



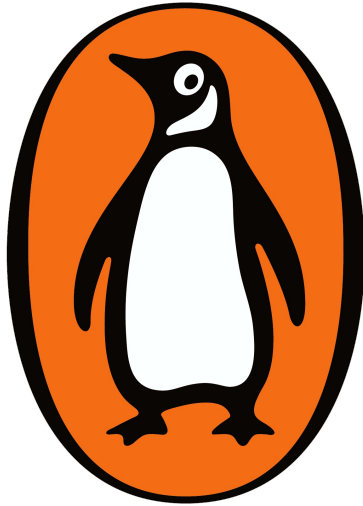
# GOLD

THE  
PLATED PRISONER  
SERIES

V

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RAVEN KENNEDY



## About the Author

Raven Kennedy is a California girl born and raised, whose love for books pushed her into creating her own worlds.

Her debut series was a rom-com fantasy about a cupid looking for love and has since gone on to write in a range of genres, including the adult dark fantasy: The Plated Prisoner Series, which has become an international bestseller.

Whether she makes you laugh or cry, or whether the series is about a character or a gold-touched woman, she hopes to create characters that readers can connect with.

When Raven isn't writing, she's reading and spending time with her husband and daughters.

You can connect with Raven on the social media platforms below or visit her website: [ravenkennedybooks.com](http://ravenkennedybooks.com)

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INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
Raven Kennedy

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GOLD

*The Plated Prisoner Series*

V



When you feel swallowed by the dark,  
may you become your own light.

When you feel swallowed by the dark,  
may you become your own light.















# CHAPTER 1

AUREN

**I** go loudly.

Loudly, loudly into the void.

The blaring rattle of a solitary fall.

I don't close my eyes against the strange dark. My grief wails like the clapping past a broken chest, while echoed teardrops stream down my face like rain.

The world ripped, and I was ripped from *him*.

It feels wrong. So wrong to be rent apart. Like fingers curled around ribs, yanking me open. Hollowing me out.

Thick wind peels at my skin. Rushing air plugs my nose and condenses on my tongue. A howling clatter drowns my ears. The flash of lightning and the stars surrounds me in the yawning dark.

Through it all, I can see the rip.

I can see the jagged edges of the torn sky above me, a betraying Ore gapping like a wound in the dark. Liquid gold bleeds through, falling like gelatinous droplets, glinting as they drip down into the nothing. But th

gets further and further away from me, my body plunging deeper into the starry unknown with unstoppable force.

I'm alone. Alone in this dark, endless void, torn away from Slade.

I keep falling and falling, further and further away from that rip. Further away from him. And as if that weren't terrifying enough, my senses are suddenly stripped away.

My sight. Sound. Feeling. Taste. Scent. All of it—*gone*.

The scream tearing from my throat is no more either. Or if it is, I can't hear it pierce my ears.

Without my senses, without any way to experience what's happening, grief and fear condenses. Time stretches and snaps.

I don't know what will happen to me in this void. I don't know if this is what it feels like to die. Though I do know one thing.

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## CHAPTER 2

SAIRA TURLEY

**I**n the beginning, there was a bridge.  
A bridge to nowhere, they said.  
A bridge that existed into non-existence. A bridge where people  
and didn't come back.  
Where cold and color warred. The former winning, the latter drained  
And I...I went.  
I walked that bridge that didn't want to end. I slogged through the  
gray, scraping through time that ceased to exist with goose bumps  
peb my thin arms.  
I was just a girl, but I went. Because my father had been forced to go  
he never came back.  
None of them did.  
So I snuck onto it, determined to find him. I told myself I wasn't going  
to fail. I wasn't going to turn around.  
Now, when the story is told, people think I kept going because I was  
But really, it was because I was scared of falling.  
So I walked.  
For days and years. Through memories and moments.

I soon found that it wasn't just a path. It was an all-consuming void own bleakness. It had me believe I'd never make it to the other side of bridge itself any more than I'd ever make it to the other side of my soul grief. They went hand in hand. They became one and the same—the joy on the bridge and the path of my own desolation. Because my mother had died, and my father had gone, and I was so utterly alone even before I the long, solitary trek.

I became hungry and thirsty on that path, and so very tired. The cold did strange things, playing sounds that came out of the foggy nothing. It was the voice of my father, telling me to keep going. The sound of my mother crying, urging me to come back.

But that earthen, colorless ground was steady and perpetual, so I kept dragging my tired soles on and on and on, letting the land guide me through the forever. Because I had nothing to go back to. I had nothing to lose going forward. And the way down looked such a long way to fall.

So I kept walking.

Until I was so exhausted I thought I might just finally have to give up and lie down to die. Forlorn body and forsaken spirit drained out into the void path.

But then, it...ended.

It's funny, I kept going because I was terrified of tipping off the edge of that endless bridge did have a limit. The rough path of earth was there after every step, until suddenly, it wasn't.

After all of that, I ended up falling, anyway.

It was a strange sort of falling, though. I didn't fall down, I fell through. My scraped and blistered feet slipped through the shade of the earth, bleeding out a scream from my throat. I plummeted down, down, down, through dirt and rock, past grime and rubble. Where my breaths were just dust now, and the sand had no purchase.

I thought I was going to fall forever through the ground, but then I vomited out like a bitter taste, and I crashed through the clouds in an amazing way to sky.

Whereas the ground had felt intangible, the sky felt liquid. Its dense waves shoved at me while cotton-bloomed clouds tossed me left and right. The ground was up and the sky was down, and I flipped so many times that my clothes tore to shreds. Thick strips of my dress cascaded out behind me

of my tattered wings while my arms flapped uselessly in the air, trying to gain control, trying to fly when all I could do was fall.

l's Until, suddenly, I wasn't falling anymore.

urney Like gravity was just a breeze, and I was lighter than the grass. The road my toes bounced lightly before my heels met the earth, the frayed strip of dress billowing down around me like wings tucking back in.

As soon as both of my feet were planted, a shockwave poured over the earth like a ripple through the water, and out of it spread a sea of glowing blue flowers that burst from the soil. The ground was now as solid as it nother, should be, the air bursting with the perfume of blooms, and the sky no longer felt like a current wanting to whisk me away.

pt I was...here.

rough I'd crossed the bridge to nowhere, and I reached somewhere new. I don't know much—I'd never left my city in Seventh Kingdom—but I knew I was no longer in Orea anymore.

I wasn't alone, either.

1 and People were around, staring at me wide-eyed, looking up at the clouds I avoided jostled through. I could feel the magic in the air even then, though I didn't know what the feeling was. I didn't know what those bystanders would do to me. Didn't know what those pointed ears meant.

2. But But I would soon.

3. step Years would pass, and this magical world would become my home, but I never forgot that endless trudge on the bridge. In turn, the fae never forgot the way I burst through the sky like a broken-winged bird, and that is why they always called me.

4. So, yes, I was scared to fall. But without falling, I never would have landed.

5. and And what a beautiful thing it was to land.

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*tattered wings while my arms flapped uselessly in the air, trying to gain control, trying to fly when all I could do was fall.*

*Until, suddenly, I wasn't falling anymore.*

*Like gravity was just a breeze, and I was lighter than the grass. The tips of my toes bounced lightly before my heels met the earth, the frayed strips of my dress billowing down around me like wings tucking back in.*

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*So, yes, I was scared to fall. But without falling, I never would have landed.*

*And what a beautiful thing it was to land.*



## CHAPTER 3

AUREN

**T***hump.*

Fragments of awareness nudge against me.

They thud against the barrier of my mind, like a log thumping against a shoreline rock. It's a hollow, steady sound that reminds me of dead, waxy things. Some pieces have edges sharp with pain, and others are dulled, watered-down memories long ago lost.

*Thump*

The first lugging piece that knocks against my consciousness with a forceful thump is a *taste*. Like the void took my senses away only to slip them back.

I taste the sweet and woody relish of a sugarcane against my tongue, fathom the split stalk, of peeling back its edges to lap up the goodness. I remember being a little girl, remember popping it into my mouth and sucking out its sugar. It's so real that I can even feel the sunshine warm my cheek. It's like I'm back there, in Annwyn, tasting it all over again. My mouth waters as the saccharine slurp explodes on my tongue.

*Thump*

Suddenly, scent surrounds me.

A flower. Though, I can't remember its name—not even what it looks like. But the moment the smell invades me, a memory of my nose buried against my mother's coat becomes a fragment in my prismatic mind. The perfume is rich and deep, heady in its floral crispness that makes me want to crawl on the floor and breathe its air forever. But not just because of the scent—because of my mother. Because of the comforting way it clung to her the same way I did.

With that scent, my nose seems to work again, the claggy air of the hallway replacing my mother's perfume with something deeper and far more rich. Like some untouched cavern in the earth that hasn't been disturbed by light or breath in thousands of years.

*Thump*

*Thump*

Incessant, the next sensation knocks against my skin, announcing its return. It sparks life down my limbs, reigniting my nerves to touch and

The catalyst is a hand holding mine. The memory so real that my fingers flex, even as the sensation of falling returns, my stomach plummeting alongside the rest of me. But that palm, that callused, warm grip... I can't see his face, can't hear his voice, but I recognize the feel of my father's hand. Strong and sure. *Safe*. So long as I kept hold of it, I knew nothing scary or painful could ever touch me.

*Thump*

*Thump*

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Next, my hearing abruptly returns with a rounded piece that fits into the slats of my mind, twisting the lock.

*"Auren!"*

I hear a young boy calling my name.

owly  
e. I can  
inside.

*"A-Auren!"* His voice is so full of laughter, the excitement making him stutter slightly. It makes my name sound like bubbles and bumps, up and down for every letter, rising to a pop at the end. The joy, the pure effervescent happiness of childhood, accompanies that single word calling into the echoes.

It makes my heart hurt.

ning  
My

When the voice fades away, I once more hear the wind rushing past my ears, the thunder spitting in the void.

And then, my last sense returns, like a gift. Wrapped paper peeling  
ks like. from the dark. It's the memory of an Annwyn morning, soft yellow be  
ainst sunlight reaching out to caress the world like a kiss against the horizon  
me is It's as if my eyes snap open to the light, though they were never clos  
l inside My vision returns, and I blink up at the rip. It's far, far above me no  
- looking like a piece of black fabric that was cut through with a dagger.  
he stays stagnant, unreachable, while liquid gold continues to leak from it  
gleaming waterfall, coating the stars.

void Lightning flares and fumes in the darkness alongside me, making m  
otous. glow, leaving streaks behind in the dark ether. I forget for a moment to  
light afraid, because of how beautiful it is—this light in the dark.

But then, those frayed edges of the rip slowly start to close.

My throat closes with it.

*Thump*

;  
l feel. *Thump*

*Thump* goes my heart.

ingers I watch helplessly as the split melts back together, fingers of wax  
right stretching to clasp me in its grip. I plunge down the gullet of this gap b  
m't see worlds, while the fibrous jaw bites hard.

nd. And I feel real fear.

y or Even with childhood memories of Annwyn flooding my senses, terr  
clomps over me until I'm trodden down with it. I'm still falling, and m  
I'll be stuck in this in-between place with these jagged memories and t  
all I'll have. Maybe that's all I deserve.

the The rip is threading back together, which means Slade won't be able  
follow me through. Reality hits me in the chest like a punch. The rip is  
closing, and I'm drained of my power, and I have no idea what to do, a  
alone, and I'm *falling*—

im *Don't fall. Fly.*

nd Slade's voice cuts through my kaleidoscope mind. Like the scrape o  
solder melting together all the scattered pieces, bringing me back toget  
led again.

He's grounding me, even when I have nothing beneath me but air.

*You have to go into it, baby. You have to. I can't get to you.*

my I watch as the last of the opening inches shut more and more, faster  
faster. Tattered strips of void clump together like ink bleeding over the  
inch of paper to absorb the rip that was made—made for *me*.

open I didn't want to go. I didn't want to go alone.  
 arms of *Look at me.*  
 l. My eyes snap to the stitching seam as if his gaze will still be there. *I*  
 sed. weren't already closed off from me.  
 w, *I will find you. I will find you in that life.*  
 It Now, my senses flood with him.  
 like a I remember the taste of his skin as I licked up his neck. His scent wh  
 cheek was pressed against his chest. The feel of his arms around me. S  
 y skin Solid. Safe. His heartbeat, thumping for *me*.  
 feel The sound of his voice when he called me *Goldfinch*.  
 I remember the sight of him coming down from the sky like a vision  
 fierce, raging warrior come to rot the world to keep me safe. Those  
 variegated eyes going from green to black, boring into me, telling me a  
 thousand things all at once.  
*I'll find you, Goldfinch. I swear to you.*  
*Now fly.*  
*Fly.*  
 between There's an echoing crash, like ocean waves slamming together. The  
 one final stitch, the rip cinches shut.  
 Totally. Completely.  
 or There isn't even a gap for my gold to drip through anymore. I can't  
 maybe rip was ever there to begin with, and the bleak emptiness of the black v  
 hat's settles around me like a suffocating cloak.  
 The way back is closed. Orea, the world I've grown to know, is gon  
 e to all that's left is the stark unknown.  
 And I...I have Annwyn on my mind and Slade in my ears.  
 and I'm Reassuring me. Reminding me.  
*Don't fall.*

f y  
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 F

Can I?  
 and I close my eyes for a breath. I shut down my dread. Shove down my  
 final weakness. Replay that strong, steady voice of his to fortify me. So that  
 I open my eyes again, I can turn and face my plummet head-on.



So that strength can rise out of the fear.

All the gold that spilled down the rip alongside me starts gathering. As if he wraps around my body in shining rivulets like it's answering some unspoken call. Even the void itself changes with my mood. The lightning starts to crackle in gilt splinters. The stars begin to pulsate with golden thrums that match the beat of my heart.

When my I smile in the glinting dark. Because once I force myself to stop being afraid, I realize that somehow, this feels...*right*.

When another flash of lightning juts through the air, it brings my attention down, and I notice one star that's brighter than the rest. I feel it pulling closer, until I'm squinting at its light.

Until I'm close enough to reach for it.

My fingertip grazes along its dazzling flare, searing me with warmth. Soon as I touch it, it cracks against the black and hatches like an egg, its radiance spilling from the burst shell. The insides pour out like a flood. I fall into it, letting it sweep me away into its starshine river.

And I am not afraid.

Because now, I'm no longer falling. I'm soaring toward the unknown, guiding myself to be swept away, no longer screaming or fighting or fearing.

The glimmering river of light that sweeps me away feels a bit like falling in love. Fast and gripping, blatant and blazing. It's a resplendent comfort that keeps me caught in its current, crackling against my skin and filling me with shivers.

I fall back in its flow, like floating in a sunshine ocean. I don't know how long I stay in the flux and the ebb, but I drift with its pulsing magic forever, and it warms me up from the inside out.

Then, I'm poured into an earth.

Each speck of sparkle is now a grain of dirt, fertile soil clogging my nostrils and filling my mouth. I'm in quicksand, except instead of pulling me down to the core, it's pushing me up up up until—

I'm spilled out into a wayward sky.

The dark is gone. The starshine is too. Even the grains scrubbing against my skin disappear. In their place is soft buttermilk light and tufted clouds of silk, bright with the shine of a sun that feels so very different from Ore.

The air is both new and familiar all at once. As soon as I breathe it in, that wild beast, that effervescent *fae* inside of me, opens her eyes. That's when I me basks in the inhale and croons in my chest.

Because *this*. This is what it feels like to *breathe*.

It With eyes wide open, with my mouth pressed in determination, and  
spoken embraced by the sky's current electrifying my veins, I spread my arms  
to spark my beast spreads right alongside me.

ch the I feel my *faeness* viscerally, as in tune with me as ever, and in this p  
bond, this fulfilling moment, something *surges* out.

ig Like feathers sprouting from skin, or petals unfurling from a stem. I  
cutting teeth from empty gums, or light spilling from a splintered horiz

ention The pain that accompanies it is consuming, yet freeing. It's a whirlw  
; me sensation hacked from loss and reborn with change.

I'm diving through the spongy clouds as if I'm a fish swimming thro  
water, until suddenly, land appears beneath me, beckoning.

1. As *Welcoming*.

is And as I curl into its open embrace, something else curls with me—  
, and I me. The pain is gone and all that's left is this strange, ecstatic comfort  
yanks free from the very center of my spirit.

n, Just before I land, I feel something flow behind me. As if I really did  
falling. As if I really did learn to fly.

earing. It wraps around my body like threads of the sun.

illing Like bands of steel.

ort, as Like rays of warmth.

me Like streams of light.

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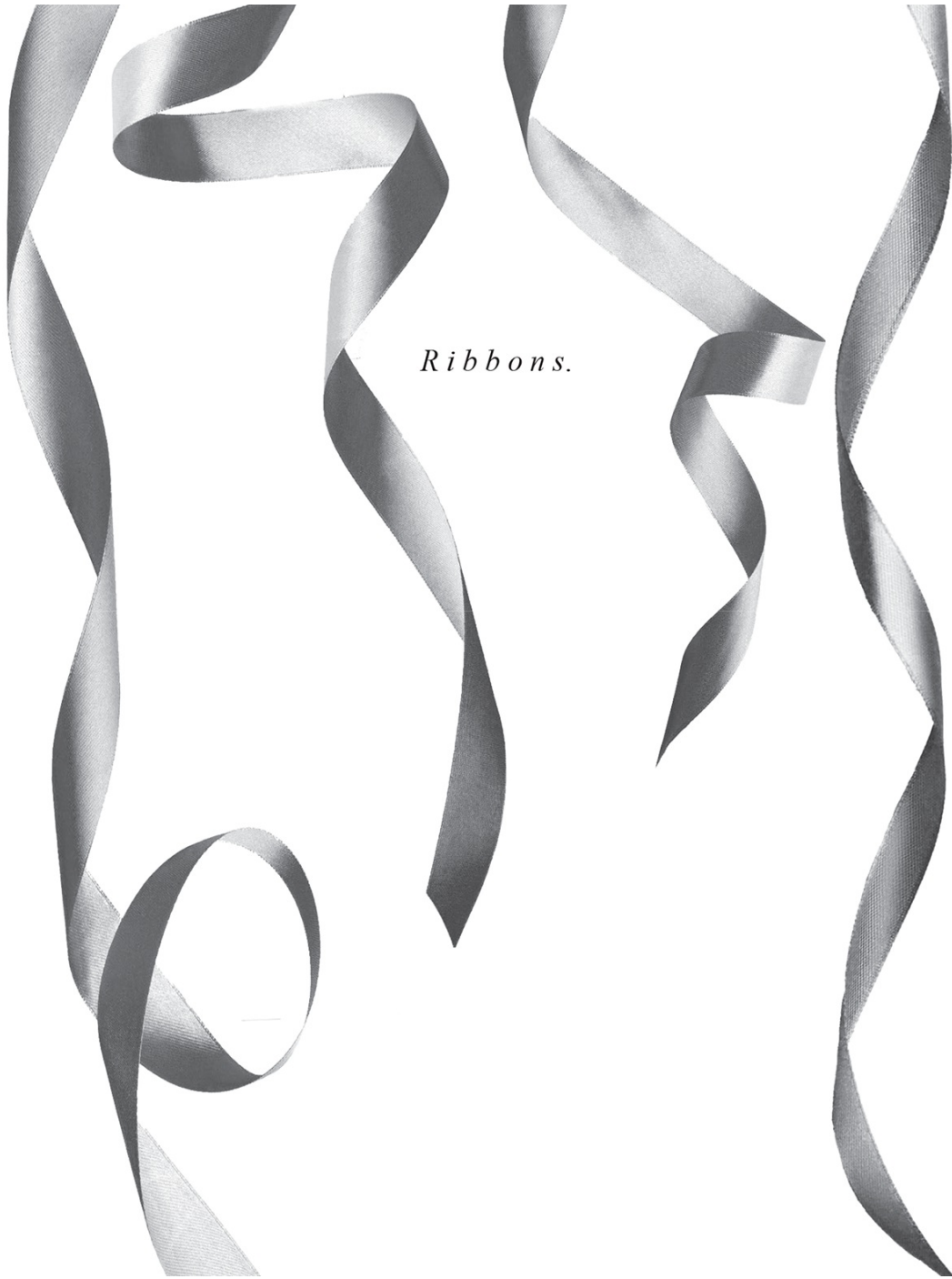
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*Ribbons.*





## CHAPTER 4

AUREN

I land the way a skipping rock grazes over the water. There is no crash, no pain. I simply glide into the landing, sinking into a blanket of a glowing blue-blossomed field.

When my body stops, I lie there on my back, staring up at the soft sky dotted with dandelion clouds. My ears are ringing like I breached the surface after diving too deep.

*Where am I?*

It feels as if there's a gentle tide buoying my body, but instead of water there are plush blossoms holding me up. When I turn my head, I see my hand touch has kissed the blooms nearby, creating a perfect circle of glowing flowers all around me, gleaming daintily in the light and sinking into the soil.

The blossom tide ebbs, my heartbeat flows, and with quickened breath pulling in the perfumed air, I push myself up to a sitting position, the glowing flowers grazing my arms.

But that's not all that's brushing up against me.

At first, I don't really register it. I don't connect the layers of glowing flowers around my arms with reality. It's not until the breeze shifts one of them

my mind confirms what my eyes are seeing.

My breath catches.

My heart does too.

I sit here amidst the incandescent flowers, beneath a lavender sky, and can think is, *am I dreaming, or am I dead?*

My trembling hands lift the ribbons beside me, and I *feel* them. Not with my fingertips, but through the lengths themselves. When I slip my fingers between a few, my eyes instantly well with tears, relishing in the silky *Great Divine...*

I count them, like a new mother counts a babe's fingers and toes. I curl two dozen strips into my fists like I'm holding the hands of a friend. I tug lightly, feeling the answering tug coming from my back, all up and down on either side of my spine. They feel satiny and sun-kissed.

A sob breaks through my mouth. Tears slip past my lids.

My ribbons are *real*.

They aren't in tatters at my feet. They aren't shredded from my skin or aren't plucked from me like feathers off a bird, lying in a deadened heap on the floor.

They're back.

The pain and trauma of what I felt when they were taken from me comes rushing up, and I tremble all over. They're here, given back to me like a divine gift, and I feel their loss, their absence, and their return all at once.

"They're back," I whisper to myself, as more tears glide down my face, landing in gilt dots on their silky soft strips. "They're back."

*I'm back.*

Because without them, I wasn't fully me.

I feel like I could cry forever, that I could weep out my soul's wrenching relief. But I simply tug them again. Just to keep feeling. And they're still here. Still real.

A smile—a true, heart-deep smile—treads up my face even as my tears keep tracking down because *they're back*.

But that smile suddenly freezes when I realize something else.

They aren't moving.

I try to strain the muscles in my back, try to get them to move, but nothing happens. My smile morphs into a frown as I tug at them again, as if I could wake them up, shaking them back and forth to stir them. Pulling each length, flexing the muscles along my spine.

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Nothing works.

They're here, they're real, but they don't stir. Not even an inch. Like hair on my head, they simply hang down, immobile, instead of me being able to shift them at will. Instead of them seeming to move with a mind of their own.

They're just...*still*.

My heart jolts, and I let out a shaky breath. More tears pool in my eyes. I don't let them fall. Don't let myself get caught into panic.

My ribbons are back. That's what matters, and that's what I need to focus on now. By some miracle, they've returned to me. Even if I can never get them again, I'll be thankful, because it's like a missing piece of myself has returned.

Maybe, after some time, they'll move again. Maybe they just need time.

I wipe my eyes as I gather the ribbons and hold them in my lap to catch them. They're so...*bright*. A new, shiny sheen to them that wasn't there before. They feel just as soft as they used to, but they also feel stronger. Beneath their satiny exterior, they've come back reinforced to their very cores.

But then, maybe that makes perfect sense. After all, I'm stronger today. I'm not the same woman I was before I lost them, so it makes sense that they wouldn't be the same ribbons they were before they were severed.

I wrap one strip around my hand and then lift my eyes to look around. Flowers surround me. Still reeling, I push myself to my feet so I can get a better look. But as soon as I do, I cry out in pain. I look down at my bruised, mottled feet, trembling as I try to stay upright.

*Ouch.*

At least I know now that I can't be dead. I'm certain death would be enough to take pain away. Which means everything that happened at the Conflux is still imprinted on me.

*The Conflux...*

Reality and memories make my adrenaline surge, sending my body into a heavy shock. It crushes me with the weight of its landing, all of my joy and disbelief replaced with pain and exhaustion. The forced drain of my power that I endured makes itself known, tearing into my body with snapping cracks. My breath wobbles, shaken like a bottle of liquid, and I sway on my feet as a wave of dizziness rams itself into me headfirst.

But then I hear a collection of whispers and gasps ring through the air.

I whirl in surprise, ribbons tangling around my waist. About thirty feet away, there's a group of two dozen people staring at me. The field of flowers stretches around us further than I can see, the blooms giving off a soft glow as they gape at me with pure awe in their eyes.

Awe...and *fear*.

My mouth opens, but instead of managing to say something, all that comes out is a gulp of pain. My legs tremble beneath me. Voices tremble in focus.

"She's...*gold*."

"Did you see the sky? Did you see how she fell from it?"

"Just like the broken-winged bird!"

"Look at her back!"

"Come away! We can't be here!"

"But look! She's *gold*! How can she be *gold*, unless—"

My gaze swings like a pendulum, while dizziness makes my focus slip and twist. "I..."

Words fail my mouth, but I see one person come forward. While I try to keep my feet under me, she eats up half the distance between us, only stopping when I try to step back and nearly collapse from the agony creeping up my burnt heels.

She has wisps for hair, like strings of silken spiderwebs have grown from her scalp, gathered into a puff that sits atop her head. She halts in front of me, aged gray eyes wide and searching as she stares at me like she's seeing a ghost.

"*Lyäri Ulvêre*," she utters, a hand flying up to cover her lined, pinched mouth as her watery gaze falls to my ribbons trailing down from my back.

"What?" My voice feels far away, barely able to be heard by my own ears.

Behind her, the murmurs get louder, the same words being repeated. I feel the palpable wonder resonating through the small crowd.

"You've come, just as she came—the broken-winged bird."

I don't know about a bird, but I certainly feel a bit broken right now.

"You're the *Lyäri Ulvêre*," she says again, her voice choking up.

My own voice pants out, my temples throbbing as my dizziness begins to feel like a tunnel through my spiraling mind. "I don't understand..."

A tear falls down her cheek, even as a smile tugs at her thin lips. "It's alright, Lady Auren. Because you're *home*."

The shock of her answer is the last straw to take me tumbling down.



et I hit the ground, knees buckled, feet fuming.  
lowers My mouth is unable to work. Mind far too shaken to process. I'm dr  
blue So, so drained. Not just my power, but *me*. From what happened at the  
Conflux to the long, lonely fall to the shock of her words. Crippling de  
creeps in, while my vision sputters out.  
comes But her voice circles my mind like a spool of thread constricting aro  
front of my chest.  
Because she said I'm home.  
Because she said my *name*.  
Her words ring loudly, loudly into the unconscious dark.

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I hit the ground, knees buckled, feet fuming.

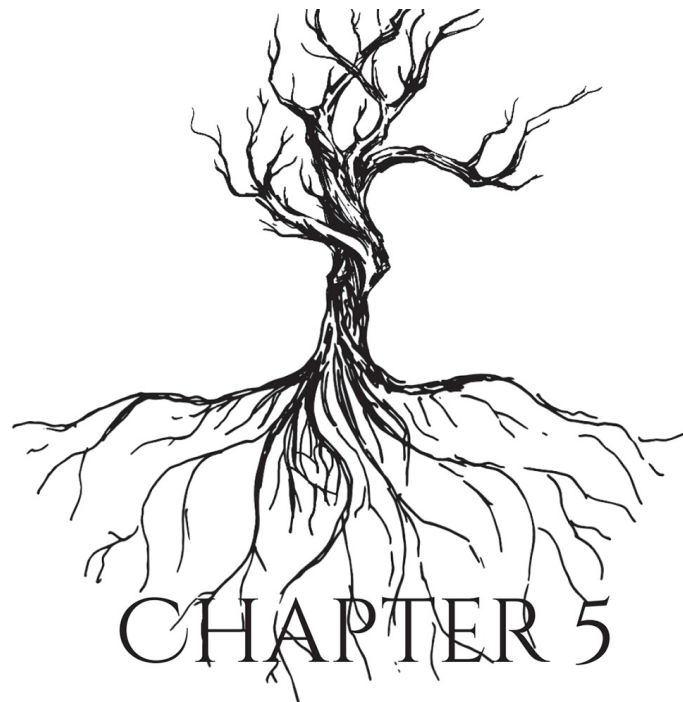
My mouth is unable to work. Mind far too shaken to process. I'm drained. So, so drained. Not just my power, but *me*. From what happened at the Conflux to the long, lonely fall to the shock of her words. Crippling debility creeps in, while my vision sputters out.

But her voice circles my mind like a spool of thread constricting around my chest.

Because she said I'm home.

Because she said my *name*.

Her words ring loudly, loudly into the unconscious dark.



## SLADE

I go silently.

The wind whips with thunderous noise, my blood pounds in my chest and beneath my ribs, a rage roars, deafening and endless.

But I am silent.

Silent as I grip the reins of the timberwing. Silent as the roots of rot spread beneath my skin, trying to split through me in angry tremors. Silent, even right there at the center of my heart, something beats with agony. With a wrongness. Like an artery was ripped right out of my chest, leaving me free to leak through my body. Because *she* was ripped away from me.

Silence is the only way to contain it.

So when there's a break in the clouds, when I see Third Kingdom land below me, I direct the drop without making a single sound.

The air whistles with our descent, the beast beneath me brays, and I focus with mute intent as Gallenreef Castle comes into view. It's standing proud atop a rocky cliffside a hundred feet up from the water. There's a tall spire at its back, the stone stained from decades of protecting the castle against the invasion of high tide and perilous waves.

The ocean is calm right now though, where ships bob gently, teal crystalline water sparkling brightly in contrast to the castle's sandy-white walls and its coral roofs pitched sharply toward the sky. The shore at it leads up in a steady slope that feeds into the capital city. It's spread out and wide amongst the chaparral of greenery. Buildings two and three stories tall mixed in with the lush plants.

It looks scenic. The epitome of an opulent, picturesque kingdom, built in its peace. A peace I want to obliterate.

The quiet rage inside of me bides its time. A cut-off ribbon in my pocket lies lifeless and still.

It's been two weeks since the Conflux. Many of those days were lost in a race to reach Deadwell. But Drollard Village, my secret haven in the mountains within Fifth Kingdom, now lies empty, caught in a frozen tundra. The rip in the cave is gone without a trace, right along with everyone trapped there.

Including my mother.

Ryatt erupted in panic. Went out into a blizzard to search for her and the other villagers. But we both knew he wouldn't find them. We both knew where they went.

Back through the rip. Back into Annwyn...or dead.

I've been trying every day to open another rip.

And every day, I have *failed*.

ears,

Ryatt's desperation is almost as intense as mine. I saw the panicked disappointment in his face every time I couldn't do it, though he never said anything. He didn't have to, because his own emotions were mirrored in my chest.

pulse

then, as

l

ison

No matter how many times I attempt to tear a hole through the world to find the villagers and my mother, to get to Auren, *I can't do it*.

My rot has come back full force, but the raw power it takes to create a hole in the world hasn't returned.

id

I poured everything I could into the rip at the Conflux. It was the first I'd ever made a rip on my own, without the clash of my father's power against mine. And when that happened, when all of my magic went into tearing that cleft in the air to save Auren, it must've done something to the world in Drollard. It must've made it implode, absorbing everything that came in contact with it. One rip opened, one rip closed.

watch

loudly

ea wall

nst the

Now, I'm helpless to open another. Helpless to find my mother or find Auren.

*And it's Queen Kaila's fault.*

My hands tighten on the reins.

All of this—Auren propagated into a villain and dubbed *Lady Cheat* stole powers and seduced kings—it was all Queen Kaila's words spinning narrative. It was she who alerted the other monarchs, she who instigated Conflux. It was she who sent her brother and soldiers to kidnap Auren from my own damn castle.

If she hadn't done all of this, Auren would still be here, safe. Instead, she's now a world away, and *I can't fucking get to her.*

Every day, every minute, my rage grows.

Into a fathomless, sinister thing. It's poisoned the already fetid rot within my veins. It's made everything else go eerily quiet. Made the fae instincts inside of me sharpen into the edge of a silently slicing blade.

And I will use it.

Because they tried to punish Auren. Tried to *execute her.*

Queen Kaila went against me—all of the other monarchs did. It's tired me out and deepens my scars and everyone else exactly why you don't fuck with me and

My borrowed timberwing descends. Crest, I call him, since the wood he has a spot on his chest that looks like the crest of a noble house. Despite the beasts being naturally aggressive and distrustful, they've always seemed to have a sort of kinship with me—just like messenger hawks. I found Crest on Drollard's timberwing Perch, and although I've never ridden him before, he said a word has no problem with me. He's even learned to anticipate my moods and react accordingly. Right now, his head feathers ruffle up with an intimate flare as we fly further down.

The front of Third's castle casts a shadow over the sandy courtyard. There's a pair of turret towers on either side of its giant front doors that are trimmed in bright coral, and the front steps leading to those doors rise from a sea of drifts of soft sand, as if they were simply swept into existence.

On either side of the front doors are matching statues of their kingdom's royal sigil—a carving of rolling waves, with the fin of a predatory shark jutting out between them. Guards are gathered in a show of force at the outer steps, their double-ended spears strapped to their backs. They were no doubt alerted to my presence by the watchers who must've spotted me as soon as I broke through the clouds in their sky.

Gaze snatched upward, I count five more guards up in the towers atop the protective outer wall, though not a single one of them makes a move to

descend the stairs. Their silver armor gleams, sigils bared on their chests, bows in their hands, tunics almost as bright blue as the sea. Their warrior reveals itself in the way they shift on their feet and back up closer to the towers, watching me from above but refusing to move toward the stairs. The guards *should* do when someone approaches a castle.

Especially when it's someone like me.

Movement in the front windows catches my eye, and I see even more clearly, she's guards watching me, grim faces bared behind the glass.

Crest lands inside the defensive wall with a screech, beach sand sprays up around his taloned feet. I jump down, ignoring the guards standing in my attention as I stare down the front doors of the castle. My hands curl around my mouth before I let out a roaring call.

“QUEEN KAILA!”

It's the first crack in my silence. The first splintering line leading from that roiling, raucous rage I'd contained during the entire flight from Deadwell. I want Kaila to come to me. I want her to have to walk out of my mine. I want her to meet my ugly fury face-to-face.

My gait is determined as I cross the sandy courtyard and step onto the slate step that leads up to the doors. Just as I do, I hear the telltale noise of arrows being nocked in their bows from the towers above me, and more in the defensive wall behind me. It's good to know that even with filthy clothes and an absent crown, I'm easily recognized.

“Halt, King Ravinger! State your business!”

I turn, my eyes lifting to the one brave enough to call down, landing on an older soldier at the right tower. There are two other guards standing below him, their arrows pointed in my direction.

“You pull back those bowstrings, and I'll rot you all before you can release.” Though I didn't shout, I know they've heard me based on the nervous glances they exchange.

*Just give me a reason.*

No one moves. No one makes a single sound. In fact, they stay very still. I turn away. Let out another roar.

“QUEEN KAILA!”

My voice rings out against the castle's outer walls, reverberating through the open air. The hate, the violence, and the need for retribution burns through me. Rot starts to bleed into the sand beneath my feet. Thick, black limbs that spread a sour stench into the oceanic air.

its,           Tension thickens, killing roots coiling through the ground, twisting  
ness           sinisterly. I can sense the strain in the guards, the anxiousness pouring  
ie             their rigid stances. Still, the castle's front doors don't open. The guards  
s as           move.

My call is even louder the third time, and behind me, Crest rumbles  
thunder.

e             The guards inside who watch from the windows stare out at me with  
eyes, hands on the hilt of their weapons. They think, by not coming out  
aying        they're safe? The ones in the towers think the height keeps them secure  
at            Wrong.

ound        They could cower behind the thickest steel at the bottom of their pre  
sea, and I would still be able to rot their muscles from their bones and  
their skin peel from their corpses.

om all       Just as I start to call for Kaila again, the massive doors open. The  
shadowed entryway reveals a silhouette, and then out comes a round man  
of her       with spectacles balanced on the tip of his bulbous nose, sigil pinned to  
vest.

re first     "King Ravinger." He gives me a low bow, though the customary gre  
e of         of respect is subverted by the line of guards that file out to stand behind  
e from     spears in hand.

clothes     "Sonnil," I reply coolly, watching as a flash of surprise crosses his face  
he doesn't think I'm aware of who every advisor is in every kingdom,  
he's sorely mistaken.

on an       "We weren't expecting you."

hind        I arch a brow. "Weren't you?"

Hesitation spreads out like a heavy rug for him to trip on. I watch him  
squirm on it, watch the drip of nervous sweat that gets stuck against his  
graying mustache. I have to hand it to him, at least he's got the balls to  
here in front of me, even if he does have a dozen guards at his back.

"King Ra—"

, very      "Bring your queen out, Sonnil."

His throat bobs. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Your Majesty."

I click my tongue. "Wrong answer."

ough        More rot seeps from the soles of my shoes, aiming to spread its poison  
slithers like sand snakes, viperous streaks ready to lash out, to sink into  
lack         the soil and inject it with venom.

Sonnil's eyes drop, face paling as rot creeps up like seeking vines. S  
off step, the stone stairs begin to crack and crumble, the sand behind me st  
s don't brown. When it reaches the step beneath his feet, he stumbles in surpr  
like making a strangled noise in his throat. The guards behind him step bac  
like watching with unrestrained fear as the roots encroach toward their feet

"King Ravinger, you cannot...this would be an act of war!" Sonnil g  
i wide turning in a circle as the rot begins to surround the stairs.

t, that "The first act of war was instigated by *your* queen. Now bring her o  
e? He makes the mistake of flicking his finger instead. A signal that he

I won't notice. My head jerks to the right, ears attuned to the sound of  
scious archers who let loose their arrows.

let Time slows.

I hear the bowstrings snap, the arrows cutting through the air with fa  
whistles. My fae instincts surge.

ian In a split second, I turn, plucking the first arrow out of the air like a  
his caught in the wind. I dodge the other three, two of them slicing past me  
hitting one of the guards instead, the last lodging into a crack of the ca  
eting wall.

d him, By the time I turn back to Sonnil, the guard with the arrows in his cl  
lurches over and collapses, making the rotten step crumble beneath his  
ace. If weight. The other guards scramble back, some of them knocked off the  
then as the stairs disintegrate.

I tsk, wagging the arrow in my hand. "Bad idea."

When Sonnil's eyes flash over my shoulder, he flinches, and I watch  
tracks movement that goes down, down, down.

m *Thud.*

s The rotted bodies of archers who shot at me now lie at the bottom of  
stand castle's defensive wall, caught in the spoiling courtyard.

When the advisor's eyes come back to me, they're unblinking, his h  
visibly shaking, but the idiot opens his mouth. "Attack!"

Another bad idea.

Every single guard behind him drops with barely a thought before th  
do more than grip the hilt of their weapons. Rot wraps around their thr  
on. It like choking collars, spears forgotten as they writhe on the ground, scr  
teeth in at their decaying necks. The ones in the towers collapse.

Sonnil jerks around. "Stop! Stop this!"

"Bring. Her. Out."



step by     The poor bastard starts blubbing. “I can’t!”  
aining     I raise the arrow in my hand and point it right at his jugular. His gaz  
se,        on it, and he watches wide-eyed as the wood shaft crawls with rot—ro  
k,         heading straight for *his* throat. I pierce the sharp tip against his skin, w  
.         a bead of blood drips down.  
gasps,     He jerks backward, his heel making the stone crack so that he goes f  
nearly landing on his ass when he trips over the struggling guards, the  
ut.”       of piss filling the air.  
thinks     “Please!”  
the        Just as I’m ready to infect the blood in his veins, movement catches  
eye, and someone comes running out.  
“King Ravinger, stop!”  
aint       My eyes narrow at the voice, and I see Queen Kaila’s brother rush fi  
castle’s front doors.  
feather    Manu Ioana.  
e and     With his long black hair pulled back and his bright blue vest and dar  
stle       pants, he looks as polished and refined as always. Just like he looked v  
came to my castle. When he took Auren from me and sat in the audien  
rest       the Conflux. Like some spectator to watch her execution as entertainm  
air feet   My lips curl up in rage, like ends of burning paper caught in a flame  
I turn to him, the advisor forgotten as Manu steps over the guards to  
me.  
“You.”  
1 as he    His hands raise to ward me off. “I know you’re angry—”  
“Angry?” A cold, dark laugh slithers from my throat. “I am not angr  
*incensed.*” I take a step forward, letting my rot curdle the stairs. “Tell l  
f the     come out here right now, or I’ll rot her whole castle through.”  
His dark eyes flash. “I can’t,” he grits out. “She’s not here.”  
ands     I pause. “Where is she?”  
He doesn’t answer, and I shake my head in disgust. “She’s in Sixth,  
she?”  
ey can    The flare of his nostrils is all the confirmation I need. I should’ve gu  
oats     that she’d fly straight there to continue stretching her power and influe  
abbling   But she had to have known I’d come seeking retribution, yet she left  
everyone to face me in her stead.  
Coward.

I tilt my head, looking him over, noting the dark circles beneath his eyes. “What’s wrong, Manu, did lying and kidnapping make you lose sleep?” I see his throat bob, see a flash of contrition in his expression before he wipes it away. “I was following orders. I am loyal to my sister. Just as you have your own loyalties. I was doing my duty,” he bites out.

I can feel the veins at my neck snapping against my jaw like they want to rip through my skin and attack him.

“What happened at the Conflux—”

My hand flashes out before he can finish his sentence, my grip choking his words. More guards have come slinking out to surround my back, and the windows of the castle have been pushed open as more of them point their arrows in my direction.

I pay them no mind.

All my focus is on holding Manu’s throat in my hand, in the pulse that beats against my thumb as I squeeze ever so slightly.

“What happened at the Conflux was your sister’s most fatal mistake when he choked, face turning color from lack of air, eyes bugging out. It would be so easy to rot his eyes from his skull, to corrode his heart in his chest. I’d tell them to stand down if I were you.”

Manu holds up his hand to stop the guards, and I have to give it to him. He doesn’t even try to fight me off. He just lets me squeeze his airway, let me lift him straight off his feet, my fae strength surging as much as my magic.

I lean in close, making him flinch as I speak through gritted teeth. “Your sister harassed Auren. Spread lies about her. Ordered that she be *taken* by me. And *you* carried out the order.”

The fear in his eyes isn’t nearly enough to satisfy me.

In an instant, I pulse out my rot, making the ground fracture behind me, swallowing up the dozens of guards who’d lined up. Their surprised screams burst out as the poisoned ground collapses in on itself, sucking them in like quicksand. The archers at the windows fall too, rot wrapping around them like ropes and yanking them to the floor, nerves dying, limbs failing.

Sonnil tries and fails to scramble back on his hands and feet, but they keep giving way. A spoiled stench clings to the air, the once picturesque castle now a churning mess of destruction as my power spreads up its walls, piercing through its coral roofs and decaying the wooden doors. The sea on the ocean is drowned out by choking screams.

Too bad Kaila isn’t here to see me give her the castle she deserves.

eyes. All the while, I keep my hold on Manu, let him see, let him hear. Let  
” know that I could end him and everyone else so fucking easily, and I see  
he realization in his expression. See the terrified resignation in his dark eyes  
you He struggles, rasping out a struggle of words. “Kill me...then, Ravin  
ant to Have your...revenge.”  
“No, Lord Manu!” Sonnil cries.  
But I chuckle darkly and put my mouth to Manu’s ear, my voice dropping  
ing off even lower. “Oh, Manu, I’m not going to kill you.”  
and the I lean back just in time to see the flash of confused fear on his face.  
eir “Death isn’t enough. I want you and your sister to *suffer*,” I say darkly  
I’ll do the same. It’s just a happy coincidence that you came out to face  
today, Manu, because the most important person to Kaila is...*you*.”  
at All he has time for is the widening of his eyes before I send a surge  
to the nerve in his neck, making him instantly pass out.  
.” I toss his unmoving body over my shoulder before turning on my heels  
would walking back the way I came on the narrow path I left unspoiled. The  
st. of choking guards behind me accompanies the sound of my steps as I hear  
others still trying to claw through the infected sand.  
im, he Crest stands apart from the decaying ground, his maw snapping at the  
s me soldiers as if he wants to take a bite out of them. I tie down an unconscious  
igic. Manu on the back of the saddle before climbing up and taking the reins.  
Your Silence once more settles over my blaring rage as I look out at the castle  
from I watch the castle’s doors deteriorate and the hinges corrode. Watch the  
windows shatter and the lines through the beach sand spread like infected  
blood while bodies become embalmed in its poisoned grit.  
me, But it’s not enough.  
reams I leave them all gasping, choking, staring up at the sky, trying to claw  
like life as my magic leeches it from them. Then I see Keon, Manu’s husband  
iem suddenly run out of the castle. His expression fills with terror when he  
realizes who I have flung on the saddle, but before he can take another  
stairs the disintegrating doors collapse on top of him.  
ie I snap the reins. Crest spreads his wings and takes flight. I leave behind  
walls, crumbling castle and a toxic ground, turning my back on dozens of corridors  
ound of that will curdle in the spoiled sand.  
A message.

t him      The only thing I regret is that I won't see Queen Kaila's face when s  
æ that finds out I've stolen her brother, killed her guards, and rotted her castle  
ves.      People should remember to heed my words. I warned them not to lo  
nger.      their arrows. I warned them not to fuck with me or Auren.

Crest lets out a roar, wings outstretched as we climb higher into the  
cutting up through the clouds just as quickly as we descended. Ryatt w  
pping on his way toward Fourth Kingdom by now.

But me? I'm not returning to Brackhill yet.

Because the seething rot still thumps beneath my skin. The raging w  
dly.      thunders in my ears, and my fury clamors in a deafening roar.

id, so      Because I can't get to her.

e me      So I'll take vengeance instead.

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The only thing I regret is that I won't see Queen Kaila's face when she finds out I've stolen her brother, killed her guards, and rotted her castle.

People should remember to heed my words. I warned them not to loose their arrows. I warned them not to fuck with me or Auren.

Crest lets out a roar, wings outstretched as we climb higher into the air, cutting up through the clouds just as quickly as we descended. Ryatt will be on his way toward Fourth Kingdom by now.

But me? I'm not returning to Brackhill yet.

Because the seething rot still thumps beneath my skin. The raging wind thunders in my ears, and my fury clamors in a deafening roar.

Because I can't get to her.

So I'll take vengeance instead.



## CHAPTER 6

### QUEEN MALINA

**I** look between the bars on the window, gaze holding the path between jagged clefts in the ground. From up here in the tallest tower of Castle, I can see the way the army moves like a snake winding its way through the snow. A sneaking plunderer hollowing out a path of hostility. An army of fae.

It shouldn't be possible. Fae have been gone for hundreds of years. The way our worlds connected was broken. Permanently. They all left. We had nothing to do with Orea because they wanted nothing to do with us. They thought themselves superior, all because they brought magic to our world and we had none without them. That broken connection should've been the end of it.

It was the end of it.

Until now.

My eyes skate to the left. It's nearly out of view from my window's vantage point, but just there, I can see its entrance—the bridge of Lemnara. Where the droves of fae keep marching in.

I curl my hands into fists at my sides, but a twinge of hurt has me opening my fingers and glancing down at the slice across both palms. Instead of deep gashes being red and angry, the skin along the cuts has gone blue. Little layers of frost pecked into the unhealing lines.

*“I am Queen Malina Colier of the Colier royal bloodline, and I will give my blood to restore what was lost and to gain what is new.”*

My voice echoes in my own ears, and I feel my chest stiffen. The lay that night float down, page after page, listing out a clear account of what actually transpired, because it felt as if I woke up from a flowery dream and the nightmare was the reality.

The fae twins lied to me. Tricked me. Manipulated me and used some of magic to make me see what was not here. Until I gave them my blood that broken bridge became *unbroken*.

The first fae soldiers to cross over dragged me straight into Cauval and locked me in here under Pruinn's orders. I haven't seen him nor Friand and Friano ever since, and it's been days, maybe weeks. I can't tell. Per time passes differently so close to the edge of the world.

I have raged and paced and cursed endlessly, but none of it was heard. None of it seen. None of it mattered.

That's always been the way of things. Once I serve my purpose to those who need me, I am pushed aside, because I have only had one worth to give. My blood.

In one shard of jagged glass that still clings to the broken window, I see my ghostly reflection. My white hair is tangled and loose, hanging upon my shoulders. No oils or soaps to wash it, much like my clothes hanging wrinkled and dirty. My face looks almost hollow, the sharp bones of my cheeks beneath my deathly pale skin only contrasted by the dark circles under my icy blue eyes.

I look like a ruin, much like this castle.

The restoration was a farce. This room is intact, but barely. There's no wallpaper, no paint, no carpeted floors or warm chandeliers. It's all been stripped away with time and cold, leaving this place barren.

Like me.

The bed, which I thought was a grand, comfortable thing? It's actually crooked, two legs missing, with a threadbare cover over it and a stained mattress. The tub is nothing but a tin basin for washing clothes in, and it itself reeks of decades' worth of dust.

There is no scent of crystalline flowers anymore. No sound of lyrical music. To think, I was under some sort of fae enchantment all along, that this a beautiful space. I bet the fae twins had a great laugh at my expense.

My fingers curl into fists again, and they instantly surge with cold. I'm looking down as flakes of white start drifting down from my hands. They

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yers of snowfall oozes out of the cuts in my palms like pus from an infection,  
at dribbling down and leaving tufts of snow on the floor.

n, and Magic.

ie sort Frigid, foreign magic that somehow was born in me the moment the  
twins did their ritual.

od and “My brother and I have very unique magic, my queen. They work or  
tandem. I can instill something new...”

Castle “And I can restore something old.”

assa “The blood of a pure Orean royal that is willingly offered to restore  
rhaps Orean kingdom...”

rd. “By offering this to us, I believe my brother’s magic will instill mag  
you, giving you exactly what you need to rule.”

Lies and truth, woven together.

ie men They didn’t believe in my right to rule. They only needed my blood  
to them. restore the bridge, which I gave. Willingly.

It seems Friano was right. His brother’s power *did* give me magic in  
can Ice and snow that either pours out of me uncontrollably or lies in frigid  
limp dormancy.

Useless.

ones of Behind me, the sound of a clink resounds, and I jolt. All I’ve heard a  
rcles sounds of my own thoughts and the wind moaning through the window  
anything else is jarring.

I look over my shoulder at the tray that’s suddenly appeared on the l  
no table out of thin air. It pops up irregularly, but it always contains the sa  
en thing. One piece of bread. One bowl of stew. One cup of tea.

Prisoner’s rations.

I glance away, utterly disinterested.

lly Lifting my hands, I grip the bars on the window and stare out. The c  
d breeze coming in from outside doesn’t bother me, nor does the chill in:  
the air the room. The pile of firewood left inside the chimney remains unlit be  
don’t need it. Don’t want it.

I I watch as more regiments of soldiers wind their way forward throug  
inking snowy landscape. I know the rest of the castle has become a base of so  
se. though I’ve only been able to catch glimpses of fae going in and out, o  
gasp, been able to hear shouts or voices rumbling up from the ruined walls w  
ie the wind didn’t strip the noises away.



Yet I don't need to eavesdrop. I don't need to see the massive amount of soldiers and weapons being smuggled into Orea to know what they plan. The fae twins spelled it out for me. The fae have returned to take over Orea. Are they a winding, continuous regiment? They're heading right for Highbell.

*My kingdom.*

The bars beneath my grip go icy cold. I watch blue-tinged frost spread across the rusted metal, and I snatch my hands away to stare at my palms. At the next moment, the frost recedes, the bluish white tinge creeping back down into the cuts. I quickly grasp the bars again. Urge the frost to come back, but it doesn't.

Just like every other time I try to control it.

It keeps creeping up without warning, but every time I try to use it, it's gone.

"Fancy trick."

The voice has me whirling around, and I find none other than the assassin before me, the shadows clinging to him like steam. His very presence screams threat, because even though he hasn't killed me yet, I can't forget that's the sole reason he followed me here. Can't forget the way he killed the guards and plunged a blade through Jeo's chest.

As always, he's in his black cloak with the hood pulled down low. All I can see is the bottom half of his face, his dark brown skin giving way to a patch of light pigment that surrounds his mouth. His lips curl up into a grin and although I can't see his eyes, I can feel them boring into me.

"Is that why you did it?" he asks, leaning against the wall, arms crossed in front of him.

His smug, overly comfortable pose irks me. I don't know how his magic works, but he seems to be able to materialize wherever he wants. The thought that he can simply appear in my room fills me with a shiver of fear.

"Is that why I did what?"

Though his hood is pulled low and his shadows are keeping him barely visible, I can see his eyes flash with anger. "Don't play dumb, Queenie," he says, his voice deep and grating, always with that roughness to it like he has spoken in a long time. "It's common knowledge that Malina Colier was without power. So is that why you betrayed your world? Because the fuckers promised you'd be able to do some magic tricks after?"

Anger spikes in me, stabbing up through my tongue so I spit out the words. "I didn't betray my world, the fae betrayed *me!* *They* did this!"

nts of He shoves away from the wall so quickly I flinch back before I can  
n. The myself. I can't let myself forget, even for an instant, that he's an assassin  
nd that "You did this," he snarls in my face. His shadows are erratic with his  
coiling like smoke that rises from a pyre, embodying death and destruction.  
Yet from this close, I can also see more of his face. See the dark eyes that  
ad up bleed with enmity. "Because of your selfishness. Your own self-importance  
the Your own filthy ego."  
ack "How dare—"  
ne He grabs my throat. I'm so shocked at his daring that my words rip out  
Not because he's pressing hard enough to cut off my air—because he isn't  
but because of the warmth of him. It's a shock, a flare of heat that emanates  
it's from his touch that's almost painful, making me realize just how freezing  
skin is.  
"How dare *you*. It's because of you that the fae are now invading Or  
sassin Wake the fuck up and do something!"  
I reach up and tear his arm away, and he lets me. "What do you expect  
rget to do?"  
led my "How about take some fucking responsibility for starters?" he growls  
"I told you. They were the ones that did this. They manipulated me."  
All I "And you were just so quick to believe them, weren't you? While they  
o the whispered about all these grand things you *deserve*. You never once  
sneer, to question it, because that's really how you think. You think the world  
you, because you are a proud, entitled bitch."  
sed in My teeth gnash together. Tiny chips of ice crunching between them.  
"Don't call me a bitch."  
agic "Don't act like one," he bites back.  
hought "This is the fae's doing."  
"There you go again," he retorts, hatred swimming in his gaze. "It's  
someone else's fault. Someone else's problem. When the truth is, you  
hed in enabled everything that's ever happened around you."  
ie says, My spine stiffens with ire. "You know nothing."  
n't "And it seems you feel nothing. Do you even care that those soldiers  
s born marching toward Sixth Kingdom?"  
ae "Of course I care," I snap.  
He looks me up and down with disgust. Like I'm repellant to him.  
"Doesn't look like it, Cold Queen. Maybe you really do have no heart  
people say."

catch Rage feels like slivers of ice gashing through my chest. “*Get out.*”  
sin. “No. I don’t think I will,” he says, stepping even closer to me, pressing anger, until we’re chest to chest and freezing me in place. The heat coming off  
tion. him is so startling that I suck in a breath. It soaks into my ribs, wanting  
hat spark against them like flint on a stone. “I think I’ll stay right here and  
tance. you through the chest and see if my blade hits a chunk of ice instead of  
muscle and flesh.”

“It’s my kingdom they’re marching toward!” I scream in his face, the  
away. sound of my voice biting into the air. “Don’t presume to know what I’m  
sn’t— feeling.”

nates “Fine,” he says, his shadowed face tilting down just enough for me to  
ing my his dark eyes glinting with menace. “Then say what you *are* feeling, C  
Queen. About all of it. The way your kingdom rejected you. The way your  
rea. husband did the same. The way your people revolted against you. The way  
your father barely tolerated you because you had no magic.” He leans in  
ect me say the last part right into the cold shell of my ear. “The way I killed your  
lover.”

ls. My mouth goes dry.

” He pulls back slightly to watch me, his eyes skating over my face as  
ey heave in a shattering breath. The space between us grows thick, layered  
opped something beyond tension. Our breaths seem to be at war. We inhale at  
l owes same time, chests pushing against one another like we’re battling for  
dominance. For space. Both wanting the other to concede.

Or perhaps...both wanting to continue to fight.

To *feel*.

Even though all I’ve felt is a smooth, comfortable cold for so many years,  
the heat from his body and the exhale from his lips seems to scrape against  
always me with the smallest hint of warmth. To thaw away the numb I’ve been  
to, and I don’t...dislike it.

Which makes me furious.

I wrench away from him, backing up, forcing the warmth away until  
s are no longer touching. His shadows coil around him as he watches me.

“Sneak me out,” I abruptly demand.

The assassin cocks a black brow. “Excuse me?”

I draw myself up, shove away whatever reaction I just had and pretend  
like there wasn’t there at all. “I know your shadow magic will allow it. You would  
have been able to get in here otherwise. So get me out.”

“And why would I do that?”

ing        “Because contrary to what you believe, I do care about what happen  
ff of      Highbell. That’s my kingdom they’re marching toward,” I say, pointin  
; to        toward the window. “I need to warn my people.”

stab       “You want to warn them,” he repeats in a deadpan tone. “The kingd  
f           who overthrew you, rejected your presence, and denounced you as que  
*You want to warn them?*”

ie shrill    Anger laces across my ribs, pulling tight like a corset. I feel his wor  
m           cinching in, making it hard for me to breathe. Because those painful,  
              infuriating words, the reminder of my rejections...they are far too raw.  
o see       too biting. They’ve taken chunks out of me and left me to bleed.

old        “Are you going to help me get out or not?”

your       He stares at me for a long moment, the only sound coming from the  
way        wind flowing in through the window. I wait. Unable to draw in an inha  
in to       I hear his answer. Knowing this is madness. He’s an assassin who was  
our        after me to kill me, and yet, there is no one else in the world I can ask  
             help, because I *have* no one.

I never did.

I           Finally, he says, “No.”

d with     His denial makes my mouth drop open. “No?”

t the       “No,” he repeats.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t believe you.”

I rear back in surprise. “Believe me? About what?”

days,     He turns, and his shadows drift around him like a long train hanging  
ainst      from the folds of his cloak, scraping against the floor as he starts to wa  
n stuck    away from me. From my request.

             “Excuse me! I asked you a question!” I call after him, trying to drag  
back and wondering why I even want to.

             He stops at the door and looks at me over his shoulder. “And I gave  
l we’re    answer, Queenie. Make me believe that you want to get out of here for  
right reasons, and then we’ll talk.”

             The assassin pulls the shadows toward him, like thick smoke billow  
around flames. More and more, until it’s a swarm of darkness and flas  
nd it       bent light. Then, he’s gone, somehow disappearing from the room, tak  
ldn’t      of his bulging shadows with him.

Taking my hope.

s to The devastation that starts picking apart my soul is clawing. Twin n  
g that scrape down my ribs and embed into my chest, because those accu  
he threw at me...they were true.

om Here I am, left alone with the toll of those truths. Left alone with the  
en? Yet my chest still feels warm. Right where we'd touched.  
And I don't...dislike it.

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The devastation that starts picking apart my soul is clawing. Twin nails that scrape down my ribs and embed into my chest, because those accusations he threw at me...they were true.

Here I am, left alone with the toll of those truths. Left alone with the cold. Yet my chest still feels warm. Right where we'd touched.

And I don't...dislike it.



## CHAPTER 7

AUREN

Consciousness comes with a breeze.

There's the strangest rush of air that wafts over my feet, both which are still throbbing in pain though not as intensely as before. I'm frowning before I'm able to drag open an eye, and when one lid peels back, I see someone standing over me where I lie, her lips pursed as she blows air across my toes.

I stay perfectly still, trying to gain my bearings while I watch her continue to exhale over my feet from all angles, and I realize that her breath is very soothing me. It feels like a balm spreading over the burns that are pulsing through both soles and each one of my toes.

As I fully drag myself away from the heavy tide of unconsciousness, I realize that the woman's breath isn't just soothing my feet. It's *healing*.

Both of my eyes snap all the way open, and I jerk upward to balance myself on my elbows. At my sudden movement, she lurches back, hands coming to rest over her yellow dress.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to wake you," she says soothingly. Estelia."

She has dark brown skin with tight black curls that hang down to her shoulders. Bright orange streaks swoop along both of her cheeks, but it's from rouge. It's as if her skin just took on a gloss of color that goes from apples of her cheekbones and curves up to the edges of her pretty arched brows. It makes the amber color of her eyes pop. "I'm so glad you're a healer though. Is it alright if I give you a few more healing breaths? I'm just a healer done."

I look around the room, unsure of what to say or do. She takes my silence for acceptance, leaning over me again as she purses her lips. The second I feel her exhale upon my skin, I have to hold in a groan from the instant she touches me.

After a few more breaths, she straightens back up. "There," she says with a kind smile.

Eyes flicking down, I see that my burnished and bloodied feet now look like they've had at least a week to heal. I sit up, bending my knees to get a better look. No more gilt blood drips from my raw heels, no more blistered arches. My toes aren't burnt anymore either, and even though the skin on the sides of my feet seems to have peeled away, a new layer has already grown in.

"How—" My dry voice cracks. "How did you do that?"

Estelia reaches up, grabbing a brass pin from where it was tucked in her collar and uses it to clasp back an errant curl from her face. "Does it feel better?" she asks.

"Much." The pain has dropped to a low twinge, like a sunburn. It's tolerable now, even something I could ignore, instead of the scorching pain it was before.

"Good," she says with a satisfied nod as she places her hands on her knees. "I've done what I can. Your feet were in a very bad way. But they should be feeling better now, at least. I'm only a fledgling healer, so I can't heal you fully, I'm afraid." Her hand lifts to swipe at a bead of sweat gathered on her forehead. "That's what I get for not getting any sort of formal training—that I would've wanted any. They would've carted me straight off to the capital if they knew, and *no thank you*. I have my own life, not to mention a family business to run. I don't want anything to do with the monarchy. I have no life to live. Anyway, I can't heal more serious wounds, but I do please minor hurts when the need arises. And believe me, in a farming town, there's always a need."

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r I blink at her, not knowing what to say, my gaze switching from my  
t's not her face. But I didn't miss what she said—*fledgling healer*.

m the *Healer*. Not mender.

ed My eyes flick to her ears, just barely poking out from her hair. Ears  
wake, very obvious pointed tips.

about I feel my heart thump hard in my chest.

“Oh, but look at me, already chattering on. Let me go get you some  
ilence and something to drink. Just relax. You should stay off those feet until  
d I tomorrow, but I can bring up something for you to wash with.” She he  
t relief. for a moment, a tentative, almost shy smile coming on her face. “I’m s  
; with a you’re here, Lady Auren. It’s an honor to heal you.”

Before I can reply, Estelia turns and walks to the back of the room a  
ook pulls up a door set into the floor. It swings up and she steps down, pull  
jet a panel shut behind her so that it’s once more flush with the wooden  
ered floorboards.

around As soon as I’m alone, I take a moment to look around. I seem to be i  
y come cobwebbed attic. The shape of the roof has pitched the ceiling low, so  
quite short where I’m lying down but tall enough for me to stand up in  
middle of the room, though the space itself is cramped.

to her There are stacked crates filled with trunks of fabric and jarred foods  
el couple of locked chests, and a damaged chair with a missing leg. I’m li  
a narrow bed in the corner, though it’s soft and comfortable. There are  
dozen mismatched pillows behind me, with loose peonies scattered arc  
agony them.

To my right is a small table with a lantern, and at the far wall, there’  
hips. single round window to light up the space, but only shards of sunlight  
uld be through because it’s been boarded up. Seeing the boards nailed to the v  
them fills me with unease. I don’t like that the sky is blocked from me. It ren  
n her me too much of Highbell. Of not being able to see the sun.

—not *Where am I?*

ie In the silence, the back-to-back memories of what happened paint a  
tion the in my head. I see each brushstroke as it depicts what occurred at the C  
That’s The splash of color as my gold was forced out of me in unnatural rivul  
nty of black rot that laid waste to hundreds of people. The red blood that scat  
there’s over the ground.

*Slade...*

feet to The attic door shoves open again, startling me out of my thoughts as  
slaps against the floor. The spiderweb-haired female I remember from  
comes climbing into the room. Her arms are laden with a tray as she pu  
with her way up, a smile perched on her slightly lined face once she stands.

“Glad to see you awake,” she says with a grin as she comes over, tra  
filled with a plate of cheeses and breads that she sets on the bedside tal  
food “Estelia got a snack for you.”

I look from the tray to her, at a loss.

sitates “Is the plate not to your liking? I can see if she has something else.

o glad Unfortunately, it’s past supper, so the servette’s stock is out until they  
their supplies replenished, but I can walk down the road and see if the  
nd something to spare. Though, I’ll need to be discreet.”

ing the I have no idea why she’d need to be discreet, but I shake my head. “  
plate is fine, really. I just—I don’t know where I am, or who you are, c

in a “I’m Nenet,” she says, hands smoothing over the pockets of her dres  
it’s Even in the lantern light, I can see that the hem is stained brown, thick  
the of dirt covering the tan fabric as if she’s often kneeling on the ground.  
spots dot her pale skin over lines of blue veins, but even so, there’s a  
youthfulness to her in the way she carries herself. “Apologies, I should  
tuffs, a introduced myself sooner.”

ying on “And...” My tongue feels thick in my mouth, gaze moving to the sh  
half a tips of her ears budding from the silky strands of her silver hair. “Whe  
und I?”

“You’re in Geisel.”

s a “And that’s in...”

show Her head tilts at my question, but when I continue to wait, her gray e  
walls sharp as she leans forward. “You’re in Annwyn.”

ninds *Annwyn.*

I think I already knew, but my mind needed the confirmation. My ea  
needed to hear it voiced. If I truly think about it, the truth was snapped  
picture my skin the second I dropped to the earth, cradled in a field of glowing  
onflux. flowers. My body knew I was home the second I felt the sun against m  
ets, the A sort of stunned melancholy washes over me.

tered Nenet’s voice softens. “You’re alright now, Lady Auren.”

The back of my neck prickles. “How do you know my name?”

“Oh, everyone in Geisel will know your name.” Her hand lifts as if s  
going to touch my arm, but she stops herself when I stiffen. “Those wh

; it here remember the lost gilded girl. It could only be you,” she says, gaz  
before sweeping over my skin, my hair, my eyes.

ishes My brow furrows.

“I knew what was happening right away,” she says with pride. “You  
y like the dawn, spilling from a fracture, and then you fell from the sky a  
ole. dropped into that field. Just like she did, so long ago.”

I swallow hard. “Like who did?”

“Why, Saira Turley, of course.”

That name sends chills down my arms, and my pulse pounds in my  
get I used to beg my mother to tell me the story of Saira Turley over and  
inn has again. I loved hearing about the Orea girl who walked the bridge to n  
and fell into a world of magic. How she grew into a woman and won th  
The heart of the fae prince. She was the one who united Annwyn and Orea  
or...” sister realms and made the bridge of Lemuria our road to each other. It  
ss. true fairytale.

Her story always stuck with me, even when so many other memorie  
Age not.

I clear my throat. “But I didn’t come here like she did. Saira Turley  
l’ve on a bridge and came to Annwyn. I...fell out of the sky.”

“Not just any sky. *This* sky. Here in *Geisel*,” she presses, the wrinkl  
arp around her eyes crinkling as she smiles, finger raised toward the ceilin  
re am “You fell through the clouds and landed in the *exact same* field as she,  
broken wings streaming behind you like sunrays.”

Both of our eyes drop to the ribbons wrapped around my waist. I gra  
of them protectively, reminding myself that they’re still here, letting th  
eyes go steady me on this uneven ground.

“They’re not wings, they’re...” I shake my head, overwhelmed. “I d  
understand.”

She takes a step forward, creaky knees bending down to the floor un  
into she’s kneeling beside my pallet. Her callused fingers gently curl aroun  
; sweat-slicked palm, her grip surprisingly strong.

I have to work not to flinch.

It’s still so new—being able to touch people freely. I always had to l  
aware of it, always had to cover my skin and stay away. If only I’d lea  
how to use my power without gold-touching uncontrollably during the  
she’s sooner. If only I’d learned I wasn’t helpless at night and could call to  
to live whatever gold was near.

e            “You don’t know who you are to us, do you?” Concern coats her torso  
her eyes have gone sad. “We loyalists call you the *Lyäri Ulvêre*—the golden  
one gone. The gilded girl who was lost in the night.”

inflamed    Chills roll over my skin and scatter like ants.

and           “Why...?” Every question is voiced in that one croaked word.

Why does everyone in Geisel know me? Why is she calling herself a  
loyalist? Why is she looking at me with something close to pitying awe?

“We have prayed to the goddesses for a very long time, and they finally  
answered us,” she says, squeezing my hand. “People tried to say you would  
die over dead long ago. Tried to make everyone forget all about you. But we  
somewhere remembered, and now, here you are. You came as she came, Lady Aurene

And look at you...” Her gleaming eyes search me over, lingering on me  
as back, at the strips that hang down. “You are the new broken-winged bird  
that was as Saira Turley was. You fell like a piece of light spilled out, here to bring  
the dawn of peace.”

so did       My mind spins. My heart pounds.

“But *why* do you know me?”

walked     Her eyes are so bright with hope that the gray shines like forged silver  
with her next words, it’s me who feels molten.

es           “We know you, Lady Aurene, because we’ve been praying that one day  
you would return. We know you, because you are the Turleys’ last-born  
with heir.”

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“You don’t know who you are to us, do you?” Concern coats her tone, and her eyes have gone sad. “We loyalists call you the *Lyäri Ulvêre*—the golden one gone. The gilded girl who was lost in the night.”

Chills roll over my skin and scatter like ants.

“Why...?” Every question is voiced in that one croaked word.

Why does everyone in Geisel know me? Why is she calling herself a loyalist? Why is she looking at me with something close to pitying awe?

“We have prayed to the goddesses for a very long time, and they finally answered us,” she says, squeezing my hand. “People tried to say you were dead long ago. Tried to make everyone forget all about you. But we remembered, and now, here you are. You came as she came, Lady Auren. And look at you...” Her gleaming eyes search me over, lingering on my back, at the strips that hang down. “*You* are the new broken-winged bird, just as Saira Turley was. You fell like a piece of light spilled out, here to bring us the dawn of peace.”

My mind spins. My heart pounds.

“But *why* do you know me?”

Her eyes are so bright with hope that the gray shines like forged silver, but with her next words, it’s me who feels molten.

“We know you, Lady Auren, because we’ve been praying that one day, you would return. We know you, because you are the Turleys’ last-birther heir.”



## CHAPTER 8

AUREN

**N**enet's declaration buckles me.

If I'd been standing, I think my knees would've given out.

"I'm not...I can't..."

Words fail me, caught in a froth of white noise that churns like a whirlpool in the middle of a sea.

*A Turley?*

I can't keep sitting. Not with her proclamation. Not with her still kneeling on the floor as if I'm some kind of altar and she's come to pay homage.

I pull away from her and clamber to my feet, but the half-tossed blankets get caught around my legs, making me stumble. Nenet lurches up to catch me, but I back away and hold out my hands to ward her off. She jolts to a stop, watching me with worry.

My feet are sore but bearable, and I have to stoop slightly so my head doesn't hit the ceiling. I look around the tiny attic, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. My mind is still caught in that condensing vortex, the turbulent undercurrent of her words making me dizzy, though my tongue manages

drag across the barm enough to speak. “I don’t have anything to do with Turley. I share no bloodline with her.”

A frown draws a line between her brows. “But of course you do.”

I’m shaking my head before she even finishes, pacing back and forth. “I don’t. I would’ve known...”

*Right?*

I remember my mother telling me the story about the bridge of Lem many times. I remember the tale always staying with me, even when I nearly everything else. But that was just because I liked the story. It does mean we’re related. I’m sure many fae children were told Saira’s story

“There must be some kind of misunderstanding,” I tell her, pinching fingertips, feeling dried smears of gold still stuck to my skin.

“Misunderstanding?” She shakes her head, as if that’s preposterous. “your name Auren?”

I scratch a flake of gold off my thumb. “Yes...”

“And was there a battle on the night you were lost?”

My heart skips, fingers scraping down past the knuckle. “Yes,” I whisper.

“Then it is you. I promise you that.”

“But—”

“I assure you, there are no others with gilded skin, shining like the stars,” she says with a lilting laugh. “There’s even a song of the battle that happened the night you went missing—a verse that has mention of you, though you’re not the only ones to sing it.”

airlpool I suck in a breath, brow caught in a furrow as she clears a crick in her throat. She begins to sing, the low timbre of her voice drifting through the air like a midnight sonnet meant only for the stars.

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*...Then Darkness fell onto Bryol,  
but it wasn't just night that came.  
A scourge came to beat, an army to rout.  
The city rubble and maimed.*

*And though due morning, dawn came,  
A terrible truth arose too.  
Our little sun couldn't be found.  
Gilded girl Turley, gone with the blue.*

th Saira The lyrics catch in my head as the last verse echoes into silence, my beating heart filling up the void. “Bryol...” I hear myself say, though my voice sounds so far away, like it’s echoing in my own skull. “That was my home. No. city where we lived.”

That was my home.

She nods, and the delicate strands of her hair catch slightly in the air as if they’d float away if not attached to her scalp. “You were very young when the battle happened and you went missing, Lyäri. What do you remember?”

“Not much,” I admit, voice thick, fingers still picking and peeling. “I don’t remember that.”

There were cobbled streets stained with the black of night. Cracks lined with debris and stumbling footsteps. Smashed windows and glass scattered along the ground like glittering stars. Flames caught on thatched roofs and hair on fire, spreading down the straw and licking down walls.

I remember the screaming. Bangs and bursts igniting down the street as rubble poured from the sky like sparking rain. I remember being huddled with the other children from the street, the taste of fear and magic prickling the air so thickly that it made me choke. My throat closes up now as it did then, and I swear, I can even taste bark-soaked leather and smoke.

Nenet’s eyes still hold that same sadness as she gently says, “You are the golden one gone...who has finally returned to us.”

I dig my fingernails deep into my palms. Grind and grate away clumps of tacky gold and squeeze them in my fist to ground me.

“So...where were you?” she asks, and although she’s trying to play it off, I can see she’s desperate to know.

My hands drop down to my side, sending tiny gold flecks falling to the floor. “Orea,” I reply, my voice hoarse. “I was in Orea.”

Her own eyes widen. For a beat, all she can do is stare at me with incredulous disbelief. “Orea? But...how?”

I shake my head. I’ve asked myself that question so many times it doesn’t feel like something that can even have an answer anymore. That’s what happens to some questions—to those unattainable truths. Sometimes, we ask, and we ask, but there is no answer, no satisfaction. It leaves gaping holes that will forever drain us with its unsolvable query, and that’s all we’ll ever have. The ask.

“I don’t know.”

“Many searched for you. You were gone without a trace. Declared dead.”



My throat feels like someone's heel is digging into it, trying to cut o  
ny air. "And my family...?"

I can't say it. I can't say it all. But Nenet seems to know exactly wh  
the asking. When her expression sprouts with more pity, when her head sh  
it's confirmation for what I've always thought, though for some reasor  
; as if feel my eyes fill.

I was declared dead, but they truly *are* dead.

My parents died that night in Bryol, and all I'll ever have of them ar  
ber?" memories and those draining, unanswerable questions.

Sadness clangs in the cave of my chest, reverberating all the way thr  
attered and filling me with its clamor. I'm an orphan, and I've had to live with  
ered resonance of that for my entire life. But now that I know for sure that I  
like have no family, that none of my childhood fantasies of being reunited  
my parents can ever come true... It leaves a lonely sound to echo throu  
t as every hollowed part of me.

I don't hear her move, but Nenet is suddenly gripping my hand, the  
clinging in gold on my skin buffering against her palm.

"You're here now, Lady Auren. Our new broken-winged bird has fl  
back home." Her gaze skims to my ribbons where they drape behind m  
re the back. "The last-birthing Turley returned to us like a golden dawn."

I don't feel like the dawn. I feel like my horizon has gone bleak.

I'm separated from Slade. My family is dead. I'm in an unfamiliar p  
lips of and I'm surrounded by people I don't know.

"So you're really fae," I say, my swimming mind needing to hear it  
it off, I aloud. "You're fae, and this is *truly* Annwyn?"

She laughs, like that's the silliest question she's ever been asked. "V  
the course I'm fae, and of course it's Annwyn. You fell from the sky. Whe  
you think the goddesses would bring you?"

I swallow hard. Blink even harder. The dizziness comes back full fo  
oesn't and I sway on my feet. "I think I need to lie down again..."

Nenet's expression sobers instantly. "Oh, look at me. I'm just an old  
it ve ask who's far too excited to be speaking to the Lyäri." She pats my hand. "  
les that another nice long nap to catch your bearings. Rest is best when sleep is  
r have. deep," she recites as she starts walking away. "You'll feel much better  
you've recovered from your journey. Rest now, Lady Auren."

She sends me one last smile before lifting the skirt of her dress and  
lead." stepping through the opening in the floor to descend the steps. Her han

ff my comes up to close the hatch behind her, and then I'm alone again.

I fall back onto the bed, my head spinning. Sinking down into the mattress, I cover myself beneath the blanket as if it can contain me. As if it can contain my rioting thoughts.

I, I still I'm in Annwyn.

Finally, after over twenty years, I'm here. I've started to get answers to questions that have tormented me for decades, and I'm not sure how to process them. How to process. Learning who you are from someone else is disconcerting. I have to somehow reconcile who I thought I was with who they think I am, and figure out how to align the two.

If Slade were here, I wouldn't feel so uneasy. So untethered. He always had a way of reminding me of who I am at my core. Of centering me. Of reminding me that maybe *he's* my center. Maybe that's why, without him, I'm unsteady.

I feel the separation from him like I've been sieved out. Holes poked through me, left to drain, left to empty, when all I want to do is wade in and let his presence buoy me.

I thought I was going to die at the Conflux. Thought I'd never see him again. And then, he came. He came for me like he always promised he would, being the villain I needed him to be. Killing for me, tearing through Orea for me, doing whatever it took to keep me safe.

All I want is to get back to him. Annwyn has been calling to me since I was stolen from it, but now that I'm back, I feel as lost as ever. Because I found myself with Slade, and only with him will I ever truly be home.

I love him with a fierceness that goes beyond the heart, and so I will wait and leak and grieve until he finds me.

And he *will* find me.

For now, I shut my eyes and think of him, letting my subconscious run out with gentle fingers. Maybe somewhere in Orea, his eyes will close. Maybe he'll feel my pull, and we can meet in our dreams while we sleep. And maybe there, we can be home, for just a little while.

Because my new home, I've realized...is *him*.

'Have

s

when



When I wake next, I can tell by the gaps in the boarded window that it's dark out. I must've slept hard and for quite some time, because the food is gone, and in its stead is a set of folded clothing on the table. There's

bucket of water on the floor, with two rags neatly rolled over its lip, an  
attress, scrap of soap tucked against the base.

contain When I get to my feet, my ribbons drift down behind me.

It's jarring to see them. As if I'd only dreamt their return, expecting  
to be gone again when I woke. But here they are, a comforting, familia  
s to the weight at my back.

o feel. I reach around to feel them, letting my fingers sift through their soft  
ting. I lengths. I might not be able to move them, but just having their presenc  
am, sprouted along my spine and feeling them whisper against my skin...it  
something that I never thought I'd have again.

ays I'm filled with shame when I think about how I loathed them before  
Or was embarrassed about their presence. They're a part of me—they *are*  
and now that I have a second chance with them, with being *whole* agai  
d not going to take them for granted. And who knows, maybe the goddess  
n him. finally listening. Maybe they'll breathe life and movement into them o  
more, if only I'm patient.

im I strip out of the gray cowled dress—glad to be rid of the scratchy C  
garb. I grab the rag with the bucket and soap and wash myself as best I  
ough shivering from the cold water as I scrub my skin free of the grime and  
blood.

ce I Once I'm clean, I pat myself dry with the second rag. The set of clot  
e I left for me is a dress that's softer than any fabric I've ever known in O  
feels like both velvet and satin, though it's neither. It's the barest of gr  
. ache colors, just a hint of blue sewn in dainty threads along the hem and bo  
slightly worn at the bottom and just a few inches too short for me. But  
dress is loose and low enough in the back that my ribbons can feed thr  
each comfortably, so I let them hang down, relishing in the way I can feel th  
too. skate across the floor.

ep. There are no shoes, but I prefer to let my feet breathe anyway. They  
tender, the edges peeling slightly, but they're so much better than they  
before. I spot a hairbrush on the table too, so I comb through my tangle  
tresses before tying them into a loose braid.

But even going through these motions can't ease the anxiousness ris  
my gut. I don't like being in this attic, with the cobwebs and the clutter  
: it's the boarded window. I don't like not knowing exactly where I am or w  
d tray with. And to make matters worse, I still feel drained from the Conflux,  
also a sapped magic making me sluggish and vulnerable.

My body is buzzing with the need to hurry and leave. I want to go back where I landed, as soon as possible. I need to see if Slade has opened a rip and come to find me. Everything in me pushes to go—to reunite with them. Everything in me misses him with the fiercest longing.

What if he's there in that field, and he doesn't know where I am? What if he knows how many hours it's been since I collapsed? What if he's hurt? What if he reopened the rip, and it drained him of so much power that he needs

I have to get to him.

With hurry skittering through my feet, I rush to the hatch in the floor and haul it open. Peering down, all I see are a set of narrow ladder-like steps, how I the dim light. I start to descend, feeling my way out of the attic.

Once I hit the bottom step, I turn around and see that I'm in a small room, I'm with a rack of coats and clothing directly in front of me. I have to shove things aside in order to get through, and as soon as I do, the clothes settle back into place, hiding the attic entrance again.

I trip over a few big boots lined up on the floor, but I catch myself on the door just ahead. When I open it, I walk into a short hallway and follow the light I can see peeking from around the corner. I step into what looks like a living room, where dim sconces are alight, revealing a pretty pale blue walls and cozy furniture set up around an unlit fireplace.

It's a small space but clean, the windows at the front all closed off with heavy curtains. I spot a doorway into a washroom, and I bolt for it, quietly doing my business. After I'm finished, I catch my reflection in the mirror, noting the stress strained around my eyes.

When I get back into the living room, I freeze at the sound of muffled voices coming from across the room, through a door just to the right of the fireplace. Tiptoeing my way across, I pass the cushioned chairs and veer around the table, coming to a stop just outside the door. Carefully, I tip my ear against it, trying to listen. Yet try as I might, I can't make out any words. All I hear is a low hum of voices, though I can tell that they're female.

I hesitate, but my pause is interrupted when the door suddenly swings open with a rush of air, making me flinch back as the healer stops short in front of me.

"Oh!" Estelia exclaims, pressing a hand to her heart. "Lady Auren. I don't know how I'm expect you to be up and about at this hour."

I peer over her shoulder, where I can see a big kitchen behind her. White cabinets and shelves line the yellow walls, a neat pile of dishes are stacked

ack to near the sink, and there seems to be just about every type of herb jar li  
nother along the countertop. Just like the living room, the window over the si  
ith him. shut, with thick flowery curtains covering every inch of glass so that n  
a sliver of the outside is visible.

ho A wide countertop takes up the middle of the room, lit up by a pitch  
What of the same blue flowers that were at that field. They give off their sub  
eds me? glow, helping to illuminate the space and casting off their calming col

There's a male sitting next to Nenet, drinks clutched between both of t  
r and hands that have swirls of orange steam rising out of them.

os in When Nenet sees me, she practically jumps to her feet. "My lady, yo  
up early! Dawnlight isn't for another half hour. Did you sleep enough?"

closet My gaze lingers on the unfamiliar person. He has shorn hair that loo  
e them from the flowers but I suspect is probably a dull blond. There's a dishr  
k in tossed over his shoulder and an apron around his robust waist, but his t  
seems kind, his eyes curious.

n the "I feel very rested," I tell Nenet, glancing back at her.

r the The three of them share a look, and I get the distinct impression that  
ike a mumbled words they were exchanging had to do with me.

on the "You must be hungry," Estelia says, cutting through the awkward pa  
"Come in, let's feed you."

with The male takes this as his cue to stand while I'm ushered inside. "I'  
ckly Thursil. Nenet is my grandmother," he says, introducing himself as he  
ror, out a tall chair for me at the counter. Now that he said it, I can see a lit  
family resemblance. He has the same gray eyes. "It's an honor, Lady A

ed I'm not sure what to say to that. Their collective veneration makes n  
f the awkward and wary. I'm also antsy to get back to the field, but I'll feel  
er confident going out in this unfamiliar place once the sun is up and I ca  
y my my gold-touch has replenished.

words. As I sit in the offered chair with a nod, I make a mental note to wrap  
myself in as much gold as I can, so that I have plenty of it on me at all  
gs open Just in case I need to call to it when the sun is down. I tap my foot agai  
out of bottom rung of the chair, trying not to show my anxiousness.

"What can I get for you?" the male fae asks. "We got fully stocked a  
didn't ago, so we have just about everything in our kitchen."

"It's *my* kitchen, Thursil," Estelia draws.

Wooden He shoots her a smile. "Sure, but we both know I'm in here more th  
eked love. You do the baking and dealing with the customers, but I'm the or

ned up standing over that stove for all the cooking.”

nk is She rolls her eyes, looking to me. “Only because he came into *my* se  
ot even one day and told me my stew was awful and swore he could make a be  
one. So I made him prove it.”

er-full “And?” he prompts with a smirk.

tle She sniffs. “And it was...marginally passable.”

or. He looks to me with a laugh. “Better. The word she’s looking for is

heir She had to hire me on.”

Despite my inner tension, I find myself smiling. It’s impossible not  
ou’re their banter and obvious care for one another is contagious.

” “Now look at us,” he tells her, wagging his blond brows at her with  
ks blue on his face. “I got into your kitchen *and* your knickers.”

ag Her eyes pinch at the sides and she slams a pointed finger his way. “  
face your mouth, Thursil Tern, or I’ll make sure you don’t get into *either* of  
again anytime soon.”

He chuckles good-naturedly, showing off dimples that make him lo  
: those boyish before he places a kiss on the orange swoop of her cheek. “Sure  
love.”

ause. Nenet rolls her eyes and looks at me. “Listen to the pair of them.  
Ridiculously in love. It’s a bit obnoxious, isn’t it?”

n I laugh lightly, but it makes me a little sad too. Makes me miss Slad  
pulls sharp jab to the ribs. “You don’t like love?” I ask.

tle “I prefer lust,” the old fae replies matter-of-factly.

luren.” A snort escapes me.

ne feel “Ignore my grandmother,” Thursil says before clapping his hands to  
more “Now. Let’s get you full. What’s your preference, my lady? There’s a  
n see if loaf of bread from yesterday, or if you prefer, I can cut up some fruit o  
scrounge up a tart...”

) I shake my head. “I appreciate it, but I really need to get back to the  
times. where I...landed.”

inst the All three of them look at me with wide eyes, with hints of that same  
saw in fae gathered at the field. An uncomfortable silence cuts between  
an hour like jagged strips left to hang.

When no one says anything, I push on. “Can one of you show me th  
way?”

an you, “Oh, Lady Auren, you don’t understand,” Estelia says as she shakes  
ie head, her expression almost mournful. “That field is the *last* place you

go.”

Corvette  
 better

*better.*

to—

a grin

‘Watch  
 those

ok  
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e like a

gether.  
 fresh  
 r

field

fear I  
 us

e

her  
 can

go.”





## CHAPTER 9

AUREN

**A** frown creases my brow and worry starts to wrap around me. My body tenses, muscles poised to bolt. I'm unsteady. Unsure. No certain whether I can trust these people at all.

"Why can't I go to the field?" I ask warily.

"She doesn't understand," Thursil murmurs, darting a glance to Nen. "She doesn't know anything..."

My back stiffens. "Know *what*?"

"You can't go out," Estelia tells me. "It's not safe."

*Can't go out.*

*Not safe.*

A jarring echo of Midas's words that rings in my head and instantly my hackles raising. Has me reaching back to grasp my ribbons and pull into my lap. Reminding me of who I am now. Of who I am not.

My eyes go hard. "I spent years being told that very same thing. Key cage for my supposed safety, when really, it was about control. So know—I'll *never* allow anyone to keep me trapped again, no matter the reason. Estelia's amber eyes widen with surprise and immediately fill with

apology. “I’m sorry, Lady Auren. I didn’t mean...I only want you to be careful. If they find out who you are, they’ll take you.”

My hackles rise. “What are you talking about?”

“Geisel is Saira Turley’s city. This is where she first came and where she lived before becoming a princess. That’s why most of us who live here are still loyalists, why you can trust us—because having you here truly is an answer to our prayers.”

“Okay...”

She tucks a thick black curl behind her pointed ear, looking at me with a worried expression. “But when you fell from the sky, it flared. It sort of...tore open the air and looked *strange*. The truth of your arrival will be protected by most of us, but it’s possible that you were seen by more than just those in the field or that someone will talk in front of someone who *isn’t* a loyalist, and that would not be a good thing.”

“Why not?”

Her amber eyes sink into me with a weighty hold. “Because while we are loyal to the Turleys, many more throughout Annwyn are *not*.”

The way she says that makes stones scrape down the walls of my stomach and bleed out worry.

“Some fae don’t like Turleys?” I ask slowly, trying to grasp what she is implying.

“Some will *hate* you. Think of you as an enemy to be snuffed out because they were fed lies about your family. While others have forgotten about you completely. The monarchy has made sure to help erase your family from the histories, painting your line with unimportance. But Annwyn is divided, and she crosses her arms in front of her as she leans against the large kitchen sink, the faucet bracketed with crystal knobs. “It’s been hundreds of years since Saira Turley sat on the throne, but we loyalists remember. We believe in the things that were back then. All of Annwyn was at peace, our land and magic were prosperous. When Saira came, she ended a war. Brought fae together. Most of us remember the golden age that came when she wore a crown.”

I frown. That sounds good, so I don’t know why some people would be against Turleys. Don’t understand why I might be hated.

“But that succession changed in Annwyn centuries ago, when one Turley didn’t want to rule,” Thursil says, bringing my gaze toward him where he props up his elbows on the countertop across from me. “It was a shock to everyone.”

ly  
it

et.

has  
l them

ot in a  
w this  
on.”

e of Annwyn when a new successor was coronated in their stead. The Carricks have sat on the throne ever since.”

e she That name niggles in the back of my mind like a loose thread on a sleeve tickling my skin.

are “And with every new Carrick crowned, Annwyn slips further away from how things should be,” Nenet tells me as she sits down beside me and picks up her cup again, bitterness lacing her tone.

ith “The worst of it was when Tyminnor Carrick ruled,” Estelia says.

. It Thursil shakes his head. “I don’t know. His grandson Tyec is a fucking menace.”

is, but “What makes them so bad?” I ask cautiously.

hat “They tax the hell out of everyone,” Thursil says. “Bleed us dry every year, making it so more and more of us struggle to survive. They force magicked fae into the monarchy’s service. Fill our cities with royal guards.”

re are “But what Tyminnor did was worse,” Estelia argues. “He was the one who spread the hate for Oreans. Called for all fae to return to Annwyn, tearing families apart in the process. He made some of us hate them and think of them as lesser. But he truly ruined Annwyn when he ordered that bridge broken.”

e’s My eyes go wide. “The bridge of Lemuria?”

ecause “The very one,” she says with a nod. “And ever since then, Annwyn has been languishing.”

it you “How do you mean?”

m our “The land where the bridge was is now dead.”

d.” She I frown. “What do you mean *dead*?”

ink, its She shrugs a shoulder. “I’ve never seen it myself, but I’ve heard plenty of stories.”

a They say the ground cracked open and death spilled out. Nothing grows there. It’s covered in ash, no matter how much rain tries to wash it away.

ic was I knew Seventh Kingdom was wiped out once the bridge was destroyed. Many but I had no idea that Annwyn’s land suffered too.

l be “The dead land spreads a little bit more every year,” she says. “And so close to our kingdom’s capital, it’s been making the king nervous.”

urley “It’s Annwyn’s way of punishing us,” Nenet cuts in before taking a sip from her steaming cup. “We were never supposed to break that bridge. Hehehe. Idiots. All of them.”

to all All of this information spins in my head.

arricks     “The Carrick monarchs have always hated the Oreans, but they hate  
Turleys even *worse*,” Nenet goes on. “They think that when Saira had  
leave, bridge connect permanently to Orea and allowed our realms to unite, s  
weakened our land and our blood. Diluted it with non-magicks. Let ou  
from be polluted with their presence. Bah,” she exclaims, waving her hand  
picks dismissively. “Like I said, idiots.”

“But really,” Thursil begins. “The Carricks hate Turleys because the  
threat to their rule. So long as a Turley lives, they’re the true heir to the  
ing throne and could overthrow the Carricks’ claim. Meaning you, Lady A  
are now their biggest threat. Now that you’ve returned, everyone will t  
that you’ll be vying for the throne. Loyalists everywhere will support y  
ry the promise of change.”

*Great Divine.*

ards.” I stare at him in shock, his words dripping like ice cold rain that plo  
ie who my head and soaks through my skin with startling discomfort. The way  
ing watch me with almost hopeful anticipation makes my gut twist.

of     “Let’s get one thing clear right away,” I tell them. “I’m not here to  
ge to be overthrow anybody. I’m not here to change Annwyn or sit on a throne.  
no queen.”

“The gold on your skin says otherwise.”

i has     His words make frustration buckle around my waist, pulling  
uncomfortably tight. “I’m just here because I fell through the sky. Tha

“So did Saira,” Nenet counters. “And look what she did. You can br  
lot of good too, Lyäri. You’re here for a reason.”

I shake my head, trying to break free from their expectations. Their  
nty. watchful eyes dim with disappointment. “I’m here because the air ripp  
’s open.”

iy.” I’m here because Slade saved my life and gave me the courage to tai  
yed, leap.

Just thinking about him makes my eyes burn. Makes my whole body  
with it in on itself, as if trying to fill the space where he should be. I press a ha  
my chest, right there in the middle where something twinges. It feels  
iother stretched, like a too-taut rope, and I want to grip it and pull. I want to t  
lge. back to me.

Desperation knots my veins, makes me lump up my ribbons on my l  
They always reached for him. Touched and danced and played.

Flirted.

d the        Then they were gone, and now *he's* gone.

the        So I'm whole...but I'm not.

he        I'm yanked out of my dismal thoughts as Estelia sets a cup of tea in  
r world of me. "We're not trying to pressure you, Lyäri, but to tell you how pe  
will view your return."

Thursil nods. "It's true. Annwyn needs changing. The open hatred fr  
y're a Oreens who still live here, the encouragement of division and fighting  
e        between fae, of rewarding nobles and punishing the workers, our dying  
uren, land...it has all systematically ruined what used to be good," he says. 'I  
hink       we fae who believe in the old monarchy do what we can for the Oreen:  
ou and here, and we encourage our fellow loyalists. When your parents were k  
and you were lost, it was considered a tragedy for us. But the Carricks  
*happy* you were all gone."

ps onto    "They facilitated it, more like," Nenet grumbles under her breath.

y they    My stomach churns, and I squeeze my ribbons tight. "You mean...y  
think my parents were killed on purpose because of *political* reasons?"

"It's what we've always believed," Thursil says. "The Carricks knew  
. I'm       well where the Turley family lived, no matter how much they tried to p  
your line no longer mattered. So long as a Turley lived, they were thre  
The battle that came to Bryol? Never should've happened. The war wa  
over. It was all too convenient that the city was sacked. That you went  
t's it."    missing and your death was announced with your parents', though you  
ing a       was never found. Many were convinced that you were taken. Some ho  
that you were rescued, but as time went on, more believed that you we  
dead."

ed        My heart contorts in my chest. After so long of knowing nothing, he  
these things makes my throat fill with bile. Were my parents killed, no  
ke the    unwitting casualties of a war, but as a purposeful political scheme beca  
some king felt threatened by their existence? By mine?

y cave    "Even with the Turley line wiped out, or perhaps *because* of it, us lc  
and to    have only strengthened over time," Estelia says. "But so has the hate a  
the Turleys. If the wrong people find out that you're alive, that you're  
ug him back..."

ap.       "You'd go missing all over again," Thursil finishes. "This time,  
permanently."

My stomach drops.

"*Thursil*," she admonishes sharply.

He shrugs. “What? She needs to know.” His gray eyes lock onto me  
are celebrating your return, my lady, more than you can probably fath  
front just being here means you’re in danger.”

I loop a ribbon around my finger again and again. “And you’re sure  
ople I’m actually a Turley? Because—”

“Yes.” All three of them answer vehemently at the same time.  
or Great Divine.

I blow out a breath, eyes dropped down to the counter as I try to tak  
; everything in.

‘But It makes sense now—why I’m up in that attic room. Why all the wir  
s still are closed off. Why some of the people in the field seemed both in aw  
killed are me...and terrified.

Coming to this town full of secret Turley loyalists means I’m putting  
ou all in danger just by being here, and yet, I’m seen as some kind of gho  
back to life, with the promise of change.

“We remember every Turley, but you were especially beloved for yo  
,v damngolden skin. But did you know that every Turley ever born had some p  
pretend them that was gold?”

Shock widens my eyes as my gaze snaps back up to Estelia. “Really  
atened. She nods. “Oh, yes. Your mother had golden eyes, just like yours. H  
is long mother had lips that looked like she kissed liquid gold. And it’s said th  
r body Saira Turley herself had flaxen hair with gilt strands that gleamed in th  
ped sunlight.”

“And you have the Turley rounded ears,” Nenet says, nodding at me  
re truly My hand immediately lifts to my ear where it pokes through from m  
aring “You’re saying all Turleys have rounded ears?”

She bobs her head. “Every single one. Part of your Orea heritage.”

“Rounded ears are dangerous here,” Estelia says. “Not every part-O  
use has them like the Turleys, but the ones that do...they have to be carefu  
oyalists Luckily, most know how to hide them. There are a lot of fae with Orea  
gainst blood who live in Geisel. Some of them were unlucky enough to get th  
particular stubbed ear gene passed down, but fabricated tips are easy ei  
to come by if you know who to ask, and I happen to know a source.” S  
turns to look at Nenet with a smile.

“Not that it matters for you,” Nenet says with a chortle. “Your golde  
appearance will give you away far faster than your ears. Not everyone

. “We Annwyn will remember the golden one gone, but when word spreads, I  
m. But figure it out soon enough and everyone will then know you’re a Turley

“That’s why you need to stay hidden,” Estelia adds.

that I stare at each of them, their gazes earnest and kind. I don’t know what  
make of it. I’m so used to seeing eyes filled with suspicion, fear, envy,  
Yet these fae look at me with hope. It’s both consolatory...and a bit  
overwhelming.

e “I understand what you’re saying, and I appreciate the warning, but  
hide forever. I won’t let that be my life again. I’m grateful that you’re  
ndows me stay here, but I need to return to the field. It’s important.”

e of “But we just explained how dangerous it is!” she exclaims.

“I know, but I’m looking for someone—the person who helped me get  
g them here.”

st come Nenet makes a noise in her throat, and there’s a look of pity in her  
gray eyes. “Saira Turley came here looking for someone too. But she  
our found him.”

art of For some reason, that irks me, and my gaze sharpens. “I’m not Saira

?” I *will* find him. Even if I have to figure out how to slash open the world  
myself.

ler “Nenet told us you were in Orea,” Estelia says, expression carrying  
at disbelief. “*How?*”

ie “I don’t know,” I answer, telling her the same thing I told Nenet. I pull  
ribbon away from my finger so I can rub my temples. This flood of  
information is boiling over and sloshing around my neck in overwhelm  
y hair. waves. “But now I’m suddenly back here, and you’re telling me I’m a  
heir that the monarchy wants dead, and that Annwyn is a mess I’m supposed  
to somehow fix, but I’m just trying to find someone. *He* is my priority.  
need to go back to that field and try to find him.”

l. “But you could be seen. Caught,” Estelia exclaims with distress, her  
in twisting hands burying into her blue skirt. “They could imprison you or  
at worse.”

nough I pin her with an unwavering gaze. “I’d love to see them try.”

he She rears back, like my fierce words took her by surprise. Even Thura  
looks a bit shocked.

m Not Nenet. She suddenly slaps a hand across her thigh and *cackles*.

in “There’s the fierce Turley I was waiting for! Heart of gold and spoken  
she recites in singsong before looking at the others, teeth flashing in her

they'll "She's a true Turley, isn't she?" Jumping down from her seat, suddenly  
7." seeming far more sprightly, she says, "Well. It's decided then. Lady A  
says she needs to get to the field, so we have to listen to her. This could  
hat to part of what the goddesses want. It's not yet dawn. I'll sneak her into c  
anger. the harvest carts, just like I did when we got her here, and take her to t  
myself."

"It's too dangerous. She *can't*—Thursil," Estelia exclaims, turning to  
I can't him like she's looking for help. "Say something."

letting He comes over and cups her elbow, looking at her tenderly, and just  
one look shows me how much they care for one another. "She knows t  
danger now, love. We're here to help the Lyäri, not keep her locked up  
get grandmother is right. Maybe this is what the goddesses want. If she say  
needs to get to the field, then we need to help get her to the field."

ged Estelia pinches her lips together, and the orange streaks across her c  
iever grow darker, like fall leaves just before they go brown and snap off the  
branches. "Fine," she relents with a sigh before she glances at me. "Bu  
i." need to eat at least. I can't have an underfed guest staying in the best s  
orld in Geisel, even if you are here in secret."

I almost protest, but her glare is very convincing, so I nod instead.  
slight "Alright. Just something simple. I've already been enough trouble for  
two."

ull the Thursil chuckles as Estelia whirls around and starts digging through  
cupboards in the kitchen and pulling things down. "Trouble? My Stel's  
ring favorite thing to do is make food that people love, and I love to help he  
Turley that."

posed "I only wish we could serve you in the dining room properly," Estel  
. So I over her shoulder as she starts putting together some food. "But there a  
many windows, and the servette will be opening soon. We can't risk yo  
going out there and being seen."

r "Speaking of," Thursil begins. "I'd best go out back. Get a look at w  
there. If I can find Keff, I'll get him to bring his cart right at the road. I  
covered."

rsil "Good idea," Nenet nods. "I'll go with you."

They disappear through a swinging door on the opposite side of the  
kitchen, while Estelia comes over with a plate and sets it down in front  
bold," "Here you are. Eat every crumb. You need your strength."

er grin.



y Her genuine concern makes my heart squeeze. She doesn't even rea  
uren know me, and yet she's worrying for my safety and comfort. "Thank y  
d be Estelia."

me of Her face softens at my words, amber eyes shining with concern. "Of  
he fieldcourse. It's an honor to have you in our home. We're just so thankful t  
Lyäri Ulvêre has returned. We want the best for you."

oward I don't know what to say to that, because I've done nothing to deser  
kind of devotion and acceptance. I've never come across a group of pe  
that who instantly trust and support me, and I'm not sure how to navigate it  
he to trust it.

My At my smile, she points to the plate. "Eat."

ys she I pick up the sandwich stuffed with meats that I don't recognize, tho  
they're full of delicate spices. While I chew, I watch her curiously as s  
heeks moves through the kitchen. I wonder at her life, her healing magic, this  
sir servette. "How long have you and Thursil been together?"

it you She gives me a smile over her shoulder. "Not as long as we should've

ervette My eyes drop to my plate, my bite suddenly hard to swallow. I chew  
silence, listening to her flit around the kitchen, humming softly beneath  
breath.

you Just as I finish my sandwich, she speaks up again. "This *him* you're  
looking for... How long have you been together?"

the My gaze flicks up and I give a sad smile. "Not as long as we should

s "Thought so. You have that look about you."

er with "What look?"

ia says "Homesick. Lovesick." She sets a plate of beautiful, dainty-looking  
in front of me. They're four layers high yet still bite-sized, with the pre  
re too decorations on top of glossy icing and different syrups oozing over the  
ou sides. "I hope you find him," she says gently.

"I will."

who's I reach forward and pop the chocolate cake into my mouth. Except, :  
His is chocolate. The flavor is smoky and sweet, somehow both airy and den:  
the same time. At the center, there's a bit that crackles with heat again:  
tongue. "Great Divine," I say around a moan. "These are delicious."

She beams. "These are my specialty. Puff cakes."

of me. After I'm finished eating, I down my water, just as Thursil comes ba

"I talked to Keff. He's got his cart ready."

"And you're sure he knows to be utterly discreet?" Estelia asks him.

lly            “Keff knows to keep his mouth shut,” Nenet says, coming in from the  
ou,            storage room. “His ears weren’t always that pointy.”

                 My brows lift in surprise. “He’s Orean?”

                 “Quarter one,” Nenet tells me. “And a bit bitter about it to be honest  
hat our        “It’s nearly sunup,” Thursil says, looking to me. “If you want to go to  
                 you should head out.”

ve that        “Or you could rest for another day or two...” Estelia offers hopefull

ople            “I’ll be fine. Trust me.”

t. How        “Wait,” she says, holding up a finger as she disappears into the living  
                 room. She comes back just a few seconds later with a long cloak. “Her  
                 drapes the thick brown fabric over my shoulders and hooks it at my co  
ugh            “At least wear this. It might not do much to hide you, but it’s better than  
he              nothing. We don’t want too many tongues wagging.”

                 I pull the oversized hood over my head and wrap my ribbons loosely  
                 around my waist so they won’t drag. She nods, but when her gaze drops  
ve.”            down to my feet, her lips pull into a frown. “I don’t have a spare set of  
                 that will fit you yet, but I’ll get some today. Maybe you can wear socks  
r in             don’t like you being on them so soon after your healing. Are they hurtin  
h her            “They’re much better,” I assure her. “And barefoot is fine.”

                 She wrings her hands. “I’m sorry I’m not more powerful, but my magic  
                 runs out quite quickly. I wish I could’ve completely healed them...”

’ve.”          Thursil gives her a look of admonishment. “Love, you’re one of the  
                 precious few who still have a lick of magic at all. I’d say that makes you  
                 plenty powerful.”

cakes          I blink in surprise. “What do you mean?”

ttiest          “Remember what I told you about the land dying when the bridge was  
naked broken?” Estelia says. “Well, that’s where it started. At the same time,  
                 started giving birth to children with no magic. It’s gotten worse ever since

                 “And yet the king blamed that on the Oreans too,” Thursil says. “Even  
it’s not though there’d been plenty of Orean and fae joinings that produced pop  
se at          children. He never claimed it had anything to do with the bridge at all.  
st my          our sudden lack of power was brought on by diluted bloodlines. Just magic  
                 propagated hate toward the Oreans. Some still believe those lies.”

                 “Our betrayal of Orea poisoned our land. Mark my words,” Nenet says  
ack in.        she pulls on her own cloak, buttoning it at the neck.

                 Thursil wraps an arm around Estelia. “That’s why my Stel is so special  
                 Magic is rare nowadays. If the monarchy knew she had it, she’d have taken

re shipped off to serve them years ago.”

“Another reason we need a new monarchy,” Nenet says pointedly to I give her a look. “Like I said before, I want nothing to do with any throne.”

today, She sighs. “How unrevolutionary.”

y. “Hush, Nenet,” Estelia chastises. “You’re going to scare her off with talk.”

g “Bah,” the old fae says, waving her hand. “Youth is wasted on the youthful. In my day, I would’ve marched right up to the king’s castle and e.” She tossed him on his arse if I had a gilded face.”

llar. Thursil snorts. “I was told you used up all your youth flirting with e m male who came through Geisel, tossing them on their arses in a very di way.”

y “Ah, the good old days,” she laughs, showing off her sharp canines. s she turns to me, her gray eyes alight with mischief. “This is the most shoes excitement I’ve had since. So let’s get you to your field, Lyäri, and hel s? I find who you’re looking for.” ing?”

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“Bah,” the old fae says, waving her hand. “Youth is wasted on the youthful. In my day, I would’ve marched right up to the king’s castle and tossed him on his arse if I had a gilded face.”

Thursil snorts. “I was told you used up all your youth flirting with every male who came through Geisel, tossing them on their arses in a *very* different way.”

“Ah, the good old days,” she laughs, showing off her sharp canines. Then she turns to me, her gray eyes alight with mischief. “This is the most excitement I’ve had since. So let’s get you to your field, Lyäri, and help you find who you’re looking for.”



## CHAPTER 10

AUREN

**T**he pre-dawn air is dark and crisp, holding the sharper edges of a night not yet warmed up by the sun.

Nenet guides me, her wispy head a foot shorter than my own, clutching her skirts as she hurries me out of the back door. We pass through a small walled-in area that appears to hold more of the servette's storage barrels and supplies, and then we exit out of a gate and turn a corner into a narrow alleyway. Water drips from the downspouts of the gutters, forming little puddles that we pass. The whole area smells like the wet rock of a cobblestone street just ahead, but the air has a freshness to it—a sweetness that never existed in Orea.

“Stay here,” Nenet tells me, just before she hurries forward to the end of the alley and reaches the street.

I see her give someone out of sight a nod, and within moments, a horse clops forward, pulling a cart. It doesn't look like Orea's horses, though one is white with swirls of pastel purples that strike through its hair and hooves. Its tail and mane are the same lavender, with delicate flower vines braided through it.

The cart itself is different too—more *fae* than I’m used to. Instead of normal wood and tarp, the walls appear to be made from some kind of material with blue and copper specks. Even the wheels are made from that same material, shining with its smooth, speckled spokes. At the top of the cart is a taut stretch of arcing blue fabric that covers the whole thing, with a small flap bending up to shade the driver sitting behind the horse. The cart stops, off the alley’s entrance, the back hatch already open and waiting.

Nenet waves me over, and I follow her cue, hurrying down the alley getting up into it. Inside, the space is stacked with empty crates, but there’s a small spot for Nenet and me to squeeze past to get to the very back. As soon as we’re settled, Nenet drags the crates in front of us and knocks, and a few seconds later, we’re jolted forward.

I open my mouth to speak, but she shakes her head, placing a finger to her lips. Her wrinkled lips, eyes darting to the end of the cart. There’s a spot where the metal hatch and the fabric have a slight gap between. Her attention stays focused there, eyes trained on the speck of street. I watch it too, though I can’t see much. Just the slivered view of buildings and other carriages we pass by, accompanied by the sound of hooves clomping over the cobblestones and the noises of people rousing before the sun.

