

LIGHTLARK
DUELING CROWNS EDITION



GRIM

and

ORO



ALEX ASTER

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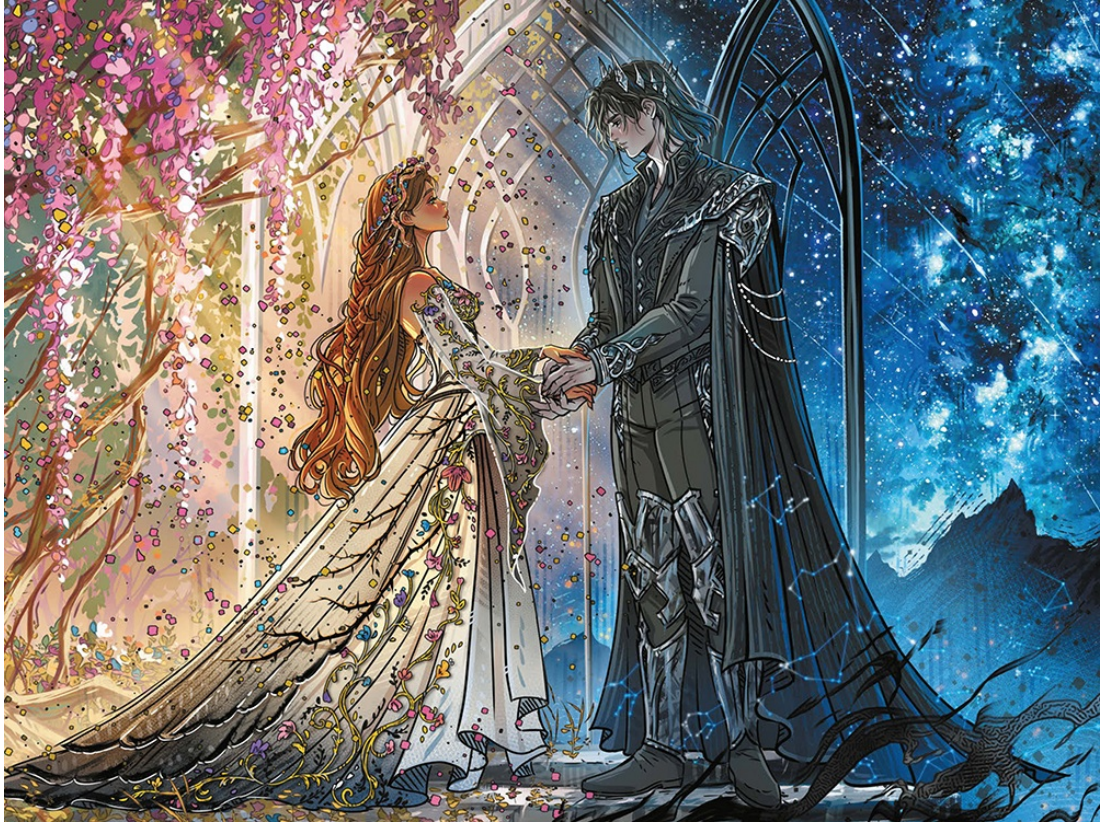
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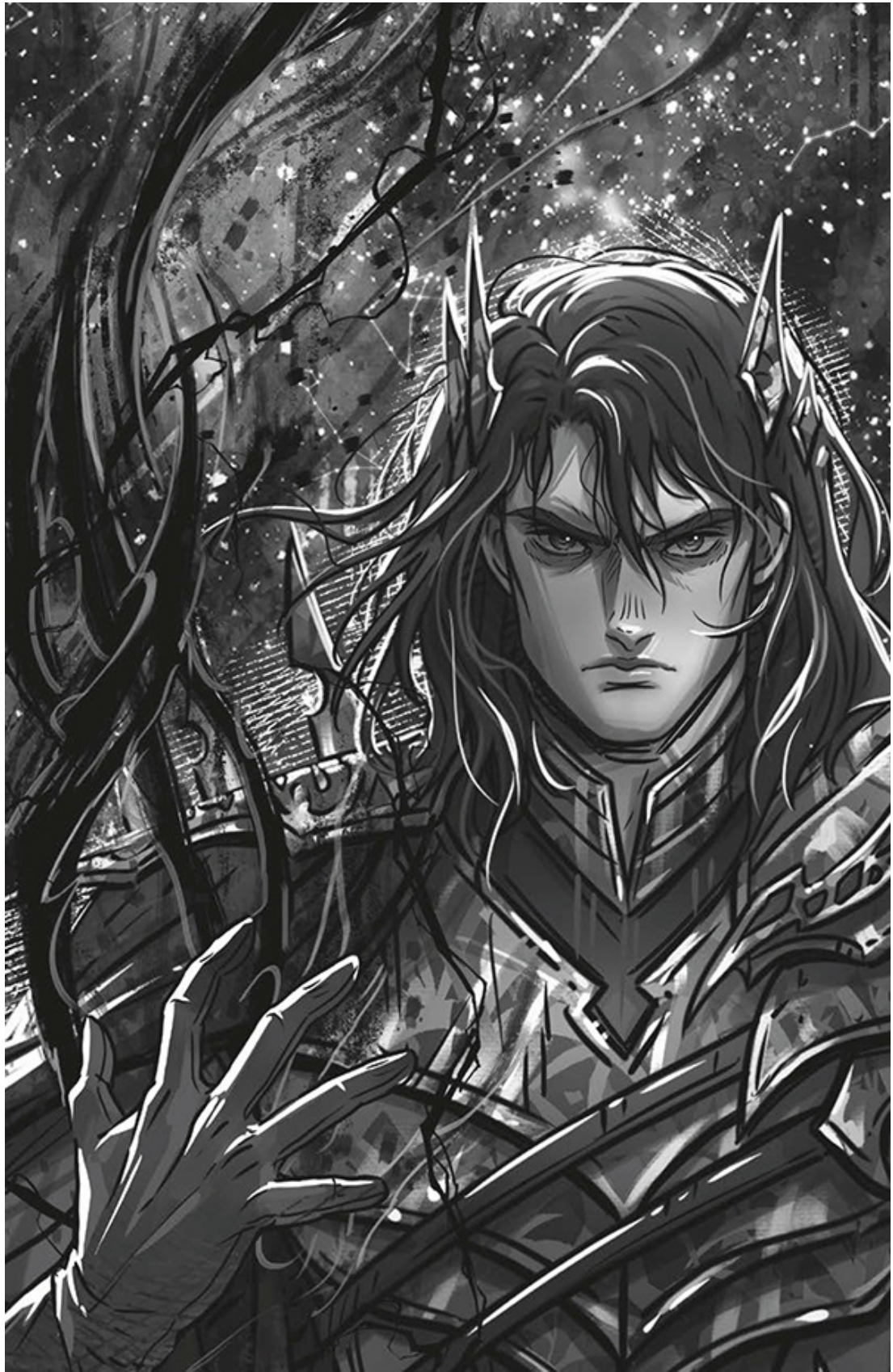
#1 New York Times
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ALEX ASTER





For those who find stars in darkness







INFINITE

Whenever I feel alone, I imagine myself scattered across the sky.

