Do you know where she is?" Shouts a deep voice, a fist hammering my door. It bursts open and Stellan stands there, pale green eyes burning into mine. A note is clenched in his fist and I suspect that she left one for him, Onyx, and Annaliya too. "Because I swear to the gods, if you do, I'll fucking lose it!"

He stalks towards me, boiling with wrath. Besides myself, he's the biggest person I've seen. He's bigger than Onyx and even Friar, about the same size as my son. Piercings cover his ears, a silver ring in his nose. Even his tongue has a stud in it as he starts to talk. "I'll tell you the way I see it. She comes running out of your halls one day, more upset than usual. Then she's not herself for two weeks, and then she runs away? You want me to add that up for you, sweetie?" He asks, in a saccharine tone.

I grab his hand as he goes to shove me, holding it in front of my face. A well-worn gold band sits on his left hand. "Does

your wife know you fuck a different person each night?" I ask, and he loses any fraction of calm he had left, pulling a knife from his belt.

"You keep her fucking name out of your mouth," he hisses, plunging the knife forward. It makes it about an inch into my chest by the time I stop it, pulling it out.

"Good try," I mutter, kicking his knee with my heel so his legs collapse. I push him onto his knees and ask the guards to remove him. I need him out of the way; Renna is all I can think about now. She can't be much further than the forest border. I cannot lose her.

But something catches my eye as I pass her rooms. A satin-black sword leans against the pale stone wall of her hallway. Dangerous hope swirls in my chest, because she'd sooner part with a finger than that sword. But as I hear her in her bathroom, my joy is short-lived.

She's crying.

And gods above, I hate that. I'd reforge the boundaries of this earth if it would make her happy. But she isn't happy now, and worry spears up my spine. I've seen Renna go through a lot without crying, and she sounds broken.

"Rennalya, sweetheart, let me in," I say, and the crying quiets. "I know you're in there."

"Leave me alone."

"It makes me sad when you're sad. Whatever it is, we'll deal with it," I say, calmly. "Whatever it is, it's nothing you and I cannot conquer together."

"Just leave me alone," she sobs, and I sigh, turning around and heading to the other guest halls to try to find the one person I need to be able to help her.

Onyx glares at me from across my desk, a letter scrunched in his hand too. But what's very interesting is that he hasn't tried to murder me like Stellan did. It tells me that he knows I'm not the reason Renna wanted to run away.

He's silent, so I press on his weakness. "Onyx, if you tell me what's happened, it'll be much easier for us to help her."

"Do you know where she ran away to?"

"Tell me what happened," I say, in a voice that has most people trembling.

He sighs. "We ran out of Ashhal."

"It very rarely grows east of Fellton."

"We figured. She wasn't doing well this week anyway, after whatever had happened between the two of you. This was the cherry on top, I think."

I hurt her. "How many more week's supply do you have?"

"Days, at best. Probably less."

We both turn to the sound of the door latch opening and Renna shuffles in. Her hands are lost in the sleeves of one of my giant shirts as she wipes her nose with the white fabric. Her eyes are downcast, shoulders slumped. It's not the Renna I know at all. Both of us stand to go to her, but she holds up a shaking hand to keep us in place before finally looking up.

Holy shit.

My breath catches in my throat. Brilliant orange eyes, more luminous than my own, stare back at me. They're the colour of fire, and just as bright too. Her light brown skin has a faint glow around it. She was striking before, but now she's unlike anything I've ever seen.

"Rennalya," whispers Onyx, eyes wide with awe.

"I don't want to talk about it," she mumbles, her bottom lip trembling as her eyes look from me to him. He holds her face between his hands, tilting it from side to side.

"*Holy shit.* Holy fuck, Renna. You're a fucking sorceress," he whispers, as if they'd not quite believed it all this time.

She nods, and he gasps as a pale orange tear slips down her cheek. "No, Ren. Don't cry. Don't cry, because I'll cry," he pleads, and she covers her face with her hands and sobs. It breaks my heart.

“I’m so scared of what’s going to happen to me!” She cries, her hands trembling with genuine terror. She’s dropped her guard, the most vulnerable I’ve ever seen her, and it fucking hurts. Onyx picks her up gently and carries her out of my study, every single one of her sobs splintering my chest. I’ve never seen her cry like that. She’s terrified and it should be me in there helping her.

She told me how she fucking felt, and I said nothing back.

I rake a hand through my hair as Friar steps out of his study next door and into the hallway. He catches my eye and opens his mouth to speak but I raise a hand to silence him. Today, I’m going to send him away. Today, I need an evening off. Today, life comes first, not work.

“Not tonight, Friar.”

“There’s an army marching on us. It is six days away from the Vault.”



“OKAY?” I mouth at Renna, as she comes into a meeting room at two in the morning. We’re in here preparing for the worst, and Renna has walked in looking a whole lot better than she did an hour ago, her eyes no longer red and puffy with tears. She looks sleepy, and it makes me want to look after her. I’ve never had that desire for anyone but my son before.

She nods at me and clears her throat. “You’re... you’re going to all think I’m lying, but I swear it’s true. I can’t hide it any longer. I’m... I’m a...” She fiddles with her fingers. “I’m a s—“

“Sorceress,” adds Onyx. “She’s a sorceress. We have no more potion to suppress it.”

The room is silent, everyone looking on in utter disbelief. “What type?” Queries Talyn, eventually.

“There are types?” Asks Renna.

“Fire. She’s a fire sorceress,” I say, calmly. Renna looks up at me like she didn’t know that, and like she has a hundred more questions for me.

How ironic that the woman who has captivated me so intensely can summon the very substance that ruined my entire life.

“This is good, right?” Asks Windan, one of my head guards. “She can save us?”

“And how would she do that?” I ask. Renna can’t save us all, but I can—if I can handle the pain. I know what I have to do to win this war, I just don’t want to do it.

“I don’t know...put the whole army in a wall of fire?”

“Do your research, Windan. Sorceresses are not so different from Evergreens. She doesn’t have that power, nor will she ever. It’ll take years for her to train her abilities to full power.”

“Ah.”

“I’ve heard from Ocealia. She and Espan are about to face an army of equal size,” I say, beginning a long page of notes.

“How did this get past us? We’ve scouted the southern lands for months.”

“They must be underground,” suggests Renna, sitting down. Everyone is still staring at her in disbelief. “When will they get here?”

“They’re not marching on my gates. They’ll be marching on the Vault.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” Asks Annaliya. “It means less civilians dead?”

Frian shakes his head, his face grave. A small patch of similar scars to mine sits on his left hand. “The enemy breaking into the Vault is the worst possible scenario.”

“Why?” Asks Anna. *Gods above, what does Renna teach these people?*

I sketch out a pentagon on the table in front of us all. “There is a small pool in that vault.” I draw a circle towards each corner, continuing to explain.

“The gods themselves placed five stones on the pool and thus created Yterras as it is today. Each stone controls part of Yterras; fire and the sun, the rivers and the rain, the earth and the flora, the skies and the air, and the oceans and all that lies beneath them. I am the Guardian of the Fire Stone, Espan of the Air Stone, King Holn guards the Earth Stone, Ocealia the Sea Stone, and Kelen the River Stone. It is our responsibility to keep them safe. Guards from all of the Five Kingdoms patrol the vault.”

“You entrusted one of the stones to *that* idiot?” Says Renna, in disbelief.

“Not to him, but to the entire River Kingdom. It’s been that way for seven centuries since the Great Fires. It may seem unwise but it is the only way we can live in world peace. Equal kingdoms, equal responsibility. You take the responsibility of a stone from a kingdom and they’ll declare war,” I say, my eyes on hers.

She’s all I want. I have to fix this. I have to tell her how I feel. *Fuck, Rexas. Not now.*

I continue. “Annaliya, the stones all sit atop the water in that pool; none higher or more important than the other. There are natural ripples in the pool which are normal, they cause the elements to fluctuate, that’s why it’s hotter on some days, or rainier on others, or why the tides go in and out. Seven centuries ago someone took the Fire Stone out of the Vault and for two days, a volcano in the north sent fire raining down from the skies. Houses melted, crops burned. Over half the population died.”

Annaliya swallows. “What if they take the others?”

“Each stone brings its own disasters. The Earth Stone would cripple Yterras with earthquakes. Whatever stone is taken, we’d see tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands dead. We have four tasks on hand,” I explain, ticking them off on my fingers. “Protect the vault, tackle the

army, guide and support our people, and heal the wounded. That's why we're all here."

Everyone nods, sitting up a little taller. As the hours go by, I watch Renna closely. She winces every now and then, her forehead glistening slightly with sweat. I know she must have the mother of all headaches, mostly due to withdrawals from the potion her body has known for so long. Her shaking hands are the first to rip open the door the second we're finished.

I want to go to her to help her through it, but I am faced with a genuine queue of people waiting to speak to me about urgent matters. And if that isn't an allegory for our relationship, I don't know what is. Renna isn't a woman who deserves scraps of my time. She deserves it all, and I can't give her that. But fuck, I just cannot let her go.

I'd rather die than see her with another.

When I go to her room, she is fast asleep in her bed, curled up in a little ball. When she's awake she rivals the most powerful storm I've ever known, but asleep, she's so serene. So calm. I brush her hair aside, planting a soft kiss on her warm forehead.

I rub my thumb over the little frown between her brows, smiling as it goes away. She grumbles, shuffling nearer to my hand.

"Rexxan," she sighs, in her sleep. "You're here."

I kiss her hair again. "I'm here." I'm here, and she's back safe. She's okay.

She's okay, and I lo—.

How am I ever going to tell her if I'm struggling to admit it in my head?

She's okay, and I lo—.

Fuck!

CHAPTER 27

CRUSTY OLD MAN (RENNA)

I wake up disoriented, my mind addled by the medicines I'd taken for my withdrawals.

The fragments of my dream float in front of me, just out of reach. I try to grasp them, but they dissipate into the cool morning air. I'm dizzy. I've woken up with a sense of unease in my stomach. Why is that?

Oh yes.

I'm a fucking sorceress, and people are finding out.

Stellan is in prison.

And we're all about to get stabbed by an angry army.

Nice.

I sit up sleepily, my eyes adjusting to the dim darkness. REXXAN sits beside my bed, still working on the battle plans that we discussed last night. I wonder if he slept at all. Probably not. His molten lava eyes meet mine. "Rennalya."

"Don't call me that."

"It's a beautiful name."

If he adds *for a beautiful girl* onto the end of that statement I'll lose hope in men forever. "Why are you here, REXXAN?"

"To watch you sleep."

"You realise that's creepy?"

"I realise it's sensible, given the amount of pain relief you've taken for your withdrawals."

I don't even ask how he knows that. Someone breathes on the other side of Yterras and REXXAN knows. "And you couldn't have sent any one of your three hundred and fifty staff?"

"No."

I'm angry with him. I'm angry he put Stellan in prison. I'm angry he mentioned Stell's wife. I'm fucking furious that he let me stand there and open up to him and said nothing back. I'm angry that he doesn't love me enough to tell me. "Well, I'm awake and I haven't choked on my own sick, so now you can get out of here and choke on yours."

"Renna," he sighs wearily. "I want to talk to you."

"Well, I'm not in the mood now. And don't you have better things to be doing? For example, leading this entire nation through a war?"

Annoyance flashes in his eyes, and I know that was a careless comment. If there's one thing he isn't, it's a bad king. He works twenty one hours some days. "What do you think I've been doing all night, Rennalya?"

"Take. Stellan. Out. Of. Prison," I say, enunciating each word slowly as if he were a child. He and I aren't going to make any headway in our relationship whilst my best friend is in a cell.

"He got off lightly."

"Take him the fuck out of there, REXXAN. I swear to the gods."

"Oh, the gods won't help against me." He stands, clearly giving up. "See you in the same meeting room at eight. Don't be late."

He stalks out of the room, the sheer weight behind his footsteps rattling the table beside my bed. I spend ten minutes just staring into the mirror, my eyes as bright as the lanterns on the wall beside me. I look different, and I'm terrified by that. From this day onwards, there's a target on my back, a heavy price on my head. I turn away from the mirror, uncomfortable with my reflection for the first time in my life.

I hum as I look over my very limited wardrobe. I really need to invest in an outfit that isn't black leggings and one of REXXAN's shirts that I stole. I run my finger over a black dress. Maybe I need genuine help, but the idea of making REXXAN fucking desperate for me is awfully appealing right now. I'm not above using my looks to get my best friend out of prison. He would do—and has done—it for me. I step into a satin dress, rub golden oil into my skin, and stain my lashes black. Standing in front of the mirror, I drape a black silk cloak around my shoulders.

REXXAN doesn't stand a fucking chance.

I make sure to swing by his halls on my way out, smiling at the guards who aren't doing a good job of hiding their approval of my outfit. REXXAN is just where I want him, outside his study and engaged in conversation with the Head of the Forest Army.

FRIAN clears his throat, moving his huge frame to the side to turn to see me.

"Good morning, FRIAN," I say, brightly.

He clears his throat again. "Um...morning, my lady."

"Oh, and you too, of course," I add, wiggling my fingers at the King in a wave.

He shakes his head at me in despair with an indescribable amount of desire in those entrancing eyes. "Can't stay, I'm just *so* busy," I purr, feeling his burning gaze on me as I walk out of his halls.

"You're playing with fire, RENNALYA," he calls.

"I'm a fire sorceress, REXXAN, I was born for this."



I BEGIN my day by announcing to my hunters that I am a sorceress. Half of them don't believe me, which I am more

than fine with. The other half begin going round bragging to everyone else that they know a sorceress, and I watch my secrecy plan evaporate into non-existence. Once I've briefed my nine senior hunters on the battle plans so far, I move on to the next item on my list.

Stellan whistles when he sees me, sitting shirtless in his prison cell. He's probably slept with half of the guards for all I know. He had the shock of his life when he'd seen my eyes when I'd visited the prisons last night. "That's a revenge dress, if ever I've seen one. You look like REXXAN's wet dreams!"

I laugh, stepping aside so the guard can open his cell. "It *is* a revenge dress, and I think it worked." The guard delivers me one more appreciative glance before letting me in. My eyes lock onto Stellan's. "I'm going to get you out of here."

"Don't, because the second you let me out I'm taking that fucker's eyes out."

"Stellan, just don't. I'll deal with REXXAN."

"Yeah, and by 'deal with' you mean suck him off."

"Stellan!" I say, exasperated. "I am the Commander of an army, an army that is legally contracted to fight in this war. Hence I am keen to have my best warrior out of prison and on the battlefield. So shut up, sit tight, and behave. Let me handle REXXAN."

"Renna," he says, his face serious for once. "You can't commit yourself—"

"Don't. Don't even say it. I know what you're going to say and I don't need to hear it."

"Yeah? What am I going to say?" He asks, crossing his tattooed arms.

"That I need to stay the fuck away from him," I reply, mimicking his deep voice and stomping around like he does in a tantrum.

He's laughing as he speaks. "Uncanny. You ever heard of letting people finish their sentences?"

Fair point. "Sorry."

“Look, I hate the man. *Hate* the man. But I know what love looks like, and I see the way you look at him and the way he looks at you. I saw you two dancing by the lake in Rinnia in summer. What I’m saying is, only a fool would throw love away, but also that only a fool would give themselves to someone who isn’t ready to receive them. Either stay away from him completely or work out all your problems and give him every part of you. Don’t do some half-in-between option like you’re doing now. It’s one or the other.”

I sigh, sitting down. “I don’t know if he loves me back. I don’t even think he’s capable of love. He’s been through so much that he’s just...a shell of a person.”

“Maybe this just isn’t your week?” He suggests. “Maybe trying to work out whether you’re soulmates should be saved for a week when you aren’t the two leaders marching two armies into war?”

I laugh. Yeah. “Probably a sensible suggestion.” I breathe a long therapeutic sigh into the fresh air around us. “Remember the first time we went to a prison?”

He chuckles, stretching his arms over his head. “Life was simple then. You weren’t Commander. Onyx and you were just children, pretty much. What did we even go to prison for?”

“Throwing grapes at Kelen’s grandfather.”

He grins. “Simpler times.”

“I’m getting you out of here. *Behave!*” I shout, holding his mischievous face between my hands.

But as I take the quiet route out of the prisons and back to the palace, a hand clasps over my mouth as I walk through a lesser-used tunnel below REXXAN’s halls. I yank it off, twirling around to punch a man I don’t recognise in the face. He squeezes my neck and I knee him between the legs.

Fuck. This is why I don’t wear dresses. I have no weapons on me.

He yanks my head back as my fist connects with his nose again. “Onyx! REXXAN!” I yell, hoping they’d hear me upstairs with their super-human senses. The dark-haired man pins me

against the wall with his hands. “I know a fair few people who’d pay a pretty price for a sorceress,” he snarls, his breath tickling my face.

“Well done, genius. So do I.”

His fingers squeeze my neck harder as movement catches my eye over his shoulder. REXXAN holds his finger to his lips, carefully plucking a spear from a rack on the wall.

Oh fuck no. He is not throwing that in our direction.

“Trust me,” he mouths, stepping a little closer. As the man moves to knock me out, I look down and watch the head of the spear go straight through this man and stop half an inch from my now blood-soaked abdomen.

“Bloody hell, REXXAN!” I yell, as the man slumps onto the floor, a spear in his stomach. “You could’ve got me too!”

“Are you alright?”

“Other than nearly being impaled on some crusty old spear, thrown by some crusty old man?”

“I’m fucking serious, Renna. Are you alright?” He repeats, turning me around to check for injuries. His eyes roam over my bleeding knuckles and he turns to the spluttering man on the floor. He slowly and lazily twizzles the spear, watching the man scream in agony with a bored expression.

“Nice job on the nose,” he observes, over the screams.

“Thanks. I thought so too.” I squat down to poke his broken nose as REXXAN stares at me with an expression so smouldering that I feel my face flushing. Oh yes. The outfit. I forgot about the outfit.

He drinks me in like a dying man at an oasis, his eyes lingering on every little detail of me for a few seconds. That unreadable gaze flicks over to the man on the floor. “He didn’t deserve to lay his eyes on you,” he states, before yanking the spear out of his abdomen and plunging it into his mouth, out again, and into his eye.

That’s gruesome, even by my standards. REXXAN doesn’t wince.

“So it begins,” he states, and I know exactly what he means. This is the first of endless attempts from different people who are desperate for a sorceress on their side. This is the beginning of my new life.

“So it begins,” I repeat, staring at the mess on the floor.

“Can we talk now?”

“No! Just because you shoved a spear in someone’s mouth doesn’t mean I’ll tremble at the knees and marry you. This isn’t some shit book, REXXAN. This is real life, and we have a hell of a lot going on right now, including the fact that you need to release Stellan!”

“I’m not releasing Stellan. He’s a headache.”

“He’s my best warrior! He’s in prison because *you* antagonised him about his dead wife!”

“I antagonised him? After *he* broke into my study and held a knife to my chest?”

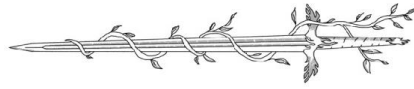
“Oh, don’t give me that. He wouldn’t be a threat to you. No one is a threat to you. If you don’t release him, this—“ I gesture between us, “—isn’t going anywhere. I’m serious. Now, we both have to be at a meeting in ten minutes so let’s table this.”

“Then I’ll delay the meeting.”

“You’re *so* irritating!” I shout, my voice sounding tinny in the barren tunnel.

“So I am told. Often. And for the record, I may be old but I am *not* crusty,” he declares, opening the door for me and hauling the bleeding corpse over his shoulder, dumping it in a spare room for the guards to deal with.

I genuinely do need help, because he shouldn’t be turning me on right now but he is. Still, I’m not giving in to my treacherous thoughts. I blow him a quick kiss and vanish into my makeshift study to get my notes and convince Onyx that I’m not dead.



I DO my evening stretches alone in the quiet of my room. I would love to know why midday Renna thought two hundred weighted lunges and thirty pull-ups were a good idea. I've hurt muscles I never knew I had.

"Rennalya. Back in the meeting room for eight in the morning tomorrow," comes a deep voice, outside my door.

"Fine," I say, finishing my giant glass of pain medicine. Turns out, withdrawals from a drug you've been taking for almost a century are no joke.

I have to do something about my need for him. "Wait, I'm coming!" I shout, standing.

"On my face?" He asks, as I swing open the door.

I grin up at his towering frame. "I sure do hope so, my lord."

"This is a change of heart," he says, his hand snaking around my waist. His body stands hot and heavy against mine, lust emanating from every inch of him. My thoughts turn to mush as he leans down to kiss me, his lips soft and gentle as a rough hand holds my throat. In a smooth move, he picks me up with one arm and tosses me over his shoulder, stalking to his rooms without another word. From my upside-down position, I wave at my favourite guard. Ellatar gives me a knowing eyebrow raise and a wink in return.

Rexxan tosses me onto the bed, heading straight for the wine cabinet and pouring us each a glass. "We need to talk."

"I have no interest in anything that comes out of your mouth while my best friend sits in your prison."

"So you're here because...?"

"Because...", I huff, crossing my aching arms. "Because watching you fight Friar all sweaty and angry in the training

ground, and then comfort those scared children earlier made me feel some kind of way.”

“Do you ever consider filtering your thoughts like the rest of us?”

“No. You’d rather I lied to you?” I ask, as he kisses his way up my thigh. He smiles, his warm breath caressing my hips.

“Do you realise what you do to me in that lovely black dress of yours? I’ve been sitting at my desk unable to focus all day.”

I smile innocently, sitting up and straddling his lap as we lie in his bed. His pupils dilate, looking at me with nothing but pure awe. No one has looked at me the way he does. Like I’m enough for him and then so much more. But I’m not, clearly.

As I lean down to kiss him, his huge calloused hands run down my back, lower and lower. I grab them before he can reduce me to a trembling mess, bringing his hands above his head as I kiss his neck.

A low grumble forms in his throat. “Hm, I don’t like you in control, angel,” he whispers, as the room around us heats with desire.

“Really? Because it feels like you do?” I offer, grinding my hips against his rock-solid length. He hisses through gritted teeth, flexing his hips and invoking an involuntary moan from my lips. I hold his wrists there with one hand, my free hand sliding to the chains I’d snuck beneath his pillow while he had been pouring the wine.

He wants me to play his games? Gladly.

But he’s going to play mine too.

CHAPTER 28

A KING IN CHAINS (REXXAN)

I should've known that the Shadow Commander was up to something.

When is she not?

She's too sure of herself to show up at my door for sex when she's angry at me. Of course there is a different motive. When I feel the distinctive chill of metal on my wrists I pull my arms down out of her reach, but I'm too fucking late. The steel cuffs bite into my skin and my arms are restrained above my head.

I am chained to a headboard in the company of the world's deadliest assassin.

If I'm still alive in ten minutes, I'll be surprised.

"I swear to the fucking gods, angel, unchain me from this bed or I'll—"

"Or you'll what, Your Majesty?" She asks, sitting back on the bed and pulling her dress over her head, completely naked in front of me. The trees and plants of my bedroom cast a jungle of shadows across her skin, incandescent. "You look a little... tied up right now."

I'm going to fucking kill her. "Rennalya, untie me."

"I'll free you when you free Stellan," she says, crawling up the bed like a cat, striking orange eyes on mine. Her skin glows, kissed by the sun who is ever as desperate to touch her as I am. The golden light glints off her pierced nipple and the gold necklace at her throat.

I'm enthralled.

Captivated.

Enchanted.

Privileged to breathe the same air as this woman who weaves her magic through my world and everything in it. I want *all of her*.

"I'm not freeing Stellan."

"Then that's just too bad," she murmurs, her tongue darting out to lick those soft pink lips of hers. Slowly, deliberately, she sinks back on her heels, running her hands down to her thighs and spreading them apart as she kneels on the bed.

"Fucking save me," I whisper, in a quiet plea to gods that I gave up on long ago.

But they won't save me from her. Nothing can save me from this woman.

She's glistening wet, begging for me, and my fingers close and open in a fist. In terms of torture, I think her pulling my teeth would be preferable to this. She's two feet away from me, and I miss her.

How the mighty have fallen.

She pulls the cork from a bottle of oil with her teeth, letting it drip over her chest and then over her golden thighs. I watch a droplet run in slow motion over the muscles of her abdomen, the soft curves of her hips, trickling down between her thighs. Where I want to be. Fuck that little oil droplet.

"Renna!" I shout, in pure frustration. The loss of the ability to touch this woman is a punishment that no man deserves. If I gave it everything, I could probably break free, but this is so much more than her tying me up. This is an exchange of trust. It's an exchange of *power*, one that she needs and one that I'm happy to concede if it'll make her happy.

My razor-sharp vision is so blurred by her. I don't know how to feel about her anymore. She is both the poison that plagues my veins and the antidote that restores them. She's the

fire that incinerates my chest and the water that suffocates the flames. She's injected my world with the buzz and the hum of life that I never knew I needed. Now I have it, I never want it to go.

She sits in front of me like the goddess she is, her hand massaging oil into her skin until she glows like a bronze statue. My burning gaze follows her hand as it waltzes down to her nipple. Every muscle in my body tenses as she rolls it between two fingers and whimpers, her head dropping back.

So this is her plan. To torture me until I can't take it anymore. It's fucking working. "Rennalya, put the key in the lock and turn it."

"I'd rather die."

Her other hand runs over her stomach, down between her legs. The chains on the shackles clink as I pull on the restraints, dying to touch her, to touch myself, to touch *something*. I'm so hard it hurts, and she only makes it worse when she looks down at me with a starved expression, trapping her bottom lip between two rows of white teeth.

"Rexxan," she breathes, two fingers circling her clit. "I want you so, so bad."

I pull on the chains and the metal punishes me with harsh bites into my skin. She's going to kill me, or I'm going to kill her. I don't know which.

She spreads her legs wider, soft breathy moans echoing around my room, and my cock throbs. "Do *not* fucking come when I'm not touching you," I grit out, blood trickling down my forearms from the cuffs that encircle my wrists. "Or better still, fucking unchain me!" I don't want to break free, I want her to free me.

Another quiet moan escapes her lips as she touches herself, her fingers glistening now too. "You want to taste?" She asks, repeating the same question I give to her so often. I really do.

I close my mouth around her fingers, twirling my tongue around them in a way that makes her let out a soft sigh and a breath that sounds like my name. The fire in her eyes glows a

little brighter, the atmosphere a little hotter. When she moves to withdraw them I clamp my teeth on her skin.

She gasps, her whole body shuddering a little as my teeth graze her soft fingers. “Free Stellan,” she whispers, her hips wriggling against the bed. She’s as desperate as I am. I release her fingers from my mouth.

“No.”

She growls in frustration, long hair spilling over golden shoulders as she leans down to kiss me. A few smudges of my blood decorate her breasts as she runs her tongue over my aching length, and my vision blurs because it’s simultaneously so much and just not enough. She’s mine. Mine in every single way. Despite this unbearable persecution, I know that I’d choose being chained up in her company over being free but deprived of her.

In one quick swoop, she takes me to the back of her throat, choking but staying put. The ferocious cutting of the chains into my arms does nothing to dull the white-hot pleasure in my veins. This is the most infuriating and also the most assuaging experience of my life as she chokes on me with watering eyes. I long to put my hands on either side of her face and hammer into her until her throat is too sore to speak, but the nymph in my bed has other plans.

“Fuck, slow down,” I say, my breathing ragged. Sweat glistens on the tanned skin of my chest. But of course, she doesn’t fucking do as I ask, because when does she ever? She speeds up, pressure building in my lower stomach as I get closer and closer. She smiles as the muscles that form my abdomen tense, but she betrays me at the eleventh hour, pulling away right when I am at the edge. Her glorious mouth is swollen from me. *I’m going to die.*

“Rexxan, fucking free Stellan!” She shouts, her arms outstretched like she is losing the will to live.

“No!” I yell back, every muscle on my body straining for release.

She tips her head back and casts her eyes at the plant-covered, vaulted ceiling. "Rex, you'll be the death of me."

"I fucking hope so," I say, gritting my teeth so hard I'm surprised they're intact. "I swear to the gods, if you don't ride me now," I grab her between my calves, dragging her closer to me and she yelps, laughing out loud as she falls onto my chest. She rises up on her knees above me, fiery gaze on mine.

This woman has burnt my world as I know it to the ground, and I want to rebuild it with her at the centre.

"Rennalya, let me touch you," I ask, pulling on the chains once more as she kneels over me. This is torture. I need to touch her. I've never come without touching myself before, but I fucking could now. If she even breathed on me I'd probably explode. But I can't let her win, not while I'm cuffed to the bed.

If I let Renna believe that chaining people to their headboards is a way to get what she wants, I'm worried she'll take that information and run with it.

"Rexxan!" She cries, her voice desperate as she sinks down on my length.

"I know, huntress," I whisper, my arms relaxing in the chains for the first time since she'd tied me here. "Breathe and it'll feel easier."

She lets out a shaky breath, her mouth open as she lowers herself down, enveloping me in her soft heat and gasping out a moan that fuses with mine. "You feel so good around me, Rennalya."

"Please," is all she can manage as she rides me, slowly at first. I don't even know what she's pleading for anymore. We've both been driven beyond insanity by each other, I think.

If I can last twenty seconds I'll view it as an achievement of a lifetime, because the way she looks right now is unforgettable. My chest warms as the last of the evening sun stretches her fingers into our room, painting Rennalya in shades of deep orange and gold and illuminating her eyes even more than they already are. She is fire in its human form, and I

am standing too close, blinded and scorched but unable to care.

Somehow, despite the chains on my wrists, I feel like the luckiest man on this earth that I get to see her like this. I flex my hips and she shudders, falling forward with her forehead on mine, letting me set the pace.

“Rexxan?” She whispers, her chest heaving.

“Yes, love?”

“I’d die for you,” she replies, her eyes sincere.

“I’d walk through fire for you, Rennalya. I mean it,” I reply, hoping she understands the sheer weight of that sentence for me. It’s true.

She plants a small hand on my jaw. “We have to work things out. This is too good to throw away.”

“I know, sweetheart,” I whisper, my lips against hers. “We’ll work it out. We’re just two complicated people with two very complicated jobs and two very complicated pasts.”

She nods, her breaths in time with mine. “We’ll be okay?”

She’s worried about us, and that thaws the frost inside my ribs a little. I brush my nose down hers and plant a kiss on her lips as her eyes burn into mine, waiting for my answer.

“We’ll be alright, my love.”

She lets out a sigh of relief like she’d been needing to hear that for a long time, and relaxes enough to let me grind my hips into hers. “I don’t think it’s going to take very long to—oh, fuck!” She shakes, sitting up straighter to get the angle that she loves so much.

I whisper a silent thank you to the gods as she comes hard around me, taking me with her as I let out approximately seven million curses in seven million languages, coming harder than I have in a long, long time. This woman makes me see stars. She buries her pretty face in my neck, exhausted as we quietly catch our breath.

It's *these* moments, these snippets of peace in my otherwise chaotic world, that I never knew I needed. With her, they're different. I'm so content in her presence, so content to sit in silence and listen to the sound of her breathing. She's changing me, and I just hope it's for the better. I hope she can be patient with me long enough for me to work out how to tell her how I feel.

I've been broken and rebuilt so many times now that there are fractures and fissures beneath my skin that stop me from doing and saying everything I want to.

"I didn't know Stellan's wife was dead," I murmur, once she has unchained me and is half asleep on my chest. The bedsheets are smudged in my blood. "But it doesn't change my opinion of him."

"He's a good man, Rex, and I need him on my side."

"I'll send a guard to release him, but I'm not allowing him through the palace gates."

She nods brightly whilst running her fingers over the deep cuts on my arms, dark red streaks of blood running over my wrists and biceps. "Whoops."

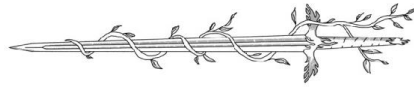
"That's all you have to say on the situation? Just 'whoops'?"

She laughs, her face flushed with genuine happiness. "Yep! Are you going to get me back?"

"Yes, love, I'm going to ruin you in return. In our downstairs bedroom, perhaps."

"Yes, sir," she mumbles, standing up with an indecent smile on her face. "We have shit to do. Will you show me one thing? One little thing I can do with my powers before the war? Even if it's tiny?"

"I'll have a look in the library if I have any spare time, which is unlikely."



IT IS forty-eight consecutive hours before I take any kind of break from work, and I take two precious hours to sleep and two hours to honour Renna's request of finding something she can learn to do with her magic.

She sits cross-legged on my desk as I sit on the chair opposite her at three in the morning. Narrow shards of moonlight streak in through the trees and plants in my study, piercing us both with silver light. Ever so quietly, she whispers an enchantment I'd shown her, clicking her fingers. A small spark forms at her fingertips and she sighs in frustration. I think she was hoping that when her powers came through, all her abilities would too. But it doesn't work like that—just because she has a paintbrush, doesn't mean she can paint. In a few years, she'll be a very powerful woman.

“You'll get there.”

She does it again, and the very same thing happens.

“Really focus on it, Rennalya. Focus on channeling your energy into your fingertips.”

“What does that even mean!” She complains, arms outstretched. “You're used to having magic. I don't even know what my 'energy' is, let alone how to channel it into my fingers!”

I place my hand on my chest. “That warmth, that fire you feel in here, focus on shifting it through your arm. It'll take practice.”

She takes a slow breath, and I know she is doing it right because the orange glow to her eyes gets a little brighter. She clicks her fingers and gasps, a tiny marble-sized flame floating between her fingers. The grip of my fingers on my thigh increases to agonising. I loathe fire.

“Good, now lower it over the wick of the candle,” I instruct her, watching her do it with bated breath. She engulfs the wick in the flame, watching the candle light.

“Yes!” She exclaims, throwing her arms up in the air and screaming as she topples backward off the desk. I make a shit attempt at pulling her up but with us both laughing like children, she just tugs me down to the floor instead.

I snake my hand down to her behind, squeezing her lush curves. She’s wriggling beneath me and I hum in delight, spreading her legs with my knee.

“Oh my days, you’re insatiable! Rexxan! We’re doing important research here!”

“Fuck the research.”

“Once I’ve done this, you can obliterate me.”

She sure knows how to motivate a workforce. She does it again, the orb a little bigger this time. She is careful to keep her distance from me, knowing my relationship with fire is very strained. Just watching this is making my burns surge. It’s yet another sign that this woman is bad for me in every way, and it’s yet another sign I’m going to ignore.

“When you’ve mastered this a little more, you can put it on the end of a sword or a spear to make your weapons flame.”

“Holy shit! I’m...I’m very cool!”

“Oh, gods. Maybe our age gap is too big,” I declare, in denial that she’d just said that out loud. She lets out a loud laugh, closing her fingers to make the orb vanish.

“Thank you for this. It’s really helpful,” she whispers, and I kiss her gently. And when I pull away, the same warm feeling in my chest is reflected in her eyes.

But today I don’t run from it, I just kiss her again. This feels...*right*.

CHAPTER 29

CANCELLED (RENNA)

Stellan kicks a fruit bowl across the room. Oranges roll under the table. Even our food is avoiding his tantrum.

“This is such bullshit.”

“Six,” I mutter, under my breath.

“What?”

“Six times you’ve said that sentence in five minutes.”

“Well, it *is* bullshit, Renna!”

“Seven!”

Rexxan cancelled the war. And I thought that cancelling a war is not a thing, but it is, because he has just done it. All we received was a note in his posh stationery informing us that we can stand the army down and await further instructions.

Stellan’s favourite pastime is stabbing things. He is not happy. Onyx is, though. He is currently sitting at the table in my bedroom working through a children’s activity book that’s teaching him how to write the letters of the alphabet. It hurts my heart as I watch him muddle up his ‘b’ and his ‘d’. I love him so much.

Ellatar swings his golden-haired head around the door as Stellan’s brown, tattooed hands move to punching a pillow. Ellatar is in casual clothes and I hardly recognise him outside of his golden armour. “Are you off work?” He asks, and I nod.

“What the fuck is going on?” Me and Stellan ask, in perfect time.

“Come with me,” he whispers. He holds up a bottle of wine, and Stell is instantly sold. Onyx wants a quiet night in, but I follow.

I thought I was drinking with Ellatar in the palace gardens, but as our journey on horseback approaches its third hour, I realise I was wrong. I am definitely about to get murdered by the King’s guards. I knew I wasn’t getting away with the whole chaining-to-the-bed incident.

Only once we’ve tied our horses at the base of a hill and climbed to the top does Ellatar stop, flopping down onto the grass. When I turn to see the view of the dark landscape, my heart leaps into my mouth. At the base of a mountain lies the army that had been seen, lit by torches and campfires. They’re within a day’s reach of REXXAN’S gate, and we’re unprepared.

What...the fuck?

I whirl around to face Ellatar, anger bubbling up in my chest. “What have you done?!” I hiss, kicking dirt onto his legs. “We’re all going to fucking die because you and the other guards stood down the army! You had me believe their army had turned around! Is this some kind of joke?”

Ellatar holds up his hands in a *calm-down* motion, notoriously the most effective way to get a woman to calm down. “Just stop talking and wait.”

“For what?” I snap. I’m yelling and Stellan is chugging the wine; both immersed deep into our coping mechanisms. Ellatar pats the ground beside him and pulls out a paper bag of sweets to lure me into submission. I hate that it works.

As I stare in silence at the army who have clearly stopped for the night, I wonder what I’m supposed to be looking at. Then as dark brown splotches appear on the paper bag and raindrops start running over my nose, I’m wondering again why I, a five-foot-five—five and a half on a good day—female, let a man double my size who I don’t know particularly well drag me out to a remote location at midnight.

Just as I go to leave, our faces are illuminated purple by the most powerful bolt of lightning I’ve ever seen. I shriek,

grateful that it's masked by Stellan's high-pitched scream as he runs to hide beneath a tree, shouting something about his eye makeup.

"This is why I brought you here!" Yells Ellatar, over the deafening thunder. The rain pelts our faces and I'm chilled to the bone. But I don't move, and neither does he, because this is mesmerising.

And as the third lightning strike spears the mountain opposite us, I realise why he has brought me here. One by one, rocks begin to tumble down the cliffs like marbles, an ear-shattering rumble filling the air. A fourth bolt hits the mountain, blinding me momentarily. It's weaker now, as if the storm is losing its power, but it's enough.

I watch, frozen to the spot beside my two friends as the army is buried in several feet of stone and mud. For the first time in living memory, neither Stellan nor I have a single word to say. "That's why we're not fighting," explains Ellatar.

"You have the gift of foresight?" I ask, wondering how he could ever have known this chain of events was going to happen.

"No, that was REXXAN," he says, vaguely gesturing to the landslide as he starts making his way downhill. "The army chose the stupidest possible place to stop for the night, so the King capitalised on it."

"Fucking boring way of doing it," moans Stellan. But I'm not really listening, because my skin is prickling with unease. REXXAN has told me more than once that he does not change the weather because it doesn't leave him with enough energy to manage his burns. Now what should be a happy sight is stained with sickening concern for his welfare.

I race back into his palace, kicking open the door to his bedroom, then his libraries, then his armoury, then his study, but he is nowhere.

"REXXAN?" I shout, running through his training courtyard. I'm winding myself up, convinced he's hurting, or worse, dead. I shout his name again, distressed.

“He’s busy,” comes a voice, and I spin to see Friar beneath one of the arches of the courtyard walls, his dark hair as wet as mine is. I’m soaked through, my hair plastered to my face as cold droplets run over my lips. “He wants you to know he’ll find you when he is free again.”

“Where is he?” I ask, as the wind whips my cold hair around my face.

“In a spare bedroom,” he says, and I take off running. He bolts after me, trying to slow me down as I reach the other bedrooms. “He’ll find you when he’s not busy.”

“Stop saying he’s busy when I know he’s hurt!” I shout, and when I feel warmth caressing my bitterly cold face, I realise I’m crying. Why, I don’t know, but I feel tethered to Rexas by some kind of invisible string. It’s so hard to imagine him in any pain. It’s hard to imagine him vulnerable. I hear low muffled screams outside a guest room and fresh tears form in my eyes as I knock on the door.

“It’s Talyn,” replies his healer, from inside. “Are you hurt, Renna? Can I help you?”

“I want to see Rexas.”

“He’s in here, I’ll have to let you know when he’s free, my lady.”

“Rex, are you too busy for me?”

“Rennalya, come back later,” comes Rexas’s voice, strained and quieter than usual. He’s in agony.

Concern prickles the base of my spine. “Are you alright?” Stupid question. I know the answer.

“Come back later,” he insists, and I press my forehead to the door. “I won’t judge, Rex. I just miss you.”

“I’m not good to be around right now,” he says, after a low grunt of pain. I feel my bottom lip trembling.

“Please?” I ask, knowing that my seeing his weaknesses is a vital step in our attempts to get closer. We’re just two damaged people too scared to be handled by the other, but I want to change that. Talyn opens the door and I take a deep

breath. REXXAN has been holed up in his room with his burns a few times since I've met him, but I've never been allowed in. I step inside tentatively.