It’s not until the wheels beneath us finally hit dirt that Nenet seems to relax. Fresh air feeds into my lungs, and the dawn pours out, the noises of the street ebbing away. As soon as I feel the prickle of the sun, I let out a small breath.

Making sure Nenet’s still focusing on the gap, I surreptitiously call on my gold-touch. Tentatively at first, making sure my power has replenished after being so dangerously drained. Relief spreads through me when my magic easily drifts out.

With my eyes up and my hands inside the cloak, I form gold pieces. I first make a solid gold belt to wrap around my waist, fitting in neatly beneath my ribbons and hidden from view. Next, I make a cuff for each arm, wrapped securely around my biceps in thin swirls like coiled snakes tucked underneath my sleeves.

“It’s safe to talk now,” Nenet says, and I nearly jump, my focus snapping back to her. I make my magic dry up, letting it soak into my palms, satisfied that I at least have a little bit of gold on me, at my disposal and ready for nightfall. “It’s better to be cautious when we’re in town.”

“Where are we now?”

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“The road that leads to the fields. Geisel is part of the flower district our land here has the most harvested flowers out of all of Annwyn. On farmers are out here at this time, and Geisel farmers have lived and worked on this land for generations.” She leans forward conspiratorially and winks a bit. “We’re on your side, my lady.”

cutting “But this is dangerous for you, isn’t it?”

“Danger,” she scoffs. “What’s life without a bit of that?”

and “I don’t want you getting in trouble for being with me. I’ll be okay on my own.”

She looks offended. “I would never allow you to simply fend for yourself. Can you imagine?” she adds with a laugh. “Waving the Lyäri out the door while I have a cup of tea? I think *not*.”

My lips tilt up. “Don’t worry, Nenet. I can handle myself.”

“I have no doubt. But Turley loyalists will always stand by your side,” she looks down at her lap. “Or sit, at the very least.”

My smile grows wider. “So, tell me about Geisel. You seem to really like it here.”

“Oh, I do. Geisel is one of the last decent places. My family has lived and worked on this land for hundreds of years.” I can hear the pride in her voice.

“The town itself used to be much smaller, but our soil has become the best of the best in all of Annwyn, which is coveted even more because of the deathlands that have spread from the bridge. We also grow the rarest, most coveted blue flowers.”

Her gray eyes delve into mine. “It doesn’t grow anywhere else but in Geisel since they sprouted when Saira came.”

I feel my brows lift. “Those glowing blue flowers?”

“The very ones,” Nenet nods. “It’s the only thing of the Turleys that has survived the monarchy hasn’t destroyed. Too profitable for them, I suppose. Of course, once everyone realized how functional they turned out to be, Geisel grew, and with that growth came more attention. With attention, comes politics. The Stone Swords are very prevalent here—because of the fields and the Turley history.”

“Stone Swords?”

“It’s the royal guard. They police the cities, and they’re under strict orders from the throne. Every single one of their regiment trains in Annwyn’s king’s capital before they’re sent off.”

“And these Stone Swords...do you think they know I’m here?”

, and       The corners of her eyes tighten. “I’m not sure, my lady. But I will sa  
ly our     —even some of the folk who weren’t in the field that day mentioned s  
rked     something strange in the sky. A sort of flare or a...a...”

s.         “Rip?”

She snaps her slightly crooked fingers. “Exactly. There was a noise,  
when I looked up, I saw the sky tear open. You drifted down like a bir  
breeze, with silken wings shredded into strips streaming down behind  
on my     saw the ground welcome your fall so that you did not crash, but instea  
rself.     *settled* into it like one settles back on the calm surface of a sea. Everyo  
loor     the field saw, and some in the city know *something* was in the sky that  
got you out of there as fast as I could. I don’t know what the whispers  
saying yet, but they will be saying something.”

Whispers. I’ve come to know all too well how dangerous whispers c  
e.” She    “And these Stone Swords...they’ll recognize me?”

“They might, they might not. It isn’t just loyalists who followed you  
y love     bloodline. Some will remember the gilded girl who disappeared during  
Hundredflame Battle and was declared dead. If they realize who you a

d and     “I won’t get a welcome party.”

voice.    “Not the kind you’d want.”

richest   My eyes shift to the back gap of the cart, the horizon brightening wh  
ds that   thoughts cast shadows in my head.

oom.”     If I’m recognizable, at least to some fae, does that mean...that Slade  
Geisel.   I was a Turley? Or if he doesn’t, what will he think once he finds out?  
do *I* even think about being a Turley? I haven’t really had time to begi  
process it.

our       “I’m sorry you’re not returning home under better circumstances,” I  
rse,     tells me. “There should be celebrations throughout Annwyn. Parades in  
ew,     streets. Not this sneaking around.”

ing.     “I’m used to having to sneak around,” I say, giving her a wry look. ‘  
he       funny—all I ever wanted for a long time was to get back here. When I  
little, I used to dream of waking up in Annwyn again because my life i  
was...uncertain. Dangerous. I never imagined that it would feel the sar  
law of   here.”

dom      “People have a way of ruining things,” she replies, gray eyes far too  
pointed. “But other people have a way of setting things right again.”

I shake my head at her insinuation. “I didn’t even know I was a Turl  
“Saira didn’t know who she would be to Annwyn either.”



ly this “Great Divine, you’re persistent.”  
eeing Nenet grins. “A goddess blessing, I’m sure.”  
“Mm-hmm,” I say sardonically before switching the subject. “Are th  
many Oreans still in Annwyn?”  
and “Yes, though it’s not a good life for them. Since the bridge was brok  
d in a Oreans trapped here have lived a long life of oppression. Forced to wo  
you. I Punished if they hold any fae power in their blood. Most live as servan  
d noble houses. Others have been imprisoned or worse.”  
ne in “That’s terrible.”  
day. I “We hide and protect those we can.”  
are “You’re good people.”  
She gives a humorless laugh. “Some would say we are the scourge c  
an be. Annwyn, weakening it with our wrongful sympathies. *Idiots.*”  
I laugh. “Maybe you should be the one challenging the king for his t  
ir I don’t know how he could possibly stand up against you.”  
; the “He couldn’t,” she says with a confident nod. “The Stone King wou  
re...” shake in his marble boots.”  
“Stone King?”  
“His power. He can control stone and rock. It’s why his guard are ca  
nile my Stone Swords. He outfits them with magical stone weapons and armor  
“Sounds heavy.”  
e knew “Not as heavy as gold, I daresay,” she says cheekily.  
What My eyes sharpen on her and I go still, hand wanting to reach for the  
n to belt at my waist.  
“Ha!” she says with a knowing grin when she takes in my expressio  
Nenet “That *was* your magic at the field, wasn’t it? The goddesses truly have  
n the on you, Lady Auren.”  
Maybe a hand that shoved me down face-first into the ground over a  
‘It’s over again. But I don’t say that.  
was The cart jolts to a stop just then, and there’s a soft knock against the  
n Orea Nenet peers between the gap. “We’re here. Keff just gave us the signal  
ne it’s safe, but let me go first, just in case.”  
I watch as she shifts aside some crates before scooting her way dow  
pushes the back open and gets out, and then I hear murmured voices. I  
sweat nervously as the minutes drag on. Finally, she calls for me to fol  
ey.” With trepidation sewing through the seams of my stomach, I make my  
out of the cart, my bare feet hitting lush grass.

I look down, suddenly jolted with my past. It used to feel like a farfetched dream that I could be in control of my power and have *this*—the ability to walk barefoot in the sunlit grass. To no longer have to fear what my skin might brush up against during daylight. I can eat and drink and touch a person when the sun is up, and not have to cover, or hide, or live in terror of accidentally killing everyone and everything in my path.

I've come so far.

And now, I'm even further than I ever thought I'd be.

In Annwyn.

When I look around, all I can do is stand and stare. I didn't get a chance to truly take it all in before, but these fields are *beautiful*.

"We call this field *Eëdleth Bire*," Nenet says beside me. "Loosely translated into *her waterless blue*. These flowers bloomed when Saira : throne. here. Before, it was nothing but parched grass and patches of dirt."

Waterless blue is the perfect name for it. As far as my eyes can see, the subtle sloping of the hills looks like crests of gentle waves, every inch covered in the glowing blue blooms, lapping lightly in the morning's breeze as the plants sway.

"It's blue everywhere. Except for one spot now."

My eyes immediately drift to where Nenet is motioning, and I see the gilded circle right there in the middle, where the blue stemmed flowers gleam gold.

"That's where you landed, my lady."

I turn to reply, but my eyes catch on to the dozens of fae standing around the field. Some of them have clearly been working out here, their clothing splattered with stains of soil as they hold their tools, but there are others who aren't working.

There's a group of them near the golden circle of flowers, gathered around and staring at me openly, including children. They all watch me with inquisitive eyes and pointed ears, and my nerves jump at the attention.

"Don't worry," Nenet murmurs reassuringly. "Everyone here is loyal to the Turleys."

Nodding, I slowly push the hood off my head, letting the sunlight lap against my face. My feet carry me forward through the soft grass until I'm walking between the neat rows of flowers. The stems are dark blue, the petals lighter, peeling open like a plume of feathers and emitting their soft glow. The blooms sway in the breeze like they could simply unfurl and take over the world.

etched “The flowers are named after her too, of course,” Nenet tells me as I  
y to fingers lightly drift over the soft petals at my waist. “Though, even that  
in banned. So instead of calling them Saira’s Sea, now they’re known more  
and live commonly as Blue Bird’s Plume.”

“They’re beautiful,” I say, watching as some of the farmers continue  
work, carefully pruning the plants and placing them into crates and sacks.  
“What do you use them for?”

“They’re one of the most potent medicinal plants in all of Annwyn. They  
aid in even the worst sicknesses and can also be used to make serums for  
injury to some injuries. Lots of people use them for their glow too, until it fades  
they wilt.” She leans in and breathes. “Plus, they smell quite nice too.”

She straightens up and then nods toward the circle of gold that’s taking  
fell the field several feet away. “But it’s those golden flowers that brought  
crowd here today.”

I continue forward down the perfect row, not stopping until my toes  
the just an inch away from the gilt flowers. They’ve taken up the space like  
reeze golden eye in the middle of the sea, just waiting to blink. It’s formed a  
circle, left to glint in the sunlight. I can see where a cluster of them have  
crushed, the space of grass molded to where my body must have landed  
ie center.

My gaze then lifts to the lavender sky, to the fluff of clouds that run  
s now like a billowing curtain. The air is sweet and the breeze is peaceful. When I  
take in a breath, it’s like I’m breathing for the first time after so many  
ound stagnant, stale years. The sun is softer here, painting the world in a past  
ies light, and something in me settles down and sighs in familiarity.

But even with this sense of home, threads in my stomach begin to knit  
s here because there is no torn line in the sky. There is no crack in the void.

The rip is truly gone.

I knew it was. I saw it close when I fell, but I’d hoped that it would  
nment —that Slade would be here by now. But he’ll find me, just as he promised  
il to the He’ll reopen the rip. I just have to be patient.

And yet...there’s a little voice in my head spewing doubts. Erupting  
p unease. Making more and more knots tangle in my stomach. Because I  
I’m how drained he was—saw how much power he used. That takes a toll,  
e petals on someone as strong as him.

*What if something happened to him?*  
flight.

[ let my My body tenses, writhing with worry, my chest pricking with needli  
t was hurt. What if he was so weakened at the Conflux, that the other monar  
re hurt him? What if all that power he expelled made him so drained that  
I yank off that thread of thought before it can unspool any further.  
e to No. He's okay. He *has* to be.  
ks. A spot in the center of my chest pinches sharply. I twist my hands th  
my ribbons and squeeze just to keep from crying.  
They Forcing myself to take a breath and swallow down my distress, I ask  
for anyone noticed anything else in the sky?"  
as She shakes her head. "I asked around, but there's been nothing, and  
me, plenty of people have been here since you came."  
en over I try not to let the tightening ache in my stomach show on my face.  
the Looking back down, I notice that the fae circled around seemed to hav  
moved closer, like they want to be nearer to me, their attention rapt on  
are face.  
e a "But I daresay if someone *does* come searching for you, they'll know  
perfectwere here," Nenet murmurs, motioning toward the metal coursing over  
re been petals and dripping down the stems.  
d at the I could pull the gold back, but like Nenet said, I want to leave it so t  
when Slade comes, he'll know I was here. And...one glance at the peo  
ple gathered gives me the impression that they wouldn't want me to remov  
hen I Like it's become as important to them as the flowers themselves.  
tel "Is it...real gold?" Nenet asks.  
not, The crowd leans in, as if straining to hear my answer. The farmers s  
working.  
reopen The fae murmur, a soft sort of excitement billowing through them. C  
ised. pretty fae with long black hair, steps forward and smiles at me. "Lyäri  
Ulvêre," she says and then makes a gesture, pressing her thumb to her  
chin, and chest, before she bows her head slightly. As if she's set off  
everyone else, the rest of the group starts doing the same thing, all of t  
murmuring Lyäri, all of them looking at me with awe, some even with  
saw in their eyes.  
even "Nenet..." I murmur.  
"They heard the whispers, Lady Auren. Came to see for themselves  
was true. Your presence is a gift they can't believe they're witnessing."  
"But isn't this dangerous?" I ask. "For them to be here? To see me?"

ng            “It’s a blessing to see you with our own eyes,” a young male fae cal  
chs          “And we true Geisels would never betray the Lady Lyäri.”

he...        Nenet nods. “This might not be Bryol, but Geisel is still your home.  
              My eyes automatically lift to the sky, to the pristine expanse of past  
              and tufts of feathered clouds. Now that I’m here, under this sun, all I w  
rough do is get back to him.

              Because I’m looking up, it must hint at the direction of my thoughts  
s, “Has because Nenet says, “Do you truly think he’s coming?”

              “He is. I just have to be patient,” I reply, resolve thickening my tone  
believe Though I think I’m assuring her as much as myself.

              She eyes me dubiously but lets the matter drop. “Let me show you  
something.”

e            I follow her, careful to step around golden flowers as we walk aroun  
my          circle, passing more people until we reach the other side. There on the  
              ground, nearly hidden between the blooms, is a heaping basket full of  
w you        feathers of every color and size.

r the        “What’s all this?”

              “Offerings,” she says, plucking up one of the feathers and handing i  
hat          It’s black, the length of my hand, and right at the end, there’s a yellow  
ple          tied to it. “We used to leave offerings here all the time for Saira, but th  
re it.        to stop long ago for fear of getting caught. These ones though, these ha  
              been left for you.”

top         “Yes,” someone else says, harsh voice cutting across the field. “Bec  
              you’re the golden girl we all thought was lost forever.”

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“It’s a blessing to see you with our own eyes,” a young male fae calls out. “And we true Geisels would never betray the Lady Lyäri.”

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My eyes automatically lift to the sky, to the pristine expanse of pastel light and tufts of feathered clouds. Now that I’m here, under this sun, all I want to do is get back to him.

Because I’m looking up, it must hint at the direction of my thoughts, because Nenet says, “Do you truly think he’s coming?”

“He is. I just have to be patient,” I reply, resolve thickening my tone. Though I think I’m assuring her as much as myself.

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I follow her, careful to step around golden flowers as we walk around the circle, passing more people until we reach the other side. There on the ground, nearly hidden between the blooms, is a heaping basket full of feathers of every color and size.

“What’s all this?”

“Offerings,” she says, plucking up one of the feathers and handing it to me. It’s black, the length of my hand, and right at the end, there’s a yellow thread tied to it. “We used to leave offerings here all the time for Saira, but that had to stop long ago for fear of getting caught. These ones though, these have been left for you.”

“Yes,” someone else says, harsh voice cutting across the field. “Because you’re the golden girl we all thought was lost forever.”



## CHAPTER 11

AUREN

**I** turn around.

The fae who spoke stands just several feet away, but the distance seems to be eaten up by his pure presence. By the way the others in the field watch him with respectful familiarity.

He's wearing similar garb to what the other farmers have on—a simple long-sleeved tunic and woolen pants tucked into boots. And yet, he looks out of place. The shirt is just a little too tight, the boots just a bit too clean. A glance at his fingernails reveals the crescents are free of any dirt or grime, although he looks strong, used to working his muscles. His skin holds a warm hue, eyes as dark as the soil beneath our feet.

“Who are you?” I ask, keeping my attention rapt on him.

“My name is Wick, Lady Auren.”

I glance at Nenet, but she's looking at him with familiarity too, and even a bit of excitement. “Wick! I didn't hear you were back in Geisel

“Just passing through. It was pure luck I was here,” he says as he comes forward.

He stops and places a feather in the basket at my feet. When he raises

his full height again, he stands close enough that I can see a couple faint lines nicked into his forehead. His sleek black hair is swept back in a tousle down the center of his head, while the rest of it is shaved short against his scalp.

He looks me up and down like he's analyzing every inch of me. I want to take a step back just to put some distance between us, but I dig in my heels instead.

"You really are her," he breathes, almost like he's talking more to himself than me. "You're Auren Turley."

"So I've been told."

His brown eyes flick between mine. "You didn't know?"

"That I'm a Turley?" I glance at Nenet. "Not until recently."

"How is that possible?" His expression and tone are coated in suspicion. Like he doesn't quite believe me. "How could you not know who you are?"

Irritation fills me, dumping down my stiffening spine. "Long story."

"I'd like to hear it."

The fact that he's pushing makes me uneasy. "Forgive me, but I don't know you."

"Well, I know *you*, Lady Auren," he says before waving a hand at all the bystanders, who are still and silent around me. "We all know you."

"You know *of* me. That's not the same thing."

The two of us stare at each other, and there's this awkward strain between us that I don't quite understand. I haven't known Nenet for long, but I've been myself trusting her pretty quickly for some reason. Estelia and Thursil are here. This fae, however, is making me wary. There's an ambitious arrogance about him that I want to get to the root of. The crowd looks on with nervous anticipation that crackles like dried grass beneath booted feet.

Luckily, he relents, blowing out a breath that pops the intensity. "You're right," he says, posture loosening its tension like steady hands smoothing a blanket. "I apologize. I didn't mean to get off on the wrong foot. It was just a shock to hear that the Lyäri Ulvêre had returned. Even though I've heard the whispers, I didn't actually expect to find you, real and alive and standing right in this field. It's...inconceivable."

He keeps looking at me, so I keep looking at him too. He's trying to be casual, in, to seem like everyone else, but I have a feeling he's not a farmer.

"Who exactly are you?" I ask. "Do you live in Geisel too?"



nt scars Wick hesitates, but then he lifts his hand, knuckles bent to show me  
d line small golden ring on his forefinger with the mark of a bird stamped on  
his metal. “Do you know what this is?”

I shake my head.

ant to “There are loyalists who have been working behind the scenes to  
reels undermine our current monarchy. We are called the *Vulmin Dyrūnia*—  
Dawn’s bird. This is the Turley symbol. And now, it seems, it’s yours.

imself “*Vulmin Dyrūnia*. So you’re rebels?”

“Loyalists,” he says again, gesturing around to the crowd. “The Vul  
help other sympathizers and the oppressed Oreans, while also doing wh  
can to uphold the old Turley principles and legacies. We have been wo  
underground for a very long time.”

tion. “And you’re...what? One of the Vulmin leaders?”

are?” “*The* Vulmin leader,” Nenet tells me.

’ “I see.”

“I don’t think you do,” he counters. “Your return—it’s a sign.”

it My brows pull together in both confusion and suspicion. “A sign for  
what?”

ll the “For us to step out of the shadows and rise up. For the Vulmin—for  
loyalists everywhere—to finally take back Annwyn and undo the wrong  
the Carricks have facilitated and inflicted. And we can do that with you  
tween Lady Auren. You—”

found “No.”

too. My interruption severed his words, but he picks them back up with a  
e to cutting edge.

energy “What do you mean, *no*? You’re not even going to listen to what I h  
say?”

ou’re I bristle. This male has barely had one conversation with me, and he  
ng out already trying to *use* me.

; foot. Being gold is exhausting.

ugh I “I did listen,” I tell him. “But I’m not interested.”

and His gaze flicks to the crowd for a second, like he doesn’t want them  
hear, and his tone lowers. “You are *exactly* what we need to mobilize c  
blend cause—to finally come out in the open and demand change. If more pe  
see you, it will give everyone a reason to take action in a real way, whi  
Annwyn needs now more than ever. You are the Lyäri Ulvêre, our *gilc*

a gone, and you've come home. With you as our symbol, we can inspire  
to the thousands to stand with us."

*Inspire thousands?*

"I've only just returned," I tell him incredulously. "Just found out w  
am, who I'm related to. I have no firsthand knowledge of Annwyn's p  
I'm not in a position to do anything. I don't know enough about it."

"So let us teach you." Vehemence bleeds through his face, his tone.  
with me. Join us. Be the face of our cause so we may finally rise up ag  
min the monarchy. There's trouble brewing in the kingdom's capital. Soldi  
hat we have been conscripted, the army is on the move—it doesn't bode well  
orking Annwyn. We need to face them, to force change. We *need* it to happen

Seems to be a steep ask when I've been in Annwyn for a whole two  
minutes.

I take him in, really focus on the urgent gleam in his eye, the fist of  
hands, the way he's homed in on me. I empathize with what he's sayin  
with what the others have told me, but at least they don't make me feel  
owe them something. This fae is acting like the purpose of my sole exi  
and arrival here is to help his cause.

Turley "Again, I don't know you. I respect your plight, but I'm not a face to  
igs that used," I tell him. "I'm not a symbol, I'm a person. I've been gone for y  
ur help, and I need to get my bearings and figure out where to go from here, no  
pushed into doing something just because you say so."

Frustration digs through his tone, making it deeper. "You can trust u  
a Vulmin always fought to protect the Turleys. That was always the mai  
priority."

ave to "Yeah? Well, the Vulmin failed at protecting my parents, didn't they  
grit out, losing my temper. "At protecting me. I wouldn't have been m  
's for twenty years otherwise."

I can't be sure, but I think shame might flicker through his expressio  
"Then let us right the wrongs. We can protect you now if you join us."

My shoulders snap back. "I can protect myself."

to If I thought the crowd felt inundated with the tension between Wick  
our me before, it's nothing compared to now. All I want to do is leave. To  
ople away from everyone's watchful eyes and weighty expectations so I can  
ich process.

led one I turn to Nenet. "I'd like to go now."

Nenet looks hesitant, but she nods. "Of course, my lady."

Together, the two of us walk away from the gold circlet of flowers, away from the crowd, away from Wick.

I can feel his eyes boring into my back.

“What’s his story?” I murmur beneath my breath.

“He’s led the Vulmin for a long time,” she tells me. “He’s a good man, a bit on the blunt side. But he believes in the cause and for righting the wrongs of the monarchy, that I can assure you.”

I can’t help but steal a look over my shoulder. When I do, I see him staring after me, arms crossed in front of him, disappointment thick in his muddled eyes. I whip my head back around.

“I’m surprised he’s even in Geisel. He’s usually off on some mission or another. It’s interesting that he’s here,” Nenet goes on, side-eyeing me. “Interesting timing, indeed. Some might even say...fated by the gods.”

“Or a coincidence,” I reply tartly as we reach the cart.

She snorts. “Coincidence is just the excuse people use when they don’t want to acknowledge fate.”

“Or maybe fate simply steals the credit from coincidence.”

“The only thief around here is the monarchy,” she replies seriously.

“They’ve stolen the very heart of Annwyn.”

A small sigh escapes me. “If you knew what I’ve been through in the last twenty years, you wouldn’t ask this of me. I’ve been a pawn, a token, a piece. Now, I just want to be *me*. Nothing more, nothing less. And that means going to make my own decisions for my own reasons.”

She studies me for a moment, and I can see the questions building up and stacking against the creases of her face. Thankfully, she doesn’t unnerve me. “Why?” I ask.

At the cart, the one who must be Keff is sitting up on the driver’s seat with a book propped in his lap. The gangly fae is all knees and elbows, his long hair windblown from the ride and a piece of straw stuck between his slanted teeth. He gives me a nod and tucks the book beneath his leg before getting up the reins.

Nenet reaches up and plucks a pin from her hair, passing it over to me. It sits in my palm, feeling far heavier than it truly weighs, and I blink down at it in surprise. It has the same exact bird symbol that was stamped on Wick’s signet ring. What I didn’t notice on his, however, was that the wing on the bird was skewed. Broken.

away        “Maybe, by simply being here, you’ve already started change by to  
the first rock. Maybe it’s up to us to make sure the ripple spreads.”

Her gaze shifts to the flower fields around us. *Her waterless blue.*

“After all, out of all the places in Annwyn, the rip opened up *right h*  
ale, if ashe muses, giving me a sidelong glance. “The Turleys’ last-birthe  
wrongs first to land in the water.”

She’s ever persistent.

still        But so am I.

his        Which is why I turn back one more time, not to Wick or the crowd.  
the gold or even the flowers. No, I look at the sky. At the uncut, untorr  
n or        pastel-stained sky.

At the place where I came down, and he did not.

sses.”     “You *should* make your own decisions,” she says, pulling my gaze t  
her. “Trust yourself, Lady Auren, because we trust you too.”

n’t        My heart tightens.

Nenet pats my arm with a smile. “If fate has taught me anything, it’s  
ever lose hope.”

“I won’t,” I reply, and I mean it.

Because he’s the only thing in this world and the next that keeps my  
e last     alive. Because he promised to find me, so he will.

a tool.    Or I’ll find him.

s I’m     And *that* is the fate I believe in. That is the cause I’m willing to figh  
The fate of him and me.

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“Maybe, by simply being here, you’ve already started change by tossing the first rock. Maybe it’s up to us to make sure the ripple spreads.”

Her gaze shifts to the flower fields around us. *Her waterless blue.*

“After all, out of all the places in Annwyn, the rip opened up *right here,*” she muses, giving me a sidelong glance. “The Turleys’ last-birther, the first to land in the water.”

She’s ever persistent.

But so am I.

Which is why I turn back one more time, not to Wick or the crowd. Not to the gold or even the flowers. No, I look at the sky. At the uncut, untorn, pastel-stained sky.

At the place where I came down, and he did not.

“You *should* make your own decisions,” she says, pulling my gaze back to her. “Trust yourself, Lady Auren, because we trust you too.”

My heart tightens.

Nenet pats my arm with a smile. “If fate has taught me anything, it’s to not ever lose hope.”

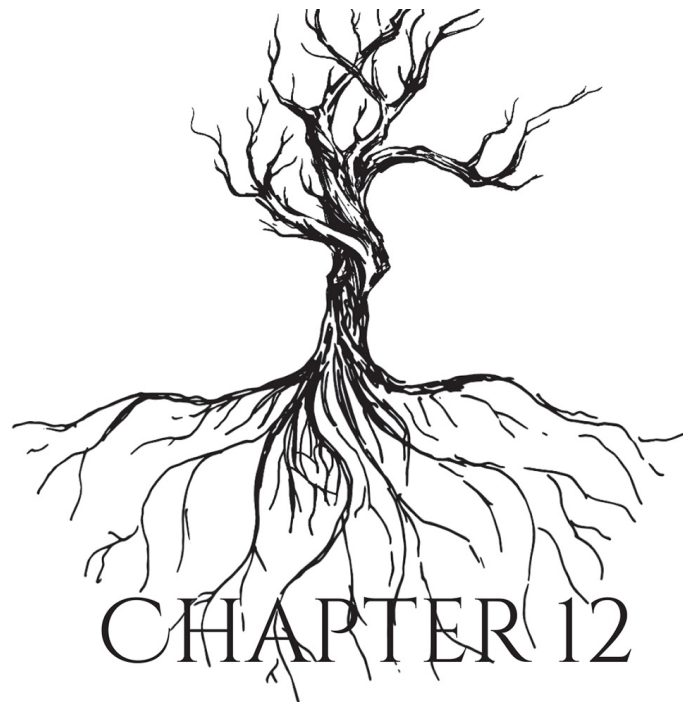
“I won’t,” I reply, and I mean it.

Because he’s the only thing in this world and the next that keeps my hope alive. Because he promised to find me, so he will.

Or I’ll find him.

And *that* is the fate I believe in. That is the cause I’m willing to fight for.

The fate of him and me.



## SLADE

**T**he shoreline is dark with browned foam.

At the slumping tide, there's a reek of rotting fish, their gills open while their glossy, scaled bodies float on the surface. In the morning, the fishermen won't be dropping their nets. Sailors won't be dropping their anchors, either.

Off in the deeper water, the shadows of several ships sit, nobody yet that they're slowly sinking. Running out of time as they bob in the sea, disintegrating into sodden splinters while water slowly fills their hulls. flesh trader ships, and all of them will be rotted and sunk to the bottom ocean by daybreak.

I walk through the cystic puddles pocking the beachside street, my s seeming to echo. It was loud and raucous when I first arrived here a few hours ago, but everyone has since scattered, slunk away to hide. West was full of every kind of depraved and debauched activity you can think of but now, it's silent. The kind of stillness that only comes from death and

When I turn the corner, I see shops lined up on the right. The faces of buildings are stained from the briny air, scabs of moss caught on their dripping rooftops while scrapes of white skid down from the eaves.

A rat scuttles past me, hiding behind a barrel, and ahead, I see some stagger out of a pub before he turns and starts pissing, completely oblivious to the carnage just down the way. When he turns bloodshot eyes toward his flaccid dick still in hand, he does a double take that nearly has him toppling over.

He quickly shoves himself back in his pants midstream and falls against the wall. “*King Rot.*”

My power hisses inside my blood, crawling through every vein. The the air makes my skin feel tight.

Or maybe that’s the rage that wants to burst out of me.

I stop in front of him, and I see his attention go to the black roots wrap up my neck. Then his glossy gaze drifts behind me to the putrid street. If he walked down there, he’d see the rotted buildings, the swollen corpses hanging out windows and wedged in doorways, caught in their attempted escape.

No one was able to get away, though. Not from me.

Not from my rage.

The men involved in the flesh trade and their forced employment of saddles has ended.

I found out Midas killed his own rival and Auren’s owner, Zakir West long ago. He also ended everyone in his employ who came into contact with her. It was his attempt to cover his tracks and his previous life, but also to erase Auren’s existence from here as well. He bought up all the saddle makers with his new wealth...and created *the painted saddles* of Derfort. They were the most notorious and popular brothels in Third Kingdom. Famed for the saddles who paint their skin in different colors, and animal prints, and designs, making everyone forget all about the girl with golden skin.

Zakir West might be long gone, Midas might be gone, but that doesn’t mean the wrongdoings were eradicated here. It wasn’t long before new people took up the gauntlets of the crime rows, and Kaila is ignorant of either by chance or by choice.

For her brother’s sake, I hope it’s the former.

But these new lords of East and West now lie in their own poisoned where they’ll be left to bloat like beached whales.

I lean toward the man, smelling the alcohol wafting off of him, noticing the piss stain spreading through the front of his pants. He’s probably lived in Derfort his whole life, based on the sun-scarred tinge of his skin. Prob-

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, keels  
Empty  
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steps  
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End  
ik of,  
id fear.  
of the

one partook in the exploits of the saddles who were forced to work these ro  
vious I had proof of it, I'd rot him where he stands.

d me, The only reason I don't, and the only reason I'm not destroying it al  
letting this entire harbor city wash up with those rotted fish, is because  
wouldn't want me to.

inst She'd want me to spare the innocents. For now, I have to assume he  
So instead of letting my sizzling magic release on him, I lean forward  
e salt of whisper in a cruel taunt. "Run."

Flinching, the man chokes on his spit and then turns and takes off,  
zigzagging in his mad rush to get away from me. Even with instincts  
othing drowning in booze, he's aware enough to realize the threat. The same c  
corner. be said for the others I dealt with. East's and West's crime lords had to  
pses many stupid men working for them. Too cocky, too relaxed, too certain  
t to thinking they were at the top of the threat tier.

They were wrong.

Tomorrow, Derfort will wake up and see the ends obliterated. Peopl  
buildings rotted through and left as a warning. If anyone takes up the  
trafficking torch again, I'll make sure they meet their deaths too, whet  
my hand or my Wrath's.

st, Speaking of...

t with I veer off the street, boots sinking into the beachy sand as I make my  
o to back to the figures on the shore. My chest shoots with a stab of pain, a  
houses falter slightly, looking down where the rotted veins at my hands pulse.  
r're the Wither.

I bury my hand into my pocket. Fist the strip of gold ribbon inside o  
When I get nearer, I ask, "You handle the middle?"

Judd deftly catches the dagger he'd been tossing up into the air befo  
n't sheathes it and straightens up from leaning against the side of his timbe  
7 The wind keeps knocking his bright blond hair into his eyes, but he loc  
f it jovial as ever. Despite the long travel time he's had, which is evident in  
patchy hair on his normally clean-shaven face, he's in a good mood.

Might be all the maiming.

skin, His sharp eyes give me a once-over, probably to determine my ment  
state. "Of course," he says. "I made sure your message was *very* clear t  
ing the those in the neutral zone. None of them seem eager to take over East o  
in side anytime soon."

ably "Good."



ows. If “But there will always be others.”

I nod as I approach Crest. The beast isn’t nearly as fast as Argo, and smaller, but for one so young, he’s handled himself really well with the Auren distances. “And when there are…”

I see Judd’s grin flash in the dark. “I’ll gladly pay another visit.”  
is one. Satisfaction slithers through me. Judd may seem like the most easygoing and all of us, but he’s my Wrath for a reason.

He had stopped in Third Kingdom to rest his timberwing on his flight home from First, but he caught news of what I did to Gallenreef. So he tracked me down, somehow knowing I’d go to Derfort, and found me before I reached the shore earlier tonight.

Anyone other than my Wrath would have taken one look at me and flown away in the other direction. But not Judd. He saw the fury in me, and the thing he said was, “So, who are we killing?”

He hadn’t yet heard about the Conflux. About Auren. About how Kier and Thold, who he’d *just* finished renegotiating with, flew right to the Conflux and was a participant in Auren’s trial.

After I filled him in, Judd was more than happy to join me in my objective. To help destroy the streets that used Auren and ruined her childhood, rather than her believe that her worth lay in pleasing others.

The thought that she was here, scared and subjected to endure terrible things, makes my fury spiral so tightly that every vein in my body twists.

We both mount our timberwings, and Judd looks to me as I grip the tightens my thighs around the beast, flinching from the steady pain that ratcheting through my chest.

“You alright?”

I grit my teeth. Shove the pain away.

“No.”

And I won’t be. Not until I can get to her. Not until I can find her and her mother.

He studies me. “You’re not going back to Fourth yet, are you?”

I shake my head. “You go.” I motion toward the lump of a body now draped over the back of his timberwing. “Take our package. It’ll be a reward for Os.”

On cue, Manu, tied and flopped over the saddle, starts to flail. He wags his tail, lifts his head, and his furious brown eyes lock on to me. There’s pale blue

sand crusting his tawny cheek and sticking to the ends of his loose black hair as he hangs there like a sack of supplies.

I yanked out the rot I'd put inside him as I flew from Gallenreef Castle. It wouldn't kill him. No one pursued me. I don't know if it's because Keon took all of her timberwings with her, so they couldn't...or if Keon and his joining of soldiers were too nervous to follow me in fear that I *would* kill Manu.

Without the rot, without being poisoned or knocked out, he's been fighting back to live through every second of his kidnapping. Screaming at me until his throat went hoarse and I shoved a cloth in his mouth, tying it securely around his head, while also binding his wrists and ankles. Forced to watch as I killed people from his very own kingdom.

Judd glances back at Manu, who's trying to yell at us through the gap. The first "Don't talk with your mouth full," he says with a *tsk*.

Manu glares at him.

Judd turns back to me and lowers his voice. "And...what about a rip in the flux? I give a terse shake of my head. No matter how far down I dig, how hard I try to reach that void inside of me and shovel up some of the raw power, it's always been there, it's still empty.

*I'm still empty.*

"It'll come back," he says, offering me reassurance. Just as Ryatt tried to do. Just as I've tried to reassure myself too.

"Of course," I reply.

I wonder when it started feeling like a lie.

With a parting nod and a snap of leather, Judd directs his beast into the night and disappears into the night sky, flying in the direction of Fourth Kingdom.

I glance behind me at Derfort, and once again, I frown, wondering how the *fuck* they smuggled Auren here in the first place. No child should be taken from her family, but to also be taken from her world?

*How did they get her from Annwyn to Orea?*

That question has been tormenting me since I first saw her. Since I first heard her story.

I wish Midas hadn't killed Zakir West. If the bastard were still alive, it would be nice giftable to find out just who he purchased Auren from and then have some trail to follow. But there's nothing. No matter how many inquiries I've made, the trail goes cold. I've asked Auren as many questions about it as she can answer, gone over every small detail, and I've come up with absolutely nothing.

ck hair     Anger twists like a knife, that spot at the center of my heart searing.  
Spreading out in painful rivulets like acid streams slicking through my

ittle so     I don't know how Auren got here, but I know she's gone now. Until  
Caila     reopen another rip to get to her, this is all I have. This mission to hunt  
the     everyone who hurt her, everyone who made her feel small.

And while tonight, I swept through the crime streets and decayed ev  
orced     piece of shit involved in the flesh trade, not even this has settled my ch  
his     call for vengeance.

around     I need more.

Judd     My separation from her is a smoldering rage that will burst from my  
and leave me to fume until I'm nothing but poisoned ash. Judd could t  
ig.     my rot power was riding me hard, but he doesn't know the half of it. D  
know what happened when I felt that rip slam shut. When I felt her lea

With a snap of the reins, I direct Crest to lift up into the air, cutting t  
o?"     the sky. We fight our way through the humid clouds while I steer us in  
hard I     right direction, and I settle in, letting my spikes unleash, allowing them  
er     burst through my skin like painful piercings. Blood soaks into my shirt  
rolls down my brow, but I barely feel it, because the other pain I'm in :  
far worse.

ed to     It's like my heart—my fucking *soul*—has been torn from my chest,  
me to gape. I'm hollow with nothing but the echo of her and the revert  
of fury. I imagine my aura must be a pit of malevolence churning in th  
deepest shade of black, because this rage...it will consume me wholly.

the air     And I'll let it.

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y

Anger twists like a knife, that spot at the center of my heart searing. Spreading out in painful rivulets like acid streams slicking through my skin.

I don't know how Auren got here, but I know she's gone now. Until I can reopen another rip to get to her, this is all I have. This mission to hunt down everyone who hurt her, everyone who made her feel small.

And while tonight, I swept through the crime streets and decayed every piece of shit involved in the flesh trade, not even this has settled my churning call for vengeance.

I need more.

My separation from her is a smoldering rage that will burst from my skin and leave me to fume until I'm nothing but poisoned ash. Judd could tell that my rot power was riding me hard, but he doesn't know the half of it. Doesn't know what happened when I felt that rip slam shut. When I felt her leave me.

With a snap of the reins, I direct Crest to lift up into the air, cutting through the sky. We fight our way through the humid clouds while I steer us in the right direction, and I settle in, letting my spikes unleash, allowing them to burst through my skin like painful piercings. Blood soaks into my shirt and rolls down my brow, but I barely feel it, because the other pain I'm in is far, far worse.

It's like my heart—my fucking *soul*—has been torn from my chest, leaving me to gape. I'm hollow with nothing but the echo of her and the reverberation of fury. I imagine my aura must be a pit of malevolence churning in the deepest shade of black, because this rage...it will consume me wholly.

And I'll let it.



## CHAPTER 13

### QUEEN MALINA

I haven't seen the assassin in days.

He's left me here without a word, and I suspect he's doing it on purpose to get back at me. To prove his point.

*"Make me believe that you want to get out of here for the right reasons."*

What an absolute pompous ass. Who does he think he is? He's an assassin. His life's trade is to do nothing but murder people, and yet he dares to accuse me?

My ire is a living thing, sharp and weighted, like a thick chunk of ice in the pit of my stomach that grows each day I'm forced to stay locked in my room and watch more fae infest my realm.

I glare out the open window, the frigid air gusting straight into my face. More troops are marching onward, through the jagged remains of Seven Kingdom. Toward Orea. Toward *Highbell*.

Ice congeals on my lashes. Heavy, frozen fragments gathering along my eyelids, flaking away with every angry blink and leaving a dust of snow on my cheeks.

My anger is frozen. Unchanging. Arctic. Hardened in its frigid ferocity. I'm frozen in place too. Stuck in here and made to watch the invasion through my ice-hewn eyes.

A clank sounds behind me, and I turn to see the new tray of food has appeared, the old one gone in its place. I stare at the crooked metal tray as my anger chisels into my ribs.

Wrenching away from the window, I stomp over to the tray, and in a sweep of my arm, I send it crashing to the ground. The tin teapot clangs on the stone floor, the bread goes flying, and the metal tray clatters where it lands. I heave, puffs of air condensing like a cloud as I charge toward the locked door.

I grab the handle and wrench it, but of course, the lock stops it from turning. "Let me out!" I yell at the wood. At the lock. At the fae. At *him*.

Again and again, I shake and wrench at the knob, but it holds steady beneath my anger, anger that leaps up my throat and pours from my mouth as a furious, wordless yell. It tears free from my lips at the same time that the knob seems to explode from my palms, and then, the doorknob suddenly *shatters*.

It doesn't break, not comes loose. The metal knob froze so thoroughly that the wrench of my hand made it break beneath my grip and fall into a million pieces on the floor.

I stare at the frozen fragments, my heart thumping, pounding with a permeating chill. My eyes go down to my palm, to the icy line across it. Magic buzzes through the shards of flurries gathered upon my skin, each pulsing. Alive.

I hurry and fling open the door, only to jolt to a stop.

ons."  
sassin.  
judge

Fassa and Friano stand in front of me. Their thick hair hangs from their heads like heavy drapes, dark eyes peering out at me through the gaps. They're so identical it's eerie. Those moles on their cheeks are their only distinction. Friano's is on the left, Fassa's on the right.

e held  
in this

Their assessing gazes flick down to the hole in the door where the doorknob used to be before glancing back at me.

ace.  
with

"You've got some nerve," I snarl as I step in front of the door, blocking their view of the remnants of the knob. "Locking me in there like some kind of animal."

; my  
n my

"Oreans are really just a step above a pet," Fassa says smoothly before looking to his twin. "Don't you think, Friano?"

ity.  
through

"Indeed. Though, good pets know better than to let themselves out."

My hands curl into fists. I feel the crunch of snow crushing between my fingers.

s  
, and

"At any rate, we were coming to fetch you," Fassa goes on, completely unaffected. "Come."

My nostrils flare.

one            The fae turn on their polished heels and descend the stairs, expecting  
s on          follow behind dutifully. I open my fists, willing the ice to spread, to freeze  
it            them solid so I can shatter *them* to pieces next, but nothing happens.

he            I want to scream in frustration. This magic that's filled me with cold  
power that crusts ice at my palms, it's faulty. Dysfunctional. Or perhaps  
me. Unable to create life, though I have a womb. Unable to create magic  
m.            though I now have power. Unable to rule, even when I wore a crown.

              I hesitate a moment, but my only other option is to go back inside the  
outh in room, and after being stuck inside, that's the last place I want to be. Tu

: it            I start to follow, though it burns me to trail them. I keep my steps unhu  
atters.        clinging to the illusion that I'm choosing to follow them rather than ob  
at one        their order.

on            Fassa looks back and smirks as if he knows what I'm doing, and I w  
could smack the look right off his face. Down we go, the spiral stairs s  
and broken, the walls cut through with holes that blare out bleak peeks  
t.            drab sky. I suppose it's lucky the walls of this tower stand at all, becau  
ch one        most of the castle has been wrenched open and left to hollow out.

              There's no longer any carpet on this spiral, making every step slick  
ice. The banister and railing are gone too, so there's no way to catch m  
ieir          I slip. Yet my feet stay stable, even when the brothers struggle, shoes s  
every so often. I want to raise my hands and shove, let the frozen floor  
ily            open their twin skulls. Maybe I would dare, if there were only one of th

              At the base of the tower, there's a destroyed corridor open to the ele  
walls cut off into a crumble just above my head where the blustery wir  
whistles in. There's old doorways leading to hundred- foot drops, entir  
ing          rooms tumbled by time, piles of snow gathered at thresholds.

e kind        Then we reach a wide stairwell, the stones left with crooked clefts in  
steps like gapped teeth. I stop short at the top of it, breath catching as I  
ore          below.

              The ruined castle is filled with fae.

              This once grand hall is now nothing but fallen walls and a tall, split-  
my          ceiling showing slivers of sky through the stone chasms. Frosty ash cli  
every surface of the raw bricks, making it feel like a gutted-out skeleto  
ely          to decay in its arctic grave.

              The walls that are still standing have been expunged of all embellish  
except for a couple lone candelabra sconces hanging bent and rusted. T  
faintest swatch of faded wallpaper is slashed across one corner at the b

g me to the room, and there's an old pillar that's fallen like the cracked trunk of a dead tree.

And all of it, every inch, is taken up by snowfall and tents. Fae stream in and out of them, heading all throughout the castle, stations having been set up with tables of food and piles of weapons. It's all out of place—the tent fabric, the food, the weapons, but especially the fae.

Their features are sharper. Particularly the pointed tips of their ears, the sight of which makes the ice in my body grind against muscle and bone. Their bodies move with a honed gracefulness, and even the way they stride carries an edged lilt.

Their eyes are sharp too, like hawks in the sky, and some have strange colored hair that's unnatural—too bright, too colorful—cutting through the blandness of their armor. Colorless pebbles cover their chests like polished cobbles, and heavy swords that swirl like marble are tucked at the backs, ready to strike.

“Magicks, with me!”

I jump at the shouted order, my gaze flying across the broken hall to find a huge fae standing in front of the downed main entryway. The doors are long gone, but the rubble was cleared enough to make an easy access to the sliding doors outdoors.

Fae head toward him, lining up in perfect formation as he assesses them. He travels over them all. “Land fae, at the front. I want this snow shifted before the next regiment hits. We're behind schedule,” he growls, and then he marches on his heel and leads them out into the storm.

“Queen Malina.”

My head whips to the right where the twins have reappeared at my side. The word *queen* seems to have echoed around us with reedy sarcasm that drips off their tones.

All the fae below turn to look, and aggression fills the air. Vibrant energy lands on me like heated poker, as their hostility gathers through the open devastation of the castle. Some of them turn their full bodies toward me, while others grip the hilt of their weapons in a clear move to intimidate me.

I won't be cowed.

The twins each hold out a hand, smirking. “This way, Majesty.”

I lift my chin, holding my back straight, and I descend and then make my way across the hall, ignoring each and every fae I pass. One of them spreads his hand to clear the snowfall at my feet, and I stop, brow arched as I glare at him. He st



f a back at me, clearly pleased with himself as he chews at his cheek. I feel  
cold burrow deeper into me, making my bones go stiff with the freeze,  
m in though it's *his* bones I wish I could snap like a shard of ice.

1 set up Turning away, I walk the snowy path out of the hall and into a room  
s, the has lost its ceiling completely. Piles of snow are gathered at the corner  
the walls are only half-standing. One wall to my right has the bones of  
the fireplace, its mouth empty and yawning, its chimney streaking up like  
e. and left to stab at the sky.

peak Past this, the twins lead me through a gaping entryway, and then I find  
myself in a room that's been completely built anew.

ge Solid walls gleam in neat rows of bricks, as if someone plucked up  
1 the from the rubble and carved off their jagged edges, polishing them to a  
The ceiling is closed, arcing up like a dome, and the floor is a swirl of  
air trimmed stonework. With this room rebuilt, it's shut away from the cold  
outside, but I'm still chilled through.

o a Because at the center of the room sits a man—a fae—propped up in  
e long throne made of solid rock, its curved edges ending at least a foot above  
head. The stone table in front of him is in the shape of a triangle, except  
top point is slashed off, his hands braced on the smooth line.

eyes There's a potency about him. Something powerful and deadly that  
efore the hair on my arms lift and puts me on edge, but his appearance does  
e turns too. His eyes are like granite. Speckles for pupils, mottled with browns  
blinks, and it's like watching a statue come to life.

side. He has thick muscles chiseled into his form, his taupe skin nearly the  
hat color as his gray-brown eyes and just as hard. His lips are thin, his nose  
gray crown that looks like it was lifted from the depths of a boulder and  
yes chiseled into gleaming spires before resting on his head.

e, and I try not to shake where I stand, but my every instinct is yelling at me  
when you're born into a royal line. Yet I have never felt this innate fear  
any of them like I do now. I have never felt such inherent threat. He is  
different. Other. And that otherness burns off his body like noxious fumes  
forcing me to choke on it.

bits on He glances up at me from a map on the table, then his eyes flick to the  
tares right. I look over to find Pruinn standing there. I bristle while his silver

l the take me in. I should have known right away that something was wrong  
him. He's too magnetic. Too strange. He promised to lead me to my he  
desire, tricking me like a fool with the scroll in his merchant's cart and  
l that charlatan's words.

s, and I hate him.

an old As if he can sense the thoughts in my head, he grins, flashing too-br  
a scar teeth, his blond hair short, his face clean-shaven. "Allow me to introdu  
you," he says smoothly. "This is King Tyec Carrick."

nd The fae king looks me over like I'm a lowly bug crawling on his flo  
"Hmm. Malina, was it?"

pieces "Queen Malina Colier," I answer, thankful that I manage to keep the  
shine. tremble from my tone.

ld air "Indeed," he says, his voice just as stony as his visage. "So, you are  
pure Orean queen whose given blood allowed us to remake the bridge.  
pauses. "Born powerless, isn't that right? Pruinn here tells me you wer  
a allowed to sit on your own family's throne because of it. That your pec  
e his hate you."

ot the My molars snap together and grind.

akes "Some rulers think you need to be loved," the king goes on, rising fi  
throne. His steps sound heavy, like his boots are filled with rocks. "Bu  
that a misconception. You need loyalty, not love. Allegiance, not adoration  
s and is the way to rule."

ly. He I don't say anything in reply, and he cocks his head and studies me.

e same "Pity that you're Orean. You might be considered a great beauty in  
Annwyn if it weren't for the inferior blood in your veins."

e is Outrage stabs through me, making my palms burn cold. "That *inferi*  
sts a *blood* was what you needed to get here," I snap back. "Maybe it's you  
d species who's inferior to us."

ie to He laughs, as if my insult was ridiculous and ineffectual. Then that l  
abruptly cuts off, and the table in front of him jolts. I barely have time  
pected realize it's streaking through the air until it slams into my stomach, ser  
r of me sprawling to the ground.

nes, I cry out at the onslaught of sudden pain, so stunned that I don't noti  
a moment that the stone tabletop is now on top of me, crushing me ben  
its staggering weight. I gasp, mouth opening and closing like a fish out  
his water, limbs too pinned down to flail.

r eyes

King Carrick walks over, steps unhurried. He looks down at me, harshly taking me in with apathy. “Cold Queen they call you, is that right?”

I can’t answer. Buried beneath the rough weight, I’m caught, barely draw breath.

“Fassa and Friano tell me that they believe their restoration ritual imbues some magic into you. A gift, of sorts, from their give and take powers. He speaks as if he’s not crushing me to death.

With his careless gaze, he watches me struggling, the granite specks glinting in the drab light. “Use it. Use this gifted power that you only have because a *fae* gave it to you.”

I shake and sputter, feeling like my ribs are about to crack, my chest to collapse. The pressure is seizing. Horrifying. Every second that I can breathe free spikes my panic even more. My bones are pinned, my ribs trapped. The weight is pure threat, like even a single grain of sand added on top would make me split open. Pop like a grape.

I want to freeze this horrible fae where he stands, because I know that he will kill me. I can see it in his face. He doesn’t care. He will let this slab of stone pulverize me into a puddle of flesh and blood without batting an eye. So I try to concentrate through my panic, try to use this sputtering magic that seems to come and go without any control, but it does *nothing*. Black dots invade my vision, and my lungs feel like they’re about to burst along with my consciousness.

He laughs. At my struggle, at my gasping breaths. Then he leans in, and I can smell the scent of wet rock feeding from his breath. “See? Inferior. Unable to even use the magic that fae power bestowed upon you. Prodiges Oreams don’t deserve magic or this realm,” he spits. “So we will take both.”

He turns away, and the weight instantly lifts as the stone is removed from me with the flick of his finger. Air shoots into me, and I flip onto my side coughing and sputtering with ragged breaths. Deep humiliation fills me. My rage at my own impotency makes my entire body shake.

“Bring her back to her room,” he says dismissively, as the slab settles onto the table’s legs just in time for him to sit down again and give me a smile. “It has the best view up in that tower, don’t you think, Cold Queen?”

Fassa and Friano pull me to my feet, but I wrench my arms out of their grasp and stare hard at the king. I’m not terrified of him anymore. He’s a bully trying to humiliate me into submission. It doesn’t matter if he’s a fae or

d gaze Oorean or a god or a devil. He's just another arrogant man wearing a crown and I've dealt with plenty of those.

able to "Do you know what the cold does to stone, King Carrick?" I ask.

He pauses and tilts his head as he looks at me.

ibued I gesture through the doorway, to the crumbling stone walls that are  
" He and abraded. "Stone has rifts and crevices. *Weaknesses*. It may look  
invincible and strong, but the cold can exploit those things. Moisture drips  
into those cracks and fissures, and when it freezes, it ruins. Stone can't  
ave withstand it forever. In the end, cold will always win out."

My icy eyes glint with an impenetrable freeze.

about A tic in his jaw appears, and for a moment, I wonder if he'll shove the  
n't get tabletop into me again, if he'll let it crush me to death this time.

l. This I don't care. I'm not going to let another power-hungry king tell me  
ild useless.

Turning on my heel, I pass Pruinn and stride out with my head held  
at he fully expecting the king to kill me.

b of He doesn't.

eye. Once again, I ignore the sneering fae within the castle, ignore the two  
magic they lead me back to my room. Ignore the new knob and lock that someone  
ack has put on my door. Ignore the pain still pulsing in my body from nearly  
ong being crushed to death.

I ignore everything but the cold.

until I The cold that's filled my veins, the blustery air that collects in my lungs  
and coalesces into icy shards caught on my lips like cracked skin.

f that I ignore everything until the room grows dark and my fingernails have  
ack gone glacial blue.

Until the assassin returns like I knew he would. With curling shadows  
from bending light, he appears.

ide, I stand up and face him, though all I can see from beneath his drapery  
e, and is the pigment of pale skin circling his lips.

*Make me believe you.*

es back "You said my heart might just be a chunk of ice," I say, staring into  
a cruel depths of his shadowed cowl. "And that might be true."

een?" He says nothing in reply, but I can sense his attention. Can practical  
eir griphis gaze scraping over every inch of my face.

ly— "But I am the Cold Queen, and my heart beats for my kingdom." I p  
r an toward the window, to where the soldiers go on with their endless march

own, “I need to get there before the fae do, or Oreans are going to be slaugh  
without warning.” Dropping my hand, I clasp both in front of me, fing  
constricting with conviction. “And I *will* warn them. I will leave this p  
with or without your help, assassin.”

worn “They incited a rebellion against you,” he says roughly, voice in shr  
“Chased you out of your castle.”

elves “I don’t care.”

“You ordered your own people to be killed.”

Chunks of ice slide down my throat. “I was wrong.”

For a long moment, he just stares at me. My chest rises and falls wit  
he fervency, while he keeps completely still. The tension of weighted sile  
grows so tight I feel I might snap as I await his answer.

I’m When he continues to give none, I can’t take it any longer. “Well?”  
demand. “Do you believe me?”

high, Slowly, I see his lips curve through the shadows. “I believe you eno  
An exhale shakes out of me, though I’m not entirely sure what that r  
He turns toward the door and swings it open soundlessly.

ins as “That was locked,” I sputter.

eone He digs into the pocket of his heavy cloak and brandishes a brass ke  
ly eyes go wide with indignation. “You’ve had that this whole time?”

I can hear his dark snicker beneath his breath, and that’s all the reply  
ngs gives. Then he holds out his hand, and I hesitate for a moment before v  
forward and gripping it. His skin is startlingly warm beneath my icy fi  
marked with the bumps of calluses and lines of old scars.

ve “If you try to assassinate me...”

He leans in, the flap of his hood brushing against my cheek as he let  
v and his gravelly voice. “I won’t need to. The fae will probably do that for r  
Now, hold on tight, Queenie.”

d hood I suck in a breath as shadows instantly swarm us, and light begins to  
around us with an unnatural wind. We blow through the open doorway  
the castle becomes something that’s no longer tangible.

the I only see snippets past the swarm of shadows and prisms of light th  
engulf us. Bodies are distorted as we caper past the fae like invisible bi  
ly *feel* of smoke. No one sees us. We exist like the air, like shade and wind. S  
warps, some voices bending like echoes down a ravine, while an ever-  
oint gust blows past my ears.

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With the assassin's hand clutched in mine, we make it out of the cas  
without anyone the wiser. Clinging to every shadowed corner, bending  
light as we move like wraiths, we flit past them all. Then, we're outsid  
cold, broken land of Seventh Kingdom, where troops of fae march onv  
March toward the kingdom that rejected me.

*I believe you enough.*

I wonder if the rest of Orea will believe me enough too.

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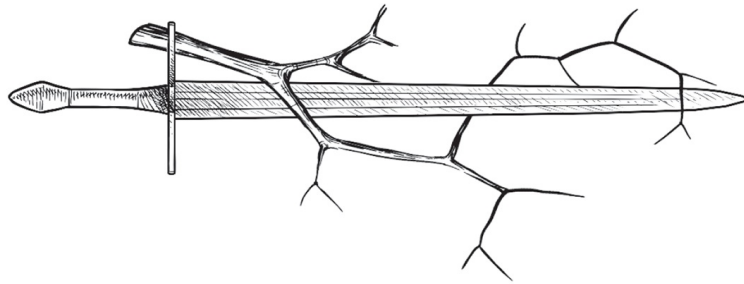
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With the assassin's hand clutched in mine, we make it out of the castle without anyone the wiser. Clinging to every shadowed corner, bending the light as we move like wraiths, we flit past them all. Then, we're outside in the cold, broken land of Seventh Kingdom, where troops of fae march onward. March toward the kingdom that rejected me.

*I believe you enough.*

I wonder if the rest of Orea will believe me enough too.



## CHAPTER 14

### OSRIK

**T**here are some really shitty sounds. The kind of sounds that get under your skin and piss you off.

Chewing is one. That shit grates, especially when you've spent years with soldiers and traveling mercenaries. Road jerky makes the sloppiest, longest fucking chews. I've punched soldiers for gnashing their teeth obnoxiously.

Another sound that used to bother me?

Wheezing.

When you've spent enough time killing like I have, wheezing is almost as common as swords clashing together. Sputtering and choking on blood usually always follows, too. But sometimes, the wheezing can go on and on for hours and days, until finally it stops, when the soldier kicks off into the mender tent. Wheezing is like nails down a porcelain plate. Enough to drive me out of my mender tent.

But now...

I look at the still, sallow form lying on the bed.

Rissa wheezes. With every fucking breath, she wheezes.

I don't know if it's blood in her throat or fluid in her lungs, or some shit I don't know about because I'm not a fucking mender, but I do know this: So long as she's wheezing, she's alive.

So wheezing has been my favorite fucking sound lately.

I hear the door open behind me, and Hojat shuffles inside. "Here again, Captain?"

"Not again. Still."



I never left. Haven't for the past few weeks.

He makes a tsk and then moves around to the other side of the bed where he starts shuffling around with the bottles on the table. I watch as he replaces a clean cloth, pouring tinctures over it methodically.

At this angle, the left side of his face is in full view, the burn scars clearly visible at the corner of his eye. I've never asked him about his burns. A mender's business is his own. But right now, I could use the distraction.

"You ever kill the bastard who did that to you?"

Hojat pauses. "I am a mender, Captain Osrik. Not a killer."

"Want me to kill them for you?" I have lots of pent-up rage I want to get out. Killing someone would hit the mark.

"Just because I said I'm not a killer does not mean that they're not a killer either."

under "Ah. Rip?" He probably took care of the fucker who did that to Hojat a long time ago, when he first brought Hojat to Deadwell.

nt "I never asked."

It's better for people like Hojat not to. Some can't handle it. But menders can't handle it either. Killing was always the one thing I *could* handle. "Killing isn't for the faint-hearted."

Hojat turns toward Rissa, cloth in hand. "I need to change her dressings again."

lost as I grit my teeth but gesture for him to get to it.

He gives me a look. "Need I remind you that the last time I changed her dressings, you nearly punched your fist into the wall?"

nd on "And?"

death. When I saw how gruesome the gaping wound was, how much blood dribbled from it, I was also seeing the blade plunging into her chest. It made me want to murder the person who did this to her over and over again. I wonder how many times I can stab him until he chokes out into death.

of any "Captain, healing is not for the faint-hearted."

other I cross my arms. "Not leaving."

ow He lets out a sigh, just as I hear, "What are you doing to our mild-mannered mender?"

ain, I turn around and see Judd walk into the room. "When did you get bored?"

"Just now..." He takes in Rissa with obvious unease. I might leave menders' tents, but Judd? He fucking avoids them like the plague. Can

stand to be around anyone who's badly wounded. "Rip told me what  
where happened," he says, eyes landing on me. "You alright?"

adies a "I fucking look alright?"

His gaze runs over me. "No, actually. You look like shit."

anking I grunt. Then pause. "Wait, Rip? When the fuck did you see him?"

Judd leans against the wall, trying to seem at ease, but his gaze keep  
; darting to Rissa. "On my way back from First, after I'd settled a new  
agreement with the king, I stopped to rest my timberwing in Third Kin  
At the capital. There was an uproar about King Rot just having left the

o get My brows shoot up in surprise. "He was in Third Kingdom? Ryatt s  
when he left, Slade was still trying to reopen the rip in Drollard."

lready "He couldn't," Judd says. "Still can't."

*"Fuck."*

at a "Yep. Apparently, that set him off, and now he's gone on a revenge  
rampage."

Hearing that he's gone to Third fills me with sick satisfaction. Quee  
? is the one who sent her brother and guards here. She and Manu are the  
faint- Rissa is lying unconscious in this mender's room with her wheezing br  
and jagged wound. "What did he do in Third?"

ng Judd smiles. It's a real creepy fucking smile.

"Kaila wasn't there, but he rotted her castle. Some of her guards. Th  
went to Derfort. That's where I caught up with him. Had a hunch he'd  
her there next."

I pause, rolling the name over my mind until it comes to me. "The p  
where Auren was kept as a kid."

l still "Yep."

makes I frown. "But when he first told us about Derfort, we looked into it.  
Makes cunt Midas had already killed the man she worked for, plus all his crot  
ath. Midas covered his tracks well.

Judd shrugs. "He wasn't satisfied, I guess. He went and rotted out E  
West ends' crime streets. Wiped them out."

"No shit?"

Judd nods.

ack?" I Guess I shouldn't be surprised. This wouldn't be the first time he's  
on a killing spree. He just usually did it as Commander Rip—not King  
Ravinger. But now that Ryatt is the new commander, it looks like he's  
l't his rot come out to play.

Makes me proud. Makes me wish I could fuck shit up right alongside but being here is more important.

“Where’s he going next?”

“Not sure. He let me have a little fun, then he took off. Didn’t want company.”

s I look back at Rissa. While I was distracted, Hojat started changing dressing, using silver tools to peel away the old bandage. When I catch a glimpse of her glaring red flesh, I grind my back teeth together.

re.” “Remember how you asked about Third Kingdom?” Judd says, gathering my attention again.

“Yeah...”

He pushes away from the wall. “Come on, I’ll show you something. I shake my head. “I’m not leaving her.”

aid “Captain, if I may...” Hojat cuts in. “My mender novices will be coming soon to give Lady Rissa her cleaning. For her own modesty, you mustn’t lead Kaila out of the room anyway.”

reason I open my mouth to argue, but he waves a hand at me. “You need to rest and rest,” he tells me sternly. “A cleaning of your own wouldn’t hurt either...”

en he Judd grins. “I do believe our dear mender just told you that you still have a foul ass. Come on. The sooner you leave, the sooner you can return.”

go I grudgingly get up from my chair. Leaning over Rissa, I gently smooth back the blonde hair from her pale face. “I’ll be back, Yellow Bell. You keep on breathing for me,” I murmur. Turning around, I follow Judd out of the room. “This better be good.”

lace Instead of going right to head upstairs out of the mender wing, we go down the narrower corridor.

That “Trust me. You’re going to want to see this.”

ies.” Intrigued, I follow him all the way down the stairs, to the lowest level of the castle. To where the rooms are cold and the air is wet and the windows are non-existent save for a few inch-wide panels. We pass by the two guards on duty, both of them standing at attention and saluting us as we go through the heavy door.

gone “What the hell are we doing in the dungeons?” I ask.

Instead of answering, he comes to a stop outside the first cell.

letting I look inside the dim and dank space, and my eyes go wide when I see a figure inside.

le him, “Told you,” Judd says with maniacal glee.

The body on the floor shifts, and instantly, I see who it is.

Manu fucking Ioana.

her The man I’ve envisioned torturing every time Rissa whimpers in her  
i a every time her face contorts with pain. Now I know what Slade was go  
through when Auren wouldn’t wake up after Ranhold. It’s a fucking to  
of its own.

ering “Rotting Gallenreef Castle wasn’t the only thing Slade did in Third  
Kingdom,” Judd tells me, rocking back on his heels.

” I feel my lips pull up into a grin that probably looks more like a sneer  
wolf baring its teeth at its prey. No doubt about it, Manu *is* my prey, and  
there’s going to be a new favorite sound of mine soon.

The sound of Manu’s pleas as I wring out my wrath.

ming in I hold out my hand, motioning for the key I know he has. Judd insta  
step digs in his pocket and passes it to me.

go eat and open the cell door.  
“You want me to stay?” he asks, eyeing me as I shove the key into the

“Nope.”

k like “Good,” he says through a yawn. “He was a fucking pain to deal with  
my timberwing the whole way here.”

I look at his unconscious form. “You knock him out?”

both Judd shrugs. “Maybe once or twice.”

u just I snort.

ut of “Had to. After Rip yanked out the rot from him, he was a nightmare  
Didn’t take too kindly to being kidnapped, I guess.”

o left, “He probably won’t take too kindly to being imprisoned and tortured  
either,” I say as I sit down on the flimsy pallet bed.

el of “Have fun with that.” Judd claps me on the shoulder before he turns  
ows walks away, his footsteps receding until the sound is gone and all that’s  
Manu’s breathing.

guards His unstrained, non-wheezing, perfectly fucking normal breathing.

ough Anger boils under my skin, the wrath I feel molten in my very veins  
rises from me like vapor that can only be seen at the sun’s peak on the  
days.

I watch him for several minutes. Take in his wrinkled blue tunic and  
ee the His long black hair hanging loose. His missing shoes that he probably

from the flight over here. He doesn't look as put together as the last time I saw him, that's for fucking sure.

But he's going to look a lot less put together by the time I'm through with sleep, him.

I continue to sit here while his fingers begin to twitch, his limbs jerk and his eyes scrunching up. Then I lean over to the cell door and slam it close as hard as I can. The loud clang makes him jump awake and flip over onto his ass.

He scrambles up into a sitting position and looks around wildly, and when he realizes he's in a dungeon, when he realizes I'm sitting here staring at him, the blood drains from his face. His ankles and wrists are bound, so when he slithers backwards, he nearly tips over.

"Where am I? What's going on?" he shouts, nervousness cracking up his throat and cutting his words in half. "This is against our laws! I am the queen's advisor and brother. She will start a war over this!"

I say nothing. Continue to watch him as I lean against the cell wall, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

"Where is he? Where's Ravinger?" he demands, his eyes darting left and right.

I stare at him.

"You can't keep me locked in here!" A little spit flies out of his mouth and his face starts going red.

"Don't just stand there," he yells, still trying to hang on to the idea that he has any control whatsoever. "I deserve a trial. I deserve to have my queen and sister present. I can't just be taken and locked up. I want to know where the king is!"

He probably spent days talking and pleading and demanding. But that won't work on me.

"You can't do this!" He tries and fails to yank at the ropes binding his wrists, his skin already raw. "I demand an audience with Ravinger!"

His outburst leaves him panting, my continued silence clearly unnerving him. Fury. He's probably hungry. Thirsty. Aching all over from the uncomfortable hottest trip. But he knows that those things are only the beginning.

My stare and my refusal to react makes him squirm more. After several minutes, I see him swallow hard.

Now I have his attention.

ne I I uncross my arms slowly, brace them on my knees as I lean forward  
look him right in the fucking eye as my voice drops low.

1 with “Let me tell you how this is going to go.”

His hands tremble.

ing, “There’s a woman upstairs, lying in a mender bed because she was s  
l as in the chest.”

o his Manu’s eyes shift.

“She’s been lying there for weeks. All because of *you*.”

when His head shakes back and forth. “I didn’t stab her! It was Second’s r  
at him, The dagger that flies from my hand is so quick that he can’t track it.

en he Doesn’t even notice that I’d yanked it from the sheathe at my hip. He s  
as it plunges into his shoulder, his back knocked into the wall behind h  
p his stares in shock at the weapon sticking out of his body.

“I missed your heart. Just like he missed hers.”

A bead of sweat tracks down his forehead, and he sucks a breath in t  
his teeth as he glances back up at me.

t and “Your fate is now tied to hers. If she’s stabbed, you’re stabbed,” I sa  
darkly. “If she bleeds, you bleed. If she doesn’t drink, you don’t drink.

His eyes have gone wide.

ith, “If she has to soil herself in that bed because she’s so mortally injur  
she can’t even fucking get up to take a piss, then you’re going to sit he  
your own filth.”

hat he It’s not just his hands anymore. His whole body is shaking.

een I drop my voice to barely above a growl. “And if she dies, *you* fucki  
e your you scheming piece of shit.”

He’s sweating fucking buckets now.

at shit He lifts his elbow awkwardly to wipe his forehead, but he hisses in p  
the dagger embedded in his shoulder. “What do you want?” he asks sh

is “My sister, she’ll pay whatever ransom. She’ll make a deal with you.

Ravinger wants the import ban lifted; I can make that happen. He want  
ving information; I can supply that.”

ortable I get to my feet and eat up the distance between us before leaning dc  
and yanking out the dagger. Blood spurts, quickly soaking into his shir  
eral making him cry out in pain. “I didn’t mean for that woman to get hurt.  
I didn’t,” he says with a hoarse plea. “I told them to just leave her. The  
didn’t listen!”

“But you fucking brought them here.”

I, and I sheathe my dagger and then dig the key out of my pocket and unlock the cell door. I'm out and have it closed again by the time he tries to push his feet despite his bound ankles, desperation running rampant across his face while blood soaks through his shirt. "Wait! I said my sister will give you what you want! *What do you want?*"

I turn the key with a squeaky click before looking up at him again. "I don't want anything."

My footsteps start echoing down the corridor as I walk away, according to him, "only by the sound of him shouting at me to come back."

I lied, though. I do want something. But I already had it. For a fleeting second, I had it, before it was yanked away. And every day Rimu stays in that bed and doesn't wake up, there's less and less chance I'm going to get it back.

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I sheathe my dagger and then dig the key out of my pocket and unlock the cell door. I'm out and have it closed again by the time he tries to push up to his feet despite his bound ankles, desperation running rampant across his face while blood soaks through his shirt. "Wait! I said my sister will give you whatever you want! *What do you want?*"

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My footsteps start echoing down the corridor as I walk away, accompanied only by the sound of him shouting at me to come back.

I lied, though. I do want something. But I already had it. For a fleeting fucking second, I had it, before it was yanked away. And every day Rissa stays in that bed and doesn't wake up, there's less and less chance I'm getting it back.





## CHAPTER 15

AUREN

**F**or five days, I return to the field and search the sky. Each soaring and split in the clouds makes me hold my breath in anticipation, to let it out again in a disappointed sigh.

I steal out like a thief in the night, and Nenet escorts me without fail hiding me away in the back of Keff's cart and moving me under the cover of dawn and dark.

And every day, a few more fae are out there in the field with me, waiting.

But while they're looking at me, I'm looking for a rip that doesn't appear.

Nothing else comes of the whispers of my landing, and Wick doesn't return to speak to me. The people do, though. Bringing me offerings, like their baskets of feathers overflow, all of them careful not to tread on the gilded flowers, as if it will bring them bad luck.

Every night, I return in the back of a bursting cart with depleting offerings. I wear hope on my sleeve like armor, but it's begun to tear off at the seams, weakening with each passing day.

Meanwhile, my mood has snagged with a single loose thread though  
*What if Slade opened up another rip...but it's just not here?*

Annwyn is a huge realm, with more lands than I can remember. If he opened another rip, there's no guarantee that it would be here in Geise. Which means he could be *anywhere* in this world. We could be separate miles and oceans, with no way of knowing.

The chance that Slade would end up in this field is probably near to nothing.

It's a depressing thought, one that I've been trying to push against for the last few days. But right now, in the middle of the night and cloistered in my hidden attic room, with only a short-wicked candle to keep me company, that thought consumes me. I watch the lit flame as it pours a glaze of gold against the walls, and I fester.

I never thought I'd ever come to Annwyn again, and now that I'm here, I realize just how out of touch I am. Everything feels unknown. It's like I'm five years old again, carted off to Orea for the first time. I'm unsettled, I feel guilty about feeling unsettled, as if I'm somehow betraying my heritage.

Yet the heaviest guilt comes from the disappointed gazes of the fae. They're all looking at me like I've done something wrong. Refused the Vulmin. Ever look at me like I've done something wrong. But how can they expect me to help lead a rebellion when I know next to nothing about any of it?

It's strange to return to the place where your roots are, only to realize you're actually a tumbleweed, cut off and drifting.

Sleep continues to evade me, so I give up when it's about two hours before dawn. On the bedside table is a little pile of rocks I've accumulated—each one I've turned each one solid gold.

I don't know why I keep doing it. Maybe to make a little visible mark of the days that pass. Or maybe to remind myself of who I am and what I'm capable of. Despite my uneven footing here, I'm me, and I have my magic.

And while liquid gold still drips easily from my hands during the day, I can still control any gold around me at night, one thing is different.

The black lines that now run through my gold. Black lines of rot.

They're on the rocks. On the gold I fashioned for myself and wear every day. Rot writhes through my magic every time I call my gold-touch forth. It's a constant presence weaving through my molten metal. At the Conclave, I was accused of stealing Slade's power, but I didn't.

And yet...

I stare at the rocks, at each thin vein wrapping around them. His rot is all over my gold like strings floating through water.

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e            *How did this happen? Why?*

l.            My magic feels different. There's a *pull* that wasn't there before. Not  
ted by tempting one inside of me that unfurls, but something that beckons out  
myself.

A beckoning, perhaps, that comes from him.

In some strange way, it makes me feel connected to him, even when  
ver the worlds apart. So, I *like* it—having his rot twisted with my magic. But e  
nside time I see it, it makes my chest twinge. My heart ache.

pany,       *Maybe he'll be there today...* a small voice in the back of my mind  
range whispers. *Maybe today, he'll finally come.*

It's warm hope that I don't want to douse.

ere, I       Forcing myself to get out of bed, I get dressed into another clean, sin  
being gray dress, wrap my ribbons around my waist, and sling the cloak over  
and I shoulders, buttoning it at my collar. I then slip my feet into borrowed b  
ritage. that have softened leather and creases at the vamp that curl up like a s

I hear       Bright side, my feet are completely healed now, courtesy of Estelia.  
1 kids isn't even an inch of peeling skin left. They look as if they were never  
ne to at all. With my magic back and my body feeling replenished, it's almo  
the Conflux never happened. I look like my old self.

e            Except...my ribbons still don't move. They seem like they're just pi  
fabric that could be draped off a dress.

before     *They just need to heal*, I keep telling myself. *They just need more tir*  
one for I don't know if that's true, but that's what I tell myself. They just ne  
more time. Just like *I* need more time. Like Slade needs more time. So  
ers of find each other.

'm           Swiping the gold rocks off the table, I slip them into my pocket, feel  
agic. their heavy weight against my leg. I brush through my hair and braid it  
y and I and after blowing out the candle, I make my way down the attic ladder

As soon as I'm on the main level, I can smell fresh-baked syrup bre:  
coming from the kitchens, so I know Thursil and Estelia are hard at wo  
very despite the early hour. My mouth is watering by the time I walk in, sof  
rward. coming from the stove's fire and the flickering lanterns set on the cour

flux, I       Thursil glances over his shoulder from where he's stirring a giant pc  
stove, and Estelia pauses midkneading.

"You're up earlier than usual," she comments with a smile.

twines     Her hair is pulled back into a bright ribbon this morning, the same e  
hue as the orange streaks across her cheeks. But it's the little brass bra

hanging on her delicate wrist that my gaze lingers on. Because right there at the center, hand-painted on a little white oval, is the broken-winged bird symbol. The same one Wick wore on his ring. The same one Nenet had on her hairpin.

I pull my eyes away. "Couldn't sleep," I answer as I slip into the chair. "We're at the middle countertop."

Each "Nenet won't arrive for an hour still, but you can eat if you're hungry."

"Of course she's hungry," Thursil cuts in, already moving to pull down the basket. "I'll whip you up some eggs."

"Thank you."

I watch as the two of them work fluidly beside each other, their quiet murmurs bringing a smile to my face.

"Almost done with that bread, love?" Thursil asks. "Don't go knocking all the air, now."

She shoots him a glare. "The only air I'm going to knock out is your pride. There you keep it up. I know how to knead bread. Much better than yourself, a little bit of butter might add."

He reaches over and taps her butt. "I know how to knead just fine," Thursil says, squeezing her before she slaps his hand away.

"Mind your manners, or you'll find yourself out of my kitchen."

"We both know you would miss me too much."

She rolls her eyes.

He chuckles good-naturedly, showing off his dimples that make him look a little boyish before placing a kiss on the swoop of her cheek. "You love me."

"Mm-hmm," she replies, though I catch the smile on her face as he turns away.

Thursil cooks the eggs in no time and then plops them on a plate along with some fruit and slides it over to me. "Eat up, my lady."

"It looks delicious."

I quickly dig in, and between bites, I glance at the clock that swirls around the sink, telling time with the shift of colored liquid that darkens through the day. "Aren't you both up earlier than usual, too?"

"Got an extra order today from the inn down the road," Thursil tells me. "All their rooms are let out, so they need more food. Have to prepare the luncheon before we start prepping breakfast here to be on time for the next customer's serviette to open."

exact  
celet

ere at        “That luncheon needs to be finished within the hour so I can go deli  
rd        You know how I feel about not being on time,” Estelia warns.

d on        “We’ll be on time.”

air at        I lick the fruit juice from my lips. “I could help, if you like?” I offer  
Both of them look back at me. “Oh no, you don’t need to be doing th  
lady,” Estelia says.

y?”        “No, really,” I say, getting up. “You two have done so much for me.  
own a        like to help. And stay busy.”

They share a look before Thursil shrugs. “Come on over here then, I  
Auren. It’s always good to have an extra set of helping hands.”

t



ing out

Turns out, it is *not* always good to have an extra set of helping hand:  
s if        At least, not when they’re *my* hands.

I        All it takes is for Thursil to watch me stir in some slices of potato fo  
soup, and he immediately sidles me out of the way. I had no idea there  
he        an incorrect way to stir, but I accidentally burned the wooden spoon, a  
shards of ashes flaked into the broth.

I don’t think that was the flavor palette they were going for.

Then Estelia had me try to chop up some fresh vegetables, but I end  
cutting my finger and bled all over the place. Not only did she have to  
i look        magic to blow healing essence over the wound, but she nearly burned t  
”        bread she’d been making all morning because she was distracted.

urns        While a flustered Estelia ran out to take the delivery to the inn, Thu  
me start making the toast for the servette’s morning menu. And you kn  
ngside        what? Toast is hard.

After I’ve burned the fifth slice through the tongs over the fire, Thu  
physically moves me aside. “Forgive me for saying so, but...perhaps c  
above        isn’t one of your skill sets?” he says as he gently, although persistently  
ghout        the tool out of my hands.

“No, not really. I never learned how to cook.”

I could read by the time I was five, rode a horse when I was even yo  
me.        and I have memories of swimming in Annwyn as a child too. But cook  
heir        no.

“But I really enjoy eating,” I add, after apologizing for the hundredt  
for messing everything up.

ver it. He chuckles. “Sit down, my lady. I’ll sneak you one of Estelia’s puff before she gets back, and you can sort the tea bags. Shouldn’t get into much trouble with that.”

I prove him wrong, because I end up accidentally dropping all the tea bags, so my tea is a mixed-up mess, and I spend the rest of the time sorting it again.

I’d But the puff cake is amazing.

Lady



Dawn is nearly here, but Nenet still hasn’t come. It’s much later than usual, and I’m starting to get antsy, but I keep busy by helping Estelia and Thursil ready the servette by organizing the dishes and silverware while Thursil brings everything into the dining room. The two of them work efficiently together, wiping down the tables, setting out pretty crystal plates and vases with fresh flowers—the blue ones from Saira’s field.

was “Where’d you learn to do that?” I ask Estelia as she finishes up folding the napkins into pretty birds that will go on top of the plates.

nd the “My mother. This servette has been in my family for generations. We have the original Geisels.”

ed up “Was your family here when Saira Turley came?”

use her “They were,” she says with a warm smile. “They used to tell me stories about her. About how she met the fae prince right here in our town. At first, how, after she became a princess and even a queen, she would come back to the town during our holiday in the fields to celebrate with us. Everyone here loved her. She was a good ruler for the fae people.”

ow “She sounds wonderful.”

sil Estelia tips her head. “That’s her blood running through your veins.”  
ooking My eyes flick down to her bracelet again. “So you’re a part of the Veldt, too? You take *Dyrūnia* too?”

Her gaze follows mine and she spins the bracelet with her fingers. “I told you about your introduction to Wick. He’s a good fae, and he’s working hard for our cause, but he’s right. We’ve needed a push to start doing things... She lets go of the bracelet with a sigh. “Something more than simply putting out these blue flowers on the tables and wearing the Turley sigil.”

h time “And you truly believe that this rebellion can make Annwyn better?”

f cakes     “The Carricks have become tyrants. It started with Oreans, but now  
too         any fae that they deem lesser. It’s a slippery slope, and the thumb of cc  
they’ve pressed down on us is only going to crush us harder.”

ns of         “And the Vulmin are strong enough to overthrow them?”

; them        “If we all take a stand, it’s possible.”

              “You think everyone is ready for that?” I ask curiously.

              “With or without your return, things are getting worse,” she tells me  
gravely. “We just heard rumors of a town being wiped out simply beca  
someone there spoke against a new law being passed. There’s talk of g  
being seized from entire farming cities like this one, without any recou  
pay. If any place has been known to be...less than favorable toward ou  
n             rulers, the people are taxed to death. And that’s not even counting the  
and           any Oreans are treated, or any fae who’s found out to have Orean bloo  
le they       their line. They’re stripped of their rights.”

ases of       Unease circles my gut like water around a drain.

ing the       “So, yes, Lady Auren. I think the *Vulmin Dyrūnia* are ready to rise u  
just need the push to finally do it.”

              “And you think *I* should be that push?”

’e’re         “I think you are, whether you choose to stand with the Vulmin or no  
tells me. “Just by existing, by returning, you’ve reminded us of how th  
used to be. We need to act soon, because things will only get worse if  
ries         don’t.”

out           “I think that *worse* might be catching up to us, love.”

ack           Both of us look over at Thursil’s grave words. He’s standing by the  
ed her. window, pinching back the curtain and peering between the slats of the  
closed shutters.

’             “What’s wrong?” Estelia asks as she leaps up to her feet and starts h  
over.

ulmin         Suddenly, there’s a bang at the back door, coming from the storage  
that’s between the dining room and the kitchen.

Nenet         Thursil drops the curtain, his expression gone strained. “Stay here.”

rked           Estelia comes over to stand beside me, and we watch as he disappea  
nore.” through the swinging doors. We hear the sound of the lock turning foll  
utting by murmuring voices, and then he comes back in with a flustered-look  
Nenet in tow.

”             Unlike every other time I’ve seen her, her hair is down, her silvery s  
looking incredibly thin without their usual coif. It hangs in sticky clum

it's her lined face is pale, the edges beside her eyes pulled tight.

ontrol "What is it?" Estelia asks.

My heart begins to pump harder as I watch Nenet wring her hands together. "Stone Swords down the street. It took me ages to get here because I was trying not to be questioned." She pauses, glancing at Thursil. "They're checking door to door."

Everyone in the kitchen goes tense.

ause "What are they checking for?"

Nenet's gray eyes meet mine. "The person who fell through the sky. *Shit.*"

ir Estelia makes a strangled noise in the back of her throat. "They know

way "I'm not sure what they know, exactly, but it seems the whispers have spread enough that they're asking questions. Geisels have not been as loyal as they should have been."

"Or someone's greased some hands," Thursil says darkly.

ip, we "They wouldn't," Estelia insists.

"Maybe not everyone here is as loyal as they used to be," he says. "Over years of this monarchy slowly twisting things, it makes people knotted up," she Confuses the lines."

ings "What should we do?" Nenet asks. "They'll be knocking on the servant door soon enough."

"Lady Auren can hide in the attic," Estelia says firmly. "We'll show them in, let them snoop around. They won't find her."

sink "Absolutely not," I say, stepping forward. "You all will stay here, and I'm going to leave out the back door."

"You can't!" Estelia exclaims, her orange cheeks flaring. "If there are leading Stone Swords outside, you must stay inside!"

I shake my head. "I'm not going to stay here and get you into trouble." She snatches hold of my hand, expression desperate. "We want to protect you."

I give her a warm smile. "You have. Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

owed "But—"

ing "You've done so much for me, and I'm grateful for you—for *all* of you," I say, looking at Nenet and Thursil too. "But it's time I leave."

trands If trouble is coming to Geisel because of me, then I've overstayed my welcome. None of them deserve to be put at risk.



Estelia's chin wobbles. "I don't like this. I still think you should stay  
won't find you, we'll make sure of it."

I give her hand a squeeze, my heart squeezing too. "I haven't been a  
because find who I'm looking for. It's time I moved on to stretch my search and  
hey're Her shoulders slump, and she finally relents.

I drop hold of her hand. "I'm going to slip out the back."

Nenet pushes forward. "I'll make sure the way is clear, Lyäri."

She disappears out of the room before I can reply, the sound of the door  
" door closing behind her.

"Will you watch the field? Just in case..." My words trail off.

w?" "If anyone else arrives, we'll know about it," Thursil assures me. "V  
ve keep our eyes and ears open. Send word when you get to your next stop  
careful we'll reply back with any news."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"And remember, outside of Geisel, I can't promise there will be any  
loyalists around. That could be a good thing and a bad thing. Good because  
After that means there's less of a chance of people recognizing you. But bad  
up. because..."

"I won't have any allies," I say, finishing his sentence.

ette's He nods grimly.

"And you're sure about this?" Estelia asks, worry clear in her face.

them "I'm sure."

Her amber eyes fill with tears before she lurches forward and wraps  
and I'm a hug. I freeze for a moment, but then I force myself to relax, my arms  
around her.

re "It's been an honor, Lady Auren," she says into my hair. "I'm so thankful  
that the goddesses brought you to us." I hug her back, and then she pulls  
e." away, darting a hand beneath her eye. "Stay right there while I pack you  
protect some food before you go," she says quickly before hurrying to the supply  
room.

ke care Thursil comes over, face grave. "We can give you more time."

I shake my head. "No. You've done so much for me already."

He looks at me like he's not surprised at my answer, and then he reaches  
you," I into his pocket and pulls out a pocket watch. It's silver with an embossed  
broken-winged bird sigil right there on the front case.

ly "You keep this," he says, handing it over. "And remember that whenever  
you are, you have people behind you."

7. They     Emotion clogs my throat, my thumb running over the embellishments  
          don't know what to say."

ble to     "You never had to say a thing," he says with a smile. "Just you being  
yway." is going to make all the difference. I can feel it."

          Estelia comes back inside, pushing an overflowing bag into my arms,  
clumping up her lashes. "Take this."

ack     I heft it in my arms before securing the strap over my shoulder. "This  
way too much."

          She narrows her eyes and points at me. "It is barely enough."

          "This sack weighs almost as much as I do."

ve'll     "Don't argue," Thursil says, landing a kiss on top of Estelia's head.  
p, and    won't win against her."

          With a shake of my head, I smile as I slip the watch into the pocket of  
dress, trading it for my own offering. "Thank you both," I say, and then  
discreetly press all five solid gold rocks into Thursil's hand. He raises  
ause     brows, but with a pointed look from me, slips them into his pocket with  
word.

          "Come back here anytime, you hear me?" Estelia says, darting more  
away from her eyes. "You will always have a place with us while you have  
your footing."

          "My footing has never been better, thanks to you," I say, lifting my  
foot.

me in     Another tear darts down her cheek and Thursil slings his arm around  
going    waist, bringing her in close. "Stay safe, my lady."

          "Don't you worry about me. I'm tougher than I look."

inkful    He nods. "I don't doubt that for a second."

ls        And finally, neither do I.

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Emotion clogs my throat, my thumb running over the embellishment. “I don’t know what to say.”

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“Don’t argue,” Thursil says, landing a kiss on top of Estelia’s head. “You won’t win against her.”

With a shake of my head, I smile as I slip the watch into the pocket of my dress, trading it for my own offering. “Thank you both,” I say, and then I discreetly press all five solid gold rocks into Thursil’s hand. He raises his brows, but with a pointed look from me, slips them into his pocket without a word.

“Come back here anytime, you hear me?” Estelia says, darting more tears away from her eyes. “You will always have a place with us while you find your footing.”

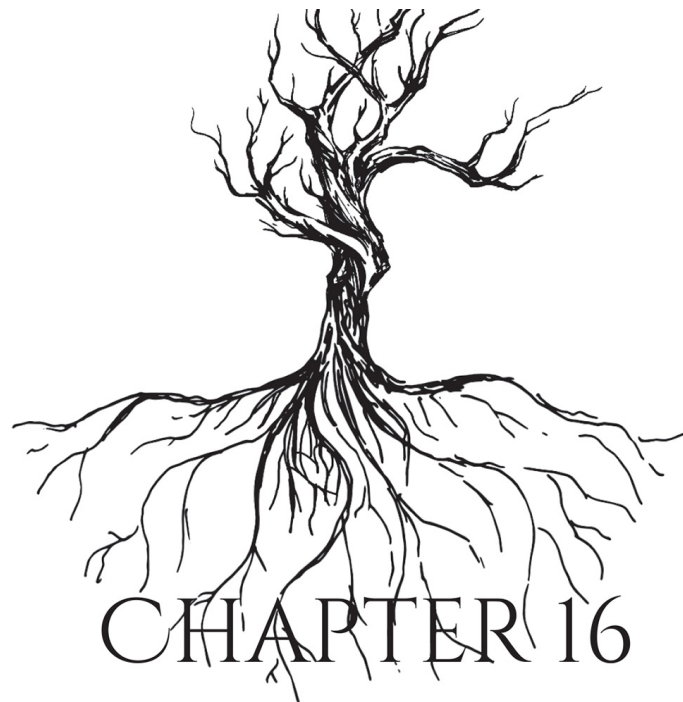
“My footing has never been better, thanks to you,” I say, lifting my healed foot.

Another tear darts down her cheek and Thursil slings his arm around her waist, bringing her in close. “Stay safe, my lady.”

“Don’t you worry about me. I’m tougher than I look.”

He nods. “I don’t doubt that for a second.”

And finally, neither do I.



## CHAPTER 16

### SLADE

I sit in the dark, watching.

Moonlight flows in through the open-air window. This building of them—windows without glass, arches without doors. No impediment to the outside, not when this castle needs every puff of air that the arid desert manages to eke out.

The night is clear, stars speckling the sky like a face of freckles. But the person in bed has none. Not a single blemish covering any part of her skin. Not that I can see much skin, to be fair. Most of it is covered in a conservative robe that must be stifling to sleep in.

I wonder if that's why she wakes up. If she tosses and turns herself to consciousness because of the suffocating heat. Or perhaps it's that some instinctive part of her knows that there's a predator watching her sleep.

Knows that death has come to pay her a visit.

Whatever the reason, Queen Isolte shoots upright in bed, clutching a dagger over her chest. Her head is covered in a plain gray cap, the bottom tied around the nape of her neck.

She doesn't see me at first. The stream of moonlight doesn't quite reach me. Her eyes aren't yet adjusted. But when her gaze finally lands on me

shadowed silhouette sitting on her hard, wooden chair, she lets out a sigh that rivals all the cicadas outside.

I get to my feet at the greeting. She shrinks back and begins to scream again in earnest.

“You can make all the noise you want. No one is coming.”

Her shouts cut off abruptly, her body shaking.

When I come closer to her bedside, her back slams against the headboard and her eyes go wide as she takes me in. The spikes cutting from my arm curve like a dangerous grin, and I imagine the scales on my cheeks may glint in the dark.

“Y-you’re Commander Rip,” she says, hands clinging to the sheet as she holds it up to her, like she’s worried for her modesty.

“Haven’t you heard? I’m not the commander anymore,” I say quietly, tipping my head down as I come to a stop at the foot of her bed and lift my hands, showing her the blood covering them. “I’ve been *set loose*.”

Terror fills her face, and then I see her press her forefinger to her thumb and *pinch*. In the next instant, there it is. She unleashes her magic on me as she did at the Conflux.

Just as, I imagine, she probably did to Auren.

What she *doesn’t* know is that I was the son of The Breaker. What she doesn’t know is that since coming here to Orea, I have lived my life to the fullest. That when I ripped a gash in the world, I ripped a gash in *myself*. Switching back and forth between forms was a physical consequence of ripping a tear in the world, of my father’s magic colliding with mine.

When I first came into Orea, I felt cut in half. Off-kilter. Went through an agonizing shift from one form to the other until I learned to gain more control. I didn’t know which part of me to be, and I struggled with that until I realized that I could use these dual forms for different goals. To show one side of myself and use them both to my advantage. But it always hurt. Like the rot did when my father forced me to use it for endless hours.

Isolte’s pain power was nothing more than a nuisance at the Conflux. Maybe part of that has to do with the rot that runs in my veins. Because it’s just pain compared to death?

But now? Now, I barely feel her power at all. It doesn’t even make me flinch. Because with Auren a world away from me, I’m already in agony. Each thump hard and incessant in my chest.

ly

riek        When I don't collapse into a quivering puddle, Isolte turns frantic. S  
m        tries to pinch her fingers together again, again, and again. Trying to sq  
me like a bug and pulverize my insides.

“Keep trying,” I dare her. “It won't work on me.”

The blood drains from her face, and her fingers drop uselessly.

“Get up.”

oard,        She's trembling so hard she gets tangled in her sheets, but she mana  
rms        get out of the bed. “Walk.”

y even        I can tell she's loath to give me her back, but she follows instruction  
walking out of her bedroom and entering the tiled corridor. But when s  
s she        sees the bloodied heap of two of her guards slumped against the wall—  
their decapitated heads lying on the floor—another scream scours her t

y,        “Y-you killed them...”

t my        “They were in my way.”

mb        She staggers, but I grab the back of her robe and haul her forward. S  
ie, just        slumps in my hold, bare toes streaking through the puddle of blood and  
leaving a thin trail as I drag her.

Again, she tries her pain power. Again, I don't react to it.

he        “What do you want from me?” she shouts, her thin frame knocking  
like she's all skin and bones.

rn in        “How many times did you use it on her?” I ask, ignoring her questio  
“Who?”

of        I grit my teeth as we round a corner. “Auren. How many times did y  
your pain power on her?”

gh the        Isolte starts to sob.

...untilslips, slicking the floor with more red streaks as she spins around.

each        “Once!” she cries. “I only did it once!”

Just        “I doubt that.”

z, and        She's shaking so hard her teeth are chattering. “Wh-where are we go  
e what        Instead of answering her directly, I keep hold of her collar and push  
forward. “I found the Temperance Matrons praying—what a strict sche  
you keep for them. Forcing the gray-robos to stay up until midnight in  
ne        temple with their foreheads pressed to tile, only to be up to pray again  
ny. It        dawn.”

She tries and fails to skid to a stop, the strength in her legs too inferi  
put up much of a resistance. “The Guardians of Temperance are highly

he dedicated,” she bites out.

uish I snort. “And yet *you* were slumbering in your bed.”

Her shoulders tense, though that might be because of the third headl guard we pass by.

Hard to tell.

ges to pious...is that followers eventually realize what they’re enduring isn’t gods at all. Your *highly dedicated* Matrons are festering with resentment, bitterness, and hate. All they need is an opening, and they’ll jump at a she to get out.”

-and I yank her through one of the doorways and speak right at her ear as throat. her outside. “So I gave them an opening.”

The desert air is congested, the night starting to drift away. In the sky moon’s brightness peels back like a flaking fingernail and scratches out the stars. I take Isolte past the fronds, over the tile embedded into the soft sand, and then enter another open-arched doorway.

She grinds her slippery feet against the floor as we go down the corridor and then she stills as soon as we get inside the circular room. With no windows and the blazing fire burning from an iron pot, the space is thick with hampered heat.

in. Isolte stiffens when she sees the dozen Matrons who stand against the white wimples covering their heads, their robes lined with the gray stripes they use their supposed sins.

“Sisters, help me!”

The Matrons don’t move.

gh she I drag Isolte forward. “Your Temperance sisters here have filled me exactly the treatment Auren received under your orders.”

The queen’s worried gaze darts around the dark room until we stop in front of the wooden tub.

ing?” “Get in.”

her Her eyes flare, hands clutching her robe at the neck. “I will not.”

chedule “You will.”

the My dark promise makes a shiver of terror travel over her entire body before looks at the other Matrons, but they don’t help. They don’t speak. They simply stand stock-still, faces stiff and hands clasped tightly in front of her to here to witness her humiliation.

7 Because this is what she did to Auren, so it will also be done to her.

Queen Isolte looks down at her blood-stained feet, and with shaky legs steps into the narrow tub and sits down. Her shoulders slant awkwardly, legs stacking over one another as she tries to fit in the confined space.

The water is tepid, neither warm enough to be relaxing, or cool enough to be refreshing. The fabric of her white robe floats heavily around her, bubbling up as she soaks. With a nod from me, the Matrons step forward for the crowd around her. They start scrubbing at her skin over her clothes, using harsh scouring brushes and sharp soap. One of them dumps a bucket of water over her head.

Watching her sputter and cough is surprisingly pleasing.

I drag “Make sure you Cleanse the queen *very* well,” I tell them. “Her cruel actions have made her soul fucking foul.”

The Matrons nod beneath their wimples and start going at her skin harshly. Each of them volunteered information *very* quickly when I walked into the desert temple tonight. They were all too ready to explain everything she had done to Auren, and even quicker to accept my order for them to Cleanse Isolte and themselves.

It seems the queen hasn't gained their lasting loyalty.

Isolte flinches and hisses, baring her teeth at the women, and when one of them lets out a scream and falls back, I go forward and shove the queen's head beneath the water.

She immediately starts to fight, body thrashing, water going all over the place, but her pain power cuts off from the Matron, leaving the woman panting and red-faced, with furious, hate-filled eyes locked on the queen.

I yank Isolte up from the water by her neck. She coughs, looking like a drowned rat, her cap skewed on her head. “Now, that wasn't very nice, was it? Your fellow Matron is simply Cleansing your soul. You have no right to punish her with your power.”

“My soul needs no Cleansing!” she shrieks.

I tsk. “Lying is a sin, Queen Isolte.”

I shove her head back beneath the water.

Rippled screams pop up from the surface as she thrashes, her pinches renewed as she focuses her magic on me once again. It's so harsh I feel a cinch at my lungs, like she's trying to squeeze all the air out of them. If I let them, some sick, dark part of me relishes in it. Makes me want to retaliate even more.



egs, she I keep her under until her movements go sloppy and slow, until her  
y, her cuts off. When I yank her back out, she hacks, her cap now fallen com  
off her bald head.

igh to She collapses back against the tub, water drooling past her thin lips  
dripping from her eyes. With another nod to the Matrons, the women p  
rd and where they left off, scrubbing their queen from neck to foot, her skin in  
ing going red and raw.

f water When they're finished, I keep my grip on the back of her neck and y  
her out. Water floods off her robe as she stands there shaking, her eyes  
of hatred that I'm actually impressed.

l "Let's take a walk."

Wordlessly, the Matrons lead the way, boxing her in as we head out  
arder. The sun is now cresting over the horizon, blazing bright orange and lig  
o their up the sand dunes in the distance. The women make their way around t  
done to outdoor path that winds around the sprawling space of Wallmont Castl  
pass by the desert plants and rotting oranges, while sand sticks to Isolta  
feet and the hem of her dripping robe.

It's not until we reach the top step of the clay stairs leading down th  
one of that she jerks to a stop. That she realizes where she's being taken.

n's Right down to the Conflux. On the same exact path that she led Aur  
"Either you walk or I'll drag you," I threaten behind her.

the She hesitates for a moment, but then she forces herself forward, feet  
i slipping a few times as we go. None of the Matrons try to stop her from  
en. falling. None of them help steady her. She glares at them all, and wher  
e a her hand twitch, I warn, "If you use your magic against them again, yo  
, was regret it."

ght to Her fingers hang limp.

When we get to the bottom of the stairs, I see the Conflux building l  
ruined and cracked before us, still reeking of the rot I infested it with. T  
dead bodies are all gone, but I can feel the death lingering in the air. I c  
the pull of the rot still embedded in the ground. The poisonous roots tw  
ng painmy presence, like serpents awakening from the depths, ready to poke b  
l it out and bite.

3ut The open-air building is a hectic slop of damage, just as badly scath  
en the ground where the spectators stood. The domed roof is damaged, th  
platform split with decayed roots still visible where they jut out of the  
crumbling stone.

power But my gaze goes to the tiny round cage right there on the stage, to i  
pletely pillars snapped like old bones, torn free from the force of the rip. Spill  
of the cage is a fixed puddle of liquid gold now hardened like cold wax  
and stuck there, shining in the sunlight, with the thinnest bands of black ve  
ick up running through it.

stantly Gold and rot, intertwined.

rank power This is the last spot I saw Auren. Terrified and trapped, forcibly drai  
while surrounded by enemies.

so full Being sentenced to death.

When I arrived, when she saw me, she didn't cringe away from my l  
power. She didn't admonish the rot as I spread it out, destroying every  
side. and everything in my path. There was *relief* in her eyes. There was lov

ghting But I couldn't get to her then.

the Just as I can't get to her now.

e. We The sound of Isolte's mangled gasp wrenches me back into the pres  
e's wet glance at the waterlogged woman where she's stopped in her tracks. A  
her, the Matrons have parted, allowing her to see where I've trussed up  
e dune husband.

King Merewen sits there on the ruined stage, on one of the thrones t  
en. they'd set up for the Conflux. His head is slumped, gray hair plastered  
his forehead, his nightshirt drenched in patches of sweat. Crest stands o  
him, fangs bared, the timberwing growling under its breath. Along the  
n wall, more Matrons stand, watching warily. Beside the king, an empty  
I see waiting.

u'll She whirls on me. "Where is my son? Where is he?" It's the first tin  
she's shown any care for anyone other than herself.

I meet her eyes steadily. "Safe in his room," I tell her. "Unlike you,  
ying punish innocents."

The Her pale throat bobs.

can feel I nod toward the stage. "Go ahead, Queen Isolte," I tell her. "Take y  
vist at throne."

ack She doesn't want to. Not when she spots the knife sticking from her  
husband's stomach.

ed as "Neale?" she calls out, voice shrill and shaky. "Neale!"

e "Just sit down, woman!" He grits his teeth, trying to clench down on  
pain. The timberwing roars at his outburst, causing the king to flinch, v  
just makes the pain in his stomach worse.

its thin Pity.

ed out Isolte hurries forward and plants her ass on the throne.

κ. It's Ahead, in the ruined square, several people have started to gather be  
ins the toppled pillars and torn tarps as they watch this spectacle with open  
horror. Merchants and laborers, who are already awake to beat the heat  
sun, come to watch an entirely different kind of trial. The kind where c  
ined of my verdict stands.

I come up to Crest and run a hand down his feathered neck. The bea  
stops growling and settles beneath my touch.

brutal "Alright, you rabid fucking demon," King Merewen bites out at me.  
one us King Rot's message and be on your way!" Sweat drips down his ter  
e. more of it damming up against his yellowed mustache, blocking the pa  
his lips.

I tilt my head. "What makes you think I'm here to send a message?"  
ent. I "That's what you do, isn't it?" he pants out. "Your king sends you o  
head of a dog on a hunt." Every word he's speaking must be agony, considerin  
her way he's grimacing. "You can tell Ravinger that we're even—he ruine  
city. You stabbed me in my bed."

hat Anger flares up in me, rioting and rampant.

against "Oh, we're far from fucking *even*."

over The spikes along my arms throb. I want to lash out and pierce him tl  
back with them. Instead, I shove my Rip form down, sharp canines and scal  
seat is disappearing, spikes sinking back into my skin in rickety, wavering pu  
force my form to switch until King Rot stands before them, inky veins  
re writhing up my arms and clinging to my jaw.

King Merewen blanches. "It-it's true. I knew I saw spikes that day,"  
I don't stutters in fear. "You're him. He's you. *How?*"

His wife cuts in. "You have two forms," she breathes, staring at me  
awe. "Like one of the gods of old. Two forms merging into one."

our "Be glad I'm not your god, for I would give you no mercy."

She swallows hard, bald head leaning against her high-backed thron  
she trembles in fear. When I look to King Merewen, all the blood has c  
from his face. Now that he knows it's me, he understands the situation  
thoroughly. His watery eyes dart around, as if looking for a way to esc

1 the There's no hope for that.

which Even if he weren't trussed up in that chair. Even if he didn't have a c  
in his gut or a timberwing ready to rip into him. Even if he had a thous

soldiers at his back.

He's at my mercy, and like I said before, I have none.

neath Not for them.

I let my rage bleed out, a cacophony blaring from the deep pit of hate carved into my soul.

I take a step forward.

"I warned you to leave Auren alone," I say darkly. "But you didn't."

I take another step.

"You kept her here."

"Give Another step.

ple, "Forcibly drained her power."

th to Another step.

"Put her in a fucking *cage*."

Another.

"And tried to *execute her*." My words are growled, barely audible past the fury in my chest that's constricting every bone and muscle and vein.

I stop right in front of him, hand snapping out to wrap around the hilt of the dagger. His arms strain beneath the bindings, eyes darting down. He thinks I'm going to yank it out. Let him bleed.

Instead, I *twist*.

King Merewen screams.

"You should've run," I tell him, leaning down so we're face-to-face. I can see every minuscule tic of pain I'm causing him as I continue my slow turn of the dagger. "You should've hidden. But instead, you stayed here thinking you were safe from me. Thinking that so long as you had fifty guards on watch, that it would be enough."

A gasp spits out of him, a whole body shudder.

My dark tone goes pitch-black.

"You should've known better."

The dagger has gone a full circle now, and the king has started to sob.

I lean in close so that it's just my voice in his ear, so that he can hear how absolutely fucked he is.

"I'm going to leave this dagger right here, buried in your gut. Do you know why?"

He whimpers.

"Because this blade has cut off the blood flow to your intestines. If that were to happen in a real battle, you'd get gangrene and die a slow, agonizing

death. But I want to watch, and I'm not particularly patient. So I'm going to speed up the process."

I twist the blade again, and he howls in agony.

"That's why I've now started to rot your entrails. You feel it, don't you? I ask quietly, pulling away to see the expression on his face. "Your tissues are dying. Without your blood flow, your organs are too. I bet your skin has already started to turn black and green in some places." I turn to Isolte. "Would you like to see?"

She doesn't say a word, her body shaking so violently that her knees are knocking together beneath her wet robe.

"His blood is clotting up in places, curdling inside his veins as they collapse one by one."

As I speak, the king's face is becoming mottled, bruises swarming and crawling up from his chest. I press around his gut, the bubbled stomach crackling from the gas caught beneath his blistering skin.

"Stop, stop!" the king wheezes, trying to scream but only managing to whisper wailing.

"You didn't stop for Auren, did you?" I ask him. "So why should I spare you?"

"Anything—anything," he pleads.

Probably because that's all he's able to say.

"We'll do anything," Isolte says, picking up where her husband left off and she melts off the throne, knees bent in supplication as she lands on the ground. With hands clasped in front of her face, she curves her spine down into a bow. "Please! It was Queen Kaila! She was the one who convinced us of what we must do. She was the one that told us Lady Ch—Auren needs to be found guilty! Please, spare us!"

I finally let go of the dagger, and I straighten up to look at her. "You're begging me to spare both your lives?"

"Yes!"

She's clenching her clasped hands together so hard that it's possible they might crack a finger.

I tilt my head in thought. "And what if I asked you to use your pain on your husband, if I told you to use it until he died? Would you do it to yourself?"

"Isolte—" Merewen clips.

ing to        “Yes,” she says immediately as she looks up at me, bald head going  
beneath the rays of the sun.

              I cock a brow. “Is that so?” I ask before nodding toward him. “Then  
you?” I Use your power on him.”

es are        Her hands shake as she drops them, but she wastes no time in pressi  
as            finger and thumb together. Pinching, pelting out the pain.

              Merewen *screams*.

              Isolte keeps pinching.

s are        On and on and on it goes. She doesn’t waver. She doesn’t stop. No r  
how much her husband screams. The people in the square look on in h  
The Matrons have all gone still.

              Finally, I tell her to stop. “That’s enough.”

s they        Merewen slumps, not even fully coherent anymore. With my rot cou  
through him, he’s already begun to smell. He’ll be dead soon. Fever, b  
skin, blisters bursting out with foul discharge, unendurable pain...that’  
the rest of his short life will be. That’s what he has to look forward to i  
next few minutes.

stop for     The queen is still kneeling at my feet. With no eyebrows, no lashes,  
on her head, she looks younger than she is. But the pure and innocent v  
she tries to put on can’t hide the darkness beneath.

              Wicked souls can recognize it in each other.

off,            I glance at the Matrons. “Go.”

the            They scatter off the stage.

own            When they’re gone, I crouch down in front of the queen. Her nostril  
ed us        like she can’t take in enough oxygen, body swaying away from me and  
ded to        shaking like a leaf.

              “You didn’t need much convincing, did you?” I ask. “I tell you to to  
i’re        your own husband, and you did it without wavering. Without even a pl  
his behalf.”