I imagine I am endless, limitless, stretched beyond reason. I imagine myself beyond this single existence.

There is a name for this, I learn.

My sister teaches me.

“You’ll get it one day.”

I jump, not expecting Laila to be right behind me, leaning casually, like she’s been there for a while. She must have flown in from the hole in the wall. I hate when she does that.

My face reddens with thorn-prickling embarrassment as I shove my hand back into my pocket. I’ve been trying for half an hour now to summon a cloaking shadow. Stupid, really, to try. No matter how long I concentrate, or how strong my stance is, nothing happens.

I have powers. I’ve used them before.

But they are fickle. Rare. Summoning shadows doesn’t come easily to me. I barely feel them stirring beneath my skin.

It’s as if they’re resting. Waiting. For what? I’m not sure.

I’m not like my siblings. I watch them sometimes, from my frost-glazed window. I see the shadows in the gardens inch toward them as they pass. My half brothers and sisters, all within a few years of my age, carelessly string them together as if it’s easy, as if it’s natural.

A burden, I once heard a guardian call me, so I have tried everything to become essential.

I left the winter palace early this morning to join my siblings and the rest of the Nightshade elite’s children for training. While they were grouped into shadow-wielders, I joined the warriors. I focused on swordplay.

I can't rely on my abilities, but I can count on my metal.

Still, a blade can only do so much.

"Here, I'll do it," Laila says, straightening, flicking her wrist like it's nothing. A towering shadow curves out of her fingers and covers us like a cloak.

At eight, my sister is only a year older than me, yet she already has full mastery of her abilities.

I wait for the flash of bitter jealousy . . . but it doesn't come. Not for her. Not for someone I care about.

I'm glad she has her shadows. I would never take them from her.

Even if she, out of anyone, doesn't need them.

Laila has discovered—or carved—holes all through the palace. Likely all through the training grounds too, up in the mountains of the Algid. She could turn and be outside in a moment's notice. She's doing this for my benefit.

Burden, I hear, whispered somewhere in my memories.

Wearing her shadow over our heads, we inch through the castle. My arm brushes the cold, glimmering stone. Whisper-quiet footsteps echo nearby, attendants rushing down the halls. We pass countless oak doors, and I can hear my siblings inside, training. *Always training*. There's the hiss of shadows. The earsplitting cry of sharpening blades.

Just when we're at the end of the last corridor, an attendant fills the entrance.

Guardian Asa. Just a few months into her tenure and already the cruelest guardian of them all. I straighten on instinct, the skin in my back stretching, scars tingling, a reminder of the pain she's inflicted.

We've been caught. I swallow, already feeling the ghost of her razor-sharp shadows, already—

Laila digs her nails into my arm and pulls me to the side, just out of Guardian Asa's way. My heart is beating wildly. Spark-like nerves swirl through my stomach, even as she passes us by, without incident.

From Laila, I feel only bubbling anticipation. Excitement. It's almost like she wants to be caught.

That was close. Too close.

It's only when we slip through the door, out into the gardens, that I finally loosen a breath. The cool air hits me and my muscles relax, tension uncoiling.

I hate the staleness of inside. Here in the cold, I feel like I can finally breathe.

One moment. I get one moment of peace.

Then Laila drops her shadow and starts running. She starts *laughing*. I curse

and run after her, frost-coated blades of grass scraping my ankles as I weave through the perfectly shaped trees and ancient statues just beyond the giant, mysterious hedge maze. The statues represent our ancestors, immortalized in stone. The *winners*. The ones strong enough to continue our line.

The guardians could be watching from the windows, as they sometimes do. The patrolling guards could see us. We aren't supposed to leave the winter palace by ourselves. More than that, we aren't supposed to be speaking to each other, let alone being friendly. None of the heirs are.

Laila's going to get us in trouble.

When I tell her so, she throws me a look over her shoulder. Her black hair is stick-straight, crudely cut by her own sword to just above her shoulders. "Good. I like trouble."

"That's because you don't get punished like the rest of us."

Laila is our father's favorite. She's one of his only children with a flair, an extra power that the bloodline doesn't guarantee. She can turn into a bat, with fangs sharp enough to rip out someone's neck.

She did, once. The act of violence only made Father like her more.

I'm not like Laila. Father has the guardians punish me every time I break the rules. Tonight, we're breaking several.

Laila and I have broken the rules for years now, though.

Whenever we get caught, she uses her flair to fly away, leaving me to deal with the consequences. She doesn't even feel bad about it. I know. I might not have a flair, but I can feel the emotions of those around me, an increasingly rare Nightshade power. I've never sensed anything remotely like regret from her. Maybe her abandonment should hurt. All I feel is admiration.

After all, it's what will make her a good ruler one day. Just like Father, who has also never felt remorse.

One day soon, we will fight to the death at the Gauntlet to determine who becomes Father's heir, just as Father did before us, and his father before him: each generation since Cronan founded Nightshade pitted against their own. Only the strongest from each generation continues the line, while the rest feed the land with their blood.

Once the youngest of us reaches training age, we must do the same.

Laila finally slows her pace, then stops, mud-laden snow sputtering around her leather boots. She's facing a low stone wall that encircles the perimeter of the grounds. I come to a halt next to her, our breaths releasing in clouds. "You're thinking about it again, aren't you?" Laila says, turning to face me. "The Gauntlet."

“No.”

She laughs. It’s a gentle sound, completely at odds with her sharp, catlike eyes. “You, Grimshaw, are a terrible liar.”

I scowl. “Don’t call me that.”

Father calls me by my full name. And my skin crawls every time I hear it. It doesn’t sound like me. It sounds like someone else.

“You are a terrible liar, *Grim*. Happy?”

Never.

I sigh. “Fine. I was thinking about it. Don’t you?”

She shrugs. “Of course I do. But I don’t get sad.”

“That’s because you know you’re going to win.”

She grins, flashing her white teeth, canines sharper than mine.

“I’ll make it easy,” she says. “Your death. I won’t make it hurt.”

Small mercies.

I crouch to help Laila up, and, when she’s at the top of the wall, she reaches back for me. My feet are frozen in my boots by the time we trek up the hill. My nose is numb. I don’t mind the cold—in fact, I like it—but it also feels like I might be dying. If I had known we would hike for this long, I would have worn thicker fabrics. I would have found socks that didn’t have holes in them. I’m about to tell Laila we should turn around, when I see it.

We both freeze at the crest of the hill.

This—this is what we came for.

The sky is ink-black, and a glimmering circle has formed in its center, as if the stars have all been roped together. They’re moving quickly, unnaturally. Beautifully.

It looks like . . . it looks like the stars are dancing. Could they be that happy? I envy the stars, for once. I envy them, as they twirl as one, like children playing together, out in the open, the way me and my siblings never could.