I bite my lip to try and stop my crying but it's fruitless. REXXAN is shirtless, lying on his back on a metal table, and his wrists are strapped down by his sides with brown leather. It is haunting.

Every vein on his huge arms is visible as he pulls against the ties. Talyn is carefully putting something on each branch of his burns whilst another healer lets magic flow over his skin.

"Fuck!" He shouts, trying to move but being held completely still. His scars spread across his face and chest, almost glowing with heat. "Stop, fucking stop," he begs them, blood running down his clenched fists. They don't listen.

"What're you doing?" I shout, pulling Talyn away. "He asked you to stop!"

"He doesn't mean it, Rennalya. If you're going to be in here you need to just sit and watch."

"He wants you to stop," I whisper, swallowing the lump in my throat. I take his hand, understanding now the source of this man's depravity. It all makes sense now, and I have a feeling I don't even know the half of it.

Talyn continues, putting some kind of orange liquid on the scars that branch down one side of his muscular chest. "Fuck!" REXXAN shouts, again, his whole body shaking in agony. He can hardly breathe, the leather cutting into his skin.

I can take it no longer. "Talyn, I swear to the gods, if you don't stop now, I will hurt you."

Talyn puts his hands in the air and sighs. "Commander Renna, I've been doing this for four hundred years. He's asked me to stop many times and he has never meant it."

"REXXAN," I whisper, warm tears dripping from the tip of my nose. He opens his eyes slightly and I fight the sob that threatens to break free from my throat. I can't imagine the pain he's in. I've seen this man cut a wolf fang out of his own chest without looking bothered.

His chest heaves up and down as he tries to talk. “I’ll be okay by tomorrow, Ren,” he whispers. “Don’t cry. This happens all the time.”

I open his clenched fist and run my finger over the deep cuts in his palms where his fingernails have sliced his skin. “Don’t cry,” he repeats.

“They’ve tied you down,” I say, my voice breaking. I hate this.

A low grumble vibrates in his throat as his burns surge a little. “Only because of the pain. They need me to be still so they can help me. Don’t cry, angel.”

“But you were asking them to stop!”

“It’s instinct. Renna, please don’t cry for me. I hate it when you cry.”

“I’m not crying!” I say, even though I am. Rexxan raises a shaking finger at Talyn who frees him from his restraints and leaves. He grunts as he sits up, a hand pressing hard on his chest. I climb into his lap, engulfed in the heat of his burns like I am sitting beside a fireplace. “I was worried.”

“Renna, what’s gotten into you? This isn’t like you,” he says, gently. He sounds like he is in agony.

“I’m in love with you!” I say, into his chest. “You don’t need to say it back, and I’m not asking you to either. But I’m strong enough to admit that I’m in love with you and I hate seeing you like this. What are they doing to you in here? Why have they done this?” I tug at the straps.

“Hey,” he says, pulling away. “Renna, they’re just helping me. You got yourself a little spooked with the straps, I think. It’s just easier to heal someone who isn’t thrashing around in pain. I thought you liked me tied up?”

I laugh through my tears. “I do! But only when we’re naked!” I don’t understand why I’m so upset either. I came in here to comfort him and it has so quickly gone the other way.

It’s because I love him. It’s because the thought of him lying on a cold table in agony every single fortnight for seven

hundred years fills me with a sadness unlike any I've ever felt. He brushes away my tears, kissing me gently. "I'm sorry! This is supposed to be about you!" I cry, through my sobs. Fucking hell. I don't know what I'm doing. I never break down like this.

"Renna, oh my word. Deep breaths, what has happened? Has someone hurt you? Do I need to kill someone for you?"

"I don't know! I just thought you'd died or something!"

He smiles down at me, his thumb gently stroking my shoulder. "So you really do love me, huh?"

"Yes!" I shake his shoulders. "And you don't believe me because clearly someone told you that you're not worthy of it but you are!"

"Renna," he says, as if he can't listen to me any longer. He lies back down as I sit on his legs. His eyes squeeze shut in sheer agony. Driven by some kind of intuition, I hover my fingers over his chest, feeling them heat up. Then, like the reverse of what he'd shown me, I draw the heat back towards my chest and my fingertips go cool again. The scorching heat from his chest warms them once more and he snaps his eyes open, jolting upright.

I jolt in surprise. "Did I hurt you? I'm sorry!"

"Rennalya, do that again," he whispers, his face paling a little.

"I don't know what it was, I was just exploring."

"Then fucking explore again!" He shouts, making me jump. He pinches his nose as if exasperated with himself. "Fuck. Sorry."

I repeat the move and he shuts his eyes, his breathing slowing. "It feels nice?"

"It feels...it feels like you're cooling them down more than Talyn or Lynna can after seven hundred years of science."

I watch the muscles in his chest relax over the next ten minutes, the contours and boundaries of his magnificent body blurring through my tears. I think they're tears of joy. He sits

up, brushing my hair out of my face. “Where the fuck have you been?” he whispers, looking at me in wonder. “My fucking soulmate. My fucking panacea.”

I half chuckle, half sob. “Panacea? Isn’t that a dessert?”

He laughs at me like I am an idiot, and it is carefree and painless. “You’re my cure to everything.”

“I love you,” I whisper, as he holds me closer. “I want to talk about a spring and summer contract with you.”

“I’d like to talk about that too,” he replies, before kissing me so hard that I forget whatever it was I was going to say.

CHAPTER 30

THE NIGHT BEFORE A HANGOVER (REXXAN)

My assistant wants my balls on an iron spike.
Renna and I were caught sharing a kiss in the training ground yesterday. I had a blip in my judgement and now we have a crowd of several hundred following us on our walk back to the palace this evening.

“Any comment on the kiss in the training courtyard?” Persists a woman who has been following us all morning, probably a writer in the gossip papers. It doesn’t bother me, but I don’t want it to affect Renna. My marital status makes the news every day, and this is the first time I’ve been seen with anyone in public for many years. The kingdom is buzzing with unnecessary excitement.

“Only that it was *really* good!” Shouts Renna, back at her. The crowd laughs, seemingly unfazed by our shocking breach of royal protocol.

“For fuck’s sake,” I sigh. “I have something I need to do, then I’ll take an hour off to have lunch with you.”

“Okay!”

She’d be enthusiastic about shovelling horse shit if I said I’d do it with her. It’s sweet. “I’m talking to Ocealia. You’re welcome to join me.”

“Talking to her how? She’s here?”

“Complicated. I’ve not been able to get hold of them for almost two weeks now. They went to battle four days ago.” Ocealia, Lynna, and I can communicate when we’re apart via a

system set up by the gods a long time ago. It's rarely used, but it comes into its own at times like these.

"Oh, fuck," she whispers eyes wide. "When did you last try?"

"Last night."

"Did they fight a joint war with Espan?"

"Yes." I take her hand once we are in private, walking down a spiralled staircase into the cellars. With an iron key, I unlock all four battered iron locks on an old warped wooden door and illuminate the sconces that hang from the cracked stone walls. The room is flooded with warm light, the flames reflecting on the water in the centre of the room. "Ooh. That's pretty! Can I touch it? What is that—"

She skips on over to the sacred pool that has remained untouched by anyone without a bloodline from the gods for over a thousand years, moving to stick her hands in it. She's *trying* to give me a heart attack, I swear. "Don't touch it!" I shout.

She jumps, pulling her hand back just in time. "Why?"

"It was put there by the gods," I tell her, joining her at the marble bowl of water. It stands atop a gold plinth, the dark blue water glowing a little. Golden sand lies beneath the surface. "It's ancient seawater."

I take Renna's hand, my other one lowering down into the water. It's strange, this physical intimacy that isn't just a means to end in sex. This is so new to me, and despite being eight hundred years old, I don't know what I'm doing. I want her to like me as much as I like her.

"Don't touch that either!" I snap, as she goes to poke the edge of the bowl. "It's like having my son as a toddler again, Renna. I had to hold both his hands half the time so he didn't touch everything. He was always trying to jump and touch the spears on the walls."

"Is he like you?"

"He is like I was before my burns."

“Do you *ever* speak to him?”

I frown. “Of course. You think I’m not close with him?”

“I don’t know...I just assumed...I don’t know.”

She’s the millionth person to suggest I don’t seem like a father who’d be close with his son, and it has to be one of the very few things people say that can ever offend me. “He’s my son, Renna. We write to each other often.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. You’re just so... cold.”

“Ocealia,” I say, changing the subject, frustrated. I hate that I come across as a bad father. Silence greets me. She is not here.

I wait in the quiet for another moment. “Ocealia.”

“Rexxan,” comes her voice, a little later, and Renna jumps about five feet in the air and screams.

Startled orange eyes meet mine. “Rexxan! I swear to all that’s holy, if you don’t tell me what the *fuck* is going on—“

“Is that Commander Renna?” Asks Ocealia, and Renna screams again.

I cannot remember anything ever being this funny.

My chest shakes with laughter as the ruthless Commander who has killed men with her bare hands runs around the room looking for Ocealia. “Is she *in* the bowl? How is she in there?” Hisses Renna, looking like she might faint. I probably should’ve given her a little summary of this before I did it. I could see it might be a little confusing if you’ve never seen it.

“Yes, it’s Renna here with me,” I say, through my hysteria. I’m going to die of laughter. My girl is an *idiot*.

“Rexxan, you sound so happy. I’ve never heard you laugh, ever,” says Ocealia, and I can hear she is smiling. She is fishing for more details, and I roll my eyes. Another nosy woman in my life.

But I don’t do small talk. “You had me worried, Ocealia. The war?”

A weary sigh fills the air, laden with exhaustion. “Victorious, though it doesn’t feel that way, at all. We struggled. Two thousand dead across mine and Espan’s army.”

I whistle through my teeth. “A pyrrhic victory, then?”

“It certainly feels that way,” she says, sounding tearful.

Two thousand dead. That’s awful. “Fucking hell, I’m so sorry. I’ll send aid in your direction. Do you need medicine?”

“We really do. Thank you, REXXAN. You? How many?”

“I dealt with it. How are Espan and Marco?”

“Both fine. Espan took a sword to the leg but he’s fine. And you ‘dealt’ with it? Does that mean what I think it means? Are your burns bad?”

“And Retrya?” I ask, ignoring her question.

“She’s fine too. I didn’t let her fight. I didn’t want to risk her being hurt.”

“I tried that with this one,” I say, looking down at Renna. “She told me to eat a dick.”

Ocealia laughs. “Commander Renna, I need you to teach me to be a little more ferocious, I think. I’ve never found it in me to go against REXXAN.”

Selfishly, I sneak in before Renna can answer to ask the question that had been burning at the front of my mind all week. “Siddie? Did he fight?”

“He’s a godsend. He led the two armies with Marco.”

“Is he hurt?”

“He came out of the war without so much as a bruise and then got bored this afternoon and attempted a fifty-five foot cliff dive to celebrate the war victory. Now he’s concussed.”

I laugh, my mood buoyant for some reason. *Siddie is okay.* “But he’s fine?”

Her voice softens with a touch of fondness. She loves Siddie with her whole heart. “Siddie’s just fine. You know what he’s like. He’s indestructible—gets it from his father.

He's off on a four-month mission across the earth tomorrow. He says he'll stop by and see you."

"I sure hope so. I'll leave you to it. I'm sorry about the number of dead, Ocealia. I'll send that aid this evening."

"Thank you, REXXAN. And it was nice to speak to you, Commander, despite the circumstances."

"Um...hello? Can you hear me too?" Asks Renna, leaning over the bowl even though she doesn't need to. I grab her ponytail before it splashes into the water. Gods, this woman needs constant supervision. She's fucking adorable, and so, so stupid sometimes.

Ocealia laughs out loud. "Yes, I can hear you."

"Wow! Can you see me too?" Asks Renna, waving at the pool.

I laugh into my hand. "No, she can't see you. She's waving at the pool, Ocealia."

Ocealia chuckles again. "Well, you've cheered me up a little, Commander. Thank you."

This is what Renna does. Even in the darkest of times, she floods people's lives with joy. She came into my life when my world felt grey, and she has stained it with every colour. I pull my hand out of the water and Renna gasps. "It's dry!"

"Not normal water, like I said. Speaking of water, let's have a bath."

"Yes," she agrees, taking my hand as we speed up the steps back to my rooms. I walk her through my bedroom. It's a huge space, five hundred square feet. A king-sized bed sits at the near side, an archway going through to the other half of the room which houses a wine cabinet, a table and six chairs, and two green velvet sofas. It is an oasis of pale wood and green foliage, some sort of hybrid between a garden and a bedroom. I like that she likes it.

Another large stone archway leads out to my outside terrace, secluded by trees. The other two doors in my bedroom lead to my dressing room and Renna's favourite; the

bathroom. She's naked and under the water in the blink of an eye. I suppose the good thing about marrying her is she'd get to have this bathroom—

Marrying her? *What the fuck, REXXAN?*

“What's wrong? Not coming in?” She asks, probably seeing my expression. We can't marry. She wouldn't even want to.

I pull my shirt over my head and she bites her lip, hiding a smile. It feels good to be wanted as much as she wants me. I've been wanted before, most of the women in this kingdom *say* they want me, but not like Renna does. She wants me, scars and bad moods included. “Renna, I have six bedrooms in my apartments. Five empty. I want you to make a home for yourself in one of them. We can renovate the bathroom to be like this one. I'll pay for it all. Put your clothes in the drawers.”

“Are you asking me to move here with you?”

“It's a fucking tragedy that you sleep at the Shadow Camp, twenty minutes down the road, when you could be here. You get up early and go to work anyway. You're not abandoning your people.”

“You have a deal, if I get to choose our dinner every night.”

“And I get to choose the wine?” That one is a dealbreaker.

She laughs, wrapping herself around me and kissing my shoulder. “Deal. Have you forgotten about what I did with the chains? You forgave me very quickly.”

“I haven't, and I will repay you in due course. I trust you haven't either?”

“REXXAN, I wouldn't forget it. I've genuinely fingered myself to the thought—“

“Stop fucking talking.” This woman is a headache personified, but I love that about her. But my sinful plans to take her to my downstairs bedroom are torn to shreds when Stellan arrives and announces he is holding victory drinks with

all the hunters, and Renna decides that a party is just what I need.

I am eight hundred years old. A party is not what I need.



“THIS IS ABSOLUTE MADNESS,” says Lynna, standing beside me with a mortified expression that I imagine is mirrored on my own face too. Renna, Anna, Onyx, and Stellan are drunk out of their minds, performing some kind of Mountain Kingdom dance on a table at their campsite. The crowd cheers them on. “Yet you cannot help but love them all.”

“I want her to be mine,” I say, not meaning to voice it aloud.

“Long term?”

“As long as I’m alive.”

Lynna smiles, tears in her eyes. “I’ve waited so long to see you happy, REXXAN.”

“Pull yourself together.” I hate emotional people.

She laughs, wiping her eyes. “I’m just happy for you, Rex. I don’t think Renna realises how unhappy you were before her. I don’t think *you* realise how unhappy you were.”

“I wasn’t unhappy.”

“REXXAN,” she whispers, leaning her head on my shoulder. “You sedated yourself every night. Gods, Rex, I found you on top of a cliff more than once.”

“REXXAN!” Lynna screams, over the lashing rain, thunder, and lightning that pummels the pitch-black night. I don’t turn back, just stare at the raging river at the bottom of the cliff. Another bolt of lightning illuminates the water. I am in the eye of the storm.

No, I am the eye of the storm.

“Rexxan, please!” She shouts over the thunder, her arms wrapped around herself as I teeter on the edge of the seventy-foot drop. I allow myself to look back at her. Golden-white hair is plastered to her face as she shivers violently, begging me not to jump. She goes to take a step towards me and I summon everything I have to make a bolt of lightning strike the ground beneath us. She sobs into her hands. “Please don’t.”

“Go home,” I say, standing at the edge, torn between my desperation to die and my love for my young son. “I said go home!” I yell, forming another bolt of lightning that sizzles the ground between us. She screams, stumbling back.

“Stop it!”

I look down at the water. Do I? Don’t I? Hot tears run down my ice-cold face. I’m alone, in a job I don’t want for the rest of my life, with a young son who I can’t make happy, and burns that make me scream all night. I can’t leave the house without a crowd gathering around me and asking me how I’m coping with the loss of my entire family.

I take one final step forward, my toes over the edge, and Lynna’s scream pierces the air. Her soft voice carries on the wind, an ancient language used by the gods flowing out of her mouth like poetry.

I look around me as pale pink flowers blossom all over the grass, and vines and flowers crawl over my feet until I am rooted to the ground. It’s a battle between the powers of the gods, the sky against the earth. She doesn’t stop until the entire cliff’s edge is lined with pink daisies.

“There’s beauty in the world, Rexxan. You can’t see it now, but you’ll see it one day. You’ll realise one day,” she whispers, taking a step towards me, her dress soaked through. As if I am made of glass, she turns me round, vines holding me back from the edge, and sobs into my chest, wrapping two arms around me until I am crying too, utterly broken.

I SHUDDER at the memory from a time in my past. Is Renna the beauty in my world? Perhaps she is.

“I’d never have done it. I couldn’t do it.” To force my son into being King when I know how much he’d hate it would’ve been unforgivable. I let out a long sigh. “The books and the stories you read...the whole time, it’s about the characters not realising they’re in love. Then they do finally admit their love for each other, and it’s happily ever after. It doesn’t fucking work like that. So what, we tell each other how we feel? It doesn’t change anything, Lynna. I’m still a King who can’t marry an assassin and she’s still an assassin who has no desire to be Queen.”

“You don’t know that about her, Rex.”

“She’s said it herself. Me admitting to loving her will not fix this. We’re not going to get married. So we either remain apart, and I never tell her how I feel, or we remain apart knowing that we love each other. Which is worse?”

Renna grins and waves at me before frowning, spotting the tension in my conversation with Lynna. “Are you alright?” She mouths, with a thumbs up.

I nod briefly. She taps Anna’s shoulder who taps Stellan’s, who lowers them both down. Renna slips through the crowd, over to me and Lynna who are watching like the parents of these big children. She bounds up to me, her gaze fixed on mine.

“Hello,” she whispers, looking up at me. I smile back down at her. My huntress is *drunk*.

“Hello, trouble.”

“You looked sad,” she says, her bottom lip poking out.

“No, beautiful. Not sad,” I murmur, dropping a gentle kiss on said lip. “But I might be over my fun limit for one day.”

“That’s okay, I’ll come back with you! Unless you want to stay in my tent here?”

“I have a meeting at five in the morning, so I’ll go back. You stay and have fun.”

“No, I want to come home to the palace with you.”

Holy fuck. She may be extremely inebriated, but hearing her call my home ‘*home*’ has made me feel genuinely...happy. It’s a feeling I’m getting used to, but it comes more and more often with her around. She waves goodbye to her friends and laces her fingers with mine, sparks warming my hands. This’ll be all over the newspapers tomorrow but I don’t care.

I carry her up the steps into the palace, fearing for her safety, and plonk her down on my colossal bed. “Wow, your room is so nice!” She observes, looking up at the high vaulted ceilings, green vines of leaves climbing above us.

“I think you might’ve seen it a couple of times before, angel,” I remind her, pulling off her top, boots, and leggings. I shrug my own shirt off and wrap it around her shoulders. “Don’t sleep on me yet.”

“I’m not sleepy,” she argues, looking outraged, and also decidedly sleepy.

I smile, wiping the makeup off her eyes. “Did you like my makeup?”

“It was very pretty, Rennalya,” I reply, fighting a losing battle with getting her to stay still. “Look up,” I say, wiping beneath her eyes.

She giggles, kissing me hard before flopping back on the bed horizontally and falling straight to sleep. She’s hopeless. I laugh, turning her the other way and lying beside her. I take a deep breath, my finger tracing her beautiful jawline, her long lashes casting shadows on her face in the moonlight. I love to watch her sleep.

“I’m so hopelessly in love with you, Rennalya, that I’m afraid of what it’ll do to me,” I confess, into the silent night.

CHAPTER 31

RETRIBUTION (RENNA)

“You’re back!” I cheer, as REXXAN returns late in the day, interrupting me from the most boring work of my month; looking at the incoming payments and outgoing spending of my army. I have achieved nothing today, except eating seven slices of toast to cure my hangover.

The atmosphere gets heavier and the temperature hotter whenever REXXAN enters a room. I know when he’s near me without seeing him. I know the drum of his boots against the ground, the pattern of the slow breaths through his lips. He just carries that sort of presence.

Heavy steps thud over to me without a word, a huge hand snatching the page from mine and scanning it. Fresh scratches rake across his cheek and chest. His hair is in its usual bun, messy tendrils flopping in front of his face. Call me pathetic, but this man makes me weak at the knees.

Brick-orange eyes gaze back at me as his body looms over mine, overwhelming and overpowering as he looks down at me like he is starving and I am the last scrap of food.

“Um...are you gonna...say anything?” I ask, letting my eyes drift over his huge arms, down over his hips and muscular legs. He just stands there, silently letting me self-combust with a small smile on his face. I shift in my chair.

“Finished eye-fucking me?” He says, eventually.

“Not really, no,” I reply, because frankly, I’m not. He grabs me roughly, lifting me up off the chair and into his arms.

“Do you want to play downstairs?” He asks, his voice deep and throaty as his thumb runs over my bottom lip.

“Yes.” Zero hesitation. *Gods, Renna, at least try and keep a little of your pride.*

“Good. Go down there, I’ll wash and come down.”

“*Dnwsh*,” I mumble, incoherently.

“Louder.”

“Don’t wash,” I repeat, feeling my cheeks heat. I prefer him bloody and sweaty and dirty. I’m coming to terms with that. I’m doing *fine*.

“You need help, my darling,” he says, in that posh voice of his, as he tosses me over his shoulder.

“You never let me walk anywhere in this palace!” I shriek, watching the hallways go by upside down.

“Because I don’t like you to lift a finger.”

Liar. “That’s not it! It’s because you don’t trust me not to run off.”

He laughs, his grip on my thighs tightening. I fucking love it when he laughs. “You’ve got me there, Rennalya.”

He sets me down on the floor outside his...let’s call it a downstairs bedroom. We’ve been here a few times now. Turns out REXXAN likes ropes, and turns out I don’t hate them either.

He plucks a black key from a chain, holding his wine glass between his teeth and mine in his left hand. I am wobbling at the knees already. He pushes open the door, waiting for me to step inside before stalking in behind me. I hear the bolt of the door slide into the latch. Ascan has cleaned this since we were last here. I’m almost embarrassed, but I know he and Talyn get up to all sorts in the bedroom. Those kinky bastards can’t judge me.

“So why the rope? Have you always been like this or...did you like, have a rope-based awakening? Do you have rope dreams? Was your first wife just a ball of rope?”

“Stop talking, Rennalya,” he says, knowing that I genuinely will not stop if he doesn’t ask me to. “Arms up, beautiful.” His lips press against the sensitive spot behind my ear once he’d put the wine glasses on the black marble table. I’m in heaven already, my mind whirring with possibilities.

At his command, I lift my arms up, his deft fingers skimming the skin across my ribs as he pulls my dress over my head. “Gods have mercy,” he whispers, walking a slow circle around me, his boots thudding heavy on the ground. *Oh yes.* I’d forgotten about the dark red lace corset I’d put on for his eyes and his eyes only. “Why haven’t I seen this before?”

“I wasn’t sure you’d lik—“

“Like it? I do. Wear it more.”

My heart, and another area, warms at his words as he places a hand on my lower back, walking me past the ropes on the ceiling, past the bed and the hooks on the wall. This man is a real control freak, but I’m happy to let him indulge himself in me. *I trust him.*

He hooks his fingers beneath my arms and lifts me onto the table, his eyes giving nothing away as he takes two ropes off the wall with his little finger. “Okay?” He asks, holding them up. I reach out to touch them, the brown rope coarse and scratchy against my fingertips. I can see how that might be intense, but I feel too sensitive, too on edge right now.

“Can we have the soft one from last time?”

“Rennalya, you can have anything you want,” he replies, in a tone so dark and dangerous that the butterflies in my stomach go berserk. He takes the soft green velvet rope off the wall, giving me a chance to appreciate him from behind. He turns back around. “Lie back, love.”

I gasp, the marble table cold on my skin. Goosebumps rise on my arms as he threads the rope through a hook at the top of the table, pulling my left arm above my head. He works silently, but he is thrumming with desire, his breaths coming hot and heavy in his chest. “How does that feel?” He checks,

once I am completely and utterly starfished, my legs wide open.

“Um...exposed?”

“In a bad way?” He asks, his voice laced with concern.

I shake my head. “But you’ll untie my hands if I want?”

“Of course,” he says, walking around the table. He hooks two fingers in one of the cuffs, loosening it. “There. If you really wanted to, you could take your left hand out.”

I nod, waiting in silence as he takes his time to look at me. I’ve been wanted by so many men and women. Hell, I’ve been the ultimate desire of some people. But no one has ever wanted me or looked at me the way REXXAN does. It’s like he’s a man possessed, blinded by a want so intense that it surpassed his hatred for me at the beginning of our relationship.

I feel the cool air on my goose-bumped skin, my nipples hardening under his gaze. A slow smile skates across his lips. He loves to do this. Just to watch me in silence while I squirm. His ringed index and middle fingers stroke the stubble on his jaw. “Are you attached to that corset?”

“Do you mean physically...or like...I mean, I haven’t sewn myself into it or anything.” I shudder. “Even thinking about that is making my skin feel funny. Oh, god. I think I’m nervous. I’m rambling!”

“Be calm, love.” He kisses my hips before his hands vanish between my legs and tear the corset apart, exposing me even more. The cool underground air chills the wetness between my legs. “I’ll replace it, Rennalya,” he says, before I can shout an insult at him.

“You’re incorrigible,” I mutter, under my breath. His huge hands flex on the table as he pushes himself up to join me, a bowl in his hand. Good lord, he looks good like that, towering over me with a confident smile. He’s hard, and I’m already writhing in the restraints.

He puts his hand in the bowl and takes out a strawberry, taking a bite and putting the rest in my mouth. Mmm. That’s good. He dips down to kiss me, his forearms rippling. He

tastes of strawberries and leather and something so distinctly him. “Good?”

I nod enthusiastically, so he takes another out of the bowl and crushes it between two fingers. I watch red juice drip from his fingers, my abdomen tensing as the cold liquid spills over my hypersensitive skin. “Where do you think of these things?” I whisper, but he doesn’t reply, probably wanting me to shut up.

“Please can I do this to you too?” I ask, quietly. Now I think about it, I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything more.

“Anytime you like, love,” he says, painting my body in strawberry juice, my core tensing and relaxing as he forges rivers of red across my skin like the god that he is. I’m aching for him to touch me now, but as usual, he’s in no rush. “Rexxan, *please*.”

“I thought you don’t like it when I ask you to beg.”

That’s true. I hate it, so why am I begging? “Fuck you.”

“In good time.”

“Rexxan!” I shout, my limbs constrained. He feeds me another strawberry. I’m so wound up, every nerve beneath my skin raw and exposed. He tugs his shirt over his head, gazing at me through dark lashes. “You remember you can ask me to stop?”

I nod, arching my back as he puts a little clamp on my unpierced nipple. Pain and pleasure spread from the area like ripples in a pond. “Fuck!” I shout, knowing no one will hear. He lowers himself down to my level, tracing a red line of juice on my stomach with his expert tongue. He pulls away, his eyes glittering with mirth.

“Do you know how many times I asked you to unchain me the other day?”

“Nope. Two million? Probably more?” I suggest, my voice sounding unfamiliar to me, fingernails clawing at the edge of the table. His tongue carves hot lines into my sensitised skin. He is overwhelming. He is everything. My love for this man outweighs my hate for him, but right now I want to choke him.

“*Six*. Six times,” he murmurs, his lips travelling across my abdomen, the stubble across his jawline scratching my skin. “So you’ll come once for each time you denied me.”

“No,” I whisper, closing my eyes. “I couldn’t.”

“You know you can ask to stop, Rennalya. Do you want to stop?”

“No!” I pull on the restraints, wriggling, writhing, wanting, but his delicious torture continues.

“So what do you think, angel—two on my fingers, two on my face, two on my cock?”

Holy *fuck*.

“Rexxan!” I shout, as his tongue traces my breast, following the red lines with pinpoint accuracy. “I hate you.”

“So you tell me, often,” he whispers, his gravelly voice reverberating in my bones. “But Rennalya, I just. Don’t. Believe. You.” Slowly, he pushes a long, thick finger inside me and I shout out his name, unable to move. “This was made for me,” he says, his speech soft. “Made. For. Me. If anyone else touches you, they’re dead.”

“None of me was made for you,” I reply, trying and failing to grind my hips on his hand.

“Agree to disagree,” he states, fucking me with his fingers until I am shaking on the table. “One,” he says, his voice penetrating the fog in my mind as I come around his fingers, unable to move to absorb the feeling. Ecstasy winds her sweet fingers around my muscles, tightening them in a mind-shattering climax. “Rexxan!”

“Frustrating, isn’t it,” he asks me, looking every bit the ruthless King he is known to be. I don’t bother begging for mercy, not from someone who hasn’t got an ounce of it in his body.

I don’t know how long I spend on that table, but it feels like hours. Hours of his giant frame on mine, casting spells on me and winding himself deeper into my brain until I lose track of the boundaries between his body and my own. The light

from the lanterns dances across his scarred muscles, flexing as he leans down to kiss my forehead.

Sweat trickles down my skin as I half shout, half sob his name. “Five,” he says, calmly, but the muscles in his neck and shoulders are tensed with loosely-contained need. “One more, huntress. You’re doing so well.”

“I hate you,” I whisper, as he slows his pace right down to give me a moment.

He brushes away a stray tear with his thumb. “Do you need to stop?”

“No,” I whisper, my legs shaking violently. He will never have my surrender, and I don’t even want this to end.

He kisses me gently, his forearms on either side of my head as he fucks me on the table. “I can’t,” I whisper, every ounce of energy sapped out of me. This is my punishment, a cruel but irresistible damnation that is breaking me and fixing me all at once. He surrendered all power to me when I chained him up and this is me returning the favour.

This is healthy for us, in its own complicated way.

He slams into me a little harder, hitting the sweet spot deep inside me that makes my back arch, each of my limbs tugging on the ropes. My senses are flooded. The sight of him above me, his broad shoulders flexing. The smell of him; wine, leather, and wood. The feel of him inside me, the cold marble on my skin, the soft velvet on my wrists. The sound of his ragged breaths, and filthy sentences uttered against my skin that accompany the taste of his mouth on mine. It all combines into an intoxicating cocktail that has me drunken and destroyed on the table beneath him.

“My favourite place is buried all the way inside you, sweetheart,” he says, his voice low.

“Stop it,” I whisper, knowing what his words do to me.

“I mean it, angel. I’d spend my life like this if I could. I’d die a happy man if all I spent my nights at your side.”

“Rexxan!” I beg, my mind scrambled. I don’t even know what I’m asking him for anymore. He rolls his hips and I half moan, half sob into his shoulder.

“You intoxicate me,” he murmurs, kissing my breasts. “You’re a drug I’ve been high on for eighteen months, Rennalya. I’m so fucking addicted to you but I can’t stop. I need you so bad.”

“Stop talking!” I shout, his words weaving through my veins and pushing me closer to the edge. I feel the exact same about him, but I can’t articulate that now. Everything between my ears has turned to mush. Oh gods, I can’t move my legs.

“Why, Ren? Afraid you’ll come again?” He teases, dark orange eyes on mine. “Because you will, together with me.”

Every word drives me further to insanity, my nails clawing at the ropes. “I won’t,” I whisper, my lips swollen from his kisses as he takes us up to the edge. My gaze meets his and his ruthless eyes soften, one huge hand coming to cup my jaw.

“I’ll look after you on the other side, Rennalya.”

“I can’t move!” I say, every muscle on my body shaking.

“I know, love,” he replies, his forehead against mine. I long to cling onto him, or to feel the heat of his scars beneath my fingers. Anything to ground me. “One more. Take us home.”

He buries himself inside me again, thick and heavy, his hips pinning me hard against the table. I’ve been on the edge for minutes, but I don’t have anything left in me. “No,” I whisper, closing my eyes.

“Yes,” he argues, squeezing my jaw so my eyes open. I’m so close. So close. It’s torture.

I can’t. He leans down, his teeth grazing my ear as he whispers a sentence that sends me tumbling over the edge.

“To be loved by you, Rennalya, is all I need for the rest of my life.”

I sob his name. I can’t get him to say those three little words to me, but that’s the closest I’ll get and it’s enough for

me. The raw emotion in his voice has me coming around him in a mind-bending, thought-melting, body-breaking wave of pleasure. He drops his face to my neck, his body shaking too as I feel him reach one himself. He stays there a moment before pushing himself up, the muscles in his tanned arms flexing. His lips are swollen too, his dark gaze sated and relaxed. “Don’t cry.”

“I don’t know why I’m crying,” I say, shaking on the table. It’s involuntary. I have nothing left in me, every ounce of my energy drained. I think that was a life-affirming moment for me.

“Did I hurt you?”

“Only in a good way,” I say, as he wipes my tears. I feel physically broken, but oddly peaceful too. The usual chaotic hustle and bustle inside my brain is quiet for once, like all my thoughts are walking instead of running. It’s nice.

He steps off the table and I take him in. He’s a work of art, the personification of power. The V of his abdomen tenses as he quickly dresses his lower half, starting to untie the four ropes at each corner of the table. “I can’t feel my legs!” I say, frantically.

“Hey, don’t panic. They’ve just been tied up for a while.” He rubs life back into them gently, before doing the same to my arms, caressing my mind with praise about how well I did today. He runs a towel over my midsection, sitting me up and running it over my back, before cleaning the table beneath my hips. “How do you feel?”

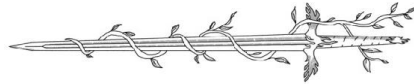
“Tired. Well-fucked. Overwhelmed. Sleepy. Mind-blown,” I whisper, as he takes us into the bedroom.

I crawl into bed on trembling arms and shaking legs, enveloping myself in the covers. “Did you mean it?” I whisper, as he sits beside where I lie. “That you want to be loved by me?”

“I’m not sure that I’ve ever meant anything more,” he murmurs, his fingernails scratching my aching back gently as I fight sleep. “I don’t know what it means, Ren. We make no

sense, and we can't be together in a normal way, but we have tried and tried for eighteen months to pretend this isn't real but it is. I can't pretend any longer."

"Neither can I," I mumble, rolling into his side. I bask in the warm, inebriating presence of the Forest King and succumb to the sleep that hovers above me.



I'M jolted awake by a hard knock on the door. It's dark out. It must be the middle of the night. Rexxan is sitting up beside me, reading a book in the dim light. Does this man *ever* sleep? All he does is read research journals, all night, every night. He's obsessed with knowledge. It can't be good for him.

"Yes?" He asks, running a hand through his dark hair and tying it up. Sleepily, I reach up and pull out a little strand so it flops in front of his face. He rolls his eyes at me.

"Aia eleyne," comes a deep voice.

"Eile," says the King, sitting up a little straighter.

"Delene assessa cinte loqueia," replies the voice, and Rexxan stands, shrugging on a shirt. I have no idea what they're saying, but Rexxan looks grumpy about it.

"Cuele?" Snaps Rexxan, stepping into some boots. I should've accepted his offer of free language classes.

"Ahia, elenye," says the voice, and Rexxan's actions speed up. "Holn?" He asks. That word I do know.

"Rexxan, what's going on? What are you saying?" I ask, sitting up too.

"Someone's accessing the vault."

"Who can access it?"

"Just the Five Kings and Queens."

"Is that...bad?"

“Not usually. Holn and Hela come every four weeks to check they’re happy with the security. Espan and Ocealia come at least once a year too.”

“So who is it?”

“A guard is on his way from the vault to confirm,” says Rexxan, pulling a black hooded cloak around his shoulders. I begin to dress too, not that I am sure why. Holy mother of fuck. I ache like I’ve never ached. *Rexxan, what have you done to me?*

“Teasa Kelen a Lana, elenye,” says the guard, and Rexxan swings the door open, bolting into his weapons room.

“What the fuck would Kelen and Lana be doing here? Isn’t it a five-week journey? They didn’t say they were coming?” I hiss, and Rexxan kicks up his sword and catches it as he hurtles out the door, clearly feeling that something is not right here. I grab mine too, strangled by a menacing feeling that somehow, something is dangerously amiss.

CHAPTER 32

ROYAL BETRAYAL (REXXAN)

My feet pound the stone hallways as I bolt to the stables.

Never let the people see you worried. My father used to drill that mantra into my brother and I from dawn until dusk. I still remember him betraying no emotion, calmly loading people into shelters as fire rained down from the sky. Even as my mother burned to death, he remained calm.

At the time, I thought he was a cold-hearted monster, and I hated him for it even in his final moments.

But now I see why he did it.

It's in times of panic like this, where I see that even the bravest of my guards are faltering, that people desperately need just one calm person to look up to. That role has trickled down generations of Kings and settled firmly onto my shoulders. That is the reason I slow down as I pass the group of soldiers at my palace steps like I don't have a care in the world.

I untie my horse as Renna skids to a halt behind me. This woman is *strong*. How she's running after last night is beyond me. "This is fine, right? It's just Kelen?"

"I'm sure it's fine," I state. "But Kelen hasn't visited that vault once. He takes no interest in it." Why now? And why at three in the morning? It's not exactly screaming '*I have nothing to hide*'.

She jumps onto her horse, letting out a short yelp as she settles on the dark saddle. A gentle flush reaches her freckled

face and I raise an eyebrow. “Sore?”

“I’m *so* sore,” she replies, as I swing onto my white horse, the two of us thundering down a forested road. Despite the situation, I spare a thought for Renna. Last night is burned into my memory forever, and if a stone is removed and we are all to die today, I couldn’t have asked for a better last night on this earth.

My people don’t just have one calm person to look up to. They have two, because Rennalya is everything I could ask of her in this situation. Calm and composed. She’s focused, and I see how she built the Shadow Army into what it is today.

It takes about an hour to ride to the Vault at our breakneck speed. It is enough time for the chilling severity of this situation to truly sink into my veins. If Kelen has taken those stones, we’ll all be dead within the week. All of us. But why would he? Even the enemy wouldn’t, because it would kill all of them too.

All I can do is hope I haven’t missed him; it would take them a good half an hour to get through all the doors into the vault. Perhaps we can arrive before he leaves.

Twenty guards stand outside the rockface that houses the hidden entrance to the Hall of the Gods. Four stand tall in blue platinum armour, with deep cobalt-blue cloaks and weapons that look like whaling harpoons. Ocealia’s soldiers.

Four in bronze armour, with pale wheat-coloured cloaks and similar coloured blonde hair. Espan’s guards.

Four mortal guards wear black steel armour, and bright gold cloaks studded with rubies. Heavy metal helmets with horns sit on their heads, barbed maces in their hands. The Mountain Watch, from Holn and Hela.

The tallest of the twenty are four in gold armour with burgundy cloaks that are stitched to look like autumn leaves. They each carry two enchanted swords that glow orange and yellow, and a gold bow on their backs. My own guards.

And finally, four in gunmetal grey armour with silver cloaks and heavy broadswords. Kelen and Lana’s guards, from

the River Kingdom. They bow to me as I jog over. They don't look panicked, and that is reassuring. I retain my ice-cool demeanour, despite the pulse that thunders in my throat. "Kelen was here?"

"He just left, Your Majesty," comes the deep voice of Won, from Hela's kingdom; in charge of all the Vault Guards.

"Anything to report?"

"He didn't stay long, just went in and came right back out. Queen Lana was with him."

"Anyone else?"

"He had two people with him, but we didn't allow them in or near the vault," relays one of Espan's guards. I nod, watching my own guards climb up the rocks and pull a hidden lever in the rock face. Two hidden doors, the first of ten, crack into two, and Renna walks in beside me, her slick ponytail hanging down to the small of her back.

We're in the Hall of the Gods; a long tunnel divided into sections by ten different doors, each one an enigma of puzzles and riddles. Lights float overhead, the walls beside us a series of gold-gilded paintings of past wars and events.

Renna skips on ahead like it's a normal fucking day, knives strapped to her thighs and waist. There's even a tiny knife behind her ear. She's fucking beautiful; danger and sweetness all rolled into one. Her heavy black boots thud beside mine on the gold and red mosaic flooring as I lead us to the second door, defended by twenty more guards.

Thirty-two bolts are in the door, each in its own slot. Quickly, I move them into an exact configuration, each one not a hair out of place. As I slide the last one over, the door clicks open and the iron locks scramble themselves once more. Renna watches my every move like a hawk, and I know that my girl is clever enough to be committing this to memory.

I take her through the door that requires a long passcode spoken aloud, through the door of riddles, and the door of puzzles, through the door of flames that I had designed, each door guarded by twenty additional guards. We reach the end of

the Hall of the Gods and step in front of the final door. “Lynna and her mother made this door,” I explain, as Renna looks at the dense wall of pastel pink flowers and leaves in front of her. It doesn’t look like a door at all, more of a vertical garden.