              “You t-told me to,” she stutters. “You are like the god of old...”

she            “It has nothing to do with me and everything to do with you wanting  
save your own skin. If you had any love for your husband, you would’  
power        least hesitated.”

to spare     All the rot that’s poking out from the crumbling stage begins to slow  
move, undulating in sinister rivulets. The reaching roots delve through  
stone, the ground shaking with its slither.

red Isolte's eyes dart around, watching as it begins to surround her, pani  
flaring in her face. "What are you doing? What is this?"

do it. "You tortured Auren. Made her hurt," I say darkly, and the roots pro  
closer, inch by inch. "Made her feel trapped. So that will be your penai

ng her Her head jerks up. "You said you would spare me! You said if I use  
power, you would let me go!"

I shrug a shoulder. "I didn't actually promise that."

"You deceived me!"

natter "I'm sure you're familiar with that particular sin." Smoothly, I get to  
error. feet and look down at her kneeling form. "Now, pray, Queen Isolte," I  
tauntingly. "See if any of those just gods will spare you."

She collapses into sobs just as the stone collapses around her. The ro  
rsing spread through the open-air stage, dug through the floor, crawled up th  
lotched walls. There's a crack beneath her, and then the floor where she's knee  
s how suddenly gives out.

n the Isolte wails. Scrabbles. Tries to pull herself out, but the rotting floor  
purchase. Her tears run down her cheeks, snot from her nose runs dow  
no hair her mouth, and her sweat runs down her brow. She's leaking fear all o

visage "Help me!" she cries.

The only help I will give is helping her understand her fate.

"You'll be pinned beneath a rubble of rot," I tell her evenly, while s  
of dust and chunks of stone begin to rain down around us. "You'll be  
helpless, just like you made her feel. But unlike Auren, no one is comi  
s flare save you. You'll die with the weight of the Conflux burying you alive  
l my rot pinches your every vein. And *that*, in my eyes, is just."

I turn and start to walk away just as the walls of the Conflux fracture  
rture fissures split up through the domed half-ceiling, and a terrible crack ec  
lea on through the square, making the spectators gasp and back away.

I approach the timberwing, his nervousness showing by the flap of h  
outstretched wings. Above us, the sky has gone yellow, the infection o  
g to kingdom leaking like pus into the clouds.

ve at Gripping the reins, I pull myself up into the saddle, and Crest jumps  
stage, landing in the square. More of the roof begins to fall. One massi  
vly hits the ground, and that's all it takes for the rest of the Conflux stage t  
the tumbling down in a terrible onslaught, trapping the royals beneath it.

Within seconds, both queen and king are buried, only the top of  
Merewen's throne visible, and Isolte's pale arm caught upward like a

reaching weed. She's screaming, the sound muffled and choked. Roots slither through the bricks in obvious threat, but now, she has the roots too, mashing her veins with poisoned pain.

The air is congested with the grit of the crumble, but when the dust settles when the people start to clear away the mess, they'll have two dead men and a very clear message of the consequences for going against me.

Crest growls and snaps his teeth, and I look down to see him snarling at the crowd who are staring up at the ruined stage in terror. The Matrons, too, finally seemed to realize the magnitude of what I just did, of their part in it. Perhaps they'll try to pray for atonement. Or maybe they'll finally strip the robes of the Temperance bullshit and get out of this gods-forsaken kingdom.

One by one, the watchers' knees bend. They bow before me until they are all genuflecting, some with their foreheads pressed down to the corroded ground. Not too long ago, these people were in this very square, falling apart because I'd rotted them through.

Now, they're doing it so that I don't.

The veins running through my skin jut and twist, a hissing sound straining through my ears with a tempting pull to kill more. I want to wring out retribution until every last drop of blood has been spilled. I want to erupt through the world and leave it to ruin.

But I won't.

Because she wouldn't want me to.

As if on cue, pain in my chest spikes so fiercely that I nearly sway on my feet. It bulges and burrows, the black veins in my skin starting to stutter as my heartbeat slugging in my chest like a drunken punch.

I take a breath, forcing my attention past the pain. The spectators come to bow. To cower. When I came during the Conflux, they were shouting *Guilty. Guilty. Guilty.* Roaring with the thirst for Auren's death.

Yanking on the reins, I turn the timberwing around to face them, my wings rising up over the crowd. "That golden female you all were so quick to condemn, the one you were all so ready to watch die...she is the *only* reason I'm not going to kill you all right now. She's the only reason I'm not going to give the rot the entirety of this kingdom so that nothing—no person, beast, or person could survive. So when you kiss that ground your lips are pressing against you'd better be thanking *her*. Because if it were only up to me, you'd all be fucking dead."



is still I nudge my heels into Crest's side, and the timberwing launches up  
in her shooting through the torn tarps and hitting the pus-soaked sky.

I've taken revenge on Kaila, on Derfort Harbor, on Second Kingdom  
settles, left blood and death in my wake.

monarchs But I'm not done.

So I turn my rage toward Fifth Kingdom.

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I nudge my heels into Crest's side, and the timberwing launches upward, shooting through the torn tarps and hitting the pus-soaked sky.

I've taken revenge on Kaila, on Derfort Harbor, on Second Kingdom. I've left blood and death in my wake.

But I'm not done.

So I turn my rage toward Fifth Kingdom.



## CHAPTER 17

AUREN

**W**hen I leave the servette, I sneak out the back door, checking ways before I head down the narrow alleyway at the side of building. As soon as I round the corner, Nenet jolts in front stopping just before we collide.

“Nenet!” I whisper, clutching a hand over my chest, pulse clamoring

“Sorry, my lady. Didn’t mean to startle you. Come this way. I could Keff anywhere, but I wrangled someone else. He’ll get you out of the c

“I don’t want to get him in trouble...”

“You won’t,” she insists, waving me forward. “But the Stone Sword just down the way, and this is the only road out of Geisel, which mean can’t get out of the city yet. We’ll have to go to the fields so things don’t suspicious. We can’t have an empty farmer’s cart heading out of town hour.”

My heart lurches. I get to go to the field one more time. A final last-look before it’s time to cover new ground.

Nenet sees the look of relief on my face. “Thought you’d like that,” says with a smile. “We’ll go straight there.”

At the end of the alley, I stop just short of the cart, the heavy bag of supplies slamming against my hip. “Wait. *We*? No, you need to stay here with Thursil and Estelia. You can’t come with me.”

She waves me off. “Bah, nonsense. I won’t have our Lyäri Ulvêre on alone. I’m going with you.”

“Nenet, I’m leaving Geisel. This is your home. You can’t just pick up and leave everything behind for me.”

“I’ll do what I like,” she retorts, her gray eyes firm. “And I suddenly like traveling.”

I sigh. “Nenet, it’s dangerous.”

“Hush, Lady Auren. Let an old fae have her fun.”

I pin my lips together, swallowing my argument in the face of her stubbornness. Maybe I can talk her out of it once we leave Geisel, after time to figure out where I should go and how to get there.

She peers around the corner and watches for a moment before reaching back and grasping my arm to tug me forward. I slip into the back of the cart and tug off my bag of supplies, setting it in the corner. When I crouch on the side, Nenet follows me in and closes the hatch. All that’s in here is a pile of empty sacks and three empty crates. The metal is cool beneath my hand as the sky already lightening through the pale blue fabric overhead.

“Let’s hide you quickly.”

both  
the  
of me,

I lie down, and Nenet starts piling the empty sacks on top of me until I’m completely covered. “Hold still,” she whispers before I hear her knuckles clacking on the cart. A moment later, it starts to move.

3.  
n’t find  
city.”

I simmer in the strain of listening, trying to pick up on anything that might be happening outside. But most of the noises are drowned out by the rattle of the wheels and the clomp of the horse’s hooves, and minutes stretch out while I breathe beneath the suffocating pile.

ls are  
s we  
r’t look  
at this

Dawn crests, and I get hot and sticky beneath the layers of burlap. A few more minutes, I can’t take it anymore. I shove them off my face, and Nenet glowers at me from where she’s tucked behind the narrow crates. The crates aren’t doing much to hide her.

ditch

Before she can say anything, the cart suddenly jerks to a halt, making my stomach leap. I lift my head up, trying to look through the fabric overhead to see what’s going on, but it’s too thick to see much more than obscure shadows. From the gap at the back, I see fae clustered together along the side of the road, heads all turned in the same direction.

she

I see why moments later.

There are soldiers marching through the city, and it's obvious why they're called Stone Swords. Each of them has a sword that looks like it's been carved out of stone, either swinging at their hip or tucked into a sling at their backs. The royal guard aren't dressed in metal armor. They have stone gauntlets on their forearms, and instead of chain mail, a vest of small, interlocking stones in drabby grays and swirled creams cover their chests and backs.

There are dozens of them along the road. Some stop to question passersby, clog around storefronts, their fists raised into harsh knocks as they demand entry. I watch, ears poised to try to hear what they're saying. Mostly, a pick up is unintelligible shouts and their booted feet in syncing steps. I don't have enough.

It's enough, witnessing the drawn look on people's faces, to see them shouting at the Stone Swords, who shove their way past and kick in doors. It's enough to see Nenet's trembling hands.

I grip the ribbons around my waist and let gold slick against my palm against a pile prepare for the worst, but the cart starts dragging forward again, and Nenet lets out a sigh of relief. After several seconds, the tension drains from me as the stopper yanked, my gold drying up.

Neither of us talks until we get to the field, and she reaches over and clears away the rest of the sacks off of me until I'm free of their cover.

“Will Thursil and Estelia be okay?”

“Don't you worry about them,” she tells me firmly. “The royal guard might have a swarm, but they don't have much smarts. They'll search through up some of the citizens for fun, and then crawl back to the pubs to drink after their day's work. There's nothing to fear.”

I give her a sidelong glance. “You're sugarcoating it.”

“I always did have a sweet tooth.”

I can't help but match the smile she gives me.

“Come. We need to let some time pass before we sneak you out of town. Give the Stone Swords time to end their search and for things to die down.”

She reaches up and sweeps back her frayed hair, twirling the strands together until they're a stuck-together swirl that she loops around her head. “Let's go see if we can find your rip today, shall we?”

Her words make a fist squeeze around my heart, but of course, when you're outside, there's no rip. No tear in the sky, no Slade walking the fields.

like every other time I've come.

hey're A sigh sears my lips, leaving burning disappointment in its wake. "I  
1 that," I say beneath my breath before I glance at Nenet. "I guess it was  
t their for me to keep coming out here. I just hoped."

"Hope is never silly. Just look around, Lyäri. Listen."

My head instantly swivels. Two fae are sitting at the back of one of  
sts and other flower carts, their legs swinging down, pants rolled up at their ca  
Clutched in their hands are matching pan flutes, the wooden cylinders  
others the instruments curved and well worn. Both fae perch their lips on the  
and tubes, moving with complimentary tunes as they blow out a song. Furt  
ll I can the fields, around the gilt blooms, fae are dancing around the flowers,  
but it's spinning and smiling, as if the troubles of the city and the threat of the  
Swords can't touch them here.

n "Is this safe?" I ask with blooming worry.

ors. "This is *our* field," Nenet tells me, steel solidifying her tone. "This i  
*waterless blue*. This is *your* golden circle. The monarchy can strip our  
ns to traditions and strain our life and search our homes, but they cannot tak  
enet Because this is where you both came down to ripple out change, and th  
me too, always be true, no matter who sits on the throne. So we will come here  
celebrate that, my lady, for as long as a loyalist lives in Geisel."

l helps My heart tips over with some unnamed emotion. "Thank you, Nenet  
say, my throat tight. "I'm glad you were here when I landed."

She grins. "And what a landing it was."

d "Lyäri! Lyäri!"

around, I startle at the shout, and a little girl comes running up to me, smile  
for a beaming across her freckled face. She has tiny rivulets of blue skimmi  
across her eyelids and stretching up into her temples until the color on  
skin merges with the streaks running through her black hair.

"*Batiellu, Lyäri Ulvêre*," she says, holding out a brown feather to m  
you, Golden One."

he city. I kneel down in front of her, gently taking the offering. "Thank you  
own." much."

She reaches down to where my cloak has parted, to where one of my  
ribbons peeks out. She stares at it in fascination. "They say you're the  
broken-winged bird, but these don't look broken to me." She picks it u  
I get it between her fingers gently and looks up at me. "If you get enough fe  
Just from us, will it fix them?"

There's a twinge in my gut, and I don't know how to answer that, but innocence makes my heart swell, so I just say, "I don't know."

I don't know how I got them back. I don't know if they're broken. I know whether they'll ever move again.

Her face scrunches up in thought. "Well, I hope it does." With a way she turns and skips away, back to the dancing fae, and I straighten, clutching a little feather in my hand. Holding it tight.

Her gesture seems to set off a chain reaction, because within seconds pipes' swarmed by more fae. Dozens of them come forward, giving me feather in murmuring Lyäri Ulvêre over and over again as their fingers gently skim over my ribbons. My hair. My hands, my back. I have to force myself to flinch. Not to pull myself away or tense up at every graze.

Most of them have the emblem of the *Vulmin Dyrūnia* somewhere on them. A pin, an embroidered handkerchief, a necklace, a patch, a belt, earrings, even a shoe buckle. The broken-winged bird symbol of dawn woven itself quietly through each one of them like a silent marker.

A quiet stand.

They look me in the eye, their gazes filled with adoration, their touches with reverence.

They look at me like I'm worthy of holding the weight of their trust.

And as each one takes their turn to see me, to smile and touch and say something in me loosens. The hard-packed ground of my uncertainty is so that my stunted roots can dig in and spread. So that I don't feel quite much of an outsider anymore.

When everyone has given me a feather, there are so many that I cannot hold them all, and with full hands and a full heart, I'm near bursting.

Because...I've always wanted this—acceptance.

"Do you see?" Nenet asks. "Do you see what's in their eyes as they look at you, Lyäri Ulvêre? You are their hope."

I don't have words adequate enough to reply to that, but I wish I did. I wish I could express how honored I am that they're doing this for me.. how utterly undeserving of their devotion I am.

But maybe I could be.

I watch as they dance around the gilt ring of blooms, their skirts and sleeves brushing against Saira's blue petals and their smiles floating up to meet me against a pastel sky.

it her      The same sky that Saira fell from. The same field that bloomed for h  
now blooms for me. Intended or not, coming back has set off ripples  
don't throughout Annwyn, starting right here. Right now.

Maybe that rip did open here for a reason.

ve, she      And maybe Slade isn't going to be able to find me...until I find mys  
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The same sky that Saira fell from. The same field that bloomed for her, and now blooms for me. Intended or not, coming back has set off ripples throughout Annwyn, starting right here. Right now.

Maybe that rip did open here for a reason.

And maybe Slade isn't going to be able to find me...until I find myself.



## CHAPTER 18

AUREN

**T**he only way out of Geisel is through it.

We leave the fields with a full cart of flowers, and now, we c the sole road that leads out. It's a regular occurrence during har overflowing wagons bumping along the road, carrying their fragrant bl to sell to neighboring towns. We stayed most of the day, making sure r would seem out of place, that we're just another overstuffed farming c churning out of Geisel.

I have baskets full of feathers and a heart full of hope when I leave t field for the final time. Nenet and I sit side by side, swaying slightly as wheels roll, not even an inch of space between us with the bushels of S blooms piled all around. Our cloistered cart is flooded with the flower' scent, smelling like the sweetest sea.

*Her waterless blue, indeed.*

It's early evening, and the sun's face is covered with blunted clouds bleed blue, marking up the lavender sky with bruises. The moisture of impending rain begins to fill the air, distant thunder rumbling like fara waves.

By the time we make it to Geisel's main road, fat droplets have started fall over the roof of the cart, though the thick tarp keeps the moisture a. Soon, the sky is pouring down, and the horse's hooves are tracking through splashes of puddles.

It's noisy—maybe that's why I don't hear anything else right away. The cart suddenly jolts to a stop, and there's a wordless shout from our driver. There are people walking just outside, more voices raised through the rain.

Nenet's wide, gray eyes snap to me. "Your hood!" she hisses as she pulls down her own.

I yank my hood over my head just before the hinge at the back of the cart screeches as the panel drops, and our driver's harried face appears. "Quick! They're checking carts!"

With a vise grip on my arm, Nenet starts to drag me out, flowers scattering in our wake. I barely remember to snatch up the bag of supplies Estelia gave me before I hop out of the cart, my boots landing in a puddle. We're immediately pelted by raindrops in the middle of the packed street, interlocking shoes bearing down on us from both sides. I slip the strap of the bag around my shoulder, securing it against me.

Nenet looks around and then pulls me forward, my feet nearly slipping on the slick, uneven cobblestones. As if that weren't hard enough to maneuver through, there are carriages and carts all over the road, congested by whatever is happening ahead. Groups of fae take up the rest of the remaining space, so we're forced to squeeze past people, nearly getting separated several times.

Even with the hooded cloak, rain pours down my face and soaks through my clothes. It's the sort of rain that pummels you from every direction and blinds your eyes with its density.

At the sidewalk, more people are huddled beneath storefront eaves, their faces in distress clear as they look ahead. But the press of the crowd starts to ease when a few fae notice me. Within seconds, everyone starts to give us a wide berth, whispered *Lyäris* falling from their lips. Now, instead of fighting against the throng, they're moving us like a tide, smoothly ushering us out of the rain and helping to hide me until we're brought to the door of a shop. Gratitude bubbles through me.

"In here, Lyäri," a female fae whispers.

She brandishes a key, pops the door open, and rushes us inside. As soon as she has the door closed and locked again, she starts yanking the shutter closed.

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vest,  
looms  
nothing  
art

he  
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'aira's  
's

that  
way

ed to        When she finishes and we're bathed in the darkness of the shop, I sh  
it bay.      back my hood, and her eyes go wide. "Goddess grieve. It's really true,  
ough        breathes, placing a hand over her heart. "Golden one."

              She has a cherry-red braid that hangs all the way down to her knees,  
But         twisted over her shoulder in a heavy drape. She's wearing trousers that  
driver.     at her calves, a studded piercing through one cheek, and she continues  
storm.     stare at me, not even blinking.

pulls        "You got searched this morning, Rillo?"

              Nenet's question makes the fae jump, gaze cutting away from me as  
e cart     shakes her head. "Yeah, and they weren't gentle about it, were they?"  
uick!      says bitterly.

              I take a moment to look around, and see destruction the Stone Swor  
uttering   wrought in nearly every corner of her shop. There are freestanding she  
a gave     along the floor, but three of them have been knocked over. Shattered g  
stantly   litters the place with shards of every color, liquids and powders left in  
ps         puddles.

my         Everything on the wall shelves has been knocked down too, and it si  
              like cedar and pine, with a hint of burnt paper. Now that the shutters ha  
ing on     been closed, the only source of light comes from a window on the ceili  
uver,     it's warped by bubbled glass and streaming with rain.

earch      Rillo sidesteps the worst of the broken vials and heads for the count  
ace, so    the corner of the room. When she comes back, she hands us both  
mes.      handkerchiefs. "Here. I'm sorry I don't have anything bigger."

ough      "This is perfect, thank you," I say, and I start to wipe the water from  
and        face. Nenet uses her cloth to squeeze out the raindrops that have stuck  
hair like dew.

their      "Do you know what's going on?"

ise         The shopkeeper sighs at Nenet's question, tension caught at the corr  
l berth,   her downturned mouth. "They've been at it all day. Barely dawn, and t  
ist the    were here, banging away. Woke me up straight from bed. I came down  
ain,      open the shop door for them, and they burst inside. Searched all over. I  
my        upstairs. Under my damn bed. And apparently felt the need to look  
through my shelves too, breaking open nearly half the tinctures in my  
she says with a glower.

soon as    "Did they say what they were looking for?"

rs         "Not specifically. Asked plenty of questions instead. Wanted to kno  
where I was a week ago. If I heard anything about any insurgents. If I'

love heard of the name Wick.” Rillo pauses and steals a look at me. “If I kn  
” she anything about a stranger appearing in Geisel or a mark in the sky.”

Nenet curses beneath her breath. “My grandson was right. Someone must’ve talked.”

cinch “Or the Stone Swords are getting better at eavesdropping.”

to “So now they’re stopping everyone riding down the street?” I ask, h  
to see such destruction brought onto anyone in Geisel because of me. I  
the fact that my presence is having such consequences. I need to get av  
she from here before anyone else is hurt.

she Rillo nods. “And still searching all the buildings. Even doubling bac  
going back through ones they’ve already checked.”

ds Nenet’s eyes flick to me, understanding bouncing between us. “We  
lves get out of the city, but I don’t think we’ll be doing it in a cart.” She rea  
lass behind her and pulls up her hood again. “But that’s okay, I always like  
walking in the rain.”

“Use the side door. No one is out that way,” Rillo says, and she lead  
mells way through her ruined shop, each of us careful to avoid stepping on th  
ave glass.

ing, but We walk down a dark hall and past a tucked-away staircase, and the  
opens a door, peering out both ways before giving us a nod.

er in “Thank you,” I say, handing the shop owner the handkerchief.

She gives me a small, sad smile. “You keep it, Lady Lyäri. And be  
careful.”

my When we step outside, Nenet wastes no time. “Come on.”

to her We slip down a narrow path, the rain appearing to fall down and lea  
back up again. But our path leads to a broken carriage, slumped and cr  
taking up the entire side street.

ers of We retrace our steps and then turn left instead of right, but just as N  
hey about to round the corner, I snatch her sleeve and haul her back. I poin  
to her breath catches when she spots the five soldiers standing with their  
Even to us. A crowd of people are packed in front of them, expressions tense  
disgruntled, voices lobbing back and forth as they argue about not beir  
shop,” to get through.

“You have to go to the main road! Turn back!” A guard shouts.

They’re socking everyone in, keeping them herded to the main stree

w Nenet and I share an uneasy look before quietly turning around. Dou  
d ever back again, we try to head down the other two alleys that veer away fr

ew main street, but one is blocked with horses, and another is a dead end.  
Dammit.

We stop beneath a back door vestibule, only getting some reprieve from the rain as we loiter beneath the low-hanging eave. “We’re too close to the square,” Nenet says in obvious frustration. “All the shops circle around us, going far down. We can’t get out. We’re going to have to go back to the road.”  
My mind whirls and my muscles tense. I don’t like feeling like we’re trapped. “How long until we make it out of the city?”

“Normally? About twenty minutes. But with this crowd, longer.” She reaches up to swipe the water dripping from her nose. “We’ll be discreet. There’s plenty of people out there for us to blend in with, and Geisel will help you.” She reaches up and tucks some of my hair beneath my cloak, pulling my hood further down my face. “There. Ready?”

I look up at the sky, gauging the time. It’s hard to tell with the storm, but we should have another hour of daylight.

“You need to stay here,” I tell Nenet. “I can make my own way out of the city. I don’t fear them.”

She shakes her head. “No.”  
“It’s *dangerous*,” I tell her. “At the very least, we should split up...”

She gives me a fierce look. “Enough of that. Are you broken-winged or broken-eared? I already told you, I’m coming.”

“You’re stubborn,” I grumble.  
“And you’re hard of hearing—much too young to have that ailment. You should talk less and listen more.”

A smile crinkles my cheeks. Her words make me think of Digby. Her matter-of-fact personality makes me think of Milly. “You know, you remind me of someone.”

She arches a brow. “Well, did you listen to them, or did you talk more?”  
A little laugh escapes. “Definitely talk.”

“Hmm. A bad habit then.”  
“Probably.”

Even though I’m smiling, I kind of want to cry, because I miss every member of my entire cobbled-together family who’s now a world away.

“I’ll not be leaving you, Lyäri. That’s that.”

“But you just met me,” I say, trying to get her to see reason, to turn her mind to something sensible.  
“Why put yourself at risk?”

om the

She cackles, like I've just made some great joke. "Whys are for eyes you don't have to show to know."

I blink. "What?"

Nenet sighs and taps her ear. "Listen. Stop hearing."

"Right. Of course. I'll just...do that."

"Good."

She abruptly spins and walks away, and I have to jerk forward to keep up with her. She maneuvers us through the dizzying paths of the alleys until we find a break between the buildings. Ahead, there's a group blocking the way to the main street, but Nenet manages to shove her way through, tugging me along.

The main road is blocked with carts and carriages and people, even more congested than it was before. Through the pounding rain, I can see Stone Swords searching systematically. They're tearing open carriages, checking carts, shoving their weapons through barrels and stabbing through sacks. More of them pounding on shop windows or kicking in doors.

Just in front of us, one Stone Sword yanks open the back of a cart, and hundreds of sacks tumble out onto the wet ground. They split open like a festering wound, grain bleeding out all over the road. Another pair of them has a fae male pinned to a shop post, mocking him and punching him in the gut.

This seems like more than just a search for me or some rebels. The rebel guard is being destructive. Acting like tyrants. I don't like it.

Nenet pulls me forward, but something up the road catches my eye, so I lean around people in the crowd to get a better look. Squinting through the rain, I strain to see, and when I do, my stomach drops.

Up ahead, Estelia stands in the middle of the street. Her clothes are soaked through, sunset dress plastered against her skin. Her hair has come undone and now hangs in soaking tendrils, and I can see her shouting, though I can't hear her words.

I tug against Nenet's grip, and when she looks back at me, I hiss in her ear— "It's Estelia!" Wrenching free of her hold, I dart forward, surging ahead with a single-minded purpose.

Thunder cracks above as I push myself through the crowd. I make my way forward as fast as I can, slipping through the gaps of people until I reach the front, where everyone has stopped like there's an invisible line drawn across the street that no one wants to pass.

, but

I see why.

The servette is just ahead on the right, the dainty hand-painted sign dripping with rain where it hangs over the door. Flowers line the front building, and it would normally look just as cheery and welcoming as the neighboring buildings, except for the windows that have been smashed shut, shutters sagging crookedly, the front door kicked in.

ep up

My heart pounds in my chest like a warning bell.

til we

Immediately, I see why Estelia was yelling, why a Stone Sword is now holding her back by her arms.

e way

ng me

Thursil has been shoved down and forced to kneel in the street, knees buried in a puddle, surrounded by the royal guard. Dripping wet, held up at the shoulders by a pair of them, he's glaring at the fae who's holding Estelia. Barely paying any attention to the male that's circling him.

more

ne

king

But I pay attention.

s,

Outrage stirs in my gut as indignation winds and slithers up my torso; it constricts in my chest. I watch like a serpent peeling both eyes open, pupils dilating, tongue flicking out to taste the air.

etting

e a

The male walking around Thursil has his helmet off and tucked beneath his arm, and no rain touches him. Not a single drop.

hem

n the

Water magic. Or perhaps some sort of shielding ability. I squint, and...*there*. Right above his head. The faintest outline of a disc hovering over him, rain pelting off it. So it *is* some sort of shield, but I wonder how thorough it is.

oyal

and I

i the

His black hair has a tinge of green that looks like algae running through it and it's slicked back behind his sharp ears. His chin is wide and square, holding all the angles of arrogance, and the edges of his mouth are bordered by frown lines.

soaked

lone

He stops and I see his lips move as he says something to Thursil. My ears strain to listen, but I'm too far away to hear. I do, however, notice the way

I can't

Thursil's jaw works, the stoic look that crosses his face, and the adamantine stubborn shake of his head.

er ear.

d with

Algae Hair smirks to himself and then turns toward the crowd, speaking loud enough for us all. "This fae is accused of harboring an enemy to the crown!"

ry way

ch the

Everyone watches with a grim disquiet, but one of them shouts back across the street at him. "Where's your proof?"

across



The Stone Sword tries to locate the voice, but whoever it was is lost surrounding group.

of the “The royal guard doesn’t need to give proof to the public. We answer  
its to our king!” he shouts back at the sodden crowd. “He’s not our king!”  
l, the someone else shouts.

Everyone seems to collectively suck in a breath at whoever dared to

ow My eyes dart around, but again, I can’t find who spoke, and neither  
The anger on his face is evident by his pinched lips. The rest of the Stone  
Swords are glowering, eyes scanning, tension mounting. The bystanders  
glower right back.

down There’s hate here. It volleys back and forth between the royal guard  
g the people, soaking through them all even more than the rain does.

o until Lowering my hand out of the sleeve of my cloak, I let the tiniest droplet  
pupils the splattering rain and landing a hit against his pant leg.

So his shield doesn’t cover his whole body. Good to know.

death his “The treason and conspiracies of the city of Geisel have gone on too  
Algae shouts. Then he delves into his pocket and thrusts up his hand,  
showing off what he’s holding in his fist.

ng over Gold rocks.

Five of them, all with little black lines coursing through. Bile sloshes  
stomach, and the look on Thursil’s face is one of daunting dread.

ugh it, “This is your price for rebelling against your crown! Gold from the  
e, of traitors!” He spins around the middle of the street, looking at everyone  
dered gathered. “Give us the gilded one, or we will destroy your precious city.

The crowd’s fear spikes.

y ears “Turn over the one you are hiding, or we will kill you all.”

way The rain falls in sharp pellets, but it’s the fae’s threat that pierces through  
nt, I expect them to give me over. I wouldn’t blame them in the least, and  
I’ve been telling Nenet and Estelia, I don’t fear the Stone Swords.

king But no one shoves me forward. No one starts pointing. And when I look  
he around, I notice something.

Small glimmers through the rain. Flashes amidst the dismal drear.

at Dozens, maybe hundreds, of broken-winged bird sigils hidden in plain  
sight.

in the It's a tiny painted emblem in a shop window. It's in a carving on an  
It's branded into a doorknob. A button sewn on somebody's cloak. A t  
er only inked into a neck. Chiseled into a lantern post. Hanging from someone  
' earlobe.

It's everywhere. Surrounding me. Flooded through this city, and I th  
say it. the first time, I really understand what broken-winged bird *means*. It's  
can he. just the frayed dress that flapped with Saira Turley's fall. It's not just r  
me ribbons that burst from my back in the air as I dropped through the sky  
rs It's *them*.

It's these fae who feel trodden. Clipped. Their way of life yanked ou  
and under them while they were shoved aside and left to plummet.

I understand that more than most.

They believe if a broken-winged bird can fly despite her fall, then m  
p of Annwyn can too. Maybe a rebellion can rise up, lifting their realm bac  
lilt where it should be.  
o like

It's not about me. It's not even about Saira Turley.

Like Nenet tried to tell me, it's their hope that they see when they lo  
o long!" me. It's their symbol come to life. And just like when Slade first believ  
me, *their* belief helps embolden me, too. Helps remind me of exactly v  
am, in that other world and in this one.

The Stone Sword's face darkens with anger. He doesn't like that no  
s in my cowering beneath his threats, that nobody is giving me up. He turns ar  
and marches back over to Thursil with menace.

"Fine," he growls out, hand suddenly fisting Thursil's blond hair. "I  
hands with you."  
me y."

Estelia screams.

The fae yanks out the sword from his scabbard and *swings*, aiming s  
ough. for Thursil's throat.  
nd like

And gold erupts from my fingertips.

look

in

It's a tiny painted emblem in a shop window. It's in a carving on an eave. It's branded into a doorknob. A button sewn on somebody's cloak. A tattoo inked into a neck. Chiseled into a lantern post. Hanging from someone's earlobe.

It's everywhere. Surrounding me. Flooded through this city, and I think for the first time, I really understand what broken-winged bird *means*. It's not just the frayed dress that flapped with Saira Turley's fall. It's not just my ribbons that burst from my back in the air as I dropped through the sky.

It's *them*.

It's these fae who feel trodden. Clipped. Their way of life yanked out from under them while they were shoved aside and left to plummet.

I understand that more than most.

They believe if a broken-winged bird can fly despite her fall, then maybe Annwyn can too. Maybe a rebellion can rise up, lifting their realm back to where it should be.

It's not about me. It's not even about Saira Turley.

Like Nenet tried to tell me, it's their hope that they see when they look at me. It's their symbol come to life. And just like when Slade first believed in me, *their* belief helps embolden me, too. Helps remind me of exactly who I am, in that other world and in this one.

The Stone Sword's face darkens with anger. He doesn't like that no one is cowering beneath his threats, that nobody is giving me up. He turns around and marches back over to Thursil with menace.

"Fine," he growls out, hand suddenly fisting Thursil's blond hair. "I'll start with you."

Estelia screams.

The fae yanks out the sword from his scabbard and *swings*, aiming straight for Thursil's throat.

And gold erupts from my fingertips.



## CHAPTER 19

AUREN

**T**he clang is so loud that it rivals the thunder.

His blade of stone meets the whip of my gold that's wielded by my clenched fist. My magic wraps around his sword, freezing it in place just a hair away from Thursil's neck.

The royal guard's head snaps to me, his furious gaze locking on my algae hair flung into his eyes. "Who dares interfere with the crown's justice?"  
"I fucking do."

I step forward and toss my hood back, still gripping the strap of gold taut rope. Determination holding its grip on *me*. I'm not going to let him harm Thursil or anyone else on this street.

His eyes rove over me from head to toe, as if he can't believe his luck if coming face-to-face with me could actually end well for him.

Idiot.

"Speak your name, golden one, so the justice of the crown can be exact." I open my mouth to answer, but another voice beats me to it.

"This is the Lyäri Ulvêre," Nenet spits, suddenly stepping up beside me. "And she is more of the *true crown's* justice than you could ever be."

“Subtle,” I murmur as I slip the bag of supplies off my shoulder and drop to the ground.

“There’s a time for subtle and a time to kick ’em in the balls,” she m back. “This is the latter.”

“Right.”

Following her cue and taking advantage of the stunned silence, I yar the cord of gold, sending the male’s sword flying out of his grip. It cra the ground, but unlike normal stone, it doesn’t crack or crumble. It lan a heavy thud, unbroken, yet too far away for him to reach.

My gold whip melts onto the ground and starts circling the fae like a bullseye. He looks down at it before that gaze flicks back to me, as if g the threat. Assessing. For a second, a wary look crosses his face, and I maybe he’ll make a smart choice.

Silly me. Very few men do when faced with a pissed-off woman.

“Arrest her!”

The Stone Swords gathered around descend on me like flies to a car

I let them—for a few feet anyway. Then I lift my hands and push riv of gold out that harden and arc into them, knocking into their pebbled and sending them flying. People in the crowd cheer, *Lyäri* coming out mouths like a victory chant.

Algae—still without a lick of rain on him—sneers at me. “You will that.”

from  
t in

I shrug. “I’m made of gold. I can afford it.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Thursil and Estelia reunited, clutch one another. Safe.

face,  
justice?”

“You’re done terrorizing Geisel,” I tell the royal guard. “It’s time fo to leave.”

I like a  
m

An ugly look crosses Algae’s face. “I will burn Geisel to the ground make you watch unless you submit.”

The fiercely fae part of me snarls. “*I don’t submit.*”

ck. As

Upon hearing my answer, he abruptly shoves his hand through the a near-invisible disc that hovered over his head moves so fast I barely ha time to blink before the shield suddenly backhands me across the chee head snaps to the left, and anger snaps through the rest of me.

acted.”

He can obviously manipulate his barrier magic for offense, not just defense.

me.

Funny, my magic can be awfully offensive too.

let it        The black-veined gold that's circling his feet shoots up like a fist and  
              knocks him on his ass, upending him in a dirty puddle.

utters        Beside me, Nenet guffaws. "Not so dry anymore, is he?"

              My lips twitch. I have to admit, this is sort of...*fun*.

I've come such a long way with learning how to use my magic, with  
understanding its limitations and mastering control. The fact that I'm h  
shes to standing up against so many fae and completely confident in it buoys r  
ds with Makes me want to float higher and higher.

The crowd roars with approval, and that fae beast inside of me roars  
at them.

gauging      "Arrest her, you idiots!" Algae shouts, neck flushing with red rage a  
think        points at me.

              The royal guard try to scramble to their feet, but every time they do,  
thick paddles of gluey gold to knock them down again.

              And again.

cass.        And again.

ullets        It splatters on their faces, their armor, their feet. Sticking to them in  
vests        partially solidified streams and smacking into them with a clang.

of their      "This is almost pathetic to watch," Nenet says, sounding absolutely  
              as she crosses her arms in front of her and grins.

pay for      Algae is not so entertained. This time when he shoves his arm throu  
air like a backhanded slap, his barrier magic slams into my chest, send  
sprawling. If it weren't for the arms of the crowd to catch me, I would'  
ing        been the one landing in a dirty puddle.

The bystanders dust me off, pushing me upright and shouting  
r you        encouragements, but as enthusiastic as they are, I don't want anyone to  
caught in the crosshairs. So I walk forward, past that invisible line ever  
and        is staying behind, getting away from them. As I go, gold drips from bo  
my hands, spilling to the ground like a fountain, those little lines of rot  
pulsing through it.

ir. The      Spurring me on.

ive        With a flick of my wrists, I make the streams of molten metal roll, li  
k. My        yarn being wound up. With every fast rotation the spheres grow larger  
heavier, until dozens of them are ringing out across the cobbles, speedi  
toward the guards.

In a blink, the globes slam into the soldiers, some big enough to roll  
over them, pulverizing their splayed-out bodies in a violent crash, mak

d blood and bone pop out and spill onto the street in a gruesome display.

The smaller spheres knock several Stone Swords off their feet, and as they're laid out, I pounce. The hardened metal melts back down as c as lightning, a thick coat of it that pins them where they're sprawled in viscous, tar-like swathe. It binds their limbs, sticking them to the road here, flail.

ne. I walk past them, gold and fierceness oozing out of me. Stepping over guards, while metallic rivulets part before me until I stand face-to-face with Algae. Until I can see the fear in his grubby eyes.

“Take your Stone Swords and leave Geisel.”

s he The fae around me shout out in vehemence, cursing the soldiers, spitting them, their voices raised and their fury heated, my presence bolstering

I use The male sneers. “We will leave. With *you* in shackles.”

There's a shout of outrage from the crowd, and suddenly, someone wrenches me back by the hair and slams me to the ground from behind so unexpected that I don't even have time to brace for the impact. My head cracks against the cobblestones, bursting with pain, and I blink, dazed, as rain pelts my upturned face.

thrilled I missed one, then.

With a snarl, I turn over and push myself up, whirling round. The Stone Sword who snuck up on me fumbles with his weapon, but he has no time to draw it. I slam my hand into his chest, anger seeping through my skin. I've burst out, instantly dousing his clothes and thickening over his armor. It's so heavy he can't stand the weight.

He tumbles to the ground, limbs pinwheeling, head swiveling like an overturned turtle that can't flip over. Panic flashes over his face as he realizes he's unable to get back up. As he realizes how royally he fucked up.

Turning, I swipe the rain from my face, leaving a smudge of gold snatched across my cheek. More sprouts from my palms like vines, and I shoot them toward Algae. He throws up his barrier in front of his head and chest just in time for some of my gold to go bouncing off, but his shield doesn't stretch the entire length of him. Gold vines wrap against his ankles and then snarl up, pinning his legs together and planting him in place.

Another burst of his magic hits me, this time going for my hands, managing to momentarily dislodge the gold collecting in my palms. The liquid splashes on the ground, my wrists throbbing from the hit.

ing

I lift the gold back up, hardening it in front of me and making my own shield to block him, but his barrier just passes right through, hitting my quick again. And again and again.

I grit my teeth as he strikes me in the same spot, making my wrists feel as they're being pummeled with the blunt end of a hammer, my gold shield dropping from the distracting pain. I'm ready to make the vines drag her deadaway straight out of Geisel, but something on his face makes me pause with not nearly as afraid as he should be.

"If you don't come with us, there will be consequences."

"I'm your fucking consequence," I snarl.

His eyes cast over my shoulder. "Do it."

I jerk my head to look. And that's when I see someone—not a Stone Sword, but just someone in the crowd—move toward Nenet. I don't even notice the dagger they're holding until after they've plunged it into her stomach.

My vision narrows. Tips. Heart stops on a single throb in my ears.

No...

I blink, and it's her, I blink again, and it's Sail. Again, and it's Digby. Again, and it's Rissa. Rotating over and over in agonizing flashes. Blatant pain, punishment, all because of their involvement with *me*.

*Not happening...*

But it is, because Nenet looks down at the blade like she's both disgusted and annoyed that it's suddenly there. Then she falls to the ground in a loud People scream. Someone grabs the male who stabbed her, and fighting crowd ensues.

I turn to run toward her, but I'm knocked in the back with Algae's net and it sends me sprawling. My slicked palms slap against the cobblestones as I catch my fall, my hurt wrists twinging on impact.

With the breath still shoved out of me, I look up and pitch my hand forward, shooting a stream of gold toward Nenet's attacker. It avoids the people pummeling him, making them stagger back as it hits the male right in the mouth, gorging itself down his throat.

He gurgles, flails, grabs his neck and gags, but the viscous liquid clogs his airway and sinks down into his lungs, gilding his breaths, weighing them down until they're too heavy to pull in. While he struggles, his hood falls away from his face, and I realize it's *Keff*. The quiet, gangly driver who takes Nenet and me to the fields every day...except today.



vn “You fucking *bastard*,” I seethe.

7 wrists I feel no regret whatsoever when he hits the ground.

Pushing myself up, I take in gulping breaths, but the crowd has gone

feel like Quiet. When I turn around to see why, Algae is right behind Estelia, w

ld blade to her throat. Thursil is on the ground, unconscious.

im My heart leaps into my throat with resounding alarm.

He’s I was distracted. My gold on him must’ve weakened while I was dea  
with Nenet’s attacker. Algae must’ve been able to use his own magic to  
knock himself loose.

“I can do this all day,” he threatens me, an evil smugness marring hi

Curses fly from my mouth, but they’re drowned out by the sound of  
hooves. My head snaps over just as Wick appears on horseback, bursti  
the parting crowd, horse leaping over the gilt bodies in the street.

He rears his mount to a stop, dark eyes scanning the scene. “Stop, St  
Sword! Leave these people alone.” He jumps down and holds up a larg  
necklace with the emblem of the broken-winged bird on it. “I’m who y  
want.”

Algae’s eyes are hard, and he whips out his hand, sending Wick spr  
off his feet from the force of his magic. “Filthy rebel,” he hisses, but h  
doesn’t let Estelia go. “Traitors, all of you!” he shouts at the crowd bef  
eyes swing back to me. “Call back your magic and turn yourself in. Do  
and I won’t kill her.”

heap. *Liar.*

He knows by my expression that I don’t believe him. He also knows  
my magic is far superior to his. Which is why when I take a step forwa  
sends another pulse of his barrier. It hits me right in the head, smackin  
ones as the skull like being walloped with a real shield. My face whips to the s  
my temple throbs, but that only pisses me off more. He’s probably tryi  
knock me out like he must’ve done to Thursil.

he When I see Estelia wince at the press of Algae’s blade, I *lose it*.

With a growl, I make the gold around the street gather together and  
him. He wraps his barrier around himself, but it’s far too flimsy agains  
his mass of my magic.

A tidal wave of viscid metal slams into him, ripping him off his feet  
surprised cry. Estelia falls back and rolls out of the way, while the wav  
sloshes over him, sprouting limbs and pinning him down. It undulates

of him like a furious tide, splashing and striking at him, sticking to his  
like thick molasses and crude oil, his magic lost in the flood of mine.

e still. Wicked satisfaction curls from my chest.

ith a More of it floods from my hands and starts to sweep down the road.  
it out like a glut, let the gold feast on the street until there's so much I  
tell if it's raining water or gold.

aling And I don't stop.

o Not when the last of the remaining Stone Swords are screaming, pel  
with it, *drowning* in it. Not when buildings are splashed with its gleam  
s face. spate. Not when Algae's limbs go jerky and rigid, his eyes bugging ou  
head as the gold seeps into the sockets and sloshes through his innards

ng past I'm furious. Feral.

And Annwyn...the air, the very land itself, seems to thrum through  
tone Like she's saying, *there you are*.

ge I feel her like a shot of adrenaline surging through my veins and filli  
rou with a staccato thrill, ready to help fuel my fury and push my power to  
of her tarnished and twisted people.

awling It *elates* me. Makes me feel everything fae that I'd been cut off from  
e still many years. And with this vicious elation, I realize something else dar  
fore his noxious that's luring my fury out—the black veins that stream through  
that, gold.

It's pushing, seeking to ravage. To *kill*.

“Auren!” someone calls, but I ignore him. Don't pay him any mind.  
s that too entranced by the pull of punishment.

rd, he Rotted gold floods the street, pouring down the Stone Swords' throa  
g me in choking off their screams. It wraps around their limbs, weighing them  
ide and decaying them even as it leaves them gleaming and glossy.

ng to I let more coat the street. Climb up the walls, flood over the cobbles  
splatter across carts. Fling droplets into the crowd. This rot, this land, r  
magic, my *fae-ness*, it all lures me like a siren song to keep singing, ke  
rush destroying.

t the My heart races, and a part of me knows I should be horrified. But th  
part of me *loves it*. Pushes for *more more more*.

with a Because they hurt Nenet. They threatened Thursil and Estelia. They  
re to intimidate me. Wanted me to *submit*.

on top The magic is demanding, spilling out of me like a deluge, and peopl  
crowd start to scream. Not cheering for me anymore, but yelling out w

body instead, shrieking in fear, running away...

Just like that night in Carnith.

Carnith, where I killed the first woman who was ever kind and accepted me. Where my magic first erupted and I flooded an entire town, killing everyone in my path.

I couldn't control my power then. Couldn't for ten years after, either now, I know how to hold the reins. The last thing I want to do is make the town fall prey to my gold the same way Carnith did. I have to stop this

I slam my eyes shut and focus, forcing an end to the savage call.

Reminding myself that I'm trying to *protect* Geisel. Not destroy it.

I clench my fists, hands shaking, trying to shut off the flow, to stop the spread of gilt rot. But I find my magic doesn't want to listen, and Slade's magic is an ensnaring, wicked temptation wanting to consume. It's the overly-sweet scented power seducing me, the bond to Annwyn enticing me. The gleam of my own gold threatening to blind me, and I have to regain control.

"Stop," I whisper beneath my breath.

The rotted gold seems to snarl back.

My jaw clenches. Teeth gnash. My entire body shakes with effort. I wield my magic. Mine. I wield it.

"*Stop!*"

The call bursts out of me like a great force of will that I feel all the way down to my bones. Instantly, that feral ferocity that took over shudders and slips.

The savagery snaps off, ending its surge.

It begins to retreat back into me, slinking down with chagrin. Heart pounding, my gaze falls to my hands as the last of the liquid drips to a stop, like the turn of a faucet.

Spinning on my heel, I take in the street.

The Stone Swords are all dead, black lines streaked over their metal corpses. The gleaming liquid has splashed over the entire street, with splatters up on the storefronts and speckles of it staining the bystanders caught in the wave.

They've stopped running, but there's at least half the amount of people here before, and all of them are staring at me. Not with awe. Not with hope.

With *fear*.

There's a low whistle beside me, and I see Wick standing next to me looking at me with an indecipherable expression on his face. He says nothing but shame crawls up my throat and chokes me.

"Lyäri."

I jerk at the voice, heart leaping into my throat. Turning, I run toward Nenet where she's slumped against the wheel of a cart. I kneel down beside her, the dress at my knees soaking through with rain and blood and gore. Horrible, churning guilt wraps itself through my limbs as I take in the sight of her. At how terribly I failed to protect her.

She looks down at the blade still buried in her gut and rolls her eyes. "Typical. Things just start...to get...interesting. And then...*this*."

A half-sob, half-laugh escapes me.

The sound of shuffling draws my eye over my shoulder, and I see Thursil's arm slung around Estelia's shoulders as she helps bring him forward. Together, they sit next to the old fae, both of them looking at her as if in a daze. In shock.

Thursil's hands flit around Nenet like he doesn't know what to do. "Stel..." he pleads.

Estelia's amber eyes go watery. "I don't know, Thursil. I don't know." Orange streaks on her cheeks have gone pale. Like a peel leached out by the sun.

But Nenet glances over at her. "You know as well as I do that your magic can't heal this."

Estelia's chin wobbles.

"We have to try," I say desperately, looking to Estelia. "You healed my feet."

"That was different. Just burns on the flesh. This..." Her eyes drop to Nenet's stomach. "But yes, I will try. I need the dagger to be removed." Thursil looks stricken.

"I'll do it." Because I know he can't bear to pull the blade from his grandmother, can't bear to cause her more pain.

I reach up and grip the hilt carefully, my eyes skipping up. "Ready?" Nenet nods.

As quick as I can, I yank the blade out of her. She cries out and jerks, but Thursil is there to catch her. Estelia instantly leans over and starts to pour out her healing breath over the bleeding wound.

Over and over and over again.

ne, Kneeling there, I grasp her cold, slippery hand, and other fae start to  
nothing, around, the mood somber, no one saying a thing. After several minutes

Estelia falls back onto her bottom, exhaustion pulling her down, the or  
streaks on her skin nearly non-existent. “That’s all I have,” she says, h  
d “My magic can only do superficial wounds. Nothing like this. I can’t..  
eside —this is—”

ld. “Fatal,” Nenet rasps.

state of Estelia buries her head against Thursil’s neck. “You did what you co  
love,” he murmurs to her, but our eyes go to the stab wound that’s still  
. blood.

Still gaping.

My eyes burn.

hursil’s “Nenet...” Tears track down my cheeks, left to dribble with the rain  
so sorry. This is all my fault.”

in a “Bah.” The noise comes out like a strangled croak.

She squeezes my hand, surprisingly strong considering how much b  
soaking through her cloak. “None of that. Keep fault for the lines in th  
earth,” she tells me, her spiderweb hair plastered against her head like  
v.” The sugar left to melt. “You’re a *Turley*. Remember that. Remember what.  
y the Turley name means in Annwyn. Remember that the gold blood in your  
veins...is good.”

magic I want to say that my gold and I almost just destroyed this whole cit  
everyone in it, but I keep my mouth shut.

She coughs, blood staining her thin lips for a second before the rain  
my it away. Her hand comes down to feel one of my drenched ribbons aro  
waist. “Broken-winged bird,” she murmurs, her gray eyes flicking bac  
o my face. “Sorry, Lyäri. Looks like I won’t...be able...to come with yo  
first.” after all...”

“Stop talking like that,” I tell her, dashing more tears away. “You’re  
to be fine.”

” She tries to cackle, but the sound is wet. Labored. The movement m  
her grimace. “Terrible liar for such...a talker,” she gasps out. “Remem  
to *listen*.”

s back, My throat tightens. “I will.”

o blow I will.

So I listen as the thunder booms overhead. I listen as the rain contin  
drop, landing with a metallic clang. I listen as Estelia and Thursil cry a

gather their goodbyes. I listen as she tells them she loves them. I listen as more  
gather around, their steps mournful.

I listen as Nenet takes her last breath.

I listen to the painful silence that follows.

When I finally get to my shaky feet, when I take in the crowd, they  
be listening too. Listening and waiting.

For me.

I flex my fingers, let out a steadying breath, and then call to my gold  
oozing Because I refuse to be afraid of my magic...or Slade's. *I'm* the one in  
and it's up to me to take it.

This time, I don't let bloodlust fuel me. I don't allow the temptation  
destruction to sing. I tame the beast and force it to move with gentle pu  
"I'm to undo the wreckage I wrought.

With reins yanked tight, I make the gold turn liquid once more. Make  
retreat from the corpses and drip down the walls, calling it all to pool i  
lood is of me. Everyone watches, murmuring, coming closer instead of runnin  
e away, offering me a second chance at trust as they see me gather it up.

Then, I make it all flow out in a gentle surge.

It floods over the cobblestones, gliding down the length of the slick  
It unfurls beneath everyone's feet, making a few of them jump or cry c  
surprise as it moves past. But it doesn't hurt them. Doesn't stick to the  
y and shoes or crawl up their legs. It simply continues to spread, until it's all  
smoothed out and gleaming, the last ripple of the metal settling into pl

Until the entire street of Geisel is gilt with marbled swirls of black rot.

I think Nenet would've liked it. And based on the awe in their faces,  
k up to think everyone else does too.

With the last minutes of daylight, with the last bit of gold that I can  
let drops fall from my fingers, molting out a pile of gold lumps on the  
going for the people to take. To use. And with my final drops, I gild their bro  
winged bird sigils until they gleam.

The crowd utters *Lyäri*, their hands outstretched to touch me, the

reverence on their faces making my heart twist and my spine stiffen.

Because Geisel didn't deserve to be terrorized by the Stone Swords, and  
Nenet didn't deserve to die.

It's clear that I'm going to be hunted, and innocent people are going  
ues to caught in the chase. But I'm not prey, so what I need to do is run with  
nd say predators.

re fae Which is why I turn to Wick and say, "I'm going with you."

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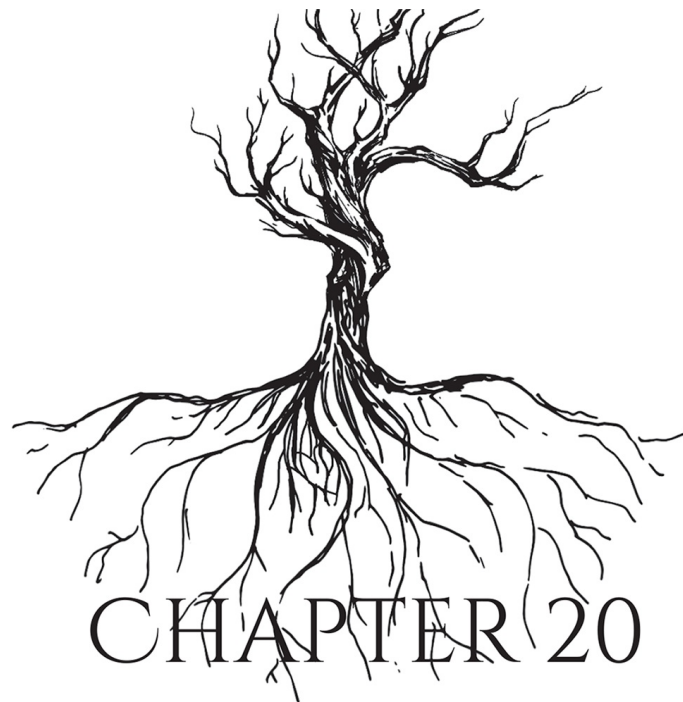
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Which is why I turn to Wick and say, “I’m going with you.”





## CHAPTER 20

### SLADE

**I** was easy to infiltrate the underbelly of Fifth Kingdom now that I don't give a fuck.

Without Auren, without worrying about peace or politics, I strode into Ranhold, threatening palace workers and guards until they told me I could find the dewdrops supply.

Then I rotted it all.

The new king of Ranhold isn't much to look at, not that I got a very good look. He cowered behind a wall of guards in the entry hall when I stormed through, his round face gone pale with fear, blue eyes watery with the terror of tears, blond hair crumpled on one side like he'd been jerked from bed and was on his way to flee when I burst inside.

He was probably terrified I was there to kill him because of his presence at the Conflux. But I have no quarrel with him. He's just a puppet who was placed in a kingdom he has no business ruling. A convenient mouthpiece for Kaila to use.

No, my grievance is with the dew.

I don't know when exactly Auren was drugged, but Digby told me he could help me as have my Wrath, filling in the gaps between Auren's words. And that

what it feels like I'm doing—filling in the gaps. Filling in every dark r that polluted her life.

I promised her I'd be the villain on her behalf.

So that's what I'll fucking be.

Fifth Kingdom supplies all the dewdrops in Orea. The late King Ful quite the operation, farther reaching than I'd realized. But now, those p will be hard-pressed to grow back since I rotted the entire lot of them, including the seeds.

Thanks to a very talkative worker down in the grow rooms, a stick o man with more white caps on his face than Highbell's mountains, and nasally voice. He informed me they'd just sent off a caravan full of the drugging petals to be sold. The last and only shipment currently in tran

Now, I'm flying over the Barrens, following it. It's heading for Brea Port, and I've half a mind to see which kingdom it's going to. But that thought goes out the window when I suddenly see a Red Raids ship ha ass toward it, appearing out of the frosty fog of the flat landscape like a specter seeping through the veil.

I drop down lower, watching as the snow pirates easily cut off the ca Fire claws take up the front of the ship, making the horses panic, the ca tipping over in an icy skid.

on't

le right  
e where

Red Raids pour out of the ship, easily overtaking the drivers, and wi minutes, the caravan is stripped of its wares. The pirates haul all the gc onto their ship, leaving the drivers with nothing but their empty carts a spooked horses.

good  
ned  
wet  
rom

So the Red Raids now have a hull full of dew? How convenient for Wicked anticipation fills me.

I keep above them, watching the line of fire claws as they run. The b are reined to the ship while their fiery paws easily maneuver through tl slick, icy landscape, covering ground with impressive speed.

ence at  
as  
ce for

The ship's polished white boards shine like mirrored glass as it glide down the Barrens like it's cutting through water. And then, through fog packed snow, the landscape gives way to a cove.

A hidden *pirate's* cove.

nough,  
t's

What the Raids don't know is that I've been aware of its location fo some time. Judd told me long ago, when I first approached him about j my army. Now, I can put the information to good use.

ecess      Their secret hideaway is right here, hiding in plain sight. A huge edge of frozen land just past the Barrens, tucked away and easily missed by the casual observer, but obvious if you know where to look.

ke ran      The bay is small and sheltered, led from a skinny inlet that feeds out the broad, glacial sea beyond. It hides the bay from view, but the most valuable part of the cove itself is the convex arch that stretches over the beach. The arch is tall and wide enough for the land ship to stop beneath, hidden from both water and sky. There, the Raids unload their stolen goods, either moving the supplies to the other caves further in or hauling them directly onto their sea ships anchored past the shore.

of a      There are three sea ships nestled inside the inlet right now, their sails white as the snow cliffs shielding them. They bob in the cerulean water right alongside chunks of ice. Not a single one carries the sigil of a kingdom, but instead, red strips are sewn into the top of their highest sails. Each ship is large and well maintained, in better condition than most of the kingdoms' naval fleets.

a      Piracy must be thriving.  
aravan.      Too bad they spend their time stealing from others and generally being pieces of shit.

arts      The Red Raids are notorious throughout Orea. While they take advantage of the landscape here in the north by using their unique land ships in the Barrens, their sea fleet terrorizes the oceans and ports throughout every kingdom.

nd      Except mine.  
me.      Fourth Kingdom has done dealings with the pirates. Weapons, mostly since I'm always supplying my army, and they're smart enough not to do deals with me. So I've largely let them be. Until now. They've been on my mind since I found Auren, so the fact they stole the dew works out quite well for me.

es      Breakwater Port is only a few miles up the shore—laughably close to the cove. Breakwater is where all the major trade happens for Fifth and Sixth kingdoms. It feeds into the upper sea, where the rest of the kingdoms' ships come to trade with the colder kingdoms. And despite how many naval ships are sent to try to protect the goods coming in and out, this is the port most often attacked by the Reds.

Convenient. They can stalk the port up the shore and then nip down the inlet with their pilfered goods and tuck into their beachside bolt-hole.

ge of        I yank on the reins, ignoring the throb in my chest that pulses with p  
e            It's been intense for hours, but finally lessening into a dull ache.

              Below, I watch the fire claws pull the ship toward the arch, steps str  
: into        now that they're off the slick ground of the icy Barrens, while whips c  
              down from the bow of the ship. When the ship disappears beneath the  
e            arch, I have Crest circle overhead. I wait in the clouds, biding my time  
th,          landing only after the sun has dipped and taken the temperature with it  
oods,        I let my Rip side take over, let the spikes pierce through.

1            Time to see if the Raids bleed as red as their masks.

              Crest lands past the bend where the salt of the ocean water has ruptu  
s as        shoreline rocks, denting them with time and force. I see the land ship t  
rs,          beneath the arch like a gaping mouth, only two pirates there still, easin  
gdom,        crates and barrels to stow into their hideaway.

sea          All the fire claws have been detached from their reins, and I pass by  
              separate cavern, its opening barred with a crude iron gate. As I walk pa  
              white felines growl and snap, glowing yellowish eyes watching me lik  
they're waiting for an opportunity to devour.

ing          They're huge, spanning perhaps ten feet tall, with long fangs hangin  
              their upper jaws that can easily scrape and shovel past snow and ice to  
ntage        prey that burrows beneath the blanket of white. The ones pacing at the  
ie          have flames licking around their paws, burning red and singeing the m  
y          floor, the fire hissing just as much as the cats themselves.

              I pass them by, the glow of their paws fading as I make my way arou  
their cavern. Further up is the main beach of the cove. The pirates' sea  
ly,          juts out like the curve of a bird's sharp beak pecking at the tide. There'  
fuck        little strip of land perfect for the skiffs to dock, the empty little boats b  
ist          up against the slice of snow.

l for        Right now, the water has lost its vibrant blue and instead looks like  
              someone dumped a bottle of ink into it, turning it as black as the night  
o this        The floating pieces of glaciers practically glow white against it.

xth          It reminds me of another moment—another arctic shore not far from  
ships        Where Auren and I stood on a beach and watched a mourning moon. V  
ships        she first started to see me but was still too blind to see herself.

lost          Even then, I saw her.

this        I could feel her strength, her brightness brimming beneath her surfac  
              waiting to come out. It didn't matter that the world constantly tried to s  
out her gleam.

ain. She shone anyway.

ained up the sky and making the sailless ship glow. It called me like a beacon  
rack fate itself was showing me the way. Reminding me for the first time in  
snowy long that I wasn't just torn in half and uprooted—but that I was also fa  
, Just like her.

. Then Ever since, she has been my light. For someone with a soul as black  
mine, who's done the darkest deeds and has the foulest power, her glow  
something I will not give up. Without her, I am darkness and death, an  
ired is what I will be until I get her back.

ucked And if I don't, then that is what will consume me. As surely as this p  
g out that's creeping from my chest and threatening to implode. Because the  
fae inside of me is bleeding out.

their My feet crunch in the snow as I go down the throat of the beak, mak  
ast, the way to the frostbitten bank inside the sea's hidden cave. The shallow v  
e beneath the hollowed space licks its way up the mouth of the cavern be  
ending around rocks and a crust of snow peppered around the ground l  
g from scruffy beard.

get to Iron torches nailed to the rock wall burn erratic flames, battered by t  
gate coughing breeze brought in from the sea. I can hear voices echoing pas  
elted frost-tipped boulders, see more wavering firelight within.

und I walk up into the belly of their hideaway, intruding on their festivity  
cave There are about fifty men tucked in around the bonfire, though probabl  
cave within the dark recesses where I can't see.

's a Most of them have taken off the red face coverings they always wea  
obbing during their plight of pillage. The cloths hang down by their necks, or  
tucked into their front pockets, or shoved up in their hair like bandanas  
red fabric is worn like a warning, meant to incite fear. To alert of blood  
sky. spilled.

I can tell they're all deep into the bottle, passing several around, a cr  
i here. henade cracked open. There are spits of skewered fish roasting over th  
Where and women and men who appear to be saddles are dangled over the lap  
the snow pirates in various states of undress.

When the first Red Raid spots me, shouts echo throughout the cave.  
ce, just there's scrambling and swearing, a sudden tension spewing out like vo  
snuff Acrid expressions fill the cave as they take me in, swords threatening t

as they rush to their feet, drunken swaying as they try to gain their fighting postures.

n. As if One of them takes me in, eyes widening before he pushes forward.

. so “Commander Rip?”

e. As soon as he says the name, unease heaves through the cave, filling hollow gut.

as “Were you on the ship that attacked Midas’s envoy?” I ask.

w is He hesitates, caught off guard by my question. “Aye. Afore you can  
d that and bought ’em all off us.”

gain “Hmm.” I look around at all the men. “That shipment of dew you ju  
picked up—I want it.”

feral I watch as confusion, surprise, and then wariness filter through the f  
ing my The man who first spoke up itches at the gold hoop caught through his  
earlobe. The bottoms of his pants are rolled, scuffed boots stuck with s  
water and his sword is tucked through the loop of his belt. He looks every bit  
efore loafing pirate, right down to the red face mask hanging at his collar.

ike a “Didn’t know your King Rot had any need for the stuff,” the man sa  
ignorant of the fact that he’s speaking to the king right now. “It don’t u  
he head that way.”

st the “We already got a buyer,” someone else calls behind him. “It’s been  
for.”

ies. “Where is it going?”

ly more “Don’t tell him,” someone says at the back.

r Hoop Ear shrugs at me and rests his hand on the hilt of his sword. “I  
need-to-know,” he says with a smirk.

are “Well, all *you* need to know is that if you don’t tell me where that de  
is. The will kill you and every pirate in this cave,” I say blandly, as if I didn’t  
d to be threaten their lives. As if it weren’t fifty to one.

ate of Truth be told, I hope all fifty of them rush me. My skin is stretched,  
chest gnawing, ribs like fanged teeth ready to devour, to fill the empty  
e fire, my soul.

os of If the tension was tight before, it’s pulled so rigid now that it feels li  
taut rope ready to snap.

Then “Tell me where the dew is.”

mit. It’s a testament to my reputation that they consider it. I see it in som  
o hurl their faces—they want to throw the dew at me and run far, far away. T  
the smarter ones.

iting But not all pirates are smart.

“Oh, fuck off, Commander,” Hoop Ear says. “You got no authority. Your king wants the drug because he can’t get laid without it, that’s his problem. He’ll have to put in an order with the Reds like everybody else.”

g up its “There won’t be any more orders,” I say. “You won’t be stealing or distributing dew anywhere else throughout Orea ever again.”

re in Several of them laugh and look at each other in camaraderie. “Listen to this? What kinda shit he spewin’?”

st “Dew’s the fastest selling goods we got. We can’t get enough of it because it’s already gone. You think the Reds would stop that?” Hoop says with a mocking laugh.

aces. “You’re going to have to, because it’s gone.”

More laughter. They don’t believe me, but that’s fine.

now, Monsters never need anybody to believe in them. They come out to meet you regardless.

t the One shifty-eyed pirate is wise enough to be wary. “Reds...maybe we should—”

ys, They cut him off.

usually “Your king send just you?”

paid “Nah, he probably got his whole army out there.”

“I don’t think so. I think the commander here is alone.”

“I am,” I confirm, and I can see they’re shocked.

The pirates share a look.

it’s Hoop shrugs. “’Fraid we can’t oblige you, Commander. Best go tell your king that.”

ew is, I “Pity you’re making that choice,” I tell him. “But I have one other question—the quartermaster who used to serve under Captain Fane. Where is he?”

just He jerks his chin up. “Goes by Captain Quarter now. Took over Fane’s ship. He’s up in Breakwater.”

my “Appreciate it,” I say conversationally. Then I palm the dagger from my waist, sending it flying through the air, where it lands between the pirates’ eyes with a sickening *snick*.

pit in Shock consumes the cave, everyone watching as he collapses on the ground, dead before his body settles.

ke a “*What the fuck?*”

e of I shrug. “I did warn you.”

hey’re

Half a dozen of them start running at me. The saddles scream and here. If disappear deeper into the cavern. A sadistic rush of satisfaction fills me as the men attack, feeding the ferocity that's been shoving beneath my skin. "I have no sword, so I'll use my spikes instead."

The first man reaches me with his blade raised, though his feet are c from drink. I punch him in the bicep, making his sword arm go flingin, ain' to giving me the opening to stab him in the chest with the spikes on my fi They stretch up to full length and pierce the man between the ribs, his efore lifeblood dribbling down through my sleeve.

I shove him off, just as three more surround me, but I kick out the ki one, punch the gut of another, and the third trips over the man I stabbe yank his sword from his flailing hand and drive it into his side, letting spew out while he releases a scream that echoes through the cave.

The one whose knees took a hit can't get up, but the other man gets as the last two join him in surrounding me. Their trio of swords point a head as they circle, the firelight glinting off the thick steel.

I grin with feral thrill.

They all launch themselves at me at the same time, but I'm faster. I and the two across from each other swing, blades meeting in a loud cla With their swords engaged, I hurl my bent body toward the third man, catching him in the stomach and tossing him on his ass, making him le grunt.

I feel the other two come up behind me, the back of my neck prickli your with the intuition gained from years of fighting battles and my ingraine senses. The men are ready to run me through, so I kick out my leg, sen uestionone sprawling.

"The last man makes the fatal mistake of raising his sword over his h he sprints toward me, leaving his chest completely open. I ram my sho e's back, the spikes along my spine stabbing into him from throat to groin

His scream turns into a gurgle.

I feel his last surprised breath against my ear as his sword drops and hilt crashes into my chest, right where the pain flares the most. I let ou furious growl and then shove him away, retracting my spikes and lettir fall to the ground in a bloody, groaning heap.

No one else attacks me, and the ones still alive stay down. Everyone who just witnessed my violence watches me warily. Finally showing tl they should.



My chest thrums with pain, my adrenaline thumping in my ears as n e as the forms war with each other. My Rip form wants to fight, slaking more t for violence and quenching it with their blood. The other side of me is writhing, rot pulsing, agony knocking against my chest. I shove it away lumsy Shove it down. g back, “Are we done with that, then?” I ask mockingly. “I’d hoped for mor oream.fight.”

No one says anything, leaving the cave quiet, save for the wind brus through the torch fire like flapping wings, and the tide sloshing up the nees of bank. That, and the gurgling of the soon to be dead man behind me.

d. I “You.” I point at the pirate who tried to speak up before. He blanch blood being called out and starts shaking like a leaf, scratching at sores along hands. He’s gangly, with yellowed teeth and a sprout of coarse hair jut bolder from his pocked chin. “What’s your name?”

it my “Scab, sir.”

“Unfortunate.”

He shrugs, red staining his cheeks that matches the cloth shoved dov duck, around his collar.

ng. “What happened here?”

His eyes go shifty again. “Uhh, happened, Commander?”

t out a “When people ask you, what are you going to say occurred in this co clarify.

ng “Oh, yeah. I don’t say nothin’.” He pauses, gauging my reaction, the ed fae quickly amends. “I mean...I tell ’em that you don’t fuck with Commar ding Rip, that’s what I say. I tell ’em that we don’t sell dew no more...right

“That’s better.”

ead as He pops out a relieved breath.

uldres “Now, those men and women who ran—are they saddles?” I ask.

. I watch his throat bob, protruding out like an apple you could pluck tree. “Y-yes.”

the “Did you steal them? Take them by force?”

t a His eyes drop to the ground, and the other pirates don’t answer, whi ig him answer enough in itself.

! else “You’re going to take those saddles on one of those ships and return to their homes, and you will not touch them. Is that clear?”

ne fear “Course, Commander. Whatever you say.”

I nod. “How long have you been a Red Raid, Scab?”

ay two      “Took the cloth twenty years ago, Commander.”  
hirst      “Congratulations. You just got promoted to captain.” I glance at the  
            “Anyone have a problem with that?”  
y.          They don’t say a word.  
            I look back to Scab. “If I find out you’re stealing anymore people, I’  
e of a      come back and make sure you join these men here,” I threaten, gesturi  
            the dead ones behind me. “Am I clear, *Captain?*”  
hing      Scab nods so hard I hear his neck crack. “Sea-clear, Commander.”  
snowy      “Good. Now, where’s the dew?”  
            “Didn’t unload it yet,” he admits quickly. “Still hitched up in the sn  
s at      ship.”  
; his      Good. I’ll rot it through on my way out.  
ting      “Who were you going to sell to?”  
            He hesitates.  
            “*Scab.*”  
            “It was Second Kingdom,” he blurts.  
vn         Looks like Judd will get to have a visit there after all.  
            “*And the one who calls himself Captain Quarter. Is he truly in*  
            *Breakwater?*”  
            Scab looks to the others and shrugs. “I dunno. I s’pose. That’s where  
ove?” I usually is when he’s not doin’ a run. He’s got friends at the Orb who le  
stay and don’t tell no one he’s a Red.”  
en         That narrows it down to where I’ll need to look.  
ider      “Don’t make me regret letting you live,” I warn him. “Do what I sai  
?”         the saddles.” I pause. “And treat those fire claws with some fucking re  
            “Course, Commander. Thank you, Commander.” He presses his sca  
hands together in front of him like he’s getting ready to say a prayer. “  
on it. You can count on us, right, Reds?”  
from a     They quickly give their muttered agreement, while another pirate sa  
            “The Red Raids are always happy to have a friendship with Fourth Kir  
Tell your Rot king we’s bein’ real amenable-like.”  
ch is      I hold back a snort. “Of course.”  
            Turning, I start to head back to Crest. It’s time to pay *Captain Quar*  
i them     visit.

others.

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ng to

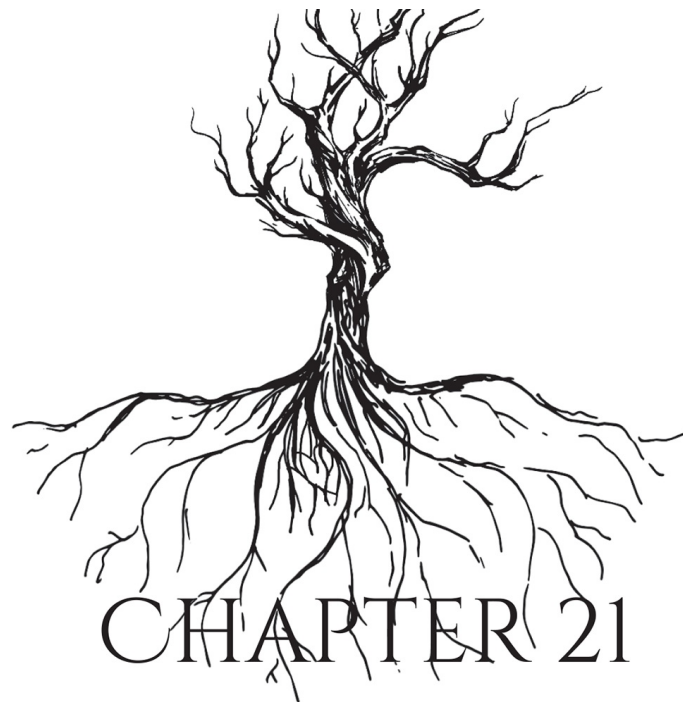
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## SLADE

**B**reakwater Port is a wakeful hub. The short days and everlasting means that nothing stops once the sun sets or a storm comes, but they're used to working through it. Activity continues to churn despite the worst conditions.

On the water itself, I can see skiffs full of boys and girls who are earning a few coins by rowing around in the dark slush, stabbing at the water with spears to break up any ice that tries to form near the ships.

As I pass in the sky overhead, I see ships moored with precision along the steel dock, sailors emptying out their hulls and rolling crates to the harbor. Their faces are caught in the torchlight that blazes every couple of feet. The wheels ring along the metal pier. At the shore, boulders sprout up, growing from the icy ground like clumps of weeds and lapped at from the lick of the tide.

I count at least three dozen people walking up and down the slight incline that leads from water to land, most of them heading for the seaside street lined with the buildings that line it. The largest ones are the packing houses, where most of the people who live here work. They do the endless job of stuffing goods

to send off or opening up the shipments to check them before turning t  
over.

With one last pass overhead, I eye the inns and pubs and the many f  
slop shops. No part of the arctic fish is wasted here. Every catch is cho  
up into stews or fried whole, head and all, a constant supply of food fo  
port, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Now that I have my bearings, I fly back to an empty part of the beac  
leave Crest behind some boulders where he starts nosing around in the  
As I walk toward the harbor city, the busy crowd doesn't notice me. I'  
another body in the dark. Fortunately, I find the *Orb* building that Scat  
mentioned rather easily. Orb Arch, to be exact. It isn't difficult to find,  
because its name is literal.

It's a large stone building with no windows, its roof covered in a thi  
layer of snow, and just in front of its bricked face is an archway made  
polished orbs of all different sizes, the gray and black spheres covered  
layer of frost. Icicles drip down the top where they arc overhead, point  
down accusingly at all those who pass beneath to enter the front door.

As soon as I step inside, I realize it's not a saddle house or a pub lik  
guessed, but a gambling hall. Though I shouldn't be surprised that a pi  
spends his nights here.

g cold  
ecause

The low-ceilinged room reeks of alcohol and smoke. Paneled wood  
hold in the cluster of people who are gathered around smoky card table  
There are stacks of coins piled at bent elbows as they hunch over their  
and pints, leaning in, lured by the possibility of winning. At the back, t  
a long counter where a barkeep flings out drinks, and in the middle of  
room, there are two saddles performing.

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th their

ng the  
bor.

, while

the

They're both on a swing that hangs suspended from the ceiling, the  
plush sling looking like it's made from bear fur. The man sits on it, sw  
them both, while the woman stands. She has one foot on his thigh, the  
split up into the air, curved around the rope as she dances to the music  
coming from the drunk bard propped up in the corner.

cline

et and

re most

oods

I scan the room, but having only seen Quarter briefly, and with the r  
cloth covering most of his face, I don't know what he looks like.

And I don't have the fucking patience to sniff him out.

So instead, I walk over to the gambling table nearest the door, where  
game appears to be in full swing. I wrench up the dealer by his collar, I  
him jerk in surprise as I spin him to face me. "I'm looking for a Red R

hem        Everyone at his table jumps to their feet while he flails, trying to kick  
at me on instinct. Yet when he gets a look at me, he goes still. I see his  
ish        flicking over the gray scales on my cheeks, the spikes on my arms, and  
pped       nervous tic appears in his jaw. “Commander Rip?”

r the        The rest of the gambling hall goes quiet. The last sound is the squeak  
rope of the swing as the saddles slow it to a stop.

h and       “The Red Raid who took over Captain Fane’s ship. Where is he?”

tide.        The dealer lets me hang him there by his neck and shakes his head. ‘  
m just       know anything about any pirates. Don’t welcome their lot here. This is  
o            respectable establishment.”

ck           I tighten the fabric around his neck until it’s biting into his windpipe  
up of       lifting him so high that only the toes of his shoes are touching the floor  
in a        starts grappling for purchase, trying to take the weight off. I hold him s  
ing        look around the room.

rate        I might not know who the owner is, but every dealer always knows t  
e I’d        and outs of what goes on in these places. If Quarter comes here, they’l  
rate        about it.

rate        “I’m not going to ask again. I want to know where the pirate is. Go e  
rate        Captain Quarter.”

walls       A dealer three tables over gets up, his chin and stare both pointed, w  
es.        a pair of suspenders cocked over his barrel chest. “We want no quarrel  
with  
bets        you, Commander. I’ll show you to the Red.”

here’s       “Good choice.”

the        I drop the other man, hearing his shoes slap against the floor as he re  
the        his footing, and I move fluidly through the room. Necks swivel, silence  
stares trailing me as I go. The dealer leads the way, past the perched sa  
wide,       past the rest of the gambling tables, past the bar.

inging       We go through an arched doorway, miniature orbs glossing the path  
other       then through a curtained-off corridor. At the very end of the dim hallw  
there’s a burly-looking man sitting against a door with a heavy pelt of  
fur hanging in front of it.

ed           He looks up at our approach, tearing his eyes away from a thick boo  
flicks his gaze from the dealer to me, recognition flaring.

              “Commander Rip came to see the pits,” the dealer says as we come  
e a cardstop.

making    The guard’s expression goes suspicious. “He got a vouch?”  
aid.”

“I’m his vouch,” the dealer assures him before digging in his pocket palming some coins to the guard.

Grudgingly, the man gets up from his seat and clunks his chair off to the side before pushing the pelt over so we can pass through. He watches me closely as I go in, right up until the dealer closes the door behind us.

Inside, the building opens up, far surpassing the size of the front garage hall. Instead of wood, these walls are made of thick stone, and the floor is packed-in dirt, while the ceiling rises up at least fifteen feet. Yet the size of the space is diminished by just how many people are present.

The pits, as the dealer called them, are exactly that. There’s one large pit dug into the center of the room, with several smaller ones scattered around the perimeter.

Fighting pits.

Violence explodes inside the lowered spaces. The crowds gathered around them are corralled off, standing behind wooden fences, steps raised up to allow them for more people to watch the fight below. The audience shouts, flinging money into the air in a burst of frenetic energy.

The hall’s workers drift around, wearing bright green belts where they shove their paper and quills, while pouches of collected coins are clasped to their hips. Other workers are carrying trays of drinks or bundles of dried leaves for people to stuff inside their smoking pipes, but the rest of the arena is packed with gamblers.

As I walk forward, I glance into the nearest dug-out pits. There are two men fighting each other in one, bare chested and bloody fisted. Another has three women fighting against one another using whips. A third has dog-eared mouths frothing, hackles raised. But the biggest pit in the center boasts the largest crowd, though it sits empty.

“The one who goes by Captain Quarter is there.” The dealer points.

I follow the direction of his finger, homing in on the person standing at the front, elbows leaning over the wooden fence that separates the audience from the fighters. He’s chatting up the people nearest him, gesturing to the sunken, empty arena below.

“Appreciated.”

The dealer nods but hesitates. “Always happy to help King Rot’s commander.”

“Good.”

and More hesitation. “Always happy for the commander to *also* help in return...”

to the I let out a sigh, but dig into my pocket and toss him a coin. He nabs the air, quick as a blink. “My gratitude,” he says with a smile before he and disappears back the way we came.

gnibling When he’s gone, I start making my way through the crowds, sidestepping those gathered. One great thing about my spikes? People learn to move their feet my fucking way.

the pit In no time at all, I get right next to Quarter against the fence. He’s talking away from me, still speaking, but when the people he’s talking to notice me, they quickly disperse, scurrying into the crowd and leaving him with his back cast over their shoulders at me.

around “What...” He turns around, and when he spots me standing so close behind him, he flinches and backs up a step.

isting His head comes up to my chin, and when his beady eyes reach my face, they go wide. “*Commander Rip?*”

ey “Captain Quarter.”

ed at He looks around, like he’s worried someone will hear me. “Go by Quarter here.”

ed “I don’t care if you go by Dickhead. You’ll answer to me.”

space He goes rigid, expression filling with anger.

wo And just because I’m in a fucking mood to rile him, I say, “I can see you turned pirate. You wanted to keep your ugly fucking face covered with the Reds’ mask,” I say, gaze flicking over him. “Good choice.”

er has His peeling lips press hard together, scarred cheeks stretching into a grimace.

is, “Fuck you,” he hisses.

the I smirk. That was entirely too easy. “Struck a nerve, did I?”

g right “Whadya want?” he asks, impatient now. “Fight’s about to start.”

udience “Funny thing. I was informed recently of a mistake.”

the He raises a bushy black brow. “Mistake?”

I nod. “I gave the Reds an entire chest of valuables during our last exchange. You were there.”

He frowns. “Aye...”

“You took me to inspect the horses I bought after your raid on Mida caravan, do you remember?”

“Yeah.”



“See, we have a problem,” I go on, leaning in closer, making it so my spikes nearly pierce into his gut. He tries not to flinch away, but his dark eyes reveal just how nervous he is by my proximity.

I recognize him now, from when I first boarded the Red Raid ship when Auren was taken. Even though I only saw the top half of his face, the way he darts his eyes, his reedy voice, they’re the same. I remember how he tried to keep Auren from me, and how fucking terrified she looked as she cowered in front of him. It makes me want to smash my fist in his face, but I hold back.

“It seems you made a mistake on the transfer. I was informed that I should get all the horses I paid for.”

His feet shift, but he puts on his best confused face. “What do you mean? I’m not interested in hearing him play dumb. “You cheated me out of the horses, Quarter.”

“No,” he says with an adamant shake of his head. He answers quickly, fucking quickly. If I hadn’t already known he was a liar, that alone would have given him away.

“Pirates are usually far better at deceit.”

“I ain’t lyin’!”

In one swift move, I yank him by the tuft of his greasy dark hair and slam his face into my bent knee. His nose cracks against the bone, but it happens so quickly that he doesn’t start howling until I wrench his head back up. Blood starts spraying out both nostrils.

He clutches his nose, shaking all over. “I’ll make you fuckin’ regret this.”

“Don’t make threats you’re not able to carry out,” I tell him calmly, tightening my grip on his hair.

“Wait!” he says through a wince, hands scrabbling at my hold. “Does it gotta be like this. You wanna make a bet?”

“Does it look like I came here to make a fucking bet?”

“I can help,” he rushes on. “I always know who’s gonna win.”

“I don’t give a fuck. I want the horses you cheated me out of. One in particular. And you’re going to tell me where I can find it.”

Cupping his palm to catch his dribbling blood, he says, “I didn’t cheat. I got out of no horses!”

I sigh. Then I punch him in the sternum so hard the breath knocks right out of him and seems to tumble at his feet where he can’t catch it. The people gathered around us don’t intervene. Why would they? They’re here to watch the fights. I don’t think they care whether it happens inside a pit or not.

ly            “I’m tiring of your lies,” I tell him as he clutches the fence, strugglin  
rting        straighten up. “Tell me where.”

              He spits at my boots, spraying his blood all over them. I cock an  
hen         unimpressed brow. “I stepped in shit on the way here, but your blood i  
way he     more disgusting.” I lift said boot and dig it into his own foot until he w  
ied to     “*The horse*, Quarter.”

ered in     When he doesn’t answer right away, I’ve run out of the last of my  
back.     patience. Not that I really had any to begin with.

didn’t     Ready to end it, I lift my arm, prepared to stab him right here and no  
              he finally relents. “Okay, okay!” he shouts, holding up both hands in fi  
ean?”     him to ward off the blow. “You doin’ all this over a fuckin’ *horse*?”

of some    Yeah, I am. Because Auren let slip that her horse was taken by the F  
              Crisp, she said its name was. They were supposed to give me everythin  
ly. *Too*    took that night, but Quarter skimmed off the top. By stealing from me,  
uld’ve     stole from her. And I won’t fucking tolerate that. She’s had enough tak  
from her.

              I glare at him and move my spikes closer.

              “Alright!” He swipes at the blood still leaking down to his mouth. “I  
l shove    few. Knew the ice pickers needed some new horses, and they were goo  
pens     stock. Got a good price for ’em.”

p and     “Where.” Not a question. A demand.

              “Berg Sheets. Not far from here. They supply the ice blocks to the si  
that!”    They needed horse haulers.”

as I       I lean in so he’s forced to look at my eyes, and fear flashes through l  
              “You’re going to go back to Berg Sheets. You’re going to get those ho  
asn’t     you stole, and you’re going to deliver them to Fourth Kingdom in perfe  
condition, or I’m going to tell my king and have him rot your asshole a  
shriveled your dick. Do you understand?”

              He swallows hard and gives a shaky nod. “Y-yeah.”

1          I press the spikes along my forearm into his chest. “You sure?”

              “Yes, yes!” he cries with a wince. “Lemme make it up to you—this  
at you    gonna have the biggest payout. I’ll tell you who’s gonna win.”

              “I’m not interested in placing bets on a swung fight.”

ght out    “Not swung,” he insists before jabbing a finger at his temple. He lov  
ple        voice to a mumbled whisper. “I just know. Any game, any bet. I can se  
watch    competitors and then know which way it’ll go.”

              My attention flicks over him. “Minor magic?”

ing to He nods but looks around to make sure no one else is paying attention. I wonder Captain Fane kept him around. This little trick must've paid off nicely for him.

s still “What does your magic tell you will happen if you try to cheat me again? Do you want to bet on the outcome of *that*?” I ask darkly.

Quarter swallows hard, his murky gaze filling with trepidation. I offer a cold smile.

ow, but promises. “All your horses will get to Fourth Kingdom. I’ll make sure of it,” he

ront of “You’d better.”

I step away and let go, removing the pressure on his foot while taking the raids—away the threat of my spikes.

ing they As soon as he feels better about our proximity, he lets out a breath. “I have to break my nose over a fuckin’ horse,” he grumbles.

en “You’re lucky that’s all I’m breaking.”

He’s *not* so lucky that I left some rot in his lung that will slowly sprout over time and kill him.

I kept a “Get to it,” I say with a jerk of my head.

ed The pirate gives me a dark look, but he turns and walks away. Quick Good riddance.

Suddenly, noise erupts around the pit, wrenching my attention. I look down, noticing that the spectators are riled up because the fighters are arriving. Below, there are barred enclosures at opposite ends of the fighting arena, and from within each cage, something comes up from the descent steps. Thick collars are around the necks of two large animals, and attached are stiff metal rods that handlers use to force them into the cages before the doors are slammed shut behind them.

The second I see what’s in there, what’s going to be fighting, anger ignites in my chest, hot and consuming. A fire claw is at one end of the pit, and a timberwing at the other.

fight’s Both animals appear to be absolutely savage.

They’re also absolutely *scarred*.

The fire claw is a female, and she has long lines of marks through her white fur. The scars crisscross all over her body, even on her tail and the whiskered face that make her snarling more pronounced.

The timberwing has signs of abuse too. There are dozens of missing feathers that appear as if someone yanked them out—or perhaps done

on. No own teeth from psychological trauma. Its maw is frothing, and at its an  
it clamp of metal with an empty hook attached to it, probably to chain it  
when it's not in the pit.

gain? When it turns its head to roar at the spectators next to me, I see the t  
streaks of white that curve down both sides of its bark-colored head. T  
er him is female too.

Handlers just on the other side of the caged enclosures remove the l  
e from the beasts. As soon as the fire claw is free, she turns and tries to a  
the handler through the bars, making the man fall back. The crowd eru  
hoots and laughter. The red-faced handler picks up a fire poker in retal  
ig its end blunted and red-hot. He slams the end of the pole into the cage,  
making the animal roar as the brand sears into her side.

'Didn't My spikes expand and shift, my skin stretching in anger.

Then the cage doors are raised, and the handlers shove the pokers at  
animals, forcing them out. The timberwing roars, her mouth wide open  
ead showcasing rows of razor-sharp teeth. The fire claw jumps out of her c  
enclosure, then immediately spins, going for her handler again. But the  
is behind his own protective pen, and he manages to leap back before t  
dly. beast's teeth clamp around the bars.

When the feline realizes she won't be able to get to the man, she tur  
k growl at the shouting crowd instead, baring long curved fangs that han  
finally below her bottom jaw. The timberwing too is pacing, snarling at the  
hting spectators above, feathers lifting, while dozens of people shout down a  
nding

For a moment, I wonder why the timberwing doesn't just simply fly  
ched attack, but then the answer is obvious—her wings have been cruelly cl  
e the

My teeth grind.

The handlers jab at both animals with the fire pokers again, trying to  
flares them forward, to get them mad enough to take it out on the other beast  
d a surprisingly, even though they're trapped in this enclosure together, th  
don't go at each other.

This pisses the crowd off, which pisses the hall off, which pisses the  
handlers off.

er thick A group of men come onto the other side of the fence, and together,  
fling in a dead mountain goat, the carcass landing in the middle of the

And the beasts go *berserk*.

Both animals launch at the carcass, and only then do they move tow  
by its each other with aggression. Which tells me they're not just held captiv

ikle is abeaten—they're also starved, forced to fight for their food.

up            They start to descend on the carcass viciously. The fire claw snarls, swiping a fiery paw at the timberwing. The bird beast roars in response, wings outstretched as they both try to fall onto the fresh meat. Saliva dells tale his one from their mouths as they clash together with talons and teeth, and the cheers with sickening excitement.

eads            The fire claw swipes furious, flaming claws, making the scent of burnt attack feathers and flesh fill the air. The timberwing growls in response, snaps into wick teeth, trying to take a bite out of her. Neither of them is willing to give up the food, but they aren't going in for one another's throats, either.

                 Apparently, the handlers don't take too kindly to this, because one of them comes up and stabs the fire poker right into the timberwing's side—an *laughs*.

both            I've seen enough.

1,              With one hand on the top railing, I launch myself up and over the fence, landing fluidly inside the pit several feet below. The balls of my feet take impact, and I look up as I straighten my legs, just as the fire claw whirls its own handler again, snapping its huge teeth. The coward backs up, turning away for the beast to reach.

ns to            So I help her.

g well           I'm at the cage in a second, and I yank the pins out of the hinges and pull the door clean away. The man inside doesn't even have time to try to fight them off. I reach in and grab him by the scruff of his neck and then toss him up and into the pit, fire poker and all.

ipped.           There's no hesitation or need for encouragement. The fire claw attacks him. The man screams, the crowd shouts, and I turn my back, striding forward to urge the timberwing next.

. But            She's fallen onto the goat's carcass, tearing into it. When I get close, she jerks her head up and starts to roar but abruptly cuts off when she sees me. I keep going until I reach the small pen where her own handler is cowering, and my body pulses with fae strength, fueled by pure anger as I tear the timberwing right off its hinges and toss it behind me. The man inside is now exposed; he gapes at me, his back stuffed into the corner.

pit.              “*What are you doing?*” he screams.

ard              I reach in and yank the fire poker from his grip and then stab the scabbard metal into his stomach. He falls, howling in pain, steam rising off him, and

coal. I toss the poker down to the ground while he clutches his stomach  
“Doesn’t feel good, does it?”

3, I turn away and re-enter the main pit, only to find that several men in  
rips protective leather vests have jumped in and are heading for me, a coup  
crowd them armed with spears. Must be guards that work for the hall. They  
probably only usually have to deal with crowd control and the occasional  
rnt violent drunk who gets pissed off at a lost bet. They haven’t had to dea  
ping someone like me before.

; to “You should turn around and leave,” I warn as they approach with th  
er. fists and lumped scowls.

of them “You’re coming with us,” the one in the front says, and then he mov  
d tackle me.

But I move faster.

One hit against his temple is all it takes for him to go down. Then th  
nce, men with spears rush at me, but I reach out and snatch the weapons cle  
ike the from their hands with laughable ease. Gripping both, I snap the spears  
ls on over my knee before tossing them away. The men falter for a split seco  
oo far but fueled by anger, they leap for me once more.

I ignore my stinging knuckles and knock the first one off his feet wh  
ramming my shoulder into the other. He flips in the air like he weighs  
l tear nothing and lands on his back, gasping for air. A third comes at me wit  
ight punches already flying, and I grin when one actually manages to graze  
him cheek. The taste of blood invigorates me even more.

I start pummeling him, jabbing at his face, his ribs, his stomach, whi  
cks shouts raise up around me, feeding into my furor, but he goes down en  
toward too fast for my liking.

The last three rush me all at once, jumping over their fallen comrade  
r, she get to me, and I meet them with wicked elation. I revel in the fight, in t  
me. I fucking beauty of fist on fist, flesh against flesh. No swords, no magic,  
ing, good old-fashioned violence.

e gate Every hit I give and every strike I take is a release. A *need*. I started  
ed, and the Raids, but now I’m truly able to let loose this messy, twisted turmo  
felt every fucking day since Auren left. So all my pent-up emotion, all  
churning guilt explodes out of me in a relief of unleashed violence.

lding I fight them, but I’m actually fighting *myself*. My failure.

like I’m not even here, in this pit. What exists in me is the uncontrollable  
and fear that’s been grating down my ribs, leaving behind coiled shard

1. helplessness beats out of me through my fists, pulsating up my spikes, seething down my veins as I throw myself completely into the brawl.

n I purposely slow, just so they can land a hit. Again. Again. *Again*.

le of And I relish in the punishment.

I enjoy that more men jump into the fight. Laugh when a good dozen of them fling themselves at me. My shoulder is rammed, my ribs are pumped, my jaw is cuffed. Someone kicks out at my kneecap, and I feel it slide sideways, pain ratcheting down my leg, but it's nothing, *nothing* compared to the pain in my chest, so what does it matter? The thrill of this rampage, a bandage over a gaping wound that can't heal, and I've become nothing but a corpse in the fight.

Nothing but violence.

Because I can't get to her. My raw power that let me tear into the world is gone. The rip in Drollard is gone. All the villagers are gone. My mother is gone.

in half *Auren* is fucking gone.

and, And I can't get to her.

Can't get to her.

while Can't.

So I fight. I bleed and I lash out in insurmountable, savage grief, like trying to fight my way to her, fight my way through this world, fight me for failing her. All the silent, seething, suffocating panic comes crashing through a raw clash of brutality.

I'm so caught up in my own head that I don't notice the person with the blade aiming for my chest. But the pile of men fighting me move out of the way for him, and by the time I realize it, he's already thrusting down.

The blade would have sunk in if it weren't for the timberwing that suddenly appears behind him. The beast looms over him, a good five feet taller, her golden eyes flashing angrily, clipped wings spread. Then she opens her mouth, baring those sharp teeth, and clamps down on the man's head, tearing it from his shoulders and tossing his body aside, spouting blood and gore before he can even finish his swing.

The other dozen men whirl around at the new threat, but they can't even cry out before it's too late. The fire claw is there, knocking into them from behind with a swipe of her paws. Blood pours from the scratch marks she makes through their flesh, and flames catch on to their clothes, burning them, melting the hair right off their heads as they run.

I heave, and my senses trickle back in. I realize really fucking quick how many hits I actually took, because the pain ripples over me like it's catching up, marking every hurt spot. Awareness trickles back in too, expanding outside of my need to fight and bringing back the rest of the

n of The spectators are shouting in a crazed frenzy. People are leaning over the fence, placing new bets, watching the slaughter with glee. The volume of the crowd bulges, and it feels like my eardrums might burst.

ared to And all of it infuriates me.

is just They're cheering for blood, relishing in the slaughter, supporting the exploitation of these animals all to get a rush from the gamble with a chance to line their pockets.

I want to make them pay.

orld is Glaring up at them, I transform, spikes sinking back into my skin.

er is Withered black veins crawl down my arms and ooze across my neck, and I clench my hands at my sides, shoving power out.

Within seconds, my magic slithers up from the ground, crawling up the pit's walls and disintegrating the fence. I don't care if anyone saw me transform from Rip to Rot. The call to kill and punish is too strong.

I hear the people above me shout in fear now instead of excitement. e I'm men fall screaming into the pit when the barrier collapses in front of them. myself They flail on their descent, arms flapping like wind-whipped banners until they hit the dirt with a *thwack*.

I watch in brutal satisfaction as the animals fall upon them with the unrestrained viciousness. Yanked off limbs go flying into the air, and blood pours into the ground in brutal slashes. Within seconds, they've torn them apart. Just like everyone else who entered the pit.

I look around for anyone else I can destroy, but the beasts have well and truly finished the job. There are piles of bodies twitching, gore seeping out and opening the dirt. The ground is scorched with ash, pieces of flung limbs burning, and the swi

l and It's impressive.

I enter the now empty safety pen, crouching down into its short enclosure, my fingers wrapping around the iron bars. Rot spreads through it instantly, and I lean away before kicking in the whole door. Inside, there's a dirt path swiped stained with animal piss that leads down beneath the pit. I descend the stairs to see what's going on underneath this fucking gambling hall.



ly just I find myself in a wide-open underground room clad with iron beam  
's stone walls. Inside are dozens of cages, with shredded cloths clustered  
corners, empty bowls that held either water or food. They each have dr  
e pit. set into the floor to rinse away piss and blood.

ver the The stench in here is fucking *awful*.

of the Some of the cages are empty, but several are occupied. The dogs tha  
fighting earlier are inside two of them, licking their wounds. There are  
wild mountain cats in another, and hissing snow serpents in the next or  
e over, their scales stark white and their eyes blood red. A wolf. Two fox  
hance boar. Clumped together roosters. Some sort of monkey that must have  
from First Kingdom. All of them looking feral and coiled, ready to stri  
their frenzied need to get out.

nd I Rot spreads through every cage, following my steps as I walk. The r  
bars start to disintegrate, and the animals all sit up, snarling, watching,  
senses on high alert.

the When I get to the very end of the room and reach a set of double doo  
place my hands in the middle and shove them both open with a bang.

Three into nothing but rusted powder.

em. When the animals realize they're no longer trapped, they start growl  
until and baying, yelling and hissing. Every single one of them races toward  
exit, rushing past me to escape, instantly taking off in all different dire  
once they're through the doors.

lood The outside gives way to a copse of skinny pine trees on the blistere  
ie men their full tips glowing beneath the night sky. The animals race past,  
disappearing into the snowy landscape as fast as their bodies can take t

and I walk out, but at a noise behind me, I step aside just as the timberw  
; into the fire claw come prowling outside. The feline sniffs at the ground  
g from tentatively and then stalks into the puffy snow. Her feet steam from the  
contact, her fiery claws sparking and hissing as they sink beneath the p  
white. She lets out a sigh like the snow soothes her burning paws, and  
osure, wonder just how long it's been since she's been outside. It's clear that  
ntly, beast, with her icy eyes and white hair, belongs in the snow and the co  
path This is her dominion.

tunnel The timberwing stands just behind the feline, her broad chest puffed  
and wings stretching out as if to test the fresh breeze. I don't know if s

s and ever be able to fly again, but the expression on her face looks happy to  
into in the free air once more.

ains I rot the collars off their necks, and the corroded metal falls to the ground.  
Then I do the same to the heavy anklet at the timberwing's leg. She uses  
teeth to yank the cuff the rest of the way off before flinging it away. She  
it were looks down at me, blinking iridescent eyes, licking at the gore still stuck  
small her blood-stained teeth.

re At least she's been well fed.

ces. A She brushes her head against my arm before turning to leave. With a  
come rumble, the feline follows, her tail whipping at my leg as she passes.

ke with I cock my head, watching as the two female beasts venture out. Unlike  
rest of the animals, they don't bolt. They don't separate. Instead, both  
metal timberwing and fire claw begin to steadily and carefully walk away, neither  
their of them leaving the other's side. They prowl across the empty, frigid  
landscape together, snow cat and flightless bird. Free.

ors, I As I turn and leave behind the gambling hall, the last of the violence  
grate out of me, my injuries pulsing one after the other, wanting to make  
themselves known.

ing When I get back to Crest on the empty beach, he's helping himself to  
l the he must've plucked from the sea. The feathered beast looks up at my  
ctious approach, fish bones and innards hanging from his mouth. While he finishes  
swallowing it, I haul myself onto the saddle and grip the reins.

d hills, I glance down, staring at my bloodied knuckles where my fingers are  
wrapped around the leather strap. With a nudge of my heel, Crest lifts  
the air.

hem. My shoulders lower slightly, loosening from the ramrod tension as a  
ing and exhale purges from my depths. I scoop out the silence of my thoughts,  
settling in the absolute gravity of my devastation.

è I am one of the most powerful fae to ever exist, and yet, I feel utterly  
flush *powerless*.

I My list of retribution has now dwindled down to nothing. This list of  
this revenge is what's kept me focused. Kept me going. Kept me *breathing*

ld. The Merewen monarchs. Kaila and Manu. Derfort. Dew. Red Raids.

l up Everything has been crossed off, and now I have to come to terms with  
he'll fact that Auren is a world away, and I'm stuck here with no way to get

I'll have to return to Fourth Kingdom with a reality to face.

be out     The reality that I don't know how long I have until I go completely  
            from the soul-ripping separation from her. How long I have until this p  
ound.     my chest consumes me. How long until I'm able to reopen a rip...  
es her     Or if I even can.  
ie         How long.  
ck in     Until I can't keep going.

a low

like the

either

e drains

o a fish

nishes

e  
into

in

y

f

l.

.

with the  
to her.

The reality that I don't know how long I have until I go completely mad from the soul-ripping separation from her. How long I have until this pain in my chest consumes me. How long until I'm able to reopen a rip...

Or if I even can.

How long.

Until I can't keep going.



## CHAPTER 22

### QUEEN MALINA

**E**ven though the fae had a head start on us, an army travels much faster than two people. Especially when we travel through shadow. We keep the winding view of the marching regiments in our mind but stay far enough away that none of the fae detect us. For days, we travel relentlessly across the snow and rocks, passing the cracked, chasmed lands of the Seventh Kingdom. There used to be cities peppered throughout this kind of little villages that existed long ago. There's nothing anymore. Nothing but cold and time hasn't swallowed.

The assassin uses his magic to whisk us through the land. We seem to absorb into shadows in the distance, skipping from point to point. We travel with the light and shuffle around with the wind, always surrounded by a churning dark. It's disorienting and nauseating, and I'm not at all sure it works, but every day, we get further away from the bridge and the ruins of Cauval Castle, until we're finally out of Seventh Kingdom.

I feel dizzy and drained when we finally stop each night, but it's not so bad compared to the toll it seems to take on the assassin. We travel for hours until he collapses into exhaustion. With heavy limbs and his ever-present hood pulled over his head, he uses his bare hands to dig into the snow, creating a pocket of protection for us to huddle into and sleep.

I watch him now, buried beneath his layers of clothing, shivering in a mound of snow he's dug out like an animal's burrow. He seems to use

bent light and curling shadows to keep himself warm, though I don't know how that works either.

I don't need to.

The cold out here is nothing compared to the cold inside me. I don't My teeth don't chatter. Goose bumps don't trail up my arms. I lean against the snow inside our little dug den, and it doesn't bother me at all.

What *does* bother me is that the assassin won't speak.

The shadow-jumping is somehow both blaring and mute, sucking the sound from my ears and yet blasting me with raucous wind, so it would be near impossible to speak while we travel. Yet when we stop, before he collapses into sleep, he still doesn't say a word to me.

Just watches me. Day after day. Night after night.

I don't like it.

I don't...dislike it.

It's confusing and infuriating, and yet I stew in the silence he's fashioning and it's loud. Just like the blaring quiet of his magic.

slower

I've found that, in this loud silence, I'm forced to think. Forced to remember. To feel. To consider. Things that I can usually shove away and ignore. Things I can normally avoid.

sights,

travel

and of

kingdom,

that

I can't avoid them now.

I'm stuck in this contemplative inner study of myself, and I don't like it all. I don't like what I see. Perhaps the assassin doesn't either, and that's why he stares.

to

bend

the

how it

is of

*Why does that thought hurt?*

His silence is aggravating. I have all these words and irritants and emotions building up, and I feel like I might burst.

I don't want to come undone, stuck in this lonely quiet.

I steal a look at the assassin. We're close. *Very* close. If I was ever close next to someone this close at court, it would be considered a scandal. Not here, in the frigid nothing, social standards don't matter. Especially not when I'm forced to rest in a snow hole every night.

thing

is until

it's

done

ing a

Which is what we're doing now. After a restless sleep, we're sitting together in our snow divot that he dug out in the side of an incline. He's gotten quite good at it. Digging deep enough for us both to crawl in, and hollowing it out at an angle so the worst of the wind is kept out.

the

his

So our close bodies are huddled in.

now Both of us are eating jerky that's only not frozen stiff because he kept tucked against his chest in a pocket beneath his cloak. I push the food into my mouth and force myself to chew, but I can feel his stare, and after so many shivering days, I'm frazzled by it. I cough out a bite of the tough meat, nearly against as I force myself to swallow it down.

He makes a scoffing noise. It startles me, making my eyes flash up. It's the most I've heard from him in two days. I leap at the opening.

e "What?" I snipe. "I can't cough?"

d be He says nothing. Just stays caught under his hood, a scruffy five o'clock shadow now covering his chin and jaw.

"You know, you could have some manners."

He stays quiet, slouched against the wall of the miniature snow cave, head bent and arms crossed beneath his cloak.

"The jerky is dry."

ioned, Still nothing.

"*Anyone* would cough," I say defensively, still pricking at him.

"No. They wouldn't."

or I'm so surprised he actually replied that I just blink at him for several seconds. Until I realize he's arguing. Then I argue right back.

"Of course they would."

ce it at He clears his throat, the noise like shifting rocks. "You've never been here before, it's why you're hungry, or you'd be more thankful for that jerky you're choking on," he says quietly. "You've never had to go days without eating or had to plan ahead weeks in advance, worrying if you'd have enough food for the winter. You've never truly had to go without."

ought "I've been a *captive* in Seventh Kingdom, and before that I was traveling there in an open cart with a man I didn't know was a fae! Do you think he served up a five-course dinner every night? No! He gave me jerky too."

let out "You still got fed, didn't you?" he counters with a snide pull of his lips. "You didn't have to source your own food. You didn't go without. You're a spoiled brat. You don't know how to be grateful for that jerky in your mouth because you were born with your nose in the air."

's "You don't know me," I spit. "Don't presume to pretend otherwise."

"Oh, yes. Poor little queen. Born into royalty with every opportunity handed to her."

A humorless laugh rasps out of my throat. "*Opportunity*? That's what you think a magic-less woman gets when she's born from a royal line? The

eps it are a fool, assassin.”

into my “And you still see yourself as a victim, Queenie.”

many I glare. He glares back.

gging Actually, I prefer him not to speak after all.

“How much longer will it take until we reach Highbell?” I demand.

It’s the to be rid of his company—if one can even call it company. I’m sure I’ve never felt more alone.

“It takes as long as it takes,” he answers very unhelpfully.

lock “What does that mean?”

He hacks off a piece of jerky and chews it with his mouth open, then his head back as he downs a gulp of whatever he keeps in his flask. I try to watch the way his throat bobs, the dark skin at his throat tensing with hard swallow. I also try not to let it bother me that he’s deliberately taking such a long time to answer.

We’ve been circling around each other for days. Caught entirely too together and yet thoroughly distanced.

When he finishes, he lets the flask hang down from his hand where it dangles over his knee. “It means that I’m expending a lot of fucking energy keeping us hidden as we shadow-leap, and it’s not easy doing it at such great distances with you clinging to me the whole way.”

*Clinging to him?* As if I’m some foolish child yanking on a mother’s skirts? The nerve of this man.

ead “You’re the one who told me to keep hold of you,” I snap back.

“Maybe I regret it,” he says in a rumble. “Maybe I regret agreeing to you.”

eling I can’t explain the hurt that lands from his words. It shouldn’t matter, but he’s saying these things, and yet, it *does*. Little swoops of frozen clumps suddenly form in my palms, curdling from the unhealed slashes. I fist my hands tight, stiff fingers curling into the dollop of cold as I let my nails dig into my palms.

u’re a “Fine,” I bite out. “Leave, then. I’ll make my own way back to Highbell.”

hand, We both know I’d be lost or dead before I could make it past these mountains, but I stick to my words because this man makes me so *furious*.

’ He snorts. “And let you get out of warning Orea? I don’t think so. You’ve made a choice, and you’re going through with it whether you want to or not.”

My lip lifts in a sneer. “Is that right?”

at you *Who is he to think he can dictate what I do?*

in you He shoves away his flask and juts up his jaw. “Yes.”



“Or what?” I challenge.

Quick as a blink, he’s before me. Leaning into my space, body draped over my bent knees. My breath catches and my fists grab his cloak on instinct. I can try to push him away. But instead, I stay like this, clutching the tattered fabric in my cold palms, while his hot breath traces down my face. “You’d better make good on your word, Queenie, or I’ll finish what I started.”

I pause. The moment pauses too. Thickens in the air.

There’s a long, drawn out second where the two of us just stare at each other. But the longer we look, something between us seems to pull. To tighten.

From this close, I can see little shards glinting in his dark eyes, the pupils in his irises carrying light patches the same way his skin does. Flecks of colorless light, so tiny they’re almost nonexistent, nearly swallowed up by the black. It makes me want to keep looking to see what else I can find in his eyes.