“How did you know about this?” I breathe, slowly sinking into the snow.

Laila shrugs as she joins me. “I overheard some of the prophet-followers talking in town. They were going to watch it from their hill. Did you know some of them are allowed to leave their mountain?”

My father hates the prophet, though I don’t know why. I’m surprised he hasn’t already turned their entire mountain to ash.

“They called it something nice. I don’t remember now. They made it sound like it happens on the same day every fifty years.”

Once every fifty years.

I won't be alive in fifty years.

This is the only time I'll see the sky look like this.

I study it carefully. I study it so that maybe, I'll dream of it. Maybe it won't be the last time I see it.

In my dreams, I don't have to fight my siblings. In my dreams, I can leave this castle without getting in trouble. In my dreams, I'm not the son of the ruler of Nightshade. I'm no one at all. No responsibility or duty or tradition burdens me. I'm like the stars—free and never alone.

“Are you afraid of dying?” Laila asks, pulling me out of my thoughts. I don't feel any sadness from her, just curiosity. I look over, and her large brown eyes are studying me just as intently as I'm studying the stars.

I remember seeing those eyes for the first time, years ago, in the hallway. She was the only one of my siblings that ever looked at me in passing. I remember her eyes, because they had a strange gold tint. They reminded me of a cat's.

That was right around the first time I got in trouble. I was three years old, supposedly intent on finding my mother. Somehow, I snuck into a room in the palace housing Covets, still nursing their heirs. I went around and asked each one if she was my mother, until the guardians found me and hauled me away.

I only know this because Guardian Asa told me that story recently, while slicing my skin in punishment for allowing myself to get hit during training. She must have heard it from her predecessors. She laughed, saying the words. Her twisted amusement felt like a poisoned cloud around me, and it was the first and only time I ever wished someone would die.

“No” I say, honestly. “I'm not afraid of death. Not if you're the one killing me.” She will make it quick. I trust her. “Are you afraid of being alone?” I counter. When she wins, she will be an only child. She will eventually be ruler. She won't be allowed to marry. Love, and everything that comes with it, are strictly forbidden.

Laila looks pensive. Her curiosity is like a circling dragonfly. Then, I feel amusement, warm like a rare pocket of sunlight.

“No,” she finally says. “A ruler is meant to be lonely. There's only room for one on a throne.”

The words could be spoken directly from our father's mouth. They probably were. He spends more time with Laila than anyone else. The Gauntlet, I think, is just for show this time. All of us—including our father—know who is going to win.

And Laila is right. Rulers are meant to be alone forever.

It's a relief that I'll never know what that's like.

The stars glitter above us. Some shoot away, in spirals. It almost looks like a message from the gods. I wonder what they're saying.

Some of them rain down, and I wonder if they land somewhere. Laila and I both sit up, watching.

"Do you know where that is? Where they're going?" she whispers, pointing at the sea.

I can't see it from here, but I know what she's talking about. Atlas, a small isle off the northernmost coast, made up of crushed, lustrous rocks. It is a place of mystery. I nod.

"There is a powerful diamond up there," she says, eyes bright with excitement.

I only overhear through the walls, on occasion, when I sit close enough to the door, and put my ear to the keyhole.

Laila hears *everything*. Being able to hide up in the rafters and listen is one of the best parts of her flair, in my opinion.

"Really?"

She nods, grinning, pleased at herself for knowing something I don't. "They say Cronan hid it."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "I don't know, but everyone wants it. Father is determined to claim it but so far has failed. Can you believe it?" Her smile widens. "I'm going to get it one day. It has a name, you know."

"What's its name?"

"Infinite."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

Her pride is thick around her, cloudlike. "It's the greatest number in the world. It means . . . *everything. At the same time. Everywhere.*"

Everything . . . at the same time . . . everywhere.

"One day, my power will be infinite," she says proudly. "I'll have the stone, and no one will be able to stop me. Even if Father decides to start punishing me, he won't be able to."

Her eyes are alight, hungry, and I can't imagine wanting anything that much.

"It will be," I say, staring back up at the stars. I wonder what they see from up there. The stars must know everything, even more than Laila. Every secret, every edge of this world that no one has ever explored.

I envy them.

We sit and watch for so long that Laila falls asleep, right in the snow. Her

brow isn't furrowed. She isn't frowning. No . . . she looks peaceful. I feel a pang of crushing sadness that, one day, she will be responsible for an entire realm.

If I could, I would save her from all this, from this fate . . . but it's what she wants. It's what she's always wanted.

When the last of the stars finally gutters out, and the night sky returns to its familiar muted gleam, I carry her home. Somehow, I get over the wall with both of us. I do my best to hide behind the statues, to move out of sight of the many windows. But the extra weight is what makes my boots crunch loudly against the frozen grass.

When I turn the corner of the palace, toward the back door, Guardian Asa is waiting for us.

I freeze and whirl back around. My panic produces a single shadow, enough to cover us, but Guardian Asa must sense it, because my shadow is ripped away, as if by a hand. *Her* hand.

I dig my fingers into Laila's arm. She's awake and taking off into the sky in a moment.

Asa must know the bat is her, but she doesn't make a move to reel Laila back. No, if anything, being able to escape will be rewarded.

And my inability to flee will be punished.

"This is the third time, Grimshaw," Guardian Asa says, and then she takes my arm so sharply, her nails draw blood. I jump, and she only sinks them deeper into my skin. "Useless boy. Corrupting your sister, future ruler of Nightshade." As if it wasn't Laila's idea.

I don't say a word. I never do.

"For this . . . for this you will pay."

For hours, Guardian Asa slices her shadows against my skin, opening her own recent cuts, deepening the layers of scars.

But a calm washes over me as I think about that swirl of stars, and, for the first time, I barely feel the slashing of her shadows. I barely notice my warm blood, sliding down my frost-chilled back.

It's the first time I don't yell in pain, and that only makes her slice deeper, until I practically pass out from the blood loss.

By the time Guardian Asa is finished with me, I have to be all but carried back to my room by three guardians. I'm barely clinging to consciousness. I can feel their irritation, their disgust.

They hope I die.

I hope I live. For that string of stars has shown me that beauty exists. How

much more is waiting beyond these palace walls? *Infinite wonders*, I think. There is a world out there, and those stars . . . they felt like a promise of better days to come.

The guardians leave me on the cold stone floor, and I'm still thinking about that patch of stars as the darkness rushes in.

My eyes blink open once. Twice.

It's still night. I'm still alive.

Laila.

Is she hurt? The guardians have never punished her, but what if this time they make an exception?

It will earn me more punishment, but I don't care. My arms tremble as I lift myself off the floor. I cry out, my back raw, the skin peeled away. My shirt's fabric scrubs against the bare muscle. I see black, but steady myself.

I manage to make it to the door and freeze when I turn the handle.

They've locked me in.