“Kelen was here?” I ask the guards. They all nod.

“And did you look in?” The guards aren’t allowed to step foot in the Vault, only the Kings and Queens. If I had my way it would be only me that had access, but this causes wars and tensions, no nation wanting another one to have more power than them.

“We did, lord. All looked as it did before he left.”

Thank fuck. “Fine.”

Renna tries the hidden handle beneath the ivy and flowers, but it doesn’t move. “How do you open this one?”

I kneel down, picking up a small jug of water and taking a pot of soil from the intricately painted wall. I pluck a seed from the centre of one of the pink flowers, place it in the soil, and water it. I place the pot beneath the handle on the floor and Rennalya claps her hands, amazed as a vine creeps up out the pot, slithering up the wall and snaking itself around the handle, pivoting it downwards.

“Wow.” She stares at it, amazed. “So how does anyone ever break in here if it’s this complicated to get in?”

“Only one person ever has, and it was elaborately planned. They had the Mountain Queen hostage, tortured her into opening the doors that they could not.” A shudder rolls through my body at the memory of that day. I hope one day I can find it in me to open up to Renna about it. “Of course, the system doesn’t account for the fact that it might be one of the Five Kings or Queens that betrays the others.”

I push the door open further to allow Renna in first and swipe my hand over one of the iron sconces by the doorway. All six of them in the room illuminate the age-old stone walls around us, the Vault nothing more than a small cave. “Don’t step off the carpet,” I order, as her boots land on the dark green pathway that leads to the pool.

“Why?”

“You’re like my son as a toddler. Why, why, why, why. The carpet reduces the vibration of our footprints and keeps the pool still.”

Her mouth forms a sweet little o. “Clever. Did you put it in?”

“A long time ago,” I say, my hand on her lower back as I walk her over to the pool on the floor, tiled in solid gold. Towards each corner of the six-foot wide, pentagonal pool sits one of the Five Stones. There is the red Fire Stone, the blue Sea Stone, the green Earth Stone, the grey River Stone, and the white Air Stone. All five are there, floating, perfectly intact.

Something doesn’t add up here. What is Kelen’s plan?

“It’s so serene in here,” she whispers, as I stand at the water’s edge. “If I jumped in, what would happen?”

My arm shoots out to grab her arm. “Don’t!”

She puts her hands up as if surrendering. “I wasn’t going to! I was just wondering!”

Renna’s love of fun and her light-heartedness in even the most difficult times is one of my favourite things about her, but I’m not in the mood for jokes about the deaths of thousands of people. “It wouldn’t be good, Renna.”

“So...what? Kelen just comes in here, stares at the stones, and leaves right after?”

My thoughts exactly. *It’s bullshit.* “I don’t think it’s believable either.”

“I mean...he’s an imbecile, but he’s not *this* morally corrupt, right? He wouldn’t be planning to take a stone? He’d kill all his own people. Maybe he came in here to take one and then came to his senses?”

“Maybe.” At my age, you don’t rule anything out. I’ve seen too much. “Stay still, Rennalya,” I order, stepping off the carpet.

I crouch down on the gold tiles at the edge of the pool, looking at my Fire Stone closely. It is glowing orange-red and perfectly spherical. Slowly, with steady hands, I slide two fingers into the water, hovering them beneath the stone. I give it the most gentle of taps. It doesn't move.

The Sea Stone behaves the same. "I'm testing the weight of them. They're heavy," I reply, when Renna asks me what I am doing. Each stone, though no bigger than an apple, weighs several pounds. I slide two steady fingers beneath the grey River Stone, giving it a tiny tap. It bobs in the water. "Fuck!" I bellow, yanking it out of the water.

Siddie. It's my first thought, and it's a sickening one.

Renna shrieks, lurching forward and trying to snatch it off me. "Rexxan, what the fuck are you doing? Put it back, you idiot!"

"It's a fake fucking stone!" I'm already running out the door. My boots pummel the hallway as I sprint through door after door with Renna in tow. The door to the outdoors looms nearer, and fuck am I tempted to just stop. The second I step out there, it all becomes real, the lives of the world teetering precariously on my tired shoulders. But I don't stop. I can't stop, and the cold air of the misty, moonlit plains outside the Vault greets me.

"Find Kelen!" I shout at Ellatar and Friar who are just arriving. They jump into action with the other guards.

Fuck, Siddie. He has to be okay. He has to be safe.

Onyx appears, arriving behind the guards. The bastard is *everywhere*, I tell you. "I saw Renna out here. I was worried. Can I help?"

"The River King and Queen left here twenty to thirty minutes ago. Find them. Friar, Onyx, you two lead the effort. You can stay here," I tell the Vault guards. The entrance is elevated enough that it will not flood. I'm already on my horse as I lean down and take Renna's delicate face in my hands, running my thumb over her cheek. I feel her calm down a little at my touch. "Rennalya, I need you to do some things for me."

“Anything,” she whispers, calm and composed. Pride swells in my chest.

“The war...the army. It was all a distraction, and we fucking fell for it. The library where we ate strawberries and apple pie the first time. You remember it?”

She nods. “Always.”

“Go back up there, break open the wooden door to the turret. The one with the handle shaped like a dragon. Climb up the ladder. There are five giant bells. One of them has a grey rope. Ring it as hard as you can to tell the people the rivers are flooding. Yes?”

She nods, pulling away and getting on her horse.

“What colour rope, Rennalya?”

“Grey,” she whispers, her eyes on mine. I nod.

“It’s important that you ring that one. My people have different evacuation plans for each stone. If you ring the red one they’ll stay in their homes. That’s not what we need.”

“Grey rope. Grey rope. I’ve got this.”

“And I need you to tell the guards to open all the schools and the Healing Halls up to people whose homes are in the areas that will flood. Tell the guards to initiate Plan Five. Then I need you to enact a manhunt for Kelen and Lana. Use your hunters too. Send your whole army out. Keep out of the Elenion Ravine. It’ll flood first.”

She nods again, and for a split second the chaos around us slows down as my eyes remain fixed on hers, and I know in this awful moment that there is no one else I’d rather have by my side during this. I’ll walk through fire to see this stone returned if I must, for Renna if not for anyone else.

She has given me her heart and there is no pain I wouldn’t bear to see that it remains intact, to see that she remains safe. She gives me a little salute, unfazed, and turns on her horse to leave. “Wait, Renna.”

I love you.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but they don't materialise. "Your people aren't safe where they're camped now. Move them inwards, at least as far as the training ground." She nods in response and thunders off into the woods.

Siddie.

I scrub my face in my hands, trying to think of anything but Siddie. I have to lead my people through this. I have to think about something else. Suddenly, my mind is filled with a to-do list about a hundred things long. I've planned for this, prepared for this. I'm ready.

I shift into action, riding through the forest to the Northern Kingdom Gate where I send fifty soldiers and five guards into the forest to start searching. I ride to the Western Gate and do the same thing, warning anyone I see on my route to head towards the centre of the Kingdom. An hour after I'd seen Renna, deafening and eerily chilling bells ring out across the kingdom. She's quick. She never lets me down. Each ring is a series of five. Five means rivers flooding. People begin to panic, coming out of their houses in their nightwear.

Siddie. Fuck!

I order the stockpiling of food to begin, opening the cellars of my palace to be filled with grains and fruit. Then I send fifty scouts and one hundred of my own hunters out to join the search for Kelen. I then have people start bringing boats to the centre of the kingdom, methodically working through my to-do list.

Next on my list, speak to Ocealia.

"Rexxan!" She speaks first, her voice shaking heavily. "What in the gods' names is going on? Espan's Kingdom is flooding!"

A stone sits heavy in my stomach. Espan's Kingdom is riddled with rivers. Ocealia's kingdom will remain untouched. Forty percent of mine will flood, and seventy of Hela's. The River Kingdom will be obliterated already. The Golden

Kingdom will be submerged before the week is out. “Kelen has taken the River Stone.”

There is stunned silence for a while before she speaks. “Kelen?” She whispers, eventually, her voice laden with sheer disbelief.

“Yes. Clearly letting only seven people in Yterras access the vault is still too many. I haven’t found him yet, so enact your rescue operation.”

Her voice wobbles, rocked by unshed tears. “Why on this good earth would he do such a thing?”

This earth isn’t good, it’s diseased. Riddled and plagued by evil down to its beating heart, but I don’t say that aloud. “Yet to be determined. I have three hundred people searching for him. Will your floodgates hold?”

“They’ll hold. My people will come to no harm,” she says, with the same quiet confidence she has always had since we were children.

“Espan’s people?”

She sniffs, crying now. “The fields are underwater. Hundreds, if not thousands are missing, and all the crops too. The river dams have burst. He’s loading his people onto boats now, sending them in both mine and your direction.”

I’m listening not properly. There’s one thing on my mind. “Siddie?” I ask, selfishly.

“I...I don’t know, REXXAN.”

“Fuck, Ocealia! What do you mean you don’t know?”

I can hear her sobbing, and I realise now that this is why she’s been crying all along. She thinks my son is dead. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” she cries. “If he stuck true to his course, he should be on the Westerly Banks by now.”

My heart flips into my mouth. The Westerly Banks. An expanse of marshland that would, by now, be flooded with water that covers even the tops of the tallest buildings there.

“Tell me you’ve seen him!” I yell, overcome with a fear unlike one I’ve ever felt. “Tell me he never left!”

“I haven’t seen him. He left two weeks ago!” She says, crying harder. “I’m so, so sorry. I don’t know where he is and I haven’t heard from him.”

“Try and get hold of Espan and ask him!” I say, gripping the edge of the fountain as if I might faint.

“I will, REXXAN. I really will.” She replies, and I leave without saying goodbye. My burns are killing me, so much that my vision is blurring.

I want to be out looking for Kelen, but for the King to leave his kingdom at a time like this would not fill my people with hope. I have to be here to coordinate the rescue efforts. All I can do is trust in mine and Renna’s scouts to do their jobs and find him before the floods hit us and before Kelen is washed away and the stone is lost in a sea of water. If we lose the stone, life as we know it is over.

Ironically, it’s the River Cities that will be destroyed by his actions. I dread to imagine the number of innocent people who have already lost their lives to his betrayal.

“Where is the Shadow Commander?” I ask a guard, as I begin to draw up a plan to accommodate the thousands of refugees that will be arriving from Kelen, Hela, and Espan’s kingdoms.

“She’s been leading the search in the forest since yesterday, my lord.”

If something happens to Renna now, I think it’ll kill me. I hope she’s being safe, but this is Renna; she’s never being safe.



I STAND on the roof of the palace with a migraine from sleep deprivation and hunger, looking out over the trees of my

forest.

What once were hills and fields now just look like the sea, the whole world flooded. It spreads to the edge of the forest, and soon it will flood parts of my woodlands too. The first bodies are beginning to wash up on the edges of my kingdom. It's a horrific sight. People across the kingdom are distraught. It's been several days since I even went near my bedroom. I'm fucking *tired*.

I curse Kelen. I hope he burns in flames until the end of time.

"Rex, I have Lana," comes a soft voice. I look down to see Renna standing on the palace walls, a few feet below me. Her pretty face is smudged with dirt and blood. She looks exhausted. "She doesn't have the stone, but Onyx found her hiding in a troll cave."

I drop down off the roof, nodding. I can't bring myself to speak to her, or anyone. Everything else in my life seems so minor now. I can't find it in me to speak to her when all I can think about is Siddie and the scorching flames that batter the right side of my body.

"Rex?" She persists.

"I'll talk to her," I grit out, breezing past her. She follows me in tow.

"Are you alright? What's wrong?"

"You're asking me that? Half of my kingdom is underwater, all of my farms destroyed, thousands of people have died this week across the earth, and I'm the man in charge of fixing it. Don't ask me what's wrong, because you know the answer."

"Bloody hell, REXXAN. I'm trying to help you here!"

"I don't need it!" I snap. I don't have space in my head for her. It's been ten hours since I'd last spoken to Ocealia. It's getting unhealthy, but I go downstairs again. I pace in circles for ten minutes, waiting for her to arrive with my fingers drumming on my thigh. I can't fucking breathe. I'm just waiting for the moment she tells me that Siddie's body has

washed up in her city, if it ever appears at all. Renna leans against the doorway, watching me intently.

“Ocealia?”

“Rexxan, I told you I’d call for you if I found out anything.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. Siddie is not here or in Espan’s capital city.”

“He has to be somewhere.”

“I’ll tell you the very second I hear anything, I promise. I have someone out looking.”

I hurl a glass at the wall. The fragments splinter and shatter on the stone floor, reflecting my mental state this week. I rake a hand through my hair. I can barely speak, my burns too bad now for me to even find words. Renna steps towards me and I shake my head. “Do not fucking touch me.”

“Who is Siddie?”

I run my hands down my face. “Siddie is my son’s name,” I whisper, at my wit’s end. He’s my pride and joy.

Her face blanches. “What’s happened to him?”

“He was crossing the Westerly Banks when the rivers burst. No one on the Westerly Banks survived,” I say, my hands shaking slightly. She steps a little closer, her eyes full of tears. This is an issue that she cannot fix.

“Oh fuck, Rexxan. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“He has to be alive. He’s all I fucking have,” I whisper, dangerously close to tears. I’ve not cried from sadness since I lost my family.

“Rex, you don’t know yet. Believe it if you see it.”

“If he is dead, we’ll never get a body. I’ll never fucking know.” I brace a hand on the wall, my forehead against the stone. “I can’t breathe,” I whispered, trying to inhale.

“Panic attack?” She asks, her hands shaky too. I shake my head, unable to speak. I feel like I’m on fucking fire, my skin

scorched beyond belief. I feel like my next breath will be my last, but it won't, because the gods are toying with me. Laughing at me. Prolonging my life when I begged for so long for them to end it.

"It's your burns?" She tries, and I manage a nod. She turns me round so my back is against the wall, tears spilling down her cheeks, tears that I know are forged of compassion rather than pity. I shut my eyes.

I'm on fire.

"I'm going to help you, Rex," she mumbles, crying silently. "I can't even imagine how bad it hurts."

She hovers her fingers over my chest, drawing the heat from my scars over the course of twenty minutes until they'd reduced from unmanageable to just excruciating. In the course of my life, I've known her no time at all, but now I don't know how I'd live without her. I grab her face between my hands, kissing her against the wall. "You need sleep, Rennalya."

"We both do," she whispers. Not happening. "Rexxan, you have to sleep and eat at some point. What's your plan here? To not sleep for the rest of the month? You're a better leader when you're rested."

"I'll question Lana and then I'll sleep."

Renna sighs but follows me through the labyrinth of underground tunnels to a dungeon where Lana is chained up to the wall.

"I see you've had your fun with her," I observe, looking at the word *bitch* written across Lana's forehead.

Renna grins, a vision of innocence as she flutters those lashes. "Rexxan, you couldn't *possibly* have expected me not to have some fun with her."

Lana screeches, and it hurts my ears. "She's a witch!"

"Indeed I am," purrs Renna, summoning a small ball of fire between her hands and hovering it so close to Lana's face that her eyebrows actually start to smoke. "And this witch wants you dead."

“She’s buried her curses in your mind, King REXXAN. She’s playing you like a fool!”

“You hear that, baby? She says you’re playing me,” I say, kissing Renna’s neck from behind. Lana squirms in her chains, shuddering like watching us touching each other is causing her physical pain. Good. I’d fuck Renna in this cell if it would make the River Queen cry.

Renna laughs like the psychotic maniac she is, tipping her head to the side so I can kiss her neck again. “She’s just angry because she feels like we’re leaving her out of the games,” says Renna, with a little pout. “So what’d you say, Rex?” She twists around to face me, a lethal glimmer in her eyes as she plucks a knife from my waist. “Shall we let her play our games?”

“I’d like nothing more, sweetheart,” I reply, my hands all over her. She feels so good beneath my fingers. Lana is increasingly uncomfortable. *Perfect*. “So here are the rules,” I say, a knife twizzling around my fingers while my other hand tugs Renna closely to my side. “We’ll ask you a question. If you don’t answer, you lose.”

“Yeah, lose a body part,” adds my deranged lover.

“What she said.”

“She’s casting spells on you!” Screams Lana. Again with that amazing ability to cause headaches with the tone of her voice alone.

“If I’m trapped in a spell, I don’t ever want to leave,” I murmur, kissing Renna again, my hand gripping her behind. Renna lets out a soft moan, opening her mouth for me slightly and Lana groans.

I’d like to spend my life with her. Why is this realisation hitting me now of all times? *I want Renna to be my wife.*

I drag myself back to the here and now. “Question one. Where is the stone?”

“I don’t know!”

Renna doesn't hesitate, quickly flicking a tiny, finger-sized knife that lands in Lana's arm. She screams, but no one will hear her here. "Maybe she didn't hear the rules correctly?" Suggests Renna.

This is where my girl gets her reputation from. There's a reason that Holn, Ocealia, and Espan all hire Renna to do interrogations for them. She has...limited, let's say, moral boundaries. "Question two. Where is Kelen?"

"That's *King* Kelen, to you, witch!"

"He's a dead man walking if I ever see him again. That was a failure to answer the question," declares Renna, taking Lana's pinkie finger between her fingers.

Lana screams. "He's on his way back to our Kingdom!" She shouts, before Renna can take her finger. Rage swells in my gut, ugly and nauseating.

"You don't have a kingdom, Lana. Not anymore. What was once your kingdom is now a seabed, and the bodies of *your* people line it!" I shout, gripping her by the neck of her dress.

Lana cackles coldly. "That's what you want us to think. Kelen and I found out the truth!"

"And what truth would that be?" I grip her tighter. She shakes with undiluted animosity, a hint of arrogance on her face. But in the end there will only be one winner here, and it will be me.

"You keep the Five Stones here in your kingdom!" She screams, her voice trembling in anger and her face an inch from mine. "You keep them here for the benefit of *your* people, harnessing the power of the five elements for *your* own good! I know the truth! I. Know. The. Truth! If the River Stone was in the River Kingdom, we'd be stronger people! If the River Stone was where it belonged, we'd be richer, happier, more powerful people. But you, Forest King, keep them for yourself. We're taking the River Stone home!"

Dread sits in my gut, heavy and ugly. She's got it so, so wrong, and I have no doubt that this is a clever brainwashing

plan from the South. “And who told you that little factoid?” I say, softly.

I’m going to kill her. I’m going to snap. Of all the stupid things I have heard in my time, this is the worst. Thousands dead. People lie, lifeless, at the bottom of an oversized river because she believed the first thing someone told her. “One of the king’s advisors,” she replies, smugly.

“Your kingdom doesn’t exist anymore!” I shout, my voice hoarse. She cries out in fear, but it does not stop me. “It’s under a river, you cow!”

“It’s a myth!” She screams back.

I could take her eyes out, I genuinely could. In all my years, I’ve never felt so burning hot with rage. “Tell me where the stone is!”

“Never!”

“Rennalya, angel, have your fun,” I say, dropping her and stepping back.



FOR THE FIRST time in a while, I manage to wash and eat a meal. How I can feel hungry after witnessing the mess that Renna made of Lana is beyond me, but I do. I eat with one hand whilst reading a note from Talyn about the amount of medicine we have remaining and the need to start rationing to have enough to heal incoming refugees. I write up a plan for this whilst Renna eats opposite me, silently reading updates from her scouts.

She puts down the paper and shakes her head as if in disbelief. “It’s a clever plan from the enemy, isn’t it?”

I nod, swallowing my mouthful of steak. “To plant a spy deep in Kelen’s counsel, to corrupt a King into taking a stone out of the Vault so that they can betray him and snatch it off him easily. To wipe out thousands of our people so they have

fewer people to fight. To cause tensions between the five Kingdoms, to see one King kill another. It's a *very* clever plan, Rennalya, and Kelen and Lana were just putty in their hands.

“Mortals like those two; they weren't alive when the Fire Stone was removed, and neither were their great, great, great, great, great, grandparents. To them, the fact that the Vault Stones could kill us all is nothing more than a fairy tale that they do not believe.”

“So you're not sure Kelen even *has* the stone?”

“I wouldn't be surprised if Kelen is dead in a ditch and the stone is in the hands of whichever enemy commander corrupted his mind.” Fuck, I hope Siddie is alive. I whisper a silent prayer to my grandfather, hoping that he's watching over my son.

“Rexxan, he'll be okay. He has your blood, he'll rise above all of this. You will see him again,” reassures Renna. She's so in tune with me, always the first person to notice when my thoughts turn downward. I nod, finishing my food in silence. I could really use just one small sign that might suggest anything towards him being alive. If Renna was out there too... *fuck*, I'd have so many regrets.

I've been stuck in a pit of grief, agony, and despair for so long. A bottomless chasm with smooth sides that stop me from ever having hope of getting out. For a lifetime, I've sat in that hollow and stared upwards, watching people come and go, heard their laughter, seen their elation, wondered if I'll ever make it up there too. Then Renna came along and threw me a rope, gave me belief that one day I could have all the simple things I craved for so long. Laughter, contentment, joy, *hope*. She is my lifeline.

“Rennalya,” I say, breaking the silence.

“Yeah?”

“I want you to be mine.”

Her fork pauses in the air. “I am yours, Rexxan. Body and soul.”

“I want you to be publicly mine.”

She laughs. “Well, you’re a King, Rex, so you don’t have that liberty. You can’t just ‘date’ someone. You can only go public with a woman if—“ her face turns pale, every bit of colour draining from her cheeks.

I nod.

She drops the fork.

“You want me to marry you?”

I shrug. “Why not?”

CHAPTER 33

A JOB FOR AN ASSASSIN (RENNA)

Am I dreaming?
Have I eaten some weird mushroom?

Has *Rexxan* eaten some weird mushroom?

“What do you mean, why not?” I ask, incredulous. “I am not marrying you! And secondly, this is *the* worst proposal in the history of all proposals, ever. I want you on your knees, Rexxan. On. Your. Knees!”

“Rennalya, my love, I very regularly get on my knees for you,” he says, his husky voice making me press my thighs together. I just shake my head in utter disbelief.

“You don’t want to marry me?” He asks, looking a little offended. Gods save me. I really thought I was making some headway towards understanding what goes on inside men’s heads.

I’ve definitely eaten a bad mushroom. Where is Rexxan? I want the old Rexxan back.

“Your ego is so inflated that it’s *that* hard for you to imagine a woman not wanting to marry you? A huge dick and a mountain’s worth of gold doesn’t automatically guarantee you a yes!”

He stalks round the dining table, picking me up, carrying me a few paces, and chucking me on the bed with one arm. “It doesn’t?”

Someone save me. This is supposed to be our precious sleeping time. He doesn’t look like he wants to sleep. At all.

As his body stills at the edge of the bed, he cracks his knuckles, flexes his thick forearms, and shreds my leggings off my body.

“Little life lesson for you, Your Majesty—clothes have holes in them. You can take them off via the holes. They’re not single-use,” I tease, and he raises an eyebrow, giving me that stern expression he always does when I’m in trouble.

“Marry me,” he whispers, grinding his hips into mine. I let out a breathy whimper. *Embarrassing.*

“Nope. No, thank you,” I reply, raking my nails down his rippling back, overwhelmed by the sheer weight of this creature on top of me.

“Why not?” He asks, his breath hot on my neck. I’m soaking already. One strong arm pins my arms above my head. I am completely at his mercy, and I know he could probably snap me with just his left hand if he wanted to. That shouldn’t make me more turned on but it does.

One for the therapist, when I eventually decide to go.

“One hundred thousand reasons, Rex,” I manage to say, despite all my rational thoughts scrambling out of my head. *Traitors.*

“Give me your top four,” he breathes, kissing beneath my ear. I moan loudly, moving my hips in time with his. I yank my arm from his grip, moving it down to undo his belt but he shakes his head. “Not until you’ve given me four reasons.”

He asked for it. “Reason number one; the size difference. It’s not sensible.”

“*That’s* your reason number one?” He questions, looking amused. He guides my hand over the outline of his erection beneath his black hunting trousers and I stifle a groan. “I thought you quite liked our size difference, Rennalya?”

“Rexxan, I have to stand on my tiptoes and pull you downwards just to kiss you!”

“Next reason, that one is bullshit. The size difference doesn’t matter.” His hand moves a little higher up my thigh,

my veins thrumming with desire.

My next reason is spoken loud and clear. “How about this one then; I. Don’t. Want. To. Be. A. Trophy. Wife.”

“You won’t be my trophy wife.”

“I’ll be a Queen, Rex. Shall I go to the library and get a book on the expectations of a queen?”

“Don’t do that.” He knows as well as I do what lies in those books. Host lunches. Be subservient. Remain quiet unless spoken to. Do not engage in any arguments or physical contact with anyone. Do not condone violence. “I’ll rewrite the books, Rennalya.”

“Reason three. I can’t have children.”

“I already have one, and he’s more than enough trouble,” he replies, his voice hoarse and husky as his fingers move inside me. I groan, tipping my head back. “One more reason, angel.”

“You can’t even tell me that you love me!” I shout, gripping the headboard as he works his expert fingers.

“It’s fucking complicated!”

“How complicated can it be?” I yell, as he whips off his belt. “You love me or you don’t? And in case four reasons weren’t enough; we’re in the middle of a fucking global disaster! And you’re the one leading the response! Oh, and did I mention I’m a hunter and an assassin for a living, and I have zero plans of giving that up? Or that if you marry a sorceress, you’re committing to have enemy armies marching on your kingdom every five minutes because they want to capture your wife?”

“All just semantics, baby,” he says, dryly, in the same tone he uses when he’s negotiating the trade rates for the year. “Minor fucking details,” he adds, as he places his hands on either side of my head, cages me in like the control freak that he is, and thrusts himself inside me.

The familiar but ecstatic burn spreads throughout my insides and I shut my eyes, letting out a slow breath. “I want to

do this,” he rolls his hips, “and I want to call you my wife whilst I’m doing it.”

“So this request is just a kink thing?”

“No.”

“This is a panic request, Rexxan. That’s what this is,” I say, gripping his arms as they flex. He makes me feel so fucking small. Carnal pleasure spreads in my lower stomach, every thrust exactly where I want it.

“This isn’t a panic request. This is me doing something I should’ve done a while ago. If I am to not see my son again, it’d kill me, but I’d have no regrets when it comes to him. Not one. He’s happy, I’ve let him follow the career of his dreams, and he knows how much he means to me.

“You’re a scout too, Rennalya. It’s not inconceivable that you could’ve been out of the kingdom that day. In which case, you’d be dead, and I would have so, so many regrets about the way our relationship played out. This,” he gestures between us, “is far too good to waste. Think about it.”

“I don’t want to be someone’s wife!” I protest, wrapping my legs around his waist and rolling us over so I am on top. “Not least a King’s wife. I’d always come second.”

“How can you say that? I worship at your feet. I’d worship at your feet on a stage in front of this whole Kingdom if it’ll convince you. We can rewrite any laws around the Queen having less power. We work well together, Rennalya. Look at the past ninety-six hours. We’ve been managing the response to the second biggest disaster in history.”

Gods above. I don’t think this is a dream anymore. I think it’s all fucking real. I burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation around me. “Why are we having this discussion during sex?”

“Because it’s the only time you ever listen to me.”

“I have to think about it, Rex,” I say, softly. “I love you, but this was never in my life plan. What would happen with my army?”

“They’d carry on as they are now, with you at the helm. They’d just be on a permanent contract here. We can negotiate the money.”

“Talk finances to me in bed *one* more time and I’ll kill you,” I warn, and he laughs out loud. I like that I can make him laugh despite the horrors around us.

“Better marry me before you do, sweetheart,” he purrs, his tongue running over his white teeth in an arrogant grin. “That’d be one *hell* of an inheritance.” I’m laughing as he flips me over, two huge hands pushing down on my lower back as he fucks me until we are both utterly spent.

And as the blissful, sated hum of tiredness settles into my veins, we get three hours of sleep for the first time in several days. I decide I’ll try to sleep an extra two hours whilst REXXAN leaves to give a speech to tens of thousands of people who have gathered to hear him talk. I want to listen, but I am just *so* tired. My efforts are futile, though, because no sleep finds me. I lie in that bed for two hours and do nothing except consider REXXAN’s proposal.

It’s insane.

It’s ridiculous.

I should say no.

But for some reason, it’s on my mind. I begin to list my reasons for and against, but after I add my seventeenth reason on the left of the page, I just stare blankly at the right side of the list, unsure what to write.

“Commander?” Comes a voice, out in the hallway.

“CETRESAR?” I open the door.

“Whilst the King is preoccupied, I thought you should see this.”

I take the scout’s report off him, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. As I scan the messy black ink scrawled across the crumpled paper, my heart leaps into my mouth. “They think they’ve seen him? Kelen?”

“With a good level of confidence, Commander, and he won’t be moving particularly fast over the next week.”

“Just call me Renna,” I murmur, distractedly. He’s right. They’ve spotted him stranded on a mountain that protrudes from the floodwater. Unless he’s got a boat, he’s a sitting duck, waiting for me to play with him.

I’m wide awake now, adrenaline coursing through my veins. I *live* for the hunt. I dismiss the guard, tearing a map out of a book and spreading it over the desk in REXXAN’s study. I push a pin in the location Kelen had been seen, a pin in where I am now, and shade anywhere that is flooded with a graphite stick. My mind whirrs, starting to plan a route to him.

Onyx and Stellan join me after an hour, both of them looking exhausted.

“So,” says Stellan, standing and cracking his tattooed knuckles.

“So what?” Asks Onyx, trying to write something down. His e’s are all backward, he doesn’t know the difference between b and d, and he’s spelled everything wrong, but I appreciate the effort.

“So what are we waiting for? Let’s get the fucker before he gets any closer to the south!”

I hum, crossing my legs. “I mean...I’m completely on board...but I feel like we should get confirmation from REXXAN.”

“We don’t need it. Let’s head out.”

I’m tempted to leave, but I don’t. REXXAN and I are working so hard on our communication. I can’t lay waste to that now. “Stell, we work for him. We have to wait for him to approve the mission,” I tell him, making my decision. “I’ll send for him now, tell him it’s urgent. I suggest you two wash, sleep, eat, and be ready to leave at short notice.”

They give me a salute and leave, and I write up an extensive plan complete with distances, timescales, latitudes, and longitudes, drawing a route with the compass and ruler.

“They saw him?” Says REXXAN, bursting through the door with five scrolls in his arms. I’ve never met a more busy person than him.

“Apparently so.”

“Then I’ll send an army,” he says, stacking his papers on a shelf.

I shake my head, pointing at the pin in the map. “We’d have to cross the floodwater to get there. It’ll take days to get the army into boats, and even then, the mountain pass is single file. This isn’t a job for an army.”

“This is a job for an assassin,” he agrees.

Approval acquired. That was easier than I thought. “We’re leaving tonight.”

“Rennalya, you will do no such thing. I have ten that work for me.”

Scrap that, approval *not* acquired. I knew this was coming. Nothing is ever simple with him. “REXXAN, you cannot be serious. This job was designed for me and Stellan. This is the perfect job for us. I’ve been to this exact summit! I know a way up!”

“You will not risk your life for this. This is what they want, Renna. To have the Stone and the Sorceress just fall into their hands.”

“This is so much bigger than that. This is about our responsibility as leaders to do the best thing for the people. The best thing is putting the best people forward for the job. I’ve done this for a living since I was a child!”

“Stellan and Onyx can go.”

“While I stay here and look pretty, my lord?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I am not losing you now.”

“You won’t. I’ll get the stone and come back. Easy.” That won’t be how it goes, but it’s easier to pretend than to face the truth right now.

He laughs in disbelief. “Easy?” I can feel waves of frustration emanating from his skin, the air is rich with it. I’m seeing him fight a losing battle with his own thoughts. “I don’t want this.”

I walk around to his side of the desk and straddle him in his chair. When I rest my head on his chest, the atmosphere in the room quickly switches from tense to serene. “I’ll come back to you,” I whisper, listening to his slow heartbeat.

“You don’t know that,” he replies, as I revel in the deep vibration of his voice through his muscular chest. It hits me then. When we were in Espan’s Kingdom, I accidentally referred to Espan’s palace as my home. Here, I call REXXAN’s palace my home. It’s not the palaces. It’s wherever REXXAN is.

He has become my home. I’m not sure I could pinpoint the moment that this happened to me, but it did. He is where I want to be at the end of my day. I never thought I’d find something like that. “REXXAN...I...I’ll do this mission, and when I get back, I’ll be yours for the rest of my life.”

He pulls away, sensing the weight of my words. “You’ll marry me?”

“If you actually propose. And I won’t go through with the wedding until we’ve rewritten the laws together.” This is utter madness. Onyx and Stellan are going to faint. I can’t believe it either, but somehow, I know deep down that I’ve never been loved like this, and that I never will love like this again. I can’t see my life without REXXAN in it.

A wave of emotion hits me and I know that I have to prepare to never see him again. I’d rather die trying to save the world than not try at all. I’d rather die engaged to REXXAN than not. I’d rather die knowing I gave our relationship my all.

“I have to do this,” I whisper, tears in my eyes as he tenderly holds my face in his hands. “I have to go. This *has* to be me.”

He nods, tears rimming his eyes for the first time since I’d met him, and I know that deep down he knows it too. He

places the gentlest of kisses on my lips, running his thumbs
beneath my eyes to wipe the tears.

CHAPTER 34

‘LOVE.’ (RENNA)

Despite the gravity of the task I must carry out, I know that it is REXXAN who will have the harder job.

He doesn't like the idea of me feeling proud of him, but I am. Healing tents and makeshift shelters line the edge of the floodwater, ready to treat anyone who washes up, regardless of who they are or where they're from. Whilst I am travelling with Stellan and Onyx, he will be on that newly-formed riverbed sorting bodies between dead and alive with everyone looking to him for guidance, all whilst hoping his son isn't one of the bodies. I don't know how he doesn't crumble under the weight of it all.

Stellan, Onyx, and I are ready to leave for the Silver Mountain to hunt for Kelen, once REXXAN has shown me whatever it is he says he needs to show me. He takes me down winding stone stairs underground, putting a rusty key into an equally rusty lock, and by the creaky protests of the door, I suspect this is a room that hasn't been entered for many years.

Underground in REXXAN's palace is a strange place. Upstairs, every single room is flooded with plants and trees and natural wood. Half the rooms have birds and butterflies overhead. Downstairs, the walls are cold stone. No light, no green leaves, no sound. It's eerie, like there are lost secrets down here that no life should touch.

He illuminates a dusty lamp, the orange light skating along cobwebs on the ceiling. Hundreds of rectangles wrapped in dusty beige linen surround us. They all look the same, but he picks one out with clear purpose, like he could never forget

which one he is looking for. It is wrapped in a chain with a lock that seems far too secure for just a bundle of cloth. “What is it?”

“Painting,” he says, through gritted teeth, and I sense his burns are making it hard to talk.

“Rexxan, don’t do this if it’s putting you in pain.”

“Needs to be done,” he grumbles, putting an oddly shaped key in the aged, rusty chain.

“Did you paint it?”

“No. I confiscated it.”

“An illegal painting?”

“It’s of a moment in my life that I never wanted captured. I just haven’t found it in me to destroy it,” he says, one hand pulling the cloth off the painting, the other pressed firmly against the burnt side of his chest. He’s in agony. He takes a torn piece of paper from inside the wrap and tosses it onto the dusty floor by my feet.

I stoop to collect it as Rexxan speaks. “My father had the gift of foresight. He said those words often.”

The paper is fragile and brittle with age. The ink has been eaten away by the jaws of time, but I can make out the words that had been written in elaborate handwriting not too dissimilar to Rexxan’s

Love, Rexxan, will kill us all.

He slides a ring off his finger and lets me look at the inside. Similar words are inscribed within the gold band. I know Rexxan respected his father, but I have to wonder what kind of parent would play such games on his son. It has left him damaged. He uncovers the painting which is as wide as I am tall, and my breath lodges in my throat.

It’s...it’s an incredible painting, but it chills me to my bones, and my head swims slightly. “Is this...,” my voice wobbles a little. “Is this...how it happened?”

“This is *exactly* how it happened. That’s why I hate it,” he says, his hand shaking against his chest. The painting blurs through my tears. It depicts four people, all piled on top of each other as fire rains down from the sky. I dare not ask, not when I can see Rex struggling to breathe through the pain. I let him stare at it a while.

“A bolt of fire hit me,” he says, breaking the silence. “It spilled over my face, over my eye, down my chest and arm.” He runs his finger over the bottom body in the pile, the colours becoming a little more vibrant as his finger removes years of dust.

“That’s me. We were too far from shelter to make it there alive. My older brother threw his own body over mine. We started to fight because I wanted to do the same for him. My mother saw us and ran over to do the same, to try and save her sons. I tried to push her off me, but the pain was crippling.

“All I could do was scream. My right eye had burnt away. She said she had to do this, had to die for us because she loved us. Then my father lay over us all,” he whispers, tracing his finger over the huge man at the top of the pile, on top of the blonde woman in the white dress, trying to cover the three of them with his arms. Rexxan grips the shirt over his chest.

“And that,” he whispers, his finger over the bundle of cloth at the bottom of the pile. “Is Siddie, my newborn son. I lay on the ground to cover Siddie, but then my brother tried to save me, my mother tried to save us, and my father tried to save us all.”

I cover my mouth, silent tears dripping off my nose. He shakes his head, struggling to speak, and for the first time since I have known him, a single tear drops down his cheek. “I passed out from the pain as soon as I covered my son, but...”

“You don’t have to say it,” I whisper, trying to cool his burns as he struggles with the next sentence.

“I passed out, and when I woke twelve hours later...,” he takes a shuddering breath. “When I woke twelve hours later they were all still there. The three of them, on top of me. Dead.” He wrestles out the final word as if it is killing him.

Grief that does not even belong to me tightens my throat and I choke back a sob. There are no words to describe what he has been through. He carries on, the tear running over his jawline. “But I was paralysed by the burns, unable to move, and so there I lay. You can’t even imagine...just the weight of them all.”

I sniff into his chest, hugging him tighter as his burns scorch his skin and my own. “I’m so fucking sorry, REXXAN.”

“Love,” he states, after a moment of silence. He spins the painting around and points to the four-letter word on the back. “‘Love.’ It’s the title of the painting. It’s a painting of the worst day of my life, and it’s called ‘Love’.” He gestures to the pile of dead bodies in the painting. “If this is what becomes of love, I don’t want it, and I wouldn’t wish it on you either.”

And just like that, it all slips into place. It’s *because* he loves me that he cannot tell me so, because he thinks this is what happens to people that he loves. I understand it now—the artist was right. ‘Love’ is the perfect title, because never before has there been such a pure depiction of love than what his family did for him that day. “It was love that saved you. It was *love* that left you and your son alive.”

“Left us with a dead family and a lifetime of agony,” he says, blankly.

I hold onto him for dear life, tears for the teenage boy who was left with a body to heal, a kingdom to rebuild, and a son to raise trickle down my cheeks. “Thank you for sharing that with me, REXXAN.”

“I just can’t say that word to you. As soon as I say it, something bad will happen to you. I’ll lose you. That’s just how it’ll go.”

“I understand,” I whisper, because I do now.

“I don’t know how or why the gods chose me to survive,” he mutters, a haunted look in his eye. “Hellyxx and my mother were burned far less badly than me, but I survived. It’s a cruel punishment, for me to have lived while all those around me died. Six months later, when I finally regained the ability to

walk again, I was expected to give a speech to the public. And do you know what the people started to call me?”

“What?” I ask, with my eyes on his like there is no one in the world but us.

“They called me the luckiest man on earth.” He shakes his head as if overcome with rage. “*Lucky*. That’s what they see. It took seven healers to pin me down every night. I’d lost my voice from screaming most days, and my advisors asked me to give a speech on how *lucky* I felt.” He shrugs like he can’t bear to talk about it for one more second. “Anyway. That’s a little explanation of why I’m deeply unlikeable. Let’s get you ready to go.”

“You’re not unlikeable,” I say, into his chest as we stand in the centre of that dusty, badly-lit room. “Rexxan, you’re my favourite person in the world.”

“I don’t want you to go. I could lock you in my prison and stop you going, Rennalya.”

“I know you could, but I’m asking you not to.” This man has some serious issues with not being allowed to do as he wants. But so do I. This task was made for me. I *have* to do it.



AS I LEAVE, Onyx and Stellan are ready to go too, busy beating each other up in the courtyard over the last biscuit. I grin, despite the cool lump of unease that sits in my stomach after seeing what happened to Rexxan. I think I’ll struggle to think of anything else for a few days. No wonder he never sleeps.

I love that these two are as light-hearted as me. “You’ve already had seven!” Yells Onyx. “I’ve had two!”

“You’ve had three!” Replies Stellan, the biscuit between his teeth as Onyx pins him to the floor. He snaps the biscuit

right out of Stellan's mouth and stuffs it into his own. Stellan slams Onyx against the floor. "You fat bastard!"

"I'm fat? What does that make you then?"