But he’s studying me too. Gaze moving back and forth. Sliding over my forehead, cheek. Flicking down to my lips.

“Is that what you’d like? For me to *finish* you?” he asks, and my breath catches at the double-sided question.

His voice has dropped, and it suddenly sounds grittier. Hungrier. Maybe he’s just hungry to snap my neck or draw a blade against my throat.

Or maybe it’s something else he craves.

The thought makes my breath twist. It’s a dark thought. A forbidden thought.

Wicked insinuations snake down my spine. Snow slips through my fingers and lands on him in little clots. My stomach tightens, and I wonder whether the realm is wrong with me.

I brace both hands and shove him away.

He falls back against the wall while I scramble out of our tiny hollow, only to be instantly smacked sideways by the force of the wind as soon as I stand upright. I ignore the way my heart is racing. Ignore the shiver that travels down my neck when he spoke. I take a few long breaths until the heat is drained away and all I feel is the blissful, numbing cold again.

He comes out of the hollow, dusting off the snow from our burrow together. “You’re not.” crouching down.

“Let’s go,” I tell him impatiently.

He pauses at my demand, shoving snow into his water hide to look at me. “Anxious to be in my grip again?” he mocks.

The thought of being in his grip makes a flush dig through my frigid and over cheeks. It irritates me to no end. “Anxious to get to Highbell and be rid of me, like you.”

He laughs and straightens back up, showing off his tall height, and then he walks in my direction, passing by entirely too close. The man has issues with personal space.

“Maybe you’ll never be rid of me,” he says in my ear as he passes. “I’ll haunt you in the shadows for the rest of your life, and one day, when you least expect it, I’ll step out and finally slide my blade through your chest. It’s a threat.”

Again.

*And yet...*

I internally shout at my heart to stop pounding. I fight to quell the responses my body gives around him. The last thing I want to do is reveal just how much he affects me.

Because he *does* affect me, though I want to deny it.

I clear my throat and look away. “The fae are already on the move,” I gesture toward the winding parade of the army. I can see them marching the distance, on the other side of this sloped hill. “We’ve crossed into their territory, so the capital can’t be that far off.”

His face angles toward the direction the army is headed. “It’s not,” he confirms.

Worry and trepidation jump up my throat. I need to warn Highbell before they reach the city. “Then let’s go. The sooner we get there, the sooner we won’t have to deal with each other anymore,” I snap, but for some reason it rings like a lie.

He turns toward me, bright white teeth glinting in a mean smile. “I’ll be dealing with you just fine.”

My heart skitters. I want to yank it out of my chest and shake it.

“Stop trying to antagonize me,” I snap. “I’ve dealt with kings and politicians and nobles all my life. You think you’re intimidating? I’ve dealt with men far more treacherous and powerful than you.”

“Is that right?”

His reply is not a question, but a dare. He starts circling me like a shark in the water. I keep perfectly still, refusing to spin, because I don’t want to think I’m too afraid to give him my back.

It’s a mistake.

l When he's behind me, his hand shoots out and wraps around the back  
l of my neck. Palm to spine, he bends it, until my head is forced back, my  
hen looking up at his looming face. "What about now?" he murmurs, tone  
as with those more *treacherous and powerful men*?"

I swallow hard, and a wave of warmth fuses itself to my stomach. Still  
'Maybelower.

en you "Yes," I say shakily. But not from fear. Or, at least, not *just* from fear.  
st." Threat and thrill seem to have joined hands. Gripped hold of me.

His fingers dig into my skin so hard I know they'll leave a mark when  
releases me.

*If he releases me.*

With a jolt, I realize I don't *want* him to let go. I have to stop myself  
real reaching up and placing my hand over his, urging him to squeeze harder.

*What is wrong with me?*

"If that were the truth, then you wouldn't be trembling so much, Colonel  
I say, Queen," he says, his voice dragging down my neck and lodging in my  
ring in "After all, I'm no king or noble or politician."

Sixth "Just an assassin," I retort.

He grins, flashing his bright teeth at me, and then gives the barest scowl  
ie his scruffy jaw against the shell of my ear. "Yes. Just an assassin."

An assassin who handles me in a way no other man ever has—true  
efore *manhandling*. No one else would've ever dared to touch a queen this way  
we makes me feel powerless. Like I'm at his mercy. Takes away my control  
son, it

*So why do I like it?*

Why, when he continues to hold me in his strong grip, do I find myself  
ike wondering how many people have died from his hand? It's a rush, to be  
close to the edge of his danger. I should be flinging myself away, not leaning  
over the brink, wanting to see more.

But I keep leaning. Keep looking.

dealt Abruptly, he releases me, and I almost tip right over onto the ground  
catch myself and cup the back of my neck where he'd gripped me, still  
feeling a phantom pulse from where his fingers had been. He crouches  
ark in again, gathering more snow into his water hide before pushing to his full  
aim to height and moving a few feet away.

I watch his lithe, powerful legs, watch the strong line of his shoulder  
beneath the cloak. I don't know why, but I have the strangest urge to p

back of his hood and force him to look at me without hiding beneath its cover. I'm so busy envisioning it that I don't even notice he's stopped or the deadly of his belt jostling until he takes a wide legged stance and starts pissing with snow.

"Great Divine!" I flinch away, whirling around until my back is facing him. "Must you do that right here?"

I hear him laugh. "Not gonna go on a trek just to take a piss. Besides guessing with all those treacherous men you've dealt with, you must've least seen a few dicks. Or was your dead lover just for looks?"

Furious, I spin back around. "Shut up."

His head turns over his shoulder as if to look back at me. "That's no polite talk."

I sputter. "You're *relieving* yourself in front of me, and you dare to talk about politeness?"

His arms show a telltale shake before he's stuffing himself back into his pants. "You're easily riled, aren't you?"

"No."

He turns to face me, and I don't miss the flash of daggers at his hip as he finishes buckling his belt. "Sure you're not."

"I want to go," I say, irritated that I sound petulant even to my own ears.

At least while we're shadow-leaping, I won't have to see him. His shadow and light keep us mostly concealed from the world, but also from each other.

"We can add impatience to your list of vices," he replies, though he saunters over and holds out his hand. The very same one he...*touched* himself with. He isn't even wearing his gloves.

I meet his eye, but the arrogant twist of his mouth makes me snatch my hand away. His smirk grows wider. Before I can tear my grasp away, he spins around, eyes searching the direction of the army before he turns slightly to the left.

He starts gathering his shadows toward us, but I stop him. "Wait. Why are you turning us that way? The fae are there."

"Yes, but so is the sunlight. There's not as much cloud coverage today. We don't need the shadows."

"But if I'm not mistaken, one of our outskirt villages is that way."

"I know where the village is."

"Good. Then you know the way. We can stay in a bed instead of a hole in the ground tonight."

over. "No."  
sound "No? What do you mean, no?"  
g in the "We're not going to the village."  
ng My spine snaps straight. "I'm telling you *we are*."  
s, I'm His fingers dig painfully around my own. "You're not in charge."  
e at "I'm a queen," I say, chin lifting.  
"You're not a queen until someone willingly bows at your feet."  
"Then get on your knees, assassin, and *bow*."  
The cruelest, most wicked grin spreads up his face. "If I get on my k  
it will be for an entirely different sort of devotion that would have not  
t very do with you being a queen."  
talk Embarrassment flares over my cheeks, and my stomach explodes wi  
flutters. The knot in my throat is so thick I can't untangle it enough to  
swallow. "You...you can't speak to me that way."  
his "Why not?"  
"It's not proper." I don't remember a time I've been so flustered, an  
considering my recent experiences, that's saying something.  
as he He laughs. "Well, that's your first mistake. Nothing about me is pro  
"That's more than apparent," I spit back, tearing my hand from his.  
ears. "You're also just an assassin. I would *never* let you have me in that wa  
dows All the amusement bleeds away from his expression, and his mouth  
other. tightens with his bunching shoulders. "There she is. The queen who th  
finally she's better than everyone."  
I bristle.  
"I don't think that."  
up his "Really? So you don't think you're above your people?"  
is "They're my subjects."  
y more "*Subjects*." He sneers at me and shakes his head. "Should've known  
that talk about saving your people was all bluster. It's still about you, i  
hy are You and your great Colier legacy."  
I open my mouth, but no words come out.  
ay. I He uses the hesitation to point at my face, his stippled skin showing  
patches of ivory at his knuckles. "Right there. That's the problem. Tha  
your own people wanted you gone. Because you wanted to be their qu  
the wrong reasons, just like I said."  
ole in I turn my head away, hating the feeling of shame that tosses into my  
stomach like stones, leaving me pitted. "Then why did you take me? W

me out?”

*Why not kill me?*

“Why should you get to sit in a castle while your people die? You should warn them because *you* did this. It’s your fault we’re being invaded. It’s you who face the consequences of your actions.”

Every word he says strikes me like another rock. Like I’m condemned to be stoned to death, each hit landing, because he’s right. I made a deal with the fae for my own gain. Led so easily into the temptation of being given the crown and the promise of my rightful rule. Yet...look what happened. Realization sinks down over my back with a weight that I don’t quite know how to carry.

I’m not sure what escapes out of the cracks of my face, but for a split second, I think the assassin almost softens. But it must just be a trick of light, because when I focus on him, his expression is as hard as ever.

He holds out his hand again. I don’t take it.

“Let’s go, Queenie.”

I don’t want to go now, but I don’t want to let on that he’s gotten under my skin either. So I reach out anyway and let him wrap us in shadows. I take the reprieve he offers, letting myself fall into the blaring, muted wind of lightning dark, with only his hold to steady me. It allows me to take a shaky breath and let it out without his eyes watching me. Judging me.

For the rest of the day, that’s what I have. A respite from his critical words and his biting words, while my stomach topples every time we leap from shadow to shadow. I would never admit it aloud, but I *do* cling to his hand. For some foolish, ridiculous reason, it grounds me, even as his words tumble over and make me squirm in all of these horrible truths I’m left buried under.

It’s more crushing than the fae king pinning me with stone.

I dislike it immensely.

I’m used to being angry, but I’m not used to this shame, this guilt. It sits like a cube of ice in my chest, turning uncomfortably in my stomach every time I go over the assassin’s words. Every time I go over my actions.

What does it mean to be a true ruler of Sixth Kingdom? What does it mean that my people wanted me dead, that they rejected me enough to run me out? What does it mean that I’m going back there now, after what I’ve done to them?

What do *I* mean...if I’m not queen of Highbell?

That’s the only thing I’ve ever been. The only thing I have.

And without it...

Emotion whips around me far more brutally than this magical wind. My own shadows consume me far more thoroughly than the assassins' do.

ould        Because I...failed.

's time      And I think, perhaps, I've been failing for a very long time. Not in the men in my life have accused me of, but in who I have become.

ed to        Hours later, when my body is ready to pitch sideways from the con-  
with        drag of being catapulted along, the shadows thin. I feel a tremor in the  
en a        assassin's hand right before we jolt to a stop. I imagine it's a bit like being  
e know     a ship at sea for weeks and then suddenly disembarking onto steady land.  
Even when I'm stationary again, I still feel like I'm moving.

it            I take in our surroundings, finding that we're against a lonely hill with  
f the        nothing else around, the snow so thick we sink right into it. "Where are

The assassin doesn't reply, and I look over just as the wind picks up and  
slaps back his hood. I see more of his face for the first time in days and  
the strain at every angle, the heavy circles under his eyes. I hadn't paid  
attention when he said he was expending a lot of energy before, but now  
der my can see the truth of that. My gaze drops to his shaking hands.

ke the      He catches me looking and clenches them into fists before burying them  
ght and     beneath his cloak. "What are you looking at?" he growls.

ath and     My brows shoot up. "It's a sore subject? For people to look at you?"

gaze        "No one *wants* to look at me because I look different," he spits, all full  
m            bitterness and heated judgment. "Don't pretend you don't feel the same

I want to lash out at him right back, and I would, if it weren't for the  
and.        that I can feel how tense he is. How...vulnerable. For the first time, I  
ip me      why. Was he made fun of as a child for the patches of light around his  
with.      skin? Have people been cruel to him as an adult? My stomach prickles with  
thorns, and I realize I don't like to think of people mocking him. Staring  
him.

sits        Yet I know the very last thing he'd want from me is pity. So I say,  
very        "Looking at you? No, I quite like that. It's *listening* to you that I can't

He bursts out with a noise of surprise, staring at me with a sort of  
t mean     incredulity. Then he shakes his head as if to clear it. "You like looking  
ie out?    me?"

o?        The question is quiet.

Subtle.

*Heavy.*

My            My lips part, ready to tell him something cutting. Something to take  
the complicated softness of what I said.  
                 The truth comes out instead.

he way        “I do.”  
                 He takes in a sharp breath. All full of edges. I can feel it scrape again  
tant          dangerous and honed.  
                 “I like looking at you too, Queenie.”

eing on      My palms tingle. Gashes blooming with gentle snow.  
nd.            “Why?” I ask him quietly. Ask myself.  
                 The assassin just shrugs. “I don’t know.”

ith            Neither do I.  
e we?”      I turn away from the moment, from him, because I have to cut away  
and          it before I start to bleed.

l notice      “Where are we?” I ask, clearing my throat. Trying to clear away this  
l much      thickness between us that seems to be expanding every day.

w, I          He takes a moment to answer. “The village is on the other side of the  
                 he says with a tilt of his head. “But I need to rest. Give me an hour.”

hem          I blink in surprise. “You brought us to the village?”  
                 “Nearly.”

’              Looking around, I take stock of the hill. It’s not too wide, and aside  
uming      the thick snowfall, it doesn’t seem like it’ll be too difficult to traverse.  
e.”          I need to put some distance between us.

e fact        Which is why I start to tread—slowly—through the thick snow. My  
vonder      and leggings are already soaked up to my calves anyway since we’ve been  
dark        dumped from snow bank to snow bank all day, so it doesn’t matter. Or  
with        in the village, I can get warm by a fire, have a hot meal, a comfortable  
ig at        “What are you doing?” the assassin calls.  
                 “I’ll walk the rest of the way there.”  
                 “Get back here,” he says. “I said I just needed an hour.”

stand.”     I turn to look at him over my shoulder. “Yes, but why wait an hour in  
this wind when I could just walk around this hill and be there?”

at            I keep going, my legs sludging through, thighs burning from the effort.  
keep        keep sinking in, sometimes all the way up to my knees, and I’m forced to  
hike up     hike up my skirts and hold them to my thighs.  
                 The assassin curses, and then I hear his lumbering steps coming after me.  
So I pick up the pace. Holding my skirts up higher, I pant as I trudge, s



away in the snow and shoving through it with each labored step, going as fast as I can.

“Dammit, *wait*.”

“Just rest,” I tell him.

Against me, “*You* fucking rest,” I hear him growl, though I can tell he’s gaining confidence. I try to go even faster. Perhaps trying to flee from our confessions. For our tense push and pull.

“You said it yourself, it’s not that far. I’ll rest once I’m inside.”

He suddenly grips my arm, stopping me. I almost feel badly about how hard he’s breathing. “Stop making me chase you, woman,” he grits out.

“I’m not making you do anything, *man*,” I retort.

“I need time to recuperate. I don’t want to be this drained when we get there just in case the villagers give us trouble.”

I pull my arm out of his grip. The spot feels warm, though I try not to notice. “This is Sixth’s village. Nobody is going to give us trouble. High on this hill,” might have rejected me, but here in the outskirts, life is quite different. I wouldn’t be surprised if they haven’t even heard of what happened in the city. I’m their queen.”

“I still think—”

“Yes, I’m quite aware of your thoughts, assassin,” I say breezily as I try to walk forward again, trying not to show how much I’m struggling in this pathless trudge. “Perhaps keep them to yourself now.”

He lets out a gnarled sound like he wants to yank out his hair. “Fine, stubborn woman. Go. Maybe I don’t care if you do run into trouble!”

My lips press together in irritation. “Fine,” I snap back. “I don’t expect you to care anyway!”

I tromp forward, ignoring the curses that dash from his mouth while I mutter the same ones beneath my breath. I stumble, and he has the audacity to laugh like the bastard he is.

Good. At least disdain is more familiar to navigate than...whatever emotion we were tipping into.

“*I like looking at you too?*” I grumble to myself with mockery. “Of course, ridiculous, stupid things...”

Why did he say that? He’s lying. That’s what it must be. He murders people for a living, for Divine’s sake. Lying would be nothing to him. He’s just playing some sort of twisted game with me.

Yet...his eyes looked like they meant it.

st as I      When I stumble again, my palms slap down on the snow, the pieces white sticking to my skin.

                 I hear the assassin chuckle again at my expense. “Just come back he Queenie,” he calls. “You’re going to be too tired to walk all the way th

on me.      He’s already counted me out. Fully expecting me to fail.

’rom      I am *not* going to fail.

                 Gritting my teeth, I keep trudging, thankful that I’m cold enough on inside that the two-feet of snow doesn’t paralyze me from the outside. ow legs are aching, my body tired, but I keep going.

                 I’m utterly sick of failing. So I don’t care if it seems like this is just foolish walk—I will get there just to prove him wrong. Knowing he’s get watching spurs me on.

                 “It’s just snow,” I tell myself, calves wedged in, my knees locking v every step as I haul my feet through the heap. “You’re a Colier. The sr ghbell in our skin, ice in our veins, cold in our blood. Just keep going,” I pant

I      I stumble again. This time, I face-plant right into the snow. I’m stuck he clawing at the flurries as I try to heave myself out, when firm hands gr arms and haul me back until I’m upright again.

                 Spluttering, I look up at the assassin, the shade of his hood making l I start look like they’re gleaming. He doesn’t let go, and despite how angry a this embarrassed I am at having him lift me up, I don’t jerk away.

                 I tell myself it’s because I don’t want to fall down again.

, you      I can’t help but let my gaze trace over his features—features he alwa hides from view. His face is handsome. Dangerous. The patches on his ect youskin add to his innate allure, perfectly harboring the dark and light mag manipulates. It makes him utterly unique, while the gleam in his eyes r him utterly wicked.

I      His lips utterly sinful. acity

                 The unkempt black hair growing at his jaw is so unlike the perfectly other shaven beards and slicked mustaches I always saw at court. In fact, everything about him is different from the men at court. There’s a hard all the him. He’s not pretty like Jeo was. Not graceful, either. He certainly do possess the silver-tongued smooth speech like Tyndall. The assassin is s everything hard and blunt. No fake pleasantries to him whatsoever.

He’s      The court would hate him.

                 I feel a bit of snow stuck to my cheek, and it streaks down my face b plopping onto the ground below. The assassin reaches up, making me t

of back instinctively. He pauses, arching a brow, but then simply uses the his cloak to wipe off my face. I stand stunned, my mind blanking.

re, “Stubborn fucking woman.”

ere.” I finally snap out of my foolishness and wrench myself from him, sh his arm away. “There’s a reason *assassin* starts with the word *ass*.”

“Talking about my ass now, Queenie?”

the My temper flares. “I’m talking about you being one.”

My He smirks. “Sure you are.”

one I start walking again, but this time, the assassin walks in front of me his steps leading the way and bearing the brunt of the snow, the rest of trek isn’t so hard. Still, my legs are shaking from exertion, and sweat is dripping down my forehead by the time we reach the gated entrance of village. The assassin was right—it was around the hill—though he fail with explain just how big the hill really was.

ow is But, I made it.

When we finally break free of the deep snow and get to the dragged k, ip my that leads to the village gate, I nearly totter onto it with wobbly legs. T slick-stepped path is a wonderful respite from the frozen plod.

his eyes Ahead, the gate is cocked open, the wooden-beamed fence that surro nd the village like pointed pikes ready to skewer the sky.

“There,” I say, dusting off my skirts. “Now we can have a proper res tonight.”

ays The assassin doesn’t reply and instead stops in the middle of the pat nearly making me run right into him.

dark “Assassin?” I say with annoyance.

gic he “Quiet.”

nakes I rear back with offense. “Excuse me?” When he says nothing, I sha head and go around him. I’m well and truly ready to be rid of him for t night. I don’t know what I was thinking, letting him wipe my face befo saying what I said aloud. I should—

lness to Suddenly, he’s at my side, his arm flung out and knocking into my t esn’t I stumble to a stop. “What—”

“Stay,” he hisses, barely above a whisper.

My head snaps over to look at him, and I open my mouth to tell him barking orders at me, but his tense face stops me.

efore “What is it?”

flinch “Copper.”

end of I frown. “What nonsense are you spewing?”

“I smell copper.”

My frown deepens, but I decide to humor the man, and I lift my own nose to smell. There’s nothing. Just cold and snow. “Copper? What a ridiculous thing to claim to smell.”

His eyes flick to me. “Blood, Queenie. I smell *blood*.”

“What are you talking about? You can’t possibly smell that.”

“I’m a fucking assassin,” he snarls. “You think I don’t know what blood smells like? We’re turning back. Right now.”

Dropping his arm, he turns around to leave, but I move toward the village gate. The wood is coated in a permanent layer of frost, and I can see snow on the roofs beyond poking over the top.

“Queenie,” he growls behind me.

I march forward. “If there’s blood in the air, we should find out why it’s here.”

I ignore him.

I wish I hadn’t.

Slipping through the open gate, I stop in my tracks as soon as I’m within the walls of the village. The blood drains from my face, but there’s so much of it on the ground that I barely notice its absence.

The sight before me is horrifying. I don’t want to look, and yet, I can’t even blink.

Behind me, the gate creaks open, and I jump, but it’s only the assassin stalking forward until he’s standing next to me again. He takes one look around the village and curses beneath his breath. “Let’s go,” he tells me. “No.”

I walk further into the village, my *no* echoing in my own ears. Because this can’t be real. *No*, this can’t be what I’m truly seeing.

Yet, it is.

This village is a small one, maybe only a few hundred people living here as most. A harsh existence, yet one they chose rather than live in the capital one of the bigger cities. It gave them larger living spaces and seclusion certainly more spread out than in the slums of Highbell. We had a dozen soldiers stationed here. No more than that, because we didn’t need it.

So we thought.

The stone houses are simple, lining up on both sides of the street, windows facing each other like open eyes. Hanging between them, laundry lines

pulled taut, from one house to another, draped above the road. Shirts and trousers clap in the wind with icicles and frost stuck to them. Yet it's not clothing pinned to those lines. The cords that stretch from window to window sag from the weight of bodies.

Unmoving, lifeless bodies.

Men, women, children. Hanging on the lines right alongside their clothes. The cords curve down like macabre smiles, blood dripping down from their still-leaking corpses into frozen puddles on the ground. I can smell blood now. Even half-frozen, the metallic scent slaps at my senses.

The entire village has been slaughtered.

Line after line, people are pinned to the cords, with the smallest incision cut into their bodies. A coin-sized slash at their jugulars. Another at each wrist and thigh. Slices into their arteries to leak their life right from the veins while they dry out with the laundry.

Most of the blood has frozen, but some still drains slowly onto the snow, dripping with icy clinks. Carrion birds are circling overhead, their wings whistling through the air. Some of them have already landed, scaly feet gripping the cords while their white beaks peck and peck and *peck*.

Something in me cracks. A fissure I can physically feel that makes room in place as I slam a hand over my heart. The beat beneath convulses.

My eyes ache.

Hate and horror battle inside my mind.

"The fae came through here after all."

The assassin's voice is low and dead sounding. I suppose he's used to seeing such gruesome death, so he can bring about that numbness to deal with when he faces it.

"Why?" I ask, my tongue dry in my mouth. "This is out of their way path toward Highbell. There's nothing of value here."

"Isn't it obvious? They didn't come here to march on one kingdom. They came here to kill."

I feel sick.

"My question is, how did they know about this village?" he asks. "As I said, it's not on the way. They purposely sent soldiers here to wipe everyone out."

"Pruinn," I seethe, my hate scraping up through my slit palms, cubed windows gathering at my molars.

From my peripheral, I see his hood turn in my direction.

nd            “Loth Pruin—the one who brought me to Seventh Kingdom. He’d  
ot just living in Highbell, posing as a merchant. He was gathering information  
indow me, but he must’ve also been gathering information about settlements  
across Sixth. Perhaps even about all of Orea.”

othes.        I can’t look away from the people. The fae didn’t just kill them. The  
made their deaths into a taunt. Treated their bodies with contempt and  
om        disrespect, just to show how little they care for us. This death, this *disgr*  
ll the        an unfathomable insult.

              “We have to get them down.”

              The assassin pauses. “You want to get them down?”

sions        The anger in me is growing like a glacier, layer by layer. “Of course  
ch        to get them down! We can’t leave them like this,” I bite out, grinding t  
ir        into little shards that stab into my gums. “I *won’t* leave them like this.”

              I can feel him watching me.

treet,        “Why not?”

gs            “Because they don’t deserve this,” I say thickly. “They’re my people  
t            their queen.”

              Their queen.

ne jolt      I never thought about ruling in the face of something like this. A  
prosperous Highbell, subjects who respected me, a life of luxury, a dar  
politics—that was always expected.

              Not this.

to            Yet, I can’t turn my back on Sixth Kingdom. Not the capital with  
thousands of people, and not this outskirts settlement.

ill him      “It’s not as if you knew any of these people. Maybe they hated you,”  
says, and anger quakes inside of me, sloshing frigid water. “Why wast  
on the time and effort doing anything at all?”

They        “Because you were right!” I shout, whipping toward him with accus  
in my eyes and a horrible clawing feeling in my throat.

              “Right about what?”

as you      “That I have always wanted to be a queen for the wrong reasons. Th  
spoiled. That I’m a cold-hearted bitch. That my people don’t want me.  
ryone      like my husband. Just like my father.”

              To my horror, my voice snaps, pitching higher with an emotion I’ve  
s of ice back for so long. I’m not sure I’ve *ever* allowed myself to feel this way  
even sure that I *could*.

been        “I brought the fae over the bridge,” I say, tone hollow, heart aching.  
1 about my fault everyone here is dead. Just like the rest of Highbell and even  
all        will be if we can’t stop them.”

I was born to wear a crown. Yet without magic, I was never enough.  
y        matter what I did, or learned, or gave, or married. I was a failure because  
didn’t have the power necessary to hold the throne. Because I wasn’t a  
lay is fulfill my role of birthing an heir to continue the bloodline.

If my anger is solid ice, my sadness is a slush.

“You say I only wanted to be queen for the wrong reasons,” I say quietly,  
cold tears gathering in the thinnest line above my lid. “All my life, I’ve  
I want been wanted for the wrong reasons. Never for me. Only for what I could  
hat ice the crown or give the men who wore one. So yes. It’s my fault. I was crushed  
’        my heart’s desire. I was offered the right to rule. I was lured with magic.  
I took it. I brought the fae over the bridge. It’s my fault everyone here  
dead. All because I wanted to be worth something. To finally have what I  
e. I’m lacked. And now, I’ve doomed the very kingdom I wanted to rule.”

The sound of a tinkling crash makes my gaze drop, and I see shards  
falling from my hands and breaking on the ground.

The assassin watches silently as I turn over my palms. He says nothing  
ice of pick at the layer of ice that’s formed over every inch of my skin like glass  
to dry. Patches of frost stay stuck to my fingertips, even more gathered  
gashes. Permanent scars slashed into me by my own temptation and  
weakness. Everlasting proof of my wrongdoing.

A long, tense moment stretches between us, and all that exists in this  
” he pregnant pause is a cold, crownless queen, a hooded assassin, and far more  
e your confessions than I know what to do with.

Far more deaths than I can atone for.

ation        Finally, after more shards shatter at my feet, the assassin speaks. “My  
responds to mood.”

I flinch as he steps toward me, but he reaches down and takes my hand  
at I’m and I go utterly still. How his palm is so warm I’ll never understand, but  
Just        sears me. Prickles my skin like my body has forgotten the comfort of his  
and his presence is reminding my senses.

held        With far more gentleness than I ever could’ve imagined, he turns my  
7. Not over in his hands and traces the gash there. Lets miniature icicles drift  
with his touch as he digs the cold off my skin and leaves it to scatter in  
wind.

“It’s  
Orea  
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I learned  
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y palm  
up  
the

“That’s why it comes and goes,” he says quietly, and that single war  
finger of his continues to trace down the bluish slash. Keeps digging th  
the gathered slurry. My eyes are transfixed on his slow, deliberate touc  
for a moment I forget how to breathe. “Mine used to be the same way,  
I learned to control it. You’ll have to get a handle on your emotions.”  
My eyes snap up to hook beneath his hood. “I’m not emotional.”  
I learned as a little girl to always keep decorum. To wipe emotion fr  
face and behave with poise and strength no matter what. To always we  
quietly, mask and keep my thoughts and feelings to myself, because my thoug  
e only feelings didn’t matter anyway. If any woman let out even a hint of emc  
ld give she was disparaged. Castigated. Criticized. Mocked.  
ffered “You misunderstand me, Cold Queen,” he says, finally dropping my  
ic, and I have to fight the sudden and annoying urge to ask him to snatch it ba  
is “I’m saying you need to get a handle on your emotions as in *use* them.  
at I’d repressing yourself. What are you feeling right now? Right when that i  
formed on your hands?”  
of ice “Anger,” I admit. “Anger and...”  
“And what?”  
ing as I “Sadness.” I swallow hard. “Guilt.”  
ue left The admission falls from my lips like the first sprays of rain. Unexp  
l at the Surprising. Leaving me looking up and wondering where to go from h  
I dry up or flood it all?  
“You know what, Cold Queen?”  
s “What?”  
nore He gives the slightest curve of his lips. “You might actually have a l  
after all.”  
I let out a shaken breath. “I’m not sure I should count that as a  
lagic compliment.”  
“But you will anyway.”  
nd, He’s arrogant.  
ut it He’s also right.  
eat The assassin slips a dagger out of the sheath at his hip and offers it t  
hesitate, gaze snatching up. “Time to help your people, Malina.”  
y palm Yes, it is.  
up I take the blade tentatively, and though it feels foreign and bulky in  
the hand, it also feels like a weight I should have to carry.



m Together, we walk into the desecrated village, inside the houses, and  
rough out the windows. Wordlessly, the two of us start cutting down the laun  
h, and lines one by one, ridding the insult of the fae, helping to lay the dead to  
before Though I'm not sure there's any rest to be had.  
For the dead, or for us.

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Together, we walk into the desecrated village, inside the houses, and lean out the windows. Wordlessly, the two of us start cutting down the laundry lines one by one, ridding the insult of the fae, helping to lay the dead to rest.

Though I'm not sure there's any rest to be had.

For the dead, or for us.



## CHAPTER 23

### QUEEN MALINA

**T**his is the last line.

I've cut dozens and dozens already, yet I hesitate now. I'm gripping the cord in one hand and the dagger in the other, but my eyes are fixed straight ahead. At one of the women on the laundry line, at her slumped over at the unnatural way the fae pinned her there like a puppet.

At the slight bump on her belly.

Directly across the street, at the window facing my own, the assassin stands. Despite the fact that I can't see his eyes, I know he's looking at me.

I swallow hard and raise the dagger. Start sawing through the cord. The lines come apart, though not as easily as when we first started this task. It takes a toll on a blade, and it takes a toll on a person, too. I feel blunted. All my sharpness was dulled in the face of such horror.

Gripping the hilt harder, I saw back and forth, again and again, and finally my line snaps, the bodies drop. The last of the weight brought down.

Once all the bodies are back on the ground, I stare out the window.

When the first line dropped, something numb threatened to come over me, but for once, I didn't let it. I forced myself to look. To see. To implant the scene in my memory.

Line by line, body by body, I've made myself be present and allow myself to feel. The horror. The disgust. The guilt. The rage. I felt it all, churning through me and leaving me battered like I've been ground to

I don't flinch when the assassin suddenly appears beside me in a boiling shadows. Yet I nearly do when he moves with the strange gentleness I'm not used to, as he reaches for my hand and uncurls my fingers from the dagger. I didn't realize how hard I was clutching the hilt until he takes the blade, leaving my hand empty and aching.

"The deed is done, Malina," he says quietly, and my heart aches as he pulls my hand from the way he says my name.

I look at the bodies outside that cover the streets like rubble. It feels like the work is done. More than anyone will ever be able to finish.

"We can't just leave her."

"Her?"

A crack spreads in the hollowed cavity of my chest. Something bursts down my face like the fissure is ripping through my cheek. "Them," I tell myself as I tear my gaze away from the woman.

Yet nothing gets by the assassin. "She was pregnant."

There's another crack. It jostles me from the inside out.

"Yes." My voice sounds strange to my own ears. I wonder if it sounds strange to him too.

He says nothing more about it, and I'm glad for that. There's a sort of silent acknowledgment that doesn't need to be voiced. It's already known.

"Your hand is blistered."

I glance down and see that he's right. How soft of a queen have I been holding a dagger for a couple of hours and cutting down rope should a man's hand so? And yet, it's fitting. I deserve whatever bubbles up. Now that to scar my palms too, right alongside the blue-tinged gashes. All night, like a death of my guilt.

"I'm going to gather some food before we leave. You should find some clean clothes to change into." The assassin walks away, his steps tread lightly over the floorboards, and I do as he suggested, though I internally cringe. While I understand the realistic necessity, wearing a dead woman's clothes and pillaging pantries makes guilt roll through me.

I pull on thick woolen leggings and a skirt, and tuck in a button-up shirt before pulling on a coat. All of it is the color of mud. Cloying, covering. Perhaps I can think of it as a kind of armor as we approach Highbell. At the very least, it will act as a reminder.

I find the assassin downstairs, new clothes bunched on his body that are slightly ill-fitting. The house feels hollow. The empty sofa, sagging from

st of years of use, the curtains still drawn, a plate on the table with half-eaten  
ness that churns my stomach, a lantern fallen on the floor.

n the “We can’t stay here tonight,” I say.

the Can’t stay in this place where everyone died because of me. Because  
what I unleashed upon them.

nuch “And we need to—” I swallow thickly, try to get the bile down. “But  
village. There are too many bodies, and the ground will be too hard and  
so far frozen to dig regardless.”

He gives me a nod, and then the two of us walk out, down the street  
death, sidestepping the frozen patches of blood. The fae didn’t even let  
livestock alive, instead butchering them in their stalls.

is *They came here to kill.*

correct I avoid the worst of the carnage as the two of us methodically gather  
straw we can find and tuck it around the bodies like a skinny pyre. The  
spread more along the street, trailing it up toward the wooden doorway  
the simple homes. I stand at the gate as he sets the small village aflame  
ds sending the people back to the gods through smoke and ash. Burning a  
the last of the coppery scent and chasing off the pecking birds.

of Then, it’s done. Nothing left but ash and regret. No one to remember  
wn. but us.

And I will always remember.

en that When night descends, we walk out of the settlement and stay in a hole  
ffect the snow far enough away that we can’t smell the smolder.

I have Sleep evades me like I knew it would. I let myself feel far too much  
marks and the faces of those Oceans flicker behind my lids every time I close  
eyes.

me When we get up with the morning, the assassin takes one look at my  
ing and passes over his flask. My brow arches as I take it.

lly “You need it today. Trust me.”

an’s I can’t argue.

Tipping it back, I let the liquid pour, the burn of the alcohol crawling  
weater my throat. I lick my lips and pass it back.

g mud. “We should reach Highbell by nightfall,” he says and then digs into  
at the bag of rations and hands me some food. Salted pork. Cold cheese. Stiff  
Food from the village.

are I slowly take it and start to chew, but my stomach sours, though it has  
om nothing to do with the alcohol. For days, all I wanted was to be rid of t

n food travel jerky, but this feels wrong. Like we took this food when we should have left it.

As if he can sense my thoughts, he says, “The dead have no use for any of the things in this world anymore.”

“But the world has great use for the dead.”

The dead spur us on. To live. To avenge. To honor. To grieve. It’s because of the dead that we live.

I swallow down the sticky lump. “I never asked—why does my dear husband want to kill me?”

He pauses before tearing off another bite of his own food. “Will any answer help?”

I consider that. “No.”

“Then maybe the question doesn’t matter.”

Perhaps it doesn’t. Perhaps a part of me always expected for Tyndal something like this. I’ve served my purpose after all. I’d be much more valuable to him dead.

“And what about you?” I ask. “He gave you the job. He won’t tolerate not completing it. Or are you still going to stab me through, as you so often like to threaten?”

He continues to chew, and I can’t help but notice the way the muscles of his jaw moves. “We have other issues to deal with.”

I let out a heavy breath. “Yes. We do.”

When we’re done, we leave our burrow, leave behind the pyred village today, we go on. Though today, the assassin gets tired much sooner than usual, my sun still has a few hours left to shine when we go still. I barely catch my breath from falling into the snow when he stops suddenly, yanking the shadow from my face away as he stumbles.

He balances himself against a boulder at the base of the mountain we stopped at. The bare, snowy mountain I know all too well—the one that houses Highbell Castle just on the other side.

I’m almost home.

He continues to heave, his hand shaking where it grips the frozen rock. “Assassin?” I ask tentatively, taking a step forward.

“I’m fine,” he snaps.

His tone makes me bristle, and in the past, I would’ve walked away as something rude in response, but over the last few days, I’ve learned to listen to his words and determine the root of his moods.

uld I step closer, hearing the heavy way he's breathing, watching the qu  
the down his spine. I can't see his face—I hardly ever can. Slowly, so slow  
if I'm reaching a hand out to pet a feral dog, I reach up and start to tug  
hood.

And miraculously, the feral dog doesn't rear back and bite me.  
ecause He lets the hood fall.

A sheen of sweat covers his skin, more beading against his beard. H  
black eyebrows are full of tension, digging a frown between them, and  
lips are thinned into a grimace. I can see exhaustion in every inch of hi  
can see it draped over his shoulders and hanging off his limbs.

Dark eyes with those slices of light flicker toward me, holding my g  
captive.

"Having a good stare?" he spits at me, like he can't stand my gaze o  
l to do face any longer, and it cuts me down. I thought we'd gotten past this, b  
e ingrained vulnerability in him is still very much there. "That's why I k  
hood on—that's why people call me Hood. They're not very inventive

My lips press together and I snap back. "Oh, shut up. I already told y  
often like looking at you. I'm not *staring*, I'm...gazing."

He lets out a snort, though the viciousness seems to have fallen awa  
e in his his expression. "*Gazing?*"

"Yes," I reply tartly. "That's what one does when they like to look a  
someone. And I certainly won't be calling you Hood, because I detest  
age as you cover your face. So how about I simply call you by your name? O  
il. The should I continue saying assassin?"

He pauses, blinking at me in surprise. Then, his tone drops. "My nar  
myself Dommik."

The way he says it makes it feel like he hasn't given it for a very lon  
e've And yet, he's given it to *me*.

We watch each other for a moment, and my heartbeat rattles beneath  
at ribs, feels jumpy and bursting.

"Now you've heard my name, you've seen my face, and you know I  
ck. weakened. I'm at the most vulnerable I'll ever be," he says quietly. Po

"And?"

"And...you know where the dagger is. You could simply grip the bl  
or said from my belt and drag it across my throat."

I laugh nervously. "You travel with shadow and light. You can appe  
gauge anywhere, without anyone being the wiser. I would be a fool to even tr

ake He turns slightly, shifting his cloak, and my eyes automatically flick  
vly, as to where the dagger sits. My pulse quickens.

off his “Go on, Queenie,” he rasps. “Do it.”

Of its own volition, my hand reaches out, blistered fingers wrapping  
around the leather-wrapped hilt. Dommik does nothing to stop me. For  
reason, a thrill travels down my back.

is “You feel that, don’t you?” he asks. “Violence is a different kind of  
his and you don’t need magic to have it.”

s face, I grip the hilt tighter. Lift the blade an inch out of its sheath. But my  
hits his hip, and he straightens up, shifting so his thick thigh comes bet  
aze both of mine, and I gasp.

But I don’t move away.

n his “There’s power in a lot of things that don’t require magic,” he murr  
out this I swallow hard.

leep the Lift the blade.

.” The metal shines in the draping sunlight, and flecks of flurry land on  
you I sharpened edges as I press it to his neck. He still makes no move to dis  
me, and I wonder.

y from Does the person who kills for a living want to die?

For some reason, that thought makes my stomach plummet. I quickl  
it lower the dagger, stuffing it back into his sheath with a snap. This taur  
when nearly as thrilling as it was a few seconds ago.

r “I think I held that quite long enough yesterday,” I say. “My blisters  
need to heal before I can use it properly against you.”

ne is He lets out a dry, raspy chuckle, but his hands come to my hips, and  
freeze in place, eyes flying up to his face.

ig time. “I thought you would’ve taken me up on my offer,” he says, fingers  
digging in.

1 my My mouth goes dry. For a moment, my mind jumbles, imagining th  
talking about something else. A different sort of offer. All of my focus  
’m homed in on his warming touch, like he’s a flame held against ice.

intedly. I can feel him melting me.

ade “Maybe some other time,” I reply, though I can’t make my tone as g  
want to. Which is aggravating. I’ve always been so good at acting alo  
“Now, are you going to sit down, or do you prefer to hunch there until  
collapse?”

ar  
y.”



down He scoffs. "I'm not going to collapse. Besides," he adds, moving his close to mine. "I have a pretty good grip right now."

His hold sears me. I shouldn't like it. But I definitely don't *dislike* it.

"I'm a queen, not a handhold. So if you would..."

some Dommik smirks, and my stomach does a ridiculous flip. "Sure, Queen." "Malina," I tell him firmly, because I've found I like the way it comes power, from his lips.

"Malina," he repeats, and great Divine, chills scatter over my arms. My thumbs brush up and down over my waist for a dizzying, drugging moment between that I recognize for what it is.

Dangerous.

His thigh is still between both of mine, and he's tall enough that I'm straddling it where I stand. It would be so physically simple, to rock against his leg and build up the fire that he's started to stoke. Realistically though, it would be so very complicated.

Perhaps he can see these inner thoughts spiraling through my head, because he says, "If you really don't want to be my handhold, why have you pulled away?"

"You're the one who should pull away, as you were the one to touch me." He doesn't let go. Instead, he lifts his thigh, just an inch. An inch that makes my entire body jolt. His firm body *right* there...

His dark, dangerous eyes with flints of speckled light delve into me. I will to reach up and trace the pigmented skin around his lips. To slide my hand under his clothing and rest it against his bare chest, just to soak in more warmth.

It's wrong. Entirely, thoroughly wrong. He was supposed to kill me. Maybe he still will, but that danger makes it all the sweeter.

His gaze drops down to my lips, and I forget how to breathe.

at he's Wrong and Want blare through me like opposing knocks on either side has door. Which side will swing open?

Giving me plenty of time to decide, he lowers his head ever so slowly. He's not shaking anymore. His exhaustion seems to have been replaced by a fiery hunger that awakens something inside of me. Makes another icy crack in my chest crack off.

Just before his mouth can press against mine, I turn my head abruptly in panic sluicing down my ribs and soaking into my lungs. "I...I'm still not in the eyes of the gods."

his face He freezes.

Shame and regret slam into me. I don't know why I said that. I *want* to kiss me. Wanted it *desperately*, and therein lies the problem, because desperation feels utterly terrifying. Still, I wish I could take the words "Queenie." shove them past my molars, and grind them into dust.

His eyes "Married?" he hisses. "He hired me to fucking *kill* you."

"Yes, well, it's not a very loving marriage."

His mouth He scoffs. "Don't turn cold on me now, Queenie. Just admit it. You admit this, don't you?"

"I will *not* admit that," I snip, refusing to look at him, gaze trained on the mountainside instead.

It nearly against my thigh, it "Interesting choice of words. You didn't answer the question, did you?" It hasn't escaped my notice that he's still holding on to me, and I do nothing to pull away. My legs part ever so slightly, hips still turned in the same direction. If I were to take a single step, our bodies would be completely flush against each other...

Queenie "Admit it..." His words are right at my ear, hot breath ruffling my wavy hair. "I bet if I were to slip my hand beneath your skirt, I'd find the Coolest first." Queenie isn't so cold between her thighs."

at He yanks me forward, tearing a gasp from my throat, my head tilting back as my lips part in shock. Shock...and a surge of desire.

I itch and One hand drops down, and he suddenly grips me *right* over my core layers of clothing bunching up at his touch. An unbidden moan slips past the edge of his lips that makes his mouth curl in a predatory smirk.

"Admit that there's a needy throb beating in your clit, that this cunt is searing hot, aching for me to sink my fingers into it."

I lift my chin in defiance, even though I'm panting. "It's not, *assassin*." He laughs darkly, making a thrill pulse through me, my body doing exactly what he said. "I love when you get haughty and show your claws. It makes me want to bend you over and take you down a notch."

ly. That image immediately springs to my mind and makes a whine crackle with my throat.

My chip "You like that, don't you?"

"No."

Queenie, "Keep lying," he says, teeth flashing with elation. "I fucking *like* it. Being married reminds me of being on the chase for one of my marks. And do you know *why* I like the chase?" He scrapes his mouth against my neck, and I know

coarse hair of his beard will leave marks on my delicate skin, but I find  
ed him that too. "It heats my blood. Makes me want to taunt my target. To draw  
e this the hunt even more before my...blade sinks into them." He punctuates  
back, word *blade* with two of his fingers hooking up against me.

I gasp. Want surges, my thighs trembling as my hips drop forward to  
out more of the touch, reaching for something right out of my grasp.

Then he suddenly lets me go, and I'm the one left swaying and panting  
like time, staring after him in shock. "What are you doing?" I demand  
breathlessly.

He starts walking off, though over his shoulder he tosses the words,  
married, right?"

My mouth gapes wordlessly.

"Are you going to sit down, Queenie? Or do you prefer to hunch the  
his you collapse?"

Insufferable assassin.

But a foreign, strange thing happens.

*I smile.*

And I don't think I've done that in a very, very long time.

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coarse hair of his beard will leave marks on my delicate skin, but I find I like that too. “It heats my blood. Makes me want to taunt my target. To draw out the hunt even more before my...blade sinks into them.” He punctuates the word *blade* with two of his fingers hooking up against me.

I gasp. Want surges, my thighs trembling as my hips drop forward to seek out more of the touch, reaching for something right out of my grasp.

Then he suddenly lets me go, and I’m the one left swaying and panting this time, staring after him in shock. “What are you doing?” I demand breathlessly.

He starts walking off, though over his shoulder he tosses the words, “Still married, right?”

My mouth gapes wordlessly.

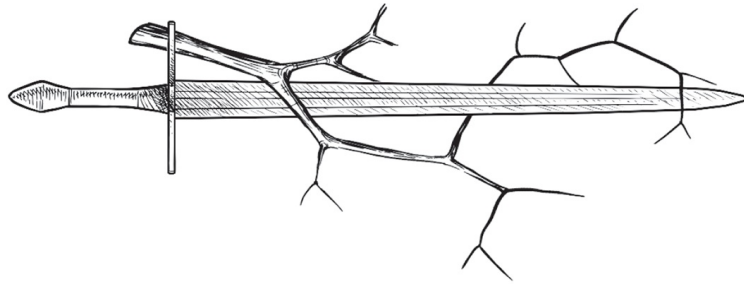
“Are you going to sit down, Queenie? Or do you prefer to hunch there till you collapse?”

Insufferable assassin.

But a foreign, strange thing happens.

*I smile.*

And I don’t think I’ve done that in a very, very long time.



## CHAPTER 24

### OSRIK

I spend the morning at the barracks in a fight circle to get out some aggression. Punching people took the edge off, and then the training exercises I did alongside my soldiers took off some corners too.

But it all bends back into sharp angles as soon as I get back to the camp to bathe and dress. By the time I'm walking down the corridor toward the mender wing, I'm crushed by it.

Just when I'm about to make it to Rissa's room, I hear raised voices. When I yank open the door to go inside, I find her thrashing. Head swinging left and right, back arching up off the bed. Her clothes are soaked through with sweat, and there's three novice menders holding her down while I try to redo her stitches.

"Stop! You're fucking hurting her!" I growl.

"Captain Osrik, you need to wait outside!" Hojat says.

Fuck that.

I push past the novices, moving them aside so they let Rissa go. I clamp my face in my hands. "Yellow Bell. Hold still."

Her teeth are gritted so tightly I fear she's gonna break her jaw. "Why is she so fucking hot?"

"She's feverish," Hojat says. "Her wound..."

I straighten up, hands dropping to my sides. Rissa lies back, whimpering as she goes to sleep.

"Let me see."

The mender hesitates. "Captain..."

"Let. Me. See."

Hojat pauses for a second, but then he reaches forward and pulls aside the buttoned part of her nightgown to reveal the wound. A breath hisses out of me. The skin around the stitches is swollen and red. Cloudy pus seeps from the stitches still caught into the jagged skin are crusted with blood.

“It’s infected,” I say thickly.

“Yes, it is.”

My eyes shoot to his. “How could this fucking happen?”

Hojat’s face is grim. “I have been diligent, Captain, but her wound is deep and very severe. We were lucky to stave off infection this long.”

“It should be healing!”

His eyes go to his novices, and I hear them skitter out of the room without a word. When we’re alone, he says, “Captain, I need you to prepare yourself.”

fucking My shoulders bunch with defensiveness. “For what?”

ig “For Lady Rissa’s death.”

I look at him with fire in my eyes that burns straight from my gut. “I do not accept that.”

“Then you are in denial, and that is worse.”

I can’t stand the look on his face. Some softhearted sympathy that I fucking want. My teeth grind, that angry burn in my stomach threatening to tear right through my skin. “Fix her!”

ugh “I am trying—”

Hojat “You are our mender, so *mend her!*”

Rissa whimpers again.

“It’s not that simple,” Hojat says quietly, like he thinks if he lowers his voice, I’ll lower mine. That if he’s calm, I’ll be calm.

asp her But how can I be fucking calm when her body is spreading with infection and she hasn’t been coherent in weeks? “I am doing everything I can. I will continue to do all I can. And right now, that means I need to finish clearing

ly’s Lady Rissa’s wound and changing out her stitches so I can then try to lower down her fever and get some liquids into her. You need to let me do that.

I start to pace like a wild beast caught in a cage, nearly tearing out my hair as I run my hands through it. “She can’t die.”

“We mortals don’t control that, Captain.”

I want to rip apart this room stone by stone and send it crashing into the fucking mountain. Instead, I turn and march out, only to nearly trample

de the a woman. She isn't one of the novices, that much is clear, since they al  
it of mender robes, and she's dressed more like a saddle.

from it, She takes a step back and tucks her blonde hair behind her ear. "I'm  
looking for Rissa, is she here?"

"Who're you?" I bark.

She narrows her blue eyes. "I'm Polly. I heard from one of the soldi  
down at the saddle house that she was hurt."

s very Right. Polly. The saddle who Rissa was tending to while she was co  
down off the fucking dew. The Polly who treated Rissa like fucking tra

without here. Rissa is being taken care of." She moves to go inside the room, but I block her way. "You're not r

Polly crosses her arms in defiance. "I'm her friend, and I want to see  
I look her over. "Not high off dew anymore, I take it?"

Anger surges over her face. "Who do you think you are?"

No. I "I'm her fucking friend. And you don't see her without my permissi  
Her face pinches, eyes glaring at me. "Just ask her! She'll want to see

"I can't fucking ask her because she can't fucking wake up!"

don't Polly's eyes go wide, the anger seeping out of her like I pulled up th  
stopper on a fucking drain. Then they get all watery, ready to leak out.

ng to "How...how bad is it?" she asks tentatively, arms dropping to her side

"She might fucking die. That's how it is. That what you want to hear  
snarl.

She flinches.

his "Please," she says, her tone now quiet and pleading. "Let me see he  
need to."

When she sees I'm going to say no, she reaches out and grips my ha  
action "Please," she begs again. "I know I wasn't..." She quickly wipes away

l will tear. "She sat with me when I was sick. Just let me return the favor."

aning I want to say no. Maybe because I want to punish her for being so fu  
oring awful to Rissa as we traveled here. Or maybe just because I'm an asshole

at." But it's not about me.

ry hair "Fine," I growl, watching as relief spreads over her face. "But not be  
you deserve it. Because *she* does."

Polly nods. "Thank you."

the I step aside, and she wastes no time slipping into the room. I stand th  
e over a second, and then I see the novices coming back down the corridor, h

supplies for Rissa. I stop one of them. "I need a spare needle and threa

I wear     The woman eyes me curiously but hands them over. Then I turn and  
downstairs.

Time to pay a visit to the dungeons.



ers

When I get down to the cell, Manu is lying on the pallet, staring up at  
ceiling. I look at the empty bowl and water pitcher on the floor. The man  
managed to get some liquids into Rissa yesterday, which means Manu  
needed liquids too.

Lucky him.

As soon as I close the door behind me, he jolts to a sitting position. His  
vest is gaping, tunic loose. His clothes are filthy, his hair greasy, eyes  
bloodshot. I haven't come down here since he first arrived. Wanted to  
wallow in fear. Wanted him to feel helpless.

Because that's exactly how I fucking feel.

I can't make Rissa better. No matter how many times I order her to,  
Hojat to, she doesn't get better. She doesn't open her eyes.

And now...

I clench my fists and stare at the man responsible for sneaking Seco  
men in. For one of them stabbing Rissa in the chest. For the fact that she  
upstairs with a raging fever and infected blood.

"Lie down."

He looks me over warily. "I'm surprised it took you so long to return  
Captain." He pauses. "How is she?"

"You hoping she died so I can fucking snap your neck and put you  
your misery?" I snarl.

"No. I..." Something crosses over his expression. "I didn't mean for  
get hurt. My sister needed me to get Auren to the Conflux. The other lady  
was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Rissa. That *other fucking lady* is Rissa."

"Rissa." He says it like he's getting a taste for it, and that just pisses  
even more.

"Don't say her fucking name."

"You don't want me to call her lady. You don't want me to call her  
name. What do you want, Captain?"

"I want her to *not be dying!*"



head        The confession comes out of me like a roar. I fucking hate it.  
              Hate him.  
              My anger is a corpse dragging behind me. Weighing me down. Plug  
my nose with its stench. Death surrounding me.  
              “Is she? Dying?” Manu asks carefully.  
              That question makes me want to hurl my fist through the wall. Inste-  
at the      kick the leg of his bed, making him almost fall over. “On your back.”  
enders      I’m a little surprised that he actually does it.  
got         A little disappointed too. I was hoping for a fight because this pent-  
wants to go somewhere, and I want to take it out on him.  
              When he’s lying down, I yank out the needle and thread from the po  
His         my pocket. “It’s your lucky day. Rissa’s getting new stitches. So you’r  
getting stitches.”  
let him     He doesn’t say a word, but he flinches when I tug back his collar. A  
my furious eyes lift up from his wound to his face.  
              He’s down here in his own piss and shit, with wet air and drab light.  
order      scraps on the floor like a rat, if he gets any at all. He’s here with no on  
tend to his wound, and somehow, he’s fucking *healing*. With no medic  
salves. He doesn’t even have clean rags.  
nd’s        Meanwhile, Rissa is upstairs with the best mender in Fourth Kingdo  
ie’s        being tended to night and day, getting all the best medicines and being  
perfectly clean, and she’s *dying*.  
              How the fuck is that right? How is that *fair*?  
n,         I stab the needle through his scabbed-over skin. Hard. I start threadi  
making him bleed, tugging the thick string in tight loops and sloppy sl  
out of     His skin goes bloody and tight, stretching at wrong angles, and I shoul  
some sort of vindication every time he makes a noise of pain, but I fee  
: her to nothing.  
ady        Nothing but this helpless rage.  
              I don’t like feeling helpless. I’m supposed to make others feel that w  
was a damn mercenary for fuck’s sake. I made men piss their pants jus  
me offbeing in the same room with them. I’m not supposed to be the helpless  
              I continue to stitch up the wound in a crass, painful crisscross. I just  
lancing deep into his skin and pulling as tight as I can, making blood s  
by         down from all the different spots I’ve pierced him through.  
              “This making you feel better?” the asshole asks.  
              “Sure fucking does,” I lie.

I do another stitch. Get another flinch.

“No, it doesn’t,” Manu says quietly, and I want to punch him in the fucking mouth so he can’t say anymore stupid shit.

I feel his eyes on my face as I continue to stab. Thread. Pull.

With his teeth clenched in pain, he says, “I am sorry. For what happened, I her. And I deserve it. All of it.”

My hand pauses. Gaze stuck on the seeping blood.

“I don’t fall for that martyr shit.”

He gives off a bitter laugh. “I’m no martyr, Captain. I’m just a man who can admit when he’s wrong, and I was wrong.”

I stab again. Close enough to the other puncture that it ruins the stitch. “That’s not going to save you.”

“I know,” he says with resolve.

“Then why fucking bother?”

He lifts his other shoulder in a shrug. “My sister was the only family member who ever cared about me. I was born without magic. That was my first mistake in my family’s eyes. My second mistake was marrying another man. My father didn’t take too kindly to *that*, because he wanted me to bind to a woman who could birth heirs. My third mistake was watching Kai married off to a disgusting suitor and not stepping in.”

“You think I give a shit?”

“No, but Kaila always gave a shit. When she became queen, she was taking care of me. Still trusting me, even when I’d let her down. I vowed never to let her down again. To always trust her, to carry out everything she needed.”

“Yeah, like kidnapping Auren and sending her to her death.”

He cringes. “I swore blind loyalty to my sister. It wasn’t personal.”

“If you turn a blind eye in the name of loyalty, then you don’t deserve to see.”

Manu goes quiet.

I know what loyalty is. I’m loyal to the Wrath. I’m loyal to Rip. All of them. Every single one, have done fucked-up shit. But I *never* turned my head. I didn’t have to look. I always watched head-on. If you’re going to commit a crime, you better look it right in the face. Because if you can’t, then you know not to fucking do it.

“You would do it again,” I say, because we both know it’s true. “Do not pretend otherwise.”

He actually has the honesty to shrug. "I like Auren. But I love my si  
She needed it to be done, so I did it."

"And an innocent woman is going to die because of it. Auren nearly  
too, while you fucking watched."

ened to His face has gone sallow. "I regret that more than you will believe."

I shake my head, holding up the needle to stab him again, but I stop.  
suddenly don't want to do it anymore. Don't want to be here. Don't wa  
listen to him. With a snarl, I yank off the needle and leave the loose thi  
who dangle, getting stuck in one of the streams of blood. I shove the needle  
into the pouch in my pocket and move toward the cell door.

h. "Auren," Manu suddenly says. "Is she okay?"

"You don't fucking care about her either," I snarl, feeling even more  
wound up.

"I do, unfortunately," Manu replies with a rueful smile. "That's the  
/ I had problem. It would be so much easier if I didn't care. I think you of all j  
: understand that, Captain."

r man. I glare at him, saying nothing. Then I turn and kick his food tray on  
myselfway out the cell door. After locking him back up, I stomp away, feelin  
la be better than when I first walked in here. Feeling fucking *worse*.

Because he's right. It would all be so much easier if I didn't care.

s still But I found a Yellow Bell growing up out of the ground despite the  
ed to surroundings, and as soon as I decided I wanted to pick it up and keep  
she was ruined. Ruined with fucking caring for her.

And now I can't stop.

I can't stop, and she can't keep going.

So what's the fucking point.

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“And an innocent woman is going to die because of it. Auren nearly did too, while you fucking watched.”

His face has gone sallow. “I regret that more than you will believe.”

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“Auren,” Manu suddenly says. “Is she okay?”

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“I do, unfortunately,” Manu replies with a rueful smile. “That’s the problem. It would be so much easier if I didn’t care. I think you of all people understand that, Captain.”

I glare at him, saying nothing. Then I turn and kick his food tray on my way out the cell door. After locking him back up, I stomp away, feeling no better than when I first walked in here. Feeling fucking *worse*.

Because he’s right. It would all be so much easier if I didn’t care.

But I found a Yellow Bell growing up out of the ground despite the shitty surroundings, and as soon as I decided I wanted to pick it up and keep it, I was ruined. Ruined with fucking caring for her.

And now I can’t stop.

I can’t stop, and she can’t keep going.

So what’s the fucking point.



## CHAPTER 25

AUREN

“Stay down.”  
Wick’s mouthed order seems loud, even though he’s silent. He’s gripping my arm like he’s nervous that I’ll move, but we need to stay absolutely still.

The forest is veiled with thick gray mist that we can barely see through. The ground is wet and dense with underbrush. I’m flat on my belly, hands braced against the mud and grass as I stare through the haze.

Ahead of us, a hundred Stone Swords march.

I can feel their every step reverberating up my perched limbs. Their muffled conversations are trapped in the humidity, murmured words I’m unable to decipher. They keep to their winding path, which is barely more than a game trail, and I watch the procession of their blotched silhouette with wariness.

Around us, pinpricks of phosphorescence shine mutely from the tips of grassy spires, frosting the air with a blue glow that makes the soldiers’ shadows look even eerier.

The branchless trees that grow here are shaped like squiggles, as if a

took up a quill and darted it left and right over the paper, bending the l soft curves all the way to the ground. Most of the sunlight is blocked b each tree has a single giant leaf sprouting from its top, opening like a s and holding pearly blooms in its pocket that bugs and birds keep flying

It's the strangest-looking forest I've ever been in, and peppered all a me, hidden in the brush, are the other Vulmin lying in wait too. We're watchful and silent, twelve of us hidden in this murky gloom.

I'm glad the mist obscures us, but we'll be spotted if we move or ma sound. So I force my breaths to stay even, force my body to stay frozen place.

Beside me, Wick almost seems to blend into nature itself. As if he's to hiding, used to becoming as still as the trees. Droplets of moisture a beading up against his russet skin, and his heavy brow is pulled down i concentration as his muddy eyes stare through the grass.

Things have smoothed out between us since our rocky start.

Over the course of the week that we've been traveling together, I've able to observe him. The rebel leader seems to be good at what he does: knows Annwyn like the back of his hand, and he doesn't dive headfirst: fights or kill without thought. Instead, he considers every move with se calculation and seems to put the other Vulmin before his own safety.

After leaving Geisel, we met up with the rest of his group outside th Ever since, we've been on the move, sleeping outside beneath the stars riding each day as we travel toward one of their safe houses.

nt.  
I know

igh, the  
aced

But we keep getting deterred with the presence of more Stone Sworn the road. I think it's safe to guess that word of what happened in Geise spread, and the royal guards are searching for me.

This group of soldiers nearly snuck up on us.

m  
ore  
s with

Luckily, we'd stopped to rest the horses when our scout spotted ther only had minutes to take our horses off the path, and then we crouched here to hide and watch. Watch, but not intervene. Not be seen. Those a Wick's orders.

s of

I look over at him and make the smallest gesture at the soldiers, but shakes his head sternly and mouths, *no magic*.

He wants to go undetected, wants us to get to our destination withou anyone being able to track where we've been, so I understand the need hide out of sight. Still, it's frustrating to do nothing when a threat is so

i child

ine in have to huddle here and watch enemies who might be searching for me  
ecause they tromp by, their booted steps sloshing through the muck.

hell Frustration bubbles through my blood.

g into. Apparently, it's my fate for kings and queens to see me as a threat, r  
round matter what world I'm in.

all All I want to do is find Slade.

It should be simple. I should be able to travel across Annwyn, search  
ake a the sky for a rip. I should be able to question people and try to figure o  
n in to get back to him. With the magic here in Annwyn, there *has* to be a v  
Someone did it before, even if I don't remember how. I still ended up i  
used as a girl, so I'm determined to make it happen again. But the circumsta  
re here have made it more difficult.

in Bright side? Even though these Stone Swords and politics are compl  
things, I'm still traveling, still able to cover ground. So I'm making pro  
in my search. I won't let these soldiers or anyone else stop me from my

I know Slade, so I know he's out of his mind trying to get to me. I k  
s. He that he feels the same restlessness, the same fierce worry and furious  
t into determination that I do.

erious Nothing will be right until we're reunited.

I look down at the gold that's slicked against my palms, at the lines  
e city. running through it. We'll find each other. He's already a part of me, in  
s and ways than one.

When Wick's hand suddenly tenses on my arm, my thoughts are tor  
ds on away, and I wrench up my gaze.

I has Instantly, I notice the source of his unease. One of the Stone Swords  
walked away from the trail.

He's coming this way.

n. We I can see the bulky lines of his armor through the mist, the shape of  
l down sword strapped to his back. My breath sucks into my chest as I press h  
re against the ground. I can feel the tension in the rest of the group grow t  
than the condensed air.

he The guard continues to walk toward us, steps sucking into the mud a  
grass swishes at his knees. My heartbeat comes up into my throat, my  
it sharpened as I track his movements through the haze. More gold smea  
l to against my palms, roots of rot ready to dig into the ground.

near. I He's coming closer.

Closer.

as            My eyes dart to Wick, but he jerks his head again, telling me to wait. Every single Vulmin is probably ready to spring into action, the nerves group winding together like a tangible knot.

10            He's ten steps away now. If he gets much closer, he'll see us.

              Seven steps.

              Five.

ning        He abruptly stops.

ut how     I don't breathe or blink. If he thought he saw something and has con-  
vay.        to search more thoroughly, I'll have to use my magic on him. I can't a-

in Orea     Wick's hand digs into my arm even harder, but I shoot him a look. C  
nces        gathers beneath my hands, congealing in a puddle, readying...

              A stream of piss abruptly hits the ground in front of us with a splash

licating    Oh.

ogress     All the tension whooshes out of me, and Wick's grip loosens. My ne-  
y goal.    wrinkles as the stench of urine wafts over us, so strong it makes my ey-  
now        water. If the guard took three more steps, he'd probably be peeing righ-  
              Wick's head.

              Might be kind of funny.

of rot     Laughter threatens to bubble up my throat at the thought, but I bite r  
more      and hold it down. It's probably not the best time for that.

n            The Stone Sword pees for a *long* time. So long that it's almost impre-  
              Though if I get so much as a drip of it splashed on me, it's really going  
sour my mood.

; has      Finally, the stream cuts off, and luckily, I'm drip-free. I watch his b-  
              he stuffs himself back into his pants and then turns away. He walks ov-  
              rejoins the others, his form once more masked through the brume as he  
back in line.

the        A breath of relief flows past my lips, and Wick and I exchange a loc-  
arder      *That was close.*

thicker    The rotted gold on the ground continues to lie in wait as I monitor th-  
              of the royal guard. The power sings to me in a hushed whisper, like a s-  
is the     melody only I can hear.

focus    I like the sound. But I don't let it take over like I did in Geisel.

rs         After a few more minutes, the last soldier finally passes by, and ever-  
              grows quiet and still once again. Wick, however, doesn't indicate for u-  
move quite yet. My body is cramping from holding position, and my c-



are soaked, but we wait until he lets out the softest birdcall to signal us of the move.

I get up with a stretch, trying to relieve my tense muscles. I dry up n gold, letting it sink back into my skin, and then together, our group sta picking our way through the forest.

The other Vulmin nod to me, letting me and Wick pass them to take lead. They keep their distance as we walk. Actually, they keep their dis ne over pretty much always.

void it. They watch me with the same awe as the people in the field did. For Gold most part, they treat me with a sort of reverence that keeps me separate them. They seem to think of me as another leader alongside Wick.

I don't know how to feel about that. I'm not sure how Wick feels ab either.

I keep watching him out of the corner of my eye, trying to determin es bothers him that his people are looking to me. I've seen nothing so far, t on don't know him well enough to read his expressions, so I keep my gua

Because one thing that usually threatens a man is the thought of beir replaced by a woman.

ny lip Not that I *want* to lead the rebels, but I don't want to lead a kingdon either, and that doesn't seem to be stopping the fae monarchy from try: assive. kill me.

to It would be really great if monarchs could stop wanting me dead.

At least I have the most powerful king of them all on my side. When oots as and I find each other, he's going to be so pissed at this King Carrick.

er and I'd like to see the Stone King try to go up against my King Rot. Can e falls doesn't stand a chance.

Pride flutters in my chest.

ok. *I will find you*, I promise silently.

I don't care how many cities I have to visit, how many fae I need to ie rest —I'm going to figure out how to get to him.

ilent I let magic breathe out of me, wrapping around my wrists to keep m busy. I manipulate the rivulets, making them braid around my arm, the motions keeping me occupied, keeping me centered.

rything It's been a week since Geisel, a week since Nenet was killed. I've b is to trying to get my bearings during these endless hours of travel, not only lothes Annwyn or the Vulmin or Wick, but with myself too.

And I've been doing what Nenet told me to.

to I listen.

I listen to the Vulmin day and night, gleaning any information I can from them. It's a bit like feeling my way through a strange house in the dark because everything is unfamiliar. So every conversation I overhear, even in a new place that we pass, I try to take it all in and learn about Annwyn and the Vulmin as much as I can.

And when I'm not listening to them, I'm listening to *me*.

Whenever I get a chance to go off alone, I use my magic. I listen to the new seductive call that purrs through the rot. I've found that it's not unrelated from my gold's push for destruction, and I mastered that once, so I can master it too. I practice as often as I can, letting it leak out of me, just to reel it back in. I learned my lesson again in Geisel—that I either control my power or control me.

And I won't let anything control me ever again.

I'm not sure how I have Slade's magic embedded with mine, but I suspect it has something to do with that piece of rot that stayed inside of me. It's a deadly, heady power, and I *have* to keep hold of the reins. They've meshed together somehow, the rot coming out every time I call to my own power. They're intertwined, as if my gold and his rot are one.

I like knowing that even apart, I have a piece of him with me. It's a comforting presence to have his magic woven with mine, as if it's reminding me that we'll never be truly ripped apart from one another.

Tilting my head up, I peer up at the fragments of sky through the gaps between the trees as I walk. It's my constant habit. I'm always looking up. Always searching for a rip.

Always hoping I'll see one.

Wick looks up with me, probably wondering why I keep doing it, but he doesn't ask, and I don't give up the information.

We're quiet as we make our way through the twisting grove, just in case there are any lingering Stone Swords, but we make it back without issue. The horses are right where we left them around a shallow gully, their appearances stark against the white tree trunks, their colors cutting through the mist. Seeing them is always a jolting reminder that I'm in Annwyn and not Cael because they're so much more colorful and unique here.

Blush, the horse I've been riding, has pale gray hair with stripes of color that run down her sides. The prism streaks are also threaded through her mane and tail, which shine beautifully at night.

Wick's mount is the boldest looking. Instead of swirls or stripes or speckles like the other horses, it has a tri-color of harsh blocks. Brown hindquarters, black for its middle, and red at the front. Its muzzle and eyes are completely red, the very same color as dripping blood.

It's a bit off-putting.

As we gather around our horses, Ludogar, Wick's right hand, comes walking over. He has shrewd teal eyes and ocean-spray hair the color of the sea, with a foamy white at the scalp. It's in the same style as Wick, with sides of his head shaved short, and a long strip down the middle that here leaves hanging over his right ear.

I haven't been around him much. He often travels ahead or patrols with us when we rest. He seems to be as busy and serious as the leader himself, always with some job to do.

I give my horse a pat while Ludogar stops beside Wick. "This is the group that's been headed in the same direction as us," he says, voice dripping with suspicion. "Where do you think they're going?"

Wick wipes at his muddied shirt. "Has to be the capital."

I peer around my horse to see Ludogar frown. "But why? There have been way too many reports of him calling for more guards to return there. Why did he draft so many over the past couple of months? What the hell is the capital doing with so many soldiers?"

"We're going to find out when we get there," Wick tells him, and I feel my eyes flick over to me. I pretend that I'm not eavesdropping as I swing my legs back into the saddle.

"I don't like it," Ludogar says. "Something is happening and we need to find out what it is."

"We will."

Wick's determined answer seems to satisfy Ludogar, because the man nods and walks off to his own horse. Within minutes, we're all mounted. Our Wick leads the way, steering us in a slightly different direction than the other soldiers without going too far off course.

I ride beside him, maneuvering around the trees and the thickest patches of glowing grass, gaze scanning through the heavy mist. My shirt is covered in mud and starting to dry against my skin in scratchy patches. I wipe at it, but it just smears even more.

Wick looks over and clears his throat. "We'll get to the safe house before nightfall," he assures me, expression looking sympathetic. "I know it's

hard week of travel as we head toward Werrith.”

for its “I’m not bothered by the travel,” I tell him, and I mean it. Because s  
nane more of Annwyn is...magical. Even when the mist feels like it’s trying  
choke me, even when I’m covered in mud, I’m still very much taken w  
how beautiful it is here. The colors are alive, the air is sweeter, the bre  
seem softer. The land itself thrums with life and power. It’s so very dif  
from Orea.

h the Wick nods and we fall back into silence, which is what usually ends  
e happening. While things between us have been smoother, there’s an  
awkwardness that seems to exist, like he doesn’t quite know how to tal  
while me.

ys It’s not like the other Vulmin—they keep me set apart out of reverer  
Wick seems to do it because he’s guarded. He watches me, and I watch  
secondand it’s like we’re dancing around each other, trying to figure each oth  
ropped. I don’t get a malicious sense from him, but I definitely don’t trust hi  
either. That’s why I’ll keep listening. Keep trying to observe everythin  
about him. Although, I suppose the leader of a massive rebellion woul  
e been reason to be guarded.

Why has But so do I.

arrick He’s true to his word though, because we reach the safe house by ni  
just like he said.

feel his By the time the mist finally thins, I feel soaked, even through my cl  
myself The forest has changed, giving way to branched-out trees. They look n  
like the ones in Orea, with sharp green leaves and rough bark, and ther  
dusting of moss along the ground that has sprigs of purple flowers swi  
through.

Our horses clomp over the stubby grass that no longer glows, and m  
ale stomach rumbles with hunger. I’m looking forward to eating and clean  
ed, and and then passing out on any surface other than the dirt ground.

e Stuffed right in the middle of the wooded area, we come upon the  
sprawled-out safe house. It’s in the shape of a horseshoe, and it seems  
t of the sole purpose for being built was to wrap around a cluster of giant green  
red in boulders that match the moss at our feet.

t, but it The house is all one level, the roof low like it doesn’t want to compe  
with the towering trees. It has curved gray siding that’s only interrupte  
y the thin slats of windows as narrow as my arm, which doesn’t allow m  
been aa glimpse inside.

Probably good for a rebel house.

eeing We leave the horses in a corral and connected stable, its roof ribbed  
; to speckled with fallen leaves. There are other horses already in the stalls  
with food and water waiting in the troughs.

ezes When we head for the main house, I can see light coming from the s  
fferent windows and hear noises from inside.

This safe house already has Vulmin in it.

up I glance to Wick with questions in my gaze, but he gives me an  
lk to indecipherable look before his eyes fall to the cloak around my should  
“Pull your hood up.”

My back immediately stiffens. “Why?”

ice. “Just keep it up for now.”

n him, He turns and starts walking off before I can ask him more, and my n  
er out. skitter like tiny feet crawling down my back. I subconsciously pull at t  
m yet ribbons wound around my waist, debating for a moment if I should sta  
g I can behind, but then I tug my hood over my head and start forward.

d have I mentally list all the gold I have on me. Arm cuffs. Thick belt. Clas  
end of my braid. Bracelets around my wrists. All this gold I have at my  
disposal to use at night, just in case. So that I’m not helpless even whe  
ghtfall sun has set and I can’t call new gold forward.

It’s comforting, because I don’t like what’s happening right now. Do  
ak. like this ominous order to wear my hood and keep concealed. This dan  
more house was supposed to feel *safe*. Irritation prickles through me, and I g  
e’s a the back of Wick’s head as I walk.

As we head for the curved entrance, I keep my eyes peeled. My head  
swings left and right, and I’m half-expecting someone to jump out from  
y behind a tree and attack me, but no one does.

We tread past the giant boulders, our reflections gleaming in their ja  
ing up surface. There are spokes of glowing lanterns stabbed into the ground  
feet, their flames flickering in the breeze. At the inside center of the hc  
like its bend lies the front door, and there’s a broken-winged bird symbol carv  
n the low-hanging eave just above it.

But my gaze hooks onto the fae standing there waiting for us.

I stay at the back of the group, watching as the male smiles at our  
ete approach. His hair looks like the head of a broccoli stalk, tufted in clus  
d by emerald-green florets, his eyes matching that very same hue.  
uch of

“It’s good to see you again so soon,” he says in greeting.

Wick clasps his arm. "It was short notice, so I apologize, Dren."

and "No apology needed. The house is always full anyway, so what's a f  
, plus more?" he asks jovially before turning and opening the door.

I frown. *Why is Wick making me hide if this fae seems so welcoming*  
kinny He leads the way, and our group files into a wide-open room with at  
dozen people inside. Some of them are eating at long benches, others a  
propped up against the walls, a few are sleeping in various spots along  
floor, and there's a group playing cards and drinking.

ers. The bent room feels a bit like standing in the middle of a curving riv  
it glows from the flames in the fireplace and a few sconces on the wall  
making it feel warm and dim. There's also a medley of furniture inside  
mismatched chairs and sofas, rugs and pillows, benches and tables. All  
erves different shapes, sizes, colors, and material. As if they gathered whatev  
he they could and stuffed it in here to accommodate as many people as po

y As our group clusters in, a few of the fae call out greetings, obvious  
familiar with one another. I continue to stay behind everyone, keeping  
p at the back to the wall, my every sense on alert. I make my gold bracelets me  
7 down, pooling the liquid into my hands, tiny lines of rot swimming thr  
n the that flick against my skin.

"Got more of us here than usual. Did that repair up in Breton Villa  
on't you asked. Took a lot of hands. The Stone Swords did a number on it,'  
nn safe says with a shake of his head. "But we still have plenty of room. There  
lare at in the kitchen, and you can claim whatever open spot you want for slee  
Stay as long as you like."

d Wick nods but tells him, "One night will be plenty, and I'm hoping  
n we leave, you all will come with us."

Dren looks over, frowning with confusion. "Come with you? Why v  
de we all come with you?"

at our "Because we have a sign from the goddesses that it's time to do mor  
use's Quiet confusion stuffs itself into every corner of the room. "What si  
ed into Wick shifts to the side pointedly and turns around to face me, and th  
of our group steps aside too. "Auren?" he murmurs.

I blink in surprise, uneasiness shifting through my gut. But as he cor  
to look at me expectantly, I relent and tug back my hood, letting it fall.

ters of The moment I do, all eyes swing to me, and I hear several people ga

Dren's eyes have gone as wide as saucers as he stares, the blood dra  
from his face. "What... She's *gold*. She...she has gold skin like..."

“Like the Lyäri Ulvêre,” Wick finishes.

Someone drops something to the floor, and a clatter fills the room. S  
to shatter everyone’s shock into a thousand pieces.

Dren shakes his head in disbelief. “But she’s dead. The little golden  
at least a was gone. Is this some kind of a trick?”

“No trick, and she’s not dead.” Wick glances at me, something  
the indiscernible in his eyes as he watches me. “She found her way back.”

Every gaze in the room is stuck to me, their unblinking regard clingi  
er, but my face. Even the fae who were sleeping have been kicked awake, so l  
s, have *everyone*’s undivided attention.

Irritation swivels up from the scrutiny, tension tightening in my sho  
l as I give Wick a look. He didn’t have me wear my hood to conceal my  
er protection, but so that he could make a dramatic spectacle out of me.

Anger claws down my back, leaving me to fume with the scrapes.

“Auren Turley,” Dren breathes. “How can this be?”

“The fates,” Wick answers, tone full of authority. “You know what t  
lt means, don’t you?”

Everyone waits, still and watchful.

Wick’s gaze seems to scan over each and every one of them. “It’s ti  
ge like us to mobilize.”

Several fae look between each other with concern. A few nod in soli  
’s food Dren blanches. “*Mobilize*? But we work in the shadows, Wick. You kr  
ep. Vulmin do everything we can, but what you’re asking...”

Wick swings a hand in my direction. “Look at her, Dren. This is the  
when *Ulvêre*. She’s returned, and she’s here for a reason. It’s our time,” he s  
with vehemence. “With her, we can finally take a stand. No more shad  
would She’s brought the dawn with her. Every single Vulmin knows her story  
will help bring us together and forge the way.”

I grind my teeth to keep from snarling. I knew what Wick was hopir  
gn?” when I joined him, but I made my stance clear on being treated like a t  
ie rest a prop, and I thought he understood that.

Obviously, he doesn’t.

It’s one thing to agree to help, it’s another to be exploited without cc  
The gold in my hand grows hotter, flamed by my ire.

“We’re ready,” Wick goes on firmly, feet braced, shoulders back. “I  
ining time to fight. Time to take back Annwyn. We need everyone to band to

now. Who will join us? Who will step out of the shadows and follow  
seems Annwyn's new dawn?"

girl Silence squeezes between every fae. Their expressions wring out,  
divulging their inner thoughts, gazes still poring over my face. They're  
surprise, acknowledgment, anticipation, and all of these things douse the  
the room. Beside me, I can feel Wick's charged expectation like a bolt  
lightning ready to surge into the ground.

ing to At the back, someone steps forward, still clutching the cards he'd be  
I truly playing. "I'll step out of the shadows."

"Me too," someone else says.

oulders "And me."

self for "I will too."

"I'll stand with the Lyäri."

One by one, they all give their oaths. Like a trickle of promises raining  
over us, saturating the entire group and buoying them. While for me, it  
this like a weight, making it hard to keep my head above water.

Dren nods, one final drop from the downpour to condense around us  
"Alright," he says soberly. "The Werrith Vulmin are with you."

me for



idarity.

ow the I stand outside the rebel house, arms crossed, leaning against the sm  
boulders. I'm tucked between a couple of the smaller ones, perfect to p  
Lyäri on as I watch the narrow window ahead. It shows a glimpse of the kitc  
ays inside, shows the back of Wick's head where he sits at the table with th  
ows. others, his black hair molded in a tight braid and tied off at his neck.

7. She We've been traveling together for a week. A whole week, and not on  
he deign to tell me about this plan of his to incite more Vulmin to join  
ing for tonight.

ool or I feel used.

Used and utterly *pissed*.

onsent. When I see him stand from the table and walk out of the kitchen, I s  
right here, because I know he'll come to me.

Sure enough, a couple minutes later, I hear the door open and shut. I  
t's booted steps. Then, he appears in front of me. An awkward silence blo  
together night air, staining us as we stare at one another.

"You haven't eaten yet."



“Too busy chewing on that display you orchestrated,” I retort.

A tic in his jaw jumps, but I can see he’s not surprised at my anger. I expected it. “I needed them to see you.”

“You should have asked me first,” I grit out. “What you did in there through *not* okay.”

His expression hardens with irritation. “You joined us, Auren. I thought you knew what you were getting into.”

I surge up, pushing away from the boulder to square off with him. “It’s clear that I had no interest in being a symbol or being used, but that’s exactly what you made me feel like tonight,” I fume. “You had plenty of opportunities all week to discuss this with me. To speak to me about the details of yours.”

“I don’t discuss plans with new Vulmin,” he says evenly, as if I’m being the unreasonable one. “I can’t divulge information to you. Especially when you turned me down the first time I asked for you to join us.”

My eyes narrow. “So because I didn’t leap at the chance to join the Vulmin when you first asked, you’re acting like an ass?”

Anger flushes over his cheeks. “You have to earn my trust. Just like anyone else who joins.”

“Trust goes both ways. And if you *ever* use me like that again without asking me first, you will regret it.”

He glares with intensity. “Funny. That sounded like a threat.”

“Oh good. Your ears are working, then.”

Tension mounts between us, braiding as thick and tight as his hair. I brace my arms in front of me, nails biting into my skin as I stare him down.

Wick blasts out a breath of frustration, his eyes glinting off the sparks that flame from the short lanterns dotted around the path. “You may be the one who leads the Vulmin, but I lead the Vulmin, and I have to act in their best interest. Right now, we know that *this* is the time we need to strike. You’re here for a reason, and everyone will see that. As word spreads of your arrival—and it *is* spreading—I can finally get everyone to band together. To not solely work behind the curtains, but to oppose the monarchy head-on.”

I can see the fervency and belief of his words stitched into every line of his face.

“I respect your role as their leader. What I *don’t* respect is being used without you consulting me first. I’m not a tool, Wick. I’m not just going to be used.”

stand still and look golden so that Vulmin will line up behind you. If you want my help, then you fucking ask me for it.”

After the eye-opening events of Geisel, I *want* to help his cause, but like this. I’m also not foolish—I know it’s better to journey with him a search Annwyn for Slade. I don’t want to travel alone, but I will if I have to. Our gazes stay locked on one another, this battle of wills caught in a clash.

“Just give me the respect of talking to me about things that involve me directly. That’s all I’m asking. I’m not your enemy, Wick.”

My words seem to disarm him, and he finally drops his weaponized expression. “I know you’re not my enemy.”

“Then act like it.”

A puff of air escapes him, and the tense line of his brow eases. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Auren.”

His apology takes me off guard, and my arms drop as I shift on my feet. He lets out a tired sigh and runs a hand down his hair. “You want to see the plan?”

“Yes.”

“The plan was to stop at all the major Vulmin houses. To avoid the ones where the Stone Swords have the biggest presence, until there’s enough of us that it won’t matter. To gather more and more of us together until we get to the way to Lydia—the kingdom’s capital. Then, challenge the Stone Kings. He tells me, his eyes flaring with determination. “Show the Carricks that we won’t stand for their regime any longer. That we’re going to take back Annwyn.”

He’s talking about full-out war. Marching on the capital is no minor feat. His eyes bounce between mine expectantly, but my lips are pressed together. The only sound is faint chirping coming from somewhere in the forest, though my mind is loud with the reverberations of his expectations.

At my continued silence, his shoulders sag ever so slightly. I watch his chest deflate, letting me really see the *person* instead of just the leader. Giving me a glimpse of who he is behind his stoicism and allowing me to see the cracks of his vulnerability and desperation beneath.

His tone shifts to something softer, his eyes carrying an impassioned honesty within their depths. “They *kill* us. Turley sympathizers, Oreaan fae who dares go against them. At the first spark of magic revealed, our children are stolen and forced to work for the monarchy. They keep the

ou dissenters starved and tax us down to our teeth. They keep their boots on  
necks, cutting off our very air. More fae and Oreans die every year. More  
not our magic and land dies too. We have to *do* something,” he says, his tone  
s I distressed, insistent. “We have to stand against this. Who better than a  
ve to. broken-winged bird to show everyone how to rise? Who better than the  
i silent Ulvêre to remind them that the darkness can’t stop the dawn?” His eye  
between mine. “We need your help, Auren. It can only be you.”

ne. His words pile on top of me like the bricks of his torn-down wall, each  
stacking over my frustration and uncertainty until it crumbles beneath the  
glare. weight of his plea.

I blow out a long breath, the rest of my anger tumbling out like drop  
pebbles left to scatter. “Okay. I’ll help you. Because I know what it’s like  
i’re live under the thumb of a controlling, oppressive king,” I begin. “But I  
looking for someone, and he’s my priority. I can’t promise I’ll be here  
feet. forever. I can’t even promise that I’ll be by your side when you get to  
know But in the meantime, I will help you try to unite the Vulmin. That’s what  
can do.”

He sucks in a breath, surprise and renewed optimism flaring through his  
cities gaze. “Okay.”

h of us “But from now on, no surprises,” I add with a sharp edge to my words.  
get all you have a plan that involves me, you talk to me about it *first*.”

ing,” “Deal,” he says, holding out his hand.

at we Our palms meet, and we nod to each other, the weighty significance  
truce settling between us.

“Deal.”

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dissenters starved and tax us down to our teeth. They keep their boots on our necks, cutting off our very air. More fae and Oreans die every year. More of our magic and land dies too. We have to *do* something,” he says, his tone distressed, insistent. “We have to stand against this. Who better than a broken-winged bird to show everyone how to rise? Who better than the Lyäri Ulvêre to remind them that the darkness can’t stop the dawn?” His eyes flick between mine. “We need your help, Auren. It can only be you.”

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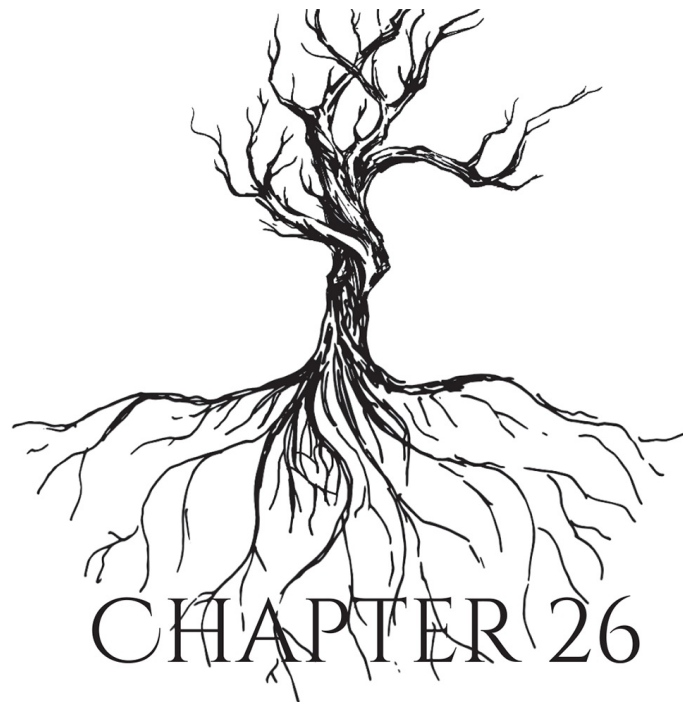
He sucks in a breath, surprise and renewed optimism flaring through his gaze. “Okay.”

“But from now on, no surprises,” I add with a sharp edge to my words. “If you have a plan that involves me, you talk to me about it *first*.”

“Deal,” he says, holding out his hand.

Our palms meet, and we nod to each other, the weighty significance of our truce settling between us.

“Deal.”



## SLADE

**T**he many rivers of Fourth Kingdom curve below me, and I fly over watery lines as they bend through the glittering city. I direct Crest toward the dark, massive shape of Banded Mountain that stands behind Brackhill, its presence looming over the castle like a shadowed

The moat seems to bleed black, its thick trench slashed deep around castle. Brackhill itself is an inky presence, its tall, smooth walls shining at night, its pointed turrets as sharp as a quill's tip, writing upon the dark with ominous warning.

I fly around to the back of the scrawling spires, to the flat-top roof of a private entrance to the castle. Crest lands, and the watching guards immediately come up to bow. "Your Majesty."

I give them a nod and begin to dismount, but I've barely gotten both feet on the ground before I have a scowling, furious man in front of me. Grand and beard disheveled, brown eyes torn through with bloodshot veins.

"Digby."

"Where is she?" he demands. "Where's Auren?"

He looks far better now than he did before. The beating he took at the hands of Midas took a toll on his body, but he's healed since then.

On the outside, at least.

I see a fury and desperation in his expression that's similar to what I see in my own chest.

"She's gone."

I see the punch coming, but I don't even try to deflect it. I welcome it that lands on my jaw. My head snaps to the side, an ache bursting through my face, but I welcome it because I *deserve* it. Because *she* deserves the love and care and protection and love from someone who would risk punching King Rot in the face in my behalf.

When he raises his fist to hit me again, another hand shoots out and stops it, stopping Digby before he can swing again.

"That's enough," Ryatt commands. "You got one hit, but you can't let me let the shit out of my brother." His dark green gaze moves to me, trailing down. "Although, it looks like somebody else already did that. What happened to you?"

"Nothing."

My brother scoffs but lets the matter drop. I'm still bruised and sore from the fight at Breakwater, but the pain has moved to a duller ache, the memory faded.

ver the  
est  
; Digby yanks out of Ryatt's hold and shoves away. The man paces, still limping slightly, though he tries to hide it. "This is your fault." He hurled his accusation right at me like another landed hit.

guard.  
the "It's not," Ryatt defends. "I told you what happened. Slade saved her. That was all he could do."

g in the  
sky "But she's *gone*. Without anyone around to make sure that he actually save her. Without me there to protect her. So it *is* his fault. She was taken while staying under his roof, under his protection, and instead of getting back, he shoved her somewhere none of us can go! Who's going to protect her? Who's going to make sure she's okay?" His voice cracks.

The man cracks with it.

1 feet  
ay hair A ragged breath leaks through that he can't seem to stop. And behind my eyes, I see the insurmountable grief and fear that he feels for her. See just how much she means to him.

I wish he would punch me again.

"Enough, Digby," Ryatt tells him.

ie hand "No, he's right," I say. "His anger is pointing in the right direction."

My brother shoots me a glower, but Digby looks dubious. “What?” I feel in “You think I don’t agree? You think I haven’t realized how thoroughly failed her? I *know*,” I tell him, the vehemence of my own self-loathing in my voice. “I know I failed her. I’m not going to ever forgive myself the hit allowing this to happen, and I’m also not going to stop trying to get through my His lips press together, his gaze tracking over my face. “Good,” he loyalty before he turns and storms across the open roof and disappears down the on her spiral staircase.

We both watch him go, and then Ryatt sighs. “He’s been torn up since I told him.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

He gives me a look, and I realize he’s shaved his hair so it’s right at the scalp. His jaw is clean-shaven too. He looks less like me and more like himself.

He walks over to Crest, but the beast snaps his teeth, making Ryatt squint and roll his eyes. “Mean thing, isn’t he? He seems to have done well for himself though.”

Crest huffs and then turns his head to look at me. He leans over and pats my arm until I lift my hand and give him a pet. Ryatt chuckles. “Every fucking timberwing looks at you like you shit out fresh meat.”

I shrug and then pat the beast on the flank. “Go on for a hunt and then come back at the Perch. You did well.”

Crest nudges me one more time and then turns and leaps into the air with feathered wings outstretched, probably already lifting his nose and directing his eyes to search for prey.

I can sense my brother’s gaze rolling over my face. “You let him get in a good one,” he says, motioning toward the mark on my jaw.

I shrug. “It’s deserved.”

“And it looks like you let someone else get in *a lot* of other good ones.”  
“It was days ago.”

He pauses. “Did it help?”

“A bit, yeah.”

I let my eyes drift to the mountain, its silhouette bathed in night’s velvet. “It’s not your fault,” Ryatt finally says. “Auren, Drollard, our mother— It’s not your fault.”

I say nothing.

Fault is there whether someone wants to claim it or not.

I ask. At least Twig wasn't in Drollard when the rip closed. At least the bc  
7 I here and safe, because I can't say the same for his family.

clear "Slade."

for I look over.

her." Ryatt chews on his question before spitting it out. "The rip power?"

growls My teeth grind and I give a terse shake of my head. "Not yet."

he I don't have that power back yet. I can't open a rip yet. It hasn't wor  
yet.

ce I How long until that *yet* disappears completely?

My hand delves into my pocket. Fingers pressing around the cut pie  
ribbon.

his "You saved her life. That's what you need to focus on right now. Th  
power will come back, and as soon as it does, we will get Auren and o  
mother back," he says fervently. "And Digby would rather have Auren  
and somewhere else than dead and here. He'll come around."

stop or you, "Those shouldn't have been her only two options."

He blows out a breath. "You're just as stubborn as he is."

nudges I take my hand out of my pocket, let it hang defeatedly at my side. "  
single going to bed."

He doesn't try to stop me as I walk past him across the roof, my boc  
en rest echoing down the steps of the spiral staircase. At the bottom, I pass my  
haired guard, Marcoul, his pose confident, his expression one of depen  
, familiarity. "Sire," he greets as I enter the corridor. "I'm glad to see yo  
ting his back."

I don't feel like I'm back. I feel like half of me is so far gone I'm ab  
t in a snap from the stretch.

I stride down the dark corridors, and even though I pass more guard  
the way, the castle feels empty.

es." Or maybe that's me.

When I'm shut into my bedroom, I fall into bed fully clothed and att  
to sleep. Except her scent is still clinging to the bed, an echo of her wa  
leaving me feeling cold. I instantly delve my hand back into my pocke  
fingers twisting to that piece of ribbon. If it were just fabric, it would b  
il. going threadbare by now.  
r...

My chest stabs. Rot gnaws like teeth chomping through my veins an  
snapping at muscle and sinew. I have her scent, her ribbon, but not *her*  
this is the last place I saw her. Felt her.



ny's I tear myself from the bed, abruptly getting back to my feet. When I  
in my closet, I yank on fresh clothes, pausing when I see the feathered  
hanging up—the coat she wore when we first met. When her golden au  
softened from the glaring beacon that shot up into the sky.

Calling me to her.

ked Auren's golden glow is all I see when I close my eyes. This cloying,  
agonizing poison stretching through my chest is all I feel. My mother's  
speaking a single word, is all I hear. Her very *last* word before she went  
forever. It all echoes through me, threatening to drive me mad.

ce of The goddesses are cruel.

ie All those years, Auren was here. Right *here*, in Orea. That kills me the  
ur most. The fact that she was just a couple of kingdoms away all that time  
I never knew.

alive Now, she's in the fae realm without me.

I'm My shoulders go tense, veins snapping at my jaw, feeling the suffocating  
emptiness of her absence. Spikes threaten to stab through my spine, pushing  
against my skin in punishment, while the room tilts. It's only once rot  
through the floorboards, making them creak and sag, that I manage to  
myself back together with the clench of my teeth and pull the rot away

ts I can be in constant motion. I can mete out punishment. I can go without  
gray- sleep. What I *can't* do is sit here a moment longer in this quiet, motionless  
dable loathing.

u So despite the tiredness dripping down my bones like tar, I stride out of my  
room with renewed determination. I can't stop. I *won't*. I will keep going  
out to will keep trying. Because I *will* tear a rip through this fucking world so I can  
get to her...

s along Or die trying.



empt

rmth I claw into my depths like a beast raking through my innards with  
t, ferocious urgency. Every raking swipe is agony, but I keep trying to dig  
e that the raw power unearths. That it spill out from my hidden depths.

But it's empty. Dried up.

id Every time I reach for the dregs at my core, I'm only met by a barren  
: And A hollowness where I was once so full, so capable. An enraged bellow

walk escapes my mouth, the anguished sound bouncing off the mountain and  
coat echoing back like a taunt.

ira This place reeks of shit droppings and blood. That's all I've been sn  
for the past three days, every time I come down here.

Here on the dark side of Banded Mountain, where Brackhill Castle c  
, seen and the horizon is crammed full with a thick forest, the timberwin  
s voice, have claimed this as their favored hunting ground. Shoved up against t  
at mute of the mountain where moss-covered boulders and felled trees litter the  
ground, it's the perfect spot for the beasts to protect their kill. There's  
at least one timberwing here in the shadows, lording over their catch as  
he maw chomps through flesh and cartilage, picking carcasses clean until  
ie, and that's left are the bones.

Right now, with dusk fast approaching, there are two of them, one a  
settled behind a cluster of boulders, sharp teeth crunching through its r  
ating can hear the other one every so often too, either stalking prey on the th  
nching forest floor or flying above the trees, the air whistling through its wing  
seeps Crest left earlier with a buck bound in his bite.

yank Every time I hear flapping wings, I half expect Argo to burst through  
trees and land in front of me. But he's probably still on a ship somewh  
hout the fucking ocean, and I don't know what any animal mender will be a  
less do for him.

Yet another thing out of my control.

t of the I've tried to pour out power here every day since I got back, and stil  
ng. I *nothing*. Rot boils in my veins, fueled by my rage, but the well of raw  
) I can stays empty.

It just makes me even more infuriated.

I feel exhaustion tugging at me as incessantly as the wrongness of m  
separation from her. But I stay fastened to the base of this mountain, fa  
over and over again. Because failing is better than giving up. Failing m  
I'm still trying.

emand failing. No one else comes here. The timberwings won't allow it—not  
their preferred handlers or riders. The beasts are far too territorial over  
feed site to tolerate anyone else. The only exception, apparently, is me  
n void. Which is why it's *really* fucking stupid when I hear a timberwing la  
behind me, and then my brother calls out, "You need to rest."

I sigh, dropping my hands down to my sides. "You shouldn't be her

d The female timberwing past the boulders lets off a guttural warning that vibrates through the air. My brother's beast lets out a responding c  
telling both equally bristled. At least Ryatt has the good sense not to dismount  
doesn't, however, have the good sense not to irritate me.

can't be "Judging by the amount of sweat staining your shirt and the pissed c  
gs on your face, I'm going to guess that you've been out here for hours. A  
he base "You know what I like about this side of the mountain?" I say. "The  
e usually no one around to say stupid shit."

always I hear him sigh behind me, and then the trample of his timberwing s  
s their forward, talons scraping over the rocks, its shadow casting over me.

all "Any improvement?" he asks tentatively.

I snap around on my heel with a snarl on my face. "What the fuck do  
lready think?"

neal. I His lips press into a grim line, hands loosely gripping the reins. "I've  
ick trying to give you space since you got back, but your refusal to sleep, t  
s. your constant presence here, your revenge crusade... You murdered the  
Merewens. Rotted half of Third Kingdom. Fucked up Fifth, and none c  
h the made you feel better. You even locked up Queen Kaila's brother."

ere in "He fucking deserves it!" I snarl. "He kidnapped her."

ble to Ryatt raises his hands placatingly. "I get it. I do. But everyone is par  
All throughout Orea, monarchs are dropping like flies and there's unre  
every corner. You're tipping the entire world off the scale."

l, "Let it topple." My words are dark, every bit as black as my withering  
power soul.

His eyes flare. "You don't mean that."

I give a humorless laugh. "You don't think so? Nothing, and I mean  
y *nothing*, matters if I can't get back to her."

iling "Your people, your Wrath?"

neans He still doesn't get it. So I yank up my shirt, exposing my torso.

Letting him *see*.

to stop I hear him suck in a breath, watch as he takes in the mass of black  
even centering around the organ in my chest. A sickly, poisoned heart, with  
this of veins staining out of it like dripping ink. It looks even worse in the  
. daylight.

nd "What is that?"

e." "My rot," I say roughly, letting my shirt drop back down. "It's like i  
rotting me from the inside out. Rotting out my fucking heart."

growl      “Has that ever happened?”

me,        I shake my head.

t. He      “So...why?”

“That piece of rot that was left inside Auren...the piece that I couldn't look out? I think somehow, she's using it through her own power. I saw something again.” in her gold at the Conflux.”

re's        He gapes at me. “She's using your rot?”

“I sensed it inside of her before, but as soon as she went through the steps I felt like someone dug inside my chest and scooped something out. Like there's a chunk that was ripped out. I'm bleeding out rot. It's infecting and affecting my magic, and I swear to fuck, sometimes it twinges, like I can't almost *feel* her. And all of this, it's just a physical manifestation of what I already knew.”

e been     “What?”

o eat,     “That I can't live without her. I won't stand for it, and neither will my

e        The separation is *killing* me, Ry. In more ways than one.”

of that    The blood drains from his face.

When he says nothing, I turn back around, cracking my neck to the side before I stretch out my arms again and try for the thousandth time today to call up the raw power that's abandoned me.

I grit my teeth, my eyes narrowing. Hands shaking with the strain. I feel scales beneath my cheeks scraping beneath the surface of my skin like I want to surge out. But I dig down with intense focus, trying to uncover the magic that's been eluding me for weeks. I pull on the invisible force, but it's like trying to pull up the rope in an empty well. No matter how many times I toss in the bucket and try to drag something out, there's nothing there.

Dizziness suddenly slams into me, and black dots appear in my vision. I feel myself slipping to the right, body ready to fall just like the toppled trees around me. But Ryatt somehow gets to me in a flash, catching me beneath my arms before I can collapse. Slugging his shoulders beneath my draped arm, he forces me upright and pulls me toward his beast. The other timberwing that's still protecting her fresh kill gives a roar of warning that rumbles the air.

I brace my hand on his timberwing's chest, panting for breath. “No, I'm staying.”

t's        “The fuck you are. Now get on, you stubborn ass, before that timberwing decides to come over here.”

“She won’t,” I tell him, though my words are caught through a strait throat and a warbled tongue.

“Yeah, yeah. All things winged adore you. That doesn’t mean she won’t get take a chunk out of *me*.”

He half drags me up onto the saddle, giving my memory whiplash as he recall him doing the very same thing at the Conflux. I feel just as drained now as I did then. More so.

He shoves me upright onto the saddle and then swings up in front of me. Unlike the Conflux, he doesn’t strap me in or brace me before he signals me, timberwing to launch into the air. The beast rises so quickly that I slide backwards, hands flailing as I almost fly right off. At the last second, I grab up the saddle strap, gripping it tight and hauling myself back into the saddle while wind thrashes against my face.

“You asshole!” I shout at Ryatt with a growl.

“If you weren’t already fucking exhausted and then out here draining yourself—with a *rotting fucking heart*, I might add—you wouldn’t have to worry about being too debilitated to stay on a damned saddle,” he tosses back.

Any retort I want to make is made useless as the timberwing gains speed, pushing through the trees and making the air rush past us.

But we both know I can’t *not* drain myself.

I slump as we fly, though I’m careful to keep my fingers clutched around the saddle strap, even with the headache that’s splitting through my skull. I see the inky dots that keep overtaking my vision. I’m jostled when we lance across Brackhill’s rooftop, Ryatt once again dragging me forward until my feet touch the ground, keeping his grip on my collar to make sure I’m not tilting.

I shrug him off, hating the feel of being weak. “I’m good.”

“Alright, then. Come on,” he challenges.

He wastes no time leading me down the spiral staircase, watching me like a hawk over his shoulder, braced to catch me. My sweat-slicked palm grips the railing as my stumbled steps get sloppier by the second, but I stay upright.

The guards nod at us as we pass, not breaking their decorum even though they probably look like shit.

At the corridor, Ryatt stops, waiting for me to catch my breath. “You need to sleep.”

“Can’t,” I gasp out.

ned His jaw works, green eyes frustrated. “Fine. Then you’re going to fu  
eat, at least.”

on’t I blearily follow him, mostly because I just don’t have the energy to  
He brings me down the corridor and another set of stairs and then oper  
s I door to the sitting room we use as our private dining room.

ed Instead of Lu being here, plopping fruit in her mouth, or Judd havin  
feet up on the table, or even Osrik squeezed into one of the chairs and  
me. over reports from the army, the room is empty.

ls his Lu is hunkering down somewhere in Sixth Kingdom, collecting  
information for me on the discontent and Queen Kaila. Judd is probabl  
snatch down at the barracks, and Osrik...

addle Fuck. I need to go see Osrik. Need to check on Lady Rissa.

“Sit,” Ryatt orders, though it’s unnecessary, since I practically heav  
myself into the sofa away from the table, body sagging into the pillow

g I tip my head back on the armrest, intending to close my eyes just fo  
e to second to get my headache to subside. But it must’ve been longer, bec  
es he’s suddenly shoving a plate against my chest, when I didn’t even hea  
collect food. “Eat.”

peed, “I don’t want to eat.”

Ryatt glares at me. “Lu’s not here to tell you off, so I’ll do it. You’v  
travelled all over the fucking kingdom, spreading your rot and going o  
ound damned murder spree, and ever since you’ve been here, you’ve done n  
ull and but drain yourself. You need to *eat* something. You look like shit and y  
l on smell like it too.”

et hit I turn and sniff. Shrug. I’ve smelled worse.

Smelled a lot better too.

He stares down at me, same green eyes as my own, though his are  
narrowed in frustration. “You’re killing yourself trying to create a rip.’

ie like I shrug again.

grips The muscle in his jaw jumps. “Your power probably isn’t replenishi  
pright, because you’ve been running yourself ragged. Stop rotting shit and kil  
ough I people for a week. Eat. Sleep. And don’t try to open a rip for a few day  
either.”

u need *A few days? Is he fucking out of his mind?*

“You expect me to just sit here and do *nothing?*” The very idea of th  
the fae side of me going mental, surging through me with fury, snarlin  
to get to her.

icking His attention flicks down to my arms, and when I follow his gaze, I  
rotted veins twitching erratically over my wrists. I shove down my sleeve  
argue. and snatch at the plate of food. He watches as I yank up the sandwich  
is the together and take a vicious bite.

After that, I realize just how hungry I really am. Ryatt must realize it  
g his because as soon as I've cleared my plate, he's already there to shove a  
poring in its place, along with a cup of water.

By the time I've eaten my fill and drained three cups, my hands are  
longer shaking, the headache has tempered down to a less agonizing throb  
y and I no longer feel like I'm ready to topple over. I can't remember what  
last ate.

"Better?" he asks.

e I grunt in response.

s. "Good." He leans forward in his seat, boots planted on the floor, hands  
r a clasped where they hang between his knees as he looks at me. I can see  
ause trying to go into command mode, because it's an expression I've worn  
r him times when I had to push aside emotions and problem solve. "You need  
rest. Give it three days, Slade. Then you can get back at it. You made it  
for Auren once; you can do it again."

e "Maybe I *can't* do it again," I lob back, voicing my fear. "That was  
n a only time I did it alone. The first time I made a rip, it wasn't just *my* mouth  
othing Ryatt's jaw tightens, a flash of anger passing over his eyes. We don't  
you my father's name. Not ever. If it's at all possible, I think my brother might  
hate him more than I do.

Frustration bubbles up, frothing at my mouth. "I ripped us into this village  
and then I ripped Auren out of it. I don't care what it takes. She's in Auren  
Alone. Neither of us are saying it, but we both know where our mother and  
' the rest of the village went." My eyes latch on to his. "They're back *there*."

ng Ryatt's nails dig into the armrest of his chair, as if he's holding himself  
back, keeping himself seated. "Don't."

ling He doesn't want to think of our mother being back at my father's estate  
/s any more than I do. But if the rip in Drollard closed because I opened it  
one, then it's fair to reason that everyone got tugged back through it and  
right back to where we were before.

at has Right back to that nightmare.

g at me "It was my doing," I tell him. "So I'll fix it."

see He takes in a breath, rubs a hand at the back of his neck as if he's trying to wipe away the tension. I know this is hard for him too. The entire village put fucking loves him, and he protected them fiercely. His bond with our father is unparalleled.

to too, I can't fucking stand his gutted look. It would be better if he was fighting me. Arguing with me. "Where's my brother who's always agreeing with me? I say I've fucked up and needling me about every damn thing he thinks I'm doing wrong?"

brother, Heavy-laden eyes lift as he watches me tread furious steps into the courtyard. "I think we've spent enough of our lives butting heads. Right now, that's all I'm going to help. I want to help fix this. Fix *you*," he says, gesturing towards his chest. "Get our mother back. Help you find Auren."