I follow the rules, generally, unless Laila asks me to break them. I'm not with her all the time, though. In training, we are on different parts of the mountain. The warriors follow mandates, and so do I.

But knowing I have so little time . . . knowing I can count on one hand the number of years left before the Gauntlet . . .

I shake the handle, but it doesn't give. I try to kick it down, but my diminished strength is nothing compared to thousand-year-old wood.

I try to summon shadows. In my desperation, they flicker to life. They inch forward before disappearing completely.

I sink to the floor, and—

I can't breathe. I can't—I can't *breathe*.

No. The opposite. I'm breathing so much that I can't get a full breath in my lungs. I clutch at my throat, try to make a sound, but nothing comes out.

Out.

I need to get out. I need to be out of this room they've locked me in. I need to be *free*, finally, please. Please, please, let me *out*.

LET ME OUT.

I fall to my knees and barely feel the stone beneath me. I bang on the room's narrow windows, then scrape at the glass, as if I could claw myself out—

And then I'm clutching sand.

The soft hiss of melting waves sounds to my right. Silvery sea foam fizzes

around my knees.

Slowly, I look up, and see the Nightshade castle, the one my father resides in, towering above like a beast.

Impossible.

How?

This must be a dream . . . but it isn't. My back still burns. My eyes are blinking over and over and nothing is changing.

I'm really here. One moment I was wishing I could be out of that castle . . .

The next, I was on the other side of Nightshade. Dread falls through my stomach.

Impossible. I can barely control shadows, I definitely don't—

I don't have a flair.

I don't have *this* flair. I can't.

This is what I wanted. To be free. To be *out*. I should feel relief, cold as the sea pooling around me, but all I feel is the sharp poison of panic.

Because I know what this means.

No. I look up at the castle. It's perched precariously on the cliff, like a creature waiting to strike.

He can't know.

Father can't know I can do this.

I have to get home. But how?

How did I get here in the first place?

Sunrise bleeds along the horizon, and all I can think about is Guardian Asa opening my room to find it empty.

The thought of her face brings me a twisted joy. And a pleasant idea pierces my panic.

What if I didn't go back? What if this is . . . a gift? They can't punish me if they can't find me . . .

Hope has me finally taking a full breath, filling my lungs with salt and brine and morning breeze. I could do it. I could run away. The people of Nightshade don't know what I look like . . . they'll think I'm just a normal boy. And then . . . maybe I can go farther. To places most Nightshades haven't even dreamed of.

In seconds, I plan out a whole life, one that is filled with quiet moments, honest work, and maybe a family. One that doesn't have to kill each other for power.

But then, as always, my thoughts return to my father.

He won't care that I'm gone. He practically doesn't even know I'm alive.

But when he realizes I was able to escape a locked room . . .

Only one other person in our history has had this ability. Cronan Malvere.
The founder of Nightshade. And if Father finds out I can portal . . .

He will want me to be heir.

An image of Laila, dead, among the rest of my siblings flashes through my mind, and I shake my head, banishing it.

No. No one will know. It will be a secret, and Laila will kill me without knowing. Never knowing.

My ribs feel like they're closing in on themselves. My eyes burn. I have this chance . . . this *one* chance to be free . . . And I'm letting it go.

For her, I will return to the castle. I will figure out how to get back.

The sun is steadily rising. The guardians will be at my door soon.

I need to get back.

I claw at the sand, thinking about the castle. Pleading with the blazing sun and cold brush of sea to *please*. *PLEASE*—

It takes hours, but it is that surge of care for her that finally gets me back in my room. The door is still locked, from the outside. They haven't tried to come in yet.

I fall forward in relief, shaking from the cold of the ocean, finally feeling the sharp sting of salt in my wounds.

Relief smothers it all.

I'm here.

Laila will be safe.

No one notices the sand in my shoes.



BOTTOMLESS

FIVE YEARS LATER

For years, I don't use my flair. I pretend it doesn't exist. But, as we inch closer to the Gauntlet, I start to wonder.

I start to wonder about the edges of the world. About all the stars can see.

Late one night, when everyone is asleep, I reach for that power.

Take hold of it.

I end up in the gardens. It takes hours to go back to my room. I try farther the next night. To the snowy hills just beyond the palace.

Then, to the markets.

I can't stop. I don't want to. Every night, I portal. I see an entire world outside my room. Outside the palace. Outside training.

And it is glorious.

There is one store in particular that I visit all the time. A licorice store. The candy stains my tongue deep violet.

Laila notices.

"What is that?" she asks.

"I stole it from the kitchens," I lie.

She takes one. Chews it. Frowns. "That's disgusting."

"Good. More for me." For months I explore, learning and testing the limits of this power, this gift. Even as my inevitable death gets closer and closer, I've never felt freer.

The Gauntlet is in three days. All my siblings are training. They are getting ready to fight to the death. Some have resorted to trying to poison others in

advance of the Gauntlet, so Guardian Sorsa, my newest guardian and one who has shown me unusual kindness, tells me not to drink the morning tea. Day by day, I watch my siblings' bodies being carried out of the castle and buried.

Deceit is celebrated. Any means to the inevitable end. The survival of the most powerful.

Laila visits me that night. She flies through the hole in my room, and lands on her feet.

"I have to ask you something," she says. I test the air for her emotions and feel none. She is perfectly calm as she says, "How do you want me to do it? Do you have a preference?"

For once, I feel a shudder of sadness at my impending death. Death feels worse now that there is something to live for. "Through the heart," I say.

She nods. "Good."

Then, she does something unexpected. She hugs me.

She buries her head against my shoulder. Only then, do I feel a single rush of emotion. One of the first times I've felt anything resembling sentimentality from her. "I'm going to miss you," she says. "I've—I've enjoyed all our adventures."

She looks up at me, and her eyes are watery. She's crying.

"I've enjoyed all our adventures too," I say, meaning it, even though most have ended with punishment. She's the only one of my siblings that never cast me out for not being able to use my abilities. She's the only person who has ever invited me to leave this room. Without her, I would never have seen those stars. I would never have yearned for a world beyond these walls. And though I'll die without seeing most of the wonders of this world, I have seen some, and that is enough.

"You're going to make a great ruler one day," I tell her, meaning that too.

She smiles, a single tear escaping and sliding down her dimpled cheek. "I know. I just wish you would be around to see it."

Laila leaves, and I'm left alone, watching melted snow slide down my room's icy window.

It's one of my last nights alive, and I want to see beyond these lands. I want to see *more*.

I want to see the other island.

It's forbidden. No one is allowed to leave Nightshade, and no one is allowed to come in. It is treasonous.

But I have nothing to lose.

There aren't any maps of our world in this castle, but I've found abandoned

libraries. While the others were honing their abilities for the massacre, I've searched, collecting pieces, until finally, I know the way. I know the distance. There have been benefits to being unremarkable, unworthy of much notice.

One last time, I tell myself. One last time to leave this room and explore everything outside of it. I portal farther than I ever have before.

I portal to Lightlark.