"I didn't get a biscuit!" I yell. "You've had ten and not saved me *one*!"

"You were too busy banging REXXAN!" Counters Stellan.

Onyx punches him harder. "Don't say that about my sister!"

"Your sister is getting fucked into the next dimension, Onyx. The sooner you accept it, the better."

I laugh. That doesn't even cover it. From the nauseous look on Onyx's face, I decide it's time to change the subject. "Ready to go?"

"Born ready," they reply, in perfect time.

REXXAN produces three vials of glowing liquid. "Don't lose these. They're rare and expensive. This is all we have left in this entire kingdom. They won't just dull your pain, they'll make you feel none. Use them only if you need them." He stalks off to the edge of the courtyard. "Stellan, these are for you. I enchanted them earlier," he hands Stellan a bunch of arrows, the silver tips glowing pale blue. "Go and collect them after you've shot them, if you can. You can reuse them."

"Wow," says Stellan, holding one. "You have sky powers, right?" He asks, and REXXAN nods. Stellan shoots a training dummy, and lightning lashes out and strikes the training dummy on either side. "Oh. My. Gods," he squeaks, bounding over to collect the arrow. My heart warms at seeing the two of them get a little closer after such a tense start.

"For you, Onyx," says REXXAN, handing Onyx the rarest of weapons; an orange enchanted sword. I've seen them before, on the four Forest Guards that protect the first door of the vault. "On loan. There's only six in the kingdom."

"Why don't you use one?"

"Don't need the help," says REXXAN, his usual arrogant self. "You'll find killing people is a lot easier with it. It's

lighter too.”

Onyx swings it around his fingers, nodding. I can tell he’s doing somersaults of joy inside. Onyx collects weapons, and the chance to use this one is a dream come true.

“And you, Rennalya,” his voice lowers in volume. “There is no weapon I could give you to better the skills you already possess. You are indestructible. Insurmountable. Indomitable. As inevitable as the tides on the shore.” He pulls me down to kiss him, and I feel his fingers tickle the back of my neck. When he pulls away I see he has threaded the chain of my necklace through his favourite ring; a gift from his mother the month before she died.

“Keep it. It’ll keep you safe. You’re the only one for me. I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.”

I will not cry. Not now. “Goodbye, REXXAN.”

“Goodbye, Rennalya,” he whispers, eyes on mine as his huge hands hold my face with such gentleness. “Come home to me, won’t you?”

I nod, swallowing the emotion in my throat. I’m so in love with him. I don’t want this to be goodbye forever. “Now and always.”

I smile, but it’s wobbly as I walk backward away from him and try to commit every one of his features to memory.

CHAPTER 35

THE SUMMIT (RENNA)

It takes six hours to reach the forest's edge, which once an opening into a huge expanse of open land, is now a riverbank.

I see for the first time the extent of the destruction at the hands of the River King and Queen. I regret leaving Lana alive. I should've finished her off. When I arrive at the makeshift beach, Rex is trying to resuscitate a child on the river bank, Lynna crouching at his side to help him. It's an execrable sight, one that burns itself into my retinas forever.

It seems relentless here on the front line, endless boats washing up on the shore from different kingdoms. But we will take them in. We will share our food, and our homes, and our medicine until they are on their feet again. And gods forbid we should have to flee our homes, I know they would do the same.

Some boats arrive crammed full of shivering people, but some are empty and a little battered by the water, which is even sadder.

Onyx slings our three bags into a boat whilst Stellan's tattooed fingers untie the ropes, his boots thudding as he hops in first. With a quick nod at the hopeful crowd gathered to wish us luck, I join the other two in the boat, pushing us off as the two of them start to row north.

"The fuck is that?" Asks Stellan, poking a small golden figurine of an eagle that protrudes out of the water. He tugs it, grimacing with effort. "I can't even lift it."

“That, Stell, is the top of the Marsonne Bell Tower. Twenty feet tall,” I reply, marking our location on the map. “We’re rowing over what last week was a village.”

“It’s a tale as old as time,” begins Stellan, a dark look in his eyes. “Kings play chess with civilians as the pieces, and in the end, neither of the Kings truly lose. Only the people.”

Half of the roof of a house floats past us, beside a bundle of clothes that I’m going to hope doesn’t have a body inside. I hear Onyx’s swallow, the horror of it all sinking into his brain. “We have to do this.”

“I know. We will.”

Stellan just remains quiet, save for his constant humming as he rows us over the flooded earth. I listen to the two of them talk for a while, only one thing going through my brain. I have to tell them, but I’m afraid it’ll ruin my relationship with the two people I love most in the world. The only two people I consider family.

“I...,” my voice falters, wavers a little. “I have something I need to tell you.”

“You’re...a lizard in disguise?” Asks Stellan, nonchalantly.

I laugh and splash him with some water. It’s nice to not be the only one with the mental age of a child. “Nailed it, first time.”

“What is it, Rennalya?” Asks Onyx, a serious frown on his face. He’s worried, I can tell.

“You’re...seeing a woman?” Suggests Stellan. “Wait, no. We already know you go both ways. You’re...addicted to sex with REXXAN?”

“Well, yeah. But that’s not it.”

Stellan grins, holding his hands a certain distance apart. “I just know it must be huge. We’re all lying if we’ve said our eyes haven’t accidentally drifted downwards on him.”

“Stellan!” Yells Onyx, swinging his oar at my friend as I try and steady the boat, laughing at his comment.

“What? All I’m saying is, the last three nights you and REXXAN have both taken off from work, you’ve been limping the next day.”

“I haven’t!” I yell, at the same time that Onyx covers his ears, burying his head in his cloak. ‘*It’s huge!*’ I mouth at my deputy, now Onyx is dead to the world.

Stellan beams at me. “I can tell, because you were limping.”

“I most certainly was not.” *I was.*

“So what is it?” Snaps Onyx, coming out of hiding.

Stellan continues, obviously enjoying his game. Despite being six hundred and fifty years old and having the fighting ability of a god, Stellan’s maturity age stopped developing long ago. “She’s...engaged to be married?” He suggests, as a joke. He and Onyx both snicker. I swallow.

“What is it?” Asks Onyx, rowing in time with Stellan.

“I’m...I’m engaged to be married.”

Onyx laughs uncertainly before seriousness washes over his face, setting his features like a marble statue. “What?”

“Um...what?” Repeats Stellan, as we row past a floating wooden cart, battered and broken by the current of the giant river.

“I’m engaged.”

“To *who?*” They yell, at the same time. The boat rocks violently as they both fly off the handle, erupting into shouting. “If it’s REXXAN, I swear to the gods—“ Onyx growls, his head in his hands. “Who has a hold on you? We’ll work it out!”

“It *is* REXXAN, and I’m engaged by my own volition.”

Stellan’s eyes flick down to my left hand and he gives me his world-famous white-toothed boyish grin, slapping Onyx on the arm to get his attention. “Some prank, Renna. O, there’s no ring.”

Onyx's gaze follows Stellan's, and he lets out a huge huff of relief.

Fuck my life. "Stellan, you were the one that told me to commit fully to Rexas."

"You did what?" Snarls Onyx, his yellow eyes flashing with rage. Stellan holds his hands up in surrender before my brother can wedge a knife between his eyes.

"I'm not going to lie to her! There's something real between the two of them."

"The fuck there is!" Onyx snaps, his arms flexing as he starts rowing harder. "Renna, I sure hope you said no to him."

"Onyx," I sigh, giving him the same look that he gives me when he's angry. "I said yes, and before you say I'm crazy, I know! But when he asked me, I expected my instant reaction to be no, but it wasn't. I followed my gut. For me, there is no doubt. I love him and want to be with him."

"You realise why he's proposed, don't you?"

"Pussywhipped," replies Stellan, helpfully.

Onyx slaps him alarmingly hard, the sound of the impact carrying over the murky waters surrounding us. "Shut your fucking mouth, Stellan. Renna, he wants you because you're a sorceress."

Beneath my annoyance with his words lies a little glimmer of hurt. It splinters beneath my skin, into my chest. Every time anyone has ever shown interest in me, I've been told it's because of how I look, or because I'm Commander, or nowadays because I'm a sorceress. I've never been insecure, but slowly I feel more and more like no one wants the girl beneath all the titles.

"Don't hold back, Onyx, you fat fuck. Want another little jab at her, or are you done? She's funny, she's kind, she's strong, she's beautiful, she has the best tits in Yterras—and I'm saying that as someone who has seen a lot of them." *Oh no. He's making it worse.* "It's that inconceivable to you that Rexas might just want her for her?" Continues Stellan, echoing my thoughts out loud.

My sole piece of advice for people who are confined to a boat and miles away from land? Don't argue. And we've failed, miserably. Onyx snorts. "Yeah, it is, actually. Go and read a fucking book on the lengths that past kings have gone to to get a sorceress in their possession. Holn's great, great-grandfather married a sorceress only to sell her to his friends on their wedding night, and then spend his years using her powers for her own good until she passed away."

"I'm in love with him," I interject, silencing them both as through the fog, the snowy mountain we are rowing to is becoming visible.

Onyx shakes his head. "Ren, you think you are. I just want my sister safe, and Rexas hasn't treated you well. He imprisoned you. He banished you. Find someone who treats you like you deserve. He's the most powerful man in Yterras and I don't trust his intentions."

"I chained him—" nope. *Nope*. Not an appropriate audience for that story. "What I mean is, we're just as bad as each other. I love him, and I know he loves me too."

"Has he actually said that?"

My stomach sinks. "Well...no. But—"

"Rennalya, see this from my point of view. He's playing you here," warns Onyx, and Stellan rolls his eyes.

"O, you miserable old raisin, those two have something. I don't want it to be true either, but I'm not love-blind."

"You're not fucking marrying the bastard," grumbles Onyx. Anger aside, my heart softens with love for him. He's being difficult, but he's being Onyx. I know he's terrified. Terrified that if I marry Rexas, he won't have a purpose in my life anymore. It breaks my heart that he feels that way, and I know I need to help him through it. He'll be a huge part of my life forever.

"So we get the stone back in the vault," muses Stellan, wisely changing the subject as he tosses and catches the fake River Stone that he had kept the other night. "Then all of this water vanishes?"

“It won’t vanish, but it’ll start to recede,” I reply, relaying the information I’d got from REXXAN. “It’ll take a few weeks to recede. If we didn’t get it back, eventually the world would just be underwater. No one would survive it.”

“Fucking hell,” mumbles Stellan, stuffing a piece of bread in his mouth. “Better not fuck it up then, right?”

“Right.” The pressure sits heavy on my shoulders. I wish I could feel more like Stellan, who is in the same mood he would be if all he had to do today was eat breakfast and fuck all the King’s healers. Onyx is grumpy, but then he is always grumpy.

I, however, feel laden with responsibility, the pleading words of all the small children on the riverbank echoing around my mind. I can’t let them down.

After twelve hours of rowing, each of us taking turns for a two-hour sleep, we tie up our boat on a newly formed bank, which last week was a stopping point part of the way up the mountain.

The world is flooded, and a boat is a valuable treasure that people would kill for. That’s why we indulge ourselves in an hour of whittling sticks, wrapping long strands of cane around them to form some kind of bear trap. We kick leaves and mud over it until it is all but hidden, an invisible ambush for any that try to steal our bags.

No one is taking our boat today.

Stellan holds a rope between his teeth, threading it through a metal loop at his waist as Onyx and I do the same.

“I’ll go first,” I state, scaling the vertical face of the mountain before Onyx can argue. I have been training daily for fifty years. I’m good at climbing. My small hands reach for divots in the rock, the icy wind making my fingertips numb.

“Foothold on your right,” instructs Stellan, sounding quite far down. “A little higher.”

My foot finds a solid piece of rock, hauling myself up a few more feet before rolling onto the shelf above me. I tie two knots in the rope around a jagged piece of rock, giving the two

men a thumbs up to tell them they can start the climb. From this point, I can see water as far as the eye can see.

It's cripplingly sad.

In the distance, I see the treetops of REXXAN'S kingdom, painted in thousands of shades of orange, yellow, and green. He has built his Kingdom at a higher elevation than most of the world. At first, I thought it was luck that so many of REXXAN'S people are safe from the floods, but I quickly realised as I read through six hundred years' worth of his planning and implementation that it's not luck at all.

Hot on my heels, Onyx makes his way up after me and then Stellan almost runs up the sheer rock. Stellan is a freak of nature, the only person I know who is even close to REXXAN'S size. He could climb that cliff one-handed if he wanted to. In fact, I've seen it happen often when he has a snack in the other hand that he doesn't want to drop.

"Let's kill the bastard and put the stone back," I declare, and the other two nod enthusiastically. I never did have a skill for motivational speeches.

With the wind biting my skin like the jaws of a wolf, we begin the trek up the serpentine path, loose rocks crunching beneath our feet. Stellan ties a black mask around his face, presumably to either look scary or try and fight the cold. Knowing him, it's the former.

Onyx comes to a halt in front of me and pushes the heel of his boot into a small patch of charred earth on the path. "Someone's had a fire here." He crouches down, running his fingers through the blackened earth. "Less than a day ago, I think."

"Good." We must be getting nearer. Fatigue swirls its menacing breath through my tired muscles, making each step feel as though I am wading through water. Stellan must see this, because he tosses me a lemony sweet which I catch in my mouth, bowing to his enthusiastic applause. It cheers me up enough to distract me for a short moment at least.

I felt uncertain at first, when I told REXXAN I'd agree to his proposal, but every hour that goes by, every inch the sun sinks lower in the tangerine sky, I know it's what I want. I don't want to slot into his life, or to slot him into mine. I want to build a life with him from the ground up, to create an environment where we are both free to be ourselves together.

As long as I make it back from this trip, I remind myself, as we take a hairpin bend towards the slope where Kelen had been spotted by some scouts in a boat just a few days ago.

My heart rate rises just a little in my chest as our footsteps get lighter, quieter, approaching the mountain cave with panther-like stealth. I steady my breath and keep my back flush against the rock wall, stopping at the mouth of the cave and raising a finger to my lips. Onyx nods, his yellowy eyes vibrant in the evening sun.

I have no way of knowing how many people are in there, but if they're protecting the stone, I imagine it's the South's most brutal fighters. Stellan waits opposite me, his fingers flexing around the grip of his sword. His breath puffs out from the mask around his face, clouding the green glow of his eyes beneath his black hood.

An arrow nestles ready in my bow, and after a composing breath, I creep around into the cave.

Darkness. No sound. No movement. No voices.

"Aiheneya blazidiena," I whisper, a ball of fire appearing before my hands, my eyes adjusting to take in the sight before me. "Fuck!"

"What?" Shouts Onyx, coming in behind me, his sword poised to strike as Stellan comes in from the other side, bowstring pulled back.

I use my boot to roll over the body on the floor, the only person in the cave. I vaguely recognise it as Kelen, but he is badly beaten, his face plastered in dirt. He's missing some fingers, and I know that was REXXAN's doing.

"Fuck!" I yell, again, too angry to say something more intelligent. Realisation sinks its malevolent claws into my

skin, churning the contents of my stomach. *We're here too late.* We search every inch of Kelen and every inch of the cave. Nothing.

“Shit!” Bellows Stellan, his cavernously deep voice ricocheting off the jagged rock that surrounds us.

Kelen’s bleeding lips move slightly, attracting my attention. “Oh my gods, he’s alive,” I hiss, skidding to my knees beside him. “Water. Water,” I beg, holding out my hand to my brother who tosses me some. I hold my breath and pour a few drops into Kelen’s mouth, his eyelids too bruised to open.

“They took it,” he croaks, eventually.

“Yeah, no shit!” I shout, my knee pressing into his already broken ribs. A low grunt of agony reverberates from his chest. “Who? And where did they take it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, work it out!” I hiss, my face an inch from his. Rage consumes me, flooding every corner of my body until it feels like my only identity, my veins bursting with it. Kelen screams, and it is only then that I realise my fingers are burning his bruised flesh, actually sizzling his skin. *Brilliant.* I’ll add accidentally grilling people to my list of newfound talents.

“Thirteen of them,” he whispers, between weak coughs. His breathing is almost non-existent as I turn to Stellan.

“Stell, bring him back from the edge. We need information.”

Before he was a shadow hunter, Stellan was a healer, a job he claims he only got to try and get the attention of his wife. He bites the cork out of a glass bottle of potion, spitting it out and liberally spreading it over some of Kelen’s wounds as Onyx presses a hand over his mouth to muffle his screams.

“Why are you helping me? You’re not angry?” Asks Kelen, an hour later, as I carefully stitch closed a laceration to his shoulder.

I cannot help but laugh out loud. “Oh, Kelen. Naive as ever. I’m healing you so that I can have more fun killing you. But first, you’re going to give us a little bit of help finding your new friends, okay?”

“They’re not my friends!” He pleads, eyes wide with fear. “They lied to me!”

“And you believed them, and now the known death toll has ticked into five figures. Pleased with yourself?” My hands shake with the bitter malice I feel towards this man.

He says nothing, but he looks like he is going to be sick. Stellan looks satisfied enough with his healing work so he stands Kelen up, releases him, and watches him crumble right back to the floor. We all look on in silence, unimpressed.

“He can’t walk,” observes Onyx, eventually.

“Thanks, Onyx. I’ve always felt that our missions need constant narration,” quips Stellan, causing Onyx to throw a bottle at his head.

I clear my throat. “We leave now. I’m not wasting another minute. We take him with us.

Stellan hauls Kelen over one broad shoulder as if he weighs a pound. “Did they go left or right out of the cave?”

“Left,” the River King croaks, his voice barely audible.

The three of us freeze, looking at each other with the same expression. Left is up towards the mountain summit. That makes no sense. “Kelen, I will set your head on fire,” I threaten, kindling a small flame between my thumb and index finger. I think I quite like being a sorceress.

“I swear. Left,” he rasps, blood dribbling out of his mouth. Stellan grimaces, veering left.

The crimson light of the quickly vanishing sun paints the floodwaters and the mountain a vibrant shade of blood red, the route becoming darker in front of us as we climb. I grunt with effort as I scale another sheer rock face, cursing Stellan who is climbing up it with another man clinging onto him as if it’s no trouble at all.

The sun says her final goodbye and vanishes below the waterline, but we don't stop. We can't stop. We climb and climb until dawn caresses the land with gentle light, my head clouded with exhaustion. Onyx drops Kelen on the floor. "I don't even know what we're looking for here."

"Nor do I, O, but there are footprints on the trail so Kelen must've told us *something* truthful."

"And when can I chuck him off the edge of the mountain?" Asks Stellan, tossing sticks at the unconscious man on the floor. One bounces off his forehead unceremoniously.

"We need him. He's the only one who knows what whoever has the stone looks like. We use him, then we kill him."

"Fine," agrees Onyx, accompanying his capitulation with his trademark grumpy sigh.

We're hungry, but we push on. My legs drive me up the steepest climbs, and I ignore the protests from tired muscles and the migraine that envelops my skull. But as our altitude heightens, so does my malaise. Every foot we gain is a little piece of lost hope, and when we summit the mountain as the second day draws to a close, we've seen and heard no one.

Stellan slams his fist into Kelen's nose, breaking it more than it already is. "Fucking liar!" He screams, each word bursting with fury. Kelen starts to howl in pain, and right on cue, I hear distant voices. My stomach plummets twenty feet and I lurch to desperately try and stop Kelen screaming.

I've been a hunter long enough to know that stealth is everything. Surprise is the greatest weapon we can have, and with every noise that escapes Kelen's lips, I see it slipping away.

"Who's there?" Yells a deep voice. Stellan's eyes widen, his knuckles flexing around the knife at his belt.

"Kill him now!"

"We need him!"

“We’ll manage without!” He hisses, as voices draw nearer. *We need him.* In a split-second decision, I rip one of REXXAN’S potions from a pocket against my thigh and force it down Kelen’s throat, both of my battered hands over his mouth.

I can feel Onyx and Stellan’s blistering fury scorching my back as I do it. They’ll call it a waste, but I call it protection of our resources. Kelen’s screaming stops abruptly, his eyes widening in confusion as all his pain melts away. The voices are nearer, louder this time.

“Go, go, go,” I shout-whisper, as I haul our things into a bag and over my shoulder. Stellan picks up Kelen, a hand over his mouth. I should’ve gagged him. A careless but potentially costly mistake that I don’t doubt has arisen from my severe lack of sleep.

We skid down the rocks, cringing every time a fragment starts tumbling down the slope. Stellan stops up front, finding a windswept shrub to hide behind.

“Do your thing, beautiful,” he whispers, pale pistachio eyes on mine. I nod with bated breath, stalking across the rocks in complete silence, darting from boulder to boulder towards the voices. The earth doesn’t make a single sound beneath my quick feet. I slow to a stop behind a shrub, waiting, watching. The voices go quiet, only the sound of the wind and the dull thud of my quickening heartbeat filling the surrounding air.

“Swear I heard someone,” comes a gruff voice, in a language from the South that I haven’t spoken for a while. I spot a group of twelve, all carrying the grey bandana of the enemy. They all look like they are cold-blooded lethal killers.

But so do I.

One of them crouches down, hands with black fingernails running over the muddy rock beneath his feet. I grab the stuff, Stellan grabs the prisoner, Onyx covers our tracks. That’s been our evacuation plan for years. It’s a mantra we’ve exercised over and over in every corner of Yterras. I just hope Onyx did his job well today.

As they turn away from me, I run a hundred feet between trees and boulders to return to Onyx and Stellan. “I need Kelen.”

“Fuck no. He isn’t going to be able to run. You’ll give yourself away.”

“Then come with me and carry him!” I suggest, losing my patience.

“How many are there?”

“Twelve, but there might be more.”

Stellan slips Kelen over his shoulder, running with me and stopping behind a tree. I cringe, pressing my lips together. Every one of Stellan’s steps sounds like an elephant in a library. That would be a good nickname for him, actually. *Back to the task at hand, Rennalya.*

We make the next crossing, but a twig snaps beneath Stellan’s colossal foot. I hold my breath, panic threatening to make its ugly appearance in my mind as they all swivel to face the rock we hide behind. “Kelen, quick. Which one took the stone?”

“My vision is blurry.”

“Fuck! Tell me!” I hiss, into his ear as they get nearer and nearer. Kelen squints through the bushes beside the rock. “None of them. He was bald, with a t-tattoo on his head.”

My heart tumbles down to the base of this mountain, and despair fills the void that it left. We haven’t even been on the right track this whole time. My hopes for the success of this mission teeter dangerously on the edge.

“Wait...,” whispers Kelen, blood dripping down his lips. “They were with him. All of them.”

Hope radiates from the centre of my chest, dangerous and threatening. I don’t like it when people say that it’s the hope that kills you, but it really is.

Stellan nods at me and I take it as my cue to get moving whilst they wait behind. I track them closely as they search for us, remaining hidden behind rocks and shrubs until they stop

and give up—just one foot away from the giant shard of rock that Stellan sits behind. His nostrils flare as his hands clamp firmly over his own mouth and Kelen's.

Disgruntled, they turn and take an odd route back to wherever they came from, banging their feet on the floor. I frown, wondering what they're doing until out of the ground, a trap door opens.

All I catch is a quick glimpse of a bald tattooed head before they all jump inside.

CHAPTER 36

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN (RENNA)

Standing atop the mountain, my breaths short from the lack of oxygen, I let out a whistle that sounds like a bird and Stellan and Onyx hurry over. Kelen's body flops against Stellan's back as he runs, like some kind of sad fish. It's a tragic end for a tragic man. Poetic, really. "They're down a trap door."

"On a mountain?" My deputy asks, disbelievingly.

"I know what I saw," I whisper, pissed off. "Kelen, darling, go and walk over?" I suggest, in a saccharine tone. The vicious wind whips my hair around my face. We're in the clouds up here, and it makes the air quality and visibility poor.

"He'll blow our cover," protests Onyx, but I know he trusts my plan because he releases his grip on Kelen's ankle.

A low grumble erupts in Stellan's throat. He doesn't like my plan either. Stellan is a cat, who wants to play with Kelen for days before we kill him. That is a luxury we cannot afford up here.

I shove Kelen to his feet, reminding myself that this man is responsible for more deaths than anyone else in the last seven hundred years. As he starts to limp out from behind the hedges, something on Stellan's face catches my eye. I cannot *believe* this man. "You've done your fucking eye makeup."

"Of course I've done it. I'm famous for it."

"Priorities, Stellan," I say, incredulous and lost for words, as I look at the dark charcoal that lines his striking pale green eyes.

He just grins, giving me a smouldering wink. “The ladies love it.”

“And which ladies are they?” I ask, gesturing at the barren grey landscape around us.

He snorts. “You never know, baby, you never know. Men love it too.”

“Go then?” Snarls Onyx, his venomous gaze burning into Kelen. Kelen looks unsure, but with Stellan’s sword at his back, he begins to walk towards the trap door.

“So, why are we sending him?” Asks Stell, eating a dry cracker as Kelen approaches the trap door.

“To be sure there aren’t—“

My sentence is cut off as a set of huge metal jaws hidden beneath the dirt snap upwards, clamping down on an unsuspecting Kelen like a shark flying out of the water.

“—traps.” I continue, as Kelen’s body hits the floor with a dull thud. *Ouch*. “To be sure there aren’t any traps.”

“I think there might’ve been a trap,” replies Stellan, with his mouth full.

Onyx laughs, shaking his head in despair at our best friend. The trap door pops open and we dip behind a hedge, watching closely as they all barrel out with weapons drawn. They skid to a halt. “It’s just Kelen,” says the bald man.

I zero my gaze in on him. His hand is firmly in his black coat pocket, and I just know the stone is in there. “Thought I asked you to kill him, Tane.”

“Well he’s sure as fuck dead now,” says a hunter at his side.

“We’ll leave tomorrow morning,” mutters the bald one, and the others nod in agreement. They jump back down the trap door without another glance at the River King.

“You won’t be leaving tomorrow,” I whisper, as a few more of them head underground.

“So, I’m just saying, Renna. If you open the hatch and I shoot a couple of enchanted arrows in, it’ll zap them all without us even having to aim right. That’s clever actually. You think REXXAN knew when he gave me these?”

I shrug. “Probably. His father had visions of the future too.”

“How does it feel to get fucked by—“ Onyx’s hand slaps over Stellan’s foul mouth before that sentence can be completed. I think Stellan is having withdrawals from the women and men who frequent his bed. Either that or he has a huge crush on my lover.

“Ready?”

“Born ready.”

We hop across the space between us and the trap door in an oddly choreographed dance. It is the route the others took, which tells me it’s trap-free. Stellan’s middle and index fingers run up and down the feathered fletching on his arrow, waiting for me to open the door.

Sliding two needles from the wraps around my wrists, I put them into the lock, turning them silently with my heart lodged firmly into my mouth. All is quiet, save for the whistling of the wind and the oddly calming noise of Stellan stroking the fletching of his arrow, poised like a cat waiting to strike. Finally, I am met with the satisfying click that tells me I’ve hit the target.

“Ready?” I whisper, putting an arrow in my own bow. Onyx does the same, and in a split second, I yank open the door. Stellan shoots first, and chaos ensues. Shouting and swearing fill the air as a couple of our new friends pour out of the trap door and charge at us. Arrows and weapons fly in our direction, one skimming my thigh.

Stellan shoots another arrow in, and six of them drop to the ground. *Thank you, REXXAN.* Onyx, now bored of taking it slow, barrels down underground like a bull in a china shop.

“Onyx! Save some for me!” Yell Stellan and I, at the exact same time. Stellan bends over and laughs, letting me head

down first.

Wow, is my first thought. I was expecting a cave. This is more of an...underground house, I suppose. No time to think about it right now, I begin fighting the bald one. He's huge, blocking my swords with a double-sided axe. "Nice," I say, nodding at his weapon.

"You're the sorceress," he snarls. "We have hundreds of people out hunting you."

"Then clearly that's not enough people, is it?" I suggest, the last word coming out as a shout as I duck under the swing of his axe. "You stole something of ours. We'd like it back."

"We'll get the Fire Stone next, when our shelters are ready," he replies, his lips curling into a reprehensible grin. "Melt that oversized lover of yours even more than he was last time."

Nope. Fuck this. My intentions of never using my powers to give myself unfair advantage when fighting go out the window at the earliest opportunity. Insurmountable rage courses through my blood, and like REXXAN has shown me night after night, I set the bastard on fire.

He panics, trying to put the flames out by hitting his arm, which presents me with a lovely opportunity to pluck the stone right out of the pocket I thought it was in. It's unexplainably heavy, and I know it's the real one.

"Wow," says Stellan, looking around us once our job is done.

"We'll rest here tonight," I decide.

"Are you joking? We can't delay getting this back into the Vault."

"Yeah, O, and if we leave this mountain now after days without sleep, we'll get killed by the first spy that crosses our path. I struggle to believe that if the enemy can build underground bunkers to wait out the floods, they'll only have built one. We rest for six hours. We regain strength. We leave."

Stellan lets out a squeal akin to the toddlers I've met in the orphanages, jumping up and down excitedly as he pulls jars of food off the wooden shelves. "There's bread! There's dried fruit! Oh my gods, Onyx. *There's cured meat.*"

"What?" Replies Onyx, his head snapping up as he carries a body up and out of the cave. He tosses it over his shoulder, sprinting back down. I flop on a wooden chair, watching them eat an entire loaf of bread and six apples between them before moving onto the meat.

It's only when Onyx and Stellan are sleeping and I'm staring at the grey, candle-lit ceiling of the bunker that I'm hit with a wave of longing. I miss home, and that's so bizarre to me because I've never had a home to miss. Just a tent that follows me everywhere I go. I adjust in the hope that I might find sleep, gasping under my breath as I lean on a cut on my thigh.

Onyx bolts upright beside me, his arm shooting across me protectively with his sword already in his other hand. His amber gaze is immediately on the trap door. "What? What's happened?"

"You have magic hearing, O, you know that?" I say, in a hushed voice. "Just a scratch on my leg is all," I reply, not wanting to wake a sleeping Stellan on the chair by the door. He sleeps so rarely without nightmares of his wife's loss, that I don't want to disturb him. Onyx hops over my outstretched legs to be on my other side.

"Can I see?"

"No, let's just sleep."

"Need stitches?"

"No, it's shallow. Just a skim from an arrow," I say, but those glowing yellow eyes narrow at me in the darkness, and his hand comes to my forehead to check if I have a fever. I swat it away. "Onyx, give it a rest."

"Can I see if it's infected?"

"First thing tomorrow," I say, burying myself under my cloak again as my own breath clouds my vision. It's so fucking

cold, and normally I'd be cuddled up to Stellan on missions like this, but nowadays there's only one person who occupies my mind.

I miss REXXAN.

When I left, it didn't even occur to me that I'd miss him as much as I do now. I'm not sure I've genuinely missed anyone in my entire life before this week. Every day we have spent together has made it harder to spend one apart, and I see now that somewhere along the last few months, REXXAN has become part of my daily routine. He's not the kind of person that just fits into your life. He uproots it and fills every void you could think of.

He's been the constant company at my side, the warm body beside me at night. He's the intoxicating smell that works its way onto all of my clothes and bedsheets, and right now, all I can notice is that he's not here. And as much as I'd love to be at his evil mercy in his downstairs bedroom or being gently made love to on his bed, it isn't just the sex anymore. It's just...him.

"You miss him?" Asks Onyx, watching me intently as he always has. He's so mindful of everything I'm thinking. "Were you joking? On Tuesday when you said you were engaged?"

I shake my head and my big brother sighs, raking his scratched and bruised hands through messy curls. "I don't understand, Renna. Why?"

"Why marriage? Or why him?"

"Him, of all the fucking people. Is it...is it the sex?" He grimaces as he asks it. "I just don't understand."

"I had a stellar sex life before Rex, I'll have you know. That's not what I need him for." Granted, it's better with him than anyone else, but I was doing more than fine before. "There's so much more to him than he lets anyone see. He's a good man, Onyx. Look at what he's doing now. He's all but bankrupting his kingdom and ruining his own health and sanity to help all the people fleeing from other kingdoms, all while grieving the loss of his son—."

“His son is dead?” Interjects Onyx, eyes widening in horror. “Sorry for interrupting you.”

I shake my head, shrug, and then shake my head again. “Rexxan thinks so. He’s not eating or sleeping because of it, but he’s not found a body yet.”

“Fuck. I didn’t know that. I didn’t even realise he had a son until Lynna told me. How old is he?”

“Seven hundred and something.”

“Really? He had him when he was almost a child himself?”

“It was his father’s doing. Perhaps his father knew that most of the family was going to die, that Rexxan would need something to live for. I don’t know. But Rexxan is so much more than the heartless, characterless man everyone thinks he is. He looks after me.”

“But I look after you too, don’t I?” The last two words come out a little quieter, a little less sure.

A small fissure forms in my heart, splintering and spreading like lightning against a black sky. I hate my mother for what she did to Onyx, for what she’s *still* doing to Onyx. I hate that he’d probably be better off if they never took him out of that orphanage in the first place. She turned the tall but gentle-natured boy into a ruthless killing machine who’d go as far as killing his own father to protect his sister. I see in his eyes that he’s terrified, beneath it all.

He is still the same boy. The one who hid sick hedgehogs in his room and nurtured them back to health, the one who’d be the very last to resort to violence, the one who believes there is hope that anyone can change, no matter how bad their sins. He’s still in there somewhere.

His eyes widen, flooded with worry. “No, no, no. Renna. What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

“Because you don’t see where you’ll fit into my life if Rexxan is in it too!” I say, my croaky words lost in his chest. I can blame my mother, I can blame my father, I can blame our previous commanders, but it was me who killed that kind-

hearted boy. It's my fault he's damaged. "You've been my best friend for my whole life. That'll never change!"

Onyx just shrugs, and I curl up in a ball on his outstretched legs like I did when we were just two tiny children in a freezing cold house. His fingers tangle through my hair gently just like they did all those years ago, and it only makes me cry harder. Onyx is my greatest weakness. I wish I could fix him.



"WHY DIDN'T I choose a career as a fucking barman?" Shouts Stellan, as we sprint down the mountain with every piece of energy left in us.

"Or a gardener!" Yells Onyx, his legs running so fast they're just a blur.

"Or a baker!" I screech, my own legs dangerously close to giving up on me as I run from the giant group of soldiers that is hot on our heels. "Free warm bread, all day!" I skid down a pile of loose rock, the sharp edges slicing into my skin. A wolf is biting at my fucking heels.

Oh, who am I kidding, I'd miss the thrill.

As it turns out, I was right to assume that there is a whole network of underground rooms on this mountain, and it strikes me now that the South is so much more prepared for the floods than we ever imagined. This is why they removed the River Stone, and this is why they were prepared to remove the Fire Stone shortly after. They can survive underground for a long time whilst the rest of us die out.

Stell sprints ahead, tossing a huge branch onto the floor in front of our boat to trigger all the traps. "Run!" He yells, as arrows whizz past us. I swear through my teeth and catapult myself over a fallen log, ducking an arrow that skims my neck by a hair's width.

“Hold them off!” I shout, bolting past our boat, a hundred feet around the treacherous side of the mountain to where three wooden boats are tied to a shrub.

It takes me three tries to summon any fire, my body weakening on me more by the minute. I haven't slept, I have a bad cut to the leg, and we've been sprinting for near on an hour. “Rennalya!” Yells Onyx, telling me they are struggling. I toss a load of dry twigs into the first boat, setting it ablaze, and then do the same with the second and third. *Good luck escaping now, fuckers.*

“Rennalya!” Comes Stellan's voice now, amplified by Evergreen magic. I sprint back along the mountainside, my leg screaming at me to stop. My heart beats out of my chest as I dare glance over my shoulder and see I'm being chased. Stellan is pinging the King's arrows off like they are going out of fashion whilst Onyx hauls the boat into the water.

“Get in the fucking boat!” Screams Stellan, as arrows fly at us. Driving my legs faster, I sprint harder, veering off into the shallows of the water.

“My leg hurts,” is all I can whisper, through the agony that sears my thigh. Onyx lifts me up and into the boat, shoving me behind his giant frame and shouting for Stellan.

“Stellan!” I scream, as his oversized body ducks a spear at his head. He just keeps walking backward. In fact, he's fucking singing a nursery rhyme, unbothered. I fight the blackness that looms over me, threatening to take me under, but my treacherous body gives in and the whole world goes dark.



A HAND CLAMPED FIRMLY over my mouth startles me awake.

I scream through the hand, but it only squeezes harder, stopping any noise from leaving my throat.

“Quiet, beautiful,” comes a rough voice. *Hm. That’s Stellan’s accent.*

I try and fight but exhaustion has tied weights to my limbs. They feel too heavy to move. Stellan’s pale green eyes blink back at me, and I realise it’s *his* giant hand that’s pressing my mouth shut. “If I take my hand off your mouth, will you be quiet for me?”

I nod, confused and dazed. He pulls his hand away, and my head is free to move. I look down and my stomach roils. I was dizzy before, but now I see I’m all the way up a giant tree, I feel even worse. “What’s going on?”

“You’ve been asleep twenty-four hours.”

“I feel like it,” I croak, sleepily. There are stitches in my leg. “I think summoning the fire took it out of me.” An alarm sounds in my subconscious. He’s not telling me something. He looks almost...worried.

Stellan doesn’t worry.

“We have a big fucking problem. Our plan of getting out of the boat and making the ten-mile hike to the Vault?”

“Yeah?” I whisper, holding the rough ridges in the tree to focus on not passing out again.

Stellan shuffles to my left so I can see the forests and clearings ahead of me. My stomach drops to the floor. Hundreds of wolves, spies, and soldiers patrol the forest, blocking our every route. The damp earth is crawling with them like a sick infestation, each one of them actively looking for something—or someone. *They know we’re here.* Stellan’s finger hovers over his lips as a man bearing the grey bandana of the enemy walks beneath our tree, a barbed club dangling from his hand.

I hold my breath until he’s passed, letting out a shaky exhale. “Where’s Onyx?”

Stellan’s heavily jewelled finger points to another tree. “We fell asleep and woke up six hours later to this shit. *We’re fucked, Renna.* We need a new plan. We can’t just wait for

Rexxan to send an army because they'd have to get here by boat. We could starve before they get here.”

Oh, no. *Oh, no.* I try to grapple with the loose strings of the situation, but they end up knotted every time. “I need to think about this.”

Stellan nods, reaching across me to get some water.

And I hear it before it happens, but there's nothing I can do.

Part of the branch beneath his feet snaps, and although he catches the branch above us, it tumbles to the forest floor with a deafening crash, alerting every creature in the forest of our presence.

CHAPTER 37

INTO THE FIRE (RENNA)

“Move, move, move!” I hiss, as shouting fills the forest, the ring of metal travelling through the trees as swords get drawn. I’m slowed down by my leg.

Stellan hops up another branch before hurling himself like a monkey into a different tree. This is why we train the way we do, hours of our lives spent climbing ropes and balancing on beams. We torture our bodies to be good in these very scenarios. I watch as Onyx runs along a tree branch, hopping from tree to tree as arrows start firing up at us.

“Who’s there?” Bellows a loud voice, one of the enemy commanders walking the forest floor with a crossbow aimed blindly at the sky. There’s an unhinged sort of glint in his eye that chills my blood. He starts firing aimlessly in our direction.

“Your worst nightmare!” Yells Onyx, his deep voice ricocheting off the leaves around us, and I realise he’s dragging them all towards him so that I can move without being noticed. Stellan helps me across a gap between trees. My right leg feels like it’s on fire.

“Come down before we find you up there and rip out your insides!” Shouts the enemy commander, underneath the tree that my brother had shouted from.

“Oh, but you’re getting colder!” Taunts Onyx’s voice, sounding much further away now. The Commander cries out in frustration.

“Warmer!” My brother shouts, from my left. He’s good at this. Even I’m on edge, and I’m on his side.

“And colder,” teases his deep his voice, sounding a long way over to the right now. The enemy soldiers are running around like headless chickens, baffled by Onyx’s voice as he zips through the tree canopy. Pride swells in my chest.

That’s my brother.

His voice gets quieter and quieter, and so does the forest floor below us. He has drawn them away like poison from a wound, and Stellan and I are free to move to somewhere safer.

“Let’s get this little bugger back in the pool, okay?” Asks Stellan, tossing brown-black hair into a bun, his eyebrow piercing catching the light as he gestures to the stone.

I nod, even though I doubt I have the strength to do it. He points to my necklace. “That’s new. It’s pretty.”

I run my fingers over the delicate gold chain and heavy gold ring around it. “It was a gift to REXXAN from his mother just before she died.”

Stellan smiles, pulling a steel chain out from beneath his black top. I grin at the delicate rose gold rings that jingle on it; his wife’s engagement and wedding ring. He’s never taken them off except to have them repaired and renewed since she died centuries ago.

As the sun sinks lower whilst we wait on the edge of the tree line, we’re confronted with the reality of what we’re against here. I don’t know where Onyx is and that scares me. Terrifies me. Splitting up was never in our plan.