I stop, dragging my hands down my face.

brother asks "The rip at the Conflux?" he asks.

brother "Closed."

brother "I could check Drollard again..."

brother "It's gone, Ryatt," I tell him. "It's all gone."

brother He lets out a sigh. "Okay. Then you keep trying, but not to the point of exhaustion. It's not helping when you drain yourself. Your magic might need some time to accumulate."

brother "If it doesn't..."

brother His eyes flick down. "You're rotting the upholstery."

brother I yank my hand away from the blackening sofa, the fabric disintegrating under my touch and the wood caving in until I pull the rot back.

brother "You need to rest. I've never seen you this out of it."

brother I know he's right, but all I've managed to get are a few snatches here and there. Mostly down at the timberwings' kill site, where I've passed out several times against boulders and bones.

brother I keep that bit to myself.

brother If I try right now, I know I still won't be able to sleep. My chest fucking hurts. My mind spins. My two sides feel like they're warring with each other and I feel far too empty. Too *alone*.

brother "Can't," I grit out, but then I look at my brother, and an idea comes into my mind. "Maybe I can...if I take the edge off."

Ryatt's eyes narrow. "You want to spar *now*? You look like you're losing your breath away from tipping over."

I shrug. "Fighting helps."



ving to “Fucking hell. *Fine*,” he says as he heaves himself up. “You’re sleep  
ge deprived and your heart is rotting, so I’ll put you on your ass in ten sec  
nother flat.”

I snort. “Sure. Go ahead and tell yourself that.” I lead him out of the  
hting and down the stairs.

ien I “You’d better sleep after this, or I’ll knock you out myself and fucki  
I’m force you to rest,” he grumbles.

Spoken like a true brother.

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Spoken like a true brother.



## CHAPTER 27

AUREN

The sky is violet, hovering between day and night.

I'm a long way from Geisel now, and we've just arrived at yet another stop on Wick's route. His plan has worked flawlessly.

Every time we reach a new safe house, we pick up another dozen or rebels. Although today, we've had the biggest addition so far—fifty strong and ready to join. All it's taken is Wick's speech and my presence, and they've all come to come with us.

It seems most of the Vulmin are like him—ready to take on the mon Other. Others are a bit more hesitant to throw their lives so publicly on the line rather than continue in their quiet rebellion, but one look at me, and they all meld in with the rest.

The *Vulmin Dyrūnia* are growing. Every day.

And I'm growing too—in my awareness. In my power. I've been using it more and more, wielding it with increasing confidence and pushing my limits into making more difficult things or stretching it out further, pushing my limits.

Speaking of pushing limits...

All the Vulmin traveling with us can't even fit inside the safe house anymore. Tonight, many of the rebels are sleeping outside, because there are just so many that we're bursting at the seams. Soon, our numbers will be high to go undetected, just like Wick said.

Luckily, this place has a large gazebo out back and benches along a garden's walking path that people are taking advantage of. Some fae have even taken up residence in the barn. Wick always makes sure I get one bed when we stop at a house, but tonight, I insisted on sleeping on the ground and giving the others a turn.

Everyone is winding down now after a particularly hard day of travel. I'm covered in thick mud from a flooded-out gulch. Wick is sitting at the kitchen bar with a drink in hand, head cocked as he listens to Ludogar.

"Hello."

My head snaps up and I blink at the fae female standing over me. With my back against the wall of the dusk-colored room, I've been watching the Vulmin, but I missed her somehow. There haven't been any other females in the group, so her presence is a welcome surprise.

She looks down at me with a smile, and the color of her eyes reminds me of magma. It's a swirl of deep reds and burnt oranges that seems to mirror the blacks of her pupils. At the skin beside her eyes is a trio of red dots in a perfect line that reach her temples. Her hair is auburn, steeped in orange at the ends, and it's short, curling up at the edge of her jaw and neatly tucked behind her ears. Ears which are pierced at each pointed tip with dangling chains that hook to her lobes. On one of them, the broken-winged bird charm hangs down like a charm.

"Hi," I reply.

"Mind if I sit?"

I gesture to the spot beside me, and she flits down, crossing slim legs beneath her. Several people glance over, including Wick, as if they're wondering why she's approaching me.

She ignores them. "I'm Emonie."

"Auren."

"I know," she says with an impish grin. "I can't believe it. Can't believe you're *real*. My sister's favorite game growing up was to play the gilded Turley girl. Used to pretend that she was off in some hidden island in the north, biding her time before she returned to defeat the evil king and fall in love with some warrior prince from an ocean realm."

I was actually off in a broken land, not knowing that I was bidding more to meet a spiky-armed fae, but it's not too far off.

"That's quite the imagination," I say with a smile.

"No one quite imagined *this*, though," she says, looking me over, as can't believe I'm real. "That you'd be here, with us Vulmin, leading us capital like a golden guardian." Her eyes linger on my dirty cloak, on the limp and tangled hair. "Hmm. This won't do. Our golden guardian needs some care. Not surprised, since you've had to travel with this lot of magic. Come on," she says, scooping back up to her feet.

"Where are we going?"

"You didn't get a chance to clean up yet."

"The washrooms are full."

"But I happen to know that there's something *better* than a washroom with my Trust me."

I really *do* need to clean up. Traveling every day, staying someplace new every night—sometimes outside—has taken a toll.

Getting to my feet, I follow Emonie through the cramped room. Someone watches us as we go, but most of the Vulmin are sprawled out, rolled up on area rugs, propped up on the sofas and chairs, leaning against the walls; in a slumped over the dining table with their packs shoved under their heads at a pillow. They're resting, sleeping, or eating at every available space.

Emonie takes me through the main living space and out the back door into the gray-toned kitchen. Outside, the night is lit up with a half-moon. It's tipped in the sky like it's pouring out thickened buttermilk in a stream illuminated clouds. The porch has two snoring males lounging in a rocking bench, and at the gazebo ahead, I can see several more prostrate silhouettes.

"Where are we going?"

"The bathhouse," she says as I walk beside her. "I'm trying to make my friend."

My brows shoot up. "Wait, there's a *bathhouse* here?"

She grins, showing off her sharp canines. "Yep."

The thought of actually bathing and not having to use a cloth and bucket like I've been doing puts a skip in my step. There have been baths in the old houses but too many of us and too little water to go around.

"A bathhouse is a *great* way to make me be your friend."

"I thought so." She slips a hand into her trouser pocket and holds out a glass bottle. "Plus this."

y time     “Please say it’s a travel bottle of wine.”

          She giggles, and the sound is so un-rebellious-like that it makes my twitch. “Even better during travel. It’s perfumed soap,” she says, wagg if she auburn brows.

s to the     Great Divine. A bathhouse *and* soap?

ny           I crack a smile. “You’re good.”

ds           “I know,” she says breezily. “And by now, everybody else who knev les. about this place will have already bathed, so we’ll have plenty of priva Besides, no one would dare come in while you’re there. We can soak a as you like.”

          She leads us further away from the house, down a dark stone path. *A* passing a hen house, we enter thinned trees, their leaves the color of lil m here. bark as gray as thunderclouds. After just a couple of minutes, we walk a slight slope, and I spot the stone bathhouse just ahead.

new         Inside are four basic walls, but the roof is like an inverted cone, tipp inward and lit up from the moonlight above. It points directly at the ce ne eyes a large round bath beneath, sending the reflection of the stars to scatter on its watery depths. It’s big enough for at least five people, made of smo s, stone with steps leading down into it, and it’s *steaming*.

ls as a     “Hot water?” I think my voice might’ve actually cracked. “Why did tell me there was *hot* water?”

or of       She beams and starts stripping down. Normally, I’d be a bit more sh hangs but...hot water.

of           Within seconds, both of us have yanked off our clothes. I leave all tl king I was wearing in a neat pile beneath them and then climb in. As soon a ettes. on the little ledge beneath, I submerge my entire body, head and all. Tl delicious heat soaks into me, and I release a blissful exhale, bubbles ris you befrom my nose like smoke from a chimney.

          When I break through the surface again, I lean back against the wall bath, letting my head tip back to rest on the floor behind me. Looking i watch drips fall from the point of the coned roof, watch how each drop cket perfectly in the center of the water.

re           “Nice, huh?”

          I hum in agreement, unfurling my ribbons and letting them float aro in delicate wisps.

t a         “Catch.”

I barely get my hand up in time to catch the bottle she flings at me. My lips immediately pop it open, dumping a fair amount of the silky smooth scumming her onto my palms. I wash myself all over and scrub my hair until it shines. The time I'm done, I feel buffed and soft and so clean it's heavenly.

Across from me, Emonie lounges back, looking just as relaxed as I feel. "So...I heard some things. About what happened in Geisel."

"Yeah." I'm ready for her to question me about my magic. To ask about what I can do, maybe question the gold.

So I'm completely taken by surprise when she says, "I'm sorry. About your friend who died."

Her voice is gentle, attention steady. So often, people are uncomfortable with grief. It's hard to look it in the eye of others. Because ultimately, I'm terrified that one day, grief will reflect in our own gaze, too, and we are ready to face it. We're never really ready.

But Emonie, she looks right at me with unabashed boldness, like she isn't afraid of being tainted by my grief, not afraid to look at it too. And I get an inside sense that it's because she's known grief herself.

I swallow hard. "Thank you."

"Did you know her long?"

Nenet's cackle fills my ears, and a lump of sadness gets caught in my throat. "No. Not nearly long enough."

Others might judge that. They might think grief should be determined by the amount of time you had with someone, but that isn't true at all. Grief is based on someone's length of presence. It's based on the impact of their absence.

Emonie looks across the water at me, and I feel like she's seeing *me* and not the Lyäri Ulvêre. "Some people are in your life for only a moment, a shooting star. Quick and short, but they light up a part of you for a second of the and their brightness lingers even after they're gone."

I nod, though I have to blink back the emotion that threatens to drag me under. "You speak like you have some experience with that."

She gives me an enigmatic smile. "Oh, I think you'll find that lots of Vulmi have stories like that. Stone Swords are notorious for their cruel and the monarchy is notorious for public executions to teach us *conspirato* lesson."

I get the feeling that she doesn't want to talk more about that, so I laugh to another part. "Did you say Vulmi?"

“*Vulmin Dyrūnia* is a mouthful, and I always thought Vulmin sound little mean. So I call it Vulmi for short. Sounds much nicer, yes?”

I huff out a small laugh. “Are rebels supposed to want to sound nice?”

She shrugs and blows at a bubble from the soapy water.

“You know, you don’t seem like the rebel type,” I tell her.

Emonie grins. “It’s my friendly, sparkling personality, huh?”

“Yes. Everyone else here is a little...”

“Boring.”

I laugh, palms skimming over one of my floating ribbons. The silky smooth under my fingertips. “I was going to say reserved.”

“My parents were both Vulmi.”

I don’t miss that she said *were*, and I wonder if the public execution mentioned have anything to do with them, but I don’t want to pry.

“I grew up in it. Grew up with everyone here, so I’m used to them and they’re used to me. I’m just a lot more fun, because life’s too short to not have a good time when you can,” she tells me, her expression straightf while the steam around her twists and curls. “You’re lucky I’m here to your friend. You look like you could use one.”

“I do?”

She nods. “You look sad. Even when you smile.”

Ouch.

Right on cue, the spot at the center of my chest twists with a brutal pef isn’t “I...miss someone,” I admit, trying not to let the raw emotion scrape d my throat. “I’m looking for him and he’s looking for me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. We’ll find each other.”

She starts cupping water in her palm, letting it dribble back out. Eve ond, single one of my muscles is relaxed in the warm soak, and the quiet ni has made me sleepy and contemplative. Melancholic. Has given me tir me breathe away from all the people, to be still after all the travel. And in stillness, I always think of him.

“What’s he like?” she asks.

“Wonderful. Intense. A bit...rotten,” I say with a smirk.

“Oh. A dangerous male. I like those too.”

“When I first saw him, his black aura terrified me.”

Her eyes widen, magma depths churning. “You can see his aura?”

“I can, and he can see mine.”



led a She lets out a longing sigh, letting more water drip from her hand. “  
many fae get to. No wonder you’re dying to get back to each other. Ev  
r?” he is a little rotten, as you said.”

I smile, but my cheeks are hollowed out with yearning, with missing  
“I love his rotten side, but he has a heart of gold just for me.”

“I think you’re giving *everyone* a heart of gold when it comes to you  
They’re all smitten. You really took the whole gilded Turley thing liter  
huh?” she adds, gesturing toward me. “Instead of having one gilded th  
strip is you’re a *whole* gilded thing. It’s flashy. I like it.”

I chuckle, and then she stands up, clearly not worried about her nudi  
she climbs out of the bath and starts drying herself off with one of the  
s she drying cloths against the wall. “Come on. We have to be up early, so w  
better get some sleep.”

nd I pet the surface of the water, loath to leave the heated bath. “Can’t v  
ot sleep here?”

orward She smirks, toweling off her wet auburn hair, the orange ends lookin  
be darker from the soak. “And then I have to explain to Wick why I let ou  
famed Lyäri drown in the middle of the night, all because she really lik  
water? No thanks.”

“I won’t drown.” My protest is a little weak, because, well, soaking  
*has* made me sleepy.

ang. She starts tugging her clothes on, her lips twisting into a smirk. “Yo  
own made of gold. Can you even float? Won’t you just sink right down to t  
bottom?”

“Ha ha.”

ry As soon as I drag myself out of the water, she tosses a drying cloth a  
ght air along with a pile of clothes. “Those are extras of mine, and they’re cle  
a bit shorter than you, and sadly, not as curvy, but I think they’ll be alr

ne to “Thank you.” I only had one other dress packed from Estelia, plus th  
my clothes I’ve been wearing, so Emonie’s trousers and shirt are a much  
appreciated addition. I quickly dry off and squeeze out the water from  
hair and ribbons.

“So...what’s with the fabric glued to your back? Taking that broken  
winged bird thing literally too? It’s very theatrical.”

I chuckle, looking at her over my shoulder as I slip on my gold arm  
before pulling the brown shirt over my head. “They’re not glued.”

Not            “Weird,” she says as she looks at them. Then she seems to catch her  
en if           and quickly adds, “I mean *pretty*. Very pretty. And unique.”

                  Snorting, I step into the pants and stuff my feet into clean, thick sock  
; him.          then put on my boots. My ribbons trail down past the hem at the back of  
                  shirt. They’ll take more time to completely dry, but I loosely wrap them  
1.               around my waist like a belt so they won’t drag in the dirt. “Ready.”

ally,            She gathers up all our old clothes. “I’ll get these washed in the morn  
ing,             “You don’t have to do that. I can—”

                  “We’ll take turns,” she assures me.

ity as          Together, we walk back to the house, and I melt down my belt, hold  
stacked         malleable metal in my palm. It takes a few tries, but I manage to manip  
e’d             it into a comb. It’s simple but effective, and I can’t help but smile at ho  
                  much better I’ve gotten at using my gold-touch. Humming a bit beneath  
we just         breath, I start to brush through my hair.

                  Emonie trills in excitement. “Now *that’s* impressive.”

ig              I pass the comb over, and she sighs as she rakes it through her short  
ir              the ends soon flipping up with a slight curl. When she hands it back to  
ed hot         melt it down again, letting it gather around my waist beneath my ribbo  
                  once more.

in here        As we walk, Emonie starts flitting around the path and collecting thi  
                  watch her picking certain leaves, grabbing up mushrooms, and snappin  
u’re          berries along the forest floor. She stuffs everything into a pouch that ha  
he             off the loop at her pant waist, excitement bouncing off her with every i  
                  item she finds.

                  “You like foraging?”

at me,         “Mm-hmm.”

an. I’m        She cinches the pouch closed before offering me a few of the berries  
ight.”        them, and both of us pop one into our mouths. My tongue floods, the s  
ie             sourness making my jaw tingle in the best way.

my             “My parents taught me to always be looking for things to use for fo  
                  medicine—or anything useful, really. Being a Vulmi means you travel  
-              and we’re not always lucky enough to sleep in a house or have food re  
                  available, and we hardly ever have access to any kind of healer. I like t  
                  collect useful things.”

cuffs          I read between the lines. Emonie knows what it’s like to go hungry.  
                  hurt without help. To sleep in the cold. It’s almost impossible not to li  
                  and honestly, it’s a relief to finally have someone to talk to.

self, Friendships never came easy to me in Orea, but with Emonie, I just  
instant, effortless connection. A warmth that I recognize between her s  
ks and and mine. It revives something in me, making me feel more like myself  
of my again. Making me feel not so alone.

n “Oooh, look!” She’s already bent down, yanking up something from  
ground. She holds up a piece of twine proudly. “This is a good find.”  
ing.” I frown as she puts that in her pouch too. “How’d you even see that?”  
“I always know where to look,” she says with a wink.

When we get back to the dark house, the rest of the Vulmin seem to  
ing the asleep, aside from a few who are standing watch and walking around t  
ulate outside. Inside, we pick our way past all the sleeping bodies, and then  
ow of us claim an empty spot at the top of the stairwell, next to the blue  
h my balusters.

“Of course I’d become friends with the Lyäri on the night she insists  
sleeping on the floor,” Emonie grumbles.

hair, I huff out a quiet laugh and then watch as she disappears into one of  
me, I rooms. When she comes back out, she has two blankets and two pillow  
ns her arms.

“How’d you get those? I would’ve thought everything would’ve been  
ings. I claimed already.”

ig off “I just told them the Lyäri needed them,” she says with a shrug as sh  
angs hands me the pillow. “You really should use your position to your adv  
new you know. Good thing you have me around.”

Shaking my head at her, I toe off my boots and slump down to the fl  
my tiredness catching up with me. I keep the banister at my back and s  
the pillow beneath my head, while Emonie sweeps the blanket over me  
s. I takecovering me chin to feet.

weet She lies down beside me, propping her head on her own pillow and  
wrapping herself up in the second blanket while letting out a jaw-crack  
od or yawn. Even with the rug beneath us, it’s definitely not the softest place  
a lot, ever slept. It’s also not the worst.

adily For a few minutes, I lie here, looking up at the paneled ceiling, heari  
dozens of others as they snore and breathe and shift in their sleep.

“Thanks. For the bath, and the pillow, and...for talking to me,” I wh  
To be awkwardly. “Not as the Lyäri, but as just me.”

ce her, She flashes a grin in the dark. “Look at us. Friends already because  
plan worked. It was the soap that really made you like me, huh?”

feel an I smile and shift my head deeper into the pillow. “No, you had me a  
oul hot water.”  
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I smile and shift my head deeper into the pillow. “No, you had me at the hot water.”



## CHAPTER 28

AUREN

**T**he woods are all brambles and low-hanging branches, and sweet-smelling yellow leaves dotted with pockets of pink pollen. The morning sun is bright, and I have my back braced against a tree, my fingers dug into the dirt.

The gilded, rotted dirt.

It's getting easy to handle now, this combination of seductive power and gold. Easier to control. To hear, but not let it deafen me. I feel the presence of the rot as if it's added a new facet to my gold-touch, like a glass crystal held up to the light.

My power has this new connection with the land too. It seems like Annwyn is thirsty for the gold I let drip. Like she soaks it all up and sighs with relief.

But my magic isn't the only thing I try to work with.

All twenty-four ribbons lie on the ground around me like rays stretching out from the sun. I feel the earth's beat beneath them, feel the warmth of the dirt and grass. Yet no matter how many times I try to move them, t

don't budge an inch. They stay lifeless. Separate. No movement curling playfully through their lengths.

I miss them.

Tears prick my eyes, but I loop them around my waist with gentle movements, tucking them in safely against me, and tell myself they just need more time.

With that thought, I glance up at the position of the morning sun.

*Time to go.*

So I gather up the gold, calling it back. I meld it into a ball, rolling the metal between my palms until it hardens, and then I slip it into my pocket.

Slade was right about always keeping some on me. I should've been equipped. If I'd had more at my disposal during that night at Brackhill maybe I wouldn't have gotten kidnapped. Maybe I would've been able to stop those men from killing Rissa.

Regret clangs against the walls of my heart.

For a moment, I recall her stubborn face. Her clipped words. The terse sharp way she went about becoming an actual friend, as if she was still apprehensive to be a flower without the thorns.

I liked her prickly personality. I liked those glimpses of softness beneath the barbed exterior. Even though she wasn't very nice to me in Highbell there was always something about her that I admired. Plus, Rissa was the only person who understood what it was like living in Highbell all those years in the saddle. We had that connection of the past, no matter what.

Now, she's gone. Because I wasn't prepared enough. Because I let my guard down.

I can't do that again.

After wiping my hands on my pants, I start making my way back to the tent yawning as I go. There was no cozy house for us to stay in last night. Instead, we crowded inside a dilapidated barn with rotted boards and a charred roof over a hundred of us packed in together on grass and straw.

Just when I'm about to break through the tree line, I hear a branch snap before Emonie suddenly appears next to me, her auburn hair a bit messy with a leaf dangling from an orange-tipped curl at her ear.

"Great Divine," I say, hand slammed against my thumping heart. "Where did you come from?"

"Look," she chirps, shoving a leafy branch in my face. "I found Licia. Want to try it?"

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of the  
ld up  
ghs  
hing  
from  
hey

g My nose wrinkles at the bough, its leaves the color of mud. “No, that  
Yesterday, she got very excited about an old shoe with its sole ripped  
and laces missing. I have no idea what she’s going to do with it, but she  
stuffed it in her pouch with a smile on her face.

st need “Suit yourself,” she says as we continue to walk. She snaps off one of  
leaves and shoves it into her mouth, twirling the stem with her fingers  
sucks on it. “Mmm. Sugary.”

“Good foraging morning, I take it?”

he “Yep.” She carefully plucks off the rest of the leaves and puts them  
ket. pouch. “How about you? Have a good magic morning?” Surprised, I turn  
more look at her. “What? You didn’t actually think I believed you were always  
Castle, going off because you had to go, did you?”

to “So you followed me?”

“A few times,” she admits with an easygoing shrug. “It’s nothing people  
I spy on everyone.”

ative, “Now you seem more like a rebel.”

l too “Vulmi,” she corrects. “And thank you.”

I start to laugh, but then I notice something about her. “Wait. Your earrings  
leath They’re...a different color.”

ll, She turns to me, batting them. “Yeah, you like them? I got them from  
the one fae whose house we stayed at the other day. Pretty pink color. What do  
ars as a think? Romantic, yes?”

ny My own eyes twitch. My stomach does too. “Please...tell me you don’t  
forage someone’s eyeballs.”

Her delighted giggle scares a bird in a tree above us. “No, silly. I have  
glamour magic.”

camp, Surprise shoots through me. “Oh.”

nstead, She reaches over and twirls her finger in my hair. “If I touch someone’s  
roof, then I can take something of theirs and use it for glamour.” I watch as her  
short auburn hair turns as golden as my own.

nap I have to fight not to let my jaw drop. Seeing someone else with my  
sy, a eerie. “Whoa.”

Where She shakes her head, and just like that, her own color returns, the  
strawberry-orange ends bleeding back into view. “I can glamour other  
too, not just myself, but it takes a lot more magic and concentration.”

Loot! “Wow. That’s impressive.”

“Thank you,” she says cheerfully.



inks.” Up ahead, I see movement in the overgrown field as we approach the  
d off People are filtering in and out, packing up, shoving food into their mouths  
e and saddling their horses as they ready to leave.

I head straight for Blush, my sweet opal-swirled mare, only to find  
of the Ludogar, Wick’s right hand, buckling her straps. His sea-stranded hair  
as she combed straight back today, dripping slightly at the ends like he dumped  
bucket over himself to wash. He’s never been around me much, even at  
this time we’ve spent traveling together. I get the feeling he likes to keep  
in her himself.

rn to “You didn’t have to do that. I could’ve saddled her,” I tell him as I  
ays approach.

He smooths a hand over her rounded cheek, and I notice the bloom of  
pale pink right there, which does make it look like she’s blushing. “Ah,  
ersonal, you see, Blush here is my first love.”

I blink in surprise. “I didn’t know she was your horse.”

“Yep,” he says as she noses his arm. “This old girl and I go way back.”

“I didn’t mean to take your horse.”

yes. “Don’t worry, I have another. Blush isn’t keen on the riskier rides I  
sometimes. She also likes attention, so I think she quite enjoys being y  
n the mount. It’s good for her ego.”

o you I smile. “Well, I’ll take good care of her and show her off as often as  
can.”

dn’t “Good,” he says with a small tilt of his lips, but I have a feeling he’s  
ve assessing me, his teal eyes trying to dig down deep. “I’m Ludo, by the way,  
never officially introduced myself.”

“Don’t take it personally. Ludo isn’t friendly,” Emonie declares.

“Em,” I admonish.

ne, “What? He isn’t.” Her glamoured pink eyes swing back to him. “Isn’t  
her right?”

The male shrugs.

hair is “I’ve noticed you’re usually out scouting or doing some other job,”

He tips his head. “I keep busy.”

His eyes flicker behind me, and when I turn, I see Wick walking over  
people long hair drooping on the left side of his head, leaving the shaved side  
exposed on the right. He stops in front of me, black brows pulled low.  
we speak?”

e barn. I nod and he takes us around the side of the barn, away from the large  
paths, group. We walk alongside the wall, its crumbling, split boards and dan  
nails as our backdrop. When we're nearly at the middle of the building  
stops and turns toward me, and I study the drawn planes of his face. "I  
is wanted to talk to you about where we're going next."

ed a I pause. "Okay."

fter all He's kept up his side of the deal, making sure to always talk to me a  
ep to what to expect with every safe house we travel to. But his tone and his  
hesitant expression are making my own anxiety spike.

My hand slips down to my waist, thumb hooking over one of my rib  
of a "We're picking up another group of Vulmin, but they won't need m  
h, but convincing. They'll have one look at you and be ready to take on their  
mission without a single word from me."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"It is. For the Vulmin. But I fear it will be difficult for you."

k." I frown. "Why?"

He pauses, his shoulders rounding slightly, face strained with somet  
go on close to...worry.

our My fingers curl tightly around my ribbons as if they can brace me. *A*  
I'm glad I have hold of them, because his answer staggers me.

s I "Because the next place we're going is Bryol."

I rear back in shock.

;  
*Bryol.*

way. I My foundation shakes at hearing that word, the whole ground benea  
left to waver and tip. Bryol—my childhood home.

We're actually going to my *home*.

I don't know whether I'm filled with more excitement...or dread.

l't that Returning to the place I lived with my parents brings up so many en  
that I don't know how to stand still. I can't—not with how hard the ear  
seems to quake, how loudly my skull clangs.

I say. My hand comes up, bracing against the dilapidated wall, gold trickli  
down my fingers and coating the wood in slow drips.

er, his "I wanted to prepare you," he says quietly, and my eyes lift, even as  
vision wants to tunnel.

"Can "Thanks." My voice sounds far away.

Wick vacillates, boot toeing at some buried farm tool long-since rus  
covered with dirt. "If you don't want to go..."

ge My head snaps up. "I want to go," I say firmly. "I just..."  
gling I just need to make the ground settle again, need to steady myself.  
; Wick "I never thought I'd ever go back."  
He nods as if he understands, still watching me closely. "Alright. Th  
should head out. We'll be there by dusk."  
Dusk.  
bout So soon. Just a handful of hours.  
For nearly my whole life, Bryol has been a far-off, unreachable plac  
now, I'm going to be there by *dusk*.  
bons. "If you change your mind..."  
uch "I won't," I tell him.  
new After he walks away, I stay beside the barn, giving myself a momen  
I drop my hand, leaving a streak of gold against the wood. I know my  
are dead, I know this, and yet, hearing that I'm going to Bryol makes n  
as if I'm going to *them*.  
After a couple of minutes forcing myself to breathe, to process, I tur  
hing and head for the group. When I round the corner, I see all the Vulmin l  
already mounted their horses.  
And I feel everyone's gaze as I walk to Blush and get myself onto the sac  
look straight ahead, gripping the reins, trying to appear strong and sure  
and Ludogar take up the lead, while I take up the spot right behind the  
Emonie at my side.  
As we begin our travel, I focus on the scenery to calm my rattled he  
th me There's a haze of fog trying to stick to the flatlands like steam over a t  
and between the endless grass is this dusty path we're traveling on and  
buildings in sight.  
Emonie stays quiet beside me, but I can't stand the silence.  
otions "So," I begin, trying to latch on to whatever topic I can. "You menti  
th sister before. Is she a Vulmin too?"  
She seems startled by my question, her eyes turned back to her own  
ng swirling with orange and red. "No. Definitely not." She laughs, but it's  
her giddy giggle. It's more of a force of breath. "She's not the Vulmi t  
my I get the feeling I shouldn't have brought it up. "What part of Annw  
you from?"  
"All over. My parents always traveled. We never really had just one  
ted and we stuck to, so I stuck with other things instead," she says, leaning dov  
pet her horse, stroking against his dappled white coat. He has a soft bl

mane, and she's used the twine she collected to braid little plaits into it  
"Thistle has been with me since I was a girl. He's just about the only thistle I  
still have."

When we     My heart aches for her. I might've been stuck in one place for over ten  
years when I was little, never able to leave Derfort Harbor, but I know  
it's like to feel like nothing is yours. Nothing constant or familiar.

              "What were you doing for the Vulmin before you came with us?" I ask  
her, hoping I've chosen a better topic.

              She gives an impish grin, her auburn hair looking particularly orange  
at its short, curled-up tips. "Stealing from the Stone Swords."

              My eyes go wide. "Stealing what?"

              "Messages mostly. It was a lot of hanging out at taverns and flirting  
with the boys."

              "Mostly?"

              She lifts a shoulder. "I may have foraged a few things from them here  
and there."

              "Like what?"

              "Coin. A very risqué portrait carried in one of the captains' pockets-  
*herself*," she giggles. "Plus, a nicely carved pipe. Some yummy chewy  
bread that tasted like jam. And...one of their swords."

              I sputter out a surprised laugh. "You took one of their swords? Those  
swords are huge. Aren't they heavy?"

              "Not at all. The Stone King makes them with his magic. They're surpris-  
ingly light. Very long though. I prefer a short blade, myself."

              "How'd you manage to steal it?"

              "Told the soldier I wanted to *touch it*," she says with a wag of her  
finger. "He was mightily disappointed when he realized I was talking about his  
sword and not the other rock-hard piece he had on him. Although, I must  
admit, that *was* impressively lengthy too. But I never get involved with  
the Stone Swords." She wrinkles her nose in disgust at the thought.

              "What about other rebels? Do you *get involved* with them?"

              She teeters her head. "Here and there. But males are so exhausting, you  
know? Always demanding commitment when it's convenient for them."

              "Run into that problem a lot?"

              "Of course," she replies with a wistful sigh. "Plenty of them fall madly  
in love with me. But I live a treacherous life of a Vulmi. I can't be tamed  
like the Lyäri."

              A laugh tapers out of me. "And you shouldn't be."

Emonie glances over. “And what about this...dangerous lover of yours? Did he tame you?”

The smile on my face goes sad, a fresh pang of longing pinching the center of my chest.

“The opposite. He set me free.”

I can feel her mottled gaze on my face, but I stare straight ahead. Eyes skipping up to the sky.

The sky makes me think of him, the land makes me think of my parents today and I’m hovering on the horizon between them both.

“I heard we’re going to Bryol,” Emonie says quietly.

I manage to speak despite the hard lump in my throat. “Yeah.”

“If you decide you don’t want to go, I’ll hole up with you.”

Appreciation swims in the depths of my whirlpool stomach. “I’ll let you know if I change my mind. Thanks for the offer.”

“Of course. Friends stick together.”

I don’t know how I’ve gotten so lucky since being in Annwyn. First meeting Nenet, then Estelia and Thursil, and now her. It reminds me that I’m not alone.

“Besides,” she goes on. “You can turn things shiny. Imagine the things you could forage from you.”

I snort. “That’s called stealing.”

“*Collecting*,” she amends breezily. “Besides, I think a bit of sharing between friends is normal. Healthy even.”

“Of course.”

“I shared my soap. And my clothes.”

“I turned your sigil earring gold,” I reply, head tilting toward her piece of jewelry and the pretty chains dangling down from the pointed tip. “It really took a Stone off your gleaming charisma.”

Her slender finger brushes over it. “I know. You just understand me better than I do.”

For the rest of the day, Emonie helps distract me from melancholic thoughts as we banter back and forth, talking about nothing and everything.

And all the while, apprehension eats at me. Our group chews up the distance of our destination, time biting through the day one nipped hour at a time.

Then, just before dusk, we reach Bryol, and I find it’s quite hard to swallow.

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## CHAPTER 29

AUREN

**T**he city is a clutter of ruin. A patchwork of crooked destruction. Bryol sits on the horizon like a scar. Bubbled up with pocked buildings, smears of burnt stone still stained an inky black. The place is blistered with rubble and wreckage.

It looks like a great fire spread throughout the city, and then a giant along and stomped it all out, crumbling every building beneath its bulk.

One lone street weaves through the havoc. A seam in the middle of a frayed fabric of what must've once been a thriving metropolis.

“Great Divine.” I sit atop my horse, looking out at it all, eyes skimming if I can try to find one spot that hasn't been destroyed.

I can't.

This isn't a city anymore. It's a wasteland.

Wick sits atop his horse next to me, the others gone ahead.

“What exactly happened here that night?” I ask. My voice is thick, but moisture in my eyes is thicker.

“There was a short war. It was quick—only lasted a few months that. Just another swift boot of the monarchy kicking against the rumbling r

squashing the fae who dared to resist or speak up. Every time our discourse becomes too loud, the king makes sure to deal with us quickly.” Bitter churning in his tone, making it foam up with bubbling anger. “But a battle didn’t need to happen here. The unrest was near the capital. There were even many Vulmin soldiers stationed in Bryol.”

“They attacked it because of my family.”

His gaze lashes out with a rope that tethers to mine, looping in place. They didn’t like that the resistance whispered their support for the Turley and wanted your family to retake the throne. So the Carricks sent soldiers here to send a message...and to remove their biggest threat. Though they never admitted it.”

My stomach churns, gnarled and bunching.

“Why hasn’t it been rebuilt?”

“Monarchy won’t allow it,” he says bitterly. “And truthfully, no one wanted to. It’s a gravesite now. Without a Turley in Bryol, it’s going to be dead anyway.”

It looks like a gravesite. Wedges of buildings jutting up like gravestones in a row down the street. Shots of bloomed greenery grown up over the bare land like flowers left by loved ones.

“But it’s your home. You needed to see this.”

My nod is heavy. Wick’s is angry.

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the  
ling as  
“This is what the Carrick monarchy did. They killed *thousands* of people. Razed an entire city. All because after hundreds of years, the Turley nation was *still* a threat to them, and they can’t stand it. When a Turley wore a crown there were no undue executions for fae daring to speak up. There were no exorbitant taxes, no one arrested for being Oorean, no half fae seen as less than full. He bites out that last word with gnashed teeth and curled lip, the little notch of scars on his forehead standing out more with the reddish hue of his skin. “It’s not a monarchy anymore, it’s tyranny. And so long as we sit around and don’t rise up to finally go against them, things like *this* will keep happening,” he says, jutting a finger toward the city. “With your help, the Vulmin can overthrow King Carrick...and then you can take his place.”

out the  
t time.  
able,  
My head snaps over to him. “I have no desire to wear a crown. I’m supporting the Vulmin so fae can stop being terrorized by the monarchy. That’s it.”

His black brows pull together, eyes studying me intently. “But you’re *Auren Turley*. You’re alive, and you landed in Saira’s field. Don’t be bitter.”



ord the fact that the Vulmin will want *you* to take the throne now that you'  
ness here."

le *Blind?*

en't I yank my gaze back to the city, gnawing on his words. Rememberin  
Thursil said something similar. First, Nenet accused me of not listenin  
Now, Wick's accusing me of not seeing. But I am. I just have no desir  
: "Yes, look in the mirror and see myself as something I don't want to be.

leys Silence churns around us for a couple of minutes, and Wick watches  
ers like he doesn't quite believe me. Then, he lets out a breath. "You migh  
ey differently. As you spend more time here. As you take more in," he say  
quietly. "Are you ready to go into the city?"

I nod, though I'm not sure if I'm ready at all. If I ever could be.

With a click of his tongue, he leads his horse down toward Bryol, le  
me on this hill alone.

o stay Leaving me to listen.

And see.

ones in  
owed



The streets of Bryol are an uneven seascape of frothed dust from cru  
buildings and waves of debris that sluice through the city. It's a backla  
eople. violence, anger still cracking through the stonework in severed silence

me is My footsteps though...my footsteps simmer with the undertow of re  
wn, Melancholy hangs off my arms and slumps down my shoulders, and I  
no wouldn't be surprised if I dripped it down the street. This place has wr  
asser." its arm around me and plunged a dagger of pain through my chest.

nicks "Where are you going?"

anger. I don't turn around at Wick's voice. My attention is too choked, hea  
nd and flooded.

ening," I've left my horse with the others, in the rifted building just behind u  
:an where stringy trees and fringed bushes clutter all around the outside. T  
a gash torn down its stone face in a diagonal scrape, big enough that ou  
horses were able to walk right in. It's big enough that all of us, horses  
y. can fit inside. We're supposed to wait here until one of the Vulmin che  
things over with the group we're meeting in a small village just past th  
re crumbling walls.

blind to

re I've only taken three more steps out onto the street before Wick's be  
me, hand on my arm. "Auren, you shouldn't wander alone."

g. He's saying my name here, in the same place where my parents spol  
ing how fresh wave of despondency trickles through me.

g. "I'll be fine."

e to There's a beat of silence. He's probably remembering what he saw r  
in Geisel. "Still, this place is unfamiliar to you."

s me That's where he's wrong.

it feel Because despite the rain of ruin that's flooded Bryol...I know this p  
ys Even though it's been over twenty years since I was here last, I know i  
feels familiar to me, right down to my bones. There's a little thrum thr  
the ground, as if it's recognizing me too.

aving "I'll come with you."

"So will I," Emonie says, coming up to stand at my other side.

"And me," Ludogar adds.

More Vulmin have trickled out of the building, gathering around me  
silent presence that radiates quiet support.

Gratitude bloats, floating up like bubbles to help lift my weighted-d  
heart.

umbled With all the Vulmin keeping pace behind me, we start walking thro  
sh of Bryol.

. Our boots crackle along a dusty spume of ash and ground dirt, ankle  
gret. threatening to twist over the crumbs of buildings piled up beneath our  
Most of the debris is scattered at the edges, the worst of the buildings'  
apped carnage laid to rest. But all over, plants have retaken the ashen shamb  
sprouting up through the tiniest crevices, bursting through broken ceili  
dangling down tipping walls.

rt too Despite the destruction and the overgrowth, my feet somehow know  
to go as we wind down the streets. Something tugs me forward. Maybe  
is, long-ingrained memory. Or maybe something else pulls me toward the  
here's unbeating heart.

ir The Vulmin don't say anything. Not as we climb over a particularly  
and all, spot, not as wooden spires have to be hauled away to unblock our path  
ocks as we pick our way through the various buildings and help each other c  
e city's the wild wreckage. They all just follow me without hesitation. Letting  
lead myself to my past.

Until finally, my feet bring me here.

eside        Here, on what used to be a picturesque street. I face a two-story hou  
that's now a hovel of dumped-down slabs. Knuckles of rock clenched  
ke it. A        between rust and ash, a punched-out roof smothered with char. My chi  
home, just a topple of skeleton walls, all bones and teeth and nothing i  
between.

ne do        Nothing but a fist of memories that suddenly thumps against my sku  
I had to get here to open up the lock that bound them.

lace.        Up and down this bricked street, there used to be staggered houses, c  
after the other, in neat little lines. I'd run in and out of them, playing w  
t. It        other kids, laughter and shouts peeling like bells.

ough        There were humming trees that sang in the summer, with puffstring  
that trailed down in feathery fluffs and brushed against their exposed r  
We'd hide beneath their canopies, all while their song danced through  
hair. I'd race my father on the way to the morning market, where he'd  
me warm, sugared berries pinned to a wooden skewer.

e in a        I'd swim in the crystal lagoon and ride my mother's horse with no s  
I'd watch the lightbreathers when they traveled through, putting on gre  
own        performances in the night sky big enough for the whole city to see.

And this house.

igh        This was where I would come home to each day. It had a bright yell  
door with a running trim of a decorative eave hanging over it. Inside, t  
s        were stairs with beaded rails. I had little suns and stars painted on my  
feet.        bedroom ceiling to help me fall asleep at night. Bundles of willow bra  
hung beside the fireplace for luck. Jade leaves floated in dandelion wat  
es,        bring harmony under our roof.

ngs,        I learned how to walk here, to talk, to play, to laugh, to love.

Inside this skeleton house lies a piece of my heart.

r where     The building now is nothing but a lump of coal. Cracks run jagged t  
e some     its sagging face like wrinkles strained from a sob. The whole street is r  
city's     but my house...this one took the brunt of the fire. As if this is where it  
started. As if this is where it all began.

bad  
. Not        *You're the last-birthered Turley.*  
over        *It never should've happened.*  
me        *Then Darkness fell onto Bryol.*  
*To remove a threat.*

se            My house. My family. My city. Thousands of people, and this all ha  
because Turleys lived here. Because *I* lived here.

ldhood      Tears burn my eyes, as hot as the flames that once burned these wall  
n            Behind me, the gathered Vulmin watch.

I wonder if any of them remember what Bryol used to be. I wonder  
ill, as if they think as they see a Turley standing in front of her black-charred h  
crying tears of gold.

one            Maybe my tears thin the veil between past and present, because I su  
ith the hear my mother's faint voice at my ear.

*"My little sun, where is your shine?"*

vines        *"It's here, mama,"* I said to her, even as I cried. Because no matter t  
oots.        reason for my sadness, she could fix it. She could *always* fix it.

our            *"Good, my girl. Because all I want is for you to be happy. You have  
buy        own light, little sun. So you must carry it with you when it grows dark.  
you can do that. Because we are strong, aren't we?"*

addle.      I feel more than hear Wick come up to my side, his gaze locked on t  
:at        same sight as me. "This is why we fight," he tells me quietly. "Be caus  
*wrong*. What happened here should never be allowed to happen again."

ow            When his head turns, I look over to meet his stare. I don't even try to  
here        away the tearstains trailing my cheeks.

*"You should never have been taken, Auren. Your parents should nev  
have been killed."*

iches        A crumpled-up sob tosses down my throat.

ter to        *"But I want you to remember something, Lyäri."*

*"What?"*

His brown eyes dig down, burrowing into my trampled spirit. "The  
Carricks didn't win that night. Not completely. Because they didn't ge

hrough      He surprises me when he grabs my hands and holds them gently. Su  
uined, me when I see the depth of sadness in his usually stoic face.

*"You lived, Auren."*

*Then why does my heart feel like it's died?*

*"Although they tried, they couldn't extinguish all the light of the Tu  
that night. You've been a beacon in the dark, even while you were gon  
now that you've returned, you're Annwyn's dawning sun."*

My heart throbs like an open wound, fresh tears scratching down my  
cheeks. Grief digs in her nails, making sure I'm left to bleed.

Left to scar.

ppened How long was it after my parents pulled me out of bed that night? How long did it take after they ushered me outside with the other children to safety? Was it minutes after we walked down the street with our guards? Did violence come to my house before my bed was even cold?

ls. Did my parents try to fight, to flee, to get to me? Did they die on the spot, or did they burn right here in our home? Were they already dead when taken?

what I don't have the courage to ask.  
ome, But I hope that they died thinking I was safe. Thinking that their death wasn't in vain. I hope they took their last breath believing I was okay.

ddenly I fold my legs beneath me. Knees bent, head up, tears dripping.  
the I wasn't killed that night, but a part of me died, anyway.

your Emonie comes up. With light steps, she leans down, placing the brooding  
But winged bird charm from her earring onto the ash.  
As soon as she steps away and sits beside me, more Vulmin take her place, each one of them setting down their own sigils. Until there's over a hundred of them lying at the foot of my home, glinting among ash and rubble. Until all of them are kneeling with me, here on the hallowed street.

o wipe A silent tribute.  
A wordless bond.

ver One that means more to me than I can ever possibly say.  
With a kiss pressed to my fingertips, I then rest my hand to the ground, my gold stream.  
I hear several of the Vulmin gasp aloud, many of them getting to their feet to back away, all of them watching as the tree sprouts up, reaches, grows taller and wider, its branches spreading, leaves springing, flowers blooming high overhead.

t you." Until the tree stands taller than any broken wall on this whole street. Until the bark gleams and its black-veined leaves let the last of the sunlight stream through.  
A solid gold tree, roots dug down where mine were severed. Turley's  
rleys Grown up where they tried to snuff us out.

e. And When I get to my feet, the Vulmin rise with me.  
My mother's voice is an echo through the breeze.

7 *We are strong, aren't we?*  
Aren't we.

low  
to be  
our  
?  
street,  
I was

ith

ken-

place,  
ndred  
Until

nd. Let

ir feet  
wing  
ming

. Until  
stream

gold.



## CHAPTER 30

AUREN

The group of Vulmin we meet up with actually turns out to be the village. Erected behind Bryol, past the fields where crackle grai shift with sparks of static, and lavender moss fattens the hillside. They call this village *Naonos Erith*. The Clamor of the Blaze.

Because while Bryol may lie quiet since death came during the Hundredflame Battle, the people here carry its lasting din. With devastated rattles in their chest. With a cacophony of quieted grumbles. With a rain of dissenting tears. Their reverberating discord blares through every single scarred building that now stands.

They used pieces of Bryol's ruin to build it. A circle of homes cloistered close against one another. One shop. One stable. One communal garden with a water well with a rusted pump. And one hundred fae.

That's all that remains from the thousands that used to thrive in the old walls.

As we approach on horseback, I see that the entire village is already outside.

Waiting.

As soon as they see me riding beside Wick, as soon as realization strikes, I see the change overtake them. Eyes widening and mouths gaping, fingers lifting and whispers hissing. The moment my presence sinks in, their collective clamor roars.

*The Golden One Gone.*

*Lyäri Ulvêre. The gilded girl returned.*

*Lyäri Lyäri Lyäri*

I'm filled with their blaring sound, and then I'm surrounded with their presence.

Hands are outstretched, faces smiling, others wailing, all of them trying to get closer to me as I sit on my horse. It's overwhelming. Makes my hands tighten on the reins. Even Blush doesn't know what to do with this level of attention, her nervousness apparent by the way she paws at the ground and pricks her ears.

"Auren Turley has returned to Bryol!" Wick calls out. "We come to all Vulmin, between here and Lydia. To march against the monarchy and bring our new dawn. It's time to step out of the dark." The villagers are listening to him intently, their eyes alight. "Who will join us?"

Combined bellows lift in the air so loud I flinch, and then I'm practically pulled down off my saddle. All the Vulmin dismount, and it's like being caught in a swell, a surge of people moving around me, and I have to run with it. We're ushered into the heart of the village, and within minutes a bonfire is lit that casts sparks up into the darkening sky, and a large anvil is roasting over it in preparation of a feast.

"Here, Lady Auren," a male fae says, ushering me to sit on a heap of stones by the fire.

The moment I plop down, people flock to me. They smile, welcome me, and call out their names. I do my best to greet them all, but the attention is staggering.

They watch me as I'm not just their symbol, but their savior.

"Lady Auren has returned home!" someone shouts on the other side of the flames. He's tall and brawny, with two large hoops hanging from either side of his head. Everyone turns and listens to him, the noise dulling down, making me think maybe he's some sort of village leader. "The Lyäri Ulvêre is back to Bryol! The Vulmin Dyrūnia is ready to march. The Clamor is ready to march with them!"

Voices of approval crush against my ears, the energy of the village frenetic.



nks in, “Let us feast and celebrate the return of our Lyäri! And tomorrow, v  
gers with our Dawn!”

Another raucous cheer fills the air to near-bursting.

Then, it’s a blur of villagers dancing, music and singing, or a lightbr  
who makes a show in the night sky. Where tendrils of light float up, te  
the story of Saira Turley’s bridge. Of a girl who didn’t give up. Of a gi  
kept on her path.

air I’m plied with food and drink and more drink and more *drink*.

It tastes like smoked vanilla and goes down with decadent warmth, t  
ring to crackling foam top sending bubbles right to my head.

nds *Delicious.*

el of Just like the roasted meat. And the bread husks peeled open that are  
and with creamy butter. The sugared berries pinned on a skewer.

I dance with Wick. With Emonie. With Ludogar. With all the Vulmi  
gather the entire village. I melt down the gold from my arm cuffs and make th  
nd into strings that sway around us like tall grass, glinting against the firel  
e beneath a sky that sings of home.

I let my ribbons dance with me, and even though I can’t move them,  
cally move with *me*. They spin through the air and drag across the ground, a  
ig a moment, I can pretend that they’re back to the way they were. I wish  
nove Slade, the Wrath, Digby and Rissa, Nenet and Estelia and Thursil, Sail  
, a my parents...wish that they were all here. With me.

imal is But maybe there’s a reason I’m alone.

And maybe...I’m not really alone after all.

f fur at



, give

gering. I wake up with a splitting headache.

Those smoked vanilla drinks were entirely too delicious going down  
of the not exactly sure how many cups I consumed, either. Feels like a lot.

r ear. Bright side?

think It’s better than all the times I’d wake up with these headaches in Hig  
ryol. after drinking too much wine and fermenting in despondency.

with As soon as I open my eyes, the headache chisels into my eye socket  
has me groaning. My roiling stomach makes me want to yank up the c  
and hide beneath them. I can’t though, because Emonie is on top of the  
blankets and grunts at me with a hiss of threat when I try to snatch them

ve rise      “If you move me, I will forage someone’s shoe and throw it right at beautiful face,” she grumbles, eyes still shut.

weather I mutter back.      “I’ll turn your hair solid gold so you can’t lift your head from that pi

lling      She hums croakily. “That actually sounds nice. Then I wouldn’t hav  
rl who get up.”

She’s got a point.

he      “Come on.” I shove an elbow into her side. “If I’m up, you’re up.”

A huff escapes her smooshed lips. “You’re a bit mean after a celebra  
village feast.”

“You snored in your sleep all night.”

doused      She sits up, her hair stuck around her head at all angles, the orange t  
in in      curling every which way as she tries to finger-comb through it. “I’ll co  
something you can stuff into your ears.”

rem      I snort as I get up, swinging my legs over the bed with one eye shut.  
light      don’t know what we were drinking last night, but that stuff was...”

“Amazing?”

, they      “Yeah, honestly.” As soon as I’m on my feet, I sway and slap a hand  
nd for      mouth. “Great Divine, I think I might vomit,” I say through my fingers

for      “Really?” She looks around. “Better gold yourself a bowl.”

and      I shudder and take a deep breath, forcing myself to exhale through it  
can’t be vomiting in someone’s home.”

She hums. “It would be a bit off-putting, since they just sang songs t  
celebrate you all night,” she says as she comes over and picks a twig o  
my hair. “Come on. Maybe there’s a pond we can dunk our heads in.”

Maybe that’ll numb away the skull chisel.

But as soon as I get to the door, I think I really might have to go coll  
back onto the bed and hide under the covers. Luckily, I’m saved.

1. I’m      Elisabeth, the lovely fae who let me borrow her bed last night, is als  
apparently a divine being and the most beautiful soul in the world, bec  
she has a cure in hand the moment we stumble out of the room.

ghbell      She takes one look at me, her blonde ringlets bouncing at her should  
and presses a cup into my hands and then another into Emonie’s.

and      “What is this?” I ask warily, looking down at the bit of clumpiness t  
overs      floating on the top.

2      “Best you not ask, Lady Auren,” she says ominously.

n.

your Emonie clinks her wooden cup against mine in a toast and then tosses  
back. I tip my own cup and gulp the liquid down, trying not to think at  
illow,” floaty bits. It tastes like pickled chocolate with a bit of soil, but the mo  
hits my stomach, I get instant relief.

e to “Wow,” I say, letting out a breath.

“Better?” Elisabeth asks.

“Much, thank you.”

atory She smiles and takes the cups, dress swishing as she strides away. I  
around and see Wick, Ludogar, and a handful of other Vulmin who also  
stayed here last night, picking up their bedrolls and tidying up their pre

ips Everyone, except Wick and Ludo of course, looks like they need  
Elisabeth’s helpful concoction too.

llect “Enjoy yourself last night?” Wick asks as he approaches.

“Yes, although, I probably shouldn’t have...”

“I To my surprise, he shakes his head. “You should celebrate your return  
Bryol. Don’t feel guilty about that. These are where your roots are. It’s  
happy occasion.”

l to my “But you didn’t celebrate much?”

is. He gives me a rare smile, and I can’t help but match it. “I’ve just got  
stronger stomach than you.”

t. “I “My stomach is plenty strong.”

“Really? *I* didn’t need Elisabeth’s fog juice, unlike you.”

to I shrug. “Then you’re really missing out on the full experience.”

ut of He chuckles. “Go eat some breakfast. Fill that weak stomach of yours  
I roll my eyes, but...*I am* hungry.

lapse Elisabeth, bless her soul, has the table laid out with a big bowl of thick  
cream with berries swirled through it, slices of salted meat, and dipping  
that’s soaking in some kind of syrup.

o “I made sure I saved a fresh loaf just for you,” she says with a wink.

ause “You’re the fairest fae in all the land,” Emonie tells her dreamily before  
she quickly grabs up a piece. I do the same, the two of us dunking the loaves  
into the cream until we polish off our plates.

hat’s Afterward, I wash up using a bucket of water someone brought in from  
well. When I come out dressed in the brown tunic and pants Elisabeth  
me, I find Wick and the other Vulmin with serious faces. They’re gathered  
around someone I haven’t met yet, though as she stands beside Ludogar  
easy to see the family resemblance.

as it She has the same sea-blue hair as him, the same froth of frizzy white  
out theher scalp that makes it look like the way a tide bubbles up along the sh  
ment it Her eyes are sharp teal, and she seems like the older sister to Ludo and  
couple of inches on his height. While he's wearing a tunic and vest, sh  
simple gray smock with a cloak and a white apron that frills at the edge

“How many?” Wick asks her.

She shrugs. “That I don't know.”

look His gaze flicks to Ludo, and the fae tilts his head in thought. “Fancy  
o rescue mission?”

presence. Wick smirks and looks around at the others. “What say you, Vulmin

Everyone grunts their approval, and I use the noise to move without  
sidling up next to Emonie where she's standing against the wall. “Wha  
going on?” I ask quietly.

rn to “Lerana is Ludo's sister. She works as a spy in one of the nobleman  
; a houses in Riffalt City. She has some news of some Oreans we might be  
to pick up along the way.”

My brows lift up in surprise.

t a “It's one of our most common missions,” she tells me. “We try to tra  
down Oreans who need our help. Sometimes, they're being forced to v  
for terrible fae, and we sneak them out and give them a new life in a V  
village where they can live in peace. Other times, Oreans reach out and  
help get their ears molded for pointed tips and new birth papers that lis  
as full fae. We do whatever we can to help.”

rs.” “So it's true.” The fae's voice draws my attention away from Emoni  
look across the room at Lerana, whose teal eyes are now locked on me  
brother told me about you, but to see you in person...”

g bread “Nice to meet you.”

fore “The honor is mine, Lady Lyäri,” she says, pressing a hand to her ch  
with a smile. “Word has spread of your return. The whispers are catchi  
I believe you've come at the perfect time.”

bread Let's hope so.

She turns back to Wick. “I should return. I'll await your arrival.”

om the He nods as they get to their feet, the other Vulmin doing the same. “  
gave a plan together. Tell Brennur to expect us within the hour.”

ered She nods and then leaves the house, her brother following behind.

ar, it's “I'll go pack,” Emonie says, slipping away just as Wick comes walk  
over.

As soon as he's beside me, he tilts his head toward the door, and I follow him outside. The morning air still smells faintly of smoke from last night's bonfire, and the villagers who are cleaning up look over, giving me greetings in a few smiles.

"You heard the tail-end of that, but Lerana is one of our most valuable spies in Riffalt. She holds a position as a servant, feeding us important information from a nobleman's house. He's a big supporter of the Carrion monarchy."

"And there are Oreans in his household?"

"Not his—but a neighboring one. From what it sounds like, they're in the city by choice. Normally, I wouldn't hesitate at sending a group in to retrieve them, but this particular household is incredibly risky. I need to go there myself."

"And you're wondering what to do with me," I guess.

He nods. "The whole city is crawling with Stone Swords. I don't want to leave you with the other Vulmin as they continue on toward the kingdom. The estate where I'm going will be dangerous."

"I'm dangerous myself."

His lips quirk. "Yes, you are. Which is why I think you *should* come with me, but I'll leave the decision to you. I have a plan to keep you safe, and it requires a disguise, if you're okay with that. I think it's important for the Vulmin to know you're helping to rescue these Oreans rather than stay behind. It will show them how strong you are—that you're willing to face them. Now that we have larger numbers, we should do more missions like this. "My word together on our way to the kingdom. Let word of you spread among all Annwyn, not just the Vulmin."

"I want to help," I say honestly. "And if these Oreans are in a bad situation, I want to get them out. A disguise doesn't bother me."

"Good. We'll leave within the hour, so get ready."

I'm filled with a soul-renewing purpose. This mission with the Oreans is exactly what I need—exactly what I want to do. It makes me feel like I'm not just a golden symbol, but that I can actually *help* the people who need it. I'll get started actively making strides to aid their cause.

There's no need for me to *get ready*, as Wick said. Because I already am.

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## CHAPTER 31

### QUEEN MALINA

I think Dommik might have been less dangerous when he was simply trying to kill me. Something has changed between the assassin and me. Now that he's touched me, nearly kissed me, I'm not sure how to feel.

We were supposed to have reached Highbell last night, but since he became too exhausted to continue, we ended up staying in a little cave found at the side of the mountain.

We could've gone to the safe house where I went when I fled the castle, but I didn't suggest it, and neither did he. He killed my guards there. Killed Jeo there. Tried to kill *me* there.

It wouldn't feel right if we were to return now. It seems like ages ago. I feel like a different person since I fled that place.

Perhaps I am.

Perhaps the assassin is too.

I can't help but think how things would be different if he'd been successful that day. If he'd been able to plunge his blade through my chest. None of this would've happened if he'd killed me. The fae wouldn't be invading. Two of us wouldn't be...in this strange push and pull.

Part of me still wants to hate Dommik for killing Jeo and the others, but that hate has shifted to myself. Ultimately, it *was* my fault. I took Jeo on a sort of rebellion. After so many years of watching my husband flaunt his harem of saddles, I wanted one for myself to shove in his face. Jeo was pleasant. Uncomplicated. I enjoyed his company, and I enjoyed the freedom.

felt with him. He was killed for no other reason than staying loyal to me. I left him there in the snow.

Dommik was right. I did have a heart of ice.

But I'm trying to make it thaw.

"Your thoughts are so loud I can hear them from here."

I glance up at Dommik as he treks back inside the cave. At least he's trying to go away to relieve himself this time. He stops in front of me and passes over a water skin along with some bread wrapped around a slice of hard cheese.

"Care to share what it is you're thinking about so hard?"

I pick at the crust. "Jeo."

He hesitates. "The lover."

He doesn't pose it as a question, but I nod anyway. "Lover might be a generous a term. Can you call someone a lover if you pay them to be with you?"

"I wouldn't think the Cold Queen would have a saddle."

"Yes, well, when you're in a loveless marriage and can't birth an heir, which is your sole purpose for living and only duty to the kingdom... then your one's husband leaves your bed quite quickly," I say bitterly.

Dommik watches me as I nibble on the bread. "Can't say I know much about duties to kingdoms, but I do know people, and your husband sees you as a smarmy ass."

We share a look. "I think that would be an adequate description."

After we both eat in silence for a while, he says, "Are you ready? To go to Highbell?"

I'm not sure it matters whether I'm ready or not. I have to go, regardless.

"You have to make them believe you," Dommik warns.

"I know."

"It won't be easy."

I know that too.

When we're both finished eating, Dommik shadow-leaps us away. As we reach Highbell, I won't be traveling this way anymore, and I find myself wanting to savor it. The bent light and billowing shadows have become a comforting embrace. I can't see his body, or mine, can't hear his voice, but I can feel his hand. A hot, steady, callused palm gripped in mine that never falters.

What must it say about me, that the most dependable hand I've ever held is in the grasp of my assassin?

edom I



ie, and We stop at midday, right at the road that leads to the city. I can see the Pitching Pines in the distance, those incomprehensibly tall trees that bar us from the worst of the blizzarding wind.

Up the mountainside sits Highbell Castle. Right now, it's gleaming in dappled gray daylight that filters in through the clouds. Snow covers its walked turrets and ice hangs from its belltower walls, but the gilded monstrosity never dulls enough for my liking.

se. "I gotta ask..." Dommik begins as the two of us stare at the castle. "Are you here trying to compensate for something?"

My lips curve. "A great many things, I think."

"Bold move to gild an entire castle."

too "That's all Tyndall is," I reply. "Bold moves and smarmy charm."

with "But you're still married to him in the eyes of the gods?" he taunts.

"For now." My gaze casts sideways. "Perhaps I should simply hire your services. You can assassinate him instead of me."

ir, He turns, hooded face revealing a hint of a smirk beneath. "Can you do it for me? I'm expensive."

I gesture to the castle. "Take whatever gold you can hack off as payment."

ich Amusement ripples through his face, and he opens his mouth to reply. Suddenly, his eyes dart over my shoulder, and his entire face hardens. He shoves me a fraction of a second before an arrow flies right toward his chest. Before it pierces him, he explodes into billowing shadow.

o return I fall hard, landing in the stiff snow with the breath knocked out of me. I turn and try to push myself up, but someone suddenly grips my hair in a fist and wrenches my head up, neck stretched as they stand over me. I feel as a blade starts swinging toward my throat.

But shadow erupts, and a spray of blood bursts in my face.

Once I blink as a fae soldier falls to his knees, and it takes a moment to realize that Dommik just sliced his sword through his neck. The fae's head falls, pointed ears stabbing into the snow.

Myself A bile-soaked scream lodges in my throat and makes me choke as I fall like a down at the severed head. I scramble back, slipping in the bloody snow, but I can't see before I manage to get far enough away from the splatter that I can get a few feet.

The assassin stands over the fae's body, hood pulled low, arms flexed, chest held in his sides, and sword hanging from the tense grip of his hand. Blood is

he soaking into the snow, steam rising from the rivulets. The fae's marble  
irricadeblade lays uselessly at his torso, his long blond hair now stained red.

I almost died.

in the One more second, and he would've sliced that sword through my ne  
s

Subconsciously, my hand lifts to my throat like a protective barrier a  
ty is continue to stare. My vision mottles with black spots.

"Hey."

Was He was going to kill me. My scalp still hurts where he gripped me. I  
so close. I almost—

"Queenie."

My view is abruptly cut off from the fae as Dommik stands before n  
Searing hot hands grip my ice cold cheeks. "Look at me."

It's like my body has to listen to him. Has to comply. My gaze flies  
our and we lock eyes.

"You're in shock. Breathe in and out."

afford I do as he says, realizing that the black dots I keep seeing were from  
of air, and they slowly creep out of my vision the longer I keep breathi

ment." "Good," he rasps. He drags his thumbs across my frost-touched che  
y, but rubbing flakes away. "Good," he says again. Then his hands drop, and

He watch in fascination as he dips the corner of his cloak into the snow an  
chest. gently starts wiping the blood off my face.

"You saved my life."

ne. I He says nothing, just gives a few last swipes over my cheek.

their "You were supposed to kill me, but you saved me just now instead."  
scream crusts against my palms and pinches into my skin.

"Can't have the fae collecting my bounty, now can I?"

I want to scoff but all I manage to do is grimace.

alize "Come on. The Cold Queen doesn't get shaken from a mere assassin  
ls, attempt, does she?" he teases.

I want to laugh. I want to cry.

blink Instead, I sniff and lift my chin. "Of course not."

v, I see him grin. "There she is. The unshakable cold."

to my He dusts me off, but when my eyes start to drop down to the fae aga  
turns me away to face the city once more. "Don't look behind you. Lo  
ed at ahead."

Looking ahead frightens me even more. But as he said, I have to be  
unshakable cold.

I hear him scraping around in the snow for the next couple of minutes. When he comes up beside me again, I see he's done his best to pile snow over the body, head, and all the blood. The ground is lumpy, but no one knows what's hiding beneath unless someone walks over it.

Dommik dusts off his hands. "With the presence of that fae scout, I think we have time to walk into the city and take stock. Last time I checked the scouts were only a couple of days ahead of the rest of the army. We should shadow-leap straight up to the castle."

I nod, but trepidation fills me. I'd hoped for time to sneak into the city and find out what's been happening since I left. I have no idea if Tyndall is still alive or if everyone still thinks I'm dead.

"Ready?"

I use the ice in my chest to fortify me, to freeze layer upon layer until I can stand taller. Pushing my shoulders back, I then grasp his hand. "Yes."

We lurch away with his magic, but it feels like only seconds before the comfort of his shadows pull away from me again. Too soon, we're walking in front of Highbell Castle, inside the shadowy cover of the stable over the main entrance.

Before us lies the front drive, the path open and leading right to the main door. A main door that looks as if it's been hacked at. As do the front windows that once shone with polished perfection.

I gape at it wordlessly.

Gilded bricks have been chiseled into, pieces of gold snapped off the window panes, axe marks cutting up the walls. Besides the visible damage to the castle itself, there's another startling difference.

The drive should be open and clear, save for a horse or even a carriage. Tyndall has need of it. Instead, the front of the castle is utterly full of people. So many that we're crammed at the very back of the thick crowd. I creep back even more, nearly pressing into Dommik, but no one is paying us any attention. Everyone is facing the castle ahead.

"What in the realm..." My voice trails off as the crowd makes a collective noise, and then someone speaks. My gaze snaps upward to the high balcony.

A woman stands there, addressing the people below, and she looks so startlingly different from me. Her skin is bronze, her hair lush and black, hanging down to her waist in sleek waves. She has curves so unlike my own figure, and a turquoise gown that plunges between her breasts, revealing more cleavage than is proper. She oozes so much feminine sexuality that

es. more than half the crowd seems to be riveted with desire, and the other  
ow up are looking at her like they'd do anything to please her.

e will Yet the thing that makes my stomach plummet is the glittering crown  
sits atop her head. All at once, I realize who she is. The seashells and a  
don't gemstones in the crown confirm it. Queen Kaila Ioana, ruler of Third  
icked, Kingdom.

e Why is she in Sixth Kingdom, in *my* castle, standing on *my* balcony?  
"It appears that there's a queen in your castle," Dommik murmurs b  
ity and me.

; back "What is Queen Kaila doing here?" I hiss.

"Third Kingdom?" Dommik asks, a hint of surprise in his tone. "She  
is a long way from her beach."

il I feel Her voice lifts into the air as she addresses everyone. "I completely  
d. understand the concerns of the kingdom, and I am here to rectify them.  
*She's here to rectify them?*

the Her words carry so perfectly that she doesn't even need to shout. Her  
isked husky voice drifts over the crowd, sounding like she's right beside me  
hang. speaks. A trick of her tone, perhaps? Or is she using her voice magic?

main "With his last words, King Midas beseeched me to step in and care for  
walls people. That's why I came, and I am so thankful to the gods that I arrived  
when I did. I can only apologize for not getting here sooner." She pres  
hand over her heart. "As his grieving betrothed, I will fulfill his last pl  
e what he would have wanted."

ige to I can feel Dommik's eyes on the side of my face.

Kaila's words are screaming in my ears.

ge if *Last words.*

people. *Grieving betrothed.*

ep *What he would have wanted.*

any "He can't be," I whisper, shaking my head. "He can't possibly be...  
vision is tipping, my thoughts confused. "How can he be dead? She must  
lective lying."

lcony. Dommik says nothing, but I can feel the confusion in his tension. He  
so strikes me as a person who doesn't enjoy being caught off guard. I sup  
k, with his line of work, that wouldn't be the best thing.

y slim "He can't be dead," I say again, feeling like I'm my own version of  
ig far echo.

iat

half “I will personally be in the throne room every single day, opening the doors of Highbell so I may hear your concerns,” Queen Kaila goes on. Her gaze drops from the balcony, her words drowned out by the pounding of her ears. My eyes search through the crowd as if I expect to find Tyndall among them.

I don’t.

I do, however, see a woman, brown eyes locking on me as her eyebrows shoot up in surprise. I freeze, and the sight of her pricks my senses. She is slight, but the way she holds her body screams strength. She doesn’t look like a peasant or a noble. She’s something else. She has dark brown skin and wears black leathers like a fighter, and her hair is shaved short. It looks like she has shapes shorn into her scalp. The shapes almost look like—

She turns her head, and I get distracted, my gaze pulling toward the soldiers up by the castle door. I frown at the sight of them, forgetting a moment about the woman.

Third Kingdom soldiers are standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Highbell guards at the castle entrance, integrated with one another. Silver and gold standing united under the beautiful presence of this other queen. We’re used to Third Kingdom, sure, but this is different. This is a show of unity just that—a *show*.

“She’s trying to take my kingdom,” I grit out.

Obviously, that’s what she’s doing. She’s spelled it out. Not just with words, but this ostentatious display, where she’s acting as this beautiful benefactor come to graciously save Sixth Kingdom out of the kindness of her heaving heart.

My cold hands go colder, and my fingers dig into my palms, scraping against my frosted skin.

Tyndall sent an assassin to kill me, so that he could marry *her*? So that he could have not just Sixth and Fifth Kingdom under his control, but Third Kingdom as well? He was going to have power over nearly half of all Orea, and the result somehow...he suspiciously ends up dead?

My head is spinning.

My anger spins louder.

Like someone swinging a rope round and round, making it whistle through the air, so high pitched it makes me want to cringe.

How dare this woman think she can come here and lay claim to my kingdom.

ie I start walking forward.

My "Queenie," Dommik hisses at my back. "What the fuck are you doing  
in my I ignore him and start pushing my way through. Having to squeeze p  
mongsteveryone makes me more determined to get through the crowd, so that  
know who I am. So that they'll see I'm not dead and that this other que  
can't simply stand on my balcony and try to stake claim to what isn't h

ows *Grieving betrothed*. The absolute *nerve*.

e's Her continued words clash around in my whistling ears. "I am so  
ok like incredibly proud to stand here before you and act as Sixth Kingdom's  
id steward and help get Highbell back on steady feet." She smiles beautif  
s like lovely eyes casting across the crowd like they're her horde of adoring  
children. "And being from Third Kingdom means I have stepped on m  
ship and crossed many a sea. I can safely say my feet are the steadiest  
ll find."

The crowd laughs collectively.

hbell's I shove through.

old, I'm at the halfway point where the crowd is thickest, where I have to  
e allied more aggressively, when the people start to look over at me. When the  
that is to *see*.

Then they're pointing and shouting, moving away, everyone's atten  
turning toward me.

h her "It's the Cold Queen!"

il "It's Queen Malina!"

s of her "The Cold Queen is alive!"

They have no idea how accurate that nickname now is.

ig I stop when all the people have moved aside, creating a path betwee  
bodies, one that parts all the way to the front steps of the castle.

nat he I stare up at the supplanter queen. "I am Queen Malina Colier Midas  
rd as ruler of Sixth Kingdom. My throne has no need for a steward."

in The grounds go quiet. Shock covers Queen Kaila's face before she c  
covers it up. She whispers something to her guards before looking dow  
me with a frown. "Queen Malina perished. She was killed by the very  
you stand beside."

hrough Internally, I flinch, but my face shows nothing as the crowd stares at  
and I lift my voice high, force it to stay even and strong. "I was not kil  
And you cannot be betrothed in the eyes of the gods or the people, bec  
King Midas was my husband."

Everyone just watches me—and not in the same way they watch her  
ing?” watch me with distrust. As if *I’m* the supplanter.

ast Kaila’s thick lips press together.

they’ll She doesn’t like that I’m ruining her carefully orchestrated show. I c  
en the frustration in her hard, amber eyes as she looks down her nose at m  
ers. know what I must look like. Unbathed, unbound, clothes ill-fitting and  
humble, full of a slushed hem and wrinkled creases. Tendrils of my wh  
hair ripped from the braid that hangs down my back, and I wonder if  
ully, Dommik truly removed all the blood off my face from earlier or if ther  
still traces of it on my pale skin.

I don’t care about any of it. She can’t supplant me when I’m standin  
any a here in the courtyard.

you’ll “If you are truly Queen Malina, where have you been?”

I hesitate.

Then, I feel his presence behind me. I don’t know how I know it’s h  
Perhaps it’s the scent of smoke that clings to his cloak. Or the slight tic  
o push temperature that I feel radiating at my back. But I know Dommik stanc  
y start there, a silent, hooded presence to help steel my spine.

There’s no time to dither. Not with the fae so close behind. So the fa  
tion there’s a good portion of the city here within Highbell’s walls to hear t  
truth directly from my lips is a blessing from the Divine.

So I square my shoulders and say, “I was in Seventh Kingdom.”

Surprise spreads through the crowd like a gap. It stretches between r  
them, widening like their gaping mouths.

“Seventh Kingdom,” Queen Kaila repeats in monotone. “That *kingd*  
n their doesn’t exist anymore. There’s nothing there. The edges of the world  
crumbled away hundreds of years ago.”

s and “I thought that too. Until I went there.”

She stares at me. I can feel everyone waiting, the gap stalling its spr  
quickly “Alright...and why did you go to Seventh Kingdom?” she asks careful

m at “I was...led there. By someone. But it was a mistake. A trick. They  
people my position, my confusion, and my blood. Now, war is coming to Ore

This time, the beautiful queen can’t hide her surprise as she rears ba  
t me, “War? With Seventh Kingdom? Seventh Kingdom doesn’t *exist*. Why  
led. you speaking such ridiculous lies?”

ause “Not Seventh Kingdom,” I tell her, voice raised over the people in tl  
crowd who start to shout at me. I pause, but I know I have to tell it all.

They my part in it. “I gave my blood to the fae, and they used it with their m  
repair the bridge of Lemuria. Now, they’re coming to take over Orea.”

The courtyard goes violently still. There’s no mere gap anymore bet  
can see the people and me; there’s an entire canyon that divides us. One that I  
ne. I into alone with my echoing words.

The weight of their gazes makes my shoulders stiffen and curve. Th  
ite hatred and surprise and disbelief and...the look someone gives you wh  
you’re utterly unwanted.

I stand beneath their stares and bear their incredulous hate. There’s s  
much space between us now that I’m not sure I could ever close the di

As if that weren’t horrible enough, Queen Kaila then tips her head b  
and *laughs*. The sound is just as husky and decadent as I would expect  
spreads through the air, instantly changing the tension of the crowd, m  
them erupt into laughter too.

My ears burn. Everyone surrounds me, laughing at me.

*Laughing.*

Humiliation gouges into my face, pitting my soul. I want to hide fro  
mockery, but I stand tall instead.

“It’s true!” I shout, forcing my voice to carry over their ridicule. “Th  
he bridge has been remade! The fae have sent an army, and they’re march  
Highbell!”

The laughter turns more raucous.

I have never been so mortified, so angry, so frustrated in my entire l

Queen Kaila stops laughing long enough to look down at me with  
om delighted pity. “Fae have not been in Orea for hundreds of years.”

“That’s not true. There have been some—at least three that I know c  
who were here. There could have been more. And they’ve found a way  
the bridge, and now they’re marching on us, set to slaughter us all.”

The crowd mocks me.

Kaila smirks at me.

Even Highbell’s guards standing sentry just a few steps away look a  
a.” with derision.

It goes on and on, and I feel more than hear Dommik’s fury shaking  
are through his body. “Say the word, and I’ll get you out of here,” he grow  
my back.

It’s tempting.

But I hold my tongue.



agic to “Enough,” Queen Kaila announces, as if she’s the power here and I’  
nothing but a nuisance she accidentally stepped on with her shoe. “One  
ween not laugh at a queen, however mad she may seem.”

fall My hands go so cold I worry my bones might snap if I bend my fing  
even an inch.

ere’s “Queen Malina has obviously suffered a great ordeal,” she goes on  
en speaking to the people. “Come, help her inside.”

so Guards march forward, one of hers and one of Highbell’s. I snatch n  
stance. arms out of their grips and turn, looking at the crowd instead. “I know  
ack hard to believe! I know the fae shouldn’t have a way back to Orea—th  
, and it they’ve been gone for so long their existence seems like a myth. But it  
I saw them with my own eyes, and they’ll reach Highbell soon.”

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wish they had rotten fruit they could throw at me. This time, the guard  
snatch at my arms and start hauling me toward the castle, and I can’t w  
out of their grips.

m their “You must listen!” I shout desperately, head whipping around, snow  
falling from my hands and dusting uselessly at my dragging feet. “You  
re prepare!”

ing on I know how I must look. Crazed and filthy, nothing like the poised c  
they’re used to seeing. But this is so far beyond concern for my own in  
need them to believe me. Need them to prepare.

ife. All I can see is that slaughtered village behind my eyes. Yet even as  
hauled away like a prisoner into my own castle, with mockery and curs  
lobbed at my back, I go knowing that I have a shadow following behin

of— So I hold my head high, steeling myself as we enter Highbell Castle  
7 to fix Into the belly of the gilded beast.

t me

7ls at

“Enough,” Queen Kaila announces, as if she’s the power here and I’m nothing but a nuisance she accidentally stepped on with her shoe. “One does not laugh at a queen, however mad she may seem.”

My hands go so cold I worry my bones might snap if I bend my fingers even an inch.

“Queen Malina has obviously suffered a great ordeal,” she goes on speaking to the people. “Come, help her inside.”

Guards march forward, one of hers and one of Highbell’s. I snatch my arms out of their grips and turn, looking at the crowd instead. “I know it’s hard to believe! I know the fae shouldn’t have a way back to Orea—that they’ve been gone for so long their existence seems like a myth. But it’s true! I saw them with my own eyes, and they’ll reach Highbell soon.”

A few of the people frown, but for the most part, everyone looks as if they wish they had rotten fruit they could throw at me. This time, the guards snatch at my arms and start hauling me toward the castle, and I can’t wrench out of their grips.

“You must listen!” I shout desperately, head whipping around, snow falling from my hands and dusting uselessly at my dragging feet. “You must prepare!”

I know how I must look. Crazy and filthy, nothing like the poised queen they’re used to seeing. But this is so far beyond concern for my own image. I need them to believe me. Need them to prepare.

All I can see is that slaughtered village behind my eyes. Yet even as I’m hauled away like a prisoner into my own castle, with mockery and curses lobbed at my back, I go knowing that I have a shadow following behind me.

So I hold my head high, steeling myself as we enter Highbell Castle.  
Into the belly of the gilded beast.



## CHAPTER 32

### QUEEN MALINA

Queen Kaila is enjoying this.

The slight smirk she wears looks like a perfected accessory much as the glittering earrings that drip down her lobes.

We're sitting at the formal dining table together, but the chair at the blatantly empty. We both looked at it, both bristled at the other, and then settled for the seats across from one another instead.

Still, even if she's not sitting at the head, her silent statement is clear: she's in charge.

She enjoys that it's her guards that line the room. That it's her kingdom's colors of silver and blue that adorn the napkins and silverware and place settings. There's even a centerpiece filled with blue-tinged water with floating candles on top of it. She's put her little touches inside this castle already, when all my own Colier touches were stripped away years ago.

She's enjoying the fact that she sits here perfectly put together, while I look haggard and harried. Instead of taking me upstairs so I could bathe and change, she ushered me straight here. As if she's hosting me in *her* castle.

The nerve.

I would normally fight against this sort of silent subterfuge, but there are much more important factors at play than my pride taking a hit. Besides, she can't try to intimidate me with her colors and her guards and her presence. I know she likes.

I'm not alone.

Of their own volition, my eyes flick to the back of the dining room and the corner is bathed in shadow. It looks empty, save for the gilt wallpaper that's been peeled away.

It's not empty.

Dommik is there. I can *feel* it. The space probably looks like an ordinary shadow to everyone else, but I can tell the difference. Perhaps it's because I've been traveling in his shadows for days on end, so I have some sort of connection to them.

Or perhaps, I just have a connection to *him*.

Either way, it's a silent comfort knowing he's there.

Not wanting to give anything away, my attention trails around, and I see how thoroughly this room has been ransacked. Even her kingdom's court can't hide that.

There used to be gold-threaded drapes hanging from the tall window, but those have been ripped away, save a few clumps of the fabric still stuck to the top. The gilt rug is gone, and someone even yanked off the floor trim. The walls are scuffed and chunks are scored into the walls, and the light sconces are noticeably absent. The chairs we sit in aren't the ones that used to be here. They're all simple, made of plain wood. I'm sure that the only reason the dining table still sits here is because it was far too heavy for people to steal.

I wonder how many came through and plundered the castle. I wonder how they helped cool their anger.

"That announcement outside was unwise," Queen Kaila says, the first to break the silence. I've rankled her enough to do that, so it's some concern.

Unlike outside, her face is now devoid of the charm that she wore in front of the crowd. Sitting in front of me is a very different queen.

"I'm not interested in wisdom in the face of impending threat."

She taps a nail against the crystal glass in front of her. "You want your kingdom back. I understand that. I also understand the need to play the long game. What better way to get your people to back you than an *impending threat* you called it." Her hand smooths over the table. "Though this lie about the fae is extreme."

"It's not a lie," I say through gnashing teeth. "There's a fae scout dead in the snow just outside the city. There's an entire village razed, every single person slaughtered. Send some of your soldiers to go confirm."

Kaila waves a hand dismissively, cuticles perfectly manicured. I drop my own hands into my lap, hiding my jagged, crusted nails.

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where      “Malina—may I call you Malina?”  
per        My spine goes stiff as steel. “You may call me queen, for that is who  
am.”  
Her eyes dance, as if this response is a glittering challenge she enjoys.  
nary      “Your Majesty, I believe we can come to some sort of agreement.”  
use        I nearly roll my eyes. I can imagine what *agreement* she’d put forth,  
t of      I’m not interested.  
“When did he tell you I was dead?”  
She blinks, obviously taken aback by my change of subject. “Excuse  
“Tyndall. When exactly did he tell you I was dead, and how far after  
I note    did the two of you decide to marry?”  
lors      “Such details aren’t important now,” she replies breezily. “Obvious  
information was incorrect.”  
/s, but    She’s treating this—all of this—as if it doesn’t matter, when she does  
k at the    understand how very wrong she is. “It wasn’t *information*. He reported  
Little    dead because he thought he’d ensured it.”  
She arches a brow and looks around at her guards with a wry shake  
ere.      head. “I’m sure you’re not speaking treason against the late king.”  
he        I bare my teeth in a wicked smile.  
“I’m sure you shouldn’t throw out that word *treason* when you’re try  
er if it    sit on someone else’s throne.”  
She gives me a biting grin right back.  
st to      For several seconds, that’s all we are. Sharp teeth and cool contempt  
ession.    “Your death was announced, Queen Malina,” she says to me, as if th  
i front    should be the end of it. “The lines of your Colier heritage were crossed  
the books, and with no heirs...” She lets the sentence hang.  
It slips around my neck, tightening like a noose. The shadows in the  
our      flicker, ever so slightly. Reminding me to breathe.  
: game.    “Highbell was in an uproar when I arrived. There were riots in the st  
eat, as    purgers in the castle. I put an end to all of that. You should be thanking  
: the      I look at her incredulously. “*Thanking you?*”  
“Yes,” she says firmly, hand smoothing over her lustrous black hair.  
ad in    people hate you. They were glad you were dead. I made them stop looting  
ngle      stop running wild through the city and committing crimes unchecked. I  
I’ve arrived, I’ve instilled peace again. They trust me. Adore me. Until  
p my      I’m very good at being liked.”  
I’m sure she is.

Everything about her looks as if she's used to having people like her at I young, beautiful, alluring, charismatic...warm. From head to toe, she's exactly what a queen should be.

Everything I'm not.

My smile slips. My mind falters. There's a little bit of snow that we and from the center of my palm and drips onto my lap.

Perhaps...perhaps she's right. Maybe Highbell is better off with her e me?" Something hard and jagged and bitter gets stuck in my throat. It coir with this ugly, piercing pain that seems to twist in my heart.

*Is Highbell better off without me?*

I don't like the answer that whispers in my head. I don't like the way y, his answer staggers me, like there's no even ground for me to stand upon.

What am I, if not a queen?

But my eyes drift to that corner again. Catch on a flicker of bent light I was twisting pain lessens, just a bit. Enough for me to breathe, though the t that exhales out of me is tired. Worn. A weariness that isn't physical, b of her something soul-deep.

I no longer have the stomach to sit here and play political games wit woman across from me. Because in the grander scheme of things...not izing to this matters. There might not even *be* a Highbell anymore if we can't s fae.

I rub at the building headache that's starting to form at my brow. "T t. isn't about politics, Queen Kaila. This isn't even about me retaking Six at Kingdom."

"Really?" she asks dubiously. "So you'd be content letting me ascer throne and take control of Highbell?"

"Yes," I answer, letting her see the truth in my face.

She rears back in surprise, and I think I've even surprised myself.

Her brown eyes flick between mine. "Why?"

"Because if that's what we need to do in order to save Highbell—to g me." Sixth Kingdom and the rest of Orea—then so be it," I answer honestly.

"Your fae are here, and we need to prepare Highbell and protect the people. I ting, don't, everyone is going to be killed and this city will be overrun."

Since Silence rains down between us. Like a storm cloud breaking loose, t ke you, of its fog untying to let a torrent of hush descend and douse us with it. in the breadth of the downpour, soaking in Kaila's expressions, letting soak in mine.

1. She's "All personal issues aside, Highbell needs a queen," I say, all the ha  
s fight drained out of me. "They don't believe in me right now, because  
let them down, but they will believe *you*. Help me," I implore. "Prepar  
Highbell for attack and defend this city with me."

eps She watches me intently, as I imagine a cat might watch a mouse. Y  
not trying to put myself at odds with a predator. I'm trying to make sur  
Highbell isn't defenseless prey.

icides I wait with bated breath, trying to show her exactly how serious I an  
hoping she can see the severity of the situation through the cracks in m  
usual cold facade.

y that Finally, she sweeps away the flood of silence and nods. "Alright, Qu  
Malina. I believe you."

Relief soaks through me, body wrung through. "You do?"

it. That "Yes."

reath She gets to her feet gracefully, and I shove back the chair to stand as  
out There's so much to do. So much to discuss and plan for.

"You go upstairs and get yourself cleaned up," Kaila says. "In the  
h the meantime, I'll gather the rest of Highbell's guards. There weren't man  
ie of I arrived, as most had abandoned their post, but I have rectified that."

top the The two of us stride toward the doorway. "We'll need all soldiers ca  
of fighting," I say. "The bell must also be tolled to signal for the city to  
his retreat to the castle. The people need to get behind these walls as soon  
cth possible. That includes provisions and whatever animals we can fit."

Kaila looks contemplative. "Alright. After you've had time to clean  
id the we'll speak with the advisors."

My gaze shifts as a shadow stretches across the floor.

"I'll be quick. We must act fast."

"We will," she says with a nod.

save Separating from her, I leave the dining room and make my way acro  
main hall. My steps slow, however, when I see castle workers chipping  
. "The the last of the white paint still on the wall.

f we The paint I ordered to try to cover the gold beneath.

With scrapers in hand, the men work to peel away the layers bit by b  
endrils then use a rag to wipe away the curdled white, leaving them to scatter  
I wait ground like piles of dust.

her Or snow.

My hand pauses where I grip the banister railing before I force myself face forward once more and start my ascent up the steps. The palace has been looted, the paint's been stripped away, and Highbell is gold and empty no king and a different queen.

And I don't mean Kaila.

As I go up to the higher floors, I note all signs of damage where people ripped things away. I notice every missing item. Anything the people could feasibly take, they did. The gold-threaded carpets on the stairs, the curtains, the gilt frames, the sconces, all gone. There used to be a gaudy luster to this castle. Now, it just looks scorned.

When I get to my floor, I head down the corridor to my room, but there's a woman between two of Kaila's guards walking toward me. She has long black hair that hangs limply over her shoulder. There are circles beneath her eyes, and her lips are dry and peeling in places. Yet the most noticeable about her is her rounded belly. It protrudes out from a simple white dress with a ribbon tied just beneath her breasts that accentuates her pregnancy even more.

When she sees me, her brown eyes go wide. "Queen Malina!" she exclaims, lurching toward me. "You have to help me! It's—"

One of the guards grabs her arm, and she jolts, looking up at him. "Come along, miss. Don't bother Her Majesty."

He and the other guard lead her away, the man giving me a small nod as they go. Frowning, I look over my shoulder at them, watching as they disappear for the stairs. She's familiar, but how do I—

"Malina."

I freeze at the whispered voice, every muscle in my body pulling tight. My heart pounds so fiercely that my ears are drowned out in its beat.

I'm hearing things. I have to be. Just a trick of the—

"*Malina.*"

I whip my head around the other direction where the voice is coming from. *Tyndall?*

Squinting, I barely see someone disappear around the corner at the end of the corridor with hurried steps.

It *is* him.

Emotions flood through my body too fast to grasp on to; I can't tell what one I'm even feeling. My palms go frigid—my whole body frozen in place.

Great Divine, *how* is it him? Kaila said he was dead—talked about it publicly. Unless...she lied. Unless she's done something, or perhaps that



elf to something together, some grand scheme, and he's not dead at all.

as been I turn and stride in the direction where he went, hurrying to catch up  
; with when I round the corner, I can't see him. All the light sconces down the  
corridor have been ripped off, leaving one lone window to light the wa

"Tyndall," I call quietly.

ple I hear footsteps retreating, heading up the set of stairs.

ould Picking up my grimy skirt, I hurry forward and rush up them, nearly  
tains, slipping on the bare steps as I climb up. The top of the balconied landi  
o this just as dim, and I'm out of breath when I reach it, leaning against the g  
railing as I try to catch my breath and strain my ears.

ere's a "Tyndall, what is going on?" I demand, looking left and right, trying  
ig figure out where he went. Does he need to hide from Kaila and her pet

th her "This way," he calls.

e thing Turning around, I cross a threshold and enter a dark room. There's r  
ess, a save for a single candle set on a table.

n more. "Malina, come here."

The odd tone of his voice makes my steps falter for a moment, but v  
hear something behind me, I quickly bolt forward. I bang my elbow on  
Come something as I pass by. "Ouch," I hiss between my teeth and rub the sp  
turn around, squinting. "Tyndall, what's wrong? What's happening?"

d as He says nothing, and when I walk forward, I nearly stumble over  
head something on the floor. I catch myself before I go toppling down, but t  
loud clang bursts behind me. I flinch and spin around, my heart in my  
"Tyndall?"

ht. My All of a sudden, light flares in the room, and I squint at the invasion.  
soon as my eyes adjust, my stomach plummets. Kaila stands there befo  
with several of her guards holding glaring lanterns.

She, however, is holding a key.

g from. That's when I see—when I truly realize where I am.

*The gilded cage.*

nd of The cage at the top of Highbell Castle, where no one was allowed to  
except Tyndall himself and a few trusted guards, because this is where  
kept *her*. His favored pet. His golden Precious.

which "What's going on?" I say, rushing forward, gripping the barred door  
place. realizing that was the sound—someone slamming it shut behind me an  
t locking me inside. I shake it anyway, eyes flying up to Kaila, who look  
ey did warm and soft in the lantern light, though the casting shadows make he

take on a more sinister air. “What do you think you’re doing? Where’s Tyndall?”

She cocks her head. “Dead. As I told you.”

I glance around. “No, I heard—”

She blows out a breath, and a stream of mist seems to slip out like p smoke from between her plush lips. Except, instead of the scent of tob the sound of my husband’s voice permeates the air.

“Malina, come! This way. *Malina!*”

My eyes widen in realization. In panic. “Your magic,” I breathe. “Y tricked me.”

She has the gall to smile, the vapor and voice fading away into nothi “You arrived at a very inopportune time for me,” she tells me with chastisement in her husky tone. “I finally gained a true foothold here, a io light your arrival will confuse some of the people. But no matter,” she says shake of her head. “As I said, you’re not very well liked. I’ll figure sor out to clean up this complication you’ve caused.”

My breath fumbles, blowing out in a cold cloud of white. “You...the are coming, Kaila! We don’t have time for this.”

She rolls her eyes. “Spouting lies won’t help you. You think Tyndal warn me about you? He told me all about your little underhanded atten taking control of Highbell.” A cruel smirk plays on her lips. “That didr hen a work very well, did it?”

My teeth grind in anger.

“You left this city in an uproar, but I fixed all of that. You can’t wal here now and try to take it back. Highbell is mine now. But you’re safe ore me, I figure out your use.”

She turns and motions toward the guards, and they start filing out, ta the light with them.

“No!” I rattle the bars, my hands clenching them so hard it hurts. “Y making a mistake! We have to prepare!”

Kaila turns, only two guards waiting with her. “All I *do* is prepare, C he Malina. That’s what a queen must do in this world. We plan. We play. plot. That’s the only way we get to keep our crowns. The men are lazy get to keep whatever is handed to them, but not us.” She shakes her he shiny black hair glistening in the firelight. “We queens must always pl ahead and manipulate circumstances in our favor. Take Mist for exampr face Mist...

“She’ll give birth soon, I think. A bit early, but the menders say the should live. It’ll be small, which will work very well in my favor.”

Her hand drifts to her own stomach, her dress banded below her breasts and hanging down loosely all the way to the hem. The sort of dress some might wear if they were pregnant.

Or pretending to be.

In an instant, my mind finally catches up to her words. To the familiar pregnant woman in the corridor.

Kaila shakes her head. “You really should have taken him up on his offer, you know. If you’d simply agreed to claim the saddle’s babe as your only heir, Midas might not have hired that assassin to kill you. He might not have agreed to marry me. Now, I will not only have his vow of betrothal that was announced before his death, but I’ll have his only heir too. Which means with a Sixth Kingdom is well and truly mine.”

Ice runs through my veins that has nothing to do with magic. My breath comes in quicker, thickening in my mouth like fog.

Kaila’s eyes glitter. “When a king falls, a queen can rise. But only those who know where to step.”

“Did you kill him?” I blurt out.

She smiles, showing off her bright, perfect teeth. “I didn’t have to. It was quite convenient of him.”

The proud look on her face is so familiar, because it’s the same look she always carried. “I don’t understand. You have Third Kingdom.”

Her shoulder tips up. “I don’t just want a kingdom. I want an *empire*.”

Anger and panic war in my chest, battling through every heartbeat.

“You’ll have *nothing* if you refuse to listen to me, because we will all be killed. Orea as we know it will be no more.”

She doesn’t acknowledge what I’ve said at all and looks around the room instead, as if she’s appreciating the cage she’s trapped me in. Her blatant disinterest at my words makes me shake with anger.

“Ironic, isn’t it?”

“What?” I snap.

“You, here. Being locked up in this very cage.”

My back goes ramrod straight.

Her brown eyes find mine, her face illuminated softly from the candle burning on the table just in front of her. “You let your husband lock up your gilded pet here.”

babe        “*Let him?* Tyndall was going to do as he pleased. It had nothing to do with me.”

asts        She hums in fake contemplation and taps a finger against her bottom lip. “I don’t think that’s true. It’s quite cruel to have kept her here, and yet, you’re the one who replaced her. Now, you’ve taken her place.”

ar         “I didn’t keep her here,” I argue. “She was perfectly content being his little golden whore. She was doted on every day, given every luxury and—”

offer,      Kaila cuts me off, head tilting. “Did you ask her?”

wn         “I... What?”

t have      “Did you ever ask her? Or were you simply so jealous that you didn’t care?”

it he       A reply fails me, and she steps forward until we’re nearly face to face.

ns         “Admit it. You liked that she was kept locked in here. It helped you feel like she was being adequately punished for capturing the attention of your husband.”

ath         Shards of ice feel like they’re bracketing against my ribs. Closing in on me, they’re around my lungs and making it hard to breathe.

re ones     “Personally, I would’ve played with her a bit—driven her mad with her until she snapped.” She stops as if she’s considering it. “Or I would’ve killed her. But to each her own. You played your own game, but you lost.”

but it      My lips press in a hard line, little chips of cold nearly piercing through my skin. “I was playing no game.”

I           She smiles condescendingly and slips the key to the cage into her pocket. “Then she reaches down to pick up the candlestick on the table behind her.”

2.”         “To answer your question more fully...I didn’t kill Midas,” she tells me. “The gilded pet did.”

ill be      My eyes go wide.

room       Everything in me stumbles in shock.

nt         She beams. “So very scandalous, isn’t it? What was it you said? Oh, yes. Pursing her mouth, she blows out my voice through a stream of magic.

*She was perfectly content being his little golden whore.*

As my voice fades out, Kaila smirks at me. “It seems you were wrong because that little golden whore killed him.”

I shake my head. “You’re lying.”

le still     “Am I?” she taunts. “I suppose I could be, but in this case, the truth is much more interesting. Tell me, did you know he was a fraud?”

I go still. “What?”

lo with Her smile grows wider, eyes dancing over my face in utter joy. “No, didn’t think so.”

lip. “I She turns and starts walking away. “Kaila!” I shout. “Listen to me! You did. are coming! Unlock this door this instant! You can’t keep me in here!”

At the door, she looks over her shoulder at me. “Queen to queen, I’ll is little you in on a little secret. That gilded whore is *much* more than she seems so am I. What are *you*, Malina?”

With that haunting, echoing question, she sweeps out of the room, taking the last of the light with her.

’t *What are you?*

I was a daughter. A princess. A Colier heir.

ce. I was the wife of King Midas, ruler of Highbell and the Sixth Kingdom el like Orea. People flocked to see his gleaming castle that was worth more than the riches in the entire realm.

*What are you?*

I look down at my hands brimming with snow.

I’m the Cold Queen, caught in someone else’s cage.

voices And what an ugly prison it is.

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*What are you?*

I look down at my hands brimming with snow.

I’m the Cold Queen, caught in someone else’s cage.

And what an ugly prison it is.



## CHAPTER 33

### QUEEN MALINA

I've walked the length of the cage over and over again. Bedroom washroom, through the library, through the atrium, glancing out at the iced-over windows and seething the entire time. Everything behind the bars seems to have not been ransacked by looters, probably because the door was locked.

Even though it's still daylight, the bedroom is incredibly dark, the sole window blocked by a thick layer of snow. I never realized how dark it was here. Save for the atrium, every caged-in room is dim at best, weighing down with a lonely gloom.

I'm glad there's no light to see better.

All of *her* things are still here, completely untouched. Bed unmade, shoes hanging, gloves laid out, combs set on her vanity, though the mirror has shattered. I wonder if she did that. Just like I wonder at the multiple vases of wine stacked at the corner of the room.

*Did you ever ask her? Or were you simply so jealous that you didn't*

Kaila's words keep repeating in my ears as if she's still using her voice against me, but it has nothing to do with magic and everything to do with a grudging guilt that's sitting in the pit of my stomach.

I went through my whole life without feeling that emotion, and now, it keeps coming on.

I don't want to feel it. I don't want to pity the pet that so often warmed my husband's bed. I don't want to see things from her perspective, though

I'm the one behind her bars, it's difficult not to.

I used to catch him watching her. Seeing the obsession in his eyes. I  
it.

If what Kaila said was true, if Auren truly did kill Tyndall... I just c  
seem to make that train of thought line up with all those I had in the pa  
*And yet...*

My eyes fix on the gilded bars. I always thought it was another flash  
show for my husband to have this built for her. That she was important  
precious enough—that he needed her under lock and key. I thought she  
the attention, liked being his favored pet. But maybe I was wrong. May  
didn't want to be kept.

*Did she hate him as I did? Did she hate him even more?*

Those questions jar me, but before I can try to answer them with nev  
shadows coalesce in the room. Familiar shadows.

I rush forward, hands wrapping around the bars with relief. "What to  
you so long?" I demand, though my voice betrays my shaken anxiety.

l,  
it at the  
hind  
e it

"Couldn't fucking find you," Dommik says, and I can hear his frustra  
and worry as it grates down his throat. Tossing back his hood, he stalk  
forward and takes in the room, the bars, me. "They locked you in here.  
question is a growl, and the protective anger he feels on my behalf take  
away the sting of my captivity.

ole  
is up  
; it

"Where have you been?"

"I followed a few of the guards when you and Kaila walked away, b  
I wanted to see what I could hear from them. I didn't have a good feeli  
But I swear, it was only for a moment. I had eyes on you. Until I didn'  
scrubs at his bearded jaw with frustration. "I've been searching everyw  
for you, Queenie. Didn't expect to find you here."

clothes  
is been  
ts of

"Can you get me out?"

He slips his hand into his pocket and pulls out a couple of metal picl  
Kneeling down, he starts working on the lock with determined focus.

t care?  
ice  
o do

"You can't just shadow-leap me out?"

"I can't go through solid objects."

"Back in Seventh Kingdom, you went into my room..."

s piling

"I had the key, remember?"

"But I never heard the door open."

ied my  
when

His eyes flick up to mine. "I'm good at being quiet."

I swallow hard.



“And...how many times did you sneak into my room without me  
*hated* knowing?”

“*Often.*”

an’t He says that word suggestively. Voice even rougher than his usual r  
st. My stomach fills with flurries. “And...when I bathed...”

His lips curve, fingers paused on his task, his handsome face comple  
ly focused on me instead. “Do you think I watched you?” he asks in a lov  
t— —a *wicked* one. “Do you think I stayed hidden in the shadows while y  
e liked peeled off your dress and sunk into the cold water? That I watched the  
ybe she nipples on your tits pucker?”

A flush creeps up my cheeks, but I clear my throat. “It would’ve bee  
improper if you had.”

n eyes, The thought of him watching me, desiring me when I didn’t know h  
there, when we hated each other, fills me with that twisted thrill that on  
ook can bring me.

“Well...I didn’t,” he finishes, tone back to normal.

ation I deflate.

s “But I was tempted,” he adds as he gets back to picking the lock.

?” His I waver slightly on my feet, gripping the bars for stability. “Well, I a  
as you didn’t follow through with your debauched and immoral impulses,  
assassin.”

He lets out a chuckle, shaking his head. “You’re very good.”

ecause “At what?”

ng. “Lying.”

t.” He The lock pops and he stands up, swinging open the cage door. He h  
/here an arm for me with a flourish. “Your Majesty.”

I sweep out of the cage like I’m shucking off a weight. I can’t imagi  
being trapped in there for hours or days. For weeks, months, years...

ks. *How did she stand it?*

“So, I take it Queen Kaila won’t be helping after all?”

I shake my head. “No.”

He looks around the room before his steady eyes land back on me.

Waiting.

I take a breath and wipe my hands on my skirt. “Come, assassin. If r  
usurper won’t see reason and start preparing for the fae to attack, then  
to us.”

“Really?” he asks. “You still want to help Highbell even though they laughed at you? Even when they’re supporting Kaila?”

Determination narrows through my eyes. “Highbell is my home. I will just stand by and let it be destroyed. It’s my duty to protect it, whether they want me to or not.”

Something like quiet pride flows through his face, and then he reaches down and takes my hand, his warmth pressing into each finger. “You’re sounding like a queen for the right reasons now.” He pauses for a second. “No more *enough*.”

*No more enough?*

My brows pull together in a frown of confusion. “What? You’re speaking nonsense.”

“Before, back at Seventh, I told you, *I believe you enough*,” he explains. “The *enough* is gone now. I just plain believe you, Queenie. Believe in

Flecks of snow seem to collect right at the corners of my eyes.

“You do?” I ask shakily, like I’m offering something fragile in my hand, hoping he’ll take it. Hoping he’ll take *care* of it.

He dips his head, and then so tenderly I feel like my skin might shatter as he presses his lips against my forehead, shocking me all over again. It’s there and gone in a flash, and I might even think I imagined it, if it weren’t for the bloom of warmth that seems to travel from that spot, tingling all the way down my scalp.

“I do.”

A shudder lets out through my lips.

How is it that the person meant to kill me ended up being the one who saved me?

“Ready?” he asks.

I have to be.

It isn’t difficult sneaking through Highbell with Dommik’s magic. We move down to the floor below, passing by more wrung-out, pillaged rooms, their shadows showing glimpses of broken furniture, stolen tapestries, chandeliers missing from the walls and gilt banisters knocked loose.

Once we make it outside, Dommik shadow-leaps us to the barracks, a drafty, bulky building that reeks of sweat and metal, erected behind the stables and not far from the stables. One large building takes up the most space, dedicated to their training area. The rest of the buildings are an offshoot, spreading out to their living spaces and dining hall. These barracks are

y one spot that's not gilded, but lie unchanged from the original stonewo  
my family had built long ago.

on't Dommik takes us right inside the training area, cushioning us into a  
they cloistered corner. The last time I came here, I was just a girl who'd bec  
ies interested in boys. I used to sneak in and crouch beneath the equipmen  
e where the sword targets were stacked so I could watch without anyone  
nd. knowing I was here.

I watched the men who bared their chests, sweating despite the cold  
Watched as they spit and swore, making my ears blush at the things th  
aking been, not even if I got lashed for it. I'd simply come to hide and watch  
the next day.

ains. Yet this time, instead of hiding from the soldiers, I have to step out t  
t you." them.

Dommik pulls away most of his shadows, allowing me to see. To he  
lands, "Are you sure about this?"

I nod. "Yes."

ter, he He yanks away his magic completely, and as soon as he does, I walk  
iere the dark corner of the fighting hall and stride over the sandy pit. The ro  
or the high ceiling makes it feel bigger, the stench of sweat and metal clingin  
ay over my tongue.

As I stride forward, men stumble to a stop, some getting hit from the  
sudden loss of attention. Surprise ripples through the entire room, until  
soldier is staring right at me.

ho When I'm standing directly in the middle, I look around at them all.  
Outside, the wind whistles past the high windows that line the entirety  
four walls.

"What are you doing here?" a man with a slick of sweat-soaked mou  
Ve slip brown hair asks. There's a threaded notch at the collar of his jerkin,  
he signifying him as one of the generals, and if that didn't alert me to his  
ks superiority, the arrogant look on his face would.

"This is my home, General, and there is a threat coming to Highbell  
It's a would think my presence would be expected."

e castle He levels me with a look and rests his hand on his belt. "We though  
e, were dead."

ot, The rest of the men stare at me, as if they want me to apologize for l  
the alive instead.

ork that “You were misled,” I say simply.

“Still doesn’t explain what you’re doing *here*, in my barracks.”

I bristle. Technically, it’s *my* barracks, but it’s pointless to argue.

ome “As I said. There’s a threat coming. I’m sure you’ve heard what I sa  
t benchthe courtyard earlier.”

He smiles, showing cracked teeth, as if he got punched one too man  
in the mouth. “Aye, we heard it. Had a good laugh over it too,” he chu  
and the sound sets off at least a dozen others to laugh as well.

ey I don’t react to the sound. I’ve already been laughed at today, so I ha  
ere I’d walls up to defend against it.

again “The fae are coming, General. I’m giving you orders to gather the m  
prepare for attack.”

o face He kinks his neck as he regards me. Everyone else is quiet, waiting  
what he’ll say, their gazes bouncing between us.

ar. “We’re taking orders from Queen Kaila now.”

“You didn’t swear your oaths to Queen Kaila.”

He chews at his cheek like he’s chewing up his thoughts. I’ve no do  
k out of was one of the soldiers who abandoned his post during the riots.

om’s “Highbell is better off with Queen Kaila than for us to listen to a  
g to madwoman who ordered us to kill our own citizens.”

Shame slams down over my head like a bucket of water, and the me  
air accusing stares take on a more honed edge. One I understand. I *did* ord  
l every them to do that during the riots, and I thought it justified to do so. Inste  
truly listening as a queen should, I lashed out and made things worse.

Dommik’s eyes on my back feel as piercing as ever. I don’t like for  
of the see or hear about the way I behaved before.

The general must smell blood in the water with my continued silenc

isy “Now, you’re here, ordering us to fight for you again?” He shakes h  
as he looks around the room, making the others join in his dismissal. “  
won’t be doing that. We’ve had enough of your *orders*.”

“I was wrong.” The words are gummy, hard to unstick from my tong  
. I let them fall out. I’ve never admitted such a thing in my entire life, but  
admit it now.

t you I expect them to all be shocked. To listen to me now that I’ve admitt  
fault.

oeing They do not.

“Yeah, and Queen Kaila seems *right*. We want her as our queen. No

His declaration is a blow to my face, but I don't turn my cheek. Not when I feel every single man in the room exude that same scathing sentiment.

I press my hands together in front of me, dig my fingers against my palms. "She can be your queen all you like, and she may well and truly be a better one than me. But Highbell is, and always has been, my *home*." I look at him steadily in the eye, let him see the truth of it in my white hair and dark blue eyes. "My family has lived and reigned here for generations, and the Coliers have *always* been loyal to Highbell. If nothing else, you know I have my own pride about me," I say firmly. "The fae are coming, General, and their numbers are vast. We must be ready for attack."

They're staring at me, my words sinking in, and for a moment, the general himself seems to consider me, making hope surge in my chest.

It plummets a second later when he shakes his head.

"We've heard enough. It's best you go back to being dead, Cold Queen."

With the utmost sign of disrespect, he gives me his back and walks away, and I'm left standing here as every single one of the soldiers walks away from me.

Devastated desperation has my eyes glossing over. Has a single tear even gotten caught in the corner, freezing before it can even drop down my cheek?

Feeling shaken all over, I turn and make the long walk across the room toward the door. Only once I'm outside with my back pressed to the wall do I close my eyes and let out the quavering breath.

"Malina."

My eyes peel open to see Dommik standing in front of me.

His eyes run over me, and I wait for him to ask if I'm okay. Instead, he says, "Do you want me to kill that man?"

He's perfectly serious.

A dry laugh cobbles up my throat, the tension leaving me.

I shake my head. "No, assassin. Keep your dagger to yourself."

"What about Queen Kaila?"

"No," I tell him, as tempting as it is. "Despite what happened, the people will listen to her—trust her. When the fae come, I think the city will need her presence to band together."

He looks disappointed. I, however, feel slightly better knowing he'd listen to her if I asked him to. At least I have one person on my side.

These men don't understand. They didn't *see*. If they had, they'd know that death is coming to Highbell. I can't let this place face the same fate as

even outskirts village, but I don't know how to stop it. I only know that I do  
tinent. want to see it slaughtered.

torn I walk forward, gaze falling down the mountain to the city below. To  
be a city. Not because of my royal lineage, but because this is where I've li  
look whole life. Where my family lived.

icy "You tried, Malina," Dommik says as he comes up to stand beside n  
we the flattened snow trodden down by hundreds of soldiers' footsteps. W  
that barracks at our backs and the empty mountainside just behind, we're c  
ers are shadow. The wind whips around us, my loose hair spitting at my face.  
say the word, and I'll get us out of here. Find us someplace safe."

general I reach back and re-braid my hair, pulling the white strands as tight  
before tying it off at the ends. Then I square my shoulders, my view sti  
the city. "I'm not leaving Highbell."

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away, are we going to do?"

ay with No one ever asks me that.