This land is not ash-covered. It is green. Its beaches are not ground-up rock, they are smooth and golden. It's beautiful, like the stars roped in the sky.

These are our enemies.

It is treason to be here.

But I stay. I stay all night, exploring forests that have fruits I've never seen before, portaling to lands that are silver, and blue, and gold, and the deepest green.

By the time I return, my power is so spent, I end up in the winter palace gardens. I barely have enough ability to make it to my room.

I fall into a sleep as deep and peaceful as a waveless sea.

The next morning, I awake to the sound of screaming.

Then, silence.

Laila.

My door is locked, but I portal out of my room. I run through the halls.

That's when I start to see them.

My siblings, strewn across the floor, their bodies mangled. Stacked. Bloodied. I have to step over them.

Laila. My abilities spread, covering the castle, searching for the unique shade of her emotions, panic bleeding through my chest.

Finally, I sense her. She's alive. I can feel her confusion—

I turn hall, after hall, and then I see him.

My father, standing in the middle of all his dead children.

Holding Laila by the neck.

Her fear grips my bones. I've never felt her fear before. She's never once been afraid.

"Tell me, Grimshaw," my father says. He slowly turns to face me, taking her with him. "Tell me where you were last night. Tell me your secret to my face." His black eyes are like two bottomless pools.

“I—” My mind goes briefly blank as his grip tightens on Laila. Dread sinks through me. Someone must have seen me appear in the gardens. My father must have tested his theory by locking me in my room. Somehow, I manage to keep my voice steady as I tell him what he already knows. “I can portal. I left the castle,” I say. “Now let her go.”

My father’s eyes narrow at the command, and that one look might have sent fear right to my heart, if it wasn’t already there. Not fear of him. Fear for *her*. “If your flair was any other than Cronan’s, I would slit your throat.”

I reach for my power. I try to portal her away, out of danger, but it doesn’t work. My emotions are too unstable, too unfettered. I’ve never portaled anyone but myself before.

He’s still holding her by the neck. “Kill her,” my father orders.

My voice does not yield, even though disobeying him is treasonous. “No.”

He tilts his head. “Let’s see if she would show you the same mercy.” With a push, he shoves her in front of me.

Laila.

I reach for her, to shield her, to take her away, somehow.

But she doesn’t reach back.

Her eyes sharpen. And, just as my arms are about to grasp her—she disappears.

No. She doesn’t disappear, she *turns*. With half a breath, she’s a bat. I think she might fly away, leave this place, but then I feel it.

A cold surge of determination. Ruthless, targeted focus as she hurtles right toward me, fangs aimed at my neck.

I should have known. Laila has spoken for years about killing me. We’re the last two heirs standing, and she has wanted this for her entire life.

What did I think would happen? I’ve felt her emotions. She cares for me as much as she can care for anyone . . . but she cares about power more. Just like Father.

I drop my hands. I do not portal away or reach for my sword. My father’s disappointment smothers me with the heaviness of tar, but I don’t care. I don’t fight back. I would never fight her.

Her bladelike teeth meet my jugular—and something happens. The deep-rooted mine of power within me awakens.

Shadows explode from my skin, sharp as knives.

They all stab through her at once, and I watch those catlike eyes widen. She’s thrown back by the force of my shadows. By the time she hits the floor, she’s

herself again.

And her body is in mangled ribbons. *No*. What have I done? I lunge toward her and am hit by a tidal wave of pain and panic that has me sinking to the floor. I crawl to her, and cradle her body, her blood streaming everywhere.

“I’m sorry,” I say, trying to stop the bleeding. Trying to keep her awake. “I don’t—I don’t know what happened, I—”

Her eyes.

They are filled with betrayal. With shock. With bone-withering sadness.

Then, nothing.

She’s dead.

I roar, clutching her body. *No*. This can’t be real. There has to be—there has to be a way for this to be undone.

I’ve read some of the ancient books. I know something exists . . . a dangerous way to share power. To save a life. To *transfer* it. But it requires care on both sides.

I know better than anyone that Laila never truly cared for me at all. I try. Still, I try. I try to give her my own life, my own powers, to make up for the fact that I *killed her*.

But she grows colder in my arms. Her eyes remain open and blank. Her shade, her aura, is gone.

Gone.

Pain. True pain.

Shadows burst forth, destroying everything in their path, ripping open even the floors. They tear through the castle, a raging storm of darkness. My siblings’ bodies become ash before me. Laila’s body falls into the crevice, and I bellow.

Only my father and I remain.

For minutes, I just stand there, panting. Looking at what I have done. *What have I done?*

Then, Father walks over to me. He puts a hand on my shoulder, and I flinch. It’s the first time he’s ever touched me. It’s the first time he’s truly acknowledged me.

“Pain is power” is all he says. He leaves, and my body finally gives. I sink to what’s left of the floor.

She’s dead because of me.

They all are.

This—this hurts too much. It will hurt forever.

My pain is infinite.

And from that day on, so is my power.

Sorsa finds me on the floor, covered in ash, trembling, hours later. That burst of power has left me hollow and cold. She slowly lifts me up and wipes my face. She gets me new clothing.

She leads me to the kitchens.

I'm shaking. I can't stop.

There is a slight clanking as she moves around, but I barely hear it. I barely register her at all until she's in front of me again, trying to hand me something. A mug.

At first, my shadows lash out, sharpened into talons, but she just leaves the cup in front of me. I hear the soft whisper of the door closing.

I'm about to shatter this mug into a thousand shards, but then the smell reaches me. Sweet. It's *sweet*.

That fact alone makes me hate it, but I'm cold and empty inside, so I take it, against my better judgment.

I drink.

Chocolate. It's *chocolate*.

I take another tentative sip.

The pain doesn't stop. Not at all. But it helps, just a little. It keeps me conscious. It keeps me tethered here, when all I want is to leave this world and my father behind.

The drink becomes my only balm against pain I funnel into power. I hate my father, but he's the only person I have left, so that hatred turns into wanting to please him. Wanting all this to be worth it. Convincing myself that it had a purpose.

Because if it didn't . . . they died for nothing. *She* died for nothing. The pain of loss becomes too much, so I fold my emotions away. I harden my heart.

I become what Laila wanted for herself.

I become my father's greatest weapon.



FURY

TWENTY YEARS LATER

My blade is covered in blood. Nothing new—at least, not since my father waged war against Lightlark five years ago.

I wipe it against the grass, my expression blank as I charge forward. Someone at my feet begs for mercy. He says he has children.

I put my blade through his throat before he can say anything else.

Fool, I think. Only a fool would have a family, as a warrior. Only a fool would do something as stupid as *love* anything or anyone, when life so predictably turns to death.

Pathetic, all of them.

The first time I stepped onto a battlefield, I was met with an unyielding wall of fear and panic and *pain*. The emotions nearly suffocated me.

So, I had to learn to block them out.

Just as I'd already learned to block out my own.

Merciless, they call me. Cruel. A monster. Death, itself. They're right. I don't show mercy. I don't hold hostages or leave bodies.