The Vault, built into a sheer rock mountain, has an expanse of grass at its feet, about half a mile of flat field before it meets the forest border. We’re at the forest border, which means there’s one short run, one final push across open flat land to take us to victory.

But life is never that easy.

As we creep to the edge of the trees, facing the field beyond, hundreds of wolves and soldiers roam the grass. Our plan comes crumbling down before my very eyes.

“*Fuck*,” states Stellan, echoing my thoughts aloud. Not every soldier left in pursuit of Onyx. Some remain.

“Fuck, indeed.”

Stell scrubs a hand over his mouth, frustrated. “What do we do? Wait for REXXAN?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. He could be here in ten minutes, he could be here in seven days. It just depends on the river conditions because they’ll be coming in boats.” I whisper, trying to work out what we’re going to do here. We can’t fight them. We can’t cross without being noticed.

“So here’s what’s going to happen,” says Stellan, an odd calm about him. “I’m going to draw them east, make them think I have the stone. They’re stupid. They’ll fall for it. It’ll grant you the time and space to get across.”

No. He is not risking his safety for me now. “I like the plan, but you should go across. I can’t run at full speed at the moment anyway.”

“I don’t know how to get through the ten doors, even with your instructions. Only you can get where we need to be. I’ll draw them away and then find Onyx. You put the stone back.”

I open my mouth to object but Stellan reaches into my cloak and plucks out the stone. “I’ll leave it in that branch,” he points to a gnarled branch about ten yards from our position in the trees.

“Stellan, no!” I hiss, but it’s too late. He climbs forward so he’s at the very front of the tree line. His hand holds up the translucent grey stone, the sun making it glow as he whispers the Evergreen incantation to amplify his voice.

“You’re after this, I assume?” He shouts, his voice carrying over the green plains before us. Dread sits heavy in my stomach like a ball of lead. A huge man in black walks through the army as it parts ways for him, every archer training their bows onto Stellan.

“And how do I know that isn’t the fake one that I had made?” Shouts the man, drawing his sword. Stellan raises his

other hand, now holding the fake one. “Maybe it is. Maybe *this* is the real one.”

The commander’s eyes widen, his tongue darting out and licking his lips in a salacious grin. They fire arrows at him, but he avoids every one. I used to say Stellan had nine lives, but I think he’s on number four hundred and fifty by now.

“Catch me if you can!” Teases Stellan, cackling like a madman and drawing back towards me and out of their sight as the remainder of the army barrels towards the Forest. He winks at me. “Don’t move. Not for a while. Give me time to draw them out.”

“No!” I beg, as he holds my head between his hands and kisses my forehead.

“It has to be you to take that stone back. It doesn’t matter how many times you tell us how to open the doors, we won’t remember. We’re as thick as pig shit. I’ll see you later, Rennalya, I promise.”

I rake my hands through my hair, distraught. I’ll never forgive myself if anything happens to either of them now. I just hope they can hold them off until REXXAN arrives.



I WATCH and wait for the cover and the silence of nightfall before pulling myself up a few more branches and plucking the stone from where Stellan said he’d leave it. Quietly, carefully, I make my way down to the forest floor, an arrow nestled in my bow. Only the sound of my breath fills the cool but stagnant air. It’s eerie, a disconcerting silence settling around me and prickling my skin.

Even the birds have fled.

I breathe in slowly and make a run for it, bursting out of the clearing and into the field.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Snaps a voice, and my heart skids to a halt. I turn to see a hunter aiming a crossbow at my head.

Only a fool would take on the Shadow Commander in an archery match. He’s quick, but I’m quicker, and he’s dead before he can pull the trigger.

With that, I sprint across the fields. My legs must be being driven on by some divine force because I ran out of energy about two days ago. Still they push me on, and I look over my shoulder to see four soldiers and a fucking wolf close behind me.

I push myself further, the hidden door to the Vault looming nearer. But the footsteps behind me are nearer too. Twenty dead guards lie at the entrance, so I launch myself up the rocks to pull the hidden lever myself, all but throwing myself back down the rocks to the grass below. I’ve broken my fingers, but I don’t care. Not now.

“My lady,” says a Vault Guard, as I run through the now-open door, faced with the second door and the twenty unharmed guards behind the first. There is no one outside to shut the first door with the lever, and I know I’ve unintentionally killed these guards.

“They’re coming,” I whisper, starting to slide all the bolts into place. “They’re fucking coming!”

“You can do this, Commander,” reassures a guard. They don’t know the code, only the five Kings and Queens, and now me. I slide the last lock into place as the first of the Cataclysmic Hunters arrive.

Nothing happens.

I slam my shoulder at the door, sharp pain shooting across my arm.

“Why isn’t it opening?” I shout, looking over my shoulder as they come through the first door into the Hall of the Gods. I slam my broken fist against it, my heartbeat spiralling out of control. “Why isn’t it fucking opening!”

“Keep trying,” begs the guard from Hela’s Kingdom, desperate for his family back home. “Don’t stop to fight them, we’ll handle it.”

I check all thirty-two of the bolts as an arrow lands in the neck of the Ocean Guard beside me. She drops to the floor, her blue eyes now a lifeless grey. Guilt punches me hard in the gut. I block out the chaos as they crowd to defend me. Obviously, I’ve got this wrong. They’re breaching the hall, and fear has me in a chokehold. Every breath feels like needles in my chest. My violently shaking fingers slide the twentieth bolt a fraction to the left and the door clicks open.

“Go, we’ve got it under control!” Shouts Espan’s guard, roughly shoving me through. Sorrow weighs me down, because I know they will be his final words. The iron door slams shut and I hear him scrambling the locks from the other side. I’m safe. My vision blurs and I press my forehead against the next door, fighting unconsciousness.

I have to do this.

The sooner I do this, the sooner I can find and help Stellan and O.

“You’re doing incredible,” urges a guard on the eighth door. “Keep going.”

I nod, reciting all twenty of REXXAN’S titles over and over in my head to keep myself conscious and calm. I killed those twenty guards at the second door.

I had no choice.

But I killed them.

It wasn’t my fucking fault.

It was *all* my fault.

I bang my palm against my forehead, trying to tell the insanity and mania to be quiet. My thoughts are fighting, turning against each other at a time when I need them united.

It takes me an hour in total to get through all ten doors, my progress slowed by my own sickness. As I open the flowery

door, enchanted by Lynna's magic, the Vault Guards fucking applaud me, all of them desperate to see their families safe.

But I don't feel like celebration. Not when I have seen the floodwaters and the houses and people that float there. Not when my brother and best friend are currently two-hundred-against-two in the forest.

I burst through the door, collapsing to my hands and knees on the carpet and desperately dragging air through my burning lungs. Blood seeps onto the green carpet and I don't even know which of my injuries it's from anymore.

"Stay awake, Rennalya," I whisper, crawling to the water's edge. Now that I'm here, I'm not sure what to do. Do I just... drop it in?

I move on shaking limbs to the corner that is missing a stone, placing it into the water. I don't know what I was expecting, but it just bobs there. No magic noise, no glowing light. For the agony and turmoil of the last ten days, it feels cruelly anticlimactic. I hope I've done it right.

The door jostles and my eyes widen.

They couldn't have got this far, could they?

They won't know how to open Lynna's door.

They won't know.

I keep telling myself that, scrambling to back up against the wall, too scared to open the door in case I'm faced with an army of wolves and men alike. In a sickening moment of dread, it swings open and I hurl a knife towards the gap.

It's him.

He's here. I'm hit with a tidal wave of gratitude, and then an even larger wave of fear as my knife flies towards his chest. His huge hand snaps out with lightning reflexes and he catches it an inch from his rib cage. A dark strand of his hair tumbles in front of auburn eyes, the rest up in a messy bun. He's here. He's real. He leans his sword against the wall and tosses the knife to the floor, closing the gap between us in no time.

“Rennalya,” he whispers, dark orange eyes gazing down at me with so much concern as he wraps his arms around me, holding me close to his chest. The scorching heat of his burns warms my face, and I know from that alone that he has had a horrific week.

“Rexxan,” I reply, barely holding myself together as his arms tighten around me. “I did it.”

He pulls away and brushes loose hairs from my face, his touch so gentle. I’m shivering as he leans down, kissing my bloody lips gently before hugging me to his chest. “You did, love. You never let me down.” A single tear runs down my cheek. He’s my fucking home. I’m in love with this man. “You’re sick,” he says, pulling away. “Rennalya, you’re shaking.”

“We have to go. We have to help Onyx and Stell. They’re in the forest.”

“I have the army out there. Are you badly hurt?” His fingers feel my forehead.

“It’s been a stressful week,” I say wiping my tears with my torn, muddy sleeve. “We have to find them, Rexxan. We have to help them.”

His beautiful face creases with concern, his hands quickly checking me over for injuries. He takes in my broken fingers, the cut across my thigh, the bruising on my ribs and shakes his head with a grimace. “I’ll make sure Lynna or Talyn see you.”

“Later. Onyx now,” is all I can make out, my throat dry.

“Whereabouts are they? My army is tackling the South out on the field.”

That explains the fact that he’s covered in blood, a tiny puddle of it collecting beneath his sword. “They’re somewhere in the trees. They started running southwest. They distracted hundreds of soldiers just so I could get here,” my hands shake, all my worst fears running through my mind. “What if they’ve been captured?”

“Let’s find them, shall we?” He suggests, calm and collected as he pulls me to shaky legs and plants a kiss to the

top of my head. "I have a horse outside."

"Siddie?" I ask the question that's been on my mind all week as he opens the heavy door.

He shakes his head, effortlessly lifting me into his arms when my knees buckle. "I don't want to talk about it. He's not anywhere. I can't talk about it. Not now. I can't fall apart now. I missed you so fucking much. I'm so proud of you."

"Kelen is dead," I whisper, my fist holding a black strap on his leather top.

He nods, his thumb stroking my upper arm as he jogs. He's calming to me, his presence settling the thoughts in my mind. He gestures something at the guards, opening the door with his foot. "Good."

He carries me the rest of the way out, embarrassment flushing my cheeks as the guards all thank me for what I've done. I'm not sure why I'm embarrassed but I am. More than anything else, I want to be reunited with Stellan and Onyx.

Walking out the hall, out of the hidden stone door, I realise the chaos that surrounds the night around us. What was a mostly empty field when I crossed it a little over an hour ago is now a battlefield, REXXAN'S army sweeping the land like a flow of molten gold. Strong arms lift me onto a horse, the heat of his body encompassing me when he jumps on behind me. One huge arm snakes around my midriff. "In the trees?"

I nod. "Southwest," I whisper, hearing the tremor in my own voice.

"We'll find them," he replies, his calm voice washing over me like comforting velvet as he rides us through the chaos, over the fallen bodies that lie strewn across the grass.

"How is it all?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

His hand touches my forehead. "Rennalya, you're *so* sick. I can drop you back and bring Stellan and Onyx to you?"

I shake my head. "How is it all?"

"You really want to know?"

I nod, holding my breath.

“Just Tuesday morning, I alone pulled twenty-nine bodies out of the water. Eleven children. Our accommodation is full, our healing tents are full, our mortuaries are full. The only places that are empty are our food reserves and medicine supply rooms.”

Chills run down my spine, and it has nothing to do with the cool nighttime air. These are the darkest of times I’ve ever known. “Lana?”

“Killed her on Tuesday, once I’d taken the eleventh child out. I couldn’t cope with her being alive any longer,” he says, kicking us into a gallop as we veer off into the tree line.

If I thought the forest was eerie earlier, it sure as hell is now. The sound of the battle whooshes away as REXXAN takes us through the dense bushes, and all that surrounds us is chilling silence. A bad feeling creeps across my skin.

“Stellan?” He shouts, doing something clever with his voice. It weaves its way around the trees, carrying itself across the woodland. REXXAN has a lot of powers, but his powers in his own forests are unmatched. It’s like Mother Nature herself bends to his will. I try to join in, but my voice is non-existent, stolen from me by the events of this week. I start to shake a little harder, a vision of Onyx’s dead body replacing my exhaustion with dread.

“We’ll find them,” he reassures me, sensing the change in my body language. But words cannot fix this. Words cannot find them. REXXAN shrouds us in a golden glow which slowly moves away from us, vanishing through the trees like a glowing mist. One day, I’m going to make him tell me the full list of everything he can do.

He tightens his grip on me as he navigates his white stallion over a fallen tree, and I spot the glowing mist up ahead. Hope replenishes the chill in my bones, warm and comforting. He takes a breakneck turn, skidding to a halt and sliding off the horse, tugging me off behind him but catching me before I hit the ground.

His eyes carry a haunted depth to them, and I turn to see what he's looking at, and terror snatches me into its grip with razor-sharp jaws.

My life as I know it starts to crumble at the edges

"No!" I scream, running over to Stellan who lies, unmoving, on the floor. He raises his hand in a weak greeting.

"I found O. He's hurt. He's badly hurt. Go to him, don't bother with me. He's in the cave over there," he whispers, blood running out of his mouth.

I cover my mouth with my hand and sob. The cut to his face is minor, but the four-foot-long sword that pierces all the way through his torso is not.

And I know there and then that my best friend is dying beneath my hands.

"Onyx needs help," he repeats, his breaths heaving with agony. "Help him."

"Rexxan, do something!" I scream, turning to face him. Rex shakes his head. He knows it too. Stellan takes my hand weakly. "Rexxan!" I scream again, my voice hoarse. He has to fix this. He has to. "Fucking save him! Do something!"

Rexxan kneels at my side, on the other side of Stellan's broken body. Stellan gives him a shaky smile. "He cannot undo what is already done, Rennalya. No one has powers that great."

"No," I whisper, choking back another sob as blood seeps between my small fingers, desperately trying to stop his bleeding.

Stellan coughs, pale green eyes flicking to the sword in his chest. "Take it out, Renna. For me. Don't prolong this."

"No," I croak, my own tears leaving clean streaks on his dirty face. His hand wraps around mine.

"Don't cry," he whispers, his voice giving up on him. "You know this is what I've wanted for so fucking long. So fucking long I've waited for this, and I wouldn't have wanted it to happen any other way. We did it. *This is what I want.*"

I feel like part of my heart is dying too; shrivelling and drying up, barren of love. I nod through my tears as his life leeches through the hole in his chest. I curse Kelen. I curse this life and all it has stripped from me. I curse this ugly world where men like Stellan die at the hands of the cruellest of others. “To be back with Jana,” I whisper, gasping each breath.

He smiles, tears running down his face too. “I can see her now, and our little boy. She’s waited for me long enough. She’ll be pissed off when I see her.”

I should be happy, because he is right. He has talked about dying for so long. How he won’t go out of his way to die, but how he’ll welcome it when the day comes. I should be happy for him.

But I am selfish.

“Don’t leave me here,” I whisper, my forehead on his. It’s a broken request, and I’m shamelessly begging with my pride in tattered pieces at my feet. I need him to stay with me. He places a gentle kiss on my cheek, his breaths coming shorter.

“You’ll bury my ashes with them?” He asks, his eyes pleading.

Rexxan’s huge hand takes Stellan’s other one. “I’ll make sure it’s done, Stellan,” he says, acknowledging what I cannot.

“Take it out,” he begs again, asking Rexxan this time. Rexxan’s steady fingers unbuckle a strap at my thigh, pulling out the last glowing vial of liquid. He tips my best friend’s head forward slightly, pouring it into his mouth. I watch the features of Stellan’s face relax as his pain vanishes into the night.

“Thank you, Stellan,” I whisper, my tears merging with his own on his muddy face. “For everything.”

“No, Rennalya. You saved my life in so many ways. It’s been a privilege,” he replies, as Rexxan’s hands tighten around the hilt of the sword in Stellan’s chest. I reach around his neck and unclasp the chain with his wife’s rings on, placing it in his bloody hand for him to hold onto.

Stellan grins, of course, because he's Stellan. "Thank you, beautiful."

"Don't get fat in the afterlife," I say, as my broken fingers close his fist around the rings.

He laughs, his hand shaking around the necklace. "I love you, Rennalya. I loved you from the day I met you."

"I love you too."

"And one more thing?" He whispers, choking on his words, red blood running out of his mouth. I nod, sobbing through the hand that's clasped over my mouth. His eyes flick to REXXAN, then back to me. "Just marry the old bastard, won't you?"

I'm laughing and crying all at once, my heart splintering into two as REXXAN stands, flexes his fingers around the sword, and pulls it from Stellan's rib cage. Blood spills over his chest and onto the cold, dark forest floor, and I watch as the famous eyes of Stellan Helaneth fade from green to grey.

I collapse onto his chest, my body wracked with sobs as I feel something inside me crack. Something I know that even time will never repair. REXXAN's arms wrap around me, a feeble attempt to keep the broken pieces of me together as guards pick up Stellan's body to take back to the palace. REXXAN beckons a healer to follow as he carries me to the cave where Stellan said Onyx is.

I'm sobbing as Rex illuminates the cave with magic, but when I spot Onyx, I feel worse. He looks like he's dying too. He is sat up against the cave wall, and when his gaze meets mine, a tear runs over his cheek. "He's dead, isn't he?"

I nod through silent tears as the King carries me over to my injured brother. I press my dirty forehead to his, crying with him in silence because there is nothing to say to make any of this better.

When I pull away, Onyx is staring at the ceiling, and when I look down, I see exactly why. His leg is completely mangled. I swallow the sick that threatens to appear in my mouth. "I

took a potion for the pain, so I can't feel it," he whispers, weakly. "But I think I'm a dead man talking."

"No," I reply, my whole world crashing around me for the second time today. REXXAN says something to the guard in a language I don't know whilst I take Onyx's shaking hand.

REXXAN is calm and unbothered, just cracking on with things like it's another day at work. "Rennalya, keep talking to him, please." He empties the healer's bag onto a cloth on the cave floor. "Tweezers, Ren," he demands.

"What?" I ask, through my sobs.

REXXAN reaches over me and takes some long tweezers from a case, and with steady hands, pulls the first wolf fang from my brother's leg. "Rennalya, I need you to do as I ask, when I ask, yes?"

"Will he make it?" I whisper, utterly broken. REXXAN presses his lips together. It's a *maybe*. I pass him a yellow flask of something when he asks me to, watching him force Onyx to drink it before casting some sort of spell on my brother. "Slows his bleeding," he explains, examining the bone in Onyx's leg. He looks like he knows what he's doing. I'm sure he hasn't done this ten times before, but he looks as though he has, and in that moment, I don't think I've ever been so grateful that I crashed the party of the Forest King last summer.

TALYN arrives first, his eyes softening at the sight of me, shattered and destroyed on the cave floor. "Thank you both, on behalf of the whole kingdom," he says, before crouching beside REXXAN. He shows no shock at the extent of my brother's injury, but the grave look that he and REXXAN share tells me that my brother's life is in the balance.

To me, it looks like his leg is half off, but Talyn just calmly begins discussing things with the King in healer-speak. Despite my best efforts to keep him awake, Onyx falls unconscious quickly as a flurry of healers surround him, working to save his life, trying to slow his bleeding with both science and magic.

At the centre of it all is REXXAN, his hands and arms dripping in Onyx's blood as he gives orders to everyone around him. He makes me leave while they reset the bones in my brother's thigh, and for that I am glad. I just cling onto Onyx's arm for dear life, whispering to him over and over in case he can hear me.

"Will he make it?" I ask, once I've been sitting there for hours, a gaping hole in my chest as I try to grapple with the reality of losing my greatest friend. Maybe I've already asked that once. Maybe I've already asked it a hundred times. All I know is that I'll keep asking it until someone gives me the answer I want. My eyes are shut. I can't make them stay open any longer.

"There's a seventy percent chance, I'd say," replies Talyn, his usual matter-of-fact self.

A silent sob escapes my lips. It's thirty percent too low. "I can't lose him. I need him." This is all my fault.

"He won't die, Rennalya. Not while I have breath in my body," reassures REXXAN, soaking cloths in different potions and tonics.

I lie with my head on Onyx's chest, his bleeding hand in mine, waiting and waiting for them to tell me whether he's going to live or die. But exhaustion eats away at my resolve, sickness jumbling my thoughts, and eventually I have no choice but to give in to my bruised and broken body as I black out on the cold floor of the cave.

CHAPTER 38

‘I LOVE YOU.’ (REXXAN)

Talyn and I operate on Onyx’s leg for six hours in total.

Only then do we risk loading him onto the boat to go back to my Kingdom Gates. He fades in and out of consciousness and screams into the cloth between his teeth until his voice is torn to shreds. I’d rather we were in a sterile healing room, and not a dark, damp cave, but such is life, and there is nothing I can do.

Adapt and overcome. Renna always says that to her hunters, and that is what I have done today.

I have not felt grief for anyone since I lost my family, but I find myself stricken with it over Stellan’s loss.

I’m broken for Renna, and though I would like her to be well again, I dread the moment she wakes up, because I know there’ll be a split second where she won’t remember what has happened. And then I’ll watch confusion, realisation, and finally heartbreak wash over her face. This will be no quick recovery for her. She has lost half of her tiny family, and the other half remains semi-alive in the only cabin on this ship.

She has not woken up since she passed out on the cold, blood-soaked floor of the cave. She just lies on one of the daybeds on the ship deck, out cold and badly wounded. As the wind whips around us and the floodwaters rock us from side to side, I run my hand over beautiful dark umber hair, watching her rest.

I could watch her sleep each night for the rest of my life and die a happy man.

Flowers gather at the head of her bed, my soldiers leaving notes for her and Onyx. I pluck one out of the pile.

COMMANDER RENNA, DEPUTIES ONYX & STELLAN,

MY CHILDHOOD HOME IS UNDER THE FLOODWATERS. MY MOTHER IS DESPERATE TO GET IT BACK. WE CAN'T THANK YOU ENOUGH FOR WHAT YOU'VE DONE.

YOURS IN UNDYING GRATITUDE,

ESCELIEN,

SECOND-IN-COMMAND, FIFTH RANK.

I PUT it back and run a hand over my stubble, longer than it usually is. News of Stellan's death is under wraps until Renna wants it to come out, but the endless letters to the three of them will only make her pain worse. I ask one of my staff to start putting them in boxes for her.

I wish she'd wake up.

There's *so* much I want to say to her.

I jump off the ship first when we pull up to the overcrowded beach that forms the edge of the flooding, plummeting down into the knee-deep water with a thud. The waterline has receded by a few yards today already, and I have the love of my life to thank for that.

The scene at the beach is sickening, endless boats washing up on the shore, full of unwell and injured people grieving the loss of their loved ones and their homes. There is a queue to get onto the riverbank, four rows of boats waiting to unload. Soldiers chop down trees on the border of my forest to make more room for the wounded and the sick.

Hundreds arrived yesterday. Hundreds arrived today. Hundreds will arrive tomorrow. We will find room for them. We will find food for them. We will find space for them no matter what the cost. Because somewhere else, my own son might be washing up, wounded and sick on someone else's

land and I can only hope that he will be treated with the same unconditional kindness.

It is in the greatest of tragedies where we see the greatest outpourings of love. I'd said that in my first speech I wrote as King. Just a boy I was back then, but it rings as true today as it did seven hundred years ago.

Lynna stands out, as she always does, on the beach in an immaculate and somehow completely clean white gown. She directs healers to different boats, sorting all the arrivals into mortal and immortal, assessing injuries, and directing any bodies to the tents for the dead. She spots me as I tie up the huge boat that carries some of my army and walks over, her face wrought in worry.

I lead her to the small cabin nestled on the orlop deck that houses Onyx and seven healers working shifts to keep him alive. "Stretcher him to the Healer's Halls."

Her eyes widen, filling with tears as her hand lands on Onyx's arm. Her flawless porcelain skin looks out of place beside his wrist; scarred, bruised, and caked in blood and dirt. "What happened to him?"

"Wolf bite. Broken thigh, exposed bone. I pulled teeth out of his femur."

She scrubs her hand over her pink lips, tears pooling on her brown lashes. "Gods save him," she whispers, seeing what I see. Onyx will never return to hunting the way he does now.

"And the other two?" She asks, bright teal eyes looking back up to mine.

"Renna is sick and unconscious. Stellan is dead."

"No," murmurs Lynna, the tears that gathered in her lashes finally spilling down her pale face. Her bottom lip trembles as she draws a shaky breath and tries to hold herself together. She'd formed a strong friendship with Stellan, and whatever it is that's going on between her and Onyx, they're very close. "Tell me that's not true."

I have no time for emotions today. Today I am not a man, but a King. "Have his body taken to the palace. I want Talyn

and his team assigned to Onyx, with you and yours assigned to Renna. I'll take over here on the beach."

"You need sleep, REXXAN," she whispers, crouching down at Renna's side and stroking her hair. She runs a manicured thumb over Renna's eyebrows gently, pressing her lips to her forehead. "We all owe her *everything*."



RELUCTANTLY, I leave Rennalya nestled in my huge bed back in the palace. I have washed her face and her hair, and put her in one of my shirts. She looks the size of a pea buried between soft pillows and duvets, deeply asleep. Gently, I place another blanket over her and kiss her cheek, telling her I'll be back as soon as she wakes up, even if she cannot hear me in her unconscious state. Lynna and two of her healers stay in the room and seventeen guards stand outside. Obsessive, perhaps, but I'm not risking her safety ever again.

When I make the two hour long ride back to the floodwaters' edge, my soldiers are pulling a small ship out of the water to make room for more to arrive. I pull two children and their mother out of a tiny row boat. It is half underwater and it's a miracle they have even made it this far. I direct them to one of my palace staff who takes their names and where they've come from, and then to a healer who checks the three of them over before sending them to the fields that house hundreds of tents and shelters.

The next boat is not so lucky, and I take a life-threateningly sick teenage boy to the mortal healing tents. As I leave through the tent doors, a tall hooded figure catches my eye, pulling a body out of the water. For the first time in weeks, I feel a glimmer of happiness.

It's him.

Relief unlike anything I've ever felt washes over me as I jog over, putting a hand on his shoulder. He turns to face me

and disappointment washes over my body, heavy and crushing like tar that I cannot wash off.

Brown eyes stare back at mine. It's not Siddie.

The man steps back and bows to me. "Your Majesty?"

I clear my throat. "Bodies go in the black tent."

"Thank you, my lord," replies the hunter, giving me a wary look. I am surely going insane.

I spend the day on the riverbank, lifting wounded and sick people out of the water. It's horrific, it's haunting, it's exhausting, but when I reunite a father with the children he has feared dead all week, it's rewarding. I just wish I could have the same thing happen to me. I head into the tents of bodies, scanning all the ones from today. None of them is my son, and I suppose that in some kind of sick and twisted way, for that I should be grateful.

"My lord, Lynna sent me to say the Shadow Commander is finally awake."

Jansa, one of my healers, appears at my side with a message, batting her lashes at me. How she thinks I could possibly be in the mood to entertain her flirting after spending my day sorting dead bodies is beyond me. There is only one woman who ever occupies my thoughts of late, and I'm desperate to be at her side to help her. I give Jansa a quick nod of acknowledgement—I need to keep all my healers on my side at the moment—and bolt back to the palace on my horse.

Renna isn't in the bed, and panic shoots through me like a knife.

"We're in here, Rex," comes Lynna's soft voice, drifting from the bathroom.

I lean against the doorway, watching Lynna kneel at Renna's feet, one hand holding her hip to steady her as the other helps her out of her leggings. Lynna folds them neatly, her blonde hair reaching the pale stone floor beneath them. Orange tears glisten in Renna's eyes as her legs shake violently, leaning her weight against the wall behind her.

Coloured tears for deep emotional pain, clear for physical pain. I'd learned that about her in a book. She's a peculiar creature, my Renna, and I'll help her feel proud of that in time.

"She'd like a bath," explains Lynna, gently, as she undoes the hooded cloak around Renna's shoulders. "Renna, would you rather I stepped outside and let REXXAN help you?"

She nods, thanking Lynna quietly. I take her small bruised hand in mine, steadying her as she slowly pulls her top over her head, wincing as she raises her arms. The cut on her thigh has been neatly closed by Lynna, but bruises cover her beautiful body, head to toe. I hold both of her hands and walk her to the water's edge. She's limping, but she makes it, dipping a small foot in the steaming blue pool.

"Okay?" I ask, holding her upright as she dips her toes an inch beneath the glassy surface.

"This is so humiliating," she whispers, and my heart cracks. That's how she sees this?

"That you are even standing here right now is enough to have me and the rest of this kingdom worshipping at your feet. This—," I gesture at her entire body, "—isn't humiliation. This is strength. Now, I'm going to put you in this water and I'm going to wash your hair, not because you cannot, but because I want to. Because I don't find that a lot of things make me happy, but looking after you makes me genuinely happy."

A ghost of a smile crosses her lips as I sink her beneath the waterline. I hear her breath catch in her throat, watching the muscles beneath the brown skin of her back and abdomen tense as it hits her thigh. It's once she's in the water and running a cloth over her arms that the dam finally bursts. It's one quiet sob, and then it's hundreds. She's held herself together in front of others, she's been so strong, but she shatters to pieces in front of me now with her beautiful head in her hands.

I sink down to face her in the water, pulling her to me as she finally has time to process the death of her closest friend. I've known loss better than most; I've lost most people in my life, and so I know there is nothing I can say or do except be

here for her to cling to whilst she succumbs to the cruel hands of grief. When the sobs eventually subside to quiet sniffs, I gently wash her hair, massaging her head how she likes me to, hoping she's feeling loved.

It's important to me that she feels loved.

It's important that she knows that *I'm in love with her*.

"They wouldn't let me see Onyx when I woke up," she mumbles, through silent tears.

"No, you can't visit him just yet. They're working on his wrist to realign the bones. I saw him earlier and his breathing was stronger than it was yesterday."

She nods, wobbling a little as she stands on the cool stone floor, looking up at the jungle canopy above our heads. I wrap her in a warm forest-green towel, waiting as she walks at a slow pace back to the bed.

"How did you cope?" She asks, as I pull one of my linen shirts over her head and do up a couple of the white buttons after putting a glass of juice into her hand. "When you lost your parents, your brother, and your friends, how did you cope? How are you supposed to carry on when you can't see your life without them?"

"It's not easy," I reply, truthfully, as my fingers plait her hair into one long braid, tying it at the end. It's nostalgic of all the times I'd put a tiny braid into my son's hair whenever he wanted me to. It was a frustrating few days of learning how to do it. That's life as a single parent, I suppose.

"There's no method to it either, Rennalya. You just cling onto the things you *do* still have and take every day as its own. I still had my son, and I clung onto him for dear fucking life. Don't try and think about how you're going to get through this year, just this afternoon. Then when you wake up tomorrow, try and get through the morning. It'll get easier," I plant a gentle kiss beneath her ear and lie her back down on the pillows. "Sleep."

"Sleep with me?"

I hate being King. “I have to go back to the riverbank. It’s a bloodbath out there.”

“Please?” She whispers, with big teary eyes. *I can’t say no to this woman.* This is definitely going to be a problem in our marriage; she’s got me wrapped around her little finger. Gently, I lift her up with one arm and flip her onto her side, lying behind her and enveloping her body with mine. She wriggles a little to burrow a bit further into my chest and my heart swells to the point where it bursts, spreading golden warmth across my chest and through my cold, empty veins.

“Ren,” I whisper, and she turns her face back to look at me, sunrise-orange eyes gazing up at mine. I turn her whole body over to face me.

This is long overdue. I owe her this.

“I’ve loved you for so long. *So* long. I think I fell in love with you last year in the hallway about twenty yards from here when you told me your favourite food was strawberries. I tried to deny it in the months we were apart but the first thing I thought of every single day was you and whether I’d ever see you again. It truly hit me how utterly fucked I was when we helped at that orphanage.

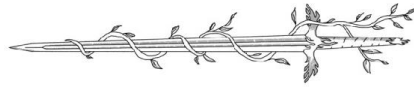
“I just remember looking at you and thinking that I could never have you, but that I’d kill anyone who ever tried their luck because no one that ended up with you would ever truly appreciate how privileged they are just to wake up in your presence.” I kiss her neck gently. “I’m so mind-bendingly in love with you, Rennalya, that it hurts my chest,” I whisper, forcing the words out through my unwilling lips.

As I stop talking, I worry that I didn’t convey the message enough. I take her head in my hands, my eyes burning into hers. “I. Love. You.”

Fresh tears well in her eyes. “Rexxan,” she croaks, burying her head in my chest. “I love you so much more.”

It’s not true, because my love for her eclipses the sun, the moon, and the stars above us. But I don’t reply, instead just

holding her close until her slow, sleeping breaths lull me into some desperately needed sleep too.



“SIDDIE!” My voice echoes off the ivy-covered stone of my bedroom walls, waking me up as I jolt upright in bed, my heart pounding beneath my ribcage. Renna sits up beside me, a hand landing on my bicep.

“Rex?”

“Fuck!” I gasp, a hand on my heaving chest. I feel sick to my stomach, my arms glistening with sweat. “Just a dream. Just a dream.”

“Rexxan, we’ll find him,” she whispers, holding my hand. “I swear.”

I lie back down, my heart thundering in my chest. *Just a dream*, I tell myself, clinging onto those three words like they’re the only things keeping me afloat. I’m not getting back to sleep, that’s for sure.

“He slept in this bed with me most nights,” I say, not for any reason. “He used to scream in his cot, and eventually we’d both be so exhausted and tearful that I’d give up and let him sleep on my chest in my bed.”

“Was he good?”

I can’t help my smile. “Oh, no. Lynna, Frian, Ascan, or I often had to collect the little tyrant from school. He was a nightmare. He was like I was at his age; not built for indoor spaces.”

A smile crosses her pretty face. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

After breakfast, Talyn greets us at the private royal entrance to the Healer’s Halls where the crowds can’t swarm us, his long dark hair in a ponytail and his skeletal frame swamped in a healer’s robe.

“He’s still unconscious, but we were successful with resetting his wrist. It’ll heal nicely,” he informs us, opening Onyx’s door. Rennalya creeps in tentatively, as if scared of what she may see. His face and hair are cleaner, and he lies on the healing table beneath a white cloth, his chest rising and falling at a reassuring pace as a healer gives her energy to him, pale light flowing into his chest.

“It’s me,” she whispers, taking a seat beside him. “If you could just...if you could just wake up, and show us all that you’re going to pull through...I’d really like that,” she mumbles, fiddling with her fingers nervously. “And I know you’re probably scared about your losing Stell and what happened with your leg but... but I’ll be right here and I’ll always be here for you. Always.”

My chest aches for her. She’s so young but she’s seen so much, so compassionate and loyal to those around her. She just quietly chats away to Onyx for an hour, never letting go of his hand.

“Renna,” he whispers, interrupting as she rambles on in astronomical levels of detail about the juice she drank earlier. Her face lights up.

“Onyx?”

“Ren,” he rasps, his throat dry. His fingers flex a little around her hand. Renna shuffles even nearer. “Onyx, you’re awake! REXXAN, look, he’s awake!”

“I can see that, my love.” I feel his temperature and his pulse, checking his leg as he half opens one eye to look at his sister. The eye shuts quickly and a loud shout gets muffled in his throat.

“I know it hurts,” I say, covering his leg. “You’re twenty minutes away from another dose of pain relief, so try and push through.”

His nostrils flare as he tries to regulate his breathing. I know he’s in absolute agony, his leg broken and cut almost all the way through. It’s a miracle he’s still breathing.

“You’re okay?” He asks, through gritted teeth, a concerned eye fixed on his little sister.

Renna nods, almost crying again. “I love you, O. You’re going to be alright. I’ll help you every day.”

“Will I walk again? Don’t sugarcoat it,” he asks, white knuckles gripping the edge of the table as his marigold eyes land on me. I perch on the edge of Renna’s chair, crossing one ankle over my knee.

“The wolf bite went very deep. It damaged your bone, muscle, and your nerves. You won’t be up and standing this month. If you were a mortal I’d say you’d never walk again, but as Evergreens our bodies are far more regenerative. Whether you’ll be able to run and fight...I wouldn’t expect to be climbing trees like you were before ever again. I imagine that you’ll walk again, Onyx, but it may well be the result of months or even years of therapy.”

Onyx shuts his eyes, saying nothing. “Ren, I just need some time alone.”

“Onyx, I’ll help you, whatever happens to your leg, I’ll help you! We’ll work it out, I’ll help you walk again, I promise. I’ll be right here, no matter what!” She says, clearly desperate to help him.

“Rennalya, please just go,” he whispers, turning his head away. “Just leave me alone a while.”

She looks up at me for help, her eyes wide with panic. “He’ll be able to meet with a good healer? We can make sure he gets the best? REXXAN, you can help him too, can’t you? You’re a good healer.”

My hand envelops hers, tugging her to her feet. “Let’s give Onyx some quiet time.”

Rennalya looks from me to her brother, back to me. She doesn’t want to leave him, at all. “We’ll come back when he’s ready, Ren,” I reassure her, and she kisses Onyx’s knuckles.

“You just tell me when you want me, I’ll drop everything to be here,” she says, but he doesn’t reply. “Yes?” She persists, her voice wobbling. Onyx gives her a slight nod and I have to

pull her out of the room. We burst into the bustling hallway of the Healer's Halls where people stop and bow to me, looking worriedly at Renna. I take her somewhere more quiet.

“Rennalya, he just needs time to process. You've all been through a lot. Give him time.”

Small, tanned hands run through dark brown hair, tousling it a little as she paces a small circle. “But he'll just isolate himself. This is what he does!”

“Then perhaps it is his safe space, and whether it's healthy or not, I think he's earned it this week. Let him indulge in isolation, even if it's just today. You have to have time to process the lows before you can work up to the highs.”

She says nothing but sways on her feet a little. She's sick and wounded, and I can see that just this small outing has drained the energy out of her.

She's still trembling when I put her back in bed after the short ride home from the Healer's Halls, eyes wide with worry for her brother. “You need another few hours of sleep.”

“Stay?”

She has no idea how much I want to stay and just sit next to her in silence so I can see for myself that she's alive and well beside me, but my life isn't like that and I don't have that privilege. Renna wants me here, but my people need me at the edge of the flooding. “I really do have to get back to the riverbank. I'll leave Lynna to sleep in here with you.”

I whittle away the rest of the day working in the healing tents. Food is scarce, medicine is scarcer, but the sense of community is in abundance.

But not everyone will get their happy ending. Not everyone will leave this horrific year with all their loved ones. Renna won't, and if Siddie doesn't appear soon, neither will I.

CHAPTER 39

GRIEF (RENNA)

Lynna says that grief is just love with nowhere to go.

Rexxan says that grief is just rage, where no amount of shouting and screaming can ease it.

I have so much love for Stellan, it flows from my chest, out to my fingers, but when I reach for him, he isn't there anymore. Instead the love stays right here in my own body, where it is not wanted or needed. It spoils and festers until something that was once so beautiful becomes agonising, weighing my limbs down like lead.

And gods above, I am angry. I am *so* angry—with myself, with him, with the fucking sword that was in his chest—but what will shouting achieve? There is no volume I could scream at to reduce the agony that splinters my heart into two. No words I could shout that would bring him back. Just like the love, the rage stays within me, burning a painful hole in my splintered chest because it has no where else to go.

Lynna and Rexxan, they are both right.

In the dead of night, I succumb to unconsciousness once more.

CHAPTER 40

SIDDIE (RENNA)

Rexxan came by this morning after my fitful night of bad dreams to tell me that he is fine and that I do not need to worry about him, which I've intelligently translated to mean that he absolutely is not fine and that I *do* need to be worried

By the time the healers have treated my leg and given me various concoctions to drink, REXXAN is nowhere to be found. My muscles scream at me as I limp into his library. Everything hurts, and I've never felt so tired.

I should feel joy, elation, or perhaps at a bare minimum a sense of accomplishment about the fact that we quite literally saved the world, but I don't. The quest stole so much from me that it's hard to feel positive about it in any form. REXXAN is always muttering about pyrrhic victories, and now at last I understand them.

"Renna, you must rest," urges Lynna, finding me wandering the library.

"I'm looking for Rex."

I turn to face her. Gods, she's absolutely glorious. Her flawless skin glows in the warm dim light of the library, the elegant sheer sleeves of her dress tumbling down to the ground, joining the skirt that pools like molten silver at her feet. A delicate gold chain sits low on her waist over the white silk. Her face is pristine, her hair immaculate, her clothes expensive, her jewellery coordinated. I'd loathe her, but she makes it impossible.

“He’s busy today.”

“Can I know why?”

“Of course you can know why, Renna. The King has given you access to all information on him and all the areas of his palace. You’re free to ask and do as you please. Ocealia’s floodgates are being damaged by a storm so Rexxan is shifting the storm northwards until the refugee boats can dock safely and it’s no longer a threat to life over there,” she explains, gathering the satin skirt of her dress and gracefully sitting down on the velvet sofa beside me as I stare at the ten feet tall shelves of books.

That doesn’t bode well for Rex. I fiddle with my rings nervously. Is he alright?

“He’s read every book in here,” she says, softly, when I’m silent for a moment.

My head whirls around to face her. “Surely not.”

“Most of them twice.”

“That must be thousands!”