That's the question I've had to ask other people all my life. My fath  
husband, my advisors.

cheek. Men.

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all do I around for the men to decide. Nobody asked or even cared much for m  
opinion. Nobody ever waited, like Dommik is waiting now, for me to c  
up with a plan. Nobody trusted me to do so. I had to resort to offering  
unwarranted opinions or pointed questions, driving them to reach the  
he conclusion I'd already thought of, to make it seem like it was *their* ide  
first place.

For once, the question is for me, and I have an answer.

"We're going into the city," I say as I turn on my heel, steps sloshin  
through the thick snow as I head for the stables. "I'm going to need a l

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outskirts village, but I don't know how to stop it. I only know that I don't want to see it slaughtered.

I walk forward, gaze falling down the mountain to the city below. To *my* city. Not because of my royal lineage, but because this is where I've lived my whole life. Where my family lived.

"You tried, Malina," Dommik says as he comes up to stand beside me on the flattened snow trodden down by hundreds of soldiers' footsteps. With the barracks at our backs and the empty mountainside just behind, we're cast in shadow. The wind whips around us, my loose hair spitting at my face. "Just say the word, and I'll get us out of here. Find us someplace safe."

I reach back and re-braid my hair, pulling the white strands as tight as I can before tying it off at the ends. Then I square my shoulders, my view still on the city. "I'm not leaving Highbell."

Dommik pauses for a moment at the ferocity of my statement. "So what are we going to do?"

No one ever asks me that.

That's the question I've had to ask other people all my life. My father, my husband, my advisors.

Men.

Whenever something needed to be decided, I had to ask. I had to wait around for the men to decide. Nobody asked or even cared much for my opinion. Nobody ever waited, like Dommik is waiting now, for me to come up with a plan. Nobody trusted me to do so. I had to resort to offering unwarranted opinions or pointed questions, driving them to reach the conclusion I'd already thought of, to make it seem like it was *their* idea in the first place.

For once, the question is for me, and I have an answer.

"We're going into the city," I say as I turn on my heel, steps sloshing through the thick snow as I head for the stables. "I'm going to need a horse."



## CHAPTER 34

### QUEEN MALINA

**D**espite the fact that I am an excellent rider, Dommik insists on the damn horse. We're in the stables, the animals firmly locked in their pens in preparation for the snowstorm that seems to be blowing in. The stablemaster jumped in fright when we appeared in the corner, one look at me made him skitter away without a word.

Or perhaps it was the hooded assassin in my company.

"I started having formal riding lessons when I was two," I point out while watching him ready the saddle. The horse's body is thick with long white mane trimmed and braided intricately.

"And I've been riding wild stallions barebacked since my cock got hot the first time. You're still riding with me, Queenie."

He finishes tightening the straps and then walks over to me. Without warning, he grips me by the waist, making me gasp, and sets me atop the horse as if I weigh nothing at all. Then he mounts himself behind me, swinging over as he sits in one fluid motion.

I shift in the saddle, my skirt not made for riding like this, but he reaches down and tugs it up until the fabric is bunched at my thighs. If weren't for the thick leggings I'm wearing, my legs would be indecent display. "I don't think—"

"Good. Don't," he interrupts.

He reaches forward with both arms on either side of me, and I expect to take the reins, but he picks them up and hands them to me instead. I



them, and he moves his hands to grip *me*. One staying at my bunched s and the other splayed against my stomach.

“I can ride alone,” I say, though my voice sounds breathy now. His t is bleeding warmth into me despite my clothing. Though it’s *nothing* to heat that erupts when he suddenly yanks me back into him until my ass flush with his groin.

I suck in a breath.

His head comes down, mouth at my ear and voice deliciously rough “You’re riding with me.”

All my previous arguments have died away. I can’t think of them wi body so close to mine, and I find I don’t want to.

“Admit it,” he says huskily. “You like it.”

“I don’t...dislike it.”

He chuckles, and the sound sends a shiver down my spine.

Clearing my throat, I try to ignore his hard body behind me and snap reins to direct the horse forward. We trot out of the stable, across the fl sharing d up in owing but as I hair, yard for t he leg nply it ly on t him grip

snowy yard, passing soldiers as we go. They all gape at me, but none c try to stop me.

Once we reach the road and begin our descent down the mountain, h my mind is trying to come up with some sort of a plan, but the other ha completely preoccupied with the feel of Dommik.

I seem to think about him a lot lately. It’s difficult not to, especially his splayed fingers start to rub circles over my stomach, making it dip.

Yet even that hasn’t distracted me fully from the terror I feel every t have to travel on this road. The way down the mountain is perilous, bu can’t allow myself to fall into distress. So I use Dommik’s touch as the distraction I need, focusing on him instead of the winding slope.

Every time we hit a slick patch, he tightens his hold on me, brings m bottom closer to his groin. Normally, I’d be in a carriage with the curta shut tight, not willing to look at the height. But here we are on horseba completely exposed, yet I’m preoccupied by the hard length pressing a me.

His hand skims lower, distracting me as those fingers of his continu slowly rotate. Heat gathers between my legs, and my eyes flutter close their own volition, my mind imagining what it would be like if he were even lower.

skirt, I desperately want to shift in the saddle, and I nearly lift up so I can  
closer—

touch The horse jolts, screeching out a neigh as it slips on a patch of ice, n  
o the flying open with terror. The animal stumbles, trying to find its footing,  
s is let out a scream, certain we're going to go careening off the edge of the  
mountain, my fear of heights rushing up so fast my head spins.

But Dommik snatches up the reins and, with expert maneuvering, ge  
horse to calm, somehow helping it regain its footing. I breathe hard as  
lurch to a stop, eyes blinking down at the edge we're just two feet awa  
ith his hands white-knuckling the saddle as I shake all over.

“Great Divine. That was...”

“Scary?” he volunteers.

“Your fault!” I snap.

He has the audacity to laugh. As if we didn't both just nearly perish  
o the the side of the mountain.

at, “Got a bit distracted, Queenie?”

of them I grit my teeth, though I'm still breathing hard. “This is why we sho  
have ridden together!”

half of “Oh, I disagree. We should do *a lot* of riding,” he says wickedly.

alf is My stomach flutters with a burst of icicle butterflies. So I jab my elt  
into *his* stomach to ensure he feels something irritating too.

when He lets out an *oomph*, which is reward enough.

“Keep it up, Malina,” he says, his tone darkly playful.

ime I I look at him over my shoulder, our eyes meeting. “I intend to.”

t I His lips curve. “Good.”

With a click of his tongue, Dommik leads the horse the rest of the w  
down the mountain with slow, sure steps, keeping his hands to himself  
y time. My body is able to cool, until I once again can pretend that neith  
ins desire nor fear has its grip on me.

ck, Once we reach the bottom and make it to the bridge that goes over th  
gainst chasm and into the city, I let out a sigh of relief, glad to be back on eve  
ground. Yet that relief is short-lived, because now, I have to face the p

e to The people who detest me.

d of After crossing the bridge, we're swept up in the city's entrance. A lo  
e to go drags across the length of the chasm behind, but in front of us, there's  
stretch of cobbled stone that glitters with a light layer of snow. There a

get several streets that lead in different directions into the city, their tidy lanes packed tight with shops and people.

my eyes I retake the reins from Dommik and direct the horse where I know it and I busiest—the square.

e No one pays us much mind as we go, probably in part to do with Dommik at my back, his cloaked height blocking me somewhat. When we reach the square, the market is still going. There are carts with awnings laid out, we filling baskets with the goods they purchased as they exchange coin before the pavilion. Yet it's clear they've been watching the sky too, as some of them are starting to put away their wares and shut up the shutters on their carts.

over The last time I was here, I was trying to win my people's favor, and they rejected me, threw things at me, hated me—and that was with a retinue of guards and a fully enclosed carriage for protection. Now, I come with only Dommik and a horse.

Vulnerable.

ouldn't Yet, I remind myself that they're far more vulnerable than I am. They don't believe me yet. It's my responsibility to make sure they do.

ow I urge the horse right into the middle of the square, where merchants and shoppers move out of the way as I yank to a stop. I stand in the stirrups, then swing my leg over and hop down, skirt settling back at my feet.

Surprise spreads over the market when people turn to look at me, when they realize who I am.

ay Dommik lands behind me, staying there with the reins in hand as I veer forward through the crowd, making sure I have everyone's attention. Make sure they see me—my Colier white hair, my face, my eyes.

this As they take in my presence, I can feel their shock and confusion. Their anger and disgust. It's clear that like the guards, everyone here would've preferred I'd stayed dead.

he It doesn't matter.

en I'm not here for me. I'm not here to win them to my side or to gain their favor this time. So as I stop and turn in a circle, I let them see my bedrock state, let them see the desperation in my face as I lift my voice high enough for them to hear me.

a wide "People of Highbell, I can see that you know me, that you realize you've been told lies about my death. I've come to warn you. There's an enemy marching on us!"

mes        There's a palpable reaction of distrust in the air as they gather around  
with wary distaste, like my words have offended them.

t'll be        "I traveled to the edge of our world. I saw the ruins of Seventh King  
with my own eyes. The bridge of Lemuria was remade, and the fae have  
mmik returned to Orea to attack us."

the        My voice catches on the blustery wind, and I continue to turn, to try  
people make sure they can all see me, all hear me. They've given me a wide berth  
neath from nobles to beggars and every status between.

of        "I was your queen once. All I want is to protect Highbell."

eir        "Lies!" a man calls from the crowd, his clothes ragged and heavily layered  
a spun cloth wrapped around his head to keep the cold away. "Queen I  
they here to protect Highbell now. We don't want you and your lies!"

of        His words set off even more angry shouts, even more dismissal.

only        "I'm telling the truth!" I cry out desperately, eyes searching through  
crowd, trying to find even one person who seems to be heeding my words.  
There are none.

just        "The fae are here! You need to get to the castle, or flee, or prepare to  
Because they *are* coming whether you believe me or not."

s and        People turn and start walking away. Turning from me as if who I am  
s and means nothing to them. As if my words hold no consequence. My breath  
scrape up and down my throat as the cold wind blasts my face, and I feel  
n completely ineffective.

Useless.

walk        Desperation catches in my throat as I shout through the storm, feeling  
I'm trying to snatch at air, my grip empty, unable to catch their attention  
Making care. "Wait! I know I have failed you. I know you rejected me. But this  
heir *nothing* to do with me. You must prepare!" I shout, urgency clawing at  
ve voice.

heir        Everyone disperses, leaving me in the middle of the square alone, leaving  
the shuddering wind. Merchants tie up their carts, vendors close up the  
stalls. Shopkeepers have gone inside and locked their doors, and the sh  
aggled and beggars have all turned away.

ough        Turned their backs.

u were        Panicked frustration gorges on me, a beast tearing out my insides and  
chomping on my guts.

rchng        No one will listen to me.

I have been a royal all my life. Servants, guards, nobles, advisors, they all *had* to listen to me. But now, when it actually matters, when a queen is trying to entreat her people, to save their lives, their neighbors, their children, their homes...my words fall on deaf ears.

It's different that Queen Kaila dismissed me—she has no true connection to this place. It's even different that the guards didn't put stock in my word, for they've seen me give atrocious orders. But for the people to turn away and not even *consider* what I'm saying might be true...

It means I have utterly failed them.

I stand in the middle of the emptying square, watching them all leave. Watching my people reject me again. My hands burn with cold. I can't fail like this. Not with everything on the line.

Perhaps Kaila is right. Perhaps I'm not wanted.

But I am *needed*.

That thought fuels me. Bolsters me. Fills me with determination like nothing ever has in my whole life. Highbell needs me. They don't know how to fight, but I do, and I won't fail them again.

Turning, I march back the way I came. I don't wait for Dommik to lead me up. I brace my foot in the stirrup and swing my leg over, setting myself on the horse as I yank my skirts up and grip the reins. Dommik settles himself behind me, gripping me around the waist once again, not saying a word, but urging the horse forward.

The wind of the impending snowstorm picks up as we race back down the street, my white hair whipping free of its braid, strands scratching over my eyes. At my back, Dommik wraps his cloak around us both, though he doesn't needn't bother. I relish the cold. It feeds something in me with every frigid breath.

The first of the snowfall starts spitting out when I yank the horse to a stop at the bridge. I jump down and walk over and then pace in front of it, eyeing the length, eyeing the other side that leads to the mountain. To the castle, the coppers caught snugly at its side like a mother holding a babe on her hip. Between the frozen chasm yawns, sucking in the wind of the coming storm like a wheezing snore.

There's one road.

One snowy, open road that leads from Seventh Kingdom. This is where the fae army will enter. They'll crest from the hill and start marching down

they've they can either go left up the mountain to the castle or cross the bridge  
n is come into the city.

children, I can't get Kaila or the guards to listen to me. I can't fortify the road  
since it's too open. And I can't get the people to flee and hide behind t  
action castle's walls. So instead, I'll have to protect the city with a wall of my  
words, At the entrance of the bridge, right where it meets the short wall blo  
vay, to the chasm, I drop down. With my legs tucked beneath me and knees br  
on the stone bricks, I hold my palms out.

"What are you doing?"

e. I don't answer Dommik. All my focus is right here, on my hands. O  
: keep gashes cut through each palm and the sharp shards of ice stuck to them  
beg.

On my knees in desperate prayer, I beg.

I don't beg the gods, because what have powerful men ever done for  
No, I beg the magic instead. The magic I shouldn't have. I beg despera  
w it, for it to do something, *anything*, to help me save the city I endangered.

*Please...*

ift me The wind howls.

f atop Snowfall starts to drizzle down from the sky.

self And I beg and beseech and *pray*.

d as I Dommik watches me. A kneeling queen and a silent assassin, the tw  
a seemingly unlikely pair. Except, we have more in common than mos  
wn the We've both brought on death. He's just honest about it. He wields a bl  
: my and spills others' blood. I let someone spill *my* blood, and now the ene  
will wield their blades against my people.

igid What I've done is far, far worse.

*Please...*

a stop My eyes are shut tight, my hands shaking, everything in me coiled v  
:yeing desperation that seems larger than life itself.

le Because I regret.

een us, I regret allowing my powerless life to mold me. I regret not standing  
a my father. I regret marrying Midas. I regret allowing him to keep a wo  
a cage. I regret looking down on the very people I was meant to serve.  
regret taking everything for granted.

ere the I regret becoming this bitter, cold woman, and I want to let that cold  
n, and To make it do something *good*.

*Please...*

and I keep praying to this power, keep begging this mercurial magic, and my teeth begin to gnash on frost. Ice forms on my hard-pressed lips and itself cracks against my tongue.

he And somehow, as if it listened to my plea, the magic starts to surge. r own. rumble up beneath my flesh and through my blood and finally, *finally* cking my call.

aced I suck in a breath as I watch ice begin to coalesce in my hands. The scabbed shards that are always stuck to the gashes begin to puff up like clouds. They stretch, reaching for the other, and the two pieces merge n the one. As soon as they do, they begin to grow. Like frost forming over a i. And I window, it builds up layer by layer, thickening until it's a block of ice and heavy that I drop it on the ground with a grunt, unable to hold its v

I stare at it. At this perfectly formed brick made from solid ice, slight r me? cloudy with frost that's as white as my hair, a blue tinge the same color tely eyes. And finally, I have an answer to Dommik's question that he asked outside of the barracks.

*So what are we going to do?*

Since no one is going to listen to me, then I'll just have to defend Hi myself.

Brick by brick.

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l out.

I keep praying to this power, keep begging this mercurial magic, and then, my teeth begin to gnash on frost. Ice forms on my hard-pressed lips and cracks against my tongue.

And somehow, as if it listened to my plea, the magic starts to *surge*. To rumble up beneath my flesh and through my blood and finally, *finally* answer my call.

I suck in a breath as I watch ice begin to coalesce in my hands. The scabbed shards that are always stuck to the gashes begin to puff up like clouds. They stretch, reaching for the other, and the two pieces merge into one. As soon as they do, they begin to grow. Like frost forming over a window, it builds up layer by layer, thickening until it's a block of ice so big and heavy that I drop it on the ground with a grunt, unable to hold its weight.

I stare at it. At this perfectly formed brick made from solid ice, slightly cloudy with frost that's as white as my hair, a blue tinge the same color as my eyes. And finally, I have an answer to Dommik's question that he asked me outside of the barracks.

*So what are we going to do?*

Since no one is going to listen to me, then I'll just have to defend Highbell myself.

Brick by brick.





## CHAPTER 35

AUREN

**I**nstead of a babbling brook, we follow one that sighs. The stream's seems to pause between breaths and then lets out an exhale of relief someone finally falling into bed after a long day. Rocks steep lazily beneath the surface, making the water tint with rivulets of green.

It's the exact shade of Slade's eyes in the sunlight.

As I sit on top of Blush, leading the horse alongside the brook, I fiddle with the collar of my tunic, swiping a thumb across the loneliness that seeps from my chest. I want to look Slade in the eyes again. I want to tell him the things that I should've said right from the start. When I was too scared and too broken to know what was in front of me. When I was too full of doubts and scars to trust myself and my heart.

I was so sure that I was going to make the same mistakes I'd made with Midas. I thought I couldn't possibly have real love with Slade. Though I couldn't possibly love someone like me.

*Love happens in all kinds of ways.*

He was right when he said that. Love *does* happen in all kinds of ways. Our kind happened like the dawn.

The dawn doesn't question when to appear. It simply does.

He walked into my life with the surety of his presence, and from that moment on, the night began to wane.

I was trapped in lonely darkness for so long that I couldn't recognize the way the world began to illuminate—not right away. I was blind for so many years that, when my horizon began to brighten, I tried to turn away. To blink and shut my eyes against it because I thought, of course, I could have that. Of course I'd stay in the dark.

But I didn't.

He showed me what it was to face the sun and not shy away. He let me approach it with my hesitations, let me ease into it without being blind.

Let me choose.

I'm in this light with him, basking in its warmth, and even our distance can't take that away. Because no matter where we are, the sun always shines. No matter where he is, I love him.

"We're almost there."

My thoughts scatter and I look away from the brook to Wick. He and the Ludogars are riding in front of us, Emonie is beside me, and two other Vulmin named Marox and Ogith are behind us. We're the six that Wick chose for on this mission to rescue the Oreans. All the other Vulmin stayed behind the village. We've been riding for a few hours now, going to meet up with the fae who will be bringing us to Riffalt City where the Oreans are being held.

I straighten in the saddle, trying to stretch my back, and Emonie digs around in her pouch before extending her hand to me. "Here."

Taking the offering, I find a bit of syrup-drizzled bread. I instantly pop it into my mouth, the burst of sweetness coating my tongue and leaving a trail of citrusy sour that makes my lips perk. "Mmm, thanks."

One thing about Emonie, I never go hungry during the long days of riding when I'm riding beside her. She's always plying me with food to snack on. Right now, it's a good distraction since I'm a bit nervous about going on my first real rebel mission. But I'm also invigorated. Ready to do something meaningful.

"Lady Lyäri," Marox calls forward. "I also have some food you can have if you're hungry."

"As do I," Ogith adds.

I look over my shoulder at the pair. Marox is scowling from beneath his bushy red beard at Ogith like he doesn't appreciate the tag-on. Ogith glances

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ys. But

straight at me, his black hair wind-swept, his freckled face open and smiling. They've both been incredibly attentive since we left. I've already had to drink their water and to take their cloaks when it rained earlier this morning.

"I'm alright, but thank you."

Ogith's pale blue eyes go a bit dejected, but Marox sits up straighter in the saddle. "Anything you need, Lyäri, we will get it for you."

"That's very kind of you, but you don't need to go to any trouble for me as I face forward again."

"That's right. She has me," Emonie chirps.

I snort as Wick begins to veer us away from the gentle brook and heeds deeper into the thick brush around us. The trees we pass have trunks as white as snow with black moss, like a broad body tucked into a cloak. Bright green leaves in the shape of tears weep down overhead, shading us from the sun, and the ground is thick with overgrown bushes. The six of us ride single file down a narrow game trail with Ludogar at the front, cutting through some of the thorny branches that block the path.

We break through a particularly dense spot of brush, and then, it seems to take the world opens up. Our group dismounts, leaving our horses behind to graze and nose around near the small pond as we approach the meeting place which seems to be a realm of its own.

A row of huge pillars stands as tall as trees. The stone is semi-transparent in a deep violet color and is incredibly old, with parts crumbled away and the rest cracked with age. Vines wind around them, sprouting through the fissures and clotting with little white reeds as puffy as the clouds.

Whatever this building used to be before, it's clear it was grand. No nature seems to have taken it over, and time has worn it away. There are a few shallow steps leading up to it, nothing but open sky in place of a roof.

Wick leads us between the crumbled walls that stand on either side, and I watch my feet. The floor has the same see-through stone as the pillars, and beneath it and right down the center, there's an underground river, making it seem like we're walking on purple water. Every once in a while, a small fish-like creature darts by, pale scales looking like the streak of a star shooting past.

"What was this place?" I ask in a hush. I'm not sure why, but something about being here makes it seem like I should whisper.

"An old temple," Wick says, thin streaks of sunlight dappling his face. He takes us to a spot where the wall has split, parts of the purple stone fall

ncere. pile with a thick layer of spongy vines grown over them. “The fae we’  
offers meeting should be here soon. In the meantime, we can relax.”

I nod as we all cluster together, and I sit on one of the cushioned roc  
pieces. Emonie walks to the wall and clicks her nail against the purple  
letting out a low whistle while fiddling with her pouch.

in his Ludogar shoots her a look. “Don’t even think about it.”

She glances over her shoulder at him as she continues to walk the le  
r me,” Ithe wall. “What?” she asks innocently, though her molten eyes dart left  
right.

His teal eyes, however, are unwavering. “You cannot, under any  
ad circumstances, steal something from this place.”

She stops and holds up a finger. “Firstly, it’s called *foraging*. And se  
lorned —” Another finger juts up, but she pauses. “Umm...why not?”

he He lets out a huff and looks at the rest of us, but Wick sits down and  
own a himself with taking a drink from his water skin, while Marox and Ogith  
re eye contact.

“This place is *sacred*,” Ludo says, like it should be obvious. “It was  
ms likefor the goddesses.”

o graze She hums thoughtfully. “Which one?”

o that His brows draw together. “Does it matter?”

“*Does it matter*,” she scoffs. “Of course it matters. Say this was the  
ucent of Dronidyliis. She was the goddess of favor and filch. She would *love*  
and the someone to steal from her temple. It would delight her.”

My lips curve up in amusement. I see Wick fighting a smirk behind  
drink. Even Ogith and Marox share a look of mirth between them.

w, “This wasn’t the temple of Dronidyliis,” Ludogar says irritably.

re a She taps another part of the wall. “How can you be so sure?”

oof. His words falter, but not his scowl. “Just...don’t steal anything! It w  
but I bring us bad luck.”

but “Did you not hear me? *Favor and filch*,” Emonie retorts. “I’d argue  
king it would get good luck.” Then she looks to me. “Droni is my favorite go

ill fish Not surprising.

Ludogar sighs and shakes his head, looking up at the trees growing l  
hing overhead like he’s trying to see the sky and find a goddess up there wh  
help explain things to her.

ce. He Unbothered, Emonie plops on the floor, legs folded and back up aga  
en in a the wall before she starts picking at the little vines dangling next to her

re Just when I lean back to get comfortable with the wait, I hear a sound  
behind me. I turn quickly as Wick gets to his feet, and see a hobbling creature  
making his way toward us.

stone, “Good, you’re here,” he says in greeting.

He has shoulder-length brown hair streaked gray from age, and a short  
beard that looks like a perfectly shaped square hedge. His skin is pale  
length of hues of gray like a clouded moon. He’s wearing a black leather vest over  
t and tunic and creased pants with a red belt looped around his waist. As he  
he taps a wooden cane against the floor, sending an echo through the nave  
the temple.

“Brennur,” Wick says as he walks over to meet him while the rest of  
us hang back. “Thank you for agreeing to come back for us.”

The slightly hunched fae gives a quick nod. “It was a task, I won’t  
be busy wasn’t.” He looks over at Ludo. “Lerana insisted it was urgent when I  
had brought her back.”

“Yes,” Wick answers. “We’re grateful you were able to bring her  
back return for us.”

Brennur stops and lets out a tired sigh as he leans on his cane. “Of course.  
You know I do all I can for the Vulmin. But why do you want  
to go to Riffalt?”

temple “There may be some Oreans there who need our help.”

for Brennur’s wiry eyebrows lift.

“We’ll need your help with that as well,” Wick finishes.

his There’s slight hesitation in the old fae’s face. “That is *very* dangerous.  
“You’ll be well compensated.”

“You know I don’t care about that,” Brennur says with a wave of his  
knobby hand. “But to sneak Oreans out of Riffalt is a great risk.”

would Wick gives him an enigmatic smile. “Everything worthy of risk is worth  
of doing.”

that we “Yes, yes. Fine. Of course, if that is what the Vulmin mission requires  
of us.” know I am at your service,” Brennur says as his eyes begin to skim around  
the rest of us in the group. “Now, let’s see, how many are we—”

high The moment his eyes land on me, they go wide. There’s a shock of  
lightning that seems to stab through him, making him stagger back from the group.  
io will Then, he yanks it out with a gush. “Y-you. You’re Auren Turley.”

inst I give him a polite smile. “Yes.”

1:

id            His face seems to drain of all color before he whips toward Wick. “I  
old fae she here? How is this possible? She’s *dead*.”

              “That’s just what the monarchy declared,” Ludo says.

ort            “And we all know how often they lie,” Wick adds. “The Lyäri Ulvê  
alive and well, and she has returned.”

with           Brennur’s hand shakes on his cane. “How is this possible?” His gaze  
er his tracking back to me, his eyes the color of clay.

walks,        “The goddesses brought her home,” Wick tells him. “Maybe even  
uins of Dronidylis,” Emonie says under her breath, making me crack a smile.

              “What’s she doing *here*?” Brennur asks.

f us            I step forward and answer, because I’m tired of being talked *about* i  
of talked *to*. “I’m going to Riffalt to help the Oreans.”

ay it           His expression is dumbfounded, with traces of fear filtering through  
looks from me to Wick. “You expect me to bring her to Riffalt City? *A  
mad?*”

id            “Auren can take care of herself,” Wick replies, and a surge of pride  
through me before I nod at the old fae.

ourse,        But he shakes his head, making his squared beard bobble. “Absolute  
nt to I cannot take her *anywhere*, least of all there. I can’t be seen with her!  
of us can! Do you know what will happen to us if someone realizes wh  
is? Tales of the Turleys might not be talked about in cities like Riffalt,  
they will figure out who she is quick enough. And if Lord Cull or the c  
nobles hear word of it...”

is...”        “He won’t. No one will see her. We just need you to take us to Riffa  
will handle the rest, Brennur. Trust that I know what I’m doing is in th  
s interest of the Vulmin.”

              His lips press down hard, thinning them out. “I don’t like this...”

orthy        “You took a vow to the Vulmin,” Wick tells him. “And so did I. I w  
put you at undue risk, but these missions always pose a danger. It must  
es, you done.”

und            Everyone watches and waits as he chews on Wick’s words. He’s cle  
torn, a frown split between his brows in a jagged line.

silence        Finally, he relents through gritted teeth. “Alright.”

age.           “Thank you, Brennur.” Wick claps him on his shoulder, making him  
slightly. “Lead the way.”

              Brennur casts a look at me again before turning and walking away, c  
clicking against the floor. I follow behind him, trailing his slower steps

How is Emonie walks beside me. This close, I can smell his leather vest, the so earthy and with an underlying tone that makes my nose twist, reminding of wet bark.

re is Our group doesn't have to follow him for long. We get outside of the temple ruins just on the other side of the pillars, and Wick motions for e keeps rest of us to stop and wait. Too bad I have no idea *what* we're waiting watch as Brennur begins walking around, gaze trained on the ground a feet as if he's looking for something.

"What's he doing?" I ask quietly.

instead "Riffalt City would take too long to get to by horse," Wick tells me. "We're traveling using much faster means."

I wait for him to divulge further, but his gaze is back on Brennur.

as he Everyone watches as he continues to walk around, and then he seem are you find what he's looking for when he taps his cane against the ground an mutters something under his breath. He toes off his sandals and then fl goes cane around, hooking them by their straps. Without a word, he extends cane out, and Ludogar comes over and takes the hanging shoes. As soc ly not. he does, Brennur flips his cane around again and starts walking forward. None determined line.

io she *What in the world?*

but He halts just past the old steps in front of a purple pillar. Still lookin other down, he then begins to walk in a circle with deep concentration, his b treading over the cracked ground.

lt. I My confusion deepens. "What..."

e best He goes around and around and around again. After his tenth rotatio path beneath his feet begins to sprout with blades of grass in a perfect They're short at first. Stubby things cutting up through the broken ston on't bright green like the first shoots of spring. My brows lift in surprise.

t be Magic.

arly As he continues to walk, the loop grows fuller, bolder. Dainty flowe bloom up in whites and purples with little petals that unfold like a butt wings. The grass becomes thicker and greener, and pebbles appear that glisten pale blue like dew drops left behind from a rain. There's a gent n teeter beneath our feet, and my skin tingles with the trace of whatever power Brennur is using.

cane Finally, when the grass is up past his ankles and the flowers are in fl s, and bloom, he stops walking and looks around at the three-foot circle with

cent considering expression before he steps off and glances at Wick. “It’s re  
ig me Marox steps forward. “I will go first and ensure all is safe for the Ly  
*Go first...?*

e “You and Ogith both go,” Wick tells them.

the “Perhaps it would be best to travel one at a time,” Brennur says, mo  
for. I to the circle. “The trace here isn’t very big.”

t his But Wick shakes his head. “We’ll fit two. It’s safer, even if it is a tig  
It will be quicker for you as well, so we don’t strain your magic.”

Brennur nods, and then Marox and Ogith stride forward. I watch as  
both step past the grassy ring to stand in the center. It’s just barely big  
enough for them both to stand in, but as soon as they’re back to back, t  
ground hums again. The grassy ring that surrounds them blows with a  
bending the flowers and splaying the leaves.

d Then, the two of them disappear. Just like that.

ips his My mouth drops open. “Wait. Is this...”

his “A fairy ring,” Emonie says, practically bouncing on her toes. “I lov  
on as passing through fairy rings.” When Ludogar snorts, she shoots him a lo  
d in a “Don’t pretend you don’t like it too.”

“Why?” I ask.

“You’ll see,” she says with a grin.

g “Emonie, you go with Ludo,” Wick tells her. “I’ll travel with Auren  
are feet The two of them stride forward and step into the ring. Emonie shoot  
wink. “See you on the other side.”

Within seconds, they’re gone too.

n, the “Ready?” Wick asks, looking over at me.

ring. *Ready?*

ie, “A little ‘*Hey, we’re going to be traveling through a fairy ring today*  
would have been good information to have,” I hiss beneath my breath.

rs He blinks in surprise. “I apologize. I assumed...” He shakes his head  
forget how little you know of Annwyn. I should have explained it earli

erfly’s Well. Now that he apologized, I can’t keep hissing at him about it. “

t Thank you. And...what is this going to do exactly?” I know of fairy rin  
le hum but only that they once used to be throughout Orea when fae lived there  
never used one, so I have no idea what to expect.

ill “We’ll step in the ring together. Rings have a twin. This one is here,  
a sister will be in Riffalt City, where Brennur traveled from. When we p



eady.” through, his magic will pull us there. Then Brennur will follow us, close behind. “I’ll be right behind you, I promise.”

I hesitate.

“You’ll be perfectly safe in the ring, I promise.”

With a tight nod, I walk forward with him. Together, we step into the ring, our backs to each other, while I face Brennur. The old fae stares back at me, nodding in encouragement, and the strangest sensation crawls down my spine. Then, a shot of heat surges up my heels, enveloping my entire body in an instant. My gold surges to my palms in response, flaring to life, just as the world around me warps.

It’s quicker than a blink, the air itself feeling like it creases around me like a breeze, a ball of paper scrunched in my fist. My vision wrinkles and my surroundings go gray, as all the colors of the world get smashed and mixed up together into one drab hue.

My ears crackle like they’re opening up from a big yawn, and some invigorating surges through my blood, like the ring’s power is fueling me. Then, the heat shooting through my body becomes a refreshing cool breeze. And it *should* feel refreshing, just as the ring’s energy should revive me.

Except my stomach coils into knots. Anxiety shoots down my limbs and cold sweat breaks out all over me, and I don’t like it at all. None of it. I’m next.”

I open my mouth to yell, but there’s no voice in this strange vortex, and it makes me panic even more.

I want to get *out out out out out*—

The scrunched-up world suddenly starts flattening again, like a steaming palm smoothing out the creases.

And then, it’s over.

With a gasp, everything is as it should be, and I’m standing in an idyllic fairy ring, though I’m somewhere else entirely. The temple ruins are gone, and in its place is a simple bedroom. Everything is completely ordinary, except for the circle of grass and flowers growing right up through the polished wood floor.

Emonie comes forward, tugging me out of the ring. “What did you think?” she asks with a bright smile. Her excitement is jarring to the panic that’s been coursing through me.

Glancing back at the ring, I have to suppress a shudder, “It was...strange.” My fall through the rip has obviously affected me more than I realize.

sing        “But *good* strange, right?” She has a wide grin on her pretty face, he carrying a faraway look. “I always feel so...*alive* after going through a ring.”

              “It is quite revitalizing,” Ogith offers. “It’s the connection to Annwyn e ring, you’re feeling. A fairy ring is made by making a connection to the lanc at me, core. Kind of like tapping into the world’s vein. When you pass throug y you’re feeling a piece of Annwyn’s beating heart.”

ody in        Emonie grins at him. “You know a lot about fairy rings.”

as the        He blushes, freckled cheeks turning crimson. “My great grandmothe a ringer.”

ne like        “Rare magic. Especially these days,” Marox says over his shoulder v ndingshe’s standing at the bedroom door, looking out through a small peep ho

er into        “All magic is rare these days,” Ludogar mutters.

              “Which is why the Vulmin are incredibly lucky to have Brennur,” V thing says as he walks across the wooden floor. With all six of us in here, the me. bedroom seems quite small. “He’s helped us complete a lot of mission

reeze.        “All in service of the cause,” the old fae himself answers as he appe e. inside the ring.

. A            “All’s clear here,” Marox announces, though he keeps his gaze on th I want door’s bubbled glass.

              Ludogar glances to Wick, and the two of them exchange some silent which communication. Then Ludo passes Brennur’s sandals to Ogith to hold, slipping out the door.

ly            At the sound of shuffled feet, I look over and see Brennur begin his track, bare feet passing over the ring of grass, flowers bending beneath heels. With every pass, the green liveliness of the grass begins to eke c flowers wilting, petals drifting off as the grass turns brown and dry.

entical        He keeps circling, the ring dying with each step, until finally, everyt one, has come loose and lifeless, nothing but sparse blades and dead stems y in it, up from the floor and scattering around like dust.

              He steps out of it, nearly stumbling over to the bed to sit down with sigh, his shoulders sagging more than before. Emonie and the others m hink?” energized from traveling through the fairy ring, but he looks worn out.

was            Ogith goes over and slips on his sandals for him, looking up at him v concern. “Alright, Sir Brennur?”

ange.”        “Fine,” he replies, waving a dismissive hand.

ed.            Just then, the door opens and Ludogar comes back in. “We’re clear.”

My stomach twists with nervous anticipation.

Brennur gets back to his feet, toes curling in his sandals. “I should go. Can’t be missed or brows will be raised.”

“Yes, go,” Wick nods. “We’ll see you at the meet point in a few hours. Marox, Ogith, you stay with him. You know what to do. Keep your eyes and ears open, and protect him at all costs. Remember, we have no friends in Riffalt.”

Tension mounts in my muscles. For the first time since arriving in Annwyn, I’m going to be in an anti-Vulmin city, surrounded by non-T loyalists.

The two Vulmin nod, their faces resolute. Then they follow the old man out, and Ludogar shuts the door behind them.

When it’s just the four of us, Wick looks around, his expression set in determination. “Alright. Getting to Riffalt was the easy part. Now, this is about to get a lot more difficult.”

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## CHAPTER 36

AUREN

**W**ick's declaration doesn't deter me. I knew this was going to be a difficult mission, and despite my nerves, I'm looking forward to the challenge. I don't like to think of Oreans being hated here more than I like the way fae are hated in Orea.

"You have a plan?" I ask him.

"I do—Ludo and I finalized it on our way here, but we have to hurry to meet Lerana, so I'm going to make this quick," he says, looking at both Emonie and me. "Ludo's sister got word about some Oreans being kept at Lord Cull's estate—a very powerful and notorious nobleman here in Riffalt. She works as an undercover servant at a neighboring estate, so she's going to help us get in. You two are to be eyes and ears *only*. That means all I want you to do is see what you can find out while you're there. But under no circumstances are you to put yourselves at risk. This is a fact-finding mission only, not a rescue mission. I will handle that part once we confirm they are there and if they actually need our help."

"Okay," I say with a nod.

"Remember that Riffalt City, and especially where we're going, is

dangerous. So it's important we all stay in our roles. Which is why I mentioned a disguise for you, Auren."

Realization dawns on me and I look over at Emonie. "Your glamour magic."

She grins. "Yep. As long as you're okay with it, of course."

"This mission requires discretion," Wick tells me. "We know you're powerful, but you're not the only one with magic. There are a lot of St Swords here, and the captains are all hand-picked because of their mag abilities. Even some of the grunts have power—it's why the crown dra them. The nobleman, Lord Cull, is a powerful bastard and close with tl king. Luckily for us, Lerana said he's not here at the moment. So our f to get in, assess their situation, and get out. Discretion and your safety the utmost importance."

I nod in understanding before my eyes flick back to Emonie. "What need me to do?"

"Nothing at all. I already collected some things from the others."

"And by *things* you mean..."

"Eyes, hair, that sort of thing."

She makes it sound like she's hacked them off and stuffed them in h foraging pouch. "Right."

"Ready?"

As soon as I dip my head, she reaches out and presses a palm to my fingers resting over my collarbone. "Hold your breath for a second."

I suck the air into my lungs and keep it there, and in the next instant a pulse directly under her hand. She drags her touch down, and the pul reverberates along my limbs and up my neck. The slight vibration mor something like water pouring down my skin, and I watch as the gold o complexion changes, fading into a dreary gray that I recognize from or the Vulmin back at the village.

The wet sensation follows her touch as she moves to graze down my and then cup my cheek, making my lips feel wet and my ears go cold. gives me a wink before tapping a fingertip over my eyelids. Instantly, eyes feel as if they're being flooded, like someone is pouring a cup of right into them.

I blink through the tears, but the feeling goes away as quickly as it s my eyes drying up. Then her hand moves to my hair. I watch as she tw

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strands of my golden locks around her fingers, and the color slowly lea out and turns an inky black, though the length stays the same.

“There.” Her hand drops away, and the three of them look at me in assessment. “Oh, wait. Almost forgot.” She reaches up and taps me on ears, and I gasp at the pinching sensation that radiates at the tops, feeli distinct points now at the tips.

I swipe a finger beneath my eyes and lick my lips, looking down at i It’s eerie to see my hands a different color. “Well?” I ask.

Emonie nods. “You still kind of look like you, I didn’t change your shape or anything. You’re just not...shiny.”

I snort.

“What about those?”

At Ludogar’s question, we all look down at the golden ribbons arou do you waist.

“Can’t do anything about those,” Emonie says.

I reach down and pull my shirt over them a bit. The ones peeking th could pass for a belt. “How’s that?”

Wick looks me up and down. “You’ll do.”

“Dazzling compliment.”

“*Dazzling* is exactly what we don’t want you to be in this city.”

Emonie pats me on the arm reassuringly. “You’re still dazzling on tl chest, inside.”

A laugh escapes me. “I thought you said using your magic on other , I feel was difficult?”

“It takes a lot of power,” she admits, wiping a bit of sweat from her

“We should only need a few hours,” Wick says. “In and out.”

Emonie’s fiery eyes churn with determination. “I can do it.”

If she says she can do it, I believe her.

“Okay,” I say, looking around at everyone. “Then let’s go rescue so / arm Oreans.”

She  
my  
water



When the four of us leave the room, we walk down a set of stairs an tarted, hit the main level of a busy inn. It’s about five times the size of Estelia irls servette, with none of the dainty decor or pretty flowers. The dining ro

ches here is filled with benches and long tables, with stains on the wood and smoke in the air.

It's loud. Fae are going in and out, more of them slopping up food or both slamming down drinks. Wick leads the way past them without hesitating the keeping his head up as we go by the busy tables and head for the door.

As soon as we're outside, Ludogar takes the lead, making a sharp right myself. Emonie walks beside me, while Wick takes up the rear watching our back. We're spread out enough that people can weave between us, but close face not to lose sight of one another on the busy street.

And the street is busy, though unlike Geisel, with flower carts and people traveling up and down the street-side shops, here, it's busy with soldiers. Stone Swords litter the place, cluttering up every corner with their intimidating presence. Most are marching in formation, postures straight and faces stiff.

I glance over at Emonie to gauge whether or not we need to be worried rough but she looks completely carefree...and is swinging a basket in her hair.

"Where did you get that?" I ask from the corner of my mouth.

She just winks over at me.

Great Divine.

"This is just a suggestion, Em...but maybe *don't* steal in the dangerous area swarming with Stone Swords," I mumble.

Her lips quirk, but I can practically hear the giggle that wants to bubble people her throat. At least Ludo is walking ahead of us. He probably would've thrown a fit if he'd seen her.

brow. As we continue to walk, I keep my eyes peeled for trouble. The street paved flat and black, and the buildings are just as plain and austere. No embellishments, no mash and mix of woods and colors. Everything is grey stone, each front face smooth and flat, boasting the same sized doors and me black-framed windows.

When we pass by another formation of marching guards, I lean close to Emonie. "Why so many?"

"Riffalt is an outpost. They have a training camp here."

No wonder this place isn't safe for Vulmin.

d then "But..." she goes on, eyes scanning the street. "It does seem like there's more than usual."

om "You there!"



l Emonie and I jolt, eyes whipping around to the Stone Sword just ahead  
r has yellow hair plaited back against his scalp, and a close-cropped beard  
embellished around his scowling face. The fae he was talking to scuttles  
on, as if glad he's moved his attention on to someone else.

My stomach plummets when he starts marching over, arms swinging  
skin at his knuckles red as if he's fresh out of a fist fight.

acks. *Shit.* What does he want with us?

enough He stops in front of us and looks us over. "Where are you two going

He keeps himself planted in front of us, sharp eyes assessing. Up ahead  
people can see Ludo has stopped walking and appears to be glancing in some  
rs. windows of one of the buildings, like he's debating whether or not to go  
but I know better.

ht and "We're just out shopping, sir," Emonie tells him brightly. "We need  
sorts of things for tonight. You see, it's our cousin's birthday, and he is  
ied, picky on what he likes for his meal. So we need to get down to the butcher  
rd. and get his favorite cut, and then the florist so we can decorate the table  
then we need to track down some fresh spices, since he likes his meat to be  
flavorful, and then we—"

"Quiet." He cuts off her chatter, his yoke-colored eyes sliding over my  
ous cityface and slipping down my body in a way that makes me want to kneel  
the groin. "What's your name?"

ble up "Nenet," I say without hesitation.

e "Nenet. What's your cousin's name?"

"Ludo."

et is The real Ludo glances our way for a moment and then starts meandering  
over, back to looking through windows. Out of the corner of my eye, I  
gray Wick pass us, though he stops near a couple of fae to our right, charming  
nd them with a smile as he strikes up conversation in order to stay close.

Nervous sweat is starting to gather at the back of my neck, but I keep  
er to face expressionless. Emonie shifts on her feet, a slight give away at her  
anxiousness. We're on a crowded street swarming with Stone Swords, and  
I have to use my magic, Wick's whole plan of discretion will be gone.

The guard continues to eye us, and my heart pounds in my chest as my  
re are palms heat, gold-touch pressing just beneath my skin, ready to surge on

He leans in close to our faces, making a big show of lording over us  
he wants us to feel like we're so much smaller than he is. "You know,  
I don't think I believe you."

ead. He I see Emonie glance at me, and my heartbeat thrums loudly in my ear.  
rd “You two are going to come with me.”

e away, His hand shoots out to grip my arm, and I go stiff for a half-second before  
grip *his* wrist with my free hand. He looks up at me with surprise, but I  
g, the at him sweetly.

“Sir, I think there’s some mistake,” I tell him. “We’re just doing our errands.”

?” “Release me at once,” he growls. “You have no right to touch a Stor  
ead, I Sword, and if you don’t come with me now, I’ll *drag* you.”

The threat has me tightening my grip.

go in, He’s too incensed about the fact that I’ve challenged him to notice the  
rotten gold that’s now slipping in through the cracks of his split knuckle.

all Who knows what he’ll do to us once we’re off the streets. I saw the  
s *quite* Swords in Geisel. The way they terrorized that town, the way they were  
cher to kill Thursil without hesitation. I won’t let him terrorize us.

e, and “I don’t think you heard my *cousin*,” I tell him. “We have things to  
quite we won’t be able to go anywhere with you.”

ny He opens his mouth to argue, but there’s a terrible choking sound that  
comes out instead.

him in “Are you alright?” I ask, my brows pulling down into a frown.

He jerks away from me and looks down at his hand, but there’s nothing  
there to see. All the gold has already made its way through blood and r  
and bone, tiny rivulets that have now swarmed to his lungs.

I can feel it—almost see it in my mind’s eye where it’s infected his l  
ering My gold has latched on to his lungs, filling them, weighing them down.  
see rotted lines slither like snakes, sinking their fangs in to decay the very  
ng he tries to take.

The rotten seed in my chest warms. My fae beast grins.

p my The guard gasps, wide eyed, his breath going putrid as he struggles to  
r own make a noise.

and if “Oh dear.” Emonie frowns as she takes his arm and starts pulling him  
behind one of the parked carriages. “You don’t look too good, sir.”

ny “No,” I say with a shake of my head as I help her prop him up again  
ut. wood. “He doesn’t look too good at all. We’d better leave him to rest.”

as if He shakes his head at us in a panic, though he’s bent over, clutching  
*Nenet*, ribs, his focus on trying to breathe. He won’t be able to for very long.

Wick comes strolling over and smiles at us. “There you are.”

ars.           “Cousin!” Emonie gushes before she threads her arm through his. “I go. This poor Stone Sword appears to be a bit sick.”

before I       Wick’s eyes flick away from the gasping guard, and then he quickly I smile escorts us away. Together, the three of us bustle around the carriage and into the crowded street. There’s a shout behind us, but none of us dares turn around or stop walking.

ie             My heart pounds, faster and faster. Wick’s bent elbow is rigid beneath hand.

he             We keep going, and Emonie chatters happily like she doesn’t have a in the world. Up ahead, I see Ludo loping through the crowd. Wick’s b stays tense beside me, but he keeps up conversation with Emonie as if les. nothing is amiss, their steps unhurried, their faces relaxed.

Stone         When there are more shouts, my stomach leaps, and I turn to glance e ready my shoulder, but Wick stops me. “Don’t,” he hisses beneath his breath keep going.”

do. So         Stone Swords run past, and anxiety spikes so high between us that e Emonie’s words peter out. Every second that goes by, I’m convinced t at we’re about to be swarmed by Stone Swords. My ears strain to listen f anyone rushing up from behind us, the corners of my eyes pulled with tension.

ing            But then, we veer off at a fork that takes us away from the busy stre muscle onto a gravel road of small white pebbles. It winds up and away from t main city, toward a slightly sloping hill, and I finally let out a relieved body. as the noisy crowd fades. Emonie and I share a look.

i. The         Wick loses the tension in his body. “What happened?” he asks.

breath        “He was questioning people on the street, I think. Something about him him off. He wanted to bring us somewhere to question us.”

              “*What did you do to him?*”

to             “Gilded his lungs.”

              Emonie whistles. “Impressive.”

m             Wick sighs. “Well...at least I know you won’t hesitate to protect yo

              “*She was brilliant.*” Emonie beams at me.

st the         “I just killed someone,” I point out.

’             Wick picks up on my unease. “He would’ve killed *you*. Stone Swor don’t question people for answers. They question to bully and torture a ; his kill. Don’t feel bad about defending yourself and your identity.”

Let's I nod, because while I don't just go around killing people without th  
I will do it to protect myself and those I care about.

"I'm going to hang back again, just in case. I'll keep an eye out," W  
id back says before he falls behind until it's just Emonie and me again, while I  
s to even further ahead.

Now that we've ventured away from the main city street, we've left  
ith my the uniformed buildings for spread-out greenery. The grass around us i  
short and shorn, looking like no one, not even animals, is allowed to w  
i care it. The road is lined with orderly trees all the same distance apart, the l  
ody tinged with blue and perfectly trimmed on either side to create an arch  
overhead.

We walk for some time beneath the spotted shade, only occasionally  
over moving aside for a fancy carriage to pass us by. Emonie swings her ba  
.. "Just her hand and hums beneath her breath, the wind blowing her amber ha  
the curled-up orange ends keep fluttering along the edge of her jaw.

ven "So your hair and eyes, are those yours or is it glamoured?" I ask he

hat "Oh, they're mine. Like I said, glamour magic takes a lot of power.

or longest I've been able to hold a different eye color for myself was two

"It's a handy power."

"When I was younger and I first got my magic, I would swap hair an  
et and with my sister all the time after I'd done something I shouldn't have. S  
he a lot of lectures about things she didn't do," she says with a lilting laugh  
breath came in quite handy."

"Where is your sister now?"

The smile falls from her face. "She went off and became a noblewor  
us set Doesn't have much time for me anymore."

I can hear the sadness in her voice despite the way she tries to cover  
"I'm sorry."

"We all have different paths, right? Take this one for instance. It's r  
neat," she says, looking around at the uniform road with her nose wrin  
urself." "Kind of makes me want to mess it up a bit. Kick some rocks off the si  
bend some of these branches down..."

"Let's not draw any more attention to ourselves today."

ls She blows out a disappointed breath. "Alright." Still swinging her b  
nd she looks over at me. "So, what's Orea like?"

"Well...there's six different kingdoms. I lived in the coldest one for  
time. But I've been to nearly all of them. There's snow and deserts and

ought, marshes and jungles... There's ugly parts and beautiful parts. There's good people and bad people."

ick "Sounds a lot like here."

Ludo is "The sky is different. So are the trees and the sun. Annwyn smells sweeter."

behind Emonie makes a noise under her breath. "Wait until we get to Lydia's kept you the air there smells worse than Orea. That's where our land is dying. It stinks something awful."

eaves "Because of the bridge?"

"That's what we think," she says with a shrug. "It's been happening since the bond between the realms was broken. It's like Annwyn is punishing us for breaking the bond with Orea."

sket in Emonie and I grow quiet as a small group of Stone Swords marches in front of us, and I wonder at this broken bond between realms. Wonder what will happen to Annwyn and everyone here if the land keeps dying.

r. When we make our way around a slight bend in the road, we see Ludo ahead, stopped beside a fae with a horse. They exchange a few words, then the male passes the reins over to Ludo before quickly turning and walking away.

nd eyes I watch as Ludo smoothly starts leading the horse forward. Emonie is beside me. "Okay, see, I only took a little old basket, but he just took a horse. That's much more noticeable."

She's got a point.

nan. Now, the road starts opening up to private paths that lead to large, elaborate estates. Most of them have thick hedges that line the drives, and one meticulously trimmed with edges so sharp it looks like you could cut your finger on the corners.

Just when I thought the estates couldn't get more extravagant looking, we reach one that's far larger than the others we've passed. It has immaculate trees lining the long drive, and in the distance, there's a lake cut into a square at the front.

The manor sits just beyond it, with green hills covering its back. The intimidating solid iron gate sitting propped open like a gaping mouth, and that's where Ludo swoops in with the horse in tow, disappearing behind it.

Nervousness passes over me, but I shove it away, sharing a look with Emonie before the two of us follow him.

l

good        The surrounding fence hides the road from view, the walled-in iron and stone pillars a good head taller than me. Just to the left of the drive spot what looks like a tiny guardhouse. It's only big enough for one person to fit inside, though it's empty right now, apparent from the square cut in the wall like a glassless window.

. I bet        Just behind the small building, we find Ludo talking to his sister, Lera. It        while the horse snuffs at the grass beyond them. As we approach, Lera reaches into the open doorway and then hands Emonie and me wadded clothes.

since        "Here, put those on," she instructs, and I shake out the bundle, realizing with        it's a long gray skirt and an apron.

past        Emonie stows her basket in the guardhouse, and the two of us then slip ll        into the skirts. Mine is long enough to hide my pants beneath, the hem skimming the toes of my boots. I loosely braid my ribbons and then feed them through the belt loops before I tie the apron on over them, and the dogar        make sure all the discreet gold I have on me is covered.

and        Meanwhile, Wick and Ludogar each get a flat cap from Lerana that snorts        stuffed over their partially shaved heads. Ludogar's short bill barely covers the riot of hair that hangs down his left side like a waterfall. They've also stuffed red cloths into the front pocket of their jackets that are now but horse. all the way to their necks.

each        Now, we all apparently look as if we can stroll onto a nobleman's estate cut        like we belong there. I hope we can pull this off, but my silent worries are stacking up. My neck and shoulders feel tight, my breaths tense. I don't want to let the Vulmin or the Oreans down. And despite the fact that I will die either myself and the others, I don't want to leave a litter of bodies in my wake either.

ig, we        "Alright, listen carefully, because I'm running out of time before I n late        get back," Lerana says with a no-nonsense tone, her own sea-blue hair perfect braided tight and wound around her head. She levels her teal eyes on E and me. "The story is, you two work with me as servants in my lord's court. ere's another neighbor this one. I'm bringing you over here to help serve *this* estate and this today, because they need the extra hands. Apparently, the arrival of the Oreans has put a dent into Cull's housekeeping."

h        Emonie and I nod.

She looks to her brother and Wick. "You two will be reporting to the stables. The horse master has ordered a new horse, so you'll be delivering it."

gate she says, gesturing to the horse standing beside Ludo. “If you give a go  
s, we showing, they’ll purchase him from you. But the horse master is very  
rson to particular, so expect it to take a couple of hours. He’ll make you do a  
to the thorough showing, so I hope you two got acquainted with one another  
walk over.”

rana, Ludogar pats the animal. “We’ll be fine.”

na “You’ll have eyes on the outside, while Lady Auren and Emonie wi  
l-up eyes on the inside. I wish I had more information to point you in the ri  
direction, but I don’t, and this is the best way I know how to get you o  
zing estate.”

“This works perfectly, Lerana,” Wick assures her. “Thank you.”

step She smiles at him, her teal eyes warming, and then lets out a sigh. “  
Ready?” she asks, looking critically back at Emonie and me. “Can you  
ed off being handmaidens?”

en “I’ve played many parts in my life. Handmaiden should be a walk in  
park,” I say, trying to play off my nerves with a little laugh. Inside, my  
they’ve tightening.

ntains I can’t let them down.

lso Wick steps forward, burying me beneath his grave expression. “If *an*  
toned goes wrong, if there’s even a *hint* that someone might suspect you are  
you say you are, I want you both to leave immediately and find us at th  
state stables, with or without information on the Oreans. The nobleman who  
are this estate is a mean bastard, and even though he isn’t here, he’ll have  
’t want Remember that you can’t trust anyone—not even the other servants. W  
defend we’re about to walk into is incredibly dangerous, so be on high alert. *A*  
ke anything feels off, you get out. By *any* means necessary.”

I don’t have to ask him to elaborate on what he means by that.

eed to “Got it,” Emonie says.

Apparently, neither does she.

’monie He stares at me a moment longer, looking like he’s going to add son  
estate for a second, but then he just nods and says, “Good luck.”

state Emonie and I turn and follow behind Lerana toward Lord Cull’s est  
e the gold bands around my arms tingle with anticipation. As I walk dow  
grassy drive, eyeing the ominous -looking estate in front of us, I take in  
breath. Readying myself—*reminding* myself who I am and what I’m c  
e of.

ing it,” *I can do this.*

nod I glance back at Wick, and when he gives me a nod, I give him one  
back. The simple exchange boosts my confidence, and when I face forward  
again, I crumple up the last of my nerves and toss them away.

on the For the first time since joining them, I finally *feel* like a Vulmin.  
So it's time I act like one, too, and save some Oreans.

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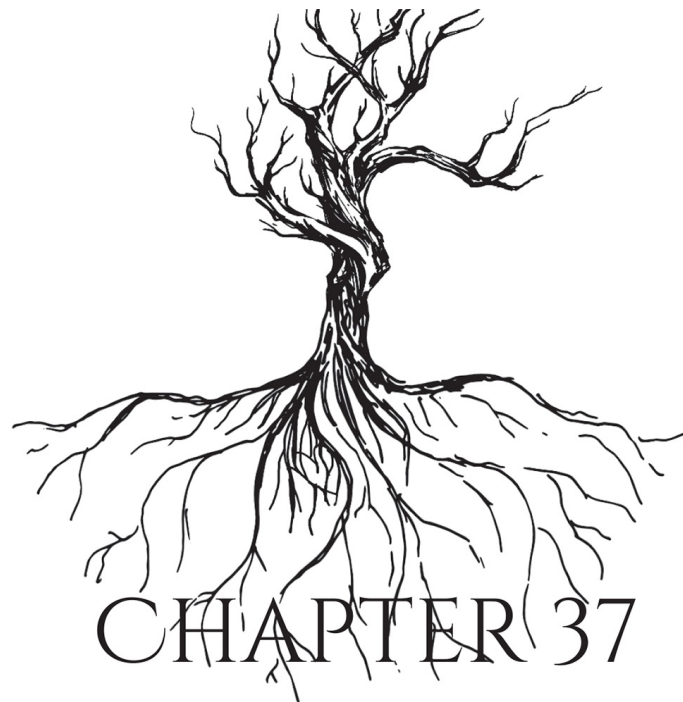
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I glance back at Wick, and when he gives me a nod, I give him one right back. The simple exchange boosts my confidence, and when I face forward again, I crumple up the last of my nerves and toss them away.

For the first time since joining them, I finally *feel* like a Vulmin.

So it's time I act like one, too, and save some Oreans.



## CHAPTER 37

### SLADE

**I**'m sweat-slicked beneath my heavy armor, my breath stuck in the humid confines of my helmet as I clutch a sword in each hand. In the fight circle, I face three soldiers. Beside me, Ryatt is facing against three of his own.

This is what we've been doing. It's the only way I can manage to get a couple hours of sleep. The first time we came down here, we pummeled the other pretty good before word caught on. Soon, news spread that we were sparring—Rip and Ryatt. Their former commander and their new one. It's been a good boost to morale with the change in command, and a good set Ryatt apart. But for me, it's been more about the fights.

Every time we come down here now, the circle soon bursts with crowds of soldiers, the energy sizzling. It's been the perfect distraction for me. Osrik also partakes in, since he's been in need of distraction too.

My muscles ache with satisfying strain as I move against the soldier, countering their attacks and pushing them to be quicker, more aggressive. Above us, the sun is searing through cluttered clouds that are pouring a slosh of messy rain. Puddles litter the dirt, making everyone's armor bludgeoned with mud spatter.

The three soldiers I'm up against are good—well trained, solid footi clever maneuvers—and the fight is exactly what I need. They work tog trying to contain and overpower me. They don't take their eyes off my but they also don't cower away from them either. Since they're used to seeing me, they've learned to not let my spikes intimidate them, but to smart about how to avoid their sharp ends. Which means they get in so solid hits.

I still put them on their asses, but the metallic taste of blood in my n fills me with pride.

Hoots and hollers raise from the soldiers spectating, and I get ready for more challengers when Ryatt's voice rings out, bringing the fights end.

I scowl at him as he comes to stand beside me. "We can keep going, him.

His face is wet from the rain, though now that he's shaved his head, doesn't have soaking wet hair to contend with. He also doesn't have th humid helmet like I do.

"No. We're done."

He leans down and helps up one of the soldiers I flattened. The man me a bloody grin before walking out of the circle with the others.

"You heard Commander Ryatt!" Judd calls from the sidelines. "Go l your training!"

The crowd starts to dissipate, and I turn to follow my brother to the overhang just at the edge of the fight circle. He tosses in his training sv and I follow suit, but irritation is pulsing down my veins. "I wanted to fighting."

Ryatt's tunic is stuck to him with sweat and rain, and unlike me, he' wearing armor. Further widening the gap between Rip and Ryatt. He h even been wearing black anymore. His tunic is white, his pants brown.

"Look at you," he says as he eyes me like he can see my glare in the through my helmet. "You're fucking swaying on your feet."

I glance down. The ground does seem to be tilting a bit.

He jerks his chin. "Come on."

I bite my tongue on a retort and follow beside him. At the fence, Juc standing with Keg. The army's cook has pieces of wood braided into h and a grin on his face. "Ho there, ex-Commander," he says to me jovia "You hungry? I can whip something up."

ng, I shake my head. “No thanks, Keg.”  
gether, He looks at me dubiously. “You sure? I think even *I* could knock you  
spikes, right now. One swift kick to the arse and you’d be down.”

I suppress a snort and arch a brow. “You want to test that theory?”  
be Keg seems to consider this and then quickly shakes his head. “Nope  
me I’m good, actually. And I got soldiers to feed, so...lots to do. Better get  
He claps Judd on the shoulder, gives us a perfunctory nod, and lopes a  
mouth with the other soldiers.

“Actually, I think he *could* knock you out,” Judd says as the three of  
to call start walking away. “You do look unsteady.”

to an “Don’t start.”

“How many hours of sleep did you get yesterday after the fight circled  
,” I tell Ryatt asks.

One. But he doesn’t need to know that.

he “Plenty.”

e He shakes his head. “Yeah. Right.”

We walk through the grounds, and I’m pleased to see the soldiers de  
to Ryatt as he passes. Moving out of the way, tipping their heads, stanc  
gives attention, saluting. He greets some of them by name, striding past with  
confidence I’ve never seen him have—not as himself, anyway.

back to I hear him and Judd talking, but they’re right. I’m fucked. Now that  
fight is draining out of me, my head feels heavy, my muscles shaking.  
all morning trying to open a rip, then came down here to fight. Now, m  
word, rotting chest fucking aches, and I barely have the strength to walk up p  
keep stables and into the line of trees where I left Crest.

With Ryatt’s help, I yank off my armor and stash my helmet, pulling  
s not spikes and scales back in before I tug on my shirt from where I kept it  
asn’t saddle bag.

“Try to sleep more than a fucking hour this time, or I swear to fuck,  
: slits really will knock you unconscious,” he hisses at me as I drag myself in  
saddle.

Guess he’s more aware of my sleep schedule than I thought.

I grunt at him and then nudge my heel into Crest. The beast leaps in  
ld is air, flying back toward Brackhill. By the time we reach the roof, the st  
is hair of the fight has drained out of me completely.

illy. The poisoned chasm in my chest, however, hasn’t.

I stagger off the roof and down the spiral stairs, unable to walk straight. I bounce off the walls of the corridor before making it to my rooms. When I reach my bed, I stumble onto it, rolling onto my back with a grimace. I even toe off my boots. I do, however, manage to dig into my pocket and pull out the strip of Auren's ribbon.

"No, it's not the gold is the same exact color as her eyes at night."

I grip it tight in my fist as the days—*weeks*—of exhaustion seem to suddenly wash over me. Catch up to me. Knock into my skull and circumscribe around my limbs in a way that I know I won't be awake after a mere hour. My body is shutting down.

My black heart chugs with painful pulses, spreading poison through my veins and I close my eyes, feeling darkness start to drag me under.

With Auren's scent clinging to the sheets and with *me* clinging to the remnants of her. With the rot in my chest reaching up and out, like it's reaching for her...

I finally, *finally* sleep.

And I dream of her.

Clinging at

the



the She's bathed in sunlight.

I spent There's nothing but shine and warmth, as if her very essence surrounds me. She's always been radiant. Always burned hot.

Just like the sun itself.

I reach out my hand in the golden ether, and she reaches right back with a look that squeezes my heart.

The moment we touch, she pulls close, tucking herself against my chest. She turns her head and presses her lips against that aching, rotting, poisonous spot of me, and I shudder.

One touch, and she takes away the pain that's been stalking me. The pain that's been eating away at my lifeforce.

A shaky breath slips out past my lips.

When she hears it, her fingertips come up to smooth against my forehead. Dancing down my jaw, making the rot beneath my beard writhe. It's trying to reach up to her. I feel the seed of rot in her own chest thud in answer.

I take her hand in mine, look down at her with an ache. "Where are you?"

ght as I My voice echoes.

en I She smiles—a smile that reaches up to her gleaming eyes. Then she  
[ don't her other hand down to rest over my heart, and I go heavy all over. Eye  
id drag drooping, mind falling. Going down, down into the dark.

But I hear her beautiful voice in a whisper just before all the light fa  
away.

*“I’m here.”*

h  
our this



out, “Is it working?”

“Yes, he’s stirring, Commander.”

ese Their voices and a sharp scent start pulling me out of sleep. But wha  
jolts me is when something jabs at my chest. I hiss at the intense and s  
pain, my fist flying up before I even open my eyes.

But my hit is caught in a fist, and someone really fucking strong sho  
arm back down. Eyes snapping open, I look up and see Osrik pinning i  
hand. He gives me a shitty grin. “Is that any way to greet me?”

“Os,” I say through gritted teeth. “Could you kindly fuck off?”

With a chuckle, he releases me. “There’s those kingly manners.”

nds As soon as he removes his weight and lets go, I take stock. I’m in m  
room, and Ryatt, Judd, Os, and Hojat are all hovering around me—the  
putting away his smelling salts. “Why are you all crowding around my  
fucking bed like I’m a corpse in a coffin?”

with a “Not far off,” Judd says, head tilting to motion at my chest.

hest. I look down and immediately grimace. I’m shirtless, so everything i  
soned exposed, and my chest is a fucking wreck. My black, rotted heart is sho  
through stretched skin, as if the organ has begun to swell, trying to bur  
through. All around it, the sickly black roots have lengthened and grow  
: drain thicker, pushing against the surface, and my skin...it’s peeling. As if I  
out in the sun too long. Except instead of being burnt, the skin is dead,  
chuffing off in ashen flakes.

owed “Your permission to apply this salve, Sire?” Hojat says.

, like I eye the sludge already cupped onto his fingertips in a tacky mound  
np in of your concoctions?”

“Of course.”

you?”

That's what I was afraid of. Hojat is always coming up with different moves experimental mixtures, but the ingredients are usually enough to turn even the hardest person's stomach. Though, they usually *are* effective.

"Just don't tell me what's in it," I grit out.

Hojat's scarred face twists as one cheek lifts in a smile. "As you wish Sire."

With quick, efficient movements, he starts slathering the gunk on my chest, which fucking hurts, but the scent...

"Goddess, Hojat. That's fucking foul."

Judd cackles at my bedside.

The scent must hit Ryatt's nose too, because he takes a step back.

"I'm not sure anything topical will actually help," I tell the mender.

"Perhaps not," he concedes. "But at the very least, it will soothe the sudden aggravated skin."

"*Aggravated?*" Osrik says with incredulity. "It's not aggravated, it's *rotting* fucking *decaying*. It looks like shit."

"Thanks, Os," I mutter.

He ignores me.

"You could've mentioned you were rotting from the inside out when you were in Derfort," Judd says from where he sits in *my* chair, legs crossed at ankles. "Just might be something worth bringing up to your closest friend."

"I was busy."

"I should kick your ass."

I roll my eyes but hiss again when Hojat goes right over the center of a particularly painful spot. "You can't kick my ass, Judd."

"Fine. Os, punch him for me."

Osrik clocks me in the head so hard my entire body jolts. "*Fuck!*"

Hojat doesn't miss a beat. Just keeps slathering.

I glare at Os. "You fucking asshole, I'm *rotting*."

He crosses his huge arms in front of him and shrugs. "Tell us next time. I told Ryatt!"

"Yeah, and you haven't talked about it since or told me it was getting worse. And you've been asleep for *three fucking days*," my brother snarls.

"One—I—Wait. Three days?" I glance around my bedroom, seeing daylight stream through the windows, and realize that I actually don't feel weighed down with exhaustion like I was before. "I've been asleep for three days."

it            “Yep. We were starting to get worried,” Judd says. “We’ve been try  
ven        wake you for an hour.”

             “I’m fine.”

             “Do you see the state of your chest?” Ryatt hisses. “We needed to m  
h,        sure you weren’t actually dead already.”

             “I said, *I’m fine.*”

y            Hojat hums over me. “I don’t think so, Sire.”

             When the army mender is concerned, then it’s probably not good. B  
three days. Maybe my magic has replenished enough. Maybe I can fina  
fucking open a rip.

             I look down as Hojat finishes slathering. There’s a part of skin just c  
center of my heart that isn’t as black as the surrounding area. A bit of a  
brown instead.

             I start to sit up, but Ryatt pins my shoulder. “What are you doing?”

             “I need to get down to the feeding grounds.”

             His eyes widen. “What? No. Absolutely fucking *not.*”

             “I know I look like shit, but I actually feel better,” I tell him. “And t  
days...maybe my power was replenished in that time. You know I hav  
1 we        check. Have to try. For Auren. For our mother.”

d at the    He glares at me while the others watch.

ends.”     “Fine,” he grits out. “But you have to eat first, and then I’ll be going  
you. You can try for an hour today. That’s fucking it.”

t a         I start to argue, but Hojat cuts in. “He’s right. You must eat. It is imp  
to keep up your strength, lest you find that you have none.”

             My molars grind together, but I give a terse nod. Hojat then places a  
cloth over me, and when he’s finished, he lifts my wrist, frowning at th  
the rot looks as it writhes like thick streams of sludge beneath my skin.  
presses his fingers against a vein, and his frown deepens. “Your pulse  
erratic.”

me.”       “Well, his heart is rotting, mender, so I think that’s to be expected,”  
says dryly.

g            “Looks like someone shat out coals on his chest,” Osrik adds with a  
aps.        Judd howls in laughter. “It fucking does!”

ht         I sigh and let my head fall back onto my pillow. “I need a new Wrat

hed        “You wouldn’t say that if you saw me in action in Derfort,” Judd tel

ys?”      “I was so damned Wrathful it was downright poetic.”

             Os rolls his eyes. “I’m more Wrathful than you.”



ing to “Yeah, but you’re an ugly, scowling giant. Everyone expects it from  
They get surprised with me.”

“So?”

ake “So...I’m friendlier, and I look nice, so my wrath comes as a surpris  
people. Which makes me scarier.”

“Fuck off. I’m still way fucking scarier than you,” Osrik says, crossi  
arms.

ut... Judd looks affronted. “What the fuck? Ryatt, tell him.”

ally “I’m not fucking telling him.”

“Hojat!” Judd springs on him. “What do you think?”

over the “Don’t involve our poor mender in this insanity. He deals with enou  
a sickly our shit,” I tell Judd.

Hojat gives me a grateful look and puts away his things. “If that’s al  
I should return to the Lady Rissa.”

I cast a glance between him and Os. “How is she?”

The mender hesitates. “She has not improved.”

hree Fuck.

e to My eyes flick up. “Os...”

His face goes hard. “No.”

Alright then. It’s clearly not open for discussion.

; with A knock suddenly sounds from the other room, making all of us turr  
strides out of my bedroom, into my entry room, and I hear him talking  
portant someone. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and force myself to  
feet. I don’t even sway this time.

gauzy Waving off Hojat, I crack my neck and then stagger for the closet. I  
ie way grimace slightly as I pull on a new shirt, but the pain has definitely bee  
. He slightly numbed from whatever the mender slathered on me.

is very Just when I come out freshly dressed, Ryatt is returning. “What is it’  
ask.

Judd My brother’s expression holds a hint of surprise. “It’s King Euden T  
from First Kingdom.”

smirk. Judd and I exchange a look.

“What about him?”

h.” “He’s here.”

ls me.



you. I do my best to look like my heart *isn't* rotting through my chest, and I slam my crown of twisted wood on my head. Ryatt, Os, and Judd accompany me as I go downstairs, but when we reach the dining hall, it's empty. One of my guards walks up, informing me that the monarch of First Kingdom is in the gardens with my Premiers.

ing his The four of us change direction and go outdoors. But as soon as we reach the threshold, Osrik stops with a strange look on his face. "Os?"

he says. Then he turns and walks back inside, shoulders stiff.

gh of "This was where Rissa..." Ryatt trails off, motioning toward the garden. Fuck.

l, Sire, kidnapped. A fresh wave of rage rolls over me, and my shoulders bunch. "Slade..." Ryatt prompts.

"Yeah." I force my footsteps forward, following the sound of voices.

When we reach the onyx fountain, I see my Premiers, Warken and I standing with the king. Warken has his hands clasped behind him, dressed head to toe in black, the silver strands in his shorn hair glinting slightly in the sunlight. Isalee stands with her husband and nods to whatever the king is saying, with a polite smile on her face. Her black gown is in perfect order. Ryatt's hair is swept up, the spirals pinned in place.

to "Ah, here he is," Warken says when he notices me. As I approach, I see my Thold is fucking with my Premiers, we're going to have a problem.

"King Thold," I say as I walk over.

in I immediately see the reason for Warken's grimace. The serpent king has a bright green viper draped around his neck, its long body curled around his bicep, tail flicking against him every few seconds. "?" I

Thold At the Conflux, my focus wasn't on King Thold. Before that, I hadn't seen him personally in years. But now that I'm in an audience with him, it's clear that time has passed since we last saw each other.

There are some gray strands through his black hair that weren't there before, and his brow is creased, though no other lines wrinkle the dark skin of his face. He's dressed in gray, his sleeveless tunic trimmed in dark green and embroidered from collar to cuff. He carries himself with all the grace of a royal. Back straight, serpent crown perched on his head, formidable air. There are three guards behind him, twisted black and g

d then Iropes latched on to the shoulders of their armor like a row of serpents in  
company kingdom's colors.

One of "We weren't expecting you," I say as I come to a stop before him.

is out "No, I imagine not." His snake turns its head to look at me, tongue s  
out to test the air. "As I was just telling your Premiers, I apologize for  
cross sudden appearance, but after what happened at the Conflux, I deemed  
necessary to come in person."

ater," "You mean when you took part in an attempted execution that should  
never have taken place." My tone is laced with my anger, biting just as  
den. as his viper.

ing He holds my gaze, but I can see the way his heartbeat quickens from  
vein in his neck. "I came here in good faith, King Ravinger."

h. "You can come in bad faith for all I care. This feigned sincerity does  
nothing."

is. As if it understands my brush-off, the viper hisses in my direction, f  
salee, bared and red eyes locked on me. Warken shifts and Isalee backs up sl  
sed but I don't move. King Thold cocks his head at my unflinching expres  
7 in the "You don't fear snakes, King Ravinger?"

is "Why would I, when I could rot the fangs from its mouth?"

der and He hums thoughtfully, finger lifting to the chin of his snake to sooth  
"And is that your intention, King Ravinger? To rot those who have wr  
see he you?"

rise. If "So you heard about my...trips around Orea."

I get a sick sort of pride that he obviously got reports of what I did in  
other kingdoms and immediately flew out here to try to patch things up  
g has a doesn't meet a similar fate.

his "I heard you rotted the front of Gallenreef Castle and every guard in  
vicinity, including one of Third's advisors."

't seen I shrug a shoulder. "Just his throat."

is clear King Thold's lips press together. "I heard...that you may have taken  
something from Queen Kaila."

e "She took from me first," I practically snarl. "And you would do we  
brown also pay attention to what Queen Kaila has been doing these past mont

leep "Her reach of power has not gone unnoticed," he tells me. "I have e  
the watching her progression in Fifth and now her attempts in Sixth."

reen "King Ravinger was completely in his rights to retaliate against her,  
Warken puts in. "Just as he was in Second Kingdom."

in his Thold dips his head, though he continues to watch me carefully. “I’m surprised to hear that King and Queen Merewen are dead. And I’m not to argue your rights of retaliation against them.”

slipping “Then why are you here?” I ask, though we both already know why.  
the “I’ve come here in person to ensure that retaliation does not come to  
it Kingdom.” He pauses. “Or to me.”

“Maybe you should’ve thought about that before going against me.”

d A tic of frustration appears in his cheek. “I’ll remind you that, before  
; sharp went to the Conflux, you sent your envoy to renegotiate with me and I  
accepted that renewed alliance. My imports are on their way to your shore  
1 the we speak, as I promised to Sir Judd,” he says, motioning toward my West

s “Imports that should have been heading to my shores anyway, but you  
initially cut them off because of Queen Kaila and her discordant spew.  
You were in breach of your treaties with me. So this *renewed alliance*,  
angs called it, doesn’t endear you to me.”

ightly, His snake tightens around his arm while Thold’s gaze skims over the  
sion. others before settling back on me. “I should not have broken our  
agreements.”

Surprise shuffles through me at his admission, though I don’t let it show  
e it. my face.

onged “No, you shouldn’t have. And now, here you are, trying to ensure I don’t  
mete out retribution for your part in the Conflux.”

His expression tightens. “I had no true part in the Conflux. The only  
n the who did were Second and Third, whom you’ve already dealt with.”

so he “You *were* a part of it,” I counter. “You were behind that barrier with  
the rest of them.”

the Irritation has his shoulders stiffening, brown eyes flashing. His snake  
responds, hissing in my direction. “I was called to a royal Conflux, and  
went. It was a request I couldn’t deny as an Orean monarch, as you well  
1 know. We are bound to the Conflux law.”

I feel my rot scrape against the skin at my neck. “Yes, and you, along  
ll to every other ruler there, condemned an innocent to death, even when they  
hs.” clearly state that *all* monarchs must be in attendance for such a verdict

yes King Thold’s eyes flicker from my blackened veins. “That is true...  
the monarch in question is unable to make sound decisions or cannot  
” physically make the journey. The way that Queen Isolte was telling it,  
were under some sort of spell by the golden woman.”

n not My gaze is steady. Icy. “Queen Isolte was mistaken.”  
: here The two of us stare at each other, the tension mounting.  
Fortunately, Isalee interjects, her voice smooth and sure as always. ‘  
know that Queen Isolte is—*was*—ruled largely by her religious beliefs  
) First religion, I will point out, which often condemns women. It is a doctrin  
Fourth do not condone.”  
Thold hesitates for a moment. “I know not of their doctrines, but I d  
e I what I saw with my own eyes, and that is the fact that the Lady Auren  
indeed using gold-touch...and what appeared to be rot was also flowin  
iores as of her. What say you about that?”  
’rath. When I don’t reply, Thold asks what he truly wants to know. “Is it t  
ou not, Ravinger? Did that woman steal your magic? Did she steal Midas’  
ng. magic? Are we all at risk?”  
as you I can feel my Premiers glance at me. Can feel my brother tense.  
e “No.” My reply is steady, unwavering. “She did not steal anything. ’  
do you think Midas kept her in a cage for so many years?”  
Thold’s expression folds with distress. “What are you saying?”  
“Midas never had gold-touch. It was always her.”  
how on He starts to pace, making his viper shake its head in agitation at the  
movement. “Are you saying that a magic-less man wore a crown for al  
won’t years?”  
“I am.”  
people He stops in front of me. “If that’s true—”  
“It is true. There is no *if*.”  
h all “You must understand the implications of that,” he says, glancing fr  
to the others. “If that information were to get out...it would shake all o  
e People would riot, the magic-less trying to lay stake to thrones.”  
l so I “Which is why I didn’t announce it publicly,” I reply. “Not until I w  
ll forced to do so at the Conflux. Yet I was not believed because of the  
narrative that Queen Kaila and Queen Isolte had both circulated.”  
g with “But that doesn’t explain the rot. Why did it appear that rot was in h  
e laws gold?”  
.” I wave him away. “It was mine,” I lie easily. “I can use my power at  
unless distance. I was trying to rot through the floor so I could get her out.”  
His dark brows pull together in a frown. “But—”  
you “I’ve answered your questions, King Thold, and that’s more than I c  
you. Lady Auren is not a threat in that way. She does not have the abil

steal magic. You and your serpents are safe, I assure you.”

He considers me, hand coming up to stroke the viper’s tail. “Curious. We all happened that day. For a moment, I thought I saw spikes come up from the ground. A moment later, they were gone. Just as I thought Lady Auren was using rot through her gold.” He looks at me in pauses for a moment, as if debating whether or not to continue. “The rot you used wasn’t rot, either. Whatever you did tore the air like parchment. I don’t know when Lady Auren disappeared through it.”

“I say nothing.”

“What did you do, Ravinger?” he demands. “Where did she go?”

My pissed-off patience has had enough. “You’re not entitled to answer for Thold. *You* cut off trading with Fourth Kingdom. *You* broke our agreement. And *you* stood with the others during the Conflux. Those are reasons enough for retaliation if I see fit, as you are *very* aware.”

His expression tightens, and his guards shift forward ever so slightly in a clear threat. “That is why I am here in person. I think you can understand, Ravinger, that above all, we strive to protect our kingdoms. I see now that you were misled at the Conflux. I would much rather have you as an ally.”

I’m sure.

“Forgive me, King Thold,” Warken cuts in. “But as my king pointed out, you broke treaties. Severed trust. Played a part in the punishment of someone who was under his protection. So why should Fourth Kingdom realign with you?”

“You need the imports,” he answers immediately. “Your land isn’t as self-sufficient as mine. As you know, since Sir Judd was sent to dislodge me from the trade block.”

I push my hands into my pockets and stare him down. “But who’s to blame? Orea can’t simply rot your kingdom and take the exports by force?”

For the first time, Thold loses his temper, and his anxious heartbeat is heard loudly. “I don’t want war, but I won’t abide threats,” he says through clenched teeth. “Our kingdoms are better off in a symbiotic relationship rather than in a state of war. We both know that First Kingdom has the largest quantity of food exports in the world. My lands are rich in agriculture, and since the rest of the world has Orea has still cut off trade with you, especially now, your kingdom is in need of what mine can provide.”

We *do* need his exports, but neither my Premiers nor I give away anything in our expressions.

“If you try to take it by force, we both know it will be at the cost of many lives, and many acres. It’s in both our best interests that we avoid all of that.”

and reinstate our alliance. I won't have First Kingdom suffer because of  
s magic misinformation and misunderstanding," he says, voice stern, eyes  
1 your determined.

e I let him sweat for a moment. Let him stew. It works well for me that  
magic here, trying to broker a deal. It also works well for me that he's nervous  
nt, and Because he fucking should be.

Thold lets out a short sigh. "You stay in your kingdom, and I'll stay  
mine, and our relationship can flourish once more. You may be able to  
my land, but your people can't eat rot. Can't live on decay. Like it or n  
vers, need my kingdom thriving, and I don't think you want the hassle of kil  
nent. another monarch. Not when it's far easier for you to accept this reallia  
nough I stare at him for several seconds before my eyes shift to Warken and  
Isalee, and one look from them tells me we're on the same page.

7 at my "I will have to discuss this proposition with my Premiers."

He bristles in frustration but gives a stiff nod. "Fine."

that I I pull my hands out of my pockets and turn around. "Judd, could you  
escort King Thold inside and ensure he's taken care of?"

He gives a nod. "This way, Your Majesty."

l out, With one last look, Thold follows Judd inside, his guards sticking to  
me one heels. When Ryatt and I are alone with my Premiers, I let out a breath,  
?" shoulders loosening.

even a Warken gives me a sidelong look. "How long do you want to make  
suade wait?"

I hum in consideration before turning to Isalee. "What do you think?  
o say I "Three days," she answers without hesitation. "Any longer, and he'll  
to come up with nefarious alternatives. Any shorter, and he won't sweat  
pulses enough."

I smirk. "Ruthless."

nan at "We're Fourth Kingdom," she says with a shrug. "Besides, he'll der  
d an answer by then. I can tell."

t of Her husband nods. "Thold is right, though. We need his imports, and  
n need does show good faith that he agreed to disregard the trade block *before*  
Conflux."

ything "I still want to rot him in his sleep."

many "About that..." Isalee's dark brown eyes bore into me. "Next time y  
f that decide to execute monarchs, warn us ahead of time. Do you know the

of of hawks that have arrived? My hands are going to be covered in callus  
the time we finish answering all the messages.”

I wince slightly. “I apologize.”

at he’s “You should,” she says, not giving me an inch. “Warken and I have  
is. dealing with the fallout from every kingdom.”

Her hand digs into the pocket of her dress, and she pulls out scroll a  
in scroll of hawk messages, like she stuffed them in there just so she coul  
ruin them at me at her first opportunity. It’s effective. “Fifth Kingdom, Thi  
ot, you Kingdom, Second Kingdom,” she lists them out as my eyes skate over  
ling various broken seals.

nce.” “It was all necessary.”

d She waves a hand at me. “That is debatable. A debate we should hav  
together, *before* you acted,” she says. “But you are the king.”

“We all know you two run this kingdom more than I do.”

u “We have no power, and you have no patience for politics. We are a  
partnership, so long as it’s that—but a partnership requires communica

“You’re right. Consider me perfectly chastised.”

his “Good,” she says with a firm nod before her eyes flick up to my hair  
beneath the crown. “You need a trim.”

I snort.

“How is the fallout?”

him “We’re managing it. But we knew when we took the position as the  
Premiers for *King Rot* that there would be the occasional public issues  
?” would need to handle regarding your particular temperament and power  
I start says diplomatically. “We’re staying on top of it.”

at I give her a smile. “That’s why you two are the best.”

mand “For the most part, there’s a renewed sense of fear of our king, espe  
from the people in Third Kingdom,” Warken tells me. “Second Kingdo  
mess, and they hastily crowned the Merewen heir—though the boy is c  
young.”

d it The prince whose barrier kept me from the monarchs—kept me from  
the Auren. Let’s hope he will be a better ruler than his parents.

“His first order of rule was to declare Fourth Kingdom an enemy.”

“To be expected. I have plenty of enemies.”

ou “Indeed.” Warken cocks his head. “Why Breakwater Port?”

amount “Red Raids,” I tell him. “Found a gambling hall that was responsibl  
animal fights. I didn’t care for that.”



ses by Isalee makes a noise of disgust. “Neither did the animals, I’m sure.”  
“Is there anything else we should know about?” Warken asks.  
I can feel Ryatt staring at the side of my face. When I hesitate, he cl  
been throat, making my Premiers glance between the two of us.  
“Oh, Divine,” Isalee says. “What is it now?”  
fter It’s clear Ryatt isn’t going to let me ignore it, so I’m forced to tell th  
d toss truth. And he’s right—my Premiers need to know.  
rd So I say it as matter-of-factly as I can to get it out of the way. “Well  
the seems my heart may be rotting out of my chest.”  
The two of them gape at me, mouths gone wide.  
“*What?*” Isalee demands.  
ve had “It’s not ideal...”  
“*Not ideal?* How long has this been going on?”  
“Since the Conflux,” I tell her. “We should come up with a continge  
d good plan. Just in case.”  
ation.” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “You are giving me far more gra  
than I should have at this age.”  
r “You look beautiful.”  
My compliment doesn’t deter her.  
“You have landed a heap of issues on Fourth’s lap. You are absolute  
allowed to die, is that clear?” she says sternly, brown eyes narrowed on  
like a mother disciplining her child.  
we My lip twitches. “Understood, Premier.”  
er,” she “At least not until we get a handle on how we’re going to manage th  
public reactions regarding what you’ve done, resecure our kingdom, an  
ensure Fourth gets what it needs in the fallout of the trade block.” She  
cially a sigh. “Then you can die. And we can retire.”  
om is a “You would be far too bored without a kingdom to run.”  
quite She sniffs. “Perhaps I’ll go to Second and help the new young Mere  
“You don’t like the desert heat.”  
n “Fine,” she relents. “But if I have to answer missives, so do you. Co  
you can help deal with the consequences of your actions, King Rot.”  
“I actually need to go...” My words trail off at her vicious glare. “N  
mind. I can spare a few hours.”  
e for “Good,” she says with a saccharine smile, while Ryatt gives me a sh  
eating grin. But then her eyes flick to him next. “You too, Commander

All of that amusement he had on his face at my expense has now been erased. “Me?”

ears his “Yes. You. As the army’s commander, I have need of your counsel, you will need to know our plans.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.”

em the Now, it’s my turn to give him the shit-eating grin.

...it When Isalee turns and starts to walk away with Warken, Ryatt glare me. “Fuck off,” he grumbles.

At least he has to endure the next few hours of politics and paperwork. As soon as I’m done, I’ll get back down to the timberwing feeding grounds to see if my raw magic is back. But a part of me is dreading it

Because if it still won’t work after three days of rest...

Then I’m not sure it ever will.

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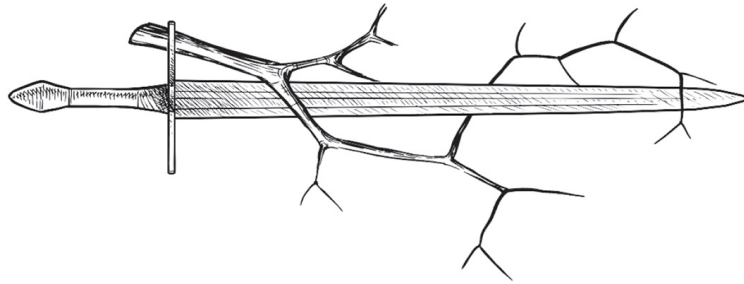
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At least he has to endure the next few hours of politics and paperwork with me. As soon as I’m done, I’ll get back down to the timberwing feeding grounds to see if my raw magic is back. But a part of me is dreading it.

Because if it still won’t work after three days of rest...

Then I’m not sure it ever will.



## CHAPTER 38

### OSRIK

**W**ith the sun at high noon, the street is busy with people. It's like everyone and their fucking mother is out in the city, buying and selling, fishing at the river. I finish tying up my horse at one of the hitching posts at the side of the road, under a grouping of trees and grass, then cross the street.

When people see me coming, they move out of the way. I'm not like them. They don't smile and wave at me, hoping for my attention. That's usually the *last* thing people want from me, and that suits me just fucking fine. I don't want attention from anyone either.

Except one person, and she still hasn't opened her eyes.

The shop I'm headed for is right here on the street, facing the water. A wooden sign hanging from its eave swings in the wind, and it has a picture of a leaf painted on it that's gone faded.

I yank open the door, and a little bell above rings as I step inside. The space is crowded with plants growing out of different sized pots on the floor or up on the shelves, or even hanging from hooks on the ceiling. Three steps into the place, and I accidentally walk into one, smacking my head on a clay pot and making soil dump out on my shoulder.

"Oh, careful there, sir!" A wiry woman pops out from behind the counter and comes around to greet me, her brown hair ruffled up around her head and tied off with a green ribbon. "Captain Osrik! What a pleasant surprise to see you in my shop."

Surprise, sure. Pleasant? Fucking doubtful.

“Do you need to put in an order to resupply the plants for the army’s medicinal uses?”

“No,” I say as I look around the shop, noting a couple of women over the corner, hovering around some leaves.

“Oh, okay,” the shopkeeper replies as she starts walking over to the counter and reaching up to a shelf with a sign that says *HERBS*. “Perhaps some herbs or spices that are good for traveling when you need to flavor up your rations. I’m running low, but I’ve got some excellent—”

“Don’t need that either,” I say with a grunt.

She stops and glances at me, wiping her hands on her apron. Then she walks closer again, lowering her voice. “Did you need some of those mushrooms? I know some of the other soldiers like them to take the edge off...”

ike For fuck.

shit or “No. I just need some fucking flowers.”

ss, and “You want...flowers?” she asks, like she must’ve heard me wrong.

The other two women turn and look at me.

I shift on my feet. “Yeah. Flowers. You got any?”

he Judd. She nods slowly. “Of course, I have all sorts. In the garden out back

ally the When I gesture for her to lead the way, she takes me behind the counter on’t the open doorway beyond. We step into a garden that’s about three times the size of the shop. There are flowering plants everywhere, growing up in

A path. “We have the favorites, of course,” she says as she walks down the center of the path. “Roses, daisies, jasmines, peonies, lilies... Are you looking for a specific flower of anything specific?”

I clear my throat as I accidentally trample over a plant with stubby bell-shaped flowers.

floor “Yellow bells,” I grunt.

steps She stops and turns with a frown. “Hmm. Apologies, Captain Osrik, the don’t have any of those.”

My shoulders go stiff, and my gaze shoots around the outdoor space under the eaves. “I got plenty of yellow flowers; I’m sure you have them.”

head and “I know every plant I’m growing,” she replies, tapping her temple. “to find carry yellow bells. No one tends to buy those. They’re also quite poisonous.”

Frustration cricks in my neck. “You’re a damn flower shop. I need a flower.”

Why is this so fucking hard?

She hesitates. “That particular flower just isn’t very popular here. Not many like them, I suppose.”

“I fucking like them,” I snap.

The woman rears back in surprise at my sharp tone, and I grind my teeth in irritation, trying to tamp down my anger. It’s not her fault.

“Just check. Please.”

With a wary nod, she turns and heads down the path to the various yellow flowers and walks through them, checking the blooms.

I just wanted some fucking yellow bells to put on Rissa’s bedside. Not that I’ve ever gotten flowers for a woman before, but it seemed like something she might like. Now, I’m twitchy and frustrated and remembering how she looked this morning. Sallow. Worn out.

I hate it.

When the woman comes back empty-handed, she shakes her head with a regretful look on her face. “Apologies. As I said, I don’t have them. But I do have some other quite beautiful blooms that are yellow. There’s—”

“Forget it,” I mumble before whipping around.

I march back through the shop, my booted steps sounding way too loud in the narrow aisle. I feel the browsing women eyeing me and whispering as I pass by. I wrench the door so hard that the bell above rips off, knocks into my head, and clatters to the ground.

I stare down at it and try real fucking hard not to see it as a bad omen or a sign of dirt.



When I get back, I nearly run into Polly just as she comes out of Rissa’s room. Her face is all blotchy red, eyes swollen with a handkerchief stuffed against them like it’ll help stop the leak spewing out of her eyes.

“I can’t keep seeing her like this. I can’t keep coming here to watch her cry,” Polly shakes her head and looks up at me all glassy-eyed. “Thank you. For letting me visit her, but I can’t anymore.” Before I can say anything, she turns and rushes away down the corridor, leaving me to scowl after her.

I have half a mind to drag her back into Rissa’s room and make her cry on the bedside and help care for her. Just like Rissa fucking did for her dad every day.

But I don’t. Rissa doesn’t need her. She has me. And unlike *Polly*, I won’t abandon her.

ot            When I enter, I find Hojat in the room. He gets up from his chair be-  
her bed, and his grim face makes my muscles bunch. My bones lock up

“It’s soon, Captain,” he says quietly.

teeth in    A cold, sickly dread gushes into my gut.

I give a sharp shake of my head. “No.”

ellow       He stops me before I can storm past him with a gentle hold on my ar-  
don’t like the look in his fucking eyes. “Yes,” he says, like he’s trying  
me down easy. “I’m sorry.”

lot that    My gaze shoots past him to Rissa’s sleeping form. One of the novice  
ing        away from her, her hands clasped, head bowed. She’s brushed out Riss-  
r bad      hair. It looks pretty. Soft and light. She’s been changed into a clean  
nightdress too. Pink, like the color her cheeks used to get every time sh-  
blushed at something crass I said. But there’s no embarrassed flush no-  
with a     gaze sparkling with fire.

it I do     She’s sleeping. Not thrashing or crying out with delirious fits. Just li-  
there.

Wheezing.

oud,       Wheezing so slowly it makes me grimace.

open      “I’ll leave you alone with her to say your goodbyes,” Hojat says sof-  
then      while I swallow hard.

n.         Denial wants to rush up, but it just...drains out of me instead. I don’t  
my eyes away from her as he and the novice leave the room, shutting t-  
door behind them.

sa’s       When it’s just us, I step forward, almost tiptoeing, like I shouldn’t d-  
ffed      the quiet. I don’t want to break it, don’t want to startle her. I slump into  
chair next to her and place the little brass bell from the plant shop on h-  
bedside table. Probably shouldn’t have taken it, but I didn’t want to ret-  
empty-handed.

” She     Reaching forward, I grab hold of her hand. It’s hot with her fever, b-  
etting    worst part is how limp it is. How fucking lifeless.

s and     “Brought you this, Yellow Bell,” I tell her, but my voice sounds too  
My hand looks huge compared to hers. She feels delicate. Fragile. I’m  
sit at     to squeeze too hard in case I break her fingers. “They didn’t have your  
y after    flowers. At a *flower shop*. Can you believe that shit?”

She doesn’t reply. Her eyelids don’t even twitch.

won’t    The pauses between her labored breaths are fucking terrifying.

side p. “Brought you a bell instead. It sounds kind of annoying to be honest like your voice. Your voice is...nice.”

I cringe. I suck at this shit. I’m almost glad she can’t hear me. I’ve n been good at words. Not good at giving compliments. But right now, I was. Because if I were, I’d give them to her.

rm. I I’d give her whatever fucking words she wants.

to let “Wish you’d wake up and mouth off to me, Yellow Bell,” I murmur scrape my callused thumb over the back of her soft hand. It’s softer than feathers. Like silk or something. Too soft for the likes of me. My hand sa’s scarred and rough, with ripped cuticles and thick skin from all the years gripped a sword.

ie She takes another slow, wheezing breath before silence draws out before us.

w, no What happens when she just...stops? When that drawn-out silence turns into *just* silence?

ying Emotion quick and hot rushes up my throat and stuffs inside my head. Tried raging. Tried torturing. Tried arguing. Tried denying. But now, in wheezing silence, the truth glares at me like a judgmental bastard.

tly, She’s dying.

She has been. Since that dagger went into her chest. Since I carried her out of this mender room. She wasn’t ever going to come back out. I wasn’t even going to hold her again.

Every time I’ve sat here at her bedside, death has been spreading over more of her, like a sheet coming to cover her up, going higher and higher.

I didn’t want to see it, but there’s no denying the infection spreading over that wound. If she were one of my soldiers, I would have broken the neck of her family already, sent a message to prepare them for the worst.

But she’s not a soldier. She didn’t enlist for violence or sign her name accepting the threat of dying on a blade. She should die of old age a long time from now, after she got what she wanted. The thing she wished for most.

rough. Her independence.

afraid She wanted to go away. To go far enough to escape her past and live without being beholden to anyone. Without having to cater or coddle or please any fuckheads to earn a coin like she had to do for years. I was a selfish bastard that asked her to stay. Look where that got her.

With a blade nearly stabbed through her heart and an infection burning alive.



Not “Can’t even get you fucking yellow bells...”

She called me her mistake. Said we were wrong. Maybe that’s true, because I can’t seem to get anything right. But when she kissed me, the wish I feel fucking right.

In a world full of wrong, I wanted one right thing.

I press my finger against the pulse on her wrist, feel the weak flutter as I makes me so fucking *angry*. I shove my gaze at the clear window, like an glare at the gods.

“Not her,” I snarl at them. “Not yet.”

It’s a pissed-off prayer, and I don’t even fucking pray. Don’t even know I believe in the gods. But if they’re up there smug as shit in their simplicity then the least they can do is come down here and help this complicated woman who doesn’t deserve this.

“She needs more time,” I tell them. “We need more fucking time.”

I thought we had all the time in the world.

“Just give us that,” I snap. “Never asked you for shit all my life. Just give us this.”

I wait, listening. Glaring out the window. But nothing happens. Not a strike of lightning or a growl of thunder. She doesn’t suddenly open her mouth. Hojat wants me to prepare myself. To say my goodbyes.

But how am I supposed to see her through to her end when we barely have time to start?

My gaze trails up to her lips, now chapped and pale, a frown dug deep between her blonde eyebrows like every breath hurts.

I feel that hurt right in my chest.

It burrows deep. Jabbing in with her next labored wheeze. Hearing the rasp of her inhale scrapes and whines as if it’s ready to give up makes that cotillion of emotion in my head rupture, like stuffing that bursts out of a seam.

I never get teary-eyed. Never let emotion seep out. Not even on the battlefield when my own soldiers died at my side. But right now, right now I find a furious, grief-ridden sob rasping from my throat and tears searing my eyes.

I lean in and place a kiss on her burning brow, and then I tip my head against hers, eyes shut with anguish. “You were supposed to wake up, you were supposed to be here as torment slides down my tongue. As the evidence of my misery lands on her skin, I find her dots against her pink nightgown. “We were supposed to have time to n

this mistake over and over again, until you finally realized how right it is.”

at *did* But time doesn't fucking listen to me any more than the gods do.

So *I* listen instead, because that's all I can do. I listen to her every breath that gets harder and harder for her to take. I listen to all the things I never say, and it to say.

I can And I listen to my own goodbye that she'll never get to fucking hear

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this mistake over and over again, until you finally realized how right it really is.”

But time doesn't fucking listen to me any more than the gods do.

So *I* listen instead, because that's all I can do. I listen to her every breath that gets harder and harder for her to take. I listen to all the things I never got to say.

And I listen to my own goodbye that she'll never get to fucking hear.



## CHAPTER 39

### QUEEN MALINA

*“Sit up straight, Malina. Honestly, is it so hard?”*  
*My father hisses this at me from the corner of his mouth. Impressive how he can speak like this, barely moving his lips. Impressive how he can convey such anger in his tone while keeping his expression completely flat.*

*I lengthen my spine and slam my shoulders back. I’ve been sitting here for hours, holding court, listening to the people as they come forward and offer us their condolences.*

*Because my mother is dead.*

*It still sounds strange, like it isn’t real. Except it is.*

*My mother is dead, and her corpse is in the atrium right now, where the death rites are being carried out. That’s where I should be. Up there with her, where the gods can look through the atrium windows and accept her soul’s ascent. I want to be with her when her soul slips away. Maybe her incorporeal spirit will remember me as she passes into the heavens.*

*Yet father won’t let me, so here I sit in the throne room. Normally, the white walls and blue carpet that runs up the stairs to the dais make it feel bright and open, but with the black drapes of mourning and the packed crowd, it feels claustrophobic.*

*More and more people come forward, leaving boughs from the Pitch Pine at the bottom step of our platform, while we sit at the trio of thrones, my mother’s seat startlingly empty.*

*I'm dressed all in black with the mourning veil hanging from the top of my head and draping down my face. At least the sheer fabric is dark enough that no one can see the silent tears that drip down my cheeks.*

*It's not until hours later, when the people have finally gone, that my father allows me to peel myself up from my throne. His advisor informs us that the mother's body is wrapped up and moved away already. I can't help but feel that escapes me, my grief echoing through the empty room. When the crowd bows and leaves, my father's eyes skate over my veiled face.*

*I so desperately want to ask him if he misses her as much as I do. If he doesn't quite feel real. But he wouldn't appreciate questions like that.*

*So I say nothing.*

*Yet as he looks down at me, I see something in his eyes soften—just for a moment. His hands come up and grip my shoulders, and I almost flinch. But Father doesn't give loving pats or hugs, or anything like that, so his touch feels so foreign, making me go stiff.*

*"Why are you crying?" he asks.*

*I blink at him, wondering if I misheard. "Because...Mother."*

*Why wouldn't I be crying? She's dead! I want to scream at him.*

*Of course, I stay silent.*

*"It is important that you do not show weakness in front of our people, Malina."*

*My head bows under the condemnation of his words. "Yes, Father, I understand—" I catch myself, horrified by the argument I almost let slip.*

*"But what?" he demands.*

*I hesitate, but I know it's no use. I have to answer him. "I wanted to be with her during her rites," I say in a small voice. A despairing one.*

*Her body is already wrapped up. Already moved away.*

*I'll never see her again.*

*That thought hits me in the chest and steals the breath right out of me. I want to cry and makes me want to fall to my knees and sob. But I can't.*

*My father squeezes my shoulder in what I think might be a rare show of affection, and my eyes snap up to his face. "This is what it means to be a daughter of Malina," he says. "Yes, your mother, my wife, died. But their queen died, and it was our responsibility to sit here and allow them to pay their respects. To grieve."*

*But what about my respects? What about my grief?*

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ra on        “When you’re a ruler, you make sacrifices for your kingdom,” he sc  
rough he shakes me, as if he wants to rattle the sadness right out of me, like  
              knocking pebbles from a jar. “Your feelings come second. You listen to  
father you act for them, even to your own detriment. Kingdom comes first.”  
at            He drops his hands and gives me one last look. “Wipe your face and  
e sob        to bed now. We have her funeral in the morning, and the bell will start  
advisor at dawn.”

              I dip my head and walk away, reeling with sadness. Reeling with his  
it            too.

              But I don’t cry again.

for a  
h.



uch is        In Highbell, the sky is constantly cluttered with clouds, making the s  
limp and futile. If it gives off warmth, it can’t be felt, nor can it be used  
marking the hour since it’s always covered. Instead, snow is how I tell  
passing of time.

              The storm that falls around me has been steady and unyielding, slow  
off the crust of the icy clouds as wind whips around me. Already, there  
e,            thick heaps of snow caught alongside the short wall that braces against  
chasm, more of it drifting toward the mouth of the bridge and trying to  
but I        up around me.

              This mouth is where I still sit, stone cutting into my bent knees. I’m  
past the point of feeling the bite. I’m not sure where our horse trotted c  
be            and there’s no one to watch, since it seems all of Highbell retreated ins  
their homes to escape the storm. Dommik and I are the only ones out h  
              It feels eerie.

              With gritted teeth, I smooth my palms over the ice brick I’m making  
y ribs        burning as I hold its weight. Dommik plucks it up from me as soon as  
finished forming it, and then whooshes away in shadows, appearing se  
v of        feet up. I squint up past the snow and wind, watching him place the he  
royal, brick on the top of the wall we’ve built. The bricks are stacked along th  
ed too, entire entrance of the bridge, and since each slab is about a foot thick,  
pects.        already quite high.

              Dommik stacks them diligently, one after the other, all across the ro  
Then, once we get a good ten feet high, we start doubling up the wall.  
tripling. Making it as thick as we can.

ays as We work all through the night.

Past the pealing of the midnight bells. Past the worst of the storm, with them, the clouds dump mounds of snowfall onto the ground. It doesn't deter the slightest. Instead, it's as if the storm is helping—pillowing where I go up on the ground and slipping onto my lips to moisten my parched mouth.

tolling I work almost in a trance, focusing only on the cold power that slushes through my veins. Ice pours from the gashes in my hands and continues to bleed out frozen magic—magic that allows me to make brick after brick.

My people might hate me, someone else might sit on my throne, the world might be marching on us, and I might not know what else I can do with new magic...but I can do this.

I can do this.

Dommik doesn't try to talk to me, he simply works alongside me in support. Somehow, we don't need words. He knows exactly how to help and does so without complaint. Even as the wind whips at his hood and his hands go chapped. Even as snow gathers on his shoulders and leeches warmth from his heated body. I make them, he stacks them, and he doesn't try to direct me or argue with me or say he knows better.

When morning crests, the storm finally abates, letting out a few last sprinkles of snow shavings. Yet as the pale gray light of morning arrives, the people do the people.

The first of them mutter and keep walking, but soon, they begin to gather. Just a few at the beginning, but then the gathering steadily grows, and more numbers, the bolder they become.

The realization that I'm using magic ripples through them, surging across the steps of disbelief, surprise, confusion, and anger, each emotion rising in fervor. They begin to voice their complaints about the bridge being blocked, the way to the castle cut off.

I've "What are you doing?"

veral "She's trapping us in!"

avy "Cold crone bitch! You're no queen of ours!"

he "She's using magic against us!"

it's "Take this down!"

"Queen Kaila won't stand for this!"

w. They ridicule me. Curse me. Hate me. But I keep going.

Then Dommik appears at my back, growling fiercely when a group of the people get too close. He grips a dagger in each hand with a threatening warning, a

on his lips as light bends around him.

here        It's enough to keep everyone from growing too aggressive in their h  
me in        and trying to harm me or drag me away. Their verbal lashes don't stop  
kneel        though, and I hear it all. My body may be numb to the cold, but my mi  
.            open to the onslaught of their heated words that continue to pour, gush  
ies           like steam, making me flinch one after another as they scald me.

s to            —*the cold queen lied about having magic—the frigid bitch—get out*  
k.            *fucking road—she blocked the bridge—she's gone mad—go back to th*  
fae            —*you should've stayed dead—*

n this        I keep working. I won't stop until the last brick is stacked along the  
twenty-foot wall. I don't care that my hands are shaking. I don't care th  
sweat beads at my brow, freezing there before it can even think to drip

silent        The hate, the doubt, the insults, I let them hit my back and strengthe  
lp, and spine, and I just keep going.

bare            —*she's trapped us—she's trying to keep us from our new queen—w*  
the            *want you here—not our queen—stop her—smash the wall down—*

esn't        Those threats make me pause.

I can't afford for them to tear down what I've so painstakingly built.  
is the only protection they have from the fae marching down this bridg  
es, so        into the city.

I've been forming these ice bricks for countless hours, but this time,  
ather.        instead of bringing my palms together to form the block, I turn around  
with        press my hands flat on the ground.

Fueled by the need to keep the wall safe from my own people so tha  
along        keep *them* safe, I silently direct the magic, hoping that it will listen to r  
ng with        pushing it to the ground, spreading it, thickening it.

cked,        Until it makes a perfectly flat, slick layer of ice to separate us.

The crowd gasps and backs away, but a few at the front of the horde  
move quickly enough, and they slip and fall. Now, they can't get withi  
twenty feet of the wall—or me.

Perfect.

I move to get up, yet as soon as I'm standing, I sway slightly on my  
Dommik is there in an instant, catching me by the elbow.

“Queenie?” he murmurs.

“I'm fine,” I assure him, brushing off the snow from my back, shaki  
m gets        from the mussed plait of my hair.

n sneer



“You’re using too much magic. Used too much all night,” he says quietly. “You need a break.”

I glance at him sharply. “There’s no time for a break.”

He doesn’t argue, because he knows I’m right.

I walk forward, assessing the barrier we’ve created. Since I was able to slick the ground, maybe my magic can do more. Placing my palms on the wall, I focus on the ice, spooling it out like a fishing line, spinning it from the ground and sending it to the top of the bricks.

I take a few steps back, watching as a swoop of half-formed ice spreads along the entire top of the wall, and then it solidifies like tines on a fork, making a perfectly spiked stockade.

Pride surges through me. My magic is *listening* to me.

Turning, I address the angry crowd. “This wall will slow the fae down, but it won’t stop them.”

“There are no fae!” someone shouts.

“There *are*,” I reply, voice cutting through the wind. “And I’d much rather you were all behind the castle’s walls, but since I knew you wouldn’t get out, I’ll defend you here as best I can.”

“Give us lies so you can trap us, you mean!”