Because no mercy was ever shown to me.

My blade goes through another chest. I cut down all the warriors, one by one, focusing only on the path of my sword.

I'm following orders. It's my duty. It's my role.

And I'm good at it.

In the end, when everyone is dead, I portal their bodies away, to Nightshade, so our people can see our strength, at my father's command. Some say it's cruel not to allow bodies to be buried.

Perhaps they're right. But since I became heir to the throne, I've never

pretended to be anything less than a monster.

I stride through the halls of the Nightshade castle, my armor scraping together, my boots echoing against the black stone floor.

My father is sitting on his throne made of twisted, whispering calcified shadows. He nods at me, a single dip of his chin, the only acknowledgment he'll allow.

I bow before him on one knee.

"Five hundred thirteen," I say, counting the dead. Counting the kills on my blade.

He frowns. "They should surrender," he says. "Why haven't they?"

I stand.

"It's the commander. The Sunling prince."

The second son. He leads the armies. He, with his *speeches* and *hope* and *fire*, has rallied men beyond just soldiers.

My men fight out of fear of my father.

The Sunling's men . . .

They fight out of love for their home, for their people.

Love is for fools, and it has made all of them foolish. It has made thousands rush into battle, with barely the right equipment.

It's idiotic.

Though . . . it has made them stronger than anticipated. Harder to beat.

My father scowls. "A second son is besting my heir? Not even the firstborn?"

My back teeth grind together. If my father actually took to the battlefield, if he didn't refuse to stay here until the very end of the war, then maybe it wouldn't have lasted this long.

I could have ended it a long time ago, with the strength of my shadows. But that would have required opening back up my emotions. Dredging up that pain. It's the one thing I refuse to do. Luckily, my father hasn't suspected I'm holding back.

I've tired of battle. I might be good at killing, but I take no enjoyment in it. And with each life taken . . . I feel that wall around me breaking. My buried emotions stirring. It's time for this to be done, once and for all.

"This was one of their strongest stands, and they lost. Tonight, while they recover, we're going to make a go at the castle."

He stands.

"So, it's time?" he asks.

I nod. "It's time."

It's time for the king of Lightlark to die.

He's dead, along with his wife.

My father has just killed him. It was the first time I saw him exert such power—it barreled out of him, like he had been building it up. Saving it.

His blade was wrapped in shadows. They spilled out of the metal, striking both rulers at once. They fell, together.

Now, I can hear the commander's bellow from the other side of the field.

The castle is right there, within reach. Their strongest soldiers have made a wall, holding firm against ours.

We're going to win, I think.

I look over at my father, his shadows retreating back into his blade. He looks back at me, and I go still.

His arms . . . they're trembling. His eyes are bloodshot. He almost looks weak, which doesn't make sense, because he is supposed to be stronger than all of us.

The commander, the Sunling prince, comes rushing out, right toward us. His blade is pointed at my father.

He's going to kill him.

I should let him, I think. I should let this Sunling, with tears streaming down his face, who is roaring so loud it cuts through the rest of the screaming, kill my father.

But then I would be ruler. And that's not something I want. Ever, if I can help it.

The war has cost me. Endless battles. Endless blood.

It's been years of this, and I'm tired.

So very tired.

"Go," I say. "I'll deal with him."

He nods. I portal him away, using shadows as cover.

Then, I roll my shoulders back and unsheathe my blade.

The Sunling prince's teeth are bared. He's roaring. He's . . . crying.

The emotion disgusts me.

Still, I offer him a warning. "You don't want to fight me," I say, as he gets closer. He doesn't slow down at all. He doesn't falter, even though I can see a group—*his friends*, it seems—try to go after him.

In response, he makes a wall of flames, blocking them. Blocking all his people.

The wall curves around us, until it makes a circle. It's just him, and me.

"Where's your father?" he demands, eyes searching wildly, the need for vengeance twisting his face.

My own voice is flat. "Gone. You'll have to fight me." I feel nothing.

He . . . on the other hand . . . I drop the barrier between us, and his emotions hit me like a battering ram. They almost have me stumbling forward.

Pain. So much . . . pain.

Loss.

Fury.

I frown. Is that what caring about your parents feels like?

"Who is it?" I ask, genuinely curious. "Who's the one whose death made you reckless enough to come here, to fight me? Was it your father?"

I feel a vague shift of emotions.

"Your mother?"

There. There, a blinding surge of sadness. It almost makes me pity him, my enemy. The person whose blood is about to be spilling down my blade.

"Ah. She—"

He lunges forward, and my sword barely blocks his. "Do not speak about my mother," he growls.

Emotion. It clouds judgment. It clouds *skill*.

This is how I win, I realize.

I poke the wound. I squeeze the vein dry.

A smile crawls across my face. It's cold. Devoid of feeling. "I'll tell you what. Lower the flames, and I'll let you keep her body. I'll let you bury her with dignity."

As if this fire could trap me.

A fresh spring of hurt pierces the air, making it heavy, like rain. He lunges forward again, and this, this is the skill I've seen from afar. He is not a bad fighter.

I'm just better.

I whirl around with half a thought and stab right through his armor. But it's like he doesn't feel the pain at all.

Red streams from the place I wounded, and he just charges forward, pushing my back against the flames. Only my shadows keep me from getting burned.

"Your father has taken everything from me," he says, his voice pure rage and agony. His eyes are blazing. "I will take everything from him."

He lunges forward and manages to scratch my armor.

I almost laugh. As if *I* could be anyone's *everything*.

The only part of me my father cares about is the fact that I will continue our line. The ability to portal convinced him we need to regain everything we once lost. Everything he thinks is rightfully ours.

We did it. We're about to conquer Lightlark. The king and queen are dead. This war, *finally*, can end.

This is dragging on too long.

I strike back, with all my force. At the last moment, he grits his teeth and avoids it. The tip of my blade manages to cut a slash across his cheek, but again, it's like he can't feel the pain. It's like he can't feel anything beyond this crushing sadness.

"As if you could understand," he says, his voice shaking with anger as our blades meet, scraping together. "As if you've ever known the pain of seeing the person you love most die in front of you."

I still. The world stills. Quiets. His words . . . His words are stronger than his sword. I might block his metal with my own, but those words lance right through me.

I've let the barrier down, to feel his emotions.

My own come rushing back, for the first time in decades, with the force of a tidal wave.

Laila.

Her confusion, when she realized Father had betrayed her. Her gasp, when she realized she was dying. I killed her.

I killed her.

I can't breathe. I stumble to the side, off-balance. Blocking my emotions hasn't made them go away, it's made them stronger, as if they've been teaming up and building forces behind my ribs, and now they blind me, they pierce me like the shadow-blades that cut right through her, that *ended her*.

I killed her. I see her shredded body, all the blood. I see the light leave her eyes. I feel that pain, that betrayal.

She trusted me, and I—

I blink, just in time to see Oro's sword inches from my chest, about to skewer right through my heart. I should let him.