“Ten thousand, and he’s read many more that aren’t in this room too.”

“What?!” I exclaim, baffled. I don’t even know why I’m surprised, actually. Whenever I wake up in the night he’s reading beside me. Lynna laughs, a row of pristine white teeth on display. Only the gods know what I must look like sat next to her.

“He’s an odd fellow, isn’t he?” I ask, peering up at the shelves, ignoring the worry for Rexxan that eats away at me. Is he tied to that table again? Is he begging them to stop? “What was he like? You grew up with him?”

“I did. We went to healing lessons together as children too, until my parents made me leave. He was... charismatic, and witty too, I suppose. Larger than life. If you ever meet Siddie, his son, he’s just like Rex used to be. Always getting up to something or showing up late to class, pretending he slept in,

which of course nobody believed because he was dressed in hunting gear, caked in mud, and carrying a sword.”

I laugh a little and she smiles fondly. That sounds like the real him.

“I remember REXXAN and FRIAN throwing a party about a year before the Fire Stone was taken. They filled the King’s Fountain with red wine. At three in the morning they were standing in it, opera singing. We were just teenagers, Ren.” Her smile fades fast, the warmth in her eyes draining away. “Then a year later, life was unrecognisable. *He* was unrecognisable.”

“Because of the stone?” I ask, barely a whisper.

“His father chose a bride for him and they married, despite him being a teenager. He put such pressure on REXXAN’S shoulders to have a child. He’d send the two of them off to romantic retreats, telling them to come back expecting a child. It was all so wrong. As his friends, all we could do was watch as his father forced him to grow up far earlier than he should’ve. Alia fell pregnant quickly, bless her, and then before we knew it, REXXAN was a father whilst the rest of us were still meeting up to drink and play games in the fields after lessons. We didn’t see much of him after that. He was besotted with Siddie, let me be clear, but he wasn’t ready for any of it.”

I nod, silently trying to process this information. I knew Rex raised his son young, but I didn’t realise it was quite so young.

“Then, of course, his family all passed and REXXAN inherited the title of King so early in life. Our nights at parties turned into his staff seeing if they could squeeze me into his schedule for the week. Conversations on the roof of the palace over a bottle of wine turned to me watching him give speeches to the public. Nights in his bed turned into overnight shifts with his council, watching him try and negotiate other kingdoms out of declaring war on each other. So much weight on such young shoulders.

“He had a newborn baby at the time. He wasn’t able to sit upright for months. He just lay there with only one working arm, one working eye, covering one side of his face and chest so his son wasn’t scared of him.” She shakes her head and blinks back tears as if banishing the memories and drawing the conversation to a close. “He’s never been the same since.”

My heart pounds in my chest. I don’t know how he’s survived it all. The rooms that separate us are suddenly far too much. I want to reach my hands into his chest and mend the scars that he doesn’t even let me see. “Can I see him?”

“If you’d like to,” she says, extending a hand to pull me up. Delicate diamonds glitter on her hand, her nails immaculately filed. A gentle arm holds mine as she helps my battered body walk out the door.

“Have you seen Onyx?” She asks, breaking the silence as we walk.

“He asked me to leave him alone. REXXAN broke the news to him that his leg may never heal,” I say, my voice hoarse with unshed tears. “What is he going to do?”

“We’ll give him all our support, Renna. I’m going to work on him too, with Talyn. We’ve already started on the research. If anyone can get him back on his feet, it’s Talyn, Aanen, REXXAN, and I.”

“Have you seen it before? Someone recovering from it?” I ask, my chest puffing with a little glimmer of hope.

“I must say, aside from REXXAN’s burns, it’s possibly one of the worst injuries I’ve seen anyone obtain and live to tell the tale... but I’d refrain from telling him he’s lucky because he won’t feel that way at all. Often we see people create distance between themselves and their loved ones after an injury like this, even if you think it ought to be the other way around. Trauma either unites or divides us, Rennalya, and for Onyx it’s the latter. All we can do is be ready for when he wants to open his heart up to us again.”

“How did you get so wise? You make me feel so...” I absentmindedly kick a leaf in the courtyard as we cross it.

“So...?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Inferior. Young.”

“If you feel younger than me, it’s because I’m almost seven times your age. And what if I told you that I feel the same way about you?”

A laugh escapes my lips before I realise she’s deadly serious. “You feel inferior to me? Being the richest, most influential, most intelligent, most desired woman in Yterras doesn’t cut it for you?”

“I think you’re the most desired woman on this earth already, and that you’ll be the richest and most powerful woman in history once you marry REXXAN, but that is beside the point. There are many things about you that I wish I had, including your fearlessness and your complete and utter acceptance of who you are—“

“Easy when your tits look like this,” I quip, my hands on my chest.

Lynna laughs out loud. “That’s exactly what I mean! I’ve never met a woman so comfortable with exactly who they are and what they look like. It’s delightfully refreshing. But my point is, Rennalya, if we all had each other’s characteristics then we’d all be clones. You’re different to me, I’m different to you, that’s why we’re friends. We spend so much time tearing ourselves down in comparison to other women that we forget that what we ought to be doing is building ourselves up *with* other women.”

I sigh, my fingers tightening around her arm. “I’m grateful REX didn’t marry you, of course, but he’s a bloody great fool not to have done.”

She breathes out a soft laugh. “I’m high maintenance, Renna. I think I’ve spent half of his money on dresses and jewels even though I can buy them myself. I’ve inherited my mother’s love of luxury gifts.”

I smile sadly. “Stellan was like that.”

“How are you coping?”

“Well, I’ve only cried about it six times so far today. Annaliya has been away with the army rescuing people stranded on a hill near the River City. I’m dreading her arrival so much I can’t explain it. Even the thought of telling her...,” I shake my head, tears welling in my eyes. “Can we talk about something else?”

Our conversation doesn’t last long, because I can’t summon any words to speak when I hear REXXAN’s deep voice swearing in agony, muffled like his mouth is covered. “Why doesn’t he ask me to cool them for him?”

“Because you ought to be saving your energy for recovery,” she says, unlocking the door with a key. I hear my swallow, my breathing unsteady as I tentatively step in, equally as scared as I was the first time. REXXAN is tied down, trying to break the restraints as Talyn and three other healers treat him.

This month has been utterly relentless. It’s one thing after another, and if there’s one person who doesn’t deserve to suffer any more, it’s REXXAN. He’s only in this position because he helped OCEALIA. I sit down on the corner of his bed and try to talk to him, but he isn’t listening through the pain. The veins on his tanned arms bulge as the heat of past flames torture him.

I hover my fingers over his chest, drawing warmth from his skin into mine, diffusing it through my body just like he has taught me. I’d trade all of my abilities with my powers just to keep this one. In the quiet peace of the spare bedroom, I watch as his breathing regulates, his chest rising and falling a little slower, and I know he’s fallen asleep.

“Thank you, my lady,” says Talyn, his smile warm. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

“I should leave him to sleep too, I suppose,” I reply, sliding off the bed, my bare feet dropping to the ground.

REXXAN’s hand tightens around mine and my heart melts just that little bit. He struggles with showing emotion, I know, but he does little things that show me more than words could. “I think I’ll stay a while, actually,” I slide back onto the bed

and curl up on his chest, spending my afternoon dozing in and out of sleep with my body on his.

When I wake up, REXXAN is no longer in the small bed in one of the guest rooms, and I roll my eyes in the mirror as I tie my hair up in a ponytail. The muscles in my shoulders burn with an unwelcome ache as I do it.

The room is silent, and I mutter an insult to Rex under my breath. He has no problem asking me to stay, but won't do it himself. *Infuriating man.*

I've bathed today, but I'm going to have another. I think it's a coping mechanism; it'd usually be fighting in the training courtyard but I've lost both the strength in my limbs and my favourite training partner. I brush away a tear before it can escape and focus on the task at hand, just like Rex tells me to. Tie hair. Stand up. Walk across the courtyard. Bathe.

Gods save me. He's leaning against the bathroom door as I arrive, one ankle crossed over the other, the densely packed muscle on his legs hugged by brown riding trousers. Forget whatever nonsense I said about the bathroom, *he's* my coping mechanism. His dark green linen shirt is immaculately laid out across huge shoulders, and just the sight of him heals my mood somewhat.

A dark eyebrow raises at me. "You're giving me that look."

I cross my arms over my chest. "REXXAN, I've honestly never felt less like sex in my life."

He gives me a small smile, but it's warm and full of understanding. "I know, my love."

Love. He said that word to me last night, and a blush creeps across my cheeks. It meant the world to me, even if I am not in the greatest headspace to articulate that to him right now. "I meant what I said last night, Rennalya," he reiterates, reading my mind. I feel my flushed face get warmer. "I knew you'd arrive here soon enough. You're addicted to our bathroom."

Our. The little butterflies in my chest fly a little faster at that three-letter word that holds so much meaning. I slowly walk towards him and he unlocks the door, stepping aside to let me walk through. When I see the sight before me, the butterflies threaten to break out of my rib cage, going berserk.

“Wow!” I breathe, lost for words. He’s made it special... for me. Candles line the edge of the pool, flickering slightly in the reflection of the steaming water. A little pathway leads to the steps into the bath, lined on each side by bright yellow roses, my favourite of all flowers. I can’t help but smile. This room, with my favourite flowers, candles—wait, candles? “Rexxan, you don’t let anyone have candles!”

“Onyx told me how much you love them. I’ll survive just one night with them. Plus, I’ve recently met a very kind lady who cools them for me,” he replies, his voice impossibly deep as it carries over the ripples of the pool.

“She sounds like a catch. You shouldn’t let her go.”

“I don’t intend to.”

I bend down to smell one and shut my eyes. “Lavender scented? Mmm.” My heart lifts even higher when I spot the basket of chocolate-covered strawberries at the water’s edge. I let out a shameless squeal, kneeling in front of it to take one out and eat it. Sweetness bursts on my tongue and I hum in pleasure. This is my idea of heaven. If I’d been good and on my best behaviour in life—which I really have not—but *if* I had, I’d come to this very room after I die.

I hear a breathy version of something that sounds a lot like ‘*oh my fucking gods, this woman*’ behind me, and I stand and turn to see what he could possibly be grumbling about now. Rexxan is holding a small wooden box, on his knees opposite me. Fuck down on *one* knee, he’s on both. The sheer emotion in those orange eyes as he looks up at me through dark brown lashes is staggering. His scars are highlighted by the orange candlelight, and suddenly I’m crying again.

Something about seeing his scars illuminated by the very thing that caused them just so he can make me happy brings me to my knees opposite him.

“Rennalya, the love of my life,” he whispers, his eyes slightly glassy. “With you at my side, nothing feels insurmountable. To wake up beside you for the rest of my life would be an honour I don’t deserve, but it is an honour I am asking for nonetheless. Make me the most fortunate man in Yterras and be my wife.”

“Rexxan,” I whisper, past the lump in my throat. “I already said yes!”

“Not properly. Not like I wanted.”

I move a little closer on my bruised knees opposite him. “Do you promise we can have strawberries for breakfast in the garden sometimes?”

“Every fucking day,” he says, laughing.

I take his face between my hands and kiss him. “Yes, Rex. A thousand times over.” I’m not good at emotional speaking, but I wish I was so he could understand the depth of my feeling for him.

He kisses me again, his teeth tugging on my bottom lip slightly as he pulls away. His huge hand takes my own and gently slides a ring over my finger. “It’s small!” I say, through a sob. He could’ve bought me the biggest diamond on the earth and he’s got me the smallest, most subtle ring and that makes me cry harder. It’s everything I’d have wanted.

“Do you want a bigger one, angel? I can make it bigger.”

“No!” I say, blinking to clear my vision and examine it. Delicate leaves are carved into the gold band, each one coloured green by a tiny emerald. It looks like a little vine creeping around my finger.

“For your love of the outdoors,” he explains. “I had it made for you last month but the world got in the way.”

“It’s perfect for me,” I say, trying to pull myself together. I’ve become one of those snivelling criers that I complain about. *Thanks for that, Stell. Making me look like an idiot even after death.* “We have so much paperwork to do before I marry you.”

“It wouldn’t be a royal wedding if there wasn’t paperwork.”

“About that...do you want to know the only thing I hate more than fish?”

“You hate fish?”

Gods. I’m marrying this man and he doesn’t even know that my single greatest fear is a fish touching my foot while I’m swimming. “Yes! But I hate weddings more. We’re not having a wedding.” That’s a non-negotiable.

He laughs, his head tipped back as if he’s baffled by me. “Fine, so what will happen then, Your Majesty?”

I smile through my horror at that title. I don’t want to be a ‘Your Majesty’. “I don’t know. Just a small dinner with our friends? We’ll read our speeches at the dinner table and that’ll be it.”

“Whatever you want is yours,” he agrees, his words caressing my skin as we sink into the hot bath together. He pours some honey-scented soap onto one callused hand so he can wash my hair, his giant paw spanning my head. He’s a gentle giant when he wants to be. “One day, we’ll celebrate that you’ve agreed to be mine, but I must get back to the river after this.”

Gods above, he’s a work of art, the embodiment of power. He looks like a marble statue, his skin golden as the waterline reaches his overwhelming chest. And he’s mine. I drag my thoughts out of the superficial. “I’ll come with you.”

“Renna—“

I shake my head, his strong fingers massaging my scalp. “I know what I need, and lying in bed crying about Stellan isn’t it. I’ve done that for days now and it’s exhausting. If he were here he’d call me a lazy bastard and tell me to make myself useful. You have a tent down there, yes?”

“I do.”

“Then if it gets too much I’ll sleep in the tent. If I stay here I’ll spend the rest of the day crying. I’ll go down with you. But

first, these strawberries need eating.”

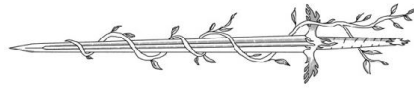
“You’re having most of them,” he orders, in his usual grumpy fashion as he floats the basket on the water between us.

“Bold of you to assume I was even thinking of sharing,” I mumble, around a huge mouthful. He sighs in exasperation at me and takes one out of the basket. I know he doesn’t even like them really; REXXAN is a lean meat and salad person, but he’s trying for me.

I smile as I eat one. It’s nostalgic of simpler times between us. The fire in his gaze as he looks back at me is enough to burn the world down twice over. “You’re divine, Renna. Crafted by the gods to show the rest of us what we should be working towards.”

My cheeks flush as his thumb tenderly wipes a little smudge of juice off my chin. “I love you, REXXAN.”

“I love you too.”



“DON’T STRAY FAR from me. I have guards keeping an eye on you at all times,” Rex grunts, as we arrive on the chaotic riverbank two hours later. He turns my face with his hand, directing my eyes to three guards in gold armour standing atop a stack of hay bales, bows and arrows in their hands, their gazes fixed firmly on me.

“Well that’s not creepy at all.”

“It’s necessary,” he mutters. His moods switch so fast. He’s in a bad mood because I won’t stay at home and sleep. I put on a smile and wave at the guards, but their stony faces stay as serious as sin.

“Do you train them to be lifeless and emotionless?”

“We do, actually.”

“Well we’re going to change that before Onyx—“ my shoulders fall. *Shit*. “He’s never going to live out his dream of being a guard.”

“He may yet.”

“Thank you, my lady, thank you,” says a mortal elderly woman, coming over to clasp my hands. I smile politely. Perhaps I should get this over with.

So I do just that. I spend the first hour accepting thanks, even though the credit belongs with Stellan, Onyx, and REXXAN’s army too. My body stiffens every time I hear Stellan’s name, and I spend half the time blinking back tears and avoiding questions about Onyx and Stell.

But life is yet to throw a challenge at me that I cannot conquer, and with REXXAN’s unwavering confidence in me, and my own faith in myself, I know this one will be no different. *I will be alright*. There are people who need me here. That must be my focus.

I roll up my sleeves, tighten my ponytail, and get to work. The first boat I haul out is a small rowboat. My fingers tie a cleat hitch knot around the makeshift dock piling, and I lift out the shell-shocked woman and her elderly father, sitting them on the riverbank with a cup of hot tea each. There’s a huge queue now to be seen by a healer.

I wander a few hundred yards up the riverbank, grateful for the guards stopping me being crowded by over-friendly people who mean well. A huge black ship is mooring, most of its dark grey sails down. It’s filled with women and children, and the iron figurine of a bull’s head at the bow of the ship tells me it has come from Holn and Hela’s kingdom.

A huge man in a black hooded cloak climbs up the mainmast with inhuman skill, his entire body double the size of anyone else on the ship. It’s nice to know Rex isn’t the only freakishly-sized human out there.

I watch the hooded figure take down the final sail before plummeting ten feet to the ground and landing with ease, quick fingers tying the rope to the mast. He launches himself

over the edge of the boat and lands on his boots with a loud thud into the knee-deep water below. With a grunt, he hauls the ship to a stop and ties it to the biggest dock post. He's *huge*.

Giant black boots stomp towards me, and he pulls his hood back as he approaches. Objectively, this must be one of the most beautiful humans I've ever seen. Not quite Rexxan, but not far off. Strikingly pale frost-blue eyes meet mine, dark tousled hair flopping in front of his tanned and slightly tired-looking face. "I have seventy-three in need of housing," he says, his voice gravelly and deep.

He must be from the Forest Kingdom. There's just something unexplainably recognisable about these forest men.

"That's okay. We're...overrun, to say the least, but everyone will get food immediately and shelter as soon as we can provide it," I explain, calmly. "Mortals?"

"All mortals, except me," he confirms, his eyes narrowing at me, scrutinising me in every single detail the same way Rexxan does. His blue eyes have the same intimidating quality, like they're seeing your darkest secrets. "And you are?"

"Renna."

"Commander Renna, of course," he says, nodding slightly as though he's impressed. "Heard a lot about you."

That's never good. Not when it comes to me. "I see. You are?"

"Obsidian," he says, a smirk on his familiar sculpted lips. I think I've met him before. His defined jawline is familiar. Everything about him seems familiar, in fact, especially the arrogant expression on his face.

"Wow...*wow*. Congratulations on having the best name I've ever heard. Obsidian? Why didn't my parents name *me* Obsidian?"

He lets out a happy laugh and it's refreshing, a drink of cool water in the desert of sadness and desolation that

surrounds us. “And congratulations to you on capturing the heart of the ice-cold Forest King,” he adds, with a boyish grin.

“What? How do you know—how do you...who’s told you things?”

“I have eyes and ears everywhere. No one moves on this earth without my permission.”

I frown. “King REXXAN says that all the time.”

“I’m well aware, Commander.”

“Well...I’m not sure if I’ve captured his heart so much as he’s just realised that sex with me is as good as his life could possibly get. You know him?”

“I’m his son.”

Oh, *no*. I should not be allowed out in public unsupervised. My hand covers my mouth, but it’s too late. “Obsidian. Obsidi-an. *Siddie*. Shit. Oh, no.” I clasp my hands on my cheeks, mortified. “That makes what I just said really inappropriate, doesn’t it?”

A loud throaty laugh escapes him, his head thrown back. He grins at me, a hand stroking the stubble on his jaw. “A little, but it’s fine. I think of my father as a friend, so I’ll get over it. I have to say, he doesn’t usually go for women below four foot tall.”

What the fuck? *Huge* exaggeration, and he’s into my bad books already. “I am tall!” I protest, outraged. For a sorceress, I am bloody tall. Another loud laugh. He’s a very cheerful person, I notice, despite looking exactly like his grumpy father. “Oh, no. This is not how meeting REXXAN’s son was supposed to go,” I mumble, twisting my foot in the dirt.

He beams down at me as if very much enjoying our exchange. “How was it supposed to go?”

“I’d introduce myself, we’d have some awkward dinner as a three, you’d be skeptical and standoffish, and you wouldn’t think I’d be good enough for your father. Then with my unexplainable charm, I’d win you over and you’d slowly accept your father’s love for me.”

“And we’ll all live happily ever after?” He adds, smothering his laughter with a huge, tattooed hand. Of course this is Rexxan’s son. No one would be this size unless they too were related to the gods.

“Exactly! Now you’re getting it.” I shake my head, the realisation of what has just happened slamming into me like a tidal wave. “Oh my word, Obsidian, you’re alive! He’s been worried sick!”

Grief is making me slow. He’s alive. Siddie. Is. Alive. I beckon over some guards to help start unloading his boat.

Obsidian walks beside me, slowing his long strides to remain level with me as I try and find Rex. I spot him standing at the water’s edge, a frown on his face as he speaks to some of the healers. His arms are crossed across his chest, his stance widened a little. His serious gaze focuses on Aanen, a dark strand of hair escaping and cutting across a piercing eye. Every inch of him is carved from marble, his presence heavy in the air around us. I know that he’s a lucky man to have me, but I’m one hell of a lucky woman to have him too.

I point a finger at him and Siddie follows it with his eyes, spotting his father. He shouts something in a language I don’t know and Rexxan’s head snaps to his right, his eyes landing on his son.

He doesn’t even leave the spot, just squats down towards the floor with his face covered by his hands, utterly overcome with relief.

CHAPTER 4I

ENEMIES TO LOVERS (REXXAN)

R elief.

I've felt it before, of course, but I don't think I've ever felt it to the extent that I feel it at this very moment. It washes over me in a restorative wave as my eyes connect with the aching familiar ice-blue ones that belong to my son.

Siddie beams and bounds over to me like an excitable puppy, pulling me back up to standing and giving me the same adoring hug he always has. "Dad," he whispers, squeezing me tighter.

"Siddie, where in the name of ever-loving fuck have you been?" I manage to ask, through the lump in my throat. My eyes are closed as I embrace him back with equal force, one hand on the back of his head. *He's alive.*

"Clingy, much?" He replies, his voice muffled by my shoulder. *For fucks sake.* "I've missed you."

I hold Obsidian's chin in my hand and turn his face left and right to look at a deep cut across his jawline, the same way I do to Rennalya when I'm worried about her. "You're hurt."

"It's been a wild month," he replies, cracking his knuckles. A thick black cuff is tattooed across each of his forearms, a look that he informed me when he got them as a teenager is 'irresistible to women'. I imagine that to Renna we look like we could be brothers, which I suppose in a way we are, being two of the oldest people left on this earth.

"Jokes aside, I've never been so grateful that you taught me to sail a ship. I'm taking her straight back to the mountains

to pick up another boatload of people.” Pale blue eyes gaze at the stretch of dampened mud that was underwater a few days ago. “It’s...is it receding?”

My arm snakes around my soon-to-be-wife’s waist. “Rennalya put the stone back.”

“With my brother and my friend,” she mumbles, and I pull her a little closer, enveloping her in the heat that radiates from my body.

Siddie’s eyes widen a little, disbelief written all over his face. “It’s back? Holy shit. Thank you, Rennalya.”

“For the love of all that is holy, please do *not* call me Rennalya,” she replies, her sweet hands clasped together like she’s begging. She’s so beautiful, dressed in a black hunting trousers and a belt that cinches her waist. I press a kiss to the top of her head, liking the feel of her safely tucked into my side.

Siddie’s smiling like a fucking lunatic at her, and I can see a friendship forming before my eyes. “Yeah? Or what?”

“Or I’ll take *your* father into *your* bedroom, into *your* bed, and let him do horrible things—“ I put a hand over her mouth, stopping whatever filth she was conjuring from leaving her mouth. She’s out of control. She’s known him all of five minutes.

Siddie just throws his head back laughing. “Fair point well made, Renna.”

His eyes dart from me to her, then back to me. I know what he’s thinking. Firstly, that she’s beautiful. Secondly, it’s not shocking that I’m with a woman, it’s shocking that I’m displaying any affection in public, at all. When you’re as famous as I am, you don’t give the public any hope for a new Queen unless there is a real chance it’ll happen. “So this is more than just a fling.”

“Rennalya has agreed to be my wife.”

A dark eyebrow raises, and he looks down at Renna as if seeing her for the first time. “Interesting. And this doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that you’re claiming the last

sorceress as your own? Because that's not very women's-rights of you."

Renna laughs out loud, and I can tell she loves Siddie already. "Shall I blink twice if I need help?"

My son grins, looking at her but tilting his head in my direction. "Please do. He can be an overbearing arse."

She whistles through her teeth. "You said it, not me."

"Are you two quite finished?" I interject, grumpily. They're exhausting individually, and I already know that together they're going to test my patience to its already-narrow limits. Renna smiles up at me, and I fight the urge to kiss her. I want her so badly, but I have to resist until she's better.

"I'll let you old men catch up for a little while," she says, giving Siddie a cheerful smile and heading off to help some guards carry children out of boats.

"She's fucking funny," observes Siddie, watching her sit a toddler on her hip as she holds the hand of a woman who steps out of a small boat. He's envious.

"She is."

"But isn't she an assassin? You don't think that's going to be a newspaper nightmare?"

"She's a *huntress*. She hasn't taken an assassination contract in months, but yes, it will be. Everything will be a problem with the newspapers I'm sure, from her height, to her origins, to her job. It's not going to ruin us."

Siddie raises his eyebrows as we walk back up the riverbank and towards the tree line where a group of our friends are jogging towards Siddie. "You really are in love. I'm just surprised, given the fact you hate emotions and all."

"Welcome back, Your Majesty," says Ellatar, as Siddie pulls him into a hug.

"Good to be home, despite the obvious," replies Obsidian, hugging Aanen next. Once he's reunited with our friends, we ride back to the palace and I catch up on half an hour of paperwork while he heads to his halls to wash and change.

He bumbles into my study, opera singing and dancing before spreading himself out across the sofa. I sit at the huge dark wood desk, each of us with a bowl of wild rice and venison salad. Birds chirp in the vaulted ceiling overhead, bushy green branches tumbling down from the beams. I have lost count of the number of meals I've eaten with Siddie here. From him being too small for his high chair to too big for a regular-person chair.

“So how did you meet her?” He asks, putting a huge forkful of salad into his mouth, eating like he'd been starved for weeks. Perhaps he has. He's fascinated by Renna, as is everyone who meets her.

“She was trespassing and sneaking around the Vault. I imprisoned her.”

“From enemies to lovers. Nice,” he says, nodding his head and giving me a suggestive eyebrow raise. *I've raised an imbecile.* “When was this?”

“About twenty months ago.”

“That long?! You were with her when you saw me last and didn't tell me?” A glimmer of hurt flickers in his eyes and I shake my head.

“We hated each other for most of that time, Obsidian.”

“So it's true that she's a sorceress? People in the other kingdoms are in shock. I'm not sure they know what to believe anymore.”

“Yes, it's true,” I say, and when he opens his mouth to speak, I interrupt him. “No, she can't fly, yes she can summon fire, no she can't make things across the room catch alight spontaneously, but yes she can do it with her touch, and no her powers aren't fully developed yet.”

He laughs. “They were exactly the questions I wanted to ask. Are people trying to take her?”

“I've thwarted four abduction attempts this month alone,” I tell him. I've not told Renna that. She doesn't need any more stress on her plate.

“Shit. She needs bodyguards?”

I snort at the suggestion. *Not my girl*. I tried to hire full-time guards for Renna and it didn't go well. “No, Rennalya can handle herself just fine. She has a couple this week, while she's recovering, which she isn't happy about. Are you staying in the hut?”

“No, I'll stay here tonight and head back off with Esme in the morning.” He points a ringed finger at me before I can reply. “Esme is the name of the ship before you get your hopes up. No wives here, only gold-digging daughters and ambitious fathers. Anyway, I'll come back with another boat of people, and then I'm free until summer, then I'm going to lead the rebuilding of Rinnia with Espan.”

I raise an eyebrow, impressed. I don't tell him enough, but he makes me so proud. I wish his mother could see him now, accepting an offer to lead an army of six thousand into rebuilding a capital city. She'd be very proud of him. He shakes his head at me, smiling ear to ear. “*Engaged*. I cannot fucking believe it. When's the wedding?”

“She doesn't want one. She just wants a quiet dinner.”

“Don't do it before I get back.”

“I wouldn't do it unless you were there, Siddie. You should sleep before you leave tomorrow. I'll get the shipwrights to give Esme a once-over while you sleep.”

He puts a comical amount of food in his mouth and washes it down with red wine before rising to his full height, just two or three inches shorter than me. “I will. Send Lynna to say hello to me when she's free.”

I nod, letting him see himself out as I finish reviewing the levels of healing supplies we have left. They're decimated, and it's going to be a hard year ahead for my people, even with the waters receding. We're rationing food.

But as we have always done, we will manage.

“My lord?” Comes Ellatar's voice, outside my door.

“Ellatar, come in,” I reply, scrawling my signature at the bottom of the report. Ellatar steps inside, standing opposite me in golden armour and the deep red cloak that signifies that he is a Royal Guard.

“I just wanted to let you know that the Commander is in your room. She seemed....”

Annoyance bristles up my spine. I hate it when people dither. “She seemed what? Spit it out.”

“Inconsolable.”

The rest of his sentence drowns into the whoosh in my ears as I push myself back from the desk. *Inconsolable*. It’s not a word I ever want said about Rennalya. I run back through to our room, bursting through the door, my eyes desperately seeking her out. She’s not in there, and I push open the floor-to-ceiling doors into the bathroom. She’s not there either, but I hear a quiet sniff from my dressing room.

“Rennalya,” I say testing the handle; a twisted wooden branch.

The door is locked and she doesn’t reply. “Rennalya, let me come in,” I ask, keeping my voice soft.

“I’m coming out in a minute, I’m alright,” she mumbles, but I can hear she’s crying. She was fine at the riverbed, and anger spikes through me. “Has something happened? Has someone hurt you?” I try the handle again.

“I don’t want you to come in!” She says, between sobs.

“Renna, fuck. Has someone touched you?” I’d burn the world to the ground if it meant I’d know they were dead. “Who has hurt you?”

“I just don’t want you to see me like this!” She says, and my heart fucking cracks. She sounds *so* hurt. I feel completely helpless, and I hate it. I could pick the lock, but it’s not what she wants. “I’m not like this. I don’t want you to think I’m like this,” she explains, through her tears. She’s so quiet through the door.

I place my palm and my forehead on the door, an ache in my chest. “Rennalya, I want to marry you. I want to marry your highs and your lows, your laughter and your tears. I want your daydreams and your nightmares. I want your praise and your insults. I want your joy and your grief. It doesn’t matter how you feel right now, I still want you. Please, just let me help.”

I hear a quiet shuffle, and then she opens the door, standing in front of me and swamped in one of my giant shirts, the sleeves hiding her arms. “I went to see Onyx and he didn’t let me in. And—and I just had to tell Annaliya and the rest of the hunters that Stellan is dead,” she says, through her tears. “And they’re heartbroken, and I feel like it’s all my fault. And I just fucking miss him!”

I pull her into my chest, wrapping two arms around her. I know the privileges of being a leader, but I also know the crushing responsibility and guilt that accompanies it. Every war, every death, every issue, it’s hard not to blame yourself. I see it in the slope of her shoulders, the weight behind her steps. This is sitting heavy on her conscience. “You cannot control everything, sweetheart. Stellan’s death was not of your doing.”

“But if I’d got into the Vault just five minutes quicker... I’d...he’d...I might’ve....”

Pain sears across my chest. I hate that she’s hurting, and I hate that she’s blaming herself, but she’s such an enigma. It’s difficult to know how to help her. Lynna is easy to cheer up. I like her, but she’s the most materialistic person I’ve ever met. *Diamonds genuinely do make me feel better*, she has always said. But Renna doesn’t want my money, and she doesn’t like excessive affection either.

“Can we sit on the terrace?” She asks, as my thumb brushes a tear from her freckled brown skin.

“We can do whatever you like. Shall I have the staff bring you some dinner?”

She nods, big eyes on me. I brush my lips against hers, putting her on the outside bed and asking a servant to bring her

some tomato soup. I'll never get used to these orange eyes of hers. My breath catches in my throat every time I look up. She eats quietly, staring out at my forested gardens that sprawl beneath the balcony. "I'm alright," she tells me, once she's finished her food. "I'll be alright. I know I'm strong enough to get through this."

I fucking love her. "I know you will, love. I'll go and see Onyx tonight and see if he'll speak to me"

She nods, graceful hands sliding the shirt off her bruised and bandaged shoulders so she can tan naked in the deep evening sun. She loves doing this. It's torture for me, but it's torture I'm addicted to enduring. As I push my own shirt off my shoulders, she crawls over me, curling into my lap like a cat. Temptress that she is, her lips begin to place featherlight kisses across my scars, and I tense for a moment before relaxing into it. I trust her.

Ever so gently, she traces the map of burns that sprawl over my chest and trickle down my side, her touch like a bucket of cool water. "Why the name Obsidian?" She asks, eventually.

"He wasn't always called Obsidian. My father named him REXXENIEL. My father was called REXXALION. He was always a pompous man." My fingertips run down the curve of her back as she lies on my chest. "Named both his son and his grandson after himself. When he died, Siddie was a newborn, and it was only us left in our little world. Renaming him was one of the first things I did. I didn't want to name him after myself and my father. I didn't want him to become like us. Do you know what obsidian is?"

"A rock?"

"It's the name given to cooled and solidified lava originating from a volcano. I'd had lava spilled over my chest, and the only reason I survived was Siddie. He was my hope that I'd see the lava cool down. The name Obsidian, obnoxious though it may be, carries so much meaning for us both. It represents everything we survived together."

“It’s the perfect name,” she whispers, eyes wide with understanding as my fingers carve a nonsense trail up her spine again. “I really like him already and... I’m sorry I said I thought you two weren’t close. I judged your parenting when I really shouldn’t have. It’s nice to see a healthy father-son relationship for a change.”

“You don’t need to apologise, angel,” I murmur, and she smiles at the nickname. It takes me back a year and a half, to times that were so much simpler than now, even if we thought they may be complicated back then. Together we have survived war, loss, disaster, and grief. Together, we are unbreakable.

“I hate this ring,” she whispers, removing my father’s gold band from my index finger, holding it up so she can see the inscription on the inside. *Love will kill us all.*

I tear it from her grip, flinging it across the balcony with a quiet clink across the stone tiles. She laughs, watching me slide her engagement ring off her small finger. I hold it up to the sky, letting her sit up to read it. “*Love will save us all.* I didn’t notice that before,” she mumbles, rapidly blinking her tears away.

I smile down at the highlight of my life so far. She looks nice in my shirts. “I’ll get the same thing engraved onto my wedding ring too, Rennalya.”

She takes my face between her hands and kisses me, her golden skin warm on mine. It’s slow and sweet, my tongue coaxing her into opening her mouth for me. A little soft moan caresses her throat, and desire pools at the base of my spine. I’ve never wanted anyone like I’ve wanted her.

I’m rock hard, my hands sinking into the soft muscle of her thighs. But I won’t fuck her, not when she’s fragile. She lets out another soft moan and I laugh. “I’m not even touching you.”

“It’s your shoulders,” she replies, wriggling a little. “I like your shoulders.”

I kiss a lazy path down her neck, intoxicated by the air around her, and when I draw her pierced nipple into my mouth, her hips buck up slightly. Perhaps she has cast a spell on me, but I can't find the resolve in me to care. I'll bask in her magic until my dying breath, and she in mine.

No games; it's not what she needs from me. Just me and her and the love we share. "Please," she breathes, and I know what she wants.

I let my stubble run over the soft skin of her inner thighs, the heels of her feet digging into my back as she wraps perfect legs around my shoulders. I'd like to say no, to tell her to sleep again, but I'm a slave to the primal instincts that surface whenever she is near. A slave to my desire to see her satisfied. Voices of the guards in the gardens below drift past us, but they could walk onto my balcony now and I still wouldn't be able to remove my head from between her thighs.

I flatten my tongue over her and slowly trace it upwards. "You taste divine, Rennalya."

A string of breathless curses leaves her ungodly mouth, her hips rocking as I repeat the motion. She's my ultimate sin.

"Fuck, like that!" She gasps as I draw her clit into my mouth, gently sucking. "Rexxan!" She whines, like she's begging me for something.

"Who's is this?" I ask, sliding one finger inside her. *Fuck*. She's hot and wet around me, and my self-control is in shreds.

"Mine," she breathes, and I grin. I love her sense of autonomy.

"That's right, my love. And who else's is it?"

"Yours. Ours," she says, her hips moving with my fingers.

I kiss her inner thigh gently. "Not mine, but ours, baby. This pussy is ours."

"Megalomaniac," she breathes, making me laugh. I eat her like I've been deprived for months, like a starving man who's found a banquet, my fingers digging into the curves of her

body. Soft mewls echo off the ivy-covered limestone around us, her nails gripping my arms.

“Fuck.” Her breathing picks up, starting to tighten around my fingers. “Don’t stop,” she begs, blazing orange eyes on me.

Gods above, I am so gone for this woman, it’s almost laughable. She’s the highlight of my day, every day. I couldn’t stop if I wanted to.

So I tell her so, not using words but using my mouth, until she’s screaming my name into a hand that’s clamped over her lips and coming all over my fingers. Gods, the *taste* of her. It’s all I need to survive.

I run the warm towel up her inner thigh, glistening in her arousal. “That was quick.”

“Oh, don’t look so smug, I got myself halfway there in the bath.”

“Did you?”

She laughs, her cheeks red. “No, I didn’t. The only reason I’m marrying you is so I can knock you and your rotund ego down a peg.”

“And then divorce me and take me for all I’m worth?” I ask, enjoying that her dry humour is resurfacing.

“Absolutely. I’m taking the library with me.”

I gasp and thwack a hand over my chest in faux shock, and the giggle that erupts from her throat makes me feel ten feet tall. I toss a blanket over her legs. “Right. I’m leaving you here with a book and a cup of mint tea, and I’m going to see your brother.”

“And thanks to you, I need an ice pack for my pu—“

“Don’t even say it.” I shove the blanket over her head to shut her up and leave.

CHAPTER 42

POPPY (RENNA)

“Ren,” Onyx whispers, his voice gruff as a guard shows me into his room. The crisp morning breeze from the window tousles my hair, the sun kissing my face. It is serene in here, and I’m grateful and privileged that Onyx has this room to heal in when so many are in the makeshift tents on the riverbank.

“O,” I barely make the word out through the emotion in my chest. He’s alive, and he’s talking. His sun-kissed brown curls are messy, a little longer than usual. A short beard lines his usually-shaven jaw. I head over and take his battered hand in mine. He hasn’t moved since I last saw him. “I’ve really missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

“You didn’t let me in yesterday,” I complain, not meaning to. I don’t want him to feel guilty for any of his decisions, but I can’t keep the hurt out of my voice.

“Because I don’t want to see you looking at me like that,” he tells me, every word sounding like he’s in agony.

“Onyx, I’m not feeling sorry for you. If it looks like that, it’s not that. I promise I’m not looking at you with pity.”

“I know it isn’t pity, and I didn’t say it was pity. It’s *guilt*. It’s written over every inch of your face. You come in here and I see that you blame yourself for this, and I fucking hate that. I didn’t let you in here because I don’t want to see you tearing yourself up over this.”

Suddenly I'm fighting tears, because he's completely right. I sit down and bring his knuckles to my lips. "I do blame myself, a little bit."

"I know, and I don't want that."

I glance down at his leg, but it's completely covered, so I don't know how it's coming along. "How is it feeling?"

"It's fine. I'll be fine. I want to know how you are. Is he looking after you? How many guards do you have? Is Anna okay? Are you sleeping? Have you eaten? He said his son is alive? That's good."

He says he's fine, but his voice is hoarse from screaming. I can see he doesn't want to talk about it, so I don't press further. "I slept *too* much last night. Yes, Siddie is alive and well, and he seems very nice too. I've eaten, thanks to strict orders from Rex. Annaliya is... heartbroken, but she'll be alright. I'm going to go and spend two hours speaking to the army straight after this. Do you want visitors?"

"No."

"Have you been able to sit up?"

"No."

"Have you eaten today?" I try, seeing the weight of his desolation on his shoulders. He tells me he hasn't, while his shaky unbroken hand reaches up and pulls the white sheet off his shoulders, exposing his torso. Tears sting my eyes. A black outline works its way up his arm and over his chest. It's not finished, but I can see exactly what it is. It's an exact replica of Stellan's tattoos.

"He always used to say it'd be a tragedy if he died because his tattoos are too pretty to be buried," he whispers, and I nod my head, because I know. It's a legacy that Onyx will continue. My finger traces alongside the swirls of black smoke that creep around Onyx's forearm, encapsulating his bicep and working their way over his chest. I wipe the tear that drops down my cheek.

"It's perfect."

“Well, I have nothing better to do here.”

“Do you want some books? They can help you learn to read.”

“I suppose I’d better, now I’ll probably spend my life sat down doing paperwork.”

“You don’t need to work, you can—“

“Leech off my filthy-rich, Queen of a sister—if she can fit me into her schedule?” He snaps, pale amber eyes burning into mine. That stung, and I feel my chest deflate with hurt, but I remind myself he’s just hurting too.

“Onyx, please don’t say things like that,” I reply, calmly. He shakes his head.

“I need to sleep,” he declares, shutting me out of his mind like he always does when he’s struggling. “Come again tomorrow.”