Others cry out in agreement, others hurl curses.

Frustration gnaws on me, like blunt teeth digging in. Yet my stomach churns as doubt thrums down my spine. Is this a terrible plan? I don’t think I was ever trained for military strategies. The only lessons I had on war were from battles were from a purely historic point of view. And yesterday, I couldn’t even get my magic to do anything at all.

A wall seemed like something achievable, something I could do piece by piece. All I can do now is hope it buys us some time.

“She’s not lying!” Dommik growls at them, and it’s the loudest I’ve ever heard him speak. “This is your queen! Listen to her!” he shouts desperately. People curse him too.

“Get inside!” I tell them. “Fortify your houses, gather your weapons, and if you can’t hold them, have them, or flee into the pinewood if you can, but I can’t promise anything. No one will be safe.”

For the first time, a few scattered faces finally turn worried, glancing around as if maybe they’re starting to doubt. To think that I might be telling the truth. All I can hope is that this trickle of worry grows into a downpour. I can’t have their trust, perhaps I can prompt them to act from pure paranoia.

quietly. “Flee. Hide. Fight. Prepare yourselves for war, because war is coming whether you believe me or not!”

The crowd is quiet. The wind whistles through us.

I turn toward Dommik and hold my hand out to him, and he arches a brow in question. “I need to be on the other side of this wall,” I tell him.

the I have more work to do.

from my The moment his hand encloses over mine, shadows collect us, and my stomach dips as we leap on top of the wall. I barely feel my feet slipping against its surface before he’s already leaping again, this time, landing us on the other side of the bridge while shouts of surprise sound from the crowd.

vn, but I turn around and face the wall from this angle, taking a moment to acknowledge just how impressive it actually looks. It sits thick and tall, but the spikes along the top are forbidding. Yet it won’t hold forever. At best, it will only delay the fae.

So I need to do more.

rather Mimicking my earlier move, I kneel down, pressing my hands to the ground. With concentration, I start feeding sashes of freeze over the bridge. It’s slow, ice creeping over the cobbled stones inch by inch. Once I spread the slippery layer over the entire length, I let out a ragged breath. This time when I stand, my swaying is so prevalent that I nearly fall right over, and I would’ve if it weren’t for Dommik catching me.

know. I “Queenie...” he warns, this time saying it with a sharp tone. To anyone else, they might think him angry, but I can tell that he’s concerned.

ldn’t For me.

ce by “Stop worrying about me,” I tell him. “I need you to go scout. Find out where they are. Let me know how much time we have.”

ever barely stand and the people in this city want to toss you over the bridge.

ately. “Well, they can’t get to me, can they?” I ask, gesturing to the wall.

Honestly, I shouldn’t have to point it out.

if you He makes a disgruntled grumble under his breath.

ywhere “Go,” I tell him. “We need to know how close they are.”

g “Fine,” he snaps. “But if I come back and you’ve passed out, I’m going to fucking kill you.”

elling I arch a brow coolly. “If that threat was supposed to instill some level of fear in me, then perhaps do it with your knife next time?”

anoia.

ng He eats up the space between us, making me lose my blasé attitude and suck in a breath. When he stands in front of me, he leans in close, his chest pressed against mine. Somehow, his dagger *has* come out to play with my brow even noticing until the sharp edge is pressed to my neck.

Then he starts dragging it *down*.

ny Over my collarbone, between my breasts, almost scratching through fabric of my dress—but not quite. I gasp when it glides down my belly and circles there, and I stop breathing completely when it starts slipping down my thigh.

. His mouth is at my ear. “If the thought of me playing with you with a blade gets you hot, just say that,” he purrs.

l and My eyes flare, my cheeks are flushed, and when he pulls back and pokes a blade away, I have to fight not to let out a noise of disappointment. At the crowd can’t see us.

I brush my hands down the front of my dress as if I can brush away the tingling trail he left behind. “It does *not* make me hot.”

rc of His lips curve at the lie.

, but “Should I scoop up your skirt and see for myself?”

d “No,” I snap, shoving him away as he chuckles deeply.

y tip I’ve lost my mind...and my body, apparently, because he’s right. I can’t—*all over*—but *especially* there.

one “We have a battle to prepare for.”

He shrugs a shoulder. “Don’t you know? A pre-battle fuck is what a soldier does. Gets their blood pumping. Reminds them what they’d miss if they lose.”

ou can “Another reason why women are superior,” I mutter.

?” His chuckle comes back tenfold. “You’ll find no argument from me.”

“That’s a first.”

“Careful, Queenie,” he says, teeth flashing. “I might think you’re flirting back with me.”

Is that what I’m doing? Flirting?

I clear my throat and force my mind to go back to the task at hand. “I’m going to assassinate.”

“Okay, but remember what I said.”

el of “Yes, yes, threats and demands. Now go away.”

I hear his chuckle even after he disappears in his cluster of shadows. I’m alone in front of a slippery bridge, with the wind whipping at my hair.

as I a gleaming castle lording high above me at the mountain at my back. M  
hest the gold of Highbell will tempt the fae enough that they'll go there fir  
out me One can hope.

Without Dommik's watchful eye, I let myself slump. I didn't dare le  
myself do it in front of him or the people, because I have to be strong,  
the using my magic all night has taken a toll. Though it doesn't matter, be  
r button still have more I need to do.

I kneel down on the bridge and open my palms, urging more ice to f  
Even though my hands are shaking and my eyes are burning from exha  
my the magic answers my call.

Slowly, I figure out exactly what I want to form and how. I envision  
the spike like a spear, and the shape coalesces between my palms in drippi  
least frigid water that ices over. I stretch and mold it, while frost builds up o  
lashes and more shakes from the ends of my hair. Then I make the spik  
the solidify into the ground, angling toward me in piercing threat.

*Perfect.*

I do it over and over again. Elongating the poles of ice, hardening th  
making the tips end in sharp lances that could puncture someone throu  
Until I've formed enough of them to stretch across this side of the brid  
im hot entrance. One more deterrent before the army reaches the wall so they  
be able to simply storm the city.

When I'm done, I fall forward, hands braced in front of me and bare  
ll the managing to hold me up so I don't face-plant. I'm shaking all over wit  
s out caked to my hands—hands that are raw and peeling back with flakes o  
skin. My cheeks are chapped too, and I can feel a swipe of frost spread  
each side where my hair keeps getting caught.

.” I give myself a few moments to breathe, to shake, to stare at the icy  
in front of the barricade. My breathing is ragged. My eyes tunnelling. I  
rting shove myself to my feet again, because I have to do more.

I have to, when all I really want to do is crawl into a bed and sleep. I  
everything screams at me to flee instead. When I remember I'm draini  
'Go, myself to protect a city who hates me.

Because kingdom comes first.

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## CHAPTER 40

### QUEEN MALINA

“Queenie.”  
I’m in a carriage being jostled left and right. The movement is so jarring, making my stomach leap into my throat and a groan grate out past my lips. I *hate* riding down this road. That’s probably why I can’t remember—I can’t stand to look out the window, so I close my eyes and keep the curtains closed. I must’ve dozed off this time, but it seems like it only made my motion sickness worse.

“Queenie!”

I snap open my eyes to see the assassin. I’m not in a carriage, I’m in his arms, and he’s shaking me so much I can feel my skull rattle. I open my mouth to shout at him to stop, but I cough instead, little pieces of ice go past my tongue and slicing my throat.

Dommik’s hand slams against my back until I elbow him in the gut hard enough to make him stop. “I’m not choking!”

He huffs at me but at least settles for gripping my arms instead of trying to knock out my esophagus. Then he’s spinning me around on his lap, and I swear I will ice him through if he keeps handling me like this.

He stops me so we’re face-to-face, all so he can snarl at me. “What’s the *one* thing I told you not to do?”

I take in his wild-eyed expression and the snow caught in his wind-blown hair. His hood is tossed back, which is an immediate giveaway of his foul mood.

I sniff haughtily. “I can’t recall.”

“I told you to not fucking *collapse!*”

“Oh. That.” I force myself off of him, scooping up some snow for my mouth to soothe my parched tongue and raw throat.

“Yes, *that.*”

With shaky legs and a dizzy head, I get to my feet, swallowing down slush with relish. “Well, I don’t remember collapsing, so how can you I did?”

I think, perhaps, the assassin might start having a fit. His eye is twitching and the growl that gurgles in his chest can’t be healthy.

“*Malina.*”

“Did you find the fae?” I ask, cutting him off.

He’s not to be deterred. “I leave like you tell me to, and then when I I find that you’ve used your magic so much you drained yourself into *collapsing.*”

“You keep saying that word, and it’s getting on my nerves.”

“*You’re getting on my nerves!*”

“Then leave me be, assassin!”

He surges forward and grips my arms again. “I can’t leave you be, you insufferable, cold woman, because for some *fucking reason*, you’ve gotten under my skin so much that I now crave the ice of your touch.”

My breath catches and I stare into his dark eyes, at the little flecks of light that float through them. “You...you crave me?”

“Yes,” he snarls, his voice rubbed raw in grit. “I can’t sleep, because I’m too busy watching you breathe. I can’t think, because my mind wanders over you. And when I should’ve just slit your throat a hundred times over in the Seventh Kingdom, I didn’t, because I wanted to watch you instead and see how far down your cold really went.”

My breath feels shallow, his grip on my arms exuding a heat that seeps all the way through my skin. His presence, his voice, his touch—everything about him, from the dangerous air he carries to the handsome lines of his face—they all pull me toward him. Make my nerves light up and my senses magnify.

The man meant to bring me my death makes me feel more alive than I’ve ever felt.

“And?” the question drags out of me in a whisper. “How far does my cold go?”

Right now, I can't feel my cold at all. All I feel is his heat. Against my breasts as his chest presses into me, through my sleeves where he's gripping me, the searing breath on my cheek as he exhales hard.

"It goes all the way through," he says roughly, though his touch has gentled. "But you know what I figured out, Queenie?"

My mouth feels dry despite the lump of snow I just swallowed. "What are you sure of?"

He pulls me forward and kisses me.

His hot lips land on my icy ones, our temperatures at war. I go weak on my knees again, but this time, it has nothing to do with exhaustion and everything to do with a rapturous need.

He kisses me with adoration, like he's demanding entry, and I want to return him in, but something stops me. Not to be deterred, he grips me by my shoulders, warring with me to open. When I still don't, he slides his teeth over my bottom lip and *bites*.

"Ouch!" I snap, though it's muffled from the press of him.

"Let me in."

I shake my head frantically, wanting to pull away but wanting him to hold me even closer.

He pulls back to look me in the eye, and I'm not sure how he sees so clearly, but his face softens and his hold on my jaw gentles, his thumbs brushing my cheeks. "Let me in, Queenie."

We both know we're not just talking about the kiss.

I tremble, because I'm so pent up, so filled with want...

So incredibly terrified.

Every man I've ever opened for has always trodden on me. Burned my heart to ash and left me to scrape up the remnants. So perhaps my heart is made of ice, but if it is, it's because I had to freeze it just to get all the pieces to stay together. I became the cold that everyone saw me as, and that cold protected me.

Because what is a burn if you're already numb?

"Let me in," he murmurs for a third time. He's asking. Waiting. Not demanding, but a true request. To let him in and give him a chance.

To give *us* a chance.

His eyes bore into me as he waits for me to decide.

Maybe I'm a glutton for punishment. Maybe being on the brink of death has my desires surging up because I know there's a chance I might die.



ny maybe, it's just him—and somehow, he figured out a way to thaw me.  
pping Whatever the reason, I lean forward, pressing my lips to his, and...I  
him in.

The kiss is a clash of heat and cold, of lust and fear, of desperate wa  
shattering uncertainty.

at?" The kiss is life changing.

Which is incredibly ill timed, considering our deaths might be on the  
horizon.

in the We shouldn't go together at all, but we do. I've never felt such a  
connection with someone, and as we meld together, I never want our k  
stop. Never want *us* to stop. Because Dommik has challenged me to be  
to let better person. A better queen. But he also fills me with a fiery desire th  
jaw, don't want to subdue.

y I want to urge it on.

The most beautiful part of this kiss is that neither of us is in charge o  
other. There's no war, no fight. It's a mutual caress between our lips an  
tongues, an equal give and take, a dance in which we take turns to lead  
o hold follow.

When he pulls away, I'm still caught in his draw, just like the shado  
o much, always curl around his body, as if always wanting to wrap around him.  
ig over blink up at him and he gazes down at me, and this push and pull betwe  
seems to settle.

"There," he says, something like a promise lingering in his tone.

"Something to look forward to after this battle."

I give a humorless laugh, his scorching hands still clasped on my ch  
my "There might not be an after, assassin."

t is His eyes darken—even those specks of light that are caught in the re  
flaked of his irises. "Make sure there is, Queenie."

the The way he seems to have faith in me to ensure such a thing is shocl  
No one has ever had faith in me about anything before, and that fact br  
me back down to reality. Back to the hard truth of what's coming.

a I take a step away to clear my head from his nearness. "Did you find  
them?"

His expression sobers. "We have hours. Nightfall, at the very most."

My stomach dips, but I nod. There's still so much to do.

attle "Nice addition," he says, nodding toward the fortified bridge. "No w  
. Or you collapsed."

I busy myself trying to dust off the snow from my dress, but I'm soaked through. "I need you to take me into the city."

"Why?"

"We have more work to do."

His eyes flare in angry disbelief. "Malina, you just *collapsed*—"

That word again.

I pin him with a sharp look. "Yes, and you know, that was quite a refreshing rest. I'm ready to do more magic now."

"You're a pain in my ass," he rumbles.

"You kissed me, but now I'm a pain in your ass?"

"Going to keep thinking about that kiss, aren't you?" he mocks. "Mind you'll dream of it the next time you collapse?"

"That would ensure I vomit as soon as I wake."

Dommik laughs, and I can't help but crack a small smile. Then he darts his hand into his pocket and shoves something at me.

I take it and look down with a scowl. "Why are you giving me this awful and jerky?"

"You want to do more?" His head nods to my hands. "Then you eat this first."

I wrinkle my nose. "This really will make me vomit."

"Don't be such a spoiled royal. Eat so I can at least pretend you have energy before you go off like the stubborn woman you are."

I can tell he's not going to be amenable until I do this, so I eat the jelly quickly as I can, though it's incredibly tough, and the taste is no better than was before. When I swallow the last piece, he double checks that I'm not hiding any in my hands before he passes me his water to drink.

I gulp it down. "There. Now, let's go."

king.  
things



The sky is starting to darken, the cold growing bolder and thicker with every breath. Dommik has taken me to several spots throughout Highgate and strategic streets now have ice barriers and walls blocking them too. Nothing like the scale of what I made at the bridge, but something to help protect the more vulnerable parts of the city. No bricks, just solid sheets of thickened ice frozen across roads.

iked I've had to be quick, because the people either scurry away when they see me using magic...or start to curse and attack me when they think I'm just walling them in.

I glance through the solid ice barrier I've made while I catch my breath, my hands shaking against its cold length. Beyond, the shanties lie in their crooked rows, the filthy street and roughshod buildings now blocked.

They don't have gates or locks or even strong walls. If the fae come through this way, they'll all be crushed. Unlike the noble houses with their guards and fences, and probably even some safe bunkers, the people who live in the shanties have nothing except teetering houses.

Maybe At least my walls are another obstacle the fae will have in their way. My hope is they'll decide not to bother with these streets at all, but at the very least, it will slow them down.

Signs of a I was lying to Dommik earlier when I said I felt refreshed. Now, I feel like death. My limbs are heavy, and the slices on my palms ache constantly. The raw, bloody layers of my skin peeled and raw and bloodied.

"Enough," he says when I continue to slump against the wall.

That I can see children on the other side as they come over and press their heads against the ice like it's a window in a sweet shop. The sight of them makes my ribs tighten. There are so many lives at stake.

Some "I'm alright."

"No, you're not," he snaps before yanking my arm over his shoulder and wraps his own around my back, gripping my waist to keep me upright.

More than it "It might not work at all. These walls are weaker, and who knows what kind of magic the fae have. They could simply burst through and—"

"You're trying. That's what matters."

I'm not sure he's right about that.

My father used to tell me that what mattered most was what would be written in the history books, and everyone knows that the ones who write history are the victors.

With "Take me to the bridge again—inside the city this time," I tell him.

Well, "Malina..."

He says, "I know," I say harshly. "But I have to try again before the fae arrive. I can get even a small percentage to believe me..."

He blows out a breath. "We need to hurry."

Dommik leaps us back through the city, and I prepare myself to be injured again. But I go over the words I can say to implore them, steeling myself.

ey see the inevitable rejection. A few minutes later, we settle on steady ground  
ust the shadows fade away from us.

I blink, eyes adjusting to take in the city's entrance, only to widen in  
ath, horror.

ieir The road in front of the bridge is teeming with people, and at the end  
where I painstakingly built the ice wall, is Queen Kaila, with four  
timberwings lounging behind her in the snow. Her blue-and-silver-clad  
heir soldiers are with her, along with dozens of Highbell guards, and they're  
ho live ripping the wall down.

*Destroying it.*

. My From here, I can't see how they broke past the spiked barricade on the  
ery other side or crossed the slippery arc of the bridge, but I can see the snow  
starting to tear my wall down brick by brick.

ael like "No!"

, the I rush forward, but Dommik grabs my hand before I can, and instead  
shadows me past the crowd. He brings us right to the front of the specter  
Kaila is holding, her bright teal dress gleaming, her smile dazzling. I realize  
r faces that she's sitting on a stack of the ice bricks they dismantled from the wall  
akes Someone's cloak is draped over them, and she sits there like she's on a  
throne, while surrounding her on the ground are piles of items and bouquets  
that people have left to her in offering.

r as he She is sitting on *my* bricks. Bricks that took me all night to create. And  
to build into a wall that they're now tearing down. All so she could...s  
hat in the city, while people bring forward gifts of adoration to lay at her feet  
it's some sort of damn holiday celebration?

I want to cry.

I want to *scream*. Somewhere in the deepest recesses of my head, I can  
end up sound reverberating through my skull, though only I can hear it.

ite Frustration swells through me to a level I've never felt before. "Why  
shout as I rush forward. "Why are you doing this?"

Kaila turns and looks at me as if she's surprised to see me. Did she  
think me locked up in that cage in the castle? So unconcerned with my  
e. If I presence that she forgot to look?

"You," she says, narrowing her eyes on me.

"Put them back!" I shout to the guards as I storm forward. "Put them  
gnored *now!*"  
elf for

d, and “This has truly been you?” she asks, gesturing toward the ice. “I thought you didn’t have magic?”

1 “She’s been walling us in!” someone calls from the crowd.

france “How do you have magic?” Kaila asks. Wasting time on suspicions when she should be fixing the damn wall she’s *ruined*.

l “The fae are coming, and you’re taking down the *one* defense we have

e “Enough,” she snaps. “Guards! Take the mad queen away.”

he The guards stop tearing down the bricks and start coming for *me* instead. Dommik is beside me in an instant, dagger in hand and shadows already gathering, but my hand snatches out and I grip his arm as all the blood drains from my face. “Wait.”

ldiers “Wait? For what?” he snarls. “I’m not going to let them take you!”

“Look.”

l, My tone is filled with terror, and Dommik follows the direction of my gaze, his lips instantly pressing tight. “*Fuck.*”

acle The guards are on us both, grabbing hold of our arms, but I don’t even realize it. I’m too busy staring at the movement just past the base of the mountain wall. At the fae army marching toward us.

1 They’re a grayish mottle of stone-armored soldiers walking in unison down the winding road around the mountain’s base, the sound of their synchronized steps starting to echo over the chasm that separates us.

ll night When Kaila notices that we aren’t reacting to the guards, she turns, and her eyes widen as she looks past the bridge and toward the mountain, where she sees the fae.

The crowd starts to see them too.

lo, the There’s a gasp that seems to spread through everyone, a deafening sound as the shock and horror sinks in.

7?” I Kaila’s guards gather around her, but she leaps to her feet and sucks in a long, drawn-out breath. It’s more than just a simple inhale. A wisp of fire comes with the pull, and suddenly, the amplified sound of a fae shouting orders echoes through the air.

still “*Fae, let’s greet these Oorean scum. Charge the city! Leave none alive! Lead Magicks, attack!*”

1 back The magicked voice that Kaila brought forth is the only warning we have. Far to my left, a massive stroke of lightning suddenly cracks down in the middle of the crowd. The flash momentarily blinds me with an unnatural purplish hue that burns my eyes. Screams rend the air, and charred, sm

ught bodies are left in a gaping pit where the thunderbolt hit, leaving dead b  
in its wake.

The air stings with fae magic that pinches my skin.

of me, There's another crack of lightning that hits further away, this time st  
one of the city's buildings and splitting it in two. Before the walls ever  
ve!" falling in crumbling destruction, a shockwave ripples through the grou  
itself, knocking everyone off their feet.

tead. I go sprawling, smacking into Dommik's body, but he cushions my  
ly while the guards who were holding us are knocked away.

drains Since the crowd is so packed in, everyone falls into one another, unt  
gathering is a tangle of frenzied, unsteady panic.

The people behind us are screaming and scrambling up, with no care  
who they trample over as they start to flee like animals in a stampede.

ly "*The fae! The fae are here to attack!*"

*"The army is here!"*

en feel Dommik wrenches me up to my feet, and together, we rush toward I  
tain. past the cracked ice on the ground. She's still staring at the road, at the  
marching toward us, while her guards and timberwings gather around I  
n with obvious distress.

She looks like she's in a shocked trance. She's not blinking, not eve  
moving, save for the inhales she keeps sucking in. I'm not even sure if  
and her aware of the random voices she's pulling, though I can hear dozens of  
re she fae. Goading each other on, giving orders, talking about their attacks, c  
after another in a jumble that's difficult to discern.

"Kaila!" I shout as I climb up the icy blocks to reach her arm and sh  
ilence her.

in a She snaps her head around to look at me in a daze. Her beautiful fac  
drained of its usual color, her hands shaking.

magic "I'll try to fix the wall, and you get your guards to form a line! Use y  
ig magic to call down Highbell's royal guard!"

The queen of voices just looks at me, her gaze tracking back to the a  
ve! "It's impossible," she whispers. "Fae don't *exist* anymore."

Frustration trounces through me, because we don't have time for her  
get. have a crisis of denial. "*They do.* But this city won't unless you help m  
n the defend it!"

al She glances back at the bold rows of soldiers marching closer, and t  
oking determination crosses her face as she nods. I let out a sigh of relief. Wi

odies voice magic, we can listen to what the fae are ordering their soldiers to we can anticipate their attacks, which can buy us precious seconds, and countermoves somehow.

riking “Use your voice magic to tell the people to stop panicking before the finish hundreds of their own neighbors!” I shout, gesturing back to the fleeing crowd. “Then you can announce through the streets and direct them! I’ll show you where to lead them!”

fall, Another lightning bolt surges, making Kaila scream, hands clapping her ears. A second later, the ground shakes again, but this time, Dommik braces me for it. Kaila nearly falls over, but her timberwing slants out its wing to catch her.

end of She grips hold of its feathers and scrambles up its back until she’s mounted, eyes skating over the screaming crowd. Some of them are yelling for Kaila for direction, some of them are sprinting away, others are hurt or and more are crying, shouting for loved ones or trying to drag lightning-struck bodies away.

Kaila, fae It’s bedlam.

her “Tell everyone to head for Pillar Row!” I shout up at her. “You need them to listen!”

n She fists her hands in her timberwing’s reins and then glances at the she’s guards. They’re a mess, unsure what to do, some of them starting to the frantically shove the ice bricks back in place, but it’s too late.

one At the center of the wall, blocks are missing from the top all the way leaving a large gap, while several more bricks on the right have been knocked loose from the quaking ground. More topple, nearly crushing one of them as we’re hit with another shockwave.

e has I lock my knees and lean into Dommik as the ground sways, while a bolt of lightning comes dangerously close to hitting us, so much so that your the hair on the back of my neck lifts.

army. “We need to move!” Dommik shouts in my ear, still not letting go of my arm, as if he’s waiting to whisk us away at a moment’s notice.

“Kaila! Hurry!” I call to her.

r to She looks at me, a moment between queens where we understand what’s at stake. Understand the implications of what’s come for Highbell. For O

hen Then, she turns and snaps the reins on her timberwing, taking off into the sky. I wait as she gets higher, knowing she’s going to try to head off the chaotic crowd and use her magic to help direct the hysteria.

do, Except...she doesn't.  
I plan She keeps flying. Past the crowd, higher and higher in the sky.  
People below all around me, scream her name in anguish as they wa  
ey kill abandon them.

g "Queen Kaila!"

ll tell "Don't leave us!"

I stare in horrified shock as she does exactly that.

, over *She leaves.*

ik I knew she wasn't going to believe me until she saw them with her c  
its eyes. Knew all she was preoccupied with was her own power play and  
politics. But I never imagined that once faced with the reality, she'd de

She disappears above the clouds, out of view, without so much as a  
lling at backwards glance.

: dead, Upon seeing her flee, some of her guards rush over and snatch at the  
g- of the other three timberwings in a mad rush. Two of them go on one,  
four guards try to scramble on the other. One of the men goes sliding c  
unable to hold on when the beast takes flight, his voice hoarse as he be  
l to get them not to leave him behind.

The last timberwing has five guards all battling each other, trying to  
its back first. Three of them do, while a fourth tries to cling to its leg as  
animal leaps into the air. The man grips fiercely, but it's obvious the  
timberwing doesn't take kindly to the guard hanging off its foot. The a  
7 down, reaches back and roars at him before knocking the guard loose. The m  
nocked free-falling with a scream, before landing in a bloody, broken heap in t  
em just crowd, the impact crashing in my ears and making me flinch.

Another beam of lightning strikes. Singes. Kills.

mother The fae army is getting closer, swarming down the snowy path, igno  
t all the winding road at their left that goes up the mountain to the castle an  
heading straight for the city instead.

f my They're going to be at the bridge within minutes.

Around me, blackened pits are peppered across the street where the  
lightning has hit, the scent of scorched bodies making bile rise up in m  
hat's at throat. And the sound...

rea. The sound of so many Oreans fleeing, screaming, *dying*...it cracks  
to the something wide open in my chest and fills me with a resolute certainty

ie "We need to get out of here!" Dommik shouts.

But I shake my head. "No."



I break away from him and run for the bridge, and though the ground is icy, I don't slip. Behind me, people are still calling for Kaila to come back to help her amidst the tumult of pleas against the pandemonium, while I come to a stop at the edge and slam my hands against the bricks.

Because I will not leave.

Even with fear so heavy I nearly buckle from the weight of it. Even with a horde of fae before me ready to kill. Even with a city of people behind me who hate me.

I might not be the queen they want, but I'm the one they have.

And I will not leave.

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I break away from him and run for the bridge, and though the ground is icy, I don't slip. Behind me, people are still calling for Kaila to come back. A tumult of pleas against the pandemonium, while I come to a stop at the wall and slam my hands against the bricks.

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And I will not leave.



# CHAPTER 41

## QUEEN MALINA

**A**bove us, snow has started to leak from a punctured cloud. The ground lifts and ripples, like a blanket being shaken out knocking people off their feet. Forked lightning cracks open the sky, targeting the largest groups of people as they try to flee. Somewhere in the city behind me, I hear a building tumble down, its crash reverberating through the streets.

I may be queen, but chaos reigns.

With unsteady feet, I finally make it to the torn apart wall, and I slap my palms up against the frost-covered ice. Skin sinking into the freeze, I cast the magic, forcing ice to stretch across the gap, filling in the space as much as I can manage. Layer upon layer it grows, bubbling up and distorting my view to the other side.

When my arms drop, the filled-in sheet of ice is much thinner than the bricks, but at least it's not gaping open anymore. Though, the same car has said for me. I feel as if there's something torn open within me—cut through my body and draining me of life.

But I have no other recourse. All I have is this taboo magic. Magic that I shouldn't have, but magic that I will use every drop of in order to help fix my wrongs.

Domnik appears at my side, lips downturned when he sees the state of things, though he says nothing. My gaze whips around, thoughts spinning, gat

trying to think through the awful noises of screaming and running and blasting down from the sky.

To my right, the rest of Kaila's guards are fighting amongst themselves, panicked at being left behind and clearly at a loss as to what to do. "Get yourselves together!" I yell at them.

Their heads swing in my direction.

"Start heading off the stampeding crowd. Order everyone to get to P Row."

"You're not our queen," one of them snarls. "We don't have to take from *you*."

"You're right—but *your* queen just abandoned us all here to die. And that's exactly what will happen to us if you don't listen to me!" I yell back.

To my surprise, one of the Highbell guards walks forward. "I'll do it," he tells me as he tightens the straps on his gilt chest plate. He probably thought when he woke up this morning that he only needed to wear it for show, to glint in the snowy daylight as he stood beside Kaila. "I'll do whatever you need," he declares.

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of me,  
hering,

The other Highbell guards nod with him, taking steps forward.

"Good," I say, though what I really want to do is fall down in relief. "Get as many people as you can to go down the row. Get them to the Pitchin Pines—do you understand?"

"Yes, my queen," he says before the group of them rush away in different directions. Beacons of gold getting caught up in the swarm, all of them shouting, trying to cut through the noise and hoping some people will listen to their instructions.

Suddenly, a lightning strike hits just to the left of us, sending Domr me sprawling. My hair is raised from the charge, eyes blinded momentarily from the lavender shock of light. When I get back to my feet, I see that my skirt is singed black.

*Too close.*

I press against the wall and peer through a crack between the icy bricks to see the other side of the bridge. There, at the front of the army, is a fae whose hands are wrapped in tiny threads of lightning that spark and twist around their fingers.

Not a single fae forked off to take the winding road up to the castle. Instead, they've all marched here, toward the bridge.

the hits    The entire army gathers behind the lightning fae, their stomping feet coming to a stop, just short of the bridge's entrance. The spiked barriers, made have been partially dismantled from Kaila's people, but the fae r quick work of the rest of it. A horde of them come forward and start ha away at the sharp spikes with loud clangs, breaking them into pieces.

'illar    Within minutes, they've dismantled the barriers enough to pull them leaving the path of the bridge open, their regiments gathering up in per lines.

orders    I swallow hard, queasiness pinching my stomach with a level of fear makes it hard to think.

d    I'm out of my depth. I was trained to be a princess, to be married off ack. king. Tutored in politics and dancing, taught how to sit and eat and dre t," he speak and sew. I was *not* trained to lead a battle, and magic or not, I fe ought staggeringlly inept to face the army that stands before me.

—to    But if I don't, who will?

you    My father's voice rings in my ear, just as the castle's bell begins to t its blaring warning. My fear doesn't matter. My *life* doesn't matter.

*Kingdom comes first.*

"Tell    The lightning-wielder moves away, and my eyes widen when I see t archers march forward and span out on either side of the bridge. They on the snowy bank and go down on one knee, one after the other, then ferent their bows into the air.

i    I suck in a breath, but my inhale stutters short just as the bowstrings hear their release.

uik and anyone to hear him.

arily    The arrows arc over the chasm toward us.

hem of    Living in Sixth Kingdom all my life means I've experienced every k snowstorm. When the arrows rain down, it sounds just like the sharper that would sometimes crack the atrium windows and dent the roof, exc cks to aftermath is so much worse.

whose    Dommik launches himself at me, and the second he has my hand gri nd his in his, he engulfs us in shadows.

The seconds inch by, feeling like an eternity, feeling like a blink.

When he yanks them away and we no longer have their wraithlike protection around us, I look down to see three arrows have punctured t ground right at our feet. They would have pierced us through.

I lift my gaze, ears pounding with the barrage of new screams. Behind countless Oceans have been struck, some fatally, arrows distending from naked bodies like quills that bleed out red ink.

They're attacking helpless citizens who are fleeing, people who are capable of fighting back. Just like the village they slaughtered, they're run away, kill without qualms.

The fae don't give us a single moment to recuperate from the first wave. There's a shout for the archers to loose another bout of arrows, and with that fury looses from *me*.

I react on pure instinct, tossing up my hands over my head, and an arc of ice *explodes* out of me. In an instant, it stretches from the top of the wall and curves back, curling like a tidal wave in a frozen sea. It spans at least a hundred feet above us, shielding the last of the crowd below.

Gasps of shock flare to life, sounding muffled beneath this blue-tinted ceiling, just as clinks of hundreds of arrows crash against my barrier. Some roll out them nearly pierce through, making fissures spread like spiderwebs.

But...it holds. No one else is hit.

"Queen! Queen!"

My attention is wrenched down, where a little girl is clutching my sleeve. Her brown hair is a tangled mess, and she's crying so hard that she's snot all over. Tears stream down her agonized face, and there's an arrow pinning into her tiny leg at the thigh. The only consolation is it doesn't seem like it's gone through, but blood has soaked into the rags she wears.

I kneel down in front of her just as she falls forward into my arms. "I need to find my mama! I can't find her!" she wails hysterically.

Great Divine.

She can't be more than five years old. I look around wildly at the last kind of the people retreating down the streets deeper into the city, none of them a red-haired woman seeming to be a mother searching for this little girl.

"I need to go home! Help me go home to find my mama, please! It hurts!" she sobs while she clutches me.

"It's alright," I say, trying to soothe her, though I've never soothed anyone in my life. I rub her back while I look down at the arrow in her leg.

It has to come out.

"We're going to help you find your mother," I tell her before one of my hands slips down to the arrow. When she sees where I'm reaching, she panics to panic, but I grip the arrow and yank it out as fast and firmly as I can.

nd me, She screams and tries to shove me away. “It’s alright,” I tell her aga  
m theirshe’s crying so hard she’s gulping and choking on air.

“Dommik. Take her. Take her home and try to find her mother.”

r’t even He hesitates, his expression conflicted.

here to “We *have* to help her.”

He leans down and picks up the little girl, and she buries her head a  
ave. his neck and cries. “Do you know where you live?” he asks, and she no  
th it, head.

“Go,” I urge as I get to my feet. “Hurry.”

rc of His face goes tight and he takes a step closer to me. “You get away  
ill and here as *soon* as those fae start to cross the bridge. Understand? Fuckin  
promise right now, or I won’t go.”

The sound of the girl’s cries are peeling away a layer of my heart, y  
ed off the muscle in bloody, painful strips. “I will. Just get her out of here  
ome offind her mother!”

With one last look at me, he vanishes.

Without Dommik by my side, I feel more vulnerable than ever.

Fortunately, the people have fled the city’s entrance, the last of them  
kirts. disappearing into the dense streets.

haking I barely get a chance to feel that relief when I suddenly hear a horn b  
erced for the fae to charge. Then, the sound of hundreds of footsteps begin to  
ke it’s the bridge. I scramble forward, looking through the cracks of the brick

The first of them race forward, but the stones are slippery with ice. I  
I can’t go crashing down, making the fae behind fall on top of them, until their  
huge dogpile caught up at the front.

Behind me, the streets are emptying, most of my people now out of  
st of The further away they can get and the more time to flee, the better cha  
n they have.

Down the bridge, the fae are scrambling, trying to get their feet bene  
urts!” them again. Pride swells in my chest when I see them retreat back and  
bridge. Something I’ve done is actually working. When they’re back in  
a child formation on the snow, I see the army move aside, letting one soldier r  
through the fray.

It’s one lone fae with jet-black hair and pale skin, a mark of red acro  
my stone armor. He walks right up to the entrance of the bridge until he re  
starts the cobbled bricks. Stopping, he glances down at his feet, then lifts his  
. and looks at the icy wall.

in, but     *What is he doing?*

I get my answer a moment later when he opens his mouth and breathes fire.

It roars out of him in a stream of red, sparking angrily like struck lightning hits the bridge. It crackles over the stones while he walks forward with determination, the ice burning up and puffing out of existence as soon as he passes. With every step, he melts the freeze, his fire eating up the snow leaving only burnt stone behind.

When he's halfway over the bridge, the army behind him begins to form in perfectly lined rows. The thump of their synchronized steps seems louder than the lightning when it struck.

A promise of death marching forward.

As he gets closer, the fae's fire gets bigger and brighter. A red threat against my icy blue defense.

I tremble, looking back at the streets. Save for the spitting smoke of charred bodies or those riddled with arrows who were left behind, I'm alone. The people have all fled further into Highbell, and hopefully, toward the pines.

They need more time to get away. As much as I can give them.

Turning back around, I press my hands against the wall. Ice pours from my palms and I thicken the wall at its weakest point—though, I'm at my weakest point, too.

Through the cracks, I watch the fae's slightly distorted silhouette as he stalks forward like a demon, his sparking fire so bright I have to squint. He gets closer and closer, and my heart pounds in terror.

I clench my teeth and divert my power. I envision it flowing past the wall and then shooting into the fire fae in sharp shards that pierce him through. But what actually forms is nothing except splinters of ice that he simply sweeps away.

Useless.

He laughs, and the sound seems to echo down through the chasm and back around to mock me.

The army behind him is my living dread. I can feel their synchronized steps reverberate up through my legs, and I know with deadly certainty that the wall isn't enough. Not nearly enough.

I'm stricken, shaking, *losing*.

I glance down at my feet. *Maybe I can try to ruin the bridge.*



My eyes lift up to the mountain—to where Highbell sits snug against the wall. We'd be cut off from the castle completely, but it's a last-ditch effort I have to try.

I fist my palms and close my eyes, fighting past the intense feeling of unnatural exhaustion that's draining me. I form and mold and *push*, and shoot out as much magic as I can, aiming it up as high as I can toss it.

A massive mallet of ice shoots up and over the wall, and then goes plunging down when gravity grips it. The fire fae stops and looks up at me, daring, but he backs up before it can flatten him. Just before it crashes through the bricks, hope leaps in my chest because maybe it's big enough, solid enough to—

It shatters.

Breaks into a million tiny pieces against the bridge.

All those livid words I tossed at their king, and I've lost.

My ice is no use against stone.

I can't stop them. Can't stop *him*.

I stand with my shoulders drooped, panting, while snow is scraped across my cheeks and salted over my lips and flaked down my lashes. I brace my bleeding palm against the wall just to keep from collapsing, and I look up at the fire fae, who smiles menacingly at me before he starts to close the weakest the gap between us.

Every instinct in me is screaming to run away. Every sense is pricked as his deadly magic advances. But I lock my knees. Steel my back. Pour my panic into my power and stay right here.

Sparks flare as he reaches the other side of the wall. As soon as he comes to a stop, he cuts his flames off. I can feel more than see him looking at me.

A mile between us wouldn't be enough—a realm between. But all I have is this wall, three-bricks deep.

He makes sure to stand right in front of me, and I see his warped smile spread over his face. Then he starts blowing fire right at me, billowing and cometoward me like a fiery fog. I flinch on instinct, though I can't feel its heat.

Yet.

I grit my teeth, feeding more ice into the wall, refusing to drop my hands. Refusing to back down. Because if I can hold them off for even another minute, then it gives my people more time.

And time is all I have to give them.

st it. My power continues to bleed from my hands, thickening the wall, but  
need fire is setting off sparks, hissing and spitting out steam into the air. I w  
ice to hold, to pour out of me, to fortify, but his flames are relentless. I  
of eating away at it, melting it, weakening it.

d then Water pours down, flooding from the melt.

But I don't drop my hands.

Not when the wall above me starts to curl inward and dissolve. Not  
t it in water slushes down at my feet. Not when frosted blood oozes from my  
against And not when my hands start to burn from the flames just on the other

I can see the fire fae now as clearly as if I were looking through a wall.  
I  
Can see the army behind him, waiting, swords in hand.

My last defense, one that took me all night to build, and I've only been  
able to slow them down by minutes. All this effort, exhaustion, energy  
barely matters. I've barely made any difference at all.

Frozen tears trickle down my face and shatter onto the ground.

The thinning wall rains down, unable to resist his flame as it drips. A  
icross the barrier between the two of us is so thin that it's ready to snap beneath  
a raw, fingertips, the fae stops his fire and grins at me. His canines are sharp and  
up at elongated, the expression on his face nothing short of ecstatic.

last of Leaning forward, he raises a finger, and *taps*.

The ice between us shatters.

It clatters to the ground in thin shards, leaving a large enough gap for  
d as to step through, the wall now useless and broken. I stumble away from  
ny forced to tilt my head way up to look in his dark, gleeful eyes.

Fear—all I feel is paralyzing, gripping fear.

“Ice Orian thinks she can beat fire fae?” he asks before his gaze moves  
t me. behind me and he breathes in through his nose. “Ah, the scent of fear is  
ve is here.” He flashes me another taunting smile and then leans in so close  
ile recoil. “I'm going to enjoy burning every Orian in this city until my flames  
it feed on their bones.”

I can see it—this picture he paints. The picture of flaring hatred and  
eat. blazing death. The picture of ash and despair left behind.

His head dips down and I snap my face to the side just as he drags a  
ands. disgusting tongue up my cheek, licking off the frost and tears that gather  
r there. “Mmm. I'll start with *you*.”

He leans back and I watch in horror as his mouth opens. At the back  
throat, I can see those harrowing, red-hot flames, ready to be let loose.

ut his Ready to scorch me right here where I stand.  
ill the I start to slam my eyes shut so I can look away from Death.  
t's But the shadows have other ideas.  
He appears like smoke come to smother the flames.  
Dommik is suddenly there, his blade skating across the fae's throat i  
quick slice. The red that pours out of the fae isn't fire, but blood instea  
when Shock is the last expression he wears before he falls face-first in a g  
palms.as he bleeds out right at my feet. When the fire fae hits the ground, the  
side. behind him ripples with surprise and fury.  
indow. Then, they charge.  
The last precious seconds I tried to give Highbell have just run out.  
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Ready to scorch me right here where I stand.

I start to slam my eyes shut so I can look away from Death.

But the shadows have other ideas.

He appears like smoke come to smother the flames.

Dommik is suddenly there, his blade skating across the fae's throat in one quick slice. The red that pours out of the fae isn't fire, but blood instead.

Shock is the last expression he wears before he falls face-first in a gurgle as he bleeds out right at my feet. When the fire fae hits the ground, the army behind him ripples with surprise and fury.

Then, they charge.

The last precious seconds I tried to give Highbell have just run out.



## CHAPTER 42

### QUEEN MALINA

I stand frozen, my mind reeling as the army hurtles toward us. “You were supposed to leave!” Dommik shouts at me, just as he leaps over the dead fire fae and snatches up my hand.

The moment the first soldier surges through the broken wall, shadow falls out of Dommik and he whisks us away. The force of his shadow-leaping steals my breath as he vaults us from point to point, so quick and jarring that we nearly pass out.

When he finally stops, I slump, only able to stay upright because his arms are caught beneath my arms.

“Stubborn fucking woman!”

We’re in the middle of an empty alleyway, and I lean against the cold stone wall in front of me, letting my forehead rest against it. I can still feel the singe of the fae’s flames heating my skin. Can still feel the burn of it against my palms.

Now that I’m still, now that we’re away, everything flashes before my eyes, and my entire body shakes, adrenaline pounding through my veins, punching through my chest as black dots start to pollute my vision.

“Breathe, Queenie.”

“You breathe!” I gasp out.

He spins me around to face him. His black hair is pulled back, snow and blood speckling his cheek. “For once in your godsdamned life, will you fucking listen to me?”

I shove at his chest, making him growl and release me as I point a finger at his face. “This is your fault!”

“*Mine?*” he asks incredulously. “How is this my fault?”

I tear at my collar, as if it’s the source for my strained inhales. Yet it’s all over me—this pressure. This suffocating grief.

I let it whip out of me through the lashings of my tongue.

“Because you should have just *killed me!*” I scream at him.

His eyes go wide, and my words seem to blast through the alley and caught in the air. Trapped in this ugly, tangled net that I have no hope of getting free from.

The longer he stays quiet, the angrier my anguish becomes.

“You should have just killed me, and then I wouldn’t have been able to do what I did.” I lift my hands to show him the evidence of the slashes that have never heal, though they’re bloody and peeling now, the skin gone blue where you’d done your damn job, then I wouldn’t have been able to get to Sealed Kingdom in the first place. I wouldn’t have been able to give my blood to then make *Orea* bleed,” I shout scathingly as my fists raise and start hitting him in the chest.

He doesn’t try to block my strikes, and that makes me even angrier. “You should have killed me!” I scream as I hit him again and again, though I know my own words that crush me, each one a weight on the ladder of my ribs.

Dommik just continues to watch me while wisps of his shadows curl around us. If I could go back in time, I’d kneel at his feet and welcome his blade.

And the truth of it is, if I *had* died, no one would have cared. No one would have mourned me.

Crystallized tears fall from the corners of my eyes and scrape down my skin.

“Do it,” I spit before I reach down and yank up the blade from his hands and shove it into his hands. When he doesn’t take it, I push it against his hands even harder, forcing his fingers around the hilt. “*Do it!*”

I’m demanding it.

I’m *pleading* for it.

For him to strike me down like I deserve.

He doesn’t move, and my throat creases with a sob. One that wrings me out and leaves me all twisted up.

“Come on, assassin. Do what you’re meant to do,” I taunt.

anger at His eyes flash, his expression suddenly transforming as anger rucks mouth into a snarl. “No.”

My heart pounds through my chest and my fists tighten, making my injured palms sear with pain. “Why not?”

Without warning, his free hand snaps out and clamps around my throat, sucking in a breath of surprise as he holds me hostage against the wall of the building, his body leaning over me. “You don’t want to die.”

I sneer in his face. “Yes, I do.”

His eyes flick back and forth as if he’s digging me up and uncovering everything I tried to bury. “You tried to warn them, Malina. Tried to protect them. You did *everything* you could!”

“And I failed!” I spit back. “So I just want you to kill me and be done with it!”

His hold on my throat tightens, and his shadows flick erratically around as he bears down on me with a dark temper that makes my stomach tighten. “You don’t always get what you want in life.”

“I want nothing but death.”

A cruel smirk curls his lips. “Is that right?”

Heat unfurls low in my belly, but I manage to nod. “Yes.”

His thumb presses over my windpipe, straining my breath, making my mind stop spinning and instead holding me right *here*.

“You want death?” he grits out, his challenge lashing against my face, spreading heat with each hit. “*I’m* your fucking death. I will consume you thoroughly there won’t be a wish for any end, because no end will release you from me.”

My heart stops. Head hollowing out of everything except his dark voice. When he leans in even closer, I quiver with need, body flooding with consuming presence. Instead of blazing panic, instead of frigid grief, there is just this all-encompassing thaw.

“You’re *mine*, Malina,” he thunders into my ears, the claim raining down and drenching me through. Spreading over me with his unrelenting heat.

“Am I?” I ask in a challenge. Hoping—*begging*—for him to meet it.

His hand flexes around my neck, and he tips my head back, lips coming down to graze across my jaw. “Yes. So you can fucking wish for death if you want, but you won’t get it. And right now, I’m going to show you what it’s like to be *alive*.”

My eyes flare at his words, and then he slams his mouth to mine.

up his      The dagger clatters to the ground.

I meet him desperately, lips parted, tongue searching, moving again in a frenzy. His kiss is harsh—almost cruel. As if he’s punishing me for I said and proving to me that I really am his.

oat. I      It’s in his biting teeth and the thrust of his tongue, it’s the strong grip  
the      my neck, and fingertips digging in hard enough to leave bruises along  
pale neck. All of it showing that I don’t get to give in. That every sense  
belongs to him—to me.

ig      To us.

rotect      And I thrill at it all, because he was right. It reminds me that I’m alive  
makes me want to *be* alive.

ie with      “More,” I order.

He hikes up one of my legs to wrap around his hip and shoves my back  
und us      against the wall, one hand dropping down. “You’re already wet for me  
;hten.      you?”

I turn my head, gasping for air, my entire face flushed. “Yes.”

His hand cups me then, and even through the layers of my clothes, it  
my breath away. The heel of his palm grinds, making me shake from weakness  
instead of exhaustion, lighting me up with the glare of his hungry eyes

ny      “I need it,” I gasp. “I need you now.”

“You want to fuck death? You want to prove to me that you’re claiming  
me right back and come alive beneath my touch?”

His hand continues to stroke against my core, building up these embroilments  
you so      between us that’ve been wanting to be stoked into a scorch.

ase      “Yes!” I fling out with fervency pumping through me.

ow.      He bites down on my bottom lip with a satisfied growl. “I’m your ass  
h his      Which means *I’m* in charge of your death. You got that?”

here’s      I whimper and nod, trying to grind against him, but he keeps me pinned  
“Tell me, Queenie.”

down      My gaze lifts to his, binding together. “You’re in charge. You’re my  
at.      assassin.”

.      “That’s right,” he says, beard scouring against my cheek as he drags  
ling      lips across, spreading his steady warmth. “And you’re my queen. So I  
i all      get on my knees and *bow*.”

what      I stare wide-eyed as he kneels before me on the ground and then buries  
head beneath my skirt. I clutch at the fabric over his head, trying to wrap



him away, trying to wrench him closer, teetering with uncertainty and tightening anticipation.

My noises go high-pitched when he snatches my undergarments to t and drags his hot, thick tongue over my slit. I flinch, head cracking aga the wall when he centers that tongue over my clit and nibbles down on sending a shock of pleasurable pain shooting through me.

He licks and laps, faster and faster, making me throb, making me int over. My clit is swollen, my breasts are heavy, and there's a full hazine settling over my mind that knows only brimming bliss.

Then he stuffs two thick fingers inside of me, a wet sound accompa his pleased growl. I would be embarrassed about how wet I sound if I v still in control, but I'm not, and what an escape it is to hand over my b and let him wring out pleasure. When he moves that growl to my clit, v , aren'the wraps his lips around it and *sucks*, I know I will forever be addicted reigning passion.

He may be the one on his knees, but I'm the one in complete submis t takes My body is ready to explode, ready to fall headfirst over the precipi vant when Dommik abruptly pulls away and stands up.

A tortured gasp escapes. "I was almost there," I seethe.

He grins, the expression made more feral by my wetness that covers ning beard. "I'm in charge, remember? So you're going to *get there* with m you or not at all."

He reaches down between us and takes out his cock, stroking it a fev times, making my mouth water. Then he hikes up my skirts so roughly they cinch into my waist, but I don't care. I like the bite of pain, just as ssassin. his hold when it returns to my throat.

Because I'm floundering, fumbling, but his authority settles me. His ned. command is a release. His mastery allows me to let go. So I gladly giv my control and gift it to him, because that's what I need, and I trust hir take it. To dominate my thoughts and feelings with his firm grip and h together so I don't fall to pieces.

With my thigh hiked up around his waist again, he drags his hard, h against me. Coats himself as he slides his length over my throbbing cli "Dommik..."

"Look at me."

My eyes fly up to his and our gazes fit together. Lock into place. Lil the only one who ever had the key.

Then, he notches his cock at my entrance and starts sliding in. Inch by inch. Feeding himself into me like he's savoring the slow drag and enjoying the side the way my body stretches to accommodate him.

Against "Breathe, Queenie."

It, I hadn't realized I'd stopped, but the moment he voices the command, I gulp in air. At the same exact moment, he shoves the last of himself in so hard I jolt.

His slow pace is gone now.

He starts thrusting in and out of me, all the way to the hilt every time. I can't help the moan that comes out as I'm kept pinned to the wall. He's searing hot. His length boiling me from the inside out, filling so much of me than just my body.

"You're gushing," he rasps at my ear, unrelenting as his hips punch forward, dick spearing into me with brutal drives that make me scratch against his cloak, nails trying to pierce through. "You're fucking *melting* around me, aren't you?"

"Don't stop," I beg as I clutch him, my palms slick, my cheeks wet. Because if he does, then I'll have to think. I'll have to remember what's happening around us. "Don't stop."

"Never." He grips my ass and starts lifting me up and slamming me down on his cock, going so deep I cry out. "I'll never be able to stop when it comes to you. You're stuck with me now."

My soul sings at his fierce possessiveness, and I sink my teeth into his neck. He growls with a flinch and fucks me harder, making me bloom with warmth all over. I lick up the border of his dark skin that patches up his chest just to taste him, just to sip in his claim and quench my deepest thirst.

"Make me come," I tell him as my frost flakes over his shoulders, the white clumps bunching into his cloak. "Make it hard."

A crude chuckle slips out of him. "As my queen wishes."

He yanks me off him, spins me around, and shoves my front against the wall. With my chest scraping against the rough bricks, my hands brace against it, he exposes my ass. I barely take a breath before he grips my ass and thrusts back in from behind.

I grunt from the wicked impact, his length hitting me at an angle that makes my eyes rolling to the back of my head. "Gods..."

He wraps one hand around my throat and tips up my head. "I'm yours."

by His hand drops and he pinches my clit so hard I jerk, though I'm im  
oying on his dick with nowhere to go. The roughness, the wildness, the way h  
takes me like he's utterly possessed with the need to have me...it make  
clench harder, makes me keen with the most wanton desire I've ever fe  
d, I my life.

to me With deft fingers, he thrums my clit, and he starts thrusting harder, h  
that perfect pace, hitting into me with merciless impact.

e, and I we're *alive* because that's the way I want it."

s He slams into me so hard my cheek scrapes against the wall, and I c  
more apart. I come *alive*.

Like a jolt of pure lightning striking a lake and dispersing across the  
surface, it blinds me with its force. The moan of release that escapes m  
guttural, the intensity of the orgasm all-consuming, full of more pleasu  
ng I have ever felt in my entire life.

He buries himself to the hilt and comes inside me until his searing-h  
spend drips down the inside of my thighs and the last of the jolts have  
's leaving me feeling raw and sparkling.

We slump together, both of our breaths labored, and slowly, reality :  
back to ripple in. I look at him over my shoulder and find that he's already l  
when it at me.

"You're mine," he says gently, and all I can do is nod around the wa  
is that's lodged in my throat.

with Tenderly, he pulls out of me, then uses the ends of his cloak to wipe  
s neck, mess between my legs. I turn around and right my dress, cocking a bro  
when he does nothing to clean off his cloak.

ie He flashes me a crooked grin. "Next time, I'll rub it over your skin a  
leave it there."

I sniff. "You absolutely will do no such thing."

the He leans forward and gives me a quick, biting kiss before pulling av  
d "When it comes to fucking, I'm in charge, and I'll do all sorts of debas  
hips things to your body, but you'll enjoy every single one."

A shiver goes down my back, and as we look at each other, we take  
t has last seconds to be in this moment. Just here, in this bubble, where this  
that exists.

r god." Until I take a breath and look down the mouth of the alley, our  
circumstances darkening my eyes and tensing my shoulders.

paled As soon as reality comes back to me on the inside, it seems to return  
he outside too. Somewhere far off, lightning crackles with a horrific *boom*  
as me hear screams rend the air.

elt in My hands tremble.

“The fae breached the city,” I whisper, needing to say it aloud.

keeping He tips his head. “Yes.”

Guilt rushes in. “We shouldn’t have done this right now.”

ember, But he shakes his head and brushes his hand over my bottom lip, du  
ome away the frost that’s gathered. “Yes, we should’ve. Because if we die,  
alive.”

I swallow hard, wishing I could block out the distant screams. Wish  
entire could control this too.

ie is “I...I don’t know what to do.”

re than I look down at my peeling, blistered hands. The gashes look angry,  
scabbed in blue and white. I hear the sound of another boom, while mo  
ot lightning flashes from the sky in that aberrant hue. Who knows what o  
faded, magic the fae are capable of? Who knows how much more magic I can

“The little girl?” I ask, looking back up at him.

starts “I got her home.”

ooking I wish that meant she was safe, but it doesn’t.

id “Alright,” I say, hands dropping back down to my sides as I take a  
steady breathing breath. “I have to try and block them some more. Slow them  
I need you to take me back to the shanties.”

the “Malina...”

w “Just do it. Please.”

nd He sucks a breath between his teeth but reaches out and grips my ha  
leaping us away. Leaping us closer.

One second, we’re engulfed in his shadows. Another, we’re engulfed  
screams.

vay. In *mayhem*.

ed In the middle of the shanties, with its crooked homes stretching above  
the street is flooded with people running away. I have a split second to  
these my bearings before lightning crashes into the building just to our left, a  
is all whole thing bursts into purple flame. Stone and wood explode out of it  
start toppling down toward the crowd.

I don’t think, I just react.

on the Tossing my hands up, ice flings forward, enveloping the stones, free  
I can them in place on their descent. The people below who would have been  
crushed drop their cowering arms and look up in awe before everyone's  
attention turns toward me.

"Get to Pillar Row!" I yell.

They start running, hopefully following my directions, dragging fall  
loved ones as they hurry down the filthy street.

sting Dommik and I run in the opposite direction, going against the flow,  
we die the danger while people stream past us. At the end of the street, a regir  
fae turn the corner and spot us, raising their bow and arrows.

ing he I shove my magic forward and it comes out like a battering ram, and  
solid mallet slams into them. It makes them go flying back from the cr  
impact before shattering over them in a rain of sharp shards. Pride fuse  
me, confidence flaring.

ore Dommik leaps to the ones still remaining, moving in a blur of shado  
ther Mostly invisible, he attacks one after another, leaving a trail of blood a  
I give? bodies in his wake.

When I see more fae come running from the same corner, I slam up  
its sudden existence slicing one of them straight down the middle befo  
settling into place. Blood drips down the barrier, the dead fae pinned in  
as Dommik leaps to the last fae on our side and slices his throat.

down. The group of fae behind the wall start slashing into it with their blad  
the street is blessedly empty. I turn and start to run back the way we ca  
We need to follow my fleeing people, need to defend their way.

"Dommik!" I call over my shoulder. "We need to catch u—"

nd, I slam into someone.

d by Jolting backwards, I whip my head around just in time to see a mass  
standing over me. Sharp canines gleam with his grin, and his blond hai  
clotted with blood. He raises his fist just as I hear Dommik shout my n  
and then pain explodes through my skull a second before shadows eng

ve us, I drop into unconsciousness, or maybe death, but I realize Dommik wa  
get I don't want to die.

and the But if I do, better to die fighting.

: and Better to die *alive*.

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## CHAPTER 43

AUREN

Lord Cull's manor sits before us like a gray sun cresting the horizon. It's three stories tall, made of smooth stone and jutting windows with metal trim. The drive is black gravel and crunches beneath boots as we pass the pond, its corners perfectly precise and sharp. There are no ripples from swimming fish, no lily pads that float on top. The water is still and dark, just like the house itself.

It looks a bit eerie, though not as eerie as it is seeing my hands swim on either side in a drab gray color that looks so completely foreign. My hair touches black strands nothing like my golden locks. The glamour magic Emonie put on me is strange.

Lerana steers us away from the front of the manor, our feet taking us through the cut grass and past the hedges until we walk along the side of the building, passing a row of trees.

"Like Wick said, Lord Cull isn't here, which works to our benefit, but we wouldn't be able to risk this mission otherwise," Lerana says, speaking quietly while Emonie and I walk on either side of her.

"All I was able to hear was that there are new Orleans here. That's all

know. But Oreans in this manor don't fare well. The ones Cull has on :  
have one thing in common."

"What's that?" I ask.

She turns to me, her teal eyes gone grim. "Their tongues were cut out  
Shock and anger tighten down the curve of my back, snapping my  
shoulders straight.

"What an *ass*," Emonie hisses under her breath.

I suddenly wish he *were* here, just so I could gild his tongue and make  
just as useless. This information spurs me on, making my focus sharper  
what's at stake.

We walk down the length of the manor, but once we reach the back,  
frown at the building just behind it, because...it's a *second* manor. It's  
another wing—this one is separate and seems much older.

It would be just as austere as the newer building if it weren't for all the  
damage. The stones are singed and scraped in some areas, the roof looks  
it's caving in, and all the windows have been boarded up. Even the ground  
around it looks like there used to be an old drive here, but they left the  
to take over.

"Two manors?" I ask curiously.

Lerana nods and fixes a few stray hairs, tucking them back into her hair.  
"Yes, he built a newer one but kept the old. Don't ask me why, because  
have no idea. He has his peculiarities just like every noble I've ever met.

At the back of the main, newer manor, there's an overhang with a shallow  
wall that hides a narrow back door. It's tucked halfway into the ground with  
set of shallow steps. "Servant's entrance," Lerana says as she leads us  
it. "Now, I'm going to get you working in here for the day, but once you're  
inside, you'll be on your own. Just keep your head down but your eyes  
peeled. Like Wick said, this is about gathering information *only*, got it?"  
asks sharply.

"Got it," Emonie and I both murmur.

"There you are!"

I jump at the voice spilling out from the tiny window notched into the  
servant's door. It swings open a second later, revealing a plump fae woman  
with red cheeks and frizzy gray hair pulled back in a bun. "You were  
supposed to send them at dawn!" she hisses at Lerana as we approach.

"Apologies, Velida," Lerana replies, her voice now much softer, her  
expression turned timid—nothing like how she was with us before. "M

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staff all would not allow us to leave before luncheon was set. We came as quick as we could.”

The fae takes the lie easily. “Nothing for it now,” she says before letting out a blustery sigh, onyx eyes skimming over Emonie and me. “These are your two best workers? They look a bit green.”

“They’ll serve you very well today, I assure you.”

“Fine,” she says, waving us forward. “Don’t have time to waste. Lord Wick is on his way back.”

Lerana goes utterly still. Emonie has stiffened too. My eyes dart around like I expect him to suddenly pop up in front of me.

“Oh...” Lerana recovers. “Already? I thought he wasn’t due to return in a few more days?”

She shrugs and swipes a hand on the front of her apron. “We received the word that he’ll be here for supper. That’s why we need the extra hands like you. Half our other staff are...otherwise occupied.”

*Occupied with the new Orleans perhaps?*

Wick would be out of his mind if he knew Cull was returning, but it’s a little late for us to back out now. It would look too suspicious. Lerana realizes too, because after the slightest hesitation, she steps aside. “Of course,” she says with a nod. “My lord will just need them sent back for supper.”

“Yes, fine,” Velida says impatiently.

Lerana turns around, a grave expression tinting her gaze. “Work well done,” she says quietly before she starts walking away.

Emonie and I share a look.

Then we follow behind Velida as she turns and descends the steps to the servant’s door. When we go through, we enter a washroom. The space is uncomfortably hot, with a massive iron stove to our left that’s stuffed full of glowing coals in its belly and has pipes leading up from it to the ceiling. Steam and smoke plug the air that instantly makes me flush with heat.

Along the far wall, there’s a huge sink where two fae are furiously scrubbing plates and stacking them on a rack above. Neither of them turns around as we walk through, passing another long sink to our right. Velida takes us into the adjoining room, which is a huge kitchen. It’s somewhat cooler inside, though not much.

Despite its size, the room manages to feel cramped because of all the counters and stoves eating up the space. There are two cooks, one of whom my lord doesn’t bother to pay us any attention from where he’s chopping through

kly as pile of vegetables. The other glances up absently for a second and then back to stirring a big pot, but I notice with a jolt that she has blunted ea

ting Both of them do. Cull's Orean servants.

are I find myself stepping closer to them. "Hello," I greet.

They look at me in surprise, but they stay silent, their eyes quickly d  
away.

rd Cull "Don't speak to them. They can't speak back," Velida says, and I ca  
if that's pity in her tone or something else.

und, But it seems Lerana was right about their tongues.

n for a Velida goes to a large cabinet on the wall beside the cutlery shelves  
yanks it open, revealing stacks of linens inside. "Now, there's much to  
done. The regular staff have been occupied with other duties, and with

ed Cull's return, it's important the estate be in perfect condition." She sna  
today. up different linens and starts piling them into Emonie's arms. "It displ  
him if anything is in disarray."

When the stack is up to Emonie's eyebrows, Velida slams the cabin  
's too and bustles over to a small sink, turning on the tap to fill up a bucket. I  
es this glance over my shoulder at the cooks again. I know the mission is to fi  
she where the new Oreans are, but I wonder if these two need help as well'

My train of thought is cut off when Velida abruptly shoves a bucket  
soapy water at me. Attention jerking back, I barely manage to grip the  
ll," she in time before she lets go, and then she plunks a scrub brush into it, ma  
water splash up into my face.

I blink through the drips, a few strands of my glamoured black hair  
stuck to my forehead. Emonie laughs but manages to turn it into a cough

is Velida glares at me, as if daring me to complain. I just plaster on a v  
full of logged smile. "Thank you."

g. She humphs and spins around. "Come on. I don't have all day. And  
*attention*," she snaps over her shoulder. "I won't be repeating myself to

Wow, okay. Velida is kind of a jerk.

irn Emonie covers her mouth to suppress more laughter, while I wipe th  
ida water off my face. Bright side—at least it cooled me down.

at We walk through a claustrophobic corridor, up narrow stairs, and in  
dining room, which we enter from the back. The door is hidden behind  
e thick drapery, and Velida pulls it aside as we follow her.

'hom Inside, the floors are black marble with red smears in the stone that  
gh a look like a bloody body was dragged across it. At the center sits the di

l gets table, the dark gray wood filled with knots. There's a chandelier made  
ars. what looks like giant talons. Bigger even than the ones on a timberwin  
feet. They're smooth and black and hooked down toward the table, like  
invisible creature ready to snatch up whoever might be seated below, v  
larting cold candles are held in its grasp.

A stray drop of water drips from my chin to the floor with an audibl  
n't tell Velida's onyx eyes flick down to it with obvious irritation. "You scrub  
floors," she says to me pointedly before turning to Emonie. "You prep  
linens for dinner service. I'll be back to check on you later. Be sure the  
and don't screw anything up." She centers her attention on me again. "Esp  
be you."

Lord With that lovely send-off, she turns and walks away, leaving us alon  
atches the otherwise empty room.

eases As soon as she's gone, Emonie giggles under her breath, magma eye  
practically lighting up with glee.

et shut "I don't think she likes me." I frown as I look down at the bucket, a  
steal a eye her pile versus mine. "Why do you get table linen duty and I get fl  
nd out scrubbing duty?"

? "It's my superior paying-attention skills and sparkling personality."

full of "Probably." I look around again to make sure we're alone before I l  
handle my voice. "Those cooks were Oreans—do you think they need our hel  
iking "I don't know," she says, nibbling on her bottom lip. "But we'll rep

Wick and see what he thinks."

now "Okay. Let's take advantage of the fact we're alone right now."

gh. She nods. "Let's do the linens first and then start scrubbing? It'll be  
vater- perfect excuse to go through the other rooms."

"Good plan."

pay Together, the two of us tackle the long table. The linens include abo  
o you." little napkin squares of all different sizes that we have to do...somethi  
with.

ie I just start folding them diagonally. Emonie starts making some wei  
flowers out of hers.

to a "I'm not sure Lord Cull is the type of person to appreciate flower na

l a "Why not?" she replies, folding the fabric into swoops of quick peta

"The talon chandelier kind of sets an anti-flower tone, don't you thi

make it Her eyes flick up. "Hmm. Yeah, you're right." She blows out a brea  
ning shakes out her flower and starts folding it into a half-star instead. "Lor

up of doesn't deserve flower napkins anyway."

g's Very true.

Some We quickly place all the napkins around the plates and then adorn the  
while with a deep red runner that goes down the middle. When we're finished  
hurry to scrub the floors. Emonie sneaks back into the washroom to grab  
e splat. extra bucket and scrub brush, and together, we move quickly across the  
the dining room.

are the When we finish, we enter a large hall, with the same bloodied marble  
it you swirling across the floor. This grand room is full of sculptures that line  
pecially walls like pillars, with more in rows throughout the middle. None of them  
simple busts, either. They're all at least my height, if not taller, casting  
ie in shadows.

One is a sculpture of an entire castle, each turret and window chiseled  
es white stone enough to cast its own shadow. There's a dragon sculpture  
looks vicious, mouth gaping with rows of razor-sharp teeth. A rabid wolf  
and then with its teeth bared. A bow and arrow pointed right at me, ready to pierce  
oor through. A huge spotted feline, its maw bared in a snarl. A woman with  
ears and tears streaming down her face. A shrouded demon with horns  
And fae. Sculpture after sculpture of terrorizing fae.

ower One of them is particularly disturbing. The male has a grotesque grip  
p?" frozen on his face, and from his back, there's another fae tearing free, clutching  
ort it to clutched in his hand like he used it to slash his way past the fae's spine  
out through his skin.

"The lovely decorating extends to this room, I see," I mutter before  
the glancing over at Emonie. I notice the drawn look on her face, the sweat  
beaded on her brow. "Hey, are you okay?"

She blinks over at me, trying to hide her strain with a smile. "Oh, yes  
ut fifty "The glamour. It's draining you," I say, worry lacing my tone. If she  
ig already strained, then how will she be able to keep it up?

"I'll be fine," she says dismissively before swiping at the sweat from  
rd hairline. "How about we split up? I can search the rooms on that side, and  
you take those doorways down there? We can act like we've already worked  
pkins." in here while we search these other rooms."

ls. "Emonie, if you can't hold the magic..."

ak?" "I can hold it," she promises as determination settles over her features.

th and "If you need to drop it, you have to tell me, okay? I don't want you  
d Cull draining yourself, and if my glamour falls away, it could be bad for both

us.”

“I know,” she says, meeting my gaze. “I promise, I’ve got you.”

ie table “But—”

d, we She cuts me off. “If it becomes too much, I’ll tell you.”

ab an I study her features. “Okay,” I say hesitantly. “Just...don’t put yours  
e risk. If we need to go, we’ll go.”

le “I’m the seasoned Vulmi,” she says with a teasing smile. “I’m supposed  
to take care of you, not the other way around.”

the I shake my head. “Friends take care of each other.”

em are Her expression turns softer, more genuine, and she gives me a real s

, long “Yeah. They do.” Then she takes a breath and tucks her short hair behi  
ed into ears. “Okay, come on. The sooner we gather information, the sooner w  
get out of here. And we really *do* need to leave.”

that “Because of your magic, or because Cull is coming back?”

olf “Neither. I meant just to get away from the interior decorating,” she  
nce me before giving a headless sculpture a disdainful once-over. “It’s really a

h blunt I snort, and Emonie trots off before I can say anything else to her ab  
magic. So I haul my bucket to the other end of the hall, my nerves wou  
tighter with the need to rush so she doesn’t weaken herself too much.

mace Going through the first doorway, I find nothing but an empty library  
dagger really, there are more pictures of maps on the walls than actual books i

and Then I enter another room, but it has absolutely nothing useful inside—  
except maybe the bar full of alcohol.

t When I walk back out again, I see Emonie leaving the room across f  
me. We both shrug, and then turn to look at the stairwell at the same ti

*Time to stretch our search.*

s.” We make our way toward it, meeting at the bottom steps. The stairc  
e’s wide enough for me to lie across, with forged iron handrails in elabora  
filigree.

her I stare up at its length, heart beating a little faster with trepidation. I  
and no one comes to question us.

washed We’re careful not to slosh water everywhere as we ascend with quic  
light steps. When we reach the landing, we glance at the corridors on e  
side of us.

es. “I’ll take the left, you take the right?” I whisper, and Emonie quickl

th of Both of us haul our heavy buckets room to room, searching for som  
—*anything*—that might help us figure out where the Oreans are being

Every time I open a door, my heart is in my throat, but I keep finding empty bedrooms.

Oddly, despite the size of this manor, I only see one other servant, a woman who pays me no mind whatsoever as she hurries out of one of the bedrooms with a pail full of ash and a chimney brush in hand.

I desperately want to find the Oreans, want to succeed in this mission even though I search every room, I come up with nothing. Frustration flows through me.

I backtrack when I'm done, meeting up with Emonie again at the large table. She shakes her head when she sees me, disappointment evident in her expression too. "We're not going to find anything up here. Maybe we can try chatting up one of the servants? Get them to talk?"

The thought of trying to *chat up* Velida almost gives me shivers.

"I think we need to check the older manor," I tell her. It's been a nagging thought in the back of my head since I saw it. "Think about it. Cull see how different it is. Very particular. This whole manor is spotless. Why would someone like to keep that old crumbling manor? There's something off about it."

Her eyes widen slightly. "You're right."

"How's your magic?"

"Fine. Honestly," she tells me. "I can hold it for at least another hour inside. Probably two. I don't want to give up yet."

Her gaze reflects a persistence that I also feel.

"Okay." I pivot toward the stairs. "We'll need to get outside. Then we can go from there."

"What are you two doing up there?"

I nearly jump out of my skin at Velida's voice that cracks across the hall below. Her expression is lined with irritation as she looks up at us through the designs in the iron railing, her fists poised on her hips.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath before Emonie and I hurry back downstairs.

"You're supposed to clean the dining room, not be up on the second floor!" Velida hisses at us.

"Apologies," Emonie says breathlessly as we stop in front of her.

I barely manage not to spill water over myself in our hurry. "We finished the dining room and the hall. We just went upstairs to see if any of the things up there needed scrubbing," I tell her.

kept.

empty        “I didn’t tell you to do that,” she snaps before eyeing the floor, as if hoping to find a speck of dirt so she can prove that we lied. When she finds none, she says to Emonie, “You’ll come back with me. We have curtains need dusting.” Then her gaze pounces on me. “And *you*. You’ll go back to the washroom. There’s a load of chamber pots that need washing.”

n, but        A gurgle of horror gets strangled in my throat, but I bob my head. “Of course.”  
twists

              She yanks the bucket out of Emonie’s hand and pushes it toward me, then whisks her out of the room. Emonie sends me an apologetic look over her shoulder before she disappears from view.

can try        With a sigh, I make my way back to the washroom, my steps slow so I don’t spill water all over the floors, my arms shaking from the weight. As I pass through the kitchen, I pause when I see one of the Orean cooks at the stove.

              I look around to ensure the coast is clear before venturing over. “Hi, Emonie.” I say with a smile.

              She’s wearing a lace cap on her head, keeping her hair out of the way. She has pale eyebrows and freckles over the bridge of her nose. She stands with a mid-cut, knife caught in a slab of meat as she looks at me with wariness.

r.             I hesitate, debating what to say.

              “Have you worked here long?”

              She nods slowly.

ve can        “I couldn’t help but notice that you’re Orean.”

              The woman goes still, and the knife in her hand clatters against the countertop as she lets go and starts to back away.

main        I take a step forward, horrified that my simple comment instigated such terror in her. “No, it’s okay! I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to—”

              She darts out of the room before I can finish my sentence. Buckets in hand, I try to hurry as fast as I can and follow her, but when I get to the washroom where the other two fae workers are still elbow-deep in soap suds, the woman isn’t there.

*Dammit.*

ished        I hope she didn’t run off to Velida or someone else, but I’m even more worried at how fearful she was at just my acknowledgement of her being Orean.  
rooms

              No wonder Wick wanted to take this mission.

she's I glance around through the steam and the smoke glugging up the air  
finds room feels even hotter than before. I set the buckets down and my hands  
ns that scream in relief, while little angry marks are left behind on my cramped  
k to fingers. The fae look over at me, both of them pausing their frenzied  
scrubbing.

Of I clear my throat, forcing my tone to stay casual. "Did you happen to  
one of the other servants come through here?"

and They look at me blankly, letting a pause drag out, and then the one r  
over me says, "No."

That's it. Just *no*. Then she turns around and gets back to scrubbing.

o I Okay, so, not the most helpful.

As I The other one continues to stare at me, and she has the brightest blue  
the I've ever seen. She cocks a brow when I continue to stand here.

"Velida told me to stack the chamber pots for you," she says, motioning  
there," behind me.

I look over my shoulder and...yep. There is indeed a tower of chamber  
y, and pots.

ops I can't help but wrinkle my nose. "I thought this manor had plumbing  
is.

"*This* manor does," she says pointedly.

She continues to watch me. Brow arched.

I definitely won't be able to follow the Olean cook now.

"Better get to work." She tosses her black braid behind her before smiling  
slightly and then gets back to her dishes. "And don't miss any spots."

The other fae laughs beneath her breath.

Rude.

uch I quickly cross off Emonie's idea of "chatting with the other servant  
because clearly, that's not an option with these two.

n hand, What *is* an option, however...

room I look at the chamber pots again.

Olean She said *this* manor has plumbing. The old one does not or, at least,  
anymore—which means that's where these pots came from. Because that's  
people there who have to use them.

ore I know damn well Lord Cull isn't squatting over a pot to do his business

ng The new Orleans Lord Cull is keeping here *are* in the other manor. I'm  
of it. And the perfect excuse for me to get there just landed in my lap. I mean  
literally, thank Divine, but still.



r. This I take in a deep breath as I walk over to the separate basin and stare  
ds at the teetering pile and at the pair of leather washing gloves left drape  
d the edge of the sink. The stench wafts up before I have time to plug my  
and I can see definite...residue left behind.

“Well, shit,” I mutter.

o see Behind me, the two fae laugh again at my expense. But I just tuck m  
glamoured hair back, yank on the gloves, and get to work.

nearest This isn’t exactly how I envisioned my first Vulmin mission would  
it could be worse. If this stack of chamber pots is all that’s between me  
finding the Oreans, then I’m going to polish these things to a fucking s

What was it Lu told me?

e eyes *Own your shit.*

I guess this is one way to do it.

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Not

I take in a deep breath as I walk over to the separate basin and stare down at the teetering pile and at the pair of leather washing gloves left draped over the edge of the sink. The stench wafts up before I have time to plug my nose, and I can see definite...residue left behind.

“Well, shit,” I mutter.

Behind me, the two fae laugh again at my expense. But I just tuck my glamoured hair back, yank on the gloves, and get to work.

This isn't exactly how I envisioned my first Vulmin mission would go, but it could be worse. If this stack of chamber pots is all that's between me and finding the Oreans, then I'm going to polish these things to a fucking shine.

What was it Lu told me?

*Own your shit.*

I guess this is one way to do it.



## CHAPTER 44

AUREN

**M**y the time I finish, I'm dripping sweat from the hot room, my fingers feel like they might be permanently shaped like claws from how tightly I was clenching the rag, and I don't know if I'll ever get the stench out of my nose...but the entire stack of chamber pots is

I'm alone, so I take advantage of it and sneak out to see if I can find Emonie. But when I peer into the formal dining room, I find her on a stool, beating the curtains with a dusting paddle while Velida lords over me. I don't dare interrupt.

I spin on my heels and quickly retreat. I'll have to go into the old manor alone, but at least I know Velida is occupied for the time being.

In the washroom, I nab a tablecloth from the linen closet and then pile the clean chamber pots inside of it. I quickly gather up the heap and head outside with my makeshift sack. As soon as I climb up the shallow step onto the grass, I veer to the left toward the old manor. I walk alongside hedgerows, keeping my eyes peeled while the metal pots clink together on my every step.

I can't help but stare at the old house as I walk its length, gaze hook

onto the cracks in the gray stone, the damage making the peaks of the roof look like a corrugated knife hacked up through the shingles.

Maybe there was a fire and the manor has been falling further into disrepair ever since, but just looking at it makes me hesitant. I have to ignore the shivers that want to roll down my back, and ignore the wedge-shaped cracks in the stone that feels like an invisible stopper pinching my blood flow.

When I get to the front door, I look over my shoulder, but the ground is empty. The only thing looming over me is the old manor itself, boarded windows glaring with suspicion. Up close, the singe marks in the wall more like gouges threatening to tear the place in half.

I move my sack, clasp the corners of the cloth in one hand, and my other hand darts out to grip the knob, but of course, it's locked. Looking around again, I debate what to do, when I hear murmuring from the other side of the door. I freeze, wondering if I should dart away, but with a glance down at the bundled heap, I raise my fist and knock instead.

The murmured voices stop, and my heart pounds for one beat, two, three.

There's a loud *snick* from the lock before the door swings open, revealing two red-and-black-clad guards. At least, I think they're guards, based on the swords strapped to their belts and their generally irritated dispositions.

The one who opened the door has hair with gray and white streaks, and he glares down at me, taking in my apron and frazzled hair. "What?" he growls.

I drop into a curtsy, because I figure that's probably what servants are supposed to do here. It makes the bundle in my hands clank loudly. "I'm here to deliver these. I was told to come in this way."

The other guard behind him has an impressively long braid of red hair and narrows his eyes on me. "You're new."

I do my best to keep my expression innocent, keep my heartbeat calm. "I was sent to help for the day. Velida has been giving me instructions."

His eyes drop to my sack. "Give it here," he says, jutting out his hand. I come forward.

My fingers clutch the bundle so hard my knuckles go white. "Oh, I'll deliver it myself, as I was told."

Irritation crosses his face. "This manor is restricted. I'll take it."

I feign indifference and start to pass it over to him. "Of course."

"What is it?" the other one asks.

I smile blandly. "Chamber pots."

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r with

ing

roof        Braid snatches back his hand so fast I'm surprised his elbow doesn't  
"I'm not touching that shit." He looks to his companion.

shrug        The second guard shakes his head. "Don't look at me. It's nearly shi  
change."

2 in my        They scowl at each other for a moment until Braid opens the door w  
and jerks his head to the side. "Take it in," he barks at me.

ds are        Relief whooshes through me, but I keep my face demure as I give hi  
d up        nod. "Whatever you think is best."

look        As soon as I step inside, he shuts the door behind me and points. "St  
ahead. Be quick about it."

1y free        Just for good measure, I curtsy again. "Yes, sir."

und        I hurry forward, feeling their eyes on my back as I go, making  
of the        apprehension prick down my tense muscles. I'm in some sort of panele  
1 at my        antechamber, dim from the blocked windows, and the darker lighting c  
my unease.

three—        Forcing my steps to stay unhurried, I head straight like the guard dir  
ealing        the metal pots shifting with my every step. When I get through the doc  
on the        and enter a stubby hallway, finally out of view from the guards, I relea  
tense breath.

and he        I got inside. Now, I just need to find these Oreans.

rows.        The door to my right is boarded up, so I head for the one to the left.  
re        get closer, my eyes drift to the black handle that swoops up like a sinis  
m here        grin. For some reason, that pinched feeling in my veins expands and st  
pumping furiously instead.

air. He        "It's just a creepy entrance," I murmur to myself, but I really wish E  
was with me so she could play off the nefarious feeling with a joke abo  
m. "I        decor.

id as he        Gripping the tablecloth's corners in one hand, I force myself to turn  
knob and walk inside. As soon as I'm through, the door shuts automati  
behind me, and my heart leaps up to my throat when it clicks shut.

should        I'm left in a dark and narrow space, coming face-to-face with an om  
wall.

It's not original to the house, that much is obvious by the way it affi  
awkwardly to the ceiling and the ill-fitting connection to the adjoining  
It's made of thick stone bricks that should be on the exterior rather tha  
inside here. And as if that weren't strange enough, there's a crisscross

t crack. strips that stretch across the entire thing, reminding me of the iron cage bolted over graves to keep robbers at bay.

ft As I stare at it, my palms go slick with sweat. My heart keeps snagging my chest, getting caught in the tangle of adrenaline and trepidation, but so, something draws me forward.

ider I eat up the short distance until I stand directly in front of it. Goosebumps scatter down my arms, and my ears begin to ring, but when I reach up and my finger graze over a brick, I realize my hands aren't sweaty after all. A gold-touch that's come up to the surface of my skin to slick my palms.

raight I leave a gold streak against the stone like dripping wax, but it's nearly overrun with rotted lines. They start stretching and rooting around through the liquid in erratic spasms, and my veins thump in response.

ed Something is wrong here. Strange.

leopens My brow furrows when I see the gilt rot crawl into the crevices of the brick, digging through the clefts, searching and sifting like it's trying to get right through the wall to reach the other side.

rway I quickly call the magic back to me, but it's slow to react. It seems to be grudgingly lift away from the stone in strings before wrapping around my wrist in thin, rigid bracelets. I have to temper the liquid still slicking my palms too, but the rot writhes over them, stretching up off my fingertips and stems reaching for the sun.

As I ter Balling my hands into fists, I squeeze tight, my arms shaking with the effort.

arts The magic doesn't want to go.

lmonie It wants to burst out, to stretch back to the wall and delve through the mortar between the bricks. I'm able to shove it back only because I've practiced so much and learned how to deny its seductive call.

the But it isn't easy.

cally I'm not sure I want to know what's on the other side of that wall.

inous I just want to find the Oreans and get the hell out of here, then tell Wally everything once I get back out.

My gaze lingers for another moment before I turn away.

xes To my left, I find a staircase rising up, and I hurry over to it. I ascend the walls. carpeted steps with near-silent feet, noticing the worn tread that's turned the runner a muddied gray.

of iron At the top of the stairs, I come to a corridor. The lighting is dusty, the walls partially boarded windows making everything take on a drab hue that s

es oftento the walls. There are at least half a dozen doors in front of me, and the corridor veers off into another part of the house at the end.

ing in It's going to take me a very long time to search this whole place by  
t even and time is breathing down my neck. Velida is going to be looking for  
umps Lord Cull is going to arrive tonight for dinner.

to let I have to hurry.

. It's Every room I check is an empty bedroom, just like my search in the  
rly manor. Except here, they're stagnant and dusty from disuse. Left aban  
ugh some of them stripped of their mattresses or other furniture. I can't hel  
notice how quiet it is, the tense silence coiling my nerves even tighter.

But the further away I get from the wall, the more my power calms—  
which makes me even *more* anxious, *more* confused.

ie I'm just about to turn another door handle when I hear footsteps con  
o go from the corner up ahead. I don't even have time to consider what to d  
o laden with a heavy tray.

my "Hello," I greet with a smile before I heft up my sack. "I have to del  
y these, but I'm not sure where to go. Is it that way?" I ask, motioning to  
s like the corridor she just came from.

ie Dark eyes flick down to my haul before she nods. Then she quickly  
me by, stealing a look over her shoulder and looking just as twitchy as  
before she disappears down the stairs.

*That's comforting.*

ie Steeling myself, I retrace her steps, cutting to the right at the interse  
with it, corridor. Instead of more doorways, this space opens up to a parlor. W  
once were stately windows are now boarded-up frames. The carpet is c  
with black and gray swirls, and there's a collection of sofas and chairs  
a cold fireplace.

√ick One of these chairs is occupied by a guard. He's got his legs prope  
the footrest, and he's jabbing at his teeth with a wooden pick, looking  
thoroughly bored. He spots me instantly and huffs out a breath. "Didn'  
d the just leave?"

ed the I pause with a blink. "That was a different servant, sir."

Another huff. "What do you want?"

ie I lift the sack, letting it clang. "Chamber pots. I was told to deliver tl  
sticks unless you'd rather?"

ie His lip curls in a disgusted sneer. “Nice try. I’m not a fuckin’ servant  
can do it yourself.”

myself, Triumph beats through my chest, though I dip my head meekly. “Of  
me course.”

and These chamber pots are really effective.

With yet another huff expelling out of him, he slaps his feet to the floor  
and then heaves himself out of the chair. I follow behind him as he wanders  
other across the parlor and through a private antechamber. We stop just in front  
of a door, and he tugs at a key that’s caught on a loop at his belt. As soon  
done, gets it free, he shoves it into the lock, making anticipation squeeze around  
p but me.

— *Please, please be here...*

He shoves open the door. “Make it quick.”

ring I barely remember to nod at him before I plunge into the dark space.  
o soon as I’m through, he slams the door shut behind me and turns the key

arms That would have doused me with panic at one time, but not anymore.  
Because now, I have power and control. Now, I’m not caged or trapped.

iver But...someone else is.

ward *Dozens* of someones.

And every single one of them has blunt ears.

passes I found the Oreans.

I feel

cting

hat

ornate

around

d up on

t you

hem...



His lip curls in a disgusted sneer. “Nice try. I’m not a fuckin’ servant. You can do it yourself.”

Triumph beats through my chest, though I dip my head meekly. “Of course.”

These chamber pots are really effective.

With yet another huff expelling out of him, he slaps his feet to the floor and then heaves himself out of the chair. I follow behind him as he walks across the parlor and through a private antechamber. We stop just in front of a door, and he tugs at a key that’s caught on a loop at his belt. As soon as he gets it free, he shoves it into the lock, making anticipation squeeze around me.

*Please, please be here...*

He shoves open the door. “Make it quick.”

I barely remember to nod at him before I plunge into the dark space. As soon as I’m through, he slams the door shut behind me and turns the key.

That would have doused me with panic at one time, but not anymore. Because now, I have power and control. Now, I’m not caged or trapped.

But...someone else is.

*Dozens* of someones.

And every single one of them has blunt ears.

I found the Oreans.



## CHAPTER 45

AUREN

**T**his must've been a grand bedroom at one time. Maybe it was even where Lord Cull himself slept. I'm guessing the large size is why they're keeping the Oreans here—they can fit them all behind a locked door.

Now I know why the mattresses were taken from some of the other bedrooms. The original furnishings in here seem to have been gutted in to fit the mattresses along the floor from wall to wall. There are no dressers, no chairs or vanities. Just the pilfered mattresses, clumps of blankets, and empty food trays.

While the room is big, it's heavily damaged. To my right, there's a crack in the plaster that reaches all the way to the ceiling, gathering in the corner a cobweb. Small bits that broke off from the wall lie forgotten on the floor like loose coins fallen from pockets.

There's hardly any light in here, save for the weak sunshine trying to stream in from the lone window that's been buried behind wooden boards. Yet despite the dimness, I can see the curled bodies of the Oreans. Most of them are sleeping, mashed up together, heads tucked down and ears on display.

My blood pumps through my body like a drum.

The smell hits me then, so much worse than just stale air. The odor of dozens of bodies cramped into one space and being forced to do their business with almost no privacy. There's a bathroom to the right, but it's been partially caved in, the wall crumbled down and beams blocking the doorway.

I venture in further, feeling like needles are prickling the back of my neck. My eyes dart around the room, and I try to count all the people I see, but there are dozens of them. Seven huddled on one mattress, eight tucked under another, and there's three more mattresses with even more lumps of bodies on them. I count ten people leaning against the walls and more scattered along the wood floor with balled-up blankets. There's at least forty—maybe fifty.

My gaze swings to the person nearest me.

I gently set down the heap of chamber pots, and they clack noisily against the floor, though only a few people stir. I quickly walk over to the man propped in the corner, who's staring at the sliver of window showing through the boards. He has thin gray hair and loose skin hanging from jaw to nose like a rooster's wattle, but his body is buried beneath thick furs, like he's used to living in the cold.

I kneel down in front of him, gaze smoothing over his blunt ears.

"Are you okay?" I ask quietly, not wanting to startle him.

When he doesn't look away from the window, I gently reach out and touch his arm.

The man's head abruptly flops against his shoulder, and then the rest of his body pitches sideways. I jerk backwards as he lands in a heap on the floor, the shock coursing through me like a rushing river that roars through my ears and floods my veins.

I stare at him in horror. His eyes are still staring at that window. Neck limp. Body limp. Eyes unblinking.

Dead.

I scramble back, my gaze flying around the room, wondering—but I don't see someone else moving. Hear another person cough. They're not all dead.

But...

Maybe they're not all alive, either.

Kneeling down once again, I gently check the man over. There are no marks on him that I can see. No wounds, no obvious reason for his death.

When  
I  
reach  
out  
to

order  
them,  
and

crack in  
the  
floor,

to come  
to  
them  
at  
last.

*What the hell happened to him?*

of I straighten up, determined to check everyone else. I start hurrying c  
where the people sleep, but as I get closer, I see a man's head turn, eye  
t's locking on to me, and I get a strange feeling. Something about him see  
ne odd.

"It's alright," I tell him. "I'm—"

r neck. A loud bang against the door makes me jump. "Let's go!" the guard  
ut outside barks.

on *Dammit!*

odies My gaze swings back to the Orean, to his greasy hair and fur-lined c  
:d "I'm so sorry," I say in a rush. "I'm going to try and help get you all o  
io, here. Can you tell me when Cull brought you here? Is he going to forc  
to be his servants? How many—"

"Wench! Don't make me come in there!" the guard shouts.

gainst I grind my teeth in frustration, but I know I have to go.

I I notice that several more of the Oreans have sat up now and are loo  
hrough me. "We'll get you out of here," I tell them quietly before I force myse  
eck turn and hurry back. I can't delay any longer or risk being caught.

's When I get to the door, I rap my knuckles on the wood, and the guar  
instantly swings it open. As soon as I file out, he slams it shut behind r  
turning in place.

"Took you long enough," he says through his scowl. "You having a  
l shake look at the traitors?"

My brow dips into a frown before I catch myself. "Traitors?"

t of his "Haven't you heard?" he asks around the pick dangling against his s  
oor, canine. "They left. Now, Lord Cull's got them back. He's gonna break  
ars and His lips pull into a delighted sneer as he sucks on his sliver of wood.

A flash of a memory explodes behind my eyes. Of a Red Raid pirate  
ck bent. captain standing in the snow, with cruelty in his gaze and threats on his  
tongue.

*I'm going to use her. Break her.*

io. I Hot anger burns down my spine—a tingle that seems to strike again:  
dead. base of my ribbons.

"Hope I can watch," the guard snickers as he munches on his stick. 'love when Oreans are reminded that they're inferior to our species."

io I don't trust myself to talk—to keep my false subservient tone. So I  
ith. myself to dip into a curtsy instead. When I turn to walk away, I skim n

hand against his sleeve and leave the disgusting fae behind to delight in  
over to cruelty.

But I can delight in cruelty too.

I'll delight in the little drop of my magic that's now slithering its way  
ms the threads of his shirt. As I walk across the parlor, it dribbles off his chest  
and starts prowling over his skin, no bigger than a bead of sweat. The  
thinnest, smallest drip to track up his jaw, slink over his toothpick, and  
slip into his mouth.

I glance over my shoulder just as he jabs a stumpy finger against his  
clothes. His tongue like he's trying to wipe away the fetid metal he suddenly tastes  
out of the droplet is already sliding down his throat, already sinking down into  
e you gut. There, the gilt rot will slowly spread over time, eating away the lining  
with heavy roots that twist and dig.

Just before I turn the corner, his hand jerks down to his stomach, prodding  
feeling the first pinch there, and then, I'm out of sight.

Out of mind.

But my magic won't be out of his body anytime soon.

It'll be slow.

Painful.

Instead of watching someone else break, he can watch his own body  
ne, key from the inside out.

Maybe I should feel regret for that. But I don't. The gold-touch, the  
good fae *and* Oorean heritage that I have—it makes me feel gruesome satisfaction.

Yet that satisfaction is cut short when I suddenly hear rushing footsteps  
sharp lot of footsteps—and heading in this direction. I quickly dart down the  
them.” corridor and jerk open the first bedroom door I get to and slip inside.

I leave the door cracked, gaze peeking out just in time to see more guards  
stomping their way down the corridor. “Hurry up,” one of them barks.

Four of them pass, heading down the same way I just came. I hold my  
s breath to listen to the muffled voices, but when I can't pick up on their words  
I creep out of the bedroom and hurry back to the corner wall and cock my  
st the head.

I hear the tail end of the rotten gut guard's words. “Supposed to stay  
“I do Someone else answers, his voice clearer. “Yeah. We don't know what  
want to do with them, so stay at your post for now.”

“When's he coming?”

“Just arrived at the other house. Wants them gathered up here.”

n his            My heart leaps into my throat.  
                  He's back. Lord Cull is already *here*—  
                  I hear movement, so I quickly dart back into the bedroom, peering th  
y up            the sliver of the closed door. My pulse pounds hard, a racket that clang  
ollar            against my hollow bones. I wait seconds.  
                  Minutes.  
l then            It sucks the life out of me to have to stay frozen, waiting, when ever  
                  in me screams to hurry. To run.  
;                Then, sound picks back up, drowning out my own anxious thrummi  
. But            I go still when I see two of the guards round the corner and head away  
o his            me.  
ing             Behind them is a stream of hunching, shuffling Oreans being led do  
corridor two-by-two.  
obably        *Fuck.*  
                  The guard's voice repeats in my head. *He's going to break them.*  
                  I need to get them out. I need to help them before it's too late.  
                  Belatedly, I wish I'd thought to ask what kind of magic Cull has, so  
I could have the upper hand with that knowledge. But maybe I can just  
with the guards. Maybe I can get the Oreans out before Cull comes into  
r spoil        manor.  
                  Steeling myself, my every muscle goes taut with anticipation as I wa  
rot, the spring.  
ction.         I see the last two guards take up the rear of the group, and one of the  
eps. A         shoves at an Orean's back. "Hurry up!"  
                  The other guard laughs as the person stumbles.  
                  With lips pressed tight, I dart out from the room and rush up behind  
uards         and then I call to my magic.  
                  It's more than ready to answer.  
ay             I reach up, hands splayed behind both of their heads, and ropes of ve  
' words, gold whip out from my palms and hook around their necks like nooses  
my             solidifying metal cinches them so tight that the only noises they're able  
make are cut-off gasps.  
r here?"      The ropes jerk them back, stealing their voices, their air.  
at he'll      One of them falls to his knees, the worn carpet muffling his fall as h  
grapples at the rope, though it's already hardening, tightening, his gaze  
around wildly.  
                  My power sings.

The second one topples toward the wall, ready to smack into it, but it can't be far too loud, and I don't want to alert the others.

Quick as a blink, I jerk his noose backwards, making the dangled end behind him bend to catch him. His body doesn't make a sound as the rope slowly lowers him to the floor.

I stand over both guards, panic blotting their eyes, wheezes coming from their constricted throats as their faces turn purple.

Ahead of us, the group still files forward, no one the wiser.

Quietly, I reach out and open the nearest bedroom door. Then, I send another stream pouring from my hands to wrap around the strangled guard's ankles and drag them into the room. I shut the door just as quickly, leaving them to writhe.

*Two down.*

The Oreans at the end of the line don't even realize there's no one behind their backs anymore. They're also much farther ahead, so I race to catch up without stomping down the corridor.

But before I can reach them, the group veers. Instead of continuing straight down the main stairwell, they're going through a panel in the wall I had noticed before.

A hidden door.

Everyone is heading through it and down the cramped stairs that must have served as a servant's passage at one time.

I hesitate, and then make a split-second decision. Yanking off my goggles, I toss them into the corridor and then follow the Oreans into the enclosed stairwell that spirals down.

When I catch up to the back of the group, I slow my steps and quickly muss my hair to cover my glamoured pointed ears and make it look like I'm as bedraggled as the others.

But with every step I take, I feel that fast thud in my veins return, feeling like my heart get bloody and beaten as it thrills behind the rungs of my chest. High-pitched ringing starts to toll within my skull.

*What is happening?*

When I reach the bottom and into a tight corridor, I glance down at my slick palms. Rot has overrun my gold almost completely. The usually tickling flying veins are more like a mass of tree roots. It's lifting up and off my palm, stretching, *reaching*—

“Where are the others?”

that'll I jump, head slashing up, and barely stop myself in time before running into the Oreans in front of me. Everyone's halted in the cramped corridor and the two guards at the front are glaring at me, their gazes tossing over my shoulder, obviously looking for the other two missing guards. I make a dash of cowering, chin tucked against my chest. The guards share a look, but they yank open the door and start shoving the Oreans through.

I nearly stumble as I walk, hands shaking as I contain the writhing rot between my fingers. My pulse races so fast I worry my blood will beat its way right out of my veins and spill onto the floor.

As soon as I'm inside the room, the guard slams the door shut behind me and then shoves me against the wall, but I barely feel it. Because power is swelling beneath my palms, roots lifting, wrapping around my fingers like rings. My whole body feels charged.

The rot is flexing, and there's an excited urgency to it that goes all the way down to my chest. It hisses and prods, like it wants to rip through my body.

When I glance to my right, I see that wall—that iron-clad stone wall that has been straight through the center of the room.

Except this time, I'm on the other side. I look around at the grand entry hall, and panic spreads its wings and takes flight, leaving me to be whipped in its back current. Because a magnet of *wrongness* pounds through me, even as a *rightness* calls me forward.

*wrong, right*

*wrong, right*

*wrong, right*

*wrong, right...*

The wallpaper is red like blood. Not as bright as the marble floor in the new manor, but a deep, dark red, like a murderous secret done in the dark. But what hooks my attention is the crack in the floor that divides the room and a broken roof that seems to snarl up at the sky.

Chunks of walls have formed boulders on the floor, and the boarded windows are shattered, their glass still littering the stained marble. But it's not stained. It's...

My eyes trace the path, back to the large crack in the floor that spreads and then gapes wide open.

There's a buzzing, a thundering. Or maybe it's only in my ears. Shadows dot my tunneled vision, but I see...*I see...*

A commotion has my eyes jerking upward. To watch someone stalk me from the other side of the room.



ing And then all the breath steals from my lungs. Ripped out of me like  
lor, clutching my hair and tearing it from my scalp.

er my My hand flies to my mouth, rot cloying against me as my eyes refus  
i show blink.

it then “Slade...”

The whisper splits from my lips.

ot He walks past a pillar, the open doorway spilling in grayed light beh  
its him, making me squint. He’s dressed in all black, save for a red wrap c  
fabric tucked into his collar like blood spilling from a slit throat.

d me I start to go forward, to get to him, my mouth opening to call his nar  
r is because he’s here. He’s *here*, and he found me somehow and he can he  
like and—

And.

he way One heartbeat, I flew.

ody. The next, I plummet.

. Or maybe it’s the world that crashes around me. Because when he c  
into better view, so does everything else.

d takes His stature was similar, but...

ism of He has a slightly different stride. Differences in his muscular frame.  
black hair is trimmed so short it’s not even half an inch past his scalp,  
beard is thick. The look of threat on his face is familiar though...except  
fact that he only has one eye.

The other socket is covered. Leather strap hooked from his forehead  
pointed ear, an onyx stone set over the spot where his eye should be. L  
the his pale face disappear beneath the eyepatch, the skin around it a dull g  
ark. color.

om, *Not Slade, not Slade, not Slade...*

The relief I felt turns into horrible, churning anguish.

-up Because everything clicks into place with shattering, dizzying, terrif  
...no. awareness.

The room. The broken floor. The rumbling noise. The wrongness of  
ids and and...

“Lord Cull,” a guard greets.

dows The other Oreans are lined up against the tattered wall beside me, th  
guards at attention, more of them filing in from the opposite end of the

out Something screams inside of me as all the shattered pieces of realiza  
swirl like a cyclone.

hands     Can't breathe. Can't blink.  
           My gaze follows him across the cracked floor that cinches together  
e to     his steps, closing the gap without a thought. He walks over it, boots ec  
           in the broken room that seems to meld around his presence.  
           But there's one spot that doesn't close.  
           Doesn't meld.

mind     The widest part of the cracked floor. The part where shadows seem  
of     hover over it.  
           My eyes snap back to him, but he's staring at one Orean in particula  
ne,     when I follow his gaze, my knees threaten to buckle.

elp me    There, standing with the rest of the bedraggled Oreans, is a woman.  
           She has black hair tied loose and crooked over her shoulder. Pale sk  
           Scared, green eyes. Her petite figure trembles against the wall she cow  
           against.  
           Recognition slams through me like a hammer to my gut.

omes     No.  
           No.  
           My eyes fly to the other Oreans, all of them dressed in their furs and  
His     cloaks. Shaking beneath their wintry clothes.

and his   I want to heave. To scream.  
at the    They're all here. *All* of them.  
           *Great Divine...*

l to     Every single villager that should be tucked away in Drollard, hidden  
ines in   their frozen village. They're *here*, in Annwyn.

gray     And that crack in the floor, that rumbling that gurgles out of it, the  
           shadows that hover overhead...  
           *It's the rip.*  
           The rip in the world that tore through the air when Slade and his fat  
ying     magic collided. The rip they all got sucked into.

it all,   The group we've come to rescue are the villagers from Orea. And th  
           woman that Lord Cull is stalking toward?  
           *Slade's mother.*  
           Because...I'm not just at a random nobleman's house.

e     And these aren't random Oreans I've come to help save.

room.    My attention locks on to the person stalking toward Elore, and bile r  
ation    into my throat.  
           I thought he was Slade.

under  
hoing

But he's not.  
Not at all.  
Lord Cull is Slade's *father*.

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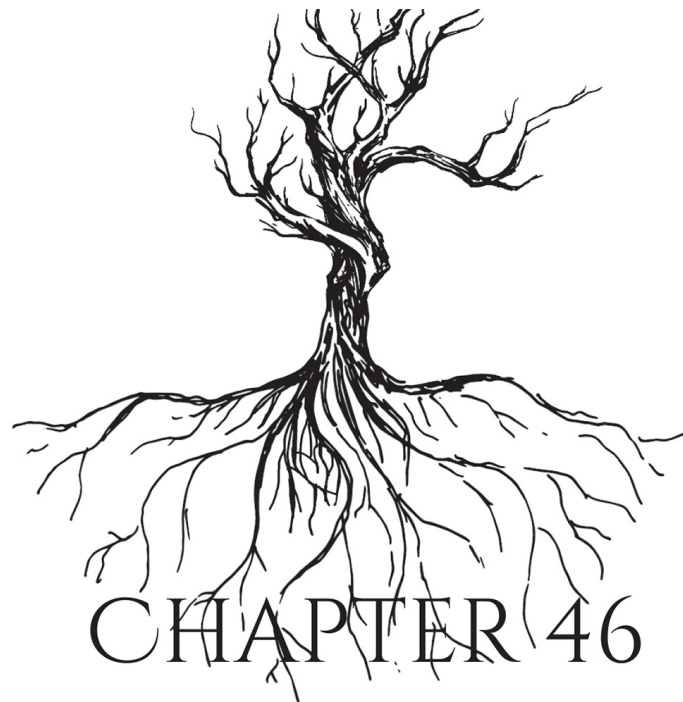
ie

ises

But he's not.

Not at all.

Lord Cull is Slade's *father*.



## CHAPTER 46

### SLADE

**T**he bright morning sun filters in from the window, catching fragments of dust in its glare. I'm behind my desk, while Isalee and Warko are in the middle of the office, sitting across from each other in wire chairs, talking finances. I toss down a report about the collapsed mine at my aching chest.

It hurts like a son of a bitch.

Even through my shirt, I can feel the raised veins of rot protruding, the swollen shell of my blackened heart.

Probably not fucking good.

When I glance up, I notice Isalee staring at me, so I quickly drop my head. "I'm fine," I assure her before she can fuss, but there's a frown pulled between her brows that doesn't go away.

There's a frown on my face that doesn't go away either.

Even with all the sleep I was able to get, I couldn't open a rip. I fuckin' tried. For hours, despite Ryatt's protests. And now, the spot at the center of my heart that's a sickly brown color has started to spread. It's peeling like deadened flakes.

*I can't heal that, Your Majesty.*

A knock at the door yanks me from my thoughts. “Enter.”

It strides King Thold. His green viper is draped around the back of his neck, tail hanging down his chest like a scarf. He’s not wearing his crown today, but he doesn’t have to. His very demeanor screams authority. He sweeps around the room, while two of his guards stand at his back.

“You’ve been a difficult man to find,” he tells me.

“King Thold, how are you today?” Warken greets politely as he and I get to their feet.

“It’s been three days, Ravinger,” he says, ignoring Warken as he persists with his stare. “How much longer are you going to make me wait for your answer?”

From the corner of my eye, I see Isalee smirk as her prediction about making Thold wait comes to fruition. Smart woman.

I get to my feet and come around the desk. “We were just finishing our discussion.”

He looks between the three of us with impatience. “And?”

“We have decided to accept the treaty of our realliance,” I tell him, and watch relief wash over his face. “But...we have terms.”

His snake flicks out its tongue. “What terms?” he grits out.

“The oil in exchange for your food imports,” Warken interjects. “It is no longer part of the deal.”

Anger fills Thold’s eyes. “That is unacceptable. It was part of the agreement.”

“And now it’s not,” I say with a shrug.

His jaw clenches. “I want the oil at the new cost I was quoted by Sir

“You’re not getting it.”

I don’t tell him it’s because the mine collapsed and we *can’t* get him the oil.

“This is madness, Ravinger,” he says with a jerk of his head. “Your kingdom *needs* my food.”

“Yes, and so does your kingdom,” I counter. “Consider this my gift. I am leaving you and yours undisturbed, despite you breaking our previous treaties as well as your participation in the Conflux. I will remind you that we have retaliated against *all* other kingdoms involved.”

Thold tenses his hands like he wants to wring my neck. His snake hisses like he wants to sink his fangs in. If it weren’t for my magic, he’d probably let it.

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igback  
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“This is our proposed alternative,” Isalee says, drawing his attention. “We all know that King Ravinger could very well take First Kingdom under his own rule. Yet despite your broken treaties and the Conflux debacle, all we can do is gaze requests is that you send your imports to Fourth as previously done in our original agreement, as proof to us of your dedication to this alliance. That was broken, King Thold,” she tells him firmly. “And that takes time to Isalee. The issue of the oil can be readdressed when we’ve had that time to mend fractures between our kingdoms.”

He’s quiet for a moment, chewing on our proposal, and I’m sure it’s a bitter lump to swallow, but swallow it he does. “Fine. But I want the next shipment of oil solely sent to First.”

Not like I’m going to be sending any to any of the other kingdoms a. Even when we do get our mine up and running again.

I glance at my Premiers, pretending to consider. Warken looks downcast and pensive before he and Isalee give a nod to me.

“Done,” I tell him before reaching out a hand.

Thold eyes it, and the snake hisses. “I think you’ll forgive me if I do shake, King Rot.”

I smirk and slip my hands into my pockets. “We’ll dine tonight instead of tell him. “Before you leave Fourth tomorrow.”

It’s both an invitation and a nudge to get him out of my kingdom. Although, I’m sure he doesn’t want to stay here anyway.

“Of course.” He gives my Premiers a nod and then turns and walks out, guards following him.

“Judd.” After the door closes, Isalee sighs. “Well, that’s done. With his ship coming in, plus the extra hands we have to make Fourth start producing food, we can make up for the losses until we’re more self-sustainable.”

“We’ll still have to ration for a bit longer,” Warken adds as he sits back down. “Barley is overseeing that, but we’re in a *much* better position than we were before. Even with no further cooperation with the rest of the kingdom, so long as we have First, plus our own efforts, we should be able to make good on our promises.”

“How long until we get the mine fixed?” Isalee asks, gesturing to the report on my desk.

“They’re still assessing the extent of the collapse,” I say. I can’t prove it, but I think Kaila did it, but I have a fucking hunch that she’s behind it. “Do you know

l. “We how morale is?” I ask Warken, since he was going over the messages f  
r his the foreman.

. he “Better. They’ve received their higher stipend and were also told the  
the getting a percentage of the oil profits once the mine is up and running a  
rust With that incentive, they’re working hard to get it repaired as quickly a  
repair. can while ensuring everyone stays safe.”

end the “Good.” I look to both my Premiers. “You’ve handled everything  
flawlessly. Having you two run this kingdom was the best decision I e  
. a made as a king.”

ext “Don’t,” Isalee retorts, her eyes as cutting as her sharp tone. “You a  
to die, so you certainly are not to start speaking your grateful farewells  
nyway. “But—”

right “Yes, yes,” she says, waving a regal hand at me. “Warken and I are  
aware of your potential demise. We came up with a contingency plan a  
requested, which you can find in that report there on your desk, and the  
end of it.”

n’t I barely hold in a snort.

ad,” I Just then, Judd comes in with a grin on his face and leans against the  
doorway. When he continues to stare at me, looking giddy, I roll my ey  
“Are you going to tell me what it is, or are you just going to keep stanc  
there with that look on your face?”