In the last moment, I use every shred of strength to turn my body from flesh and bone to just a wisp of smoke, just like when I walk through walls, and the blade goes right through me.

But we both can see it.

He won. Had I not used my power, he'd have killed me.

The second son . . . he won this battle. Against *me*.

I stumble back and go right through the flames. I use them as a wall, blocking me, as I portal back to the castle.

My feelings, my memories, they've knocked me off my carefully constructed axis. I feel. I *feel*. I make it a few steps before retching. I slide my hand across my mouth when I'm done. Teeth gritted, I try to bury these emotions again, just as I did before. I'm able to fold away some of them . . . but not all. I'm left with the regret, the self-loathing, the pain . . .

I find my father slumped over on his throne. When he sees me, he can barely get his head up.

"What happened?" I demand, the first time I've ever demanded anything from him. His weakness meant I was out there alone. I, alone, have had to kill *thousands* because of his orders.

And he isn't even strong enough to sit upright.

He narrows his eyes at my insolence, and I wonder if he would kill his only heir. The feelings within me lurch again, and I almost wish he would try.

Instead, he lifts his palm. At the center of it, sits a marking I don't understand.

"What is—"

"I've been cursed," he tells me. "I sensed it, and the augur read my blood. He confirmed it."

Cursed? "What kind of curse?" Curses are an ancient practice, only mastered by few in our histories.

"One tied to an object."

My voice is ragged, desperate, because *this bastard cannot die*. "What object?"

"On the island of Atlas, there lives—"

"A diamond."

The word is barely a whisper, as I remember one of the many secrets Laila told me. The thought of her produces another painful flare of regret. I work to put it out.

He nods. "I could not claim it . . . and it cursed me for trying."

I blink. In recent years, I've become more familiar with the diamond called Infinite. It is said to hold otherworldly ability. The climb to claim it is treacherous. And . . . even those who have made it to Atlas's peak have been

killed by the stone itself.

I don't understand why my father, ruler of Nightshade, would take such a risk. Then, a thought forms. "You thought its power would help us win the war."

The corners of his lips twitch. He looks like he's almost at the edge of losing his mind, as he leans forward. "The war? This stone would win *the world*."

Now that my emotions are unmoored, a strange rage fills me, because I had stupidly hoped there would be an end to all this bloodshed. All this death.

But this . . . it's clearly just the beginning.

My father will never be satisfied. He doesn't just want Lightlark. He wants *everything*.

The reality of our situation becomes clear.

My father is dying.

He just killed the king and queen . . . if their second son's response is any indication, every single person on that island will be attacking our forces soon, with a vengeance.

We've already lost so many. And I . . . I can't fight like this. I need time away from battle, away from bloodshed, away from the father I hate, to restrain these emotions again. To forget. To reinforce the walls that the Sunling's own feelings and words demolished.

"We need to surrender," I say, my voice firm.

Anger flashes in my father's eyes.

"You need to focus on how to survive this," I say, pretending I care at all about his well-being, beyond my own fate. "Even if we win . . . we are not in a position to keep Lightlark. They will overpower us once more. We can't take more losses. Not with you in this state . . . it could mean the end of Nightshade."

My father refuses. He tries to make a stand at the next battle, as if to prove his strength, and it almost kills him. It wrecks me. For without these walls around my mind and soul, I feel everything. The sadness. The pain. And it calls to my own, drawing it out, until I am nothing but flesh and armor holding together endless shame and self-hatred. It almost costs me my life, on the battlefield. I almost wish it did.

My father loses weight. He pales further. He's practically a husk by the time he calls me back into the throne room several weeks later. He has another plan. One that starts with surrender.

He's so weak he can barely lift a palm to sign the terms of the treaty.

"Go," he says. "Find a way to claim the island once and for all, from the inside."

The second I'm rowed onto Lightlark's shores again, I'm imprisoned.
And for months, prison is where I remain.



PEACE

Today I was finally moved from the prisons into the castle.

I'd have preferred to stay in the cell.

In the cell, no one dared *touch my things*.

An attendant scurries out of my room the moment I walk inside, and she had the nerve to make my bed.

No one touches my bed but me.

I don't like people in my space.

In Nightshade, my father kept a close circle. Only a handful of trusted attendants were allowed in the castle's private quarters.

Here . . . people are everywhere. These royals don't even make their own food. They don't even sharpen their own blades.

No wonder that ridiculous King Egan didn't dare step foot on the battlefield. He probably has someone hold his own sword for him.

Weak bastard.

His brother, on the other hand . . . Oro. Second son. Prince.

His brother visited my cell so often, I started to wonder if he was just as lonely as I was, even with that crop of irritating friends.

I could feel his emotions, his hatred of me matching my hatred of him. But then, after a few months, after a deadly adventure, both of our hatreds subsided into something that resembles . . . friendship.

I frown, even thinking the word. But it's the truth.

My enemy has become my only friend.

What a sad existence this is.

I stop portaling home in the night.

I tell my father I'm scheming, looking for a way to get the island, but it is a lie.

This is supposed to be imprisonment, but it's the freest I've been in a long while. The people here hate me, but some don't mind my company.

I have women, from time to time, and never see them again.

The pain never subsides, but slowly, I'm able to live around it. Little by little, I open myself up. Oro and I duel. We talk. I spend time on Wild Isle. There are glimmers of something resembling happiness. Peace. A life without bloodshed. Nearly two decades pass like this, and then a Wildling comes to my room, seeking me out. She demands a flower on the remnants of Night Isle. Fine. It's something to do.

I find it for her, and give it to her, and have her, and it's *fine*. Nothing memorable, or enough to feel much of anything at all.

I don't stay. I never stay.

I'm asleep in my own bed hours later when I hear it.

One scream.

Another.

Then, the world is screaming.

The pain rushes to the surface. It's just like the day my father learned of my flair. The day that changed everything. The day that still haunts my every dream. Somehow, I know it's the same.

I know if I leave my room, I'll find everyone dead.

I leave anyway, and I'm right.

From the castle windows I watch Skylings fall from the sky. I watch Sunlings catch aflame. I watch Wildlings rip hearts out with their teeth. I run through the halls, over Starlings who blanket them in silver. Dead. *Everyone is dead*. Just like my siblings. Memories blind me, merging with the present.

It's a curse. I sense it everywhere.

By who? What happened?

I turn the corner and almost crash into someone kneeling on the floor.

Oro. My friend. My only friend.

Cold relief fills me, seeing him alive.

He's clutching his brother's guardian, a Starling. She's dead. Next to her lies her daughter, Ara. The girl we saved together, years ago. I feel his crushing sorrow. His crater-deep anguish. It's enough to fill the entire castle.

Then, his fiery rage, as he looks at me.

He looks like he wants to kill me.

I blink. He hasn't looked at me that way for years. Just yesterday, we were sitting side by side on a cliff, planning a more hopeful future for both our realms.