He wants me to come back tomorrow, and I cling onto that little shred of hope as if it’s a life raft and I’m floating far out at sea, and get on with my day.



I SPEND the morning with my hunters. We all take two hours off to eat a hot meal, all two hundred and fifty of us. We share our stories of Stellan and we cremate his body so that I can one day bury the ashes beside his wife and child. And I cry all over again, but I do it without regret or apology.

Next, I find REXXAN carrying a battered, broken boat up the riverbed, smashing it up into pieces and tossing it onto a bonfire. He should definitely not be that close to it. His jaw is set in a hard line, his gaze hot enough to fuel the fire in front of him. He spots me and the flames in his eyes only intensify as he drops the last splintered piece of wood and walks over. Gentle fingers push a strand of hair behind my ear as he

towers over me and wraps a hand round my waist. He can't bear to not be touching me, and I love that.

“You look beautiful, Rennalya. How was he?”

I shrug because I'm too emotional about Onyx to talk about him much. “Fine.”

Concern dances in those terracotta eyes and he pulls me through the chaos and into the tent that is his temporary home at the moment, filled with a few changes of clothes, a single bed, healing books, a desk, and a stack of paperwork.

“Are you sure you are alright?” He asks, his fingers stroking my hair with so much tenderness, in contradiction to the explosive power that is packed into every inch of him.

I nod. “I'll be fine. I just want Onyx to be fine too.”

“He will be. Time heals all things, Rennalya.”

“Alright, grandad,” I mutter.

He laughs, a rare display of perfect white teeth. “I'm changing my mind about marrying you, you know.”

“Your loss,” I breathe, as he walks me back to the edge of his desk, his dark gaze fixed on mine, dropping down to my lips.

“You didn't sleep,” I say, trying to formulate a sentence. The closer he is to me, the more my brain is scrambled.

“I know. I was going to sleep this morning, but I got dragged away to an emergency. I managed to wash though, so that was a small win.”

I grin up at him, kneeling up on the desk so I can kiss him, hit by a sudden awe for this man who finds time for me when the weight of the world is on his shoulders.



REX KISSES ME GENTLY, his hands on my waist. We spent two hours clearing boats, and then I had a productive thirty minute cry in the tent. “Do you need to stay here and sleep?”

“Rexxan, I’m not broken. You don’t need to treat me as if I am.”

He wisely don’t mention that I just cried into a cup of tea for a while. “You’ve been through a lot this month.”

“I’ll come out and help again.” My hand slips comfortably into his and he leads me out of the tent. The kingdom is buzzing with rumours about us, and though we haven’t been subtle, we’ve agreed it’s out-of-touch to make the announcement at a time like this. There are more pressing issues that deserve attention.

“Quick fuck in the tent?” Asks Anna, appearing at my side, hauling a load of mooring lines over her shoulder to start bringing more boats in.

“Absolutely not,” I say, gasping in shock as if I’m scandalised by such a suggestion. “It was oral, and bloody good oral too.”

“Rennalya, not in public,” warns Rexxan, his voice stern.

“Sorry,” I mouth. I need to work on that. Anna winks at me and pokes her tongue into the side of her cheek. With a grin, she veers off to the left, hauling the pile of rope over to the shipwrights. Rexxan and I get to work at the waterline. I’ve not known him long, in the course of our lives, but we work together like people who have been a team throughout the ages, acutely aware of what the other is doing.

“From King Espan. It’s the first of three, to express his gratitude. More will come,” says the captain of a ship as it moors on the riverbank. No people are aboard, only bags upon bags of flour, oats, rice, grains, and dried fruit. Rexxan nods, beckoning twelve soldiers over with two fingers and asking them to unload the boat. That’s a relief, I suppose, but it’ll vanish quickly.

My focus is dragged away by the sound of someone screaming something in Golden Tongue. It takes me a moment

to adjust to the language and hear that they're calling for help. I climb up onto an abandoned boat to see a little further in the distance, and I make out a wooden boat. The stern is much lower than the bow, and a low thud of dread begins in my chest.

It's sinking.

There's no doubt in my mind as I kick off my boots and tear my black cloak off my shoulders. "Rennalya! What are you doing?" Shouts REXXAN, standing in the water where he's searching for survivors amongst the rubble.

"There's a sinking boat!" I shout back, before jumping off the boat and plummeting down into the floodwaters below. I wince as I resurface, my body bruised and fingers still broken, but I have to push through. The water is murky, congested with splintered wood, sharp nails, and metal shards so I swim carefully, the bitter cold sinking into my skin. As the screaming intensifies I start to swim, my aching muscles protest as I battle the flow of the polluted river to reach them.

REXXAN catches me up quickly, his body built for this. "Did you see how many?" He asks, a few other soldiers diving into the water behind us.

"No, but they're from Espan's kingdom. They're speaking Golden Tongue."

REXXAN channels through the water with the agility of a shark. Oh, fuck.

Sharks.

I forgot about fucking sharks.

Suddenly I'm petrified every time anything touches my foot, even though I know very well that there isn't any. "What is it?" He says, slowing down.

"I'm scared!" I screech, channelling my inner Queen Lana as I swim after him. "Could a shark have come from the sea?"

"No," he replies, like I'm stupid. I take a deep breath, reminding myself that if a shark was going to eat one of us, it'd definitely go for REXXAN because he'd make a better meal.

They're begging for help on the ship, and I reach harder, pushing myself further. The boat looks bigger and bigger as I approach, and I was right. It is sinking, almost half of it underwater.

"Fuck!" Shouts REXXAN, looking up.

"What?"

"It's Mary."

A twinge of familiarity hits me, but I can't place why. "Mary?" I ask as he bolts off.

He doesn't reply, just leaves my side and starts swimming at a ridiculous speed, and I watch him pull himself up onto the sinking boat where Mary is screaming. Mary. From a distance, she looks familiar, and I battle the rocking of the waves and push a floating wooden plank out of my way. Oh, shit. It's Mary who runs the orphanage we volunteered at.

I'm half a minute behind, and REXXAN is already up on the half-submerged deck of the ship, picking up children. He directs me around the back of the ship where some of them have fallen out and are treading water.

"I'm Renna," I explain, calmly wrapping the arms of a small child around my neck and putting him onto my back. "And I'm going to help you get warm and dry."

"I'm scared!" The small boy screams, and my chest constricts. REXXAN is dragging a child out of the water, passing him off to a soldier who puts him on a floating bamboo stretcher.

"I can't find Poppy!" Screams Mary, and REXXAN's eyes snap up. I vaguely recall the name, and then I remember the tiny blonde-haired toddler that REXXAN has been visiting for years. "When did you last see her?" Mary just sobs into her hands and REXXAN hands another small child off to a soldier, grasping Mary by the shoulders.

"When did you last see her?" He grits out, firmer than he means to. "Mary, fucking answer me!"

"I d—I—I don't know! She was here an hour ago!"

“Fucking hell. Espan didn’t send any guards to help you all?”

“We were attacked. We lost the guards,” she sobs, and I shake my head, needing to focus. I swim and swim until every child that fell in the water is on a life raft whilst REXXAN unloads the smallest of the children from the sinking boat. He lifts Mary up, gently handing her to Friar in the water and asking him to give her a healer and a therapist.

I start to swim further out, back in the direction the boat had come from, further and further until I can’t see land, and my body is wracked with exhaustion. “Poppy!” I scream, over the water. “Poppy!”

Just the distant sound of the chaos behind me and the quiet sloshing of the river meet me.

I swim further out, and I hear the sound of coughing over the gentle waves. “Poppy!” I shout again, and I hear a quiet voice, then some muffled screaming. I find her half treading water, half clinging for her life onto a piece of driftwood that’s triple her size, coughing up the floodwater that washes over her face.

“Poppy,” I say, and it’s both a shout and a sob. She looks up at me with terrified eyes. “It’s me. It’s Renna. Do you remember me? REXXAN’s friend?”

“I falled out!” She cries, between coughs.

“I know, but I’m going to get you to safety.”

“I lost my toys,” she says, sobbing into the driftwood. I cannot cry. Not here. Not now when she needs me. I tread water, pulling the piece of wood towards me.

“I’m going to help you,” I repeat, holding onto the wood instead of her, remembering REXXAN saying how scared she is of strangers. “You need to close your mouth, Poppy. See like I’m doing?” I breathe deep breaths through my nose to show her.

She nods but keeps coughing up water. “Can you hang on to me? I’ll swim us back to the land?”

She looks at me warily, mistrust written all over her tiny face. I slowly reach out my hand to touch her, and she shrinks away. A warm, strong hand settles at my side, piercing the freezing cold around me, and suddenly REXXAN is here beside us.

“Poppy,” he whispers, and she sees him and immediately starts crying harder. It’s overwhelming relief on her face, relief at seeing a face that she trusts. “Renna is right. You need to hold onto one of us. Is she choking?”

“She almost drowned.”

REXXAN gently places his hands on Poppy’s arms, her wrist almost the width of his giant fingers. “Renna and I are going to help you, okay?”

She nods. “I lost my toys.”

“I’ll have my soldiers keep an eye out for toys, alright?”

She nods, hiccuping a breath. Her arms are too short to reach all of the way around his neck, so he holds her hand and swims with her on his back. “Okay, Ren?” He checks, stopping to look at me. I nod, but I’m not. I wish he’d see himself how everyone else did. I wish he’d understand.

To this little girl and to me, in this moment, he is everything.

REXXAN swims back to the shore, talking to Poppy the whole way. She doesn’t reply, just trying to breathe through her never-ending coughing. When we make it onto dry land, he lifts her into his arms and jogs straight into the immortal healing tents. I follow, grabbing a blanket on the way in as he sits her on a makeshift floor bed and leans her forward at the waist, forcing her to cough up the rest of the water.

She screams in fear as he firmly claps her on the back, trying to escape him but he holds firm until the last of it is out of her lungs. “Stay here. I should tell Mary we found her,” he instructs me, standing and heading into another section of the tent.

“I fell out and I lost my toys,” repeats Poppy. Her huge green eyes are full of tears, her short blonde curls matted to

her face. I'm not sure I've seen a sight so heartbreaking. The healers around me get to work on all the orphans, all of the children starving and shivering. The staff is calm, collected, and organised under the leadership of REXXAN and LYNNA, and my pride to be becoming part of this kingdom triples in size.

"I know, and I'm so sorry. But we'll keep looking for more toys. Can I see your leg?" I ask, watching a small trickle of blood run down her shin. She nods, watching me with a fearful expression. "WEXXAN?"

"He'll be back, my love. He's just speaking to Mary," I say, gently. "Can I touch your leg? Would you let me touch it where it's been bashed?"

She inches away from me and I soak a small ball of wool in water. "How about you wipe it, and I'll show you how?"

She nods, taking the ball off me and wiping the blood from her cut. "You're so brave," I whisper, giving her another dry one to use.

The smell of forests, leather, and wine invades my senses, then I feel a rush of warm air, and I know he's back. REXXAN kneels down beside me and POPPY hands him the cotton wool, letting him clean her up. I refuse to believe this man is real, or better still, that he's mine. His gentle hand is as big as her shin as he heals her cut with his magic. My heart aches for the children that we cannot have together. He's so good with them.

"Somehow, all accounted for and no casualties," he says, pulling me out of the dark depths of my thoughts. Relief runs through me.

"I lost my toys," she whispers again. "I fell out."

"It must've been so scary falling out of the boat. I can't even imagine what it must've been like," he replies, wrapping a small white bandage around her leg. "But you were so strong and you held onto the wood until we saved you."

She nods, the tiniest bit of pride in her eyes, and REXXAN taps her tiny foot. "Remember who got you these boots?"

"You," she mumbles, and he smiles.

“I’ll get you a nice new cloak too. Your one is all torn and wet.”

“Pubble?” She asks, her face turning red with hopeful embarrassment, and he grins, his giant fingers unlacing her boots and drying her sheet-white feet off with a flannel.

“If you want purple, you can have purple. Are you scared to let Renna touch you?”

She nods, shrinking away from me again. Gods, she’s the sweetest child alive. Her eyes look too big in her thin face. REXXAN peers back at me. “It’s women. She’s scared of women, mostly.”

“That’s alright, I understand, Poppy. You just tell me whenever you want me to go away, yes?”

“Are you still friends?” She asks, and REXXAN tugs me closer to him, his thumb stroking my shoulder.

“We’re getting married. Renna is going to be my wife.” The glitter of happiness in his eyes as he says it with his eyes fixed on me has my heart doing somersaults.

Her eyes widen. “Really?”

“Yes, because a very sensible girl named Poppy told me I was a silly man who was pretending not to be in love with her.”

Poppy’s huge eyes widen in defensive shock. “I didn’t say silly!”

“Didn’t you? So I’m silly *and* forgetful too?!” He gasps, two hands on his head in horror. A giggle escapes her blue lips as he puts clean socks on her feet.

I am so hopelessly in love with him.

He plants a kiss on her knuckles, and she looks up at him like he created the world and everything in it. “This old, silly, forgetful man has lots of big important jobs to do today, so I’m going to leave you here in the sensible hands of Alina.” He beckons over a mortal healer who had been one of the first to arrive in a boat last week.

Alina smiles warmly. “She’s beautiful. How old is she?”

“She’s... well, in your ages she’s two, but in our ages she’s about eleven or twelve, so her speaking is more advanced than a mortal two year old.”

Alina nods, taking in this information. “My name is Alina. I’m looking after you and your friends. If you’re hungry or tired or something is hurting, just say my name and I’ll be right here.”

Poppy nods, her eyelids drooping as she lays down on the makeshift bed of hay. REXXAN puts a small pillow beneath her head as her lashes flutter shut. He stands and pauses for a moment, before picking up his dry cloak where it hangs by the door and draping it over her. He’s a sight for sore eyes, his wet shirt clinging to every ridge and muscle beneath, crafted and honed by centuries of dedication.

A guard comes over with a note as we walk side by side out of the tent. “My lord, could I get you to assign—“

“I need a minute,” he snaps, stalking out the door and across the treeline, dismissing anyone who comes near. I follow behind him, his long strides too great for me. He walks straight into the tall tent we’d been in earlier, and when I walk in he’s stood with two hands on his desk, leaning over it and puffing out a slow breath. Worry slices through me.

“Are you alright? Is it your burns?”

“No.” He rakes a hand through his messy hair. “Fuck. We were minutes away from losing her there, Rennalya.”

“She’s fine.”

“But she could easily not have been!” He shouts, and I take a step towards him, walking him back towards the small single bed. He sits down on it, and I sit down beside him before he pulls us both down to lying, squished together because we barely fit. I like being squished with him.

“If she’d died today, she’d never have known any of the love that she deserves so much. I’ve known her since she was a baby. Fuck. And the rest of them, too. They deserve better than what happened today. You know, Siddie could easily have

been an orphan, Ren. Imagine him dying like that; out there in the cold dirty water. *Fuck.*”

This has hit him hard. I see that now. REXXAN is never affected by anything, but children are his weakness, and that girl out there is like family to him. I bury my head in his chest. “We’ll help her. We’ll get her back on her feet.”

“It’s not enough. I have to find her a family to go home to. I can’t watch her go back into an orphanage. And before you say it, royalty can’t adopt.”

Oh. “Why?”

“We just can’t. It’s written into law. Too many debates about bloodlines, claims to the throne, inheritances, and so on.”

I hadn’t thought of all of that. “Then we’ll find her a family. I’ll help you,” I whisper, kissing his jawline. The stress radiating from his every pore is stifling. “Has anyone ever scratched your head?”

“Why the fuck would I want someone to scratch my head?”

“Because it feels nice.”

“I have no need for—“ his words die off as my fingernails sink into his damp hair, massaging his head and running my nails over his scalp. A low, satisfied grumble sounds in his throat and I laugh out loud.

“You were saying?”

“Why are you stopping?” He asks, his voice low and husky as he moves my hand back to his head which only serves to make me laugh harder. But he just closes his auburn eyes again, long, dark lashes fluttering shut, and I let my fingers continue. I feel him drift to sleep beneath my hands, and my heart swells so big it threatens to burst clean out of my chest.

I would die for this man, and him for me.

I see my future at his side.

CHAPTER 43

TOMATO SOUP (REXXAN)

I stand atop the roof of the palace, the sun beating down on my skin. It's hot today, and the land that stretches out before me is a million shades of yellow and green.

The water has receded out of sight.

The whole of my forest and the fields beyond are visible once more. It's been two months since Renna returned the stone, and over a month now since we found Poppy drowning in the floods. Her injuries healed quickly and she's back up on her feet; so much strength built into such a tiny person. She was adopted this week, and it feel like one of the many loose-ends of my life had at last been tied. Her and Rennalya, they're two very powerful women that I'm very grateful to have met.

And this week, Onyx was finally moved from his bed in the healers quarters into a room in the palace. He requires healers full time, but he has stood on his own and walked across a room with assistance. It's small progress, but it's progress all the same.

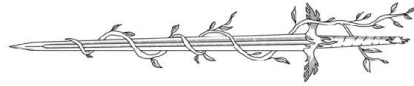
Our 'wedding' is in seven days. Rennalya wants no part in the planning, so I've made it exactly how she wants it. It's her, myself, Siddie, Lynna, Frian, Ellatar, Cetresar, Talyn, Ascan, Annaliya, eight of her hunters, and Onyx, if she can convince him to come. We'll sign the paperwork, we'll eat and drink with our friends, and then we'll leave.

It's not what I imagined it would be like, and it's a far cry from my first wedding. Food and drink are still being rationed

for us all, and I suspect they will be for a long time yet. The only reason I'm sure that Ren will follow through with the wedding is because she'll get a huge meal for the first time in a while.

Then I'm taking her to one of my many properties, a small cabin, buried in the middle of a woodland, which itself is surrounded by fields. It's truly remote, where no matter how loud she screams my name, no one will hear her. And as for her wedding present, it has cost more money than I've ever spent on anyone in my life, but I'm hoping she'll like it.

I *know* she'll like it.



THE WEEK PASSES in a blur of planning, hiding surprises from Rennalya, helping with the thousands of sick and injured, helping at the Healer's Halls, and liaising with Ocealia, who is furious to be missing the wedding. We've promised her and Espan that we'll do another one next year when they're able to leave their kingdoms again.

High-pitched screaming from the garden has me putting down my paperwork and speeding to the window. Siddie is chasing Renna around the garden with a bucket of icy water as she throws plums at his head with alarming force. I've come to realise that those two are like dogs. I just need to let them tire themselves out in the garden for a while until they're more manageable.

She trudges into our bedroom twenty minutes later, dripping wet.

"He got you," I observe. She nods, water running off her nose. She's shivering, but she's also glowing with pure childlike joy. She and Siddie have become close friends, and he is helping her through her grief for Stellan. Perhaps it's because he's so much like Stellan was.

“Ready to go?” I ask. Each kingdom has its own wedding traditions, and in the Forest Kingdom, your honeymoon begins the day before you marry. You spend the night together and then you arrive at your wedding together.

In thirty-five hours, she’ll be my wife. It’s thirty-five hours too fucking long.

She nods and smiles. “I am ready, because your staff have done everything for me!”

“Because I want you to relax and enjoy the days before our wedding.” I planned for her to have a massage today. She cancelled it in favour of stabbing trolls in the forest with my son.

“That is if I don’t jilt you.”

“If you jilt me, I’ll jilt you harder.”

She raises her eyebrows a couple of times, biting her lip. “Mmm. I like the sound of that.”

She straddles me in my lap, kissing me hard as she rolls her hips in a circle. I’m *feral* for her.

“Let’s go,” I say, kissing her neck. We’ve cut this honeymoon down from a month to a week because we’re so in-demand with the flood recovery, so I don’t want to lose another minute.

“Where are we going?” She asks, as I take her on horseback down a dirt road once we’ve made it past the huge crowd of well-wishers, overjoyed at the idea of a royal wedding at last.

“One of my houses.”

“How many do you have?”

“We have nineteen. But only eight in this kingdom.”

“*Only* eight?!” She shrieks, pulling on the reins. Her bad-tempered black stallion stomps in protest. She won’t let me get rid of that fucking horse. It’s worse than her. “And how many rooms does this one have? Does it have a galley?”

“A galley is a kitchen on a ship.”

“Oh. It just sounded posh to say. Does it have sixteen bedrooms? Ten drawing rooms? Is there a staff quarters? Do I need a map?” She’s mocking me. I showed her one other of our properties, a nineteen-bedroom manor on a lake. She hated it.

Seven of the properties I own in my own kingdom were commissioned and built by my father. Only one of them by myself. Siddie and I built it together over two years. He was a boy with energy to burn, and I was a man who needed distraction from life, and this was our solution.

Every other weekend, we’d spend it up to our knees in mud, wood, stone, and cement, until we had our own little space where we could forget we were royalty and just sit and talk and play games. In the palace, I was a King. In the cabin, I was a father.

“When can I have my wedding present? Can I have it now?” She asks, like the annoying toddler she can be. If I hear one more ‘are we nearly there yet’, it’ll be a solo honeymoon.

“No.”

“But why? Because we’re getting married tomorrow, so I don’t see—“

“Because if I give you it now you’ll want to play with it for ages, and I intend to spend the next twenty-four hours inside you,” I say, bluntly.

That does the trick.

She’s squirming on her horse now and the thought has me hard. But I rein in my thoughts, because I love her, and she deserves more than our first honeymoon fuck being in the side of a bush. Knowing her, though, she’d probably like it. She raises an eyebrow at me as I adjust myself. But, mischievous nymph as she is, she just wriggles a little more and lets out a soft moan.

“Rexxan, I want you to be so deep inside me that I lose track of the fact that we are two separate beings.”

“Rennalya.” I snap, slowing my horse. She doesn’t fucking care, she just gazes at me with those cat-like dark eyes, white

teeth sinking into her plump bottom lip.

“We’re five fucking minutes away. Do not make me fuck you on your hands and knees in the mud.”

“I have zero issue with you fucking me on my hands and knees in the mud, Your Majesty,” she says, a soft smile on her lips. Then without another word, we take off in a sprint. I don’t spare a glance at the guards that wait at the gate into the garden. They open their mouths to tell me the house is ready for us, but I hold up a finger that means *tell me later, I need to bang my wife or she’ll be cross at me.*

The second we get through the gates she’s off her horse, looking around. “Where’s the house?”

“Down the pathway.”

“A walk? No! I don’t want to walk!” She says, horrified and shuffling from foot to foot. I laugh at the irony because Rennalya has summited more mountains than any other person I know.

She’s practically vibrating with impatience, and I clear the space between us in a second. The breeze tousles her hair as I wind my fingers through it, gripping it tight, and claim her mouth as my own. We’re stood on the overgrown lawn, her sweet mouth opening for mine. In a terrific turn of events, she has nothing on beneath her black top and I let out a tortured groan. My fingers tease her pierced nipple, tugging ever so gently on the metal bar as I whisper all manner of filth into her ear.

She’s a mess beneath me, her hands exploring every inch of my chest. I love this with her. I love that she’s unashamed. She takes what she wants and she does it without apology.

Then we’re sinking, down and down into the soft grass beneath us. And then I’m kissing her harder, and her clothes and my shirt are beside us, and I don’t even know how it happened. The sunlight cocoons us in gentle warmth, and before I know it, I’m inside her.

And I wonder, here in this moment, how I could’ve ever believed that this woman is anything other than a sorceress

because the way she has stuck her hand into my chest and thawed my frozen heart is nothing short of magic.

The sun paints the flecks in her orange eyes gold, and the look she gives me speaks a hundred words. I nod, because I know exactly what she's going to say. "I feel it too, Rennalya. It feels like this for me too."

I pull out slowly, and sink into her again, relishing every inch. She was made for me, and I for her. I take it slow, giving her time to adjust to me, and when she tells me that she has, my control finally snaps. I switch between languages as I take her harder, hissing at the ecstasy that accompanies the pain of her nails raking down my back.

I'm not quite fucking her. I'm not quite making love to her either. This is some intoxicating blend of the two that has me and her suspended in a cloud of golden bliss. The invisible ties that bind us grow stronger with every passing minute, my heart tethered to hers by the most unbreakable bond.

"I love you," she whispers, her legs around my waist, glossy hair spilling over the ground beneath us. A butterfly weaves its way between our bodies. It flutters from my chest to hers and she laughs out loud. It's an angelic sound.

"It's Stellan!" She says, through her laughter. "He always wanted to join us!"

I smile down at her because she's right, and because she finds a beautiful meaning in the smallest of things. The butterfly kisses her shoulder once more and goes adrift in the wind, and I take a deep breath, appreciating the joy of this moment before it can pass me by unnoticed. But I'm burning with need for her, and if I don't move more, I'm going to combust.

So I hold her hand in mine and fuck her like I mean it. I feel the tension building up in her body, winding her up to the top. The guards can hear us. Worse, the guards can probably *see* us, but I don't care. She's shaking beneath me, her breaths in perfect time with my hips. I rest my forehead on hers as we spin nearer and nearer. But I'm dangerously close to the edge.

“Anaeseliane, liaste,” I say, in her people’s tongue. *Touch yourself, my love.* I can hardly hear myself, hardly feel the grass beneath us, or the breeze on my back. It’s just me and her, and that’ll always be enough for me.

She comes. And as she buries her head in my neck, I do too. And then she’s laughing; loud, cathartic laughter that has me laughing too, even though I don’t know what it’s about.

“What?” I say, cupping her chin and turning her face to me.

“We’re supposed to be running this kingdom and look at us,” she gestures to the lawn around us. “We didn’t even make it to the door!”

I grin because she’s right, but it’s nice to relax sometimes. To break free from the chains that have bound me since the day my father died. I put my shirt over her head so she’s just covered, and then I toss the rest of our clothes over my shoulder, smacking her behind as she walks down the path. She stops and frowns at the tiny log cabin nestled in the trees. “Is this... the gardener’s shed?”

“No, this is it,” I say, tugging her forward. She hesitantly follows.

“Rexxan, I am not in the mood for you to murder me in a cabin. And this right here is a murder cabin.”

“Drowned or hanged?” I ask her, and she follows after me through the little gate at the top of the cobbled path to the door.

“Hanged, obviously. What psychopath would choose to drown?”

“Me,” I usher her past the wooden front door before she can run off. The staff have been here. The pantry is stocked, the house warm. I don’t come here in winter, because it’s too cold to stay here without a fire, and being in a small log cabin with a fire burning isn’t good for me.

“I have so, so many questions,” she asks, standing in the kitchen that’s hardly big enough to fit us both in. It seemed big

enough when Siddie was only as tall as my waist. Now he's a giant like I am, it feels smaller.

"Fire away, sweetheart," I say, lifting her onto the oak worktop and settling between her thighs.

"Umm... do you own this?"

"Yes."

"Is it for... torturing people?"

I laugh out loud. Torturing Siddie with my chess skills, maybe. "No."

"Is it for... when you want to scream in pain at your burns?"

"No, but I've done that here."

"Did you buy it?"

"Siddie and I built it six hundred and fifty years ago, and we replace the roof and walls every now and then when they need it."

Her frown deepens. "But... I thought we were going to a castle or a manor. Something like Lynna's house."

My lips brush hers. "Why would I plan a Lynna honeymoon for Renna? This is a Renna honeymoon, through and through. We'll be alone in a wood cabin. We'll wash in the stream in the garden. We'll walk the forest outside. We'll fight each other in the garden until our swords are bent. We'll fuck until we can't anymore. We'll eat whatever and whenever you like, and we'll be husband and wife while we're doing it."

She's silent for a brief moment, but then she goes berserk, jumping up and down in my arms with childlike excitement. She barrels up the stairs and into one of the two small double bedrooms. There's an open window, a huge gap in the wall that is filled with the view of the trees outside.

"You own this?!" She yells, as she jumps out the window and lands with a thud on her feet, finding the archery target on the side of the house.

"We own it."

“This is my wedding present?”

“No. Your wedding present is better than this.” I say, leaning out the window to watch her wander to the stream in the trees. She runs around for a while, exploring every inch of the house and garden, before slamming into me with scary force.

“It’s perfect! Can we come here often?”

“As often as our schedules allow.” It’s not great, but it’s all I can offer.

That’s good enough for her, because she rewards me with a beguiling smile, and the best blowjob I think I have ever received.



“SO WE’RE GETTING MARRIED TOMORROW!” She says, perching on a wooden stool at the edge of the kitchen worktop.

I wrinkle my nose. “Maybe, yes. Depends how I feel on the day.”

She launches a tomato at my head and I catch it, putting the whole thing into my mouth. She looks deep in thought. “So... you and Siddie came here?”

I take a knife out of a block and sigh. “When he was a little older than Poppy is now, we were on our way back from his nursery when we got overrun by the public wanting to meet us. The guards couldn’t hold them back, and though they meant well, they completely surrounded us. It was a lot for him, and it turned into a crush. His hand was hurt.

“Then, when we got back, he told me he sometimes wished his father could be exactly like me, but someone else. When he saw the look on my face he took it right back, but he meant it. So I vowed to give him a piece of normal, quiet life every now and then. Away from the speeches, the dinners, the interviews, the war planning, the trade agreements, and the

long night shifts. We came here often to build a little bit more of this place. Then when we finished, we'd spend most of our weekends in summer here."

She nods, fiddling with her fingernails. "You're a good father, REXXAN."

"I've done my best, with the cards I was dealt." I grin, tossing a tomato up and catching it on the blade of the knife. "I learned to cook for him since he didn't want any staff here, just us."

"You're cooking for me?!" She squeaks, and I nod, dicing tomatoes.

"Tomato soup."

"You're cooking tomato soup for me?!" She says, even more high-pitched.

"Are you fucking malfunctioning?"

"Are *you* fucking malfunctioning?"

"Watch it," I growl, pointing the knife at her. She just laughs, shaking her head in disbelief.

We eat on the rocks outside, our feet in the stream, and if I say so myself, it's fucking good. I don't really know how to cook, just a few of Siddie's favourites. I know Renna thinks that it's good too, because she's successfully gone sixty seconds without talking. She's a mass of contradictions as she sits opposite me, humming softly as she dips bread into soup.

She's fascinating. She's holding her tomato soup as if it's the love of her life, as if she's the gentlest of souls, but she's killed so, so many people. And here's the weirdest thing; it doesn't keep her up at night. She'll squash a bee in the garden, and it'll ruin her day. She'll torture someone to death, and she doesn't blink an eye.

"Would you consider seeing a counsellor?" The words are out before I can stop them, and I hope she takes it well.

She raises a sharp eyebrow, amusement in her eyes. "Right. Because I'm crazy enough to agree to marry you, I suddenly need therapy?"

“Because you’ve killed and been on the run for so long now, that I am worried you will be lost without it.”

Her face drops as she realises I’m serious. I’m grateful for what the Shadow Hunters did for her. They saved her life. But they also turned her into something ruthless. Someone who kills without blinking an eye. She messes with her hair. “I would *like* to see one, I’m worried what they’ll think of me, though.”

“Why?”

“You know that serene feeling you get after something good? After a good meal, or finishing a long hike, or after good sex? I get that after killing people, sometimes. And if I tell a healer that... they’ll think I’m a psychopath.”

“They won’t. They’re paid to help people like you.”

“There are no others like me.”

“I thought you might like to start seeing Hettanya.”

“Hettanya? The prison counsellor?!”

I shrug. Rennalya is not so different from the prisoners, she’s just been privileged enough to make a living out of her violence, to be able to channel it into more productive places. She puts down her bowl, and I know her thought train is mirroring mine. “Holy *fuck*. That makes perfect sense, actually.”

“Something to think about, anyway.”

She crawls over the cool rock and kisses me. “Thank you for caring enough to suggest it.”

“Always,” I whisper, kissing her again.

We don’t sleep inside. We sleep beneath a blanket on a hammock outside, and it’s fucking perfect. We’re warm, the outside is cold, and I feel... happy. *I feel happy*. I say the words over and over in my head, trying to get used to them. They don’t feel right when I say them, but they are.

“Bloody hell, REXXAN, stop overthinking everything and sleep,” mumbles Renna, half asleep as she stirs in my arms. I

laugh, because she knows me so well now. I tuck her a little closer to my side, which I pretend is to keep her safe, but truly I think it's to keep my own heart safe. Somehow, despite my whirring thoughts, I drift off.

CHAPTER 44

LONG OVERDUE (REXXAN)

The sun and the wildlife wake us early on our wedding day, and dawn kisses Renna's face through the trees. She's beautiful, and I cannot believe I marry her today. She opens her eyes and I smile. They still shock me, for some reason. I keep expecting her eyes to be the dull brown they once were, but they aren't. And it's a reminder of her bravery in accepting who she really is.

"I get to marry you today!" She says, sitting up. She wiggles her eyebrows at me, feeling my obvious arousal. I've woken up with Renna on top of me; it's not my fault.

Even after all our escapades overnight—turns out fucking in a hammock is *not* easy—I still want her. She looks lovely when she has just woken up. I take her hand and start leading her up the stairs, but in true my-life fashion, we're interrupted by a knock on the door on the one single day in fifty years that I've asked not to be disturbed.

"Two minutes," I say, turning and stomping down the stairs. "Two fucking minutes, I swear."

Half-naked, I stomp down the stairs and yank open the door. "I'm fucking busy."

"I need to talk to you—"

"I'm busy."

Brilliant aqua eyes meet mine, unwavering. Lynna has never been one to back down from me. "You've mentioned."

“This better be good,” I snap, tossing my hair up into a messy bun. I want to be upstairs, inside the Shadow Commander. Six days. Six days off work. It’s all I’ve fucking asked for.

“I was leading a healing course at the orphanage today—“

“Brilliant,” I interrupt, and her eyes flash with annoyance at my tone. I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Sorry, carry on.”

“Poppy was back there. Returned late last night.”

And just like that, my anger is lost in the sea of despair that floods my entire being. My heart plummets out of my chest and through the forest floor, crushed by the weight above it. Something inside me snaps, and I don’t really hear whatever Lynna is saying. I realise that Rennalya has appeared beside me. She’s asking me if we can adopt Poppy, but my ears are ringing. She’s been discarded again. For what, the sixth time now?

Before I know it, I’m pulling yesterday’s shirt over my head and I’m on my horse.

“What are you doing?” Asks Renna, mounting her horse beside me.

“I’m doing something I should’ve done a long time ago.”

CHAPTER 45

TWO BECOME THREE (REXXAN)

“Anpopeia,” I say, outside her old wooden door, after the most exhausting six hours of rewriting a law and getting it past mine and Rennalya’s royal council to be sworn-in. This usually takes days, but I think the anger radiating from my every pore sped them up.

Between my determination and the Queen’s equanimity, we can now adopt our own child. It’s for her, and all that her parents stole from her. It’s for me, and my dreams for my future with Renna. And it’s for Poppy, and the love that the universe has never been kind enough to show her.

“Rexxan and I are here,” explains Renna, her voice so gentle and calm.

“Go way!” She screams, from inside, and I hear the sound of a toy being thrown at the door. I sit down outside in the hallway as Renna does the same. Poppy is screaming in anger at us, but she’s crying in there too.

“I’m just sitting out here,” I say. “You can come out too, if you’d like.”

It takes twenty minutes for the door to screech open, and a big green eye, two feet off the ground, peeks round. “Oh. You still here,” she says, flatly.

“Still here, lovely girl,” replies Renna, holding out a small piece of flapjack. I smile as Poppy creeps the door open a little wider and edges forward. She’s no different from my Ren; so easily bribed by food. Ever so tentatively, she takes it from

Renna's small fingers and nibbles on it, watching us through puffy eyes.

"Poppy, my love, I know you've had a bad week," I start, and she sits cross-legged opposite us in the doorway to her room. "I'm really sorry we didn't choose the right family for you." Guilt twists my stomach. They seemed fucking perfect for her, the man was a carpenter and the woman a healer. They had a grown-up son. They even had a cat, which she was so excited for.

I let her down.

"I cried too much," she says, her tone dejected. "It was as-and-."

"An accident?" Offers Renna, and Poppy nods.

"It's not your fault, at all," explains my almost-wife, as Poppy shuffles back an inch. "Not at all. They just didn't have enough spare love for someone else right now."

"I know this is a lot to think about, but we'd love to take you home to our house," I offer, after a deep breath.

"For apple pie?" She asks, quietly.

"Well, yes, for apple pie, but also for forever."

I see it in her eyes. The temptation, then the worry, then the decision that it isn't worth the pain when we send her back. "I come for apple pie, then I go back here."

She's just like Renna. *We eat and then we leave* is Ren's catchphrase. "If coming for apple pie today is what you'd like, we'll do just that. But when you're ready to think about it, we'd love you to be ours."

"I would... I would stay with you?" She asks, intrigue written on her tear-stained face.

"Forever."

"With a bed?"

"With a bedroom, and a nice bathroom too. And we have some big gardens," I explain, as she takes it all in.

“How long for?”

“Forever. For lots and lots and lots of years,” says Renna, handing her another flapjack.

“Would you be my daddy?” She asks me, looking at me as if the question means nothing at all, and suddenly I’m swallowing the emotion in my throat.

“Well, yes. But you don’t have to say that. You can keep calling me Rexxan forever if you like. And Renna would be your mother, but you can just say Renna if that’s nicer for you.” Her eyes move to Renna, and to the box of biscuits she’s holding. “Poppy, I would trust Renna with my life. She is my best friend in the world. I’d never let you near her if I didn’t think she’d be nice to you.”

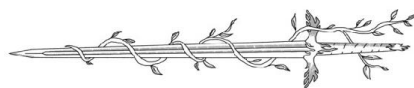
“How long for?” She asks again.

I stand up, brushing the dust off my hands. “I tell you what, let’s go have some apple pie at our house. We can think about all of this later?” I suggest, and Poppy nods.

We wait in the doorway as she walks back to her bed, her shoulders slumped. She folds up her pyjamas and tucks a toy bear into her floor bed. When she grabs a tiny square of blanket from her small bag, I recognise it immediately. It’s the cloak I laid over her after she escaped the floods, cut and sewn into a neat square as a comfort blanket. I stare at the ceiling in a bid not to get emotional, and we step aside to let her out of her room.

She crawls backward down the stairs, each one a big jump down, and Elle appears with a bright smile. “Are you going out?” She asks, and Poppy nods.

“For some apple pie,” I say, plucking her boots off the shelf. She tugs them on, holding her foot out in my direction for me to do the laces.



AT THE PRIVATE entrance in our palace gardens, we eventually convince Poppy off the horse with the promise of another go later. When we walk into our wing of the palace, she freezes in terror at the sight of the eight guards guarding the door to our apartments. Renna distracts her, opening a bag of raisins and handing one to Poppy who follows her like a dog after a scrap of dinner.

I'm struck by a feeling I so rarely feel; *fear*. Fear that Poppy won't want to be here, won't want to be adopted by the King, won't want to be adopted by me. Now that it's dangling in front of me; my wife chatting away to my potential daughter, I want this so fucking much.

But I know better than anyone that to be the child of a King is hard, and I need to get Poppy to understand my situation fully before I can let her say yes.

Renna opens our bedroom door directing her to the balcony. Poppy blinks around us, her eyes widening at the size of the gigantic bed, her eyes taking in the branches and leaves around us. We say nothing, letting her absorb it all.

"Wow," she whispers, eventually. "Lots of green! It's your house?" She spins to face me, wobbling on her feet. She's still mastering walking, a little behind her peers physically.

"This is my house, yes. Mine and Renna's."

"It's big!"

Renna smiles, her eyes filled with adoration as she parts the opaque curtains. A glimmer of hope forms in my chest as Poppy lets Renna take her hand to help her up onto the outside bed.

"You like apple pie too?" Asks Poppy, as we start eating a small slice each, the three of us sitting in a triangle on the white duvet. Renna nods enthusiastically, accompanied by an appreciative moan that has my mind going places that are not appropriate right now. If I don't get to take her to bed soon, I'm going to drop dead.

"I *love* apple pie," she says, and Poppy nods, giving Renna a look of appreciation like she had completely misjudged her

until now. She then looks to me with a look that says *good-choice, REXXAN*, and Renna and I are in stitches on the bed. She's such an old soul, my Poppy.

"I don't like you to touch me yet," she says, to Renna.

Renna nods as she swallows her mouthful, her eyes softening with understanding. "That's perfectly fine. We don't have to touch to be in the apple pie club."

A small giggle escapes Poppy's lips, and she nods her agreement, finishing her pie in comfortable silence. Finishing it isn't quite the word, because ninety percent of it is on her hands and face, but she's doing her best.

"You want me?" She asks interrupting the silence with a sigh of relief as if she'd been building the courage to ask that for hours.

"We'd love for you to live here, but we are the King and Queen," I say, and her eyes widen.

"You're King this *whole* time?"

"I am."

"But you don't have a cow."

"A crown? I have lots of crowns, I only really wear them at big events."

"Oh."

"Mine and Renna's jobs mean sometimes, one of us might need to be away from home for a night, or sometimes much longer, like a month or two, but we wouldn't both go at once, and we won't do it for at least a year," I begin explaining.