“Option three,” he replies. “Come see for yourself.”

out, his I look to the others, but Warken shrugs. When Judd turns to lead the  
we follow him out. He heads downstairs, through the main entry, and t  
ment the front doors of the castle. Outside, he doesn’t stop, boots clapping d  
g more the cobblestone drive as he veers past the obelisk statue ahead. But rig  
, on the bridge that leads over the moat, I see a gathering of people. Anc

ack —

nan we A roar sounds that makes me jolt to a stop.

doms, *Argo.*

ike it People rush out of the way as the huge timberwing nearly tramples t  
order to get to me. He’s in front of me in a flash, his maw pressing aga  
e my side, nose chucking up my arm to force me to pet him and nearly  
knocking me over in the process. I bark out a laugh, my chest swelling  
ve instant relief and happiness.

now He continues to nudge my arm, and I scratch him on his favorite spc  
“You fucking overgrown hawk, I’m happy to see you. What are you do



from here?" I murmur. "Let me get a look at you." I let my hands glide over feathers, checking for his injuries. It fucking killed me to leave him behind. It'd be that desert, broken and bloody. Now, he seems so much better, which I understand, considering the gravity of his wounds.

as they Ryatt comes striding over from where he was gathered with the people on the bridge. He's in full army gear, hair slick with sweat, so I know he's been down at the barracks probably running more training exercises. But right now, he's accompanying a girl in her late teens and an even smaller girl who's clutching her hand.

re not They have short black hair and brown skin with cool undertones, both of their faces carrying a heart shape with a widow's peak right at the center of their hairlines. They're looking around the courtyard nervously, and both are wearing long gray robes—not unlike the religious ones Queen Isolte has worn at the Conflux, which puts me on edge.

at's the My brother notices the look on my face and gives the smallest shake of his head before they come to a stop in front of me. "King Ravinger," he bows. "I'd like you to meet Shea and Wynn. They're sisters from Second Kingdom."

yes. I nod, but I notice that the older one's hands are trembling and she's looking frightened to look at me. She bows deeply and then tugs her sister's hand until she bows too.

way, "Shea was at the docks with her little sister when Argo was brought toward passage," Ryatt tells me as both of them straighten back up.

lown The little girl reaches out and runs her small hand over Argo's feathers and I blink in surprise as he nudges her with a low purr. He usually doesn't tolerate many people—not even children. The only person I've seen him warm up to other than me is Auren.

"What kind of services?" I ask curiously.

hem in The girl looks up at her sister, and Shea hesitates a moment before answering, "My little sister has healing magic, Your Majesty. She can heal any animal's wounds."

with My brows jump up, gaze immediately going to the thick wrapping around Argo's wing. I haven't heard of anyone having true healing magic in Caladonia a very long time.

it. "It's all better now," the little girl, Wynn, says. "I healed him every time he came back." As if to show me, she claps her hands.

his hands like she's about to play a children's clapping game, but when he  
hind in hands point out again, they're coated with some sort of fine powder. It  
I don't look almost like sand if it weren't for its bright blue hue.

"If she may...?" Shea says softly.

ple on With a nod from me, she reaches forward and gently unwraps the bi  
was around Argo's wing. When the last layer is peeled back, I see the wound  
ght almost completely gone. Only a few missing feathers and a reddened s  
rl area show through his bare skin.

th of Argo, as if he's well used to this routine, extends his wing and holds  
er of for Wynn, lowering it slightly so she can reach. I watch as the little girl  
er of her palms together, letting the blue powder dust over his wound. The n  
oth are it lands on his skin, the powder glows slightly and then sinks in, like a  
ad sucking up water. Within seconds, the scab is healed over, the skin no  
red.

e of his Amazement travels through everyone around me. Seeing it work in j  
egins. is extraordinary. The fact that Wynn is so young and yet in control of s  
powerful magic is impressive.

to too Argo trills, and the little girl giggles and pets his head, not seeming  
nd mind a bit that his huge fangs are just inches from her tiny arm. "There  
nd wing is all better," she says with a grin. "I did his leg first. A little bit e  
day on the ship. Then I started on the wing. He flew us the rest of the v  
to the here. Shea thought it would be better if I showed you the last part of th  
healing."

ers, "It didn't affect his flying," Shea says nervously. "It's just best to ha  
proof of these things. But as you can see, his leg is also perfectly heale

esn't That became clear the moment he nearly knocked me over in his rus  
m get to me.

"I'm in your debt," I say as Argo nudges me again. "Anything you r  
tell my Premiers and it shall be paid."

heal Shea bites her lip, but then says, "Your Majesty, we desire not coin,  
permission to stay."

round Surprise flashes through me. "To stay in Fourth?"  
Shea nods and wrings her hands. "We...do not adhere to the strict  
)rea in upbringing of Second's faith. We would like to have permission to live  
permanently in Fourth. And while my sister has this magic and is willi  
day on use it to help others, we ask that it not be announced or exploited. I wa  
s her to be allowed to enjoy her childhood. Whatever she has left of it."

r I don't like what I see as I read between the lines.  
would "Is it *only* animals she can heal?" I ask.  
Shea shifts on her feet and then starts to nod, but Wynn cuts in. "No  
says matter-of-factly. "I can heal people too."  
nding Shea tosses her a heavy look that tells me she didn't want her to say  
nd is It's clear that these two have been through something and that Wynn w  
cab taken advantage of, probably forced to use her magic.  
I know what that's like.  
; it out "I will grant both requests, as well as making sure you are very well  
l rubs compensated," I promise them, and I don't miss the pure relief that wa  
noment over the elder sister's face. "However, I do have a request as well, but  
plant that—a *request*, not an order." I kneel down in front of the little girl, a  
longer dark brown eyes peer up at me through her lashes. "You can say no, ar  
harm will come to you, and you are still very much welcome here, oka  
person She nods shyly.  
such a "There is a woman here who's in a very bad way. She was wounded  
she hasn't been healing very well. Would you go to her? See if you co  
to help?"  
; his Wynn looks up at her sister, and they exchange a look. I'm not sure  
; very they communicate, but when the girl looks back at me, she nods.  
way Relief floods through me, though I try not to pressure her and simpl  
e smile. "Thank you." I get to my feet and turn to look at my Premiers. "  
that they're taken care of—have rooms prepared for them in the castle  
ive bring her to Lady Rissa's room right away."  
d." I hope it's not too fucking late. I hope this little girl has enough mag  
; h to help, but I don't know if even this unexpected miracle can save Rissa.  
last report was grim but clear—she's on her deathbed.  
equest, A tug on my sleeve has me glancing back down at Wynn. She's lool  
at me with wide eyes that suddenly seem sad. When she tugs my sleev  
but again, I take the hint and lower myself in front of her. "I can feel your  
too," she whispers, and I go still as her hand lifts to my chest. The secc  
grazes her fingers over my bulbous heart, her eyes widen and she pulls  
"I can't heal that, Your Majesty. There's nothing to heal."  
; Nothing to heal—because my heart is already dead? Already past th  
ng to of returning to normal?  
nt her Rot slumps against my neck as if in apology.

Everyone around us has gone quiet and tense. That tension pulls inside me like a muscle ready to snap, but I don't let it show in my expression," she I clear my throat and straighten back up to my feet. "Don't you worry about me," I say, giving her a smile that doesn't reach my eyes. "They call me King Rot, remember? Rot doesn't need healing."

Wynn looks at me dubiously, and I can feel the others eyeing me too. I shake my head, letting them know the topic is closed.

I hitch up my chin at the girl. "Make sure you get a good room—your pick of the empty ones."

She hesitates for another moment, but then her sister takes her hand. "Thank you, Your Majesty," Shea says with a curtsy before she leads her sister away, following the Premiers.

Wynn gives Argo a little wave, and he croons after her, looking as if he's a lost puppy when he watches her disappear inside the castle.

"Look at you." I shake my head at him with wry amusement. "Hit with a measly arrow, and you've gone soft."

He snorts at me, getting snot on my sleeve.

Judd grins. "Ha! Good boy!" He moves to pet Argo on the shoulder, but my timberwing lets off a sudden and ferocious growl at him. Judd stumbles back, nearly falling on his ass.

I smirk while Argo looks on smugly, licking his chops like he's imagining taking a bite out of Judd.

"Rude," Judd grumbles.

"Alright, beast," I tell Argo with a pat to his flank. "Go to the Perch and have a nice long rest."

He flicks his tongue out and then walks far enough away before bolting into the sky. I watch as he flies around the ebony castle, wings spreading. He veers around a spiked turret before disappearing behind it, heading toward the base of the mountain.

"I've never heard of healing magic that powerful before," Ryatt murmurs, frowning at the door of the castle.

"Sounds to me like they were at that port for a reason," Judd says. "I'm trying to flee Second Kingdom. Someone probably knew about the girl's special ability and was using her."

I nod in agreement. At the Conflux, King Merewen forced his own soldiers to keep up the barrier between us, even as it caused the boy to fit. Any time an adult forces a child to use their power, it transports me right back to Argo.

ide of —to my own father forcing me to train until I was little more than a hu  
1. pain and exhaustion.

y My teeth grind with anger.

call “We’ll make sure no one forces her to use her magic,” I say, and I c  
Ryatt’s eyes on me. “And, once she’s more comfortable, get names. I v  
, but I know who used her.”

Judd looks at me with glee. “I’m on it.”

u get “Is Os with Rissa?” I ask him.

“Yeah. Hasn’t left.”

Nodding, I turn and start to make my way back toward the castle. I s  
ls her be there with him, just in case it doesn’t work.

“We’ll come too,” Ryatt says as he and Judd catch up to walk beside

orlorn “If this doesn’t work...” Judd trails off, his tone taking on a dire ting  
My lips press thin. “I know.”

with one I fucking know.

I see it in the rare times Osrik comes out of her room. That each tim  
leaves her, he leaves another piece of himself behind.

, but “We’ll need to—”

ables A shocking, overwhelming flood of noises suddenly cuts me off. It l  
through the air and punctures through me, jolting my body.

gining A tenor of voices crowds my ears like I’m standing in the middle of  
with hundreds of people shouting all at once. I look around wildly, my  
brother and Judd doing the same thing. The guards and castle workers  
and by the stables and the bridge react much the same way, but I see nothing  
don’t know where the sounds are coming from.

ing *Is the city rioting?*

wide as “What the fuck is that?” Ryatt yells, hand on the hilt of his sword.

for the He looks like he wants to bolt for the barracks and ready the army. J  
staring at me with wide eyes. Someone at the bridge is on their knees, h  
ses, over, hands desperately covering their ears.

Maybe Judd wince. Workers slam their hands against their ears, trying to bloc  
l’s out, the whole courtyard in disarray. But there’s no one—no people st  
the castle, no source for the sound.

son to Then, one voice cuts through the rest.

ne an “*Please!*”

nnwyn My blood runs cold.

isk of      It's Auren screaming—*pleading*—with such raw desperation that it  
me stagger. Feet dug up, yanked from the ground like a weed.

“*Please!*”

an feel      I whirl around frantically, looking for her. Is it a rip? Did I manage to  
want to one and somehow not notice? Maybe a tiny tear that I didn't see, that's  
slowly expanding?

The thought of her on the other side screaming for me has me spinning  
my heel. My heart is pounding hard, rot and blood pumping through me  
and flooding me with panic.

should      “*Please!*”

“Auren!” I shout back, turning, looking. She sounds so anguished, so  
scared.

ge.          Where the fuck is she?

Movement above has my head snapping up, just as figures blast through  
the clouds. They soar down straight for us, and it suddenly all makes sense.

e he          *Queen Kaila.*

She's using her magic. Using Auren's voice from the Conflux. Using  
sounds of the fleeing crowd.

bolts          Rage locks on to my every muscle, my face twisting with pure menace  
watch her descend.

a riot,      Kaila's timberwing lands on the ebony obelisk, wings spread wide as  
talons dig into the statue, making pieces crumble. The castle workers  
down just as seven more timberwings land behind her, forming a barrier around  
ig— their queen. Kaila's beast leaps down, landing right in front of me, teeth  
bared as it roars into my face.

I don't flinch.

Kaila jumps off in a flurry of fury, her magic a cyclone of wisping vortices  
udd is that spin around her, blowing back her black hair, making her appearance  
curled look unhinged.

“*Where is he?*” she snarls, except her magic blasts it at the volume of  
hundred thousand voices all at once, making everyone else recoil, my eardrums  
k it wanting to burst right out of my head.

forming      My own magic answers in kind.

Rot shoves out and seizes her, flooding up her legs like reaching rot  
staggers, watching as it crawls up her arms, her shoulders, her neck.

Her guards all jump from their timberwings in an instant, but I have  
on their knees as soon as their feet touch the cobblestones. They writhe

makes the rot as it wraps around their bodies and infects their veins.

The black and brown lines slither up to Kaila's mouth and dip inside staining her lips and gripping her tongue. Her power suddenly cuts off, so open all the assaulting sound cuts off with it.

It's been Blessed silence rings out as the magicked voices dissipate at once. K clutches her throat in alarm, dropping to the ground. I stalk forward uning on stand over her. My rage bearing down.

My veins "How fucking *dare you.*"

My voice sounds like thunder. My vision clouded with fury that's re strike.

o Her hands are scrabbling at her throat, a wheezing, guttural noise cri out of her mouth, brown eyes wide. "Where...is...he...?" The words a graveled, like a raw throat scraped over sharp stones, leaving it to blee ough a ruined tongue.

ense. "Your brother?" I ask, leaning over her with malice. "He's fucking r in my dungeon as we speak. His body decaying, reeking, while flies fe g the his flesh just like *he fucking deserves.*"

Her defiant eyes flash, and my hand snaps out to wrap around her ne ice as I The veins in her face start to blacken, little lines shooting through the v of her eyes as my raging magic infects her. Punishes her.

is its "You spread lies about Auren. Flamed the fires of distrust and hate. catter, Orchestrated her kidnapping. Led her to an execution." My fingers tight nd her body flailing, breath failing. "You took her from me, *so I took him h you.*"

I lean down so she can taste the wrath that seeps out of me. "I will d you next to him, rotting you from within, making you writhe in fuckin; voices *agony.*"

ice Terror flashes across her face.

of a "But I'll leave your eyes and your ears, so you can watch him slowl; So you can hear his pitiful screams."

Her magic bursts out of her with one desperate puff of breath. Auren voice rings so loudly in my ears that I feel a trickle of blood start to see of them, scraping down my neck like a gouge.

ts. She I wrench her up high in the air, cutting off the last of her air. Her gu are melting into puddles of their own flesh and bubbling blood, while t them ground in front of the timberwings crumbles, making them panic and s e with two of them taking to the sky while Kaila's timberwing roars.

I'm going to kill her.  
I know it. She knows it.  
She must've been a desperate woman to come here herself like this.  
almost respect the lengths to which she's gone to get her brother, if I d  
hate her so viciously.  
My magic seeps down, down, ready to infect her with the slowest, n  
painful poison.  
But then, a timberwing suddenly lands at my side.  
I whip around in surprise, my rot slipping, just as I see Lu jump from  
back of the beast.  
*Lu? What the hell is she doing here?*  
She's bloody. Disheveled. Covered in grime. The dark brown skin a  
cheeks peeling from the chapping, cloying windchill.  
But it's her eyes that fill me with ice.  
Because never, in all the years I've known her or had her serve as ca  
in my army, have I *ever* seen such a look of fear before.  
She runs toward me, ignoring the mayhem, ignoring Kaila, gaze loci  
mine as she comes to a stop, her breaths panting out in unsustainable g  
whites "They're here! They're here and they've slaughtered *everyone*."  
My grip slips, and Kaila crumples to the ground as I turn to Lu, my  
pinning down. "*Who?*" I demand.  
My heart pounds, ears whooshing as if Kaila's magic is still filling t  
but Lu's next words are far more potent.  
"The fae," she says with stricken desperation. "The fae have invaded  
Orea."  
g  
y die.  
i's  
ep out  
ards  
he  
creech,



I'm going to kill her.

I know it. She knows it.

She must've been a desperate woman to come here herself like this. I could almost respect the lengths to which she's gone to get her brother, if I didn't hate her so viciously.

My magic seeps down, down, ready to infect her with the slowest, most painful poison.

But then, a timberwing suddenly lands at my side.

I whip around in surprise, my rot slipping, just as I see Lu jump from the back of the beast.

*Lu? What the hell is she doing here?*

She's bloody. Disheveled. Covered in grime. The dark brown skin at her cheeks peeling from the chapping, cloying windchill.

But it's her eyes that fill me with ice.

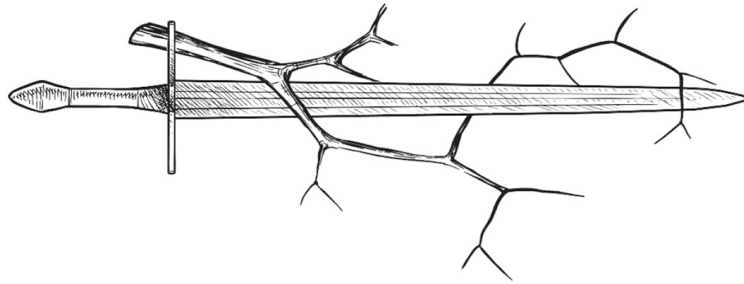
Because never, in all the years I've known her or had her serve as captain in my army, have I *ever* seen such a look of fear before.

She runs toward me, ignoring the mayhem, ignoring Kaila, gaze locked on mine as she comes to a stop, her breaths panting out in unsustainable gulps. "They're here! They're here and they've slaughtered *everyone*."

My grip slips, and Kaila crumples to the ground as I turn to Lu, my brows pinning down. "*Who?*" I demand.

My heart pounds, ears whooshing as if Kaila's magic is still filling the air, but Lu's next words are far more potent.

"The fae," she says with stricken desperation. "The fae have invaded Orea."



## CHAPTER 47

### OSRIK

**T**hey lit a candle on her bedside table. Like they're holding some mourning vigil for her, even though she hasn't even fucking die Yet.

That's what they keep saying. That word—yet. She hasn't passed yet she will. She hasn't taken her last breath—yet. Makes it sound like her is so final that her surviving isn't even a possibility anymore. Everyone waiting for that yet to catch up.

The novices keep coming in, wiping wet cloths over her fevered forehead and pressing it to her chapped lips so the water will drip into her mouth. I don't even know what time it is. I drew the curtains over the window hours ago. Blocking out the fucking gods. If they're not going to save her life they don't deserve to see her death.

Rissa whines low in her throat, and my hand tightens around her small palm, dread pooling in my stomach. "You're alright, Yellow Bell," I mumble. Like a fucking liar.

Her inhale is jagged like it's all cut up, leaving behind gashes in her throat. "Keep breathing," I tell her.

Maybe I shouldn't. The novices keep giving me sideways glances, but what the fuck do they want from me? I'm not going to just...let her give up.

"Keep going."

She takes in another labored breath that scratches up her throat with a rough rasp.

Hojat steps up beside me. “Captain, sometimes, our loved ones need hear that it’s okay for them to pass on...”

“It’s *not* okay,” I tell him.

Tell *her*.

I want her to keep fighting. If that makes me selfish, well, I never fu said I wasn’t.

We fought in life, we can fight in death.

Till the bitter end.

I don’t even notice until after he squeezes my shoulder that I didn’t him when he called her *loved one*. Didn’t correct him, because there w nothing to correct.

I love this woman.

And that admission is going to turn past tense before I can even say her in the present.

So of course I don’t fucking tell her it’s okay to pass on. It’s not oka

“You got that, Yellow Bell?” I murmur. “I don’t give you permissio  
t, but die.”

I get up from the chair and lean over her, hating the candlelight, hating death e is just way it casts all these shadows over her face. I clasp her cheeks and stroke thumbs over them. She’s still burning hot, but it’s better than cold.

“Keep fighting,” I tell her doggedly. “Fight me some more.”

1. I But I’m captain of an army. I know what it looks like when the fight  
ours someone.

Grief latches on to me like a leech, sucking the life right out of me.

“Come on, Rissa Bell. Just a little more fight. A little more time.”

We were supposed to have so much more time, but I’ll settle for a li  
all murmur. fucking settle for anything other than this. Because this? This is worse  
torture—and I would know.

lungs. “Captain Osrik?” Hojat says quietly.

I look over at him and see one of the novices handing him a vial. He  
out it, looking at me with pity.

ve in. Immediately, I stiffen. “What’s that?”

His scarred face twists with compassion. “It will help ease her passi  
She’s in pain.”

a I snap upright, hands dropping down. “No.”

“Captain—”

l to        “I said no!” My body now blocks the bed, as if I can shield her from will, if I have to. “You’re not fucking giving her that,” I snarl. “She’s a

cking      “By breath and pain,” he tells me as he walks closer, and a firm look over his expression. “She’s not going to get better, Captain Osrik. She going to die. So we can either let her suffer for several more hours or e pain and help her pass in peace.”

correct    He reaches down and I watch as he places the vial in my hand. “It’s right thing to do.”

as         Right thing.

it to      I stare at the vial. At the swirling concoction inside that we’ve used soldiers on the battlefield to put them out of their misery.

            It’s tiny in my hand but it’s the heaviest thing I’ve ever had to hold.

            I want to smash it to the ground. The only reason I don’t is because out another whimpering wheeze.

y.         Because she *is* in pain. Because she’s still fighting. Because I keep t n to       her to.

*Fuck.*

ng the     My fingers close around the glass bottle, and I turn around to look a ke my tense face. My eyes burn like I got too close to a flame. Her agonized expression sucks all the air from the room.

            I feel like a stopper suddenly yanks out of me, draining out all my re t’s left All my selfish stubbornness.

            Carefully, I sit on the edge of her bed. Brush away a strand of her ye hair and tuck it behind her ear. That flame in my eyes keeps burning.

            The candle on her bedside does too.

ttle. I’ll   Her chest rises and falls, raw breath shredding to pieces, making her than pull down harder. Making her pained whine go higher-pitched.

            My throat gets all gummed up, and my vision goes blurry, but I blin away so I can see her.

akes      Because I won’t get to keep seeing her for much longer.

ng.         She gives another whined breath, and I close my eyes, head hanging defeat draping over me. Because I hear Hojat, and I know he’s right. I her, and I know it’s time. I know I have to...let her stop.

            The fire in my eyes spreads down to my chest, and I know after this, scorched to ash. But it’s not about me. It’s about her. And I need to let stop fighting.

            My murmur is barely audible, but it’s only for us. “Okay, Yellow B

him. I Okay.  
alive.” Glancing down, I thumb off the cork, letting the mouth of the vial g  
c melds open. I stare down at the liquid inside. My hand shakes. My stomach fi  
is like it’s filled with lead.  
nd her But I lift my hand and press the vial to her plush lips, and then I tip.  
Watch the liquid start to slip toward her mouth.  
the Torment slips down mine.  
The door to her room suddenly swings open, making me jerk the via  
as I turn to look.  
on A few people file in, and I frown. “Isalee?” I say in confusion.  
The Premier nods to me, clasping her hands in front of her. “Captair  
Hojat,” she says next, looking to the mender. “I have someone I’d like  
she lets meet.”  
My brow furrows deeper as she turns and reveals two girls behind h  
elling older, maybe late teens, the other one probably not even ten. “This is V  
and her older sister, Shea.”  
I see Hojat go pale as he takes in their robes. There’s only one kingd  
t her where the people wear robes like that, and he was from there. It’s when  
got his burns.  
Isalee looks down at the younger child. “Wynn, this is Mender Hoja  
solve. that man there is Captain Osrik.”  
“Like a soldier?” Wynn asks.  
allow “Yes, exactly that.”  
I just stand here bewildered. Why the fuck would Isalee bring a child  
dying woman’s room?  
frown I watch as the girl lets go of her sister’s hand and walks closer. She  
front of me and looks up expectantly. “Excuse me.”  
k it My eyes flash up to Isalee, but when she nods, I slowly move. The g  
goes right to Rissa’s side and studies her for a few seconds. “She’s ver  
pretty. I like her yellow hair.” She turns to look at me. “What’s her nar  
; I clear my rough throat. “Rissa.”  
hear “What happened to her?”  
“She got stabbed.”  
, I’ll be Wynn’s face goes sad. “Oh.”  
her Should I have lied? Fuck, I don’t know. I’m not around a lot of kids  
“What do you think, Wynn?” Isalee asks. The little girl glances back  
all.” her. “Remember, it is up to you. There is no obligation. No force. You

decide.”

ape        “Decide what?” I ask, looking between them. “What’s going on?”  
eels        The older one, Shea, looks at her sister. “What do you think, Wynni  
The girl twists a black lock of her short hair and bites her lip. Then,  
slowly nods. “I want to.”  
A look of relief crosses Isalee’s face, and she smiles. “Thank you, W  
“What’s going on?” I ask again, frustration mounting.

il back    Isalee murmurs something into Hojat’s ear, and the mender’s eyes g  
He rushes over to the other side of Rissa’s bed. “Miss Wynn, do you n  
see the wound?”

1 Osrik.    The girl nods and Hojat undoes the top button of Rissa’s nightdress.  
you to     “Someone tell me what the hell is going on *right now*,” I demand.  
“My sister can help,” Shea says.

er, one    “Help?” Bafflement clangs through me. “*How?*”  
Wynn     “I fix hurts,” Wynn answers, just as Hojat peels back Rissa’s nightg  
and bandage, revealing the Divine-damned wound beneath. Clustered  
lom        infected blood, and swollen, bright red skin clotted with pus.

re he     I hear the older sister suck in a breath, but Wynn reaches out her har  
small palm covering the worst of it, and I’m so fucking lost that all I ca  
t, and     stand here and watch.  
The girl’s black brows pull together, and then she lifts her palm, ton  
stuck between her teeth in concentration. She scrubs her hands togethe  
and a dusting of blue powder somehow starts sifting down from them,  
d into a landing on Rissa’s wound.  
It hisses and steams against the inflamed skin. Crackles as it soaks in  
stops institched slash. My whole body tenses, while Hojat looks on in wonder,  
I’m about to fucking *lose it*, but right before my eyes, the wound begin  
girl        heal.  
y         It fucking. Starts. To *heal*.

ne?”     I stagger back. The vial falls from my hand and shatters against the  
The startling sound doesn’t deter the girl. She just keeps scrubbing h  
hands. The powder keeps falling down. And the horrible Divine-damn  
wound, the infection around it...it starts to lessen. The red leeching aw  
The swelling going down. The puncture itself starting to close up.

.         I’m so fucking stunned, my stare stuck on the wound, that I don’t nc  
k at        the girl falling until she nearly hits the floor. Luckily, Hojat catches he  
while the last of the blue powder sinks into Rissa’s chest.

The older sister rushes forward and takes Wynn, hiking her up and propping her small head against her shoulder. “Oh Wynn, I told you, n e?” much!” The girl’s head lolls and her eyes are closed, but I hear her rep she “S’okay. Wanted to help. She looked nice.”

I just keep staring.  
Wynn.” Blinking. Edge of my boot crushed over slivers of glass.  
How.

o wide. *How how how how...*  
eed to There’s more talking in the background, but I can’t comprehend wh anyone is saying. I barely notice Isalee gathering the girls and leaving room. I’m too stunned to pay attention to them. I can’t take my eyes of wound that’s now nearly healed. All that’s left is scabbed-over flesh an peeled-back stitches.

And...  
own She’s breathing. *Breathing* and not wheezing. The frown on her face with softening too, until her expression turns almost serene.

My eyes jerk up to Hojat. My voice cracks. It doesn’t feel real. I alm id, her just fucking fed her that vial to stop her heart. A few seconds more, an an do iswould have.

“How?”  
gue Hojat shakes his head, like he’s at a loss as much as I am. “Magic.”  
r then, But he’s right.  
Because when Rissa’s eyes suddenly flutter open, when I see those s blue eyes of hers focus on me, that’s exactly what it feels like.

nto the Fucking *magic*.  
and  
is to

floor.  
ier  
ed  
ray.

otice  
r,

The older sister rushes forward and takes Wynn, hiking her up and propping her small head against her shoulder. “Oh Wynn, I told you, not too much!” The girl’s head lolls and her eyes are closed, but I hear her reply. “S’okay. Wanted to help. She looked nice.”

I just keep staring.

Blinking. Edge of my boot crushed over slivers of glass.

How.

*How how how how...*

There’s more talking in the background, but I can’t comprehend what anyone is saying. I barely notice Isalee gathering the girls and leaving the room. I’m too stunned to pay attention to them. I can’t take my eyes off the wound that’s now nearly healed. All that’s left is scabbed-over flesh and peeled-back stitches.

And...

She’s breathing. *Breathing* and not wheezing. The frown on her face is softening too, until her expression turns almost serene.

My eyes jerk up to Hojat. My voice cracks. It doesn’t feel real. I almost just fucking fed her that vial to stop her heart. A few seconds more, and I would have.

“*How?*”

Hojat shakes his head, like he’s at a loss as much as I am. “Magic.”

But he’s right.

Because when Rissa’s eyes suddenly flutter open, when I see those stormy blue eyes of hers focus on me, that’s exactly what it feels like.

Fucking *magic*.





## CHAPTER 48

### QUEEN MALINA

I come to with clusters of shadows and prisms of light bobbing around. Instantly, I'm calmed, because I know I'm safe in my assassin's arms. He pulls his magic away, but only slightly. Only enough for me to see Dommik looks down at me, hood pushed back, and I realize he's holding me on his lap. He's...cradling me against his chest. As if I'm precious. But as I take in his expression, as I notice the lines of tension around his mouth and the circles beneath his eyes, worry settles in.

"What happened?" My throat is sore, as if I passed out screaming.

I frown, trying to flex my memories, and then they all come tumbling to me, making me go rigid.

He hesitates as the shadows and light continue to float.

"Dommik, *what happened?*"

"You got a nasty blow to the head," he says, hand coming up to brush the sore spot right at my left temple. "You were unconscious for hours."

"Hours?" My mind whirls, dread pooling in my stomach like a puddle of tar. "Highbell?" I croak.

A pained expression crosses his face, but it's the shake of his head that stabs my heart. "I'm sorry."

"Let me see," I tell him.

"They're *everywhere*, Malina. I wasn't even sure where to go. We're on the roof of one of the houses on the outskirts, but they've already swept through."

I push up off his lap and start to stand, but my head spins as soon as Dommik keeps hold of me, gripping my arm, but he doesn't pull the rest of his shadows away.

"Let me see, Dommik."

"Maybe you've seen enough, you ever thought of that?" He lets out a breath of frustration, gripping both arms now as he stands in front of me. "I can take you away. Wherever you want to go, I can get us there. I can stay forever if I need to."

The earnest look on his face breaks my heart, because I know he's sincere. He would whisk me away right now. Keep every terrible view from sight and tuck us into a safe spot inside his bent shadows where no one can find us.

It's a pretty, solitary dream, and a part of me wants to take his offer.

But I'm a Colier. I have always been and will always be a Colier. A captain goes down with his ship, and a queen goes down with her king.

I lift my hand and press it against his warm cheek, and it melts the tiny fragments of ice scabbed to my palm. My nails are startlingly blue as I run my fingers over his skin. "Thank you."

He blinks in surprise. "For what?"

My throat feels tight, like my emotions have collared it. "For saving me. Swallow hard. "For saving *all* of me."

Not just my life. Not just physically. There are parts of me so ugly, so barren, that I never thought they'd ever be changed—that I'd ever even want to change them. There was so much entitlement and bitterness, disappointment and scars. I never thought I could be rid of them. That could be...better than I was.

His hand comes up to rest over mine. "People don't normally thank assassins."

A small smile cracks my cheeks. "I don't think the two of us are very normal people."

He nods in agreement before his head dips down to pin me with his lips. "Are you sure you want to see Highbell like this? Wouldn't you rather remember it as it was?"

My father said that to me about my mother. That it was better to remember her in her life rather than in her death.

I shake my head. "How can we deserve to see the delights if we always close our eyes against the horrors?"

I do. He moves his hand to tuck a strand of my white hair behind my ear.  
st of “Okay, Queenie.”

Breath fills my lungs as I try to prepare myself, and Dommik pulls the shadows away. For a moment, I think we’re still in them, but it’s only a and smoke staining the air.

ie. “Let I blink through the murk, though my heart is polluted from the sight  
ide us Devastation.

That’s the word that churns through my soul as I look around from the rooftop view at the very edge of the city. Devastation came to Highbell out of swooped in with ravaging thoroughness and brought death to every corner I could see. All while I lay unconscious. I wasn’t even *awake* while my people were killed.

The city is bathed in red ruin. From up here, I can see the rows of roofs and the buildings that hug them. They should be full of people going about their day. Instead, bodies lie where they were struck down, and blood stains the streets where they’ve been left.

brush In the distance, I can count at least six spots that are burning. Other buildings have been struck by lightning, their stones singed, their walls crumbled. The roads themselves are crooked, as if the ground magic came to me.” I the city’s core and left the earth to slant.

Up on the mountain, more fae stream up the winding road to the castle. I so stare at it, envisioning them going through my hall. Sitting at my table. I want Someone searching my rooms. Generations of Coliers have lived and died at that castle, and now, an enemy swarms it.

t I Anger swarms through *me*.

In front of the mountain and arced over the chasm, I can see the bridge over the city. My wall is nothing now except grains of ice trampled beneath thousands of feet. If I follow the line of the traveling army, I can see the path as it winds through the streets of Highbell, going past the shanties a few streets up from me. They’re marching right out of Highbell.

stare. They’re marching toward Fifth Kingdom.

Thick dread gathers around me, making it feel like my legs are stuck to the ground that it’s holding me immobile. Because they’re going to do this over and over again. To every city, to every kingdom they reach.

I turn toward Dommik. “We have to warn the rest of Orea.”

ays “Hopefully, Queen Kaila will at least do *that*,” he says bitterly.

“We can’t count on it. We need to sneak into the city when there are many fae combing the streets. See if we can find a messenger shop. If there are any hawks left, we need to send one to every corner of Orea.”

Dommik nods slowly, but I know what we’re both thinking. Even if we are warned, will it even make a difference? And will they even believe us?

The wind batters past us, pulling at my clothes and whipping Dommik’s cloak. It’s wailing like a widow, or perhaps it’s Highbell herself, baying in her agony. Tears fall from my lashes and pelt down my cheeks. “We need to search for survivors.”

“They cleared out the entire city, Malina.”

“They might not have gotten into every house—”

“They have,” he tells me. “I watched. I promise you, they were meticulous.”

Frost gathers at my teeth and I crunch down hard, gnawing on the ice. My heart feels like it’s being gnawed into dust. But then a thought strikes and I turn to look behind us at the forest that borders the city. To where enormous trees stand tall, warding off the wind and cradling Highbell in their grasp. The forest seems to be the only part not flooded with the fae’s numbers.

“The Pitching Pines,” I say with a desperate whisper. “Did anyone ever get to the pinewood?”

“I’m not sure.”

Hope lurches. “We need to go check.”

“There might not be anyone there,” he says carefully, as if he wants to temper my expectations.

“I know,” I tell him. “But we have to check. Even if one person made it, we have to see.”

“Okay. Just...brace yourself. We might not find anyone down there.” He blows out a breath and looks to the trees. “The forest is massive. I’m not sure where to start.”

“There’s one road that leads into it, off the beaten path. The locals know it. I’ll tell you where to go.”

I get my bearings on where we are and then give him detailed instructions on exactly which part of the woods I want to be brought to, just past Pinewood Row.

Dommik billows us off the rooftop, and I sway in the shadows, the scent of blood and fire tainting every inhale. I’m glad for the obscurity his magic keeps us in. It’s one thing to view it from a rooftop, and another thing to

can't so to see it up close. The quick and distorted sights I'm able to view are e  
there to make my stomach twist and my chin tremble. There's scorched build  
blasted walls, splatters of blood, and dead bodies. So many flashes of c  
Orea bodies.

ne? They're everywhere.

ik's Slumped against walls. Face down in the street. Covered in snow, b  
g out charred, bloodied, piled on top of one another. Alone with no one else  
eed to around.

When we stop leaping from place to place, I realize the shakiness is  
coming from the magic. It's coming from me.

So much death.

"Hey. Queenie."

I try to brush him off, but Dommik grips my elbow and forces me to  
e while him. His magic is curled around us like a cocoon, keeping us safe with  
ces me, dark depths.

e the "They're all dead." It comes out as a whisper, my eyes unseeing as I  
in its at my feet. "The entire city just...gone." My gaze shoots up to his face  
arch. "They killed *everyone*, Dommik."

scape His lips press together, somberness soaked through his eyes. "Not  
everyone."

"I don't count."

me to He taps my lips with a finger as if to shush me. "You count, Malina.  
always count."

I swallow thickly at the surprisingly tender words.

le it, "Stop it," I breathe. Feeling miserable, feeling grateful. "Don't be ni  
me."

." He He gives me a half-smirk. "You like it."

ot sure "I don't *dislike* it," I grumble.

The pad of his thumb strokes my bottom lip as if to reward me. Then  
now of drops his hand and turns. "Ready to search?"

As soon as I nod, he dissolves his shadows and I look around. The e  
ctions to the pinewood is just behind us, the first of the trees scattered around  
illar city. I can see the backs of the buildings on the border, with smoke ex  
into the sky. But in front of me, the massive trees spread out into the fo  
scent of and it's like they've made a world of their own.

ic I start to trudge through the snow, skirts lifted, though the snowfall i  
entirely too deep. The branches hold most of the snow, cradling it like pillows

nough their boughs. The further we head into the forest and away from the cit  
dings, more peaceful it seems. The scent of pine and sweet sap overtakes that  
lead smoke and blood. The sight of stippled brown bark replaces the scorch  
busted buildings.

ent, Unlike the destruction in Highbell, in here, there's just...this. Nature  
and untouched by the horrors outside its border.

n't I glance up, taking in the pine needles that hang down like blue and  
icicles. Whenever the wind blows through them, they clink together,  
reminding me of wind chimes. And when they get too heavy, they pitc  
downward, stabbing into the snow.

o face The trees get bigger the further we walk. Until soon, they're wider th  
in its two, three, even four carriages across. They stretch so high it's imposs  
see just where they end their reach above the clouds.

[ stare All is still and serene here. As if nothing's wrong, nothing's happen  
nothing else exists. What a tempting veil of oblivion nature creates.

. As Dommik and I walk past tree after tree, I start to lose hope, becau  
there's no sign of anything outside of this tranquil wood. We don't see  
of a single person.

. You Until, finally, Dommik stops so quickly that I almost run into him. I  
veers off sharply, and I hurry to catch up just as he crouches on the gr  
He points at indentations in the snow. "Footprints," he says, looking up  
me.

ice to Hope fluxes through me, renewed with urgency. "We need to follow  
them."

he follows the tracks.

*Please, I beg to the magic. To the ether.*

*Please.*

n he One good thing about living in a climate where snow always coats th  
ground means that tracking is far easier. Dommik is meticulous about  
ntrance watching the tracks and, luckily, never loses sight of them. Neither of  
the speaks as he follows the prints, and buoyant expectation rises higher a  
ialing higher. Because what was a single track of footsteps turns into many.

orest, Heart-pounding minutes pass, and Dommik curls us around a partic  
huge pine, and then, there they are.

isn't Huddled around a Pitching Pine that snapped at its base and crashed  
on onto the forest floor long ago. There are people—at least four or five d

y, the of them—sitting atop its fallen trunk. When we come into view, they f  
of surprise, yet as soon as they realize we’re not fae, the fear leaves their  
ed and Then—

“It’s Queen Malina.”

2, quiet “It’s the Cold Queen!”

They get to their feet, all of them turning around, and I brace myself  
white for their hate—

A woman breaks into sobs, falling off the tree and landing on her kn  
h the snow. Her dress has spatters of blood at the sleeve, and there’s mor  
on her face. Her once kohl-lined eyes now drip down her ashen cheeks  
han it’s the little girl clutched in her arms who fills me with staggering reli  
ible to the same girl from before—the one Dommik took home. Her leg is now  
bandaged, and she clings to her mother like she’s never going to let he

ed, “Thank you,” the woman cries, staring up at me with tears streaming  
her face as her gaze bounces from me to Dommik. “You both saved he  
ise Saved *us*. And you’ve come. Our queen has come!” she shouts at the o

traces Breath knocks out of my chest.

All the other survivors, every single one, start quietly rejoicing.

le Whispering out their gratitude for *me*. For *my* presence.

ound. “Our queen has come!”

3 at “Queen Malina, bless you!”

“Thank you!”

7 “You saved us!”

This display is so foreign, so unexpected, that I’m stuck frozen, unsta  
ad as what to do. My people have never rejoiced for me. Not since I was a g  
Certainly never as a queen. Yet here they are, with a sacked city and de  
loved ones, and they’re *thankful*.

I feel so utterly undeserving.

he “Please, get up,” I rush to say, filling in my stunned pause. I reach to  
her to her feet but stop when her eyes widen in surprise. My hands wri  
us front of me uselessly, snow falling from my fingertips in a nervous sca  
ad am the very reason these fae are here.” I look around at everyone wher  
they’ve gotten up to face me. “I don’t deserve your devotion.”

ilarly I expect my confession to make them turn on me. Instead, the same  
gets up. “You saved us. Built that wall with your cold magic. Tried to  
down us.” She glances over her shoulder at the others, lifting her hand in the

ozen

linch indirection. “If it weren’t for your orders telling us to retreat here, we would have died with everyone else.”

The things I did to help seem so pitifully insignificant. “I couldn’t stop them.” My words pitch down just like the icicle pine needles, landing on the ground around my feet.

But the blood-spattered woman just shakes her head. “Who could, my queen?” she asks softly, lifting her tattered and bloody dress like it’s a flag of defeat. “What are we, compared to fae?”

I thought the same thing. When I first saw them, when I witnessed their magic. When I observed their might. I know that’s what they’re all there for. How can we possibly survive, against a force like that?

And yet, here they stand.

Here I stand.

As I look around, I realize what they need. Who they need.

They need *me*.

So I can’t fail them.

I draw myself up, hoping I can exude enough confidence for them to follow. To bolster themselves for the difficult times ahead.

“What are we compared to fae?” I echo, expression indomitable. “We are Oleans. That’s who we are.”

“What can Oleans do against this?” a man calls out forlornly. “Against them?”

I meet his eye. “We can *survive*. If we do that, then the fae have lost. It doesn’t matter how many cities they sack, how many kingdoms they take. As long as we survive, we have beaten them.”

They exchange looks, wary...but hopeful. Their shoulders lifting just a little bit higher. So I keep the mask on—the one that they need me to wear. The one that tells them I’m strong, determined, undefeated. Because if they see that in me, they’ll believe it for themselves too.

“What do we do now, my queen?”

*My queen.*

Emotion sharpens and pricks the backs of my eyes.

I gesture around at the mighty trees that shelter us. “I will take us to a safe place. Somewhere safe.” My gaze scans their faces so they can see the sincerity in my eyes. “I will keep you safe.”

This pinewood is good at keeping secrets, at keeping the world away from here. I will keep the fae away. Because I refuse to let anyone here die. I will



would've whatever I need to so that no more Olean blood is spilled in Highbell.  
But if any other blood is going to be spilt, I'll make sure it's either f  
Or mine.

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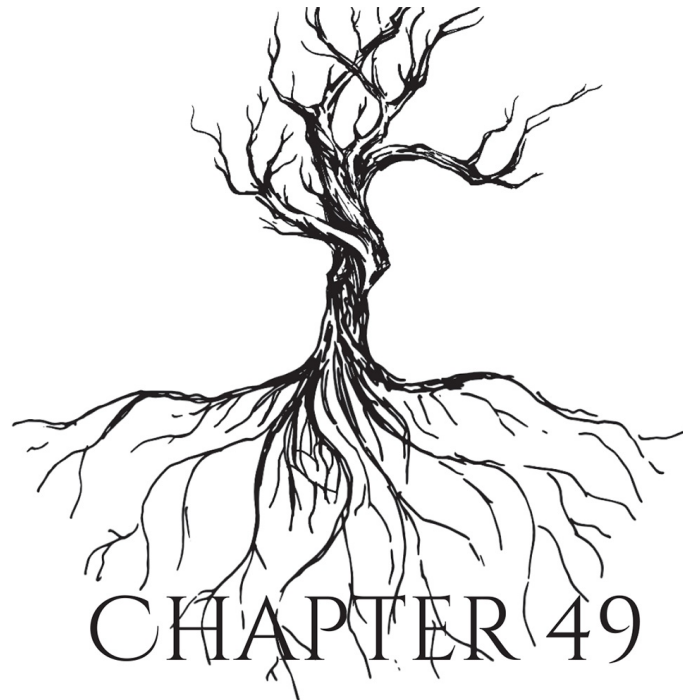
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whatever I need to so that no more Orea blood is spilled in Highbell.  
But if any other blood *is* going to be spilt, I'll make sure it's either fae...  
Or mine.



## CHAPTER 49

SLADE

“It’s impossible.” Judd’s look of disbelief is countered by the w fingers fork through his hair and shove it back.  
“I’m telling you, it’s not.”

He stares at Lu like he’s waiting for her to crack a smile and yell, “F you!”

She doesn’t.

Her gaze is solemn and exhausted, her appearance and demeanor hit in the gut with the force of a battering ram. I can feel my stomach clen my muscles bunching with tension.

We’re gathered together in our private breakfast room, except Osrik with Rissa. Digby is here, sitting next to Ryatt on the sofa. As soon as made her announcement outside, I had my soldiers drag an unconsciou down to the dungeon. Her importance has grayed in light of Lu’s information.

Now, we all look at Lu, trying to make sense of what she witnessed Sixth. She’s slumped forward on a chair next to the dining table, starin the floor.

“But...*fae*?” Judd goes on. “Here? Fae haven’t been able to get to O hundreds of years.” His hazel eyes flick to me. “Present company excluded.”

“I thought she was lying,” Lu mumbles, as if caught up in her own thoughts. “If I’d believed her, I would’ve been here sooner and maybe able to help stop the slaughter.”

I frown. It’s not like Lu to be so scattered when delivering her report another testament to how shaken she is. “Who are you talking about?”

She braces her forearms on her knees as she looks up at me. “Queen Malina.”

Ryatt and I share a look of confusion.

“But Malina...” Ryatt trails off.

“Is dead,” Lu supplies. “Yeah, that’s what we were told. But it wasn’t I saw her.”

“She was in hiding?”

“She was in Seventh Kingdom.”

I rear back, shock widening my eyes. “Seventh? But it was wiped out long time ago. The land crumbled away into the void.”

I’ve been to Seventh. Flew over it years ago. It was nothing but chaos and splits and a yawning edge.

Lu shakes her head. “I’m only telling you what I heard. Malina was adamant when she returned to Highbell. Nobody believed her, including I thought it was just a desperate bid to retake her throne. But she was telling the truth.”

The plagued look on her face makes my insides churn. “What happened?”  
“Malina went crazy. Started building ice walls all throughout Highbell City.”

Ryatt’s brows pull together. “Ice walls?”

“With magic.”

“Malina doesn’t have magic. She never has. It’s common knowledge,” Lu says, looking to me as I nod.

“I know,” Lu snaps, fist thumping against the table with frustration. “I’m telling you, she *does*. I saw it with my own eyes. I thought she was walling everyone in—that’s what everyone thought she was doing. But the fae came.” A haunted look glazes over Lu’s eyes as she glances at me quickly became clear—Malina wasn’t trying to wall everyone in. She was trying to wall the fae *out*.”

“Did it work?” Judd asks.

rea for “Not for long. It bought Highbell minutes. But it wasn’t enough.”  
uded.” “And Kaila?”

Lu jerks her head. “Fucked off. Left Highbell to fend for itself as so  
been she saw the fae coming.”

“That’s because she doesn’t care about Sixth,” I say. “Not really. Or  
ts. It’s about her reach, and only if she could grasp it easily. It doesn’t surprise  
that she abandoned it.”

Lu’s lips press together in a hard line. “Doesn’t surprise me either, b  
pisses me off.”

I can only imagine the death that spread through the city. Can only v  
what kind of magic the fae have brought. Kaila could’ve helped, but in  
l’t true. she chose to flee.

“What did you do?” Judd asks.

Lu curls her fingers, knocking her knuckles together in an aggravate  
fidget. “Tried to fucking help,” she says, though there’s a bitterness to  
it a tone—the kind of bitterness that only comes when the bite of failure is  
own. “The massacre went on and on. Felt like ages, but those fae wipe  
sms Highbell within hours.” She lifts heavy eyes to me with a gaze that I ca  
the weight of. “Men, women, children. Civilians who had no weapon,  
fight. They killed them all—either by blade or magic. They just cut the  
ig me. down like stalks of wheat, leaving them in dead heaps on their icy roac  
elling tried to kill as many of the fuckers as I could, but I couldn’t even make  
dent. There weren’t enough guards. No one was prepared.”

ned?” Ryatt lets out a thick exhale, while Judd just stares at her, like he’s s  
ell waiting for her to say this is all some twisted joke.

Digby looks as if all the blood has drained from his face. “Everyone  
asks gruffly.

Lu gives a sharp nod. “Everyone. I found none alive.”

e,” he His spine hits the back of the sofa as if his body took the brunt of thi  
shock like a punch. Out of all of us, he can understand the true devasta  
“But what Lu speaks. He lived and served in Highbell. Probably knew plent  
s people, maybe even had family or friends there.

t then, And now they’re all dead.

me. “It My hands curl into fists at my sides. I’m fully aware of fae ruthlessr  
was and their prejudice against the Oreans. Fully aware of the level of hate  
the fae monarchy bred.

And Oreans hate the fae too.

I've managed to eke by as a fae hidden in plain sight because of time. Enough of it has passed that none of the people here believed a fae could live amongst them. After hundreds of years, fae almost became mythical creatures to the Oreans, even when the truth of pointed ears and power spikes stared them in the face. It's amazing what people will turn a blind eye to because of time and surety.

"When it was clear there was nothing else I could do, I flew here as fast as I could. Lost time in a snowstorm that I had to avoid, but that's how I got here. The fae marching into Fifth Kingdom. They're going *fast*."

I suck in a breath. "They're still marching? Instead of staying in place, Highbell?"

Lu runs a hand over her face like she's trying to wipe away her exhaustion. "They're not stopping." A knife twists in my gut.

Ryatt looks panicked. "If they get to Fifth's capital, they can easily reach right up to our border. They can head for the ports and invade the ships; they can reach the other kingdoms too. If they get to Ranhold, we're *fucked*."

"I don't understand," Judd says, expression distressed, unable to keep his mouth shut as he taps his foot against the floor. "How did the fae get here in the first place?"

That question.

It makes the poisoned, blackened organ in my chest suddenly jolt.

Lu's gaze pierces into me. "The bridge of Lemuria."

My ribs close in on my lungs. Heartbeat clustering with an erratic, lurching thrum.

The bridge.

The *bridge*.

My thoughts spiral and roil.

It's Digby who looks at me then. Whose voice cuts through the rack of my mind and blares in my head. He says aloud what my mind is reeling with. What I should have connected the moment Lu said the fae were here.

"If the bridge is no longer broken, then that means..."

Everything snaps into place. A hope born from horror.

If the bridge isn't broken anymore, then I don't need a rip. If the bridge is linked, I can get into Annwyn. I can find my mother and the villagers.

I can find *Auren*.

During all the time I've been in Orea, I have been at war with myself. Ripped in two, each form wanting to come out—to dominate and thrive.

e. was a release for me to switch between skins. To be both Rip and Rot. I'd still first, to be the aggressive fae learning to protect me and mine through logical and rage. The second, to learn to protect in a different way—politically and Magically.

and eye I was able to be the commander and the king. The soldier and the sovereign. I could slake my bloodlust on the battlefield and quench my fast as for control in a throne room. Because of this, I forged the protection of saw the Drollard right along with fear and loyalty of an entire kingdom—an en realm.

There are two sides to every coin, but there's only one core, and the am in complete joined agreement.

ustion. *Auren.*

At my innermost center, where both forms connect, is this seed of h march golden vine that's grown from the pit of my power of death and decay, s to bloomed into gleaming life. When I found her, I knew right then, every was different.

ep still *She* is what matters.

rst If the fae are here, if they truly did get the bridge repaired, then that way to get into Annwyn. To get to her.

My mind is spinning. Heart pumping with the need to go. Go *now*.

aden Everyone's eyes shift to me, but it's my brother who gets to his feet rushes over, like he knows I'm ready to bolt. "I know what you're thin but *wait*. We need to talk this through. We need a plan first," he says, t vehement.

"*You* plan. You're the commander."

"Slade," he hisses out desperately. "Just... You can't abandon Orea. of your kingdom. We have to help. We have to—"

et that "I'm going to her."

I His green eyes ignite, burning everything straight down to the center pupils. "You can't just leave Orea to be invaded! This is your responsi as king. We *need* you. The old laws of Orea were made for this *very* re Ensuring that there was always a monarch with magic that could defen dge is against the threat of the fae if they ever returned. And they've *returnec* Slade."

f. "I made Auren a promise, and I'm not going to keep fucking failing bite out. "And if I can get to her, I can get to our mother too."

e. It All the breath leaves his chest.

The muscle 7. thirst 8. tire re, I er. The , and ything 's my and king, one . Think bility ason. id l, her," I

“Our *mother*, Ryatt. *Auren*. The villagers.”

He opens his mouth, tries to tear at the hair on his head, but it’s too now. I can tell just by looking at him how conflicted he is. “I *know* we to get them. But Orea’s under threat. I swore an oath, Slade. You swore an oath too. Everyone here is our responsibility, and Fourth has the strongest army in all the kingdoms. *You* are the strongest person in all of Orea. *You* can’t abandon them.”

“Auren is my priority. Our mother is my priority.”

“Don’t leave yet.” He’s pleading with me. Fearful.

“I have to.”

“Your power might be the only thing that can stop them. This world *you*.”

He doesn’t understand.

“If there is ever a choice between her or the world, it’s going to be *her*.”

His expression goes stricken, but that’s my brother. This is where his loyalty lies. With this kingdom, with Fourth’s army, with Orea. Since *she* came here, this has always been his place.

My place is with her.

Plans are already brewing in my head about how I’ll take Argo, what’s the fastest path toward Seventh is. But Ryatt’s pleas keep cutting into my thoughts, leaving them in pieces.

“I’m not asking you to not go to her, to not find them,” he says quietly, eyes boring into me. “*Of course* I want that. And I know how badly *you* want to,” he adds, gaze flicking down to my chest for a split second, as if he can see through my shirt to the rotted heart beneath. “I’m just asking for *you* to give us a chance. Just that, Slade. A chance for Orea. *Please.*”

My muscles tense. Silence sticks to me, to him, to everyone in the room. Gluey, thick, and viscid, holding us in place as everyone waits to see what I’ll do.

When I stay silent, his gaze slashes across my face, leaving its mark. “Fae are here, and it’s going to take a fae to stop them.”

His words settle on my shoulders. Sink into my skin.

Silent seconds seethe by as we look at one another.

*It’s going to take a fae to stop them.*

Fuck.

Without a word, I turn and start to stride from the room.

“Where are you going?” he calls behind me.



I'm going to think, away from prying eyes and his unrelenting pleas going to plan. I'm going to staunch the spread of torment in my chest and leeches my energy and tries to collapse my veins, while my fae nature me to *go go go*. To hurry and find Auren.

But to them, I just say, "To pack."



Two hours later, everyone is gathered in the formal dining room. I'm wearing army leathers, crown twisting around my head, boots laced up against my shins. My Premiers and Wrath are sitting to my right, and I has taken up the spot to my left. I didn't spell out the purpose for this gathering, but we're all watching the woman slumped in the chair at the opposite end of the table.

Queen Kaila's lips are no longer stained with rot, her eyes no longer coming infested.

It was with great effort that I pulled my magic away, because it was fucking thing I wanted to do.

She comes to, head jerking upright, and she blinks around at her surroundings. When she notices the two guards standing behind her, she to push to her feet, but they keep her in her chair, a hand on each shoulder.

Kaila's gaze lands on me, her face contorted with both anger and fear. She licks her lips, pulling the bottom one between her teeth, as if to make sure it hasn't rotted away.

"Is it true?" My question is quiet. Abrupt. Like the sudden snap of a branch in the middle of a silent wood.

Her hackles rise. "Is what true?" Her voice is even huskier than usual. "Because while I took away the rot, she still has the imprint of my hand on her throat."

"That you fled Sixth Kingdom and left them all to be slaughtered."

I know it is, but I want to make her confess it. At least I'm up-front where my loyalties lie. Kaila pretends to be the perfect Orean queen, as if she fled a kingdom the minute there was a threat.

Her nervous, wide eyes shift to the side, but she finds no help from Lord Thold. He stares at her without giving a single expression away. His vice, however, is coiled on the table in front of him, head raised as it watches her.

She yanks her gaze back to me.

. I'm "The city was about to be overrun. There was nothing I could do," s  
is it says, lifting her chin.

urges "Nothing?" Thold asks. "You have magic."

"Voices," she says sharply. "What is that in the face of an army? I'n  
queen, not a soldier, and I don't have offensive magic like rot," she ad  
giving me a scathing look.

"You used your voice magic offensively enough when you came her  
point out.

n "Highbell isn't my responsibility," she says with vehemence.

) "Not your *responsibility*?" At the brusque, livid voice, Kaila's attent  
Thold shifts to the one person who she probably overlooked. Digby stands ag  
the wall of the dining room, his question pelted at her like the sharpest  
e of glass. "You wanted to rule Sixth. You took the responsibility as soo  
you took control."

Her mouth curls into a sneer. "This doesn't concern you."

"Actually," I begin smoothly. "It does. Digby served as a guard in H  
the lastfor years. So if anyone can be pissed off that you abandoned the city, i  
him."

She tucks away whatever retort she was thinking about flinging.

ie tries "So it's all true? You actually saw fae?" Thold asks.

lder. She nods tightly. "Their ears were pointed. They had magic. They  
ar. She were...*other*. You could feel it." A shudder passes over her body. "The  
ure it not Orean."

I see Thold swallow her answer like a jagged scrap of metal. "Tell u  
twig everything you know about the attack."

al. "All I know is they marched from the direction of Seventh Kingdor  
before they breached the city. I saw nothing else."

on her "And you tried to flee back to your kingdom," he says with derision  
"When you must know they'll be marching on your shores next."

about "They won't come to Third," she argues with a shake of her head. "  
nd yet just wanted to gain a foothold in Sixth. I can negotiate with them. I'm  
persuasive. Third will be fine."

I scoff.

King "Don't lie to yourself," King Thold tells her with a harsh edge to his  
iper, "They're not here for a foothold. They're not here to listen to negotiati  
s her. everything is as you and Ravinger's captain reported, then from those

he accounts of what happened to Sixth, things are clear. The fae are here to  
and take Orea for their own.”

She shakes her head, but she’s shaking all over too. “No. No, that’s  
going to happen.”

ds, “It is.”

There’s mutiny in her eyes—and a hefty dose of denial.

re,” I She straightens herself up and glares at me. “I want my brother. Who  
he?”

Osrik leans forward, massive biceps braced on the table. “Oh, don’t  
worry. He’s been with me.”

Her face seems to pale as she takes in his expression, his huge form,  
shards words. He’s not someone you ever want to have on your bad side, and  
n as the only side she’s got.

“What did you do to him?” she asks, and she can no longer keep the  
tremble from her voice, or the crack of moisture that’s split through the  
lightbellseams of her eyes.

It’s the only redeeming thing she has going for her—the clear love and  
loyalty she holds for Manu.

“I want my brother!” she shouts, body leaning forward as she breathes  
hard, making Thold’s snake hiss in her direction.

Osrik and I exchange a look. Then, my gaze flicks to the guard standing  
by the wall, and I give him the smallest nod. At my direction, he opens the  
door and in come two more guards. Held between them is Manu.

Kaila slaps a hand over her mouth, eyes gone wide. “Manu!”

This time when she leaps to her feet, I signal for the guards to let her  
go. She rushes across the room, crouching to her knees where they drop her  
brother’s limp form. She turns him over, sucking in a breath when she  
sees the state of him.

Rot has seeped through his skin in mottled patches. Pits are bitten in  
They cheeks, his nose, his neck, his hands, the skin around it blackened with  
He smells fucking awful.

“You monster!” she screams at me, while tears flood down her cheeks.  
“He was innocent! It was my order that he was following!”

“Funny you should mention innocent, when Lady Auren was just there  
; voice. If say, and I’m just enough of a cruel asshole to acknowledge the sense of  
ons. satisfaction I get from Kaila’s suffering. “Manu followed your orders,  
said, which means he wasn’t innocent. He was complicit. Worked to kill

to kill Auren. Had one of our other ladies here stabbed.” Kaila’s eyes flicker, see this is news to her. Osrik glares at her. “Manu deserves everything not endured. You deserve it as well, and far more.”

She bares her teeth at me, chest heaving. “I hope Auren is *dead*. I wish I had killed her myself!” she shouts, cheeks high with color.

“*Careful*,” I growl as I slowly get to my feet, fists braced on the table. Here she can see the rot writhing through my skin.

She swallows hard.

We stare at each other. Full of bitter fury. Full of hot hate.

I let her stew in it. Let her sweat.

Then, I give a flick of my hand, and she flinches. But nothing happens that’s least, not to her.

Her attention drops down, and she gasps so loudly it echoes through the room. She watches with pure disbelief as the rot on Manu’s face fades and she starts to draw it away from him.

Her head jolts up. “What is this?”

As I get to my feet, the rest of the table follows suit. I yank my collar from the writhing lines at my neck, nearly spitting with anger at what I’m about to do.

“It’s a choice.”

She goes utterly still.

“I’ll give him back to you,” I tell her.

Shock contorts her features, pulling at her black brows as she looks at him. “*Why?*” she asks in disbelief.

She *should* be in disbelief. Because in no other scenario would I ever fucking let her walk away. Everyone else is surprised too, their attention riveted on me.

“Because there’s *one* opportunity to stop the bleed before it spreads, without lifting a finger. “We must go to Fifth and rally their army. Cut the fae off before they can overrun Ranhold like they did Highbell. Stop them before they can reach the shores. I will let you and your brother live, and in return you will ready your army. You will also take an elite force and fly to Fifth as soon as possible.”

Her hands tremble where she clutches her brother, dragging his head to her lap. “We have no hope against fighting them,” she argues. “We thrive as you have magic, and a scattering of other Oreans throughout the kingdoms. Kidnap it’ll be *nothing* compared to the abilities or numbers that they have.”

and I        “We do not roll over and show our bellies in the face of attack!” Thold  
he’s        shouts at her, making her flinch from his ire. “We bare our teeth and bite  
back!”

ish I        “Unless biting gets us put down that much faster,” she lobs. Then her  
gaze stabs into me. “Besides, *you* murdered King and Queen Merewen  
e so        cast out your rot around Third Kingdom and spread fear to every corner.  
You  
weakened us right when we needed to be strong and united! You’re not  
I don’t deny it. She’s right.

I’m no hero.

ns. At        But it’s the consequences of *her* actions that pushed me to be the villain.  
warned I would be.

“Whose fault is that?” I ask in a deadly quiet tone.

the        She blanches.

as I        That’s what I fucking thought.

“Time is running out, Kaila,” Thold tells her. “Orea’s only hope against  
this threat is to band together right now, before it’s too late.”

r away     That’s why she’s still breathing.

’m        Because her kingdom is devoted to her, and her army is loyal. Orea  
that army.

If she helps, then I’ll wait for my vengeance. I’ll bide my time.

If she runs, I’ll have every right to hunt her down and not feel an ounce  
of fucking guilt on Orea’s behalf.

from        It goes against my every instinct to let her and Manu walk away from  
but letting them live, letting her rally her army while bringing four kingdoms  
r        together is Orea’s best chance.

on        And that’s what my brother asked for. A chance.

So as difficult as it is, that’s what I’m offering.

” I say,     “If the fae truly want to take Orea, then it doesn’t matter if we band  
off        together,” she argues bitterly. “We’re dead.” Her gaze flicks around the  
ore        room. “You’re all fools if you think you can stand against the fae.”

turn,        “You’re the biggest fool of all if you think lying down is better,” Ry  
fifth as     seethes.

Her eyes narrow on him, but she keeps her mouth shut.

l into        “A choice,” I repeat, holding her gaze. “It’s the only one you’ll get,  
ee may more than you deserve.”

, but        Kaila’s face twists with loathing.

old She tries to hold steady beneath my glare, but she can't stop the tremor  
ite her hands. I want to kill her. Want to fucking rot her through and stake  
head to a spike on one of my turrets for the hawks to peck at. A tear falls  
er sharp she clutches Manu tighter, as if she can hear my thoughts.

. You My rot pinches against my hands, wanting to burst out, but I hold it  
er. You *Give us a chance.*

hero." "What's it going to be?" I ask, my tone dark.

The tension thickens, spreading through the air between us.

"Die here and now... Or rally your army. Fly your fiercest, most powerful  
lain I elite to Ranhold as soon as possible. That is your choice."

She swallows hard, and silence saturates the tension, soaking up every  
of it, weighing down the air even more and making her shoulders hunch.

"Fine," she finally says. "Third will fight. Now take the rest of your  
inst revolting magic away from my brother," she demands through her teeth.  
I arch a brow. "Say please."

Fury flames in her eyes. I watch her squirm until she grits out the  
crushing appeal. "*Please.*"

I smirk, just because I know it will madden her. And in that smirk is  
needs taunting threat.

With a flick of my wrist, I tug the last of the rot away from Manu. Within  
nce of seconds, he starts to cough and gag. Kaila jerks him onto his side just before  
he starts vomiting up thick black poison that spews out of him in a putrid  
n this, slop.

gdoms "Manu!" she cries.

When his stomach is emptied, he slumps and catches his breath. Already  
his skin is starting to return to a healthier hue, his breathing evening out.

When he sees all of us, he gasps and looks around wildly. When he looks at  
e Osrik, I see him flinch. Kaila breaks his attention as she throws her arm  
around his neck and hugs him.

When she pulls away, he takes in her tearstained face like he's still trying to  
ratt piece together how she got here. "Kaila, what's happening?"

"Your sister just saved your life," I tell him, tone flat. My eyes flick to  
Kaila. "Now take him and get the fuck out of my kingdom."

and far She doesn't hesitate. Kaila quickly gets up and tugs Manu to his feet. He  
sways slightly but she instantly bolsters him, pinning her shoulder beneath  
his arm to keep him upright.

able in When she starts shuffling him away, she stops and looks at me. “How  
her know your magic hasn’t taken root inside of him? That you aren’t trick  
lls and me?”

back. “You don’t,” I reply with a shrug. “So you’d better show up at Ranhold  
She pauses for a second and then turns and drags Manu out of the room.

Nobody speaks for several moments, though I know all of them are  
thinking the same thing that Thold says aloud when he finally breaks the  
silence. “Will she come?” he asks, letting his serpent hang over his shoulder.

werful “Maybe,” I say.

“Maybe not,” he says.

ry inch And I nod, because he’s right. Maybe not.

h. Kaila’s heart isn’t for Orea, it’s for her brother. And as much as I hate  
as much as I want to kill her and Manu both, in this, we are alike.

h. Because my heart isn’t for Orea either.

“We need her,” Thold says. “But we’ll fight regardless.”

ide- He’s a far better king than me.

“I can have my elite reach Ranhold within the week. What’s your plan  
a Ravinger?”

What is my plan?

Within Everyone waits to see what I’ll say. I feel them all. Feel Ryatt.

before *Give us a chance.*

rid “We’ll leave at first light,” I tell him, and I hear my brother let out a  
breath.

Looking at me, Thold holds out his hand. Surprise flashes through my  
eady, I reach forward and shake it.

it. “For Orea,” he rumbles.

notices A far, far better king than me.

ns After Thold and his guards leave, Ryatt comes over to stand beside me.  
“Thank you,” he murmurs.

rying I turn to him. “We have Thold and his soldiers, and when we get to  
Ranhold, we’ll have Fifth’s. And if Kaila actually shows, we’ll have her  
to forces as well,” I list off. “You asked me to give Orea a chance, and that  
I’ve brought four kingdoms together as best I could. But know this. I’m  
t. He to Ranhold because it’s on the way to Seventh. I will help set up the defenses  
eath against the arrival of the fae, and I will use my power as much as I can  
then I will be leaving,” I warn him. “Auren is my priority.”

Like Kaila said, I’m no hero.

w do I     Now that I know there's a way to get to Auren, nothing is going to s  
king     my way. So I'll give them this chance, but if it's not enough, then so b  
old."     Because I'm going to that bridge whether Orea stands...  
om.     Or falls.

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Now that I know there's a way to get to Auren, nothing is going to stand in my way. So I'll give them this chance, but if it's not enough, then so be it. Because I'm going to that bridge whether Orea stands... Or falls.



## CHAPTER 50

AUREN

**L**ord Cull.  
Slade's father.  
The Orean villagers.  
Elore.

As the truth of everything slams into place, I see it all with new eyes. The two manors. Why Lord Cull kept the old one and erected the stone wall. Why this room looks the way it does. Why the Oreans are all in heavy winter clothing.

Why I've had such a bad feeling since the moment I entered this place. The crack in the floor isn't any mere damage. The space above it is filled with shadows. This is the *rip*. The one Slade and his father made when their powers collided.

Except unlike the one back at Deadwell, or even the one at the Confines, this rip fills the air with inherent *wrongness*. It looks nothing like those ones. This one is...faded. As if it combusted and lost its connection, and that's left now is a churning cloud of shallow shadows. Whatever happened to this rip, the result is clear, there is no world on the other side of it.

It's broken.

When movement catches my eye, I look down, realizing that what I thought were stains on the floor are actually old rot lines infested through marble.

My attention pulls away when I suddenly feel a trickling sensation. Like water sluicing over me.

I gasp, the breath getting glued to my ribs as I look down at my palms, gray, glamoured palms that are now blooming with patches of my true colored skin.

*Shit. Emonie.*

The footsteps echoing through the hall make my head jerk back up, curl my hands into fists, as if trying to contain the fading glamour and writhing rot.

Slade's father stalks forward.

*Stanton Cull.*

Cull, not Ravinger as I assumed, because Slade must've taken his m

---

My gaze hooks on to Elore as he stalks toward her like a demon ready to drag her to hell. Terror claws down my back, but the intense rage claws harder.

*I won't let him fucking touch her.*

I take a step forward, but when the guard next to me lurches like he's going to shove me back, I react on pure instinct.

With a swing of my arm, a whip of gold slings from my hand and slings into his chest, sending him flying across the room. He lands with a crash. I feel the eyes of everyone suddenly land on me.

Then the metal grate of swords being drawn rings through the air as other guards start rushing toward me. Magic pours out of my palms like a fountain, drenching my boots and pooling onto the floor.

"What the fuck is this?" Cull's voice cuts through the room, his step stalling in their track toward Elore.

But I know his reputation. I know what he's done. I know what they can do to him.

*The Breaker.*

So I know I have to get Elore and all the other Oreans away from her and away from *him*. I can't risk them getting hurt, can't put Slade's mother

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danger. The last thing I can let happen is for any of these people to get between Cull and me.

I act quickly.

The gold that I've accumulated at my feet surges forward as fast as I push it. He has a breath to realize that it's coming for him, and he raises his hand and snaps his fingers. A piece of the floor breaks and wrenches upwards. My gold and my gold knocks into his stony barrier, smashing it to pieces. Debris and the impact sends him falling back, his head cracking loudly against the

The guards lunge, but I punch another wave of magic toward them before they can reach me. My molten gold thrusts out, hardening into fists that slam into their torsos, sending them flying.

Before they even land, the ground breaks beneath my feet like a beam of light come up from the earth's core, with jagged pieces of marbled teeth to surround me from below.

Instead of panicking, instead of startling, my body reacts without thought or emotion. Only pure fae instinct. I pitch myself to the side before the ground can devour me in its widening mouth, pushing two Orens out of the way as I fall.

The second I hit the floor, I lift my hand, shoving the liquid gold at whatever I already have at my disposal, whatever I can use the fastest.

A cord flings into him, snagging around his waist, filling me with visceral satisfaction. It yanks on his body, trying to topple him again, but the guards are back up, coming for me. I use my other hand to direct more gold to slam into them, to pin them down—

Cull snaps his fingers.

Pain *erupts* in my arm.

Agony strips me of breath, of movement, freezing me into incapacity. Broken. My arm is *broken*. It hangs at an odd angle. The bone in my forearm split, my limb useless, pain imploding throughout my body.

Through blurred eyes, I notice that more of my gold skin has started to bloom up my arms like blotting ink. The glamour bleeding away in great dark spots.

Cull snaps his fingers again.

I flinch, ready for him to break another bone or snap my neck and kill me—but instead, the roof breaks even more than it already was. Surprise runs through me, but I have to brace myself as the gap widens and sends pieces of ceiling careening down, aiming right for me.

caught I roll out of the way, the movement tearing a scream from my throat though it's drowned out by the blaring crash of falling debris. Pieces fall where I was a second ago, and Oreans shriek in fear, scrabbling away, I can't avoid being crushed. I see Elore crouched and being barraged with debris as his pieces, arms covering her head as dust rains down.  
forward, Fear and anxiety pounce on me like a predator, crushing me with its weight.

tile. I need to get Elore out. I need to get everyone *out*.

before Tears stain my vision, but I grit my teeth and try to yank at my magic it ram feel it swell inside my chest like a full breath. It writhes and roils with fury, but when I lift my good arm to try and blow it all out, it falters.

st The pain makes my gold-touch stutter, rising up only to fall again like a person stumbling from exhaustion or drunkenness. It's like being tortured by Queen Isolte all over again.

ought "Fuck," I hiss as I struggle to my feet. "Push through it, Auren."

crack Shaking all over, I try again, my heart beating so wildly I worry it's about to hammer right past my ribs and roll onto the floor. But that thump in my chest is obliterated when more of the ceiling breaks.

Cull— I manage to send a whip of gold to lash out at Cull, but when the strand curls around his fist, he abruptly goes still. He stares at his hand, perhaps really *looking* at the gold for the first time. That one remaining eye of his runs over the black veins that writhe through the liquid metal...and the rest of his gaze drops to the floor.

Mine follows.

My eyes widen as I see the decades-old rot slithering through the tiles as if it's come to life again.

ation. And all of it is moving toward *me*.

7 The roots thread through the floor in slow movements, making the tiles crack and groan as it starts to circle me in a protective ring. As if in response, the rot in my palms sprouts up, reaching for the rot in the floor like it's trying to reunite.

Goose bumps erupt over my entire body, and I gasp as I feel the full shiver of a cold tide receding. My eyes flush with tears, my ears twingling when I look down, I see the rest of the glamour washing away like letters drawn into the sand, erased by the drag of the tide. My hands, arms, haunches, pieces of fake coloring all pulls away until my true skin gleams.

*Please let Emonie be okay...*

When my true self shows, the Oreans gape at me. My eyes meet Elo all right and she stares in horror, hand cupped over her mute mouth in recognition. Cull's eye goes wide, drinking in my real appearance.

I take advantage of his surprise, gritting my teeth against the pain as I make the gold around his hand tighten. But before it can fully cement in place, he breaks it in half, freeing himself.

*Dammit.*

Panting and clutching my arm against my chest, I manage to make the pieces rejoin, before winding them together to form a rope. It shoots out and wraps around his ankle, and with one tug, I yank his feet out from under him, making him crash to the floor.

I try to immediately make a new stream pour from my hand, but it drips slowly instead. When I attempt to make the small pieces shoot toward him, they enter his mouth or nose or eye, it's too sluggish, too imprecise.

The rest of my gold is still keeping the guards at bay, but barely. It stretches around them like desperate fingers, holding them against the wall. So I call to the rot in the floor instead, trying to get it to attack Cull, to bring him with decay, but it doesn't quite answer to me. Sweat starts tracking down my brow as I urge it on, as I try to ignore the pounding in my arm.

*Come on.*

Instead of attacking him, the rot deteriorates the floor beneath him. It doesn't putrefy his ass, but it does make him fall through the collapsing tiles as they abruptly give way.

Arms flinging out, he manages to catch himself before the ground can completely swallow him up. Gold drips from my hands in clumsy sloshes, but I manage to gather it together and toss it toward him. The thin stream hardens and sharpens in the air, ready to pierce through his chest as it shoots forward, and I hold my breath...

But his power shatters mine into pieces.

The tiny spear I formed explodes like a star, sending bits flying. The impact against my magic is intense enough that it sends me rocking back on my heels as though I've just been punched in the chest.

Cull hauls himself up the rest of the way as I fuse my gold back together again. I send it for the fucker's throat, but he dives out of the way just in time. Then he turns and snaps his fingers, making the wall right next to him release a violent *crack*.

Jerking my head around, I see the wall start to tilt, and I react.

re's, I call for my arm cuffs, my belt, my buckles, for every bit of gold I'm  
ion. wearing that I've reserved as a last resort. Because the way I keep pulling  
more new gold out of me is taking its toll, and the pain is draining me  
I much faster.

in In a blink, every bit of gold liquifies and pours off of me, and I toss  
hands just as the wall breaks open and falls. Before it can crush me, my  
splays out like a net, catching the chunk and stopping its trajectory.

both My head swims with the effort, but I hold it, sweat dripping down my  
at to spine and soaking into my ribbons as my arms shake.

r him, I need to get the Oreans out of here.

"Run!" I shout at them.

rips Now that the broken wall has created a gap to the outside, they have  
him, to chance. My good hand lashes out, grabbing the first Orea I can reach,  
pull him toward it. "Go!"

wall. Everyone else starts to rush toward me, running as fast as they can, but  
some of them seem weakened, slow.

pollute Cull snaps his fingers, trying to mend the wall and close the break be-  
g down they can leave.

"Oh no, you fucking don't," I growl.

I use the net, flinging it forward like a slingshot, tossing the chunk of  
it might at him to cut off his attention. Gratification curls through me when he  
e as it move fast enough and the rubble knocks him in the shoulder. The rest  
an smashes to the ground in a deafening blast, but I take advantage of the  
moment to call the gold to me, and I fling it toward the gap in the wall.

eld it I form an arch there like a protective, reinforced doorway. It ripples,  
mid- holding back the groaning walls that are trying to mold back together.  
y shake, feeling my very muscles tremble from the strain, but I don't let

More Oreans race through it, and I watch them sprint away from the  
manor. And there, ahead in the grass, I see Emonie stumbling to a stop  
e blow wide as the first Orea nearly collapses at her feet.

ly Thank Divine.

The walls slam together above my arch, and I can physically feel it  
ether down on the top as if the weight were on my back. I grit my teeth so hard  
in jaw cracks, but I don't let go. I can see Cull out of the corner of my eye,  
o me straining, furious as he tries to overpower me.

One of the Oreans accidentally stumbles and bumps into my arm as  
race for the archway. A gurgled scream gets caught in my throat, pain

blackening out my vision for a moment, and I nearly lose hold of my magic arch dropping a foot before I catch it again.

so *Push through it. Shove down fucking weakness.*

I heave, but I swallow down the bile and force myself not to pass out. I stay standing.

Then the pressure on the arch suddenly lifts, so quickly that the absence of the strain has me flinching. My glassy eyes lift to look around, I see two Orens sprint out, and then there's no one left except...

*Elore.*

I turn, my blood running cold as I see Cull with his hand squeezed against her throat. Her face is turning red from lack of breath.

I can't breathe either.

He squeezes harder, making her eyes bulge, fingers scrabbling at his Rotten gold pools in my palm.

"You use your magic, and I'll snap her neck," he threatens viciously. I've seen this scene play out before—when it was my neck on the line before was another controlling, cruel person who eked out the threat and tried to force control. To force submission.

Fuck that.

Cull looks down at her with evil victory, while tears slip down her cheeks. The sight of her makes my pain become secondary. My rage overpowers it, cutting through it in the same way lightning blasts through fog.

"Leave her alone!"

With a flick of my wrist, a small puddle of molten gold vaults toward her in a thousand tiny drops that harden into thin needles.

He's focused on Elore, saying something in her ear, so he doesn't notice what I'm doing until he's suddenly stabbed in the neck, every shard embedding into his skin. He lurches back, causing both of them to fall to the floor.

He rolls to the side, neck bleeding from countless pinprick punctures, golden splinters sticking out of him like needles on a pine tree. Blood oozing down his collar, disappearing into the red cloth stuffed at his throat.

I push the rest of my gold to stream toward Elore. It loops around her, helping her to her feet, and starts pulling her toward me.

At the same time, I start bending the little slivers in Cull's neck, making them meld together so I can choke him out, but he breaks it with his magic and tosses it away.



Shaking, I clench my teeth and make the golden shards fly up and stab into the open wounds at his throat. I make them delve deeper, ready to send them into his bloodstream and straight to his heart, to stab every organ, ready to fucking kill—

Suddenly, the broken bones in my arm *grind*.

My scream shreds the air.

My hold on my magic sputters out like a snuffed candle, my gold goes liquid and dribbling out of Cull. It all sloshes down in a useless puddle making Elore stagger with its sudden absence, the thick liquid tripping round feet.

Bile swarms my mouth, and one look at my arm makes the pain a hundred times worse. I can see it. See Cull using his break power to make the tiny pieces of bone scrape together, pulling the skin sickeningly as they move. Agony clots my vision like stains of ink, and I sway on my feet, my body giving out.

Just as my knees buckle, someone's arms come up behind me before I can crash to the floor. I blink, thrashing to get out of their hold, but when I look up, it's Wick who has me.

He immediately hauls me out of the manor, pulling me beneath the eaves. Cull drags Elore up too, keeping hold of her arm as he pursues us. Outside, I can see the Oreans running for the trees.

When Cull breaches the gap in the wall too, Wick picks me up and starts sprinting us away from the manor, making the pain so much worse. My vision topples dangerously, and I know I'm going to pass out, but I try to force myself not to.

Stay awake.

Ignore the pain.

Stay. Fucking. Awake.

*grind—grind—grind—grind*

“Here! Escape here!”

Ludo's shout causes the Oreans to run for him, probably only trusting him because they see he's fighting off two of Cull's guards. Beside him, Elore is fighting too, a dagger in hand as she spins and twists. She's deflecting blows from the guard she's fighting against, keeping him away from the fleeing Oreans. Brennur is behind them both, and there's a lush fairy ring at his feet, its flowers and grass in a perfect circle, much bigger and taller than the one we used before.

ab into A group of three Oreans stagger into the ring and instantly disappear.  
l them another group goes through, and another, and another, filling me with  
y to hope.

We can get away. We can get everyone out of here, safe.

Ludo and Emonie continue to fight, but in my peripheral, I see more  
guards rushing toward them. Every running step that Wick takes as we  
ing toward the ring jostles my arm, making it nearly impossible to talk, to

, “Wait.” My voice comes out as nothing more than a raw croak. I don’t  
up her even think Wick heard me.

One look back shows Cull scanning the yard as he follows us. He spots  
hundred Brennur and the ring, sees his guards fighting Ludo and Emonie, and then  
wo eyes land back on me. He doesn’t run, doesn’t rush. He just strides after  
ve. with the promise of death in his eyes while hauling Elore with him.

dy I have to get her.

“Wait!” I push against Wick, and this time, my voice comes out loud  
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look out of his arms. He releases me, and we both stagger, my ankle nearly  
twisting as I land.

arch. “What are you doing?” he shouts as he reaches for me again.

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out of the way.

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to slices into him instead. I gasp as it cuts deep into his bicep, and Wick screams  
out in pain.

His sleeve slashes open, and blood bursts from the wound.

But I stare in shock because the blood...it’s not red.

It’s *gold*.

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## CHAPTER 51

AUREN

**S**hock stiffens my body. All my thoughts cinch.

My eyes widen, heartbeat going more erratic as I stare and stare. Gaze caught on the gold blood that gushes from Wick's gash.

Estelia's voice buzzes in my head. *Every Turley ever born had some of them that was gold.*

Wick's face swarms in my memory, of how he looked at me when we met in the field.

*You really are her...*

The startling truth runs rampant, stampeding through my ears with a deafening charge. Shock, disbelief, and outrage scatter, pulling me every which way. I feel like someone has knocked the wind out of me, barging me again and again as I try to breathe.

Our eyes meet for a split second, his gold blood saturated between us flooding me with newfound realization.

His expression is...

Regretful.

Guilt-ridden.

Soaked through with a begrudging acknowledgement that drenches both, raining down the past and the present.

*Wick is a Turley.*

It's all I hear. All I think.

Until our connection is abruptly cut off when Wick turns to face the who tried to attack me. Time hurtles out of its pause, like a door flinging open.

Wick moves with impressive speed. With one hand, he reaches forward and grips the guard by his face, and then *blows*.

A cloud of gold ash suddenly erupts out. It's thick and cloying, burs right into the guard's forced-open mouth, filling past his lips, weighing his tongue. The guard starts choking as more glinting ash piles in, a cloud thick powder surrounding his head, obscuring him from view.

His hands claw, trying to scoop the ash out of his mouth to clear his airway, but it doesn't work. He collapses to the ground, and Wick spinning yanking a hidden dagger free just in time to fight off another guard.

Movement in the corner of my eye has me whirling, and a guard rushes me, blade raised. Before he can swing, his spine suddenly cracks in half like a tree trunk snapping. He pitches forward, dead before he hits the ground. Eyes staring, unseeing.

"No one touches her!" Cull yells as he stalks forward, Elore's feet dragging in the grass as he wrenches her along.

ire.

I clutch my aching arm against my chest and face him, thoughts racing.

part

Behind me, the last of the Oreans are trying to get to the ring. Ludo is fighting. Emonie is fighting. Wick is fighting. There are more guards rushing this way, surrounding us from all sides.

ve first

"Retreat!" Wick shouts. "To the ring! Hurry!"

My focus is on Elore—on the terrified look on her face. I can see all years of abuse and degradation in her eyes. All of it centered on the man who has hold of her.

ry

ng into

"Auren!" Wick calls behind me. "We have to go!"

"I'm not leaving her!" I toss back over my shoulder.

s,

I shovel magic out of myself, forcing it past my pain and scooping it into my palms. Sluggish, thick clots drop onto the grass.

Cull sneers at my pathetic attempt. "Why did the rot move to you?"

When I don't answer him, he tightens his fist, and his magic intensifies. *grind—grind—grind*

us I'm shaking all over. With anger. With determination. Trying to concentrate on my magic even through the debilitating pain.

"Fuck. You."

I send the clotted gold zipping forward. Make it sharpen. It stabs into my hand where he grips Elore, forcing him to let go. Blood oozes from the wound but he lifts that very same hand and snaps his fingers.

Pure, piercing, agony explodes through me.

I look down at where he's just broken one of my ribs.

Trying to inhale is torture.

My legs give way, knees slamming hard into the ground. I pitch forward, barely catching myself from collapsing by bracing my good hand in front of me. My arm shakes as I try to hold myself up. To keep from falling face down. Sweat and bile and tears are ready to pour out of me. The grass in my vision spins. The breath in my lungs tightens.

But the spot in my chest—the seed of rot left behind...

*It seethes.*

"Why did the rot move to you?"

I bite my tongue to keep from screaming.

Gold congeals against the grass.

"Tell me!"

I lift my head, glaring with defiance. With fury. With threat.

His eyes harden. His hand lifts.

The Breaker keeps breaking. But not me.

*Snap.*

Behind me, I hear Ludo shout.

*Snap.*

Emonie screams.

*Snap.*

Wick cries out.

My stomach heaves, strained neck barely able to look back, to see the man sprawled on the ground, clutching broken bones, panic and hate and desperation slamming through me, and I have to *do* something. Have to do this. Have to save everyone.

"I'll keep breaking their bones one by one unless you tell me what I need to know," Cull shouts. "Why did that rot magic come toward you? Why are you seeking *you* out?"

So that's why he isn't just killing me. He wants answers.

“I don’t know.”

My voice comes out like a whisper. My gold curdles and cools. But that runs through it writhes. The spot in my chest burns.

o his Thrums.

My ears pound, not from the pain, but the drumming of the rot. Not rot that’s intertwined with my magic either, but the rot from inside the *His* rot. *His* magic.

It’s thumping. Pulsing. Like veins from a heart. Beating through me way I’ve never felt before.

ward, My fingers curl into the grass.

ont of I wake up the fae beast inside of me, make it open both eyes.

re-first. Slade’s magic is singing its seductive song, baying out like a wolf h  
vision at the moon.

The song of power calls to my beast.

So I set it free from the cage of my ribs.

And I let it sing *back*.

And as soon as I do, that rot in my chest starts burning hotter.

Hotter.

“Tell me what connection you have with my son!” Cull demands, voice cutting through the air.

*His son.*

My head lifts, eyes spearing him with glittering fury. “He’s not *your* anything,” I snarl.

He’s my everything.

Protective possessiveness flares up from within. Slade is mine. Not I *Mine.*

I claim him—my heart, mind, body, beast, my soul claims him.

Cull’s eyes gleam with thirst. “So you *do* know him. Is he here? Did you send you? Tell me!”

iem I feel my stomach pitch and sway. Squeeze in on itself as bile burns throat and waters my tongue.

o stop My hand digs deeper into the grass. Into the soil beneath. My beast lurches up, talons latched into my torso. I feel it reach up and close its mouth around that seed of rot.

want y is it I suck in a breath.

Then the beast swallows that seed of power whole, and my entire body shudders. My entire world *twists*. Something at the deepest part of my

shifts.  
 the rot Melds.  
 Cull doesn't see. Doesn't see behind him. Doesn't feel what I feel.  
 Unaware of Slade's magic swimming beneath his very feet, stretching  
 just theme—reaching to my own rot.  
 house. Like Slade himself is holding out his hand, and I'm reaching right b.  
 Nearly touching.  
 in a Nearly there.  
 I can feel him as surely as I can feel my own skin. Can sense his ver  
 as if it's intertwining through mine.  
 Weaving and weaving and *weaving*...  
 owling Cull's brown eyebrows slam together at my continued silence. He d  
 hear how loud my roaring song is. Doesn't hear the violence screaming  
 through the roots in the ground.  
 "I will break *everyone* until you tell me what I want to know," he th  
 as he yanks Elore over to him by her hair. "Including her."  
 Her.  
 Our eyes lock.  
 dice My gold ones.  
 Her green ones.  
 The same exact shade as Slade's—like he's the one looking out at m  
 The ground rumbles—I rumble.  
 Fury is hot. It's wild. It's beastly.  
*It's rot.*  
 his. Cull lifts his hand. His finger poised against thumb. Ready to snap. I  
 to break.  
 Instead...  
 l he I break  
*open.*  
 my Slade's rot smashes into mine, and I rupture from within.  
 Time tilts.  
 leaps Distance thins.  
 round And something...collides.

## AUREN

dy  
 being I gasp.



Breathe.  
The air of Annwyn. The air of Orea.  
I pitch backwards.  
The beast and the seed surge.  
*Combine.*  
My back heats.  
Rot delves. Not with death, but rebirth. *Life* tears free.  
Two souls reach out. Clasp. My ears echo with two heartbeats.  
With a bonded song.  
My aura flares.  
Changes.  
*I can feel him.*

oward  
ack.  
y soul  
oesn't  
3  
reatens



*I can feel her:*  
Changes.  
My aura pulses.  
A roar sounds in my ear. Souls tether.  
was my dying heart.  
scales erupt over my chest, bursting from what I thought  
My two sides...they *mend*. Something else tears free.  
Something shifts.  
*Bursts.*  
My rotting heart suddenly swells.  
My knees buckle.  
Her warmth. It consumes me.  
I can scent her.  
I gasp.

re.  
Ready

## SLADE





## CHAPTER 52

AUREN

**T**ime snaps back into place.

Cull is frozen, standing there gaping at me. Elore's eyes have gone wide.

It feels like a star as hot and bright as the sun has suddenly burst out roots as dark and poisoned as death streaming in.

Confusion, elation, and something unnamed—but its essence feeling utterly fitting—sweeps through me. I look down, my whole body shaking, gasp tearing from my throat.

I've only seen one aura before, and that was Slade's while in his Rip Dark, coiling black emanating around him like smoke and shadow. An aura that pulsed with his essence.

He said my own aura shone like the glowing sun.

And that's what I see.

Light has exploded over my body in luminous warmth. But...there are shadows of black curling through it.

Like our auras combined.

Inside, I convulse with a wave of heat and tepidity, with light and da

and death.

Black and gold.

There's this connection I can't quite explain but somehow understand intrinsically. Like two hearts beating as one.

Breathlessly, I watch the glowing gold and wisps of coiled black slowly sink back into my skin until the flare of colors is gone. But while I can't anymore, I can still feel it. Can still feel Slade's presence. Gently. Soft. Like the quiet moments right before waking, when I can sense him lying to me. Like when he enters a room and I know he's there, even before I to look.

A cruel bark of laughter startles me, wrenching me away from my inner reflections. I jerk my head up and see Cull's eye gleam, his teeth flashing with a menacing grin.

"Well, that explains everything, doesn't it?" he says, his gaze cruelly mocking. "*Päyur.*"

My brow furrows.

That word...spoken with the old fae lilt. I recognize that word... How do I recognize that word?

Then I remember.

I remember me, back in Ranhold. A dark library. A cover made of elderwood, stitched with red leather. A forbidden book of the fae that I had slipped into my pocket.

gone

I remember peeling it open and seeing an illustration inside of it.

of me,

Of a woman with flaxen hair that gleamed gold. Of a fae male beside her with wings. There was a haze that enveloped them both as they embraced.

Almost like...

so

Joined auras.

ing, a

And that word, just below them.

form.

*Päyur.*

aura

My heartbeat rumbles. Resonates.

"That explains the rot," Cull says, his expression arrogant. Ecstatic. "How long were you able to see my son's aura? How long have you known you were fated to be a bonded pair?"

are now

Bonded pair...

My vision tunnels.

ark, life

One sharp memory suddenly shoves forward. As if it's been waiting for me to burst in all along.

My mind's eye sees it so clearly. A frigid night, out on a balcony, beneath snow and stars. Beneath demanding want and debilitating conflict. Beneath a set of black eyes.

wly  
't see it  
ly.  
ig next  
I turn

*I look up, letting snow fall onto my lashes, and when I turn to glance at Rip, I find he's already looking at me.*

*"So, still angry at me?" he asks with a wry tinge to his tone. I leap at it, relieved to end the silence, to move past the rebuttal on the stairwell.*

*"Furious."*

*Rip tips his head down, as if he expected nothing less.*

*"You?" I ask him.*

*"Livid."*

*Our mouths twitch in synchronicity, shared smirks tipping up at the corners.*

*He leans back in his chair, the spikes along his back disappearing beneath his leathers. "We're quite the pair, you and I."*

*At his words, chills scatter over my arms, even though I'm wrapped beneath the blanket. "What do you mean?"*

*There's an enigmatic look on his face that I can't decipher, and he opens his mouth to answer, but appears to reconsider, going silent once more. Flakes of snow land on his black hair, soaking into the inky locks while he considers me with that intensity I've grown so accustomed to.*

*"It's remarkable, you know."*

*"What is?" I ask.*

*"We might be the last two fae in the entire world, and somehow, our paths crossed that night."*

*His words from before, about how my aura was a beacon that he followed, make a lump appear in my throat. "Fate does funny things."*

*"It does."*

e her  
ced.

"Tell

It does.

My mind is a cyclone. Twisting and twisting. My emotions are in ch  
And still, his words echo.

eneath

We're quite the pair, you and I.

Quite the pair, you and I.

Pair, you and I.

*Päyur, you and I.*

2

t

1

laos.

We're quite the pair, you and I.

Quite the pair, you and I.

Pair, you and I.

*Päyur, you and I.*



## CHAPTER 53

AUREN

**H**e knew.

That's the thought that chokes up and lodges in my throat. I taste the truth of it at the back of my tongue.

I only ever had a vague inclination about auras. As a little girl, I can remember them abstractly. So when I first saw Rip that night in the Ba knew he was fae. I'd never seen an Orean have an aura before, so the haze that always clung to him like smoke and shadow, plus his slightly ears obscured behind his hair and helmet? I knew what he was. I could the *otherness* in him.

Except I never knew that only fated bonded pairs could see them. I knew what it truly meant. How would I? I was five when I left Annwy But Slade knew.

Emonie's previous words come back to me.

*"You can see his aura? Not many fae get to. No wonder you're dyin get back to each other."*

I didn't think about it. Didn't stop and consider why, when I returne Annwyn, I didn't see any other auras. I've been too wrapped up in tryi



find him, trying to manage my power...

And his.

I glance down at my palms, watching the twisting lines across them.

“Where is he?”

My eyes shoot up. Cull is closer now. Elore is too.

He sees my attention on her and tightens his hold on the back of her  
“Look at this, Elore. A true Păyur right in our midst. Not that you’d ca  
much, would you? It’s not as if you’re one of the very rare Oreans to e  
capable of bonding with fae. But here she is. Bonded to our son.” He g  
back at me. “And my son, nowhere in sight.” His expression is full of s  
promise. “But I have you, don’t I?”

“No,” I snarl. “You don’t.”

I fist my hand, and Slade’s magic that flooded in now answers my c  
The amassed rot explodes out of the ground, shooting up in a violent u  
that cracks the earth.

It rises like serpentine roots, thick and sinister and towering.

A breath. That’s all they have, and then it slashes at every guard, hu  
them away.

And because I acted too suddenly, without warning, the biggest root  
slams into Cull, the abrupt appearance of the magic and strength taking  
by surprise. He goes flying.

“Auren!” Wick calls.

can

*Time to go.*

With my good hand, I snatch hold of Elore. Together, we start racin  
toward the fairy ring where Wick, Emonie, and Ludogar are already ga  
Wick’s shoulder looks shattered. Emonie is clutching a broken hand, a  
Ludogar had to crawl to the ring, his leg snapped. My own broken bon  
in torment, stealing my ability to breathe, but I push through it.

rens, I  
lack  
r tipped  
sense

Miraculously, none of the guards have gotten to Brennur. None of th  
were able to cut off our only escape.

never  
n.

Behind me, the poisoned roots grow and grow, looming over the gro  
thickening like the most treacherous brambles. But then I hear the root  
snapping. Breaking.

“Go!”

g to

We all shove our way in at once. Clustered together, bodies bulging  
the ring, the five of us plaster against one another. My feet are on tipto

d to  
ng to

good hand clutching Elore, Wick beside me, still bleeding, breathing hard. Emonie shouldering Ludogar to keep him upright.

And we disappear.

The world crumples like paper, tossing away, tossing us with it. Disorientation fills me, the chasm of my surprise slowly filling me with elation. We get to the neck. We got *away*.

But revulsion sinks through my stomach too as we travel through the forest. Even before Brennur's magic. I don't know why I hate the fairy ring so much, don't know why I have such an aversion to it, but I do. A cold sweat breaks over my forehead. Sadistic and I want *out*—

We land. Everything smooths.

I grip Elore's hand, squeezing tight, tears of relief starting to pool around me. "We made it. Everything's alright, we're—"

The world comes into view, and I instantly realize that I'm wrong. Everything isn't alright.

In fact, it's very, very wrong.

The fairy ring we're huddled in is at the mouth of a castle.

Towering over us, the white structure drips with swooping stone and stained glass, every pane lit up with the reflection of the setting sun. We get to the just before the castle's front steps, a short, wide stair thrusting out from a huge double doors like a tongue that spat us into the courtyard.

And surrounding us are at least a hundred Stone Swords.

My blood runs cold. My heart trips. Because every single Olean villager I'd thought had gotten away from danger is here, on their knees with a dagger at their throats and dismay on their faces.

A king stands before them. Dressed all in gray with a regal mantle lined with fur. He has taupe skin and a hard expression, and on his head sits a crown with sharp spires hewn from rock.

King Carrick.

Alarm blares in my ears and reverberates down my limbs, making my joints shake with it.

"What's happening?" I breathe as I look around wildly, trying to understand. "Where are we?"

"We're in Lydia, but we shouldn't be," Wick says, confusion clear in his tone. "We should—"

The fairy ring suddenly gives us a big *shove*.

ard, All five of us get pushed out. Wick is only barely able to keep hold of Ludogar before he goes sprawling. Emonie stumbles but manages to right herself and presses up against me, while Elore clutches my arm so tight her nails indent into my skin.

ot out. As soon as we're clear of the circle, there's the sound of a fierce wind tearing grass and flowers blow through the ring, though I don't feel the breeze. We barely have time to glance back at it and see people start to appear inside the ring before—

ly skin, *grind—grind—grind—grind*

I'm on my knees, buckled from the agony of my arm and rib. My ears are ringing so loudly I don't even realize the others are screaming until I hear a sound wherewithal to look around and see Emonie, Wick, and Ludogar all on the ground, obviously going through the same bone-breaking agony as I am.

Their pain kills me. Floods me with panic.

Elore crouches down in front of me, pale hands grasping my cheeks. Her expression frenzied and terrified. Even through the horror of this moment, the fact that Slade's mother is trying to comfort me makes me want to cry.

The Breaker stands over us, glaring around like we're rodents in a trap. I'm not looking at him. I'm looking at Brennur. Beside me, so is Wick.

1 the "What the fuck did you do?" Wick yells at him, his voice hoarse. "What the fuck have you done?"

The old fae's eyes shift away. Grayish skin mottled at the cheeks.

ager Betrayed. We were *betrayed*.

blade Brennur opened up the fairy ring here, instead of safety. Here, in Annwyn's capital...

ined Whipping gusts of fury blast into me, but my body and mind are too a gray to move.

ie Wick is on the ground, clutching his shoulder, blood still soaking through his shirt, looking like he got stained with smears of my gold-touch. But so, he tries to use that ashen magic of his, tries to blow a stream of it off me. He barely sputters, like dust in a feeble puff, before Wick is screaming, laid on his back.

*grind—grind—grind—grind*

n his I'm going to pass out, and maybe I would have if it weren't for the fact that Brennur moves closer to me. If it weren't for the fact that I catch another whiff of the leather from his vest. An undertone to it like it was soaked in bark.

of Oak bark.

ght My head hollows out. My heart does too.

tly that I'm not here, at the fae's castle. I'm there, in Bryol, when I was five old. When a leather gag that tasted of oak bark was pressed into my mouth. The When I was stolen from my guards, separated from the other children. I taken into Orea.

de the Orea...where old fairy rings used to dot across the lands when fae had lived there.

Bile heaves up my throat and spews from my mouth, making my brothers are rib stab me with horrible pain. The acid burns, but my eyes burn hotter. I breathe the "You," I breathe, staring at Brennur as I wipe my mouth against my teeth. "It was you, wasn't it? You took me to—"

n. I don't even see his cane before it slams into my face.

Pain explodes across my cheek, making my vision collapse and my legs go sprawling back onto the ground. I think I might've passed out for a moment, the several seconds, because when I come to, the royal guard has Elore, Wick, Emonie, and Ludo on their knees by point of sword.

ap. But Hate and fury flare hot in my gut, molten and burning.

. The fae king looms over me, right alongside Cull. Side by side, the two. What they are backed by the glaring castle, their expressions monstrous. Victorious.

"So it's true. *Auren Turley*." The king bites out my name with a gravelly voice. There's so much loathing in his granite eyes that my hackles rise. "You're supposed to be dead."

"You fucking will be," I spit out.

dazed Gold and rot rush out of my palms and slam into the king, Cull, Brennur, knocking them back, nearly skidding them into the guards...

rough The Breaker snaps another rib.

t even Agony staggers my power, rips it away. My liquid metal sloshes to the ground in an ineffectual heap, like wind torn out of the sail of a boat.

id out "Enough of that," I hear the king say distantly, even as Wick and Emonie also scream my name. I can't see them through the tears blurring my eyes.

"I need her alive, but I need her useful," Cull says.

fact that "A useful Turley?" King Carrick laughs but rubs at his chin in thought before glancing at someone out of view. "Bring Una."

l in... I pant against the grass. The battle with Cull, how much I've used my gold-touch and Slade's rot, it's taken a toll, hacked into me again and a

like the swing of an ax against a trunk. The pain, every break Cull inflicts it's like the last cut before the tree falls.

years  
outh.  
and  
The king looks back at me, at the defiance flashing through my sweat-slicked face. He raises a brow and then glances at his guards. "Start killing the Oreans."

ad  
"No!" I wrench up, black dots clouding my vision, but I see the first fall, a bloom of blood weeping from the man's throat.

Then another.

oken  
Another.

'.  
*grind—grind*

sleeve.  
More Oean bodies fall.

"Stop!" I scream again and again, trying to claw my way forward, gouging and staining the grass with my drag.

body  
stop stop stop stop stop

least  
The pain, the death, the heart-stopping realizations, I need it all to stay

'ick,  
"I'm doing them a favor," the king intones. "Dying here in my court is much quicker than the ones who are dying in Orea."

*What?*

two of  
I drag my eyes up to the king's hard face.

velly  
e.  
"Oh, didn't you know?" he asks before looking around at Wick and others. "I've finally made it happen. The bridge of Lemuria has been unbroken. My army marches on Orea as we speak, killing everyone in its path. Soon, every Oean will be dead."

Wick shouts. Struggles. The villagers wail.

But my ears have latched on to one thing.

nnur,  
The bridge of Lemuria has been unbroken.

Slade.

I can get to *Slade*.

he  
This thought is the only thing powerful enough to cut through the agony and the drain, and the vulnerability.

nonie  
yes.  
The king has miscalculated. He thought his words would only bring despair and panic, and they do...but they also bring vicious, surging hope.

ght  
y  
again,  
I don't wait. Using this burst of power, I shove everything I have at the king. The blundering puddle on the grass suddenly sloshes together, lifting like a thick limb. With a grunt, I make it arc toward the two fae, to gild them solid, ready to fucking kill them all because I can *finally* get back to Slade—

icts,            Hands behind me suddenly clap over my ears.  
                  There's instant, intense pressure, like I've been dumped into the bot  
at-            the sea. Plunging down its depths far too fast.  
ling            My magic tumbles out of my grip.  
                  It feels like my eardrums are about to blow out, my eyes ready to bu  
Orean from their sockets. I scream from the pressure, trying to wrench away t  
hands, but then, something *digs in*.  
                  Tunneling down my ear canals, probing into me, making me scream  
louder, though I can't hear it. There's a clicking that peals through,  
encompassing everything else. My gold splashes to the ground, my bo  
slumps.  
old            Something burrows  
                  burrows  
                  burrows  
op.            into my ear, into my *brain*.  
yard is        Like a caterpillar chomping through a leaf, a mouse tunneling throug  
dirt. I go rigid when it suddenly hits something in my mind. Delves in.  
                  Goes deeper.  
                  The fight, the fear, the anger, it all just stops. It's scooped out, leavin  
the            holes and pits in their wake.  
                  And I...  
its            I?  
                  I blink.  
                  My head feels light. My ears sound hollow. Something chomps...  
                  "How long will it take?" I hear someone ask.  
                  Who?  
                  What?  
                  I'm very far away. Or very close. I'm watching myself from above i  
gony,        disconnected dream.  
                  But wait...there was something I needed to do...someone I needed t  
me            to.  
ope.            A stranger comes up beside me, wiping her hands off, blue striped e  
Cull            looking at me with contemplation.  
ether,            She smiles. "Not long."  
ready        People scream. When I look around, there are so many faces looking  
get            in horror. In devastation.  
                  "*What did you do to her?*" the fae with a wound on his arm shouts.

I frown...  
tom of But a hand on my arm tugs me away.  
I feel my memories, my *self*, tugging away too.  
And away  
rst And a w a y  
the And a w a y

. even

dy Because this is what it feels like...

gh the

1g

n a

io get

yes

g at me

I frown...

But a hand on my arm tugs me away.

I feel my memories, my *self*, tugging away too.

And away

And a w a y

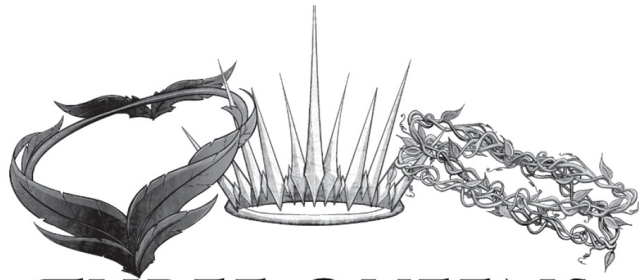
And a w a y

Because this is what it feels like...



to forget.

to forget.



# THREE QUEENS

## PART TWO

There once were three queens,  
inside two different lands.  
Past, present, and void,  
to whom destiny hands.

Three queens were declared, but only one born.  
She was the ice that looked on in scorn.

The other was brought, through a bridge, she was made.  
When her fate fell, the goddesses bayed.

The last was a vine, who reached through the split.  
Gilt come to rain, Fates come to knit.

Together they were, apart they would be.  
But these different queens, heard the song of the Three.

And that ballad, it played, like a whisper or drum.  
It sang in their ears, with a pulse and a thrum.

The stars above, they watched and they waited.  
Divine gripped the bridge and fed snow into Jaded.  
Then tipped back the sun, and out hatched the gold-plated.

That is how the Three were then fated.

There once were three queens.  
But one thing about them, the same.

These three were reborn.

And with magic...  
they claimed.

These three were reborn.

And with magic...  
they claimed.

# Acknowledgements

Writing this book during postpartum with a baby was no easy feat. I did everything I could to creating these pages, and I don't think I'd ever be able to adequately describe all the emotions I went through. But the only reason I was able to write a single sentence this year was because of my family and friends.

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For the better.

There were growing pains, but I've never worked so hard or for so long on a single book like I did with *Gold*. Now that it's written, I'm so happy with what it became.

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as able especially while I just wasn't in the headspace to be able to do it. You  
who amazing and have the perfect eye, and I'm always so grateful for you

To my formatter, Amy, thank you for making *Gold* truly shine.

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wouldn't be doing any of this without you. Thank you for loving this  
and taking the time in your own busy lives to fall into this world wit

And for anyone going through a dark time, just remember a new dawn  
always rises. One day at a time. One step. You are strong, just like A  
and you shine just like her too.

—RK

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And a BIG, HUGE, GINORMOUS thank you to the readers.

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And for anyone going through a dark time, just remember a new dawn always rises. One day at a time. One step. You are strong, just like Auren, and you shine just like her too.

—RK



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