We sit on that bed as the morning breeze morphs into the afternoon sun, telling everything to Poppy. I know she's only twelve or so, I don't expect her to understand it all, but I want her to understand that Renna and I are famous and so she will be too.

"Shall we take you back?" Asks Renna, as the afternoon draws late, the sun staining the cotton clouds in shades of orange and red.

Poppy looks unsure, picking at her bottom lip.

“What’s going through your little head, Pop?” I ask, knocking on her head as if it was a door. She giggles, shuffling nearer to me and burrowing into my side.

“I’m thinking what if you send me back.”

“We will never, ever send you back,” I say, meaning it. Not for anything. “There’s nothing you could do that would make us send you back. You could…” I stroke the stubble on my chin, “you could smash an apple pie on Renna’s head and call her a silly cow, and we wouldn’t send you back.”

Poppy is in a fit of giggles, and Renna continues. “You could call Rexas a giant poo, which would be true, by the way, and we wouldn’t send you back.”

She’s rolling around on the bed laughing, genuine care-free laughter filling the air, and me and Renna are wearing the same face-splitting grin. But my next words are serious. “It doesn’t matter how much you cry, or how much you scream, or how much you wake us in the night, or if you don’t want us to cuddle you ever again, or ever come into your bedroom. We will never send you back.”

She holds out her little finger to us both, and I shake it with the most serious of faces, as I do if I am negotiating the Kingdom out of war. “I can stay today?” She asks, with eyes full of hope. She’s had the best day today, full of excitement and new things. She must be so tired.

“You can stay if you like, but if you want to be back at the orphanage for a few more days—“

She vehemently shakes her head, and Renna gets up. She’s grinning at me. And I’m grinning at her. Because our wedding is so fucking cancelled, and there’s never been a sweeter reason.

All I know is that with my son, my new daughter, and the love of my life all safely under this roof, life has never felt as whole as it does now. I whisper an eternal thank you to the gods for delivering Renna to me. She’s all a man could wish

for and more, and she's taken my shattered heart and mended it into something far greater than it ever was before.

As the sun sinks, once Poppy has eaten her dinner alone in a quiet room—which is what she asked to do—we get her cleaned up and take her to the room next door. Renna's eyes widen, impressed. In three hours it has been transformed. A soft rug spreads itself over the stone floor. The king-sized bed has been replaced by a small toddler's bed, the books on the shelf replaced with children's ones. Her teddy has appeared on her pillow.

And for the first time, we do bedtime together, and it takes fucking hours to get her to sleep.

Renna brings the blanket right up to Poppy's chin. She's worried, I think, because being a parent was never something she expected, and it has come out of nowhere. But I know Rennalya, and she loves more fiercely than anyone I've ever met. Poppy and I are lucky to have her.

I head outside with my hand in hers, watching Poppy sleep as we ease the door closed. "I've never been more sure about anything in my life as I am about you," I say, turning to face her in the dim hallway. She smiles up at me like I'm the one who put the stars in the sky, and I swear I feel twelve feet tall.

The hallway is silent and dark, save for the soft silver light of the moon. I think about how far we've come, how many memories we've shared in this very hallway. From leading her and Onyx through here the day I found her trespassing in my forest, to catching her spying on me from the rafters above our heads, to helping her walk down this hallway after she'd put the stone back because her body was too broken to do it on her own. I fell in love with her in this hallway.

We've laughed, cried, fought, grieved, sung, danced, and kissed under this roof, and now our daughter sleeps beneath it. "I'm very glad I met you, Commander Renna."

She's crying now, and it's not just about Poppy. It's everything. It's months without regular sleep. It's the loss of her friend. It's the sheer amount of death we've seen this year. It's the physical toll we put on our bodies to be as strong as we

are. It's the amount of friends we've had to say goodbye to. It's what happened to Onyx, and it's the little ray of hope that sleeps in the next room.

"I'm not good at emotional words!" She says, through her tears. "But I am glad too, and I don't think I'm going to jilt you after all."

I laugh, tossing her over my shoulder, lighting the lanterns in the hallway in case Poppy wakes up, and taking Rennalya into our room. I deposit her onto the bed, hook my arms under her thighs, and in one smooth move, roll us over so she's straddling my face. She lets out a breathy moan, and I squeeze her thighs.

"Quiet, baby, we're parents now," I order, and I can hear her smile.

We're parents now.

CHAPTER 46

THE CALM (RENNA)

“So you and daddy are being married today?” Asks Poppy, as she lets me rub soap into her head. It’s been slow progress, and she hasn’t let me hug her yet, but she likes it when I massage her head, just like someone else I know.

“That’s right, which means you’ve been here for six weeks now!” She’s put a touch of weight on, her bones no longer so extremely visible, and she finally unpacked her bag this week. She’s starting to believe us when we tell her she’s here forever. It’s been a joy to get to know her, even for such a short time. She loves horses and reading. Last week, we had a little three-day holiday, just the four of us in our log cabin in the trees.

It’s been *so* hard. She screams at night, and won’t let us near her some evenings. Sometimes she sits in her room and tells us not to come in all day, and all we can do is sit outside her door whilst she cries herself to exhaustion from damage inflicted before we even knew her.

I’ve cried so many tears. Some days I feel like I’m on the back foot with her compared to Rexxan, who’s she’s known for almost all of her life. She lets him see so much more of her heart than she does me, but I wouldn’t change any of it for the world. She just needs some time and lots of love, and I have bags of both to give her. “You still don’t want to come?”

Small arms splash around in the bubbles. “How many people?”

“Not very many. Less than twenty,” I hold up my fingers twice to show her how many. “Siddie will be there.”

“Siddie!” She sings, and I laugh. She’s in love with her big brother already, who takes her down to feed the horses. “I not going.”

“That’s alright,” I kiss the top of her head. She doesn’t like loud rooms yet, and she doesn’t trust all of our friends, so she’s staying at home tonight. It’s our first ever night away from her in the forty-five days she’s been with us, and Rexxan is not coping well. He has half the army guarding our halls for the night, with even more lining the gardens below our balcony. You’d think we are expecting a full-on invasion.

“Uncle Onnie?”

“He’ll be with you all the way until the morning. You’re sure you’re happy for us to go?”

Poppy nods, her soapy curls bouncing. “Onnie and I can eat sweets.”

“What?!” I screech, and she bursts into laughter, splashing the bubbles. “Let’s not tell your father.” I put bubbles on my chin in the shape of a beard and imitate Rexxan’s ludicrously deep voice. “You girls need to stop eating all the sweets!” I growl, and she laughs harder as I reach to get her a warm towel.

“Up we get then, Anpopeia.”

“Is Renna your big name too?”

“No, mine is Rennalya. Daddy uses it when he’s cross with me.”

“Is he cross at me?”

“No, not at all. You’re not trouble like I am. We absolutely love being your parents, Poppy. We feel so lucky.”

“Lucky,” she tests the word like she doesn’t believe me. I dry her short blonde hair, laying out her clothes and letting her dress on her own. I thought it might be hard, having a child who isn’t yet comfortable with physical touch, but it isn’t. Growing up with an abusive father has me understanding every little decision that pops out of her head.

“Arms up!” I say, when she hands me the sweetest little knitted jumper. I bought it for her to match the colour of REXXAN’S eyes. She holds her arms up and I slip it over her head quickly, smiling as her head pops out of it. “There she is; my lovely girl.”

Her cheeks flush, shy like she is whenever anyone compliments her. As I roll up the cuff of her sleeves REX strides in, his face a little bloody. He locks his sword in our new child-proofed cabinet and comes right over. He’s so happy. I thought he was happy just before POPPY, but he’s *so* happy now. Beside the man I met in the forest two years ago, he is utterly indistinguishable.

“My girls,” he says, kissing my lips softly and then both of POPPY’S cheeks. She holds up her arms for him to pick her up and he spins her around, tugging me up to dance with them.

“Did you miss me?” She asks, barely audible. She asks us both this, every single time we come home from anywhere. It’s sad, because I know there must be a reason why she asks it so often.

“I missed you *so* much, ANPOPEIA. And your mama too.”

REXXAN and I have cut our work hours down for this month and next. It buys us time to spend some time together with POPPY. And when she’s at nursery, it allows us to waste an afternoon in our downstairs bedroom, or volunteer with the displaced families that are still sheltered here, or do our newfound hobby of hunting together in the woods.

We get her shoes on and take her down to the nursery, full of similar-aged children of the palace staff. She used to cry when she arrived, now she barrels in like a bull in a china shop in the direction of the drawing table. We can’t even get a goodbye out of her. It makes my heart sing.



BY EARLY AFTERNOON, Anna, Ascan, and Lynna burst into my room. They all shriek, piling into mine and REXXAN'S bed. Anna tackles me with astounding force, tossing me into the headboard.

"Your braids are in my mouth," I protest, as she hugs me hard. She pulls away and smells a pillow. "Even your room smells like sex. Fuck me, did you *just* have sex in here?!"

"It's not my fault! We didn't get to bed last night because Poppy had the mother of all meltdowns!"

Anna and Lynna start berating me and I'm fighting for my life as Ascan smells the pillow and nods. "Smells like sex, Renn." "

"Stop!" I hiss, hiding behind Lynna, who just laughs. She carries a silk bag in her hand, sealed with the green ribbons of the best dressmaker in the Forest Kingdom.

I sit on the bed, chatting happily with Anna while I let Lynna and Ascan fuss over my hair. A huge bouquet of yellow roses arrives into the room, hand-delivered by two guards. They deposit it on the bedside table in front of me, and hand me a card. I open it to see little messages from all forty of the royal guards, each one carrying kind words about me. I look up and swallow the lump in my throat as they smile and bow their heads. "Congratulations, my lady. Have a wonderful wedding."

"Thank you both," I say, my heart full to bursting. I've come to love REXXAN'S staff. He says they're an extension of himself, and I understand that now. My manicured—thanks to Lynna—fingernails pluck the notecard off the flowers. Ostentatious handwriting in metallic gold ink sits atop dark green paper; REXXAN'S stationery.

RENNALYA,

I'M THE LUCKIEST MAN ALIVE TO BE ABLE TO SAY YOU'RE GOING TO BE MY WIFE.

DON'T DRINK TOO MUCH, I HAVE PLANS FOR YOU LATER.

*YOURS AND ENRAPTURED,
ROATR.H.*

I GRIN at the name at the bottom. He's added our daughter's name to his own. REXXAN Obsidian Anpopeia Tsellyx Relynn Hallenian. His name is as obnoxious as the opulence of our home, but beneath the surface it's a tribute to the people he loves. Anna sighs at the huge bouquet of roses in the box. "I want one."

"One day," replies Lynna. Ascan just winks at me. I know Talyn spoils him just as much as Rex spoils me.

"Holy *shit!*" I say, as Lynna turns round the full-length mirror. I look...well, I look *pretty*. I often feel sexy, but it's not often I feel pretty. I feel it now, though. I'm in a black dress, the shiny satin pooling at my feet. The bodice is tightly fitted, and a scandalous off-shoulder neckline shows off more than enough cleavage. I love it. The skirt billows out around my hips, the perfect shade of iridescent black.

My hair is almost all down, left to flow freely to my hips, just two small braids put into the front and tied to meet at the back of my head. Dark makeup lines my eyes, expertly applied. A gold necklace with a tiny poppy charm dangles around my neck. I've never been much of a dress person, but I'd be buried in this one if I could.

Ascan is crying. *For fucks sake*. "You're the most beautiful bride I've ever seen!"

Lynna nods, dabbing the corner of her eye with a handkerchief. Anna just wolf-whistles. "I would if I could!" She shouts, and I laugh.

"I feel happy and sad," I whisper, as Lynna delicately puts an earring in my ear.

She smiles fondly. "To marry as a woman is bittersweet, Renna. We gain *so* much, but we lose a little of ourselves too. Its okay to feel sad for the little girl you once were."

She walks me down to the small dining hall that we are eating in, leaving me alone outside. I'm nervous. Why the fuck am I nervous? I've never been nervous about anything in my life, let alone seeing the man who I've seen almost every day for a year.

Motion in my peripheral vision distracts me, and I spin to see him. Heat engulfs my face, spreading lower in my body, and my mouth is suddenly dry. All rational thoughts make a beeline exit out of my head as I drink in every inch of him, every curve of his muscular legs clothed in black. He's a behemoth of a man, radiating power as he strolls leisurely towards me like he owns the place. *He does own the place, Renna. And so will you, in an hour.*

It's his shirt that's my undoing, tailored perfectly to him. It sits perfectly across broad shoulders, the shape of his chest visible beneath. It's tailored to his arms, but not tight, and it's crafted from the same fabric that I'm wearing now. Something about Rexxan clad head-to-toe in black has me all hot and bothered.

"If my past self could see me now," he shakes his head in disbelief, his eyes sliding down my body at a lazy pace, running back up again just as slow. "He'd wonder what I could possibly have done in my life to deserve to even lay my eyes on you."

"Rexxan," I whisper, finally unfreezing from the spot and running over to him, launching myself into his embrace. He's hard already and I laugh when he suggests we sack off the wedding and go straight for our one-day-long honeymoon.

I take his arm, and side by side we walk through the hallway, smiling at the guards who open the double doors into the dining room which erupts into cheers, everyone clapping our arrival at the large dinner table that seats all of us.

"You look *so* pretty, Renna. He's a very lucky man, and you're a lucky woman," says Siddie, kissing my cheeks as I hug him hard. I thank him through the emotion that tightens my throat and somehow hold it together until I reach the last person in the line.

Onyx looks at me with what I can only describe as undiluted fatherly pride. “You look so grown up, Rennalya. He’s the luckiest man alive,” he says, tears glittering in those yellow eyes. I wipe my own away, but they are just as quickly replaced. We both miss Stellan tonight.

Rexxan pulls out my chair, sitting me between him and Onyx. I rest my head on my brother’s shoulder as we chat happily with Lynna and Talyn whilst Rexxan talks with some of my hunters. Lynna is opposite me, heart-achingly beautiful, and I catch sweet glances between her and Onyx every now and then.

I’ve not always had a lot of love in my life, but this room is teeming with it. It’s suffocating in the most beautiful of ways.

Rexxan has chosen every element of this meal for me, from it being my three favourite dishes to the fact that, against palace protocol, everyone only has one knife and fork. I hate trying to work out which is which. As our first course plates are cleared, Onyx clears his throat, shoving his sword into the polished wood floor to use to help him stand. That is probably a fortune’s worth of damage to the solid cherrywood flooring, but Rexxan doesn’t seem to care.

“I’m...I’m not good at this kind of thing,” he shuffles uncomfortably, hating that people are looking at him, so I squeeze his hand. I nod at him, silently telling him that he’s doing fine.

“But in place of the father of the bride, Rexxan asked if I’d say a couple of words,” he says. He’s nervous, but he carries on. “Ren...when I was adopted, I didn’t get the loving parents I’d wished for, but I got love by the bucketload from you. I...,” his voice wavers, and so does my heartbeat, “...I’ve spent my life protecting you, and I’m handing that responsibility over now...but I’ll always be here for you, just like when we were small. I’ll never let you get hurt.”

Fuck my life. I feel like my heart is breaking. Onyx is holding back tears, and I’m not entirely sure that they’re happy ones. His yellow gaze meets Rexxan’s. “And Rexxan. We got

off to a shaky start, I know. But I want you to know that there's no one else I'd trust more with my sister. I've seen the change in her, the joy that she carries when she's with you and Poppy. So, I want to thank you for making her so happy. But nothing has changed—hurt her and I will kill you,” he adds, hastily.

Rexxan stands and leans over to clap him on the shoulder. “I'd expect nothing less.”

It's what I hear Rexxan whisper to Onyx as they embrace that puts me on the edge of sobbing.

There's room for us both in her life, Onyx. Never doubt that.

I stand after we've eaten chicken pie. “I'm even worse at speaking than my big brother,” I say, whacking him on the shoulder. Onyx just laughs, shaking his head at me in despair.

“I have no blood relation to anyone in this room, or in fact this entire world,” I tell them, trying to remember the speech I planned in the bath this morning. “But I've never felt more surrounded by family in my entire life. I didn't come to the Forest Kingdom to fall in love. But I did, and I couldn't be gladder that I'm marrying the incredible bathroom that captured my heart on my first day here.”

They laugh, and I grin at Rexxan. I'm not *just* marrying him for the bathroom, but it definitely sweetens the deal. I thank Siddie first, because my friendship with him has been the most unexpected blessing from all of this. I thank Friar and the other guards, because they have kept Rexxan going through the perpetual stress of his entire life.

Next, I thank Lynna, because I could never possibly have imagined that a relationship with my husband's ex-lover could have enriched my life by so much, but it has, and she is an inspiration to me in all that I do. I thank Annaliya, because everything I've done over the last two years, including leaving camp to meet Rexxan and leaving to get the River Stone, is because she never fails to step up to lead the army when I'm dragged away. I am surrounded by strong women. I am one myself.

And very briefly, because it makes me cry, I thank Stellan, even though he isn't here to listen—not that he'd be listening anyway—because it was him who pushed me to give my relationship with REXXAN a chance.

I take a deep breath to thank Onyx, but nothing comes out of my mouth. There are no words in the tongues of all the Five Kingdoms that could ever do justice to how much I love him. I take another trembling breath, but instead just I shake my head, my hand covering my mouth as I feel a warm tear running down my cheek. I cannot say anything I want to him without breaking down.

He. Is. Everything.

He has *always* been my everything.

My childhood superhero. My father figure. My brother. My best friend. My guiding light. The calming voice in my nightmares. The one to patch up my grazes as a small child. He has been the constant reminder that there is kindness left in the world even when it feels so insurmountably dark. There is nothing, and I mean *nothing*, I wouldn't do for Onyx. There is no pain I wouldn't suffer to see him happy. There is no torture I would not endure to see the weights that tie him down removed.

But as my tearful eyes hold onto his, absolutely none of that comes out of my mouth. Instead, I just hand him a two-page letter that contains everything I want to tell him but can't.

Like the fact that he is worth *so* much more than he thinks. That he is the reason I am still here today. That he is the embodiment of all the good in the world. That even though he thinks he'll be lost now I'm married, he'll actually be *free*. Free from the ties that my parents bound him in. Free of me and the curse I have been to him for so long.

"I'm sorry. I'll read it to you," I say, as I try and pull myself together. REXXAN doesn't intervene, and I love that about him. He lets me say what I need to, he lets me break down and then find my own strength.

Onyx folds the paper and tucks it into his jacket pocket. ‘*I get it,*’ he mouths, with a reassuring smile. I nod, squaring my shoulders and turning to the man who has changed it all.

“But to you, REXXAN, I don’t know where to start. I’ve never met anyone like you, and I know I never will again. I’ve never met someone so driven, so hardworking, and so selfless. I met you at a time when I woke up each day and chose to hide who I am and where I’m from, and you taught me to be proud of it. I truly believe that together, we are utterly unstoppable. And... oh, *fuck*. I had so much written down! It’s on a piece of paper in my bedside table!”

He’s laughing at me. Fuck him. I try and remember what I want to say. “You make me so happy?” I suggest, trying to rescue my speech. *Oh, no. I think I’m going to start crying again.* “And I love you, and I’ve forgotten the rest, but I really do love you, and Poppy and I love lying in bed and reading a book with you. And you’re the best father ever and....”

REXXAN’S huge shoulders shake with laughter, pulling me down to sit beside him before I ramble on nervously. Oh, gods. I’m glad I didn’t attempt my speech to Onyx. It would’ve been a disaster. “That was perfect, my love,” he presses a kiss beneath my ear, then one on my lips. “I love you.”

“I love you so much,” I reply, and we’re grinning at each other like we’re two complete idiots in love.

We are.

We eat dessert, which despite the grandeur and the chandeliers around us, is nothing more than a giant bowl of chocolate-drizzled strawberries plonked in the middle of the table with a load of forks. I fight Siddie and Anna for the last one, and it makes me miss Stellan even more because he would’ve joined that fight and he would’ve won it, too.

We sign the contract that legally binds us, and it lodges a lump in my throat because for the first time in my life, I have a surname. I have three names, in fact, now I’ve adopted the Forest tradition of adding your children’s names onto your own.

Rennalya Anpopeia Hallenian, Commander of the Shadow Hunters, Guardian of the River Stone, Queen of the Green Woodland and of the Dark Forest.

I like how that sounds.

Rexxan signs his signature beside mine, his eyes locked on mine as he does it. “My wife,” he mouths, the second his quill leaves the paper. “My wife.” He repeats, loud enough for the others to hear. They erupt into cheering, and he takes my face between his hands and kisses me.

“Renna,” he says, with a hand on my shoulder as I eat another strawberry. “When I met you in the forest, I don’t think I could’ve ever imagined that we’d have been through what we have today. You’re the strongest person I’ve ever met, and watching you grow in confidence and in experience over the last two years despite the adversity life has thrown at you has been a complete and utter privilege.

“I have had my fair share of lows, even if I am abysmal at talking about them, and when I was burned I remember telling Lynna that every day for the rest of my life would be an opportunity to finally die. But with you, my days have morphed into days I can be grateful to live.

“I cannot wait to share all of your joys, and to support you through your tears. I cannot wait to pick you up at our lows and to celebrate with you at our successes. I cannot wait to see our daughter, and any other children we may adopt, grow up in a loving home with loving parents. I cannot wait to watch her learn with such an inspiring role model for a mother. I cannot wait to watch your friendship with Siddie get progressively more ridiculous, and I cannot wait to get to know your brother and your best friend better.”

He casts terracotta eyes to my brother and continues. “I couldn’t be happier or more fortunate to be gaining you as a brother, Onyx, and I’m well aware of the fact that Rennalya would not be sat beside me today if you hadn’t approved of me—that’s how much she loves and values you.” I’m crying, but Rex just smiles down at me, stomach-clenchingly handsome.

Rexxan has taken the pieces of my life that had been fragmented and scattered into some kind of impossible jigsaw, and he's meticulously and painstakingly put every single piece back in its place to create the most beautiful picture. He kisses me one last time amid a backdrop of whoops and cheers, and when I cast my eyes over Lynna's shoulder, Onyx has made his slow and painful way to the door while we were all distracted by Rexxan's speech.

He salutes me and gives me a nod, and I'm fighting tears because this feels like more than just a simple goodbye. This is more. This is the end of an era, and it's bittersweet. Like a crack in my heart has mended but a new one has formed beside it. He cocks his head towards Rexxan and gives me a thumbs up as if to say that I made a good choice, and then disappears through the door to go and look after my daughter.

I turn my attention back to my husband, who is busy avoiding questions about himself and instead gushing about me and everything that I do. I grin with my chin on his shoulder, basking in the love he gives me.

CHAPTER 47

THE STORM (RENNA)

I 'm sure the carriage driver didn't hear us.

I *hope* the carriage driver didn't hear us.

I'm trying so hard not to laugh as REXXAN steps out of the black carriage and the driver opens the other door for me. I dare glance up at him as he bows his head slightly. His face is bright red, eyes anywhere except me, and I know he heard REXXAN fuck my brains out in the back of the carriage to our cabin.

"That was...if you heard noises...uh...one of the flooring planks was loose."

What am I saying? Stop, Renna, *stop*.

But no one replies, so I carry on my panic-rambling. "The noise was...we...we had to bang the loose plank back into place?" I offer, and REXXAN's teeth sink into his lip. He's trying not to laugh at me. Then I'm aware of the fact that I'm miming hammering a plank back into place, so I immediately put a stop to that. REX hands an obscenely huge tip to the driver and dismisses him.

He turns to face me. "Hammering a plank ba—"

"Shut the fuck up."

The cabin is cold, the fireplace unlit. I would like a fire, but I'm not willing to trade REXXAN's mental welfare for it. "In my kingdom, Rennalya, it is tradition that every couple plants a tree on their wedding night. Either in their garden or in the forest."

My heart flutters. That's very romantic. "So your kingdom...your forest...."

"Is built upon thousands of centuries of partnerships. Some young saplings, some ancient oaks. My forest is built from the commitments it's people make to each other. And in time, the oldest trees will die and the youngest will become strong. Tonight we'll plant ours, and we'll watch it grow until the gods decide that our lives are complete."

As is tradition, we kneel in the dirt barefoot, digging a hole with our hands. My dress is filthy, but I don't care. This is perfect. Our legs are knee-deep in dirt as we lift the silver birch sapling into the hole, filling it once more but saving the final handful of dirt for Poppy and Siddie to place tomorrow.

As we pat down the soil, he leans over and kisses me hard.

I have a husband.

The one thing I thought I'd never do, and it's the one decision I've never been more sure of.

His lips are on mine again, and I'm basking in the heat from his hard body. His hands run down my back, circling my waist like he'll die if he isn't touching me.

"There is nothing you and I cannot achieve together," he whispers, kissing me harder now. His mouth is hot and possessive on mine, one hand gripping the hair at the back of my head. The breath is snatched from my lungs and I'm overcome with pleasure, both physical and emotional. His words seep into my chest, mending the cracks and splinters that have fractured my heart for so long.

The first drop of rain lands on my arm. It's one, and then it's hundreds. But Rexxan doesn't notice, or maybe he just doesn't care, because his lips never leave mine.

The sky opens above us, thundering down like it's trying to wash the hardships of our lives away, like it's giving us a chance to start anew. It is bitterly cold, but neither of us move to go inside. My laughter is lost in the thunder, and then Rexxan's is too. He tips his head back, his palms turned outwards, surrendering himself to the will of the elements.

He's grinning as his thumbs brush my cold face, and I know my makeup must be running down my cheeks, mingling with the raindrops. But it doesn't bother me, because Rex has a way of making me feel beautiful whatever.

"I can't dance!" I yell, when he lifts my hand above my head as lightning shatters the fragile sky.

"I don't care!" He shouts back, over the thunder and the rain. He twirls me around, waltzing me around our tiny cabin's garden. I really cannot dance, but I don't need to, because REXXAN is doing it for me.

My expensive dress and his tailored shirt are soaked through, my hair plastered to my face as the rain pummels down. It washes away all my thoughts and leaves me with nothing but childlike elation. I'm not naive, and this isn't a fairytale. I know my relationship with REXXAN won't remove or fix everything I've been through. But beside him, I feel much bigger than my demons. Beside him, I can manage them.

I don't know what I was expecting him to deliver as a honeymoon, but it could not be any better than this. When lightning strikes a tree near us, he drags me inside and we leave a trail of water on the cool stone tile, running up the stairs and laughing like children.

The huge wooden barrel that forms our bath is already hot. Leaving our clothes in a soaking heap on the tiled floor, we sink into it. The heat of the water stings my cold toes, but it's a nice kind of pain. A pain that reminds me I'm just where I want to be. I lean over the edge of the barrel and rest my chin on my hand, watching the storm batter the trees in our garden.

"You want me to make the rain stop, baby? I'd do it for you."

"No," I sigh, happily. "No, I really don't."

"You're celestial, Renna." Big arms snake around me and his chin rests on my shoulder as he watches out the tiny window too. The outside is cold and brutal, but we're warm in here. I love it when that happens.

I glance over my shoulder, my face an inch from his. The golden light from the lanterns dances along his scars and reflects in those unreadable auburn eyes. He's a work of art, a rich tapestry built from all the events of his life. He is a god.

I turn my gaze back to the window, to the lighting illuminating the inky black sky. Hot kisses trail up my neck, his front flush with my back. "You do things to me, Rennalya," he whispers, as another gentle kiss lands beneath my ear.

I shudder a little, wriggling my hips to taunt him. A ragged breath tickles my neck. "Oh, Ren. You've been teasing me since day one."

"And you've been delivering on it," I reply, as strong hands lift me up to standing.

He pulls my hips back to fold me forward so I'm leaning over the edge of the bath. "Spread your feet wider, Rennalya."

Yes, Your Majesty.

For a second, he steps out of the bath and I'm left wondering, but then a full-length mirror slides its way in front of me, leaning against the wall. It's angled so that I can see myself, and then him too, when he returns to his position behind me.

He wants me to watch.

"I'd like you to watch, my love."

I know him so well.

"Happy to do this?" He checks, as he puts my hair up in a messy bun.

I nod, moan, and then bury my head in my forearms as his fingers start to tease me, but his hand gently lifts my head again. "*Watch, Renna.*"

So I do. I watch the fire in his eyes ignite as he fucks me with two fingers. I watch my mouth drop open as the pleasure becomes too much, and I watch my body shake when I come, his free hand touching himself.

I like this mirror. This mirror can stay.

His eyes seek my approval again, and when I nod, he drives into me. “Fuck!” I shout, my head dropping to my forearms again. This time he lets me hold it there a while, my hands gripping the edge of the barrel as he starts to make good on all the whispered promises he gave me at the dinner table earlier.

My eyes catch his in the mirror as one of his hands gently holds my jaw and neck. “Good?” He asks, flexing his hips at a torturous pace.

“So good,” I whisper, against the quiet sound of the water sloshing.

“Good,” he says, which makes me smile. What started tender quickly turns rough, and I watch water splash onto the wooden floor as he fucks me harder, pleasure washing over me. “You feel like you were made for me, Rennalya,” he says, his voice hoarse. “Like *I* was created to make you feel good. And I will, for the rest of my life.”

My head drops forward again, my forehead on my knuckles. Every movement of his hips is utter bliss. Soft moans echo around the bathroom, louder and louder, dancing on the water’s surface, skating over the walls, reverberating through the the steam-filled air. It’s ethereal in here.

“Eyes up, sweetheart,” he says, his voice gentle against the harshness of his movements. The lanterns are dim, and their light caresses the contours of his body in all the right ways, painted in shadows and light. The muscles in his arms ripple as his hands grip my hips. He’s been sculpted to perfection. I am dragged out of my own thoughts when two fiery eyes meet mine in the mirror.

“Do you like to watch me fuck you?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my voice strained as he winds me closer to the edge.

“Do you like to watch me come?”

“Gods, yes,” I say, shaking now. The muscles in my arms tense to stop myself from flying over the edge of the bath. His

thrusts get less controlled, his breathing more ragged, his carnal desires taking over. I *love* to watch the Forest King lose his control. I'm on the edge, and I see the ridges of his abs contract in the mirror, his mouth opening a little wider. His gaze dips down to watch himself disappear inside me and I shake my head.

"If I look, you look, Rex," I whisper, and he grins, his gaze lifting to mine.

"That's my wife," he mouths, and then we come together. My back arches, the muscles of his upper body tense, our breaths shudder, my knuckles turn white, the V of his abdomen flexes, but through it all, our eye contact never breaks.

It's an out-of-body experience.

And it's an in-body experience.

It's everything all at once, and when he cleans me up and puts me in bed with a hot chocolate and a piece of buttery bread, I think I might just die of happiness.



MY CLOUD of bliss is cruelly shattered at six, yes, *six* in the morning, when Rexxan wakes me up.

"Our honeymoon is approximately fifteen hours long and you have woken me up at six in the morning!" I yell. "I had *one* opportunity for a lie in, Rexxan, and you've ruined it!"

He's laughing, dragging me out of bed. "I have to give you your present before Poppy gets here."

"Why, is it *that* kinky?" My mood is already on the up. I can't even remember why I was grumpy.

"No, Rennalya. It's just a half an hour trip away from here."

Oh. "It's at the palace?"

“Near the palace.”

“Well, why didn’t you bring it here?” I ask, sitting up. He raises an eyebrow when I wince.

“Sore?”

“Very,” I say, as he hands me a glass of water. “I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

He’s smiling like an idiot. It’s a good look on him. “No, we didn’t. Up you get.”

As our horses canter past the palace, past the crowds of well-wishers, REXXAN stops outside a very tall hedgerow with a large black metal gate built into it.

“Your gift, Rennalya.”

I frown, sliding off my horse and walking along the hedgerow towards the colossal double gates. They’re ornate, crafted from metal tree branches, and only when I get face-on can I read the steel letters atop the gate. *The Stellan Halanian Training Village*.

“Now your hunters are here to stay, I want them to have a place to call home,” he says, waiting for my reaction.

I’m holding my breath. I’m aware I’m holding my breath, but I can’t not. Because he has built my people a fucking *home*.

“How long has this taken you?” I whisper, eyes wide.

“A few months, with several hundred builders. I figured it’d be useful even if you declined my proposal. Plus, I wanted to get your hunters out of the shadow camp and use the shadow camp to take in refugees. It was the Shadow Hunter Training Village, but then I renamed it.”

“The name is...” I swallow the lump in my throat. “The name is absolutely perfect.” I open the huge iron gate, stepping past the hedgerow, and gasp.

It’s... holy fuck, it’s *heaven*.

Rows of high beams, climbing walls, archery targets, ropes, nets, and training dummies line a huge stone courtyard.

There are steps for crowds to watch. There are racks of expensive weapons. Fifty or so of my hunters sit round a giant campfire, a few of the introverted ones sat round one of the three smaller campfires.

There are fucking *houses*. Log cabins like Obsidian and REXXAN'S one, with one, two, or three bedrooms. Anna has her own little house. Onyx has his own little house. Even I have one. There are two freshwater wells. There is a big shed full of food. There are weights for people to lift. There are barrels of wine to drink.

They're all elated, crawling on all the equipment like children in a brand-new playground. For these two hundred and fifty people who were never given a chance at life, it's *home*.



“WE’LL HAVE lots to do this year,” says Rex, as we eat strawberries on the lawn back at the cabin. “Lots for you to learn, lots of people for you to meet as Queen. If it’s ever too much, just say.”

I nod, my mouth full. High-pitched laughter echoes around from the other side of the house and my mood lifts. With Poppy, you never know whether it’ll be a happy day, a silent day, an angry day, a leave-me-alone day, or anything else. But today must be a happy day because she’s singing a nursery rhyme as Siddie carries her onto the lawn.

“Daddy?” She shouts, when she sees us.

“Yes, little love?” He says, opening his arms as she wobbles towards him.

“I change my mind. I do want to be at your married.”

“Our wedding? You want to come now?”

She nods, and REXXAN pulls an *oh-shit-we-have-to-get-married-again-to-keep-our-daughter-happy* face at me.

And that's how we end up dressed in our still-damp wedding clothes, stood on the lawn with Onyx and Siddie as our guests. Poppy stands between us with a towel on her head for reasons we're not sure of. "Does daddy agree for Renna to be his wife?" She shouts, when REXXAN's eyes lock on mine.

"He does," he tells her, grinning at me with glassy eyes.

"And does Renna agree for daddy to be his..."

Big green eyes look to Onyx for help. Onyx mouths the word *husband* to her.

"To be his cupboard?" She says, and we all laugh.

"I do, Poppy," I confirm. Even though this is silly, it feels serious, and REXXAN is looking at me with the same emotional expression he gave me yesterday.

"Then you are married!" She shrieks, bouncing up and down with excitement. REXXAN scoops her up into a hug, kissing her face. She tugs on my hand. "Can I have a cuddle?"

I'll never get used to her asking that. It's rare that she does, and I treasure each one. "How long?"

"Four seconds this time."

I hug her, counting to four and then pulling away. She smiles. "Two more seconds!"

I hug her again, blinking back tears.

I love her.

I love Siddie.

I love Onyx.

I love REXXAN.

I love this life I've built.

And honestly, I love *myself*. I'm proud of myself. Because every time I told myself there is no challenge I cannot overcome, I was right.

EPILOGUE (REXXAN)

Today is a celebratory day.

The orange sun sinks low over the horizon as Rennalya, Poppy, Lynna, Onyx and I sit and eat at a rickety wooden table. It's much too small for us but we don't care. Happy conversation fills the air, the cool evening breeze settling comfortably around us, kept at bay by the warmth of good food and close family.

Onyx has this week been dismissed from full-time care, and we have had Poppy for one year today. Sadly, we don't have apple pie to give her, because a year on and we are still rationing food so no one in the kingdom starves.

There are a lot of people still here who escaped the River Cities, and a new River King has been crowned. Marco has been Espan's second-in-command his whole life, and I'm not sure that there could've been a better person to rebuild the River Kingdom into something better than it was before. It'll take years and years, but when these people are able to return to their homeland, it will be more than worth it.

We're not going to spoil our daughter today. We don't have piles of presents. We don't have a big party. She'd hate all of that, except the apple pie. She'd hate the fuss and she'd hate the loud noises. Poppy *loves* routine. Her start in life was so rocky; tossed from home to home, kingdom to kingdom, displaced by floods and abused by family, that she relishes in every single boring day.

Every day that she wakes up, gets dressed, eats food, does her colouring, and goes to bed in her bedroom makes her happy.

Perhaps I'm making it sound easy, but it really hasn't been. Her invisible scars run so deep. Some days we can't coax her out of bed. Some days she has the most horrific nightmares that leave all three of us in tears.

But she's happy and she's healthy. Her bones don't show through her skin. Her blonde hair is bouncy and curly. Her smile appears more and more these days. Without her, her mother, and her brother, I'd be nothing more than a cold pile of dust.

Poppy shifts in Renna's lap, turning to face her and pouting her lips up to her mother. Renna laughs, her bright orange eyes blazing with love as she leans down to let Poppy kiss her freckled nose. *My huntress. My sorceress.* She's starting to master her powers too, but she doesn't use them and doesn't plan to. Except to toast marshmallows for her and Poppy.

Holy fuck, I'm the luckiest man in the world.

Today, between three meltdowns and two outfit changes—fairly good going if you have a toddler—we have moved Onyx into his new home. Siddie has a very tiny cottage at the end of our gardens for.... Actually, as his father I don't want to think about what it's for, but it is five minutes from us, and the kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom are all downstairs so it is perfect for Onyx. He'll have his privacy now that Siddie is spending the year in Rinnia rebuilding the flood damage.

He walks almost perfectly now, just with a slight limp. Stairs are hard for him though, and he sees healers every day. We don't know how much pain he is in, only how much pain he lets us see. He may be back up and mobile, but the road laid out before him will be a painful and difficult journey. Rennalya blames herself. Sometimes the guilt over what happened to both Onyx and Stellan keeps her up for nights on end. But therapy helps, and she'll get there.

The newspapers have said that we finally have our happy ending.

Except it's not perfectly happy, and it wouldn't be authentic to us if it was. It's riddled with the shadows from our past. My burns still leave me speechless. Ren has been through more horrors than anyone should, and she's constantly hunted for her race. Poppy struggles at night. But fuck me, are we content. I'd drop everything I own for this life, warts and all.

And truly, it's not really an ending either; more of a beginning. Because Rennalya and I have the rest of time together and this is only the start.

Do we have a happy ending? Not exactly, I suppose. But do I want one? No. I just want whatever it is I have right here, with Renna's head resting on my shoulder and my daughter shuffling onto my chest. Renna's ever-bruised hand passes me my wine so I don't have to disturb Poppy.

"Thank you," I whisper, tipping her chin up to plant a kiss on her lips.

"You're very welcome, my lord," she replies, with an inappropriate glance.

"I don't just mean for the wine." For everything. Because this woman has taken my grey life and turned it around. She's painted my skies blue, my evenings orange, my forests green, my blood red. She's breathed life into my aching soul.

The evening passes in a blur of contentedness, and when Renna and I return from a walk around Onyx's new garden, he is sprawled out on the too-small velvet sofa, fast asleep with Poppy snoring on his chest and a hundred picture books spread around them. I drape a blanket over our daughter, careful not to disturb them. If I get evenings like this for the rest of my life, I'll be just fine.

Renna looks up at me, her orange gaze composed of equal parts love and lust.

"We ought to go to bed."

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading my first ever book—I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Shameful though it may be, Evergreen began in the notes app of my phone during lonely lockdown evenings travelling home from work. I never imagined I'd have published it.

Like the ending of the story, finishing this book is so happy but bittersweet for me. I first started writing as Renna when I was seventeen, and saying goodbye to her feels like the end of an era.

She may be fictional, but I've learnt more from Renna than I ever thought I would. She's a reminder to have faith in myself when times are difficult, and writing this story made me feel proud to be a woman. When cliff-diving this summer, the last words I whispered before throwing myself off the tallest one were '*what would Renna do?*'.

Catch you in the forest again soon,

Autumn.

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First and foremost for my mother, who told me, and I quote, to ‘cut out all the fantasy and fill it with sex scenes.’ I hope you never read this but you probably will, so hello.

To Mr Woods—my whole heart—I’d call you my Rexxan but there isn’t a morally grey bone in your body. This book wouldn’t exist without you lending me your laptop so I could actually create it, or without the endless hot chocolates and unwavering support. I love you more than life.

To my beautiful Let—it’s genuinely comforting to know there’s still people like you left in a world that feels so dark at times. You always believed in both me and this book. I love you so much, and the day I finally meet you in person I’ll squeeze you *so* hard.

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And last but never least, to you, for reading my first ever book! It's wild to me that Yterras will no longer be a place in my imagination but now other people's too. I'll never take that for granted.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Autumn Woods is a first-time romantasy author who lives with Mr Woods in Somerset, England. When not writing or working as an engineer, she's usually painting, baking, or spending time outdoors.

Her books are inspired by a love of both spicy contemporary romance and fantasy, all the strong women in her life, and endless trips to the forest as a child.

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