Now . . . now, where there was once trust and friendship, I just feel pure and utter hatred. He thinks I did this. He thinks I'm *responsible* for all these deaths.

Could it be my father? It's a Nightshade curse . . . could my father somehow have sent someone else? Did he grow tired of my increasingly infrequent visits, and drawn-out strategies?

It wasn't me. But his mind is made up.

It's not just our people that die today. Our friendship dies too. Forever.

And a jagged piece of myself, of trust and hope and a sliver of happiness, dies with it.

I run in the opposite direction, closing myself off, building walls, burying any emotion that I let slip in the last two decades. A mistake. *Always a mistake*. I go back to my room, and I do the thing I've been avoiding for years.

I go back to my father.

He is barely more than flesh and bone. His chainmail hangs off him as he hauls himself to his feet, with trembling effort.

He's just as surprised by the curse as I am. I expect him to be elated. Everyone is dying. It's our chance to overtake the island.

Instead, he says, "It's time, then."

I blink, thinking I must have misheard him. His voice is hardly a croak. "Time for what?"

He only staggers down the center of the room, toward me. "While you were gone, I killed the prophet," he says lightly. "He wouldn't tell me the future. But the fool wrote an entire book of predictions. I tortured one of his followers until he gave me a prophecy."

His head tilts. His eyes are filled with searing determination.

"Cronan's power will rise again. Our line will rule them all. Nightshade will regain everything we've lost . . ."

He's speaking to me. He's looking at me not with disappointment, but, for once, *pride*.

"The stone," he says, his eyes filled with anticipation. "It will be *yours*. You will claim it."

The diamond. Infinite.

My emotions are muted now, but I feel a whisper of unease. I've already

seen so much death, already *killed* so many for my father. Today, so many died on Lightlark. How much more death can this world handle?

He continues. "It will all come to pass . . . with a great sacrifice. With me laying down my life for yours. *It is time.*"

No. Never in a thousand years would I think my father would sacrifice *himself*. But all he cares about is the continuation of the line. He wants to see this world conquered, even if it requires his death.

I don't share that same sense of duty. I don't share that dream of conquering anything.

On Lightlark, when I was free to do what I wished . . . when I wasn't ordered to kill countless people . . . I was finally approaching something close to happy.

All that is gone now.

I search the air for any tinge of emotion. Any heart from my heartless father. Sadness. Fear. Regret.

I feel absolutely nothing.

"You can't be serious," I say. "You would die? For this?"

He looks at me. "Do you think I fear death?" He shakes his head. "This is greater than me. Greater than *you*. This is fate. This is all of us playing our role so that our line never ends. So that it rules them all."

He takes a step closer to me.

"The prophecy had one other part. Do you know what caused all of this? These deaths today? These curses? *Love.*" He says the word like it disgusts him. "Do you know what the biggest threat to our line is? Not creatures. Not other realms. *Love*. That is the warning Cronan gave from the very beginning, and the one the prophecy promised. Love kills kingdoms."

He takes me by the collar, with surprising strength, given his state. "You will bring us to greatness. You will ensure the prophecy is true. Kill your heart, Grimshaw. Kill your feelings. Do not be a fool."

Then, he hands me his crown.

It feels poisonous to the touch. As if something in my marrow already knows this is a mistake.

"By the end of the day, I will be dead, and it will be your time," my father says. "It is time for Cronan's power to rise."

I portal him to Lightlark. I know it's the last time I'll ever see him.

And nothing will ever be the same again.



TEMPTRESS

499 YEARS LATER

“You must have an heir.”

My hand clenches around the curve of my throne.

The councilman who just spoke has served in this court for eight hundred years. It’s only that tenure that allows him to keep the tongue in his mouth.

Tynan, a warrior I’ve wanted to kill for my entire reign, speaks up. “He’s right. These are uncertain times. Tradition must be continued.”

Tradition.

The tradition of a Nightshade ruler having dozens of heirs who fight to the death.

Tradition of lining up women to sleep with, then discarding them after they’ve given birth.

A sliver of emotion lances through the prison I keep around my feelings, an arrow spiraling through the gaps in my armor, and I catch it. Turn it to ash. Smother the memories.

This isn’t the first time my council has brought up the issue of succession. It’s happened every few decades, as more and more have died from the curses.

Now, a danger far worse for our realm than our curse has put it right in the forefront.

I faced that danger last night. I shift to the side, gritting my teeth against a flash of half-healed pain, skin still stinging where talons nearly shredded me.

I don’t want children. I never wanted to continue any of these twisted traditions. I never wanted to rule at all.

Still—I can’t postpone this conversation any longer. The scar across our land, keeping winged beasts called the dreks at bay, has begun to tear open in

earnest. The curse has begun to affect my power. My lands are weaker and my people are dwindling.

The dreks could kill me at any moment, and then my entire line and people will be dead. Unless I have an heir . . .

Sometimes, even that thought doesn't move me to action. But if they all die . . . if my realm is lost . . . then everything that came before meant nothing.

Memories again, choking me. Blood spilling across those halls—

The ancient councilman is speaking again. "Your father had thirty-two heirs. They were weak, of course, worthless other than you, but he—" His voice breaks off in a gurgle. He claws at his neck, and I watch, bored, as he mouths voiceless pleas. As his feet slowly leave the ground. As my shadows wrap around his neck.

I just stare at him, not feeling anything. No guilt. No pity. No remorse. Just an endless expanse of nothing.

Not even when I twist my finger and his neck breaks. His body falls to a heap on the ground. Eight hundred years of life, lost.

I can't bring myself to summon even a shred of giving a shit.

The room is silent. Even my own guards have gone still.

"Fine," I say, standing, then stepping over the body as I stride through the throne room, black cape curling behind me, shadows following. "I'll have an heir."

Sweet-poisoned envy radiates from my guards as I pass through the hall. It makes me scowl. *Fools*. They think I'm lucky to be heading toward a line of women ready to sleep with me, eager to be part of the ruling blood.

I would rather be at the scar, battling dreks, instead of this.

I've had many women, and it has been a pleasurable, yet fleeting distraction. This is different. This has a purpose.

I've never been with a woman more than once. It's against our rules, to keep from getting attached.

As if I would.

Love. It almost makes me laugh. What fool would put themselves in that position? For what, a person to bed more than once? To be nagged at and fussed over for eternity?

Some men in my court have taken wives.

I pity them.

I reach the end of the hall and sigh.

A line of women awaits. I can feel their emotions on the other side of this door, melding together in one big vat of fluttering, dizzying *excitement*. It makes me want to turn on my heel and leave.

Duty is the only thing that keeps me rooted in place.

Let's get this over with.

I open the door and go still.

Red.

People's emotions have auras. Colors. They are usually similar. Dull. I've never seen this color before. It's so *saturated*. It's the shade of roses, of hearts, of blood—

Her.

Her.

A woman wearing the same scrap of fabric as everyone else, but somehow, she stands out. The room is full, but she has my full attention. It isn't, I admit, just her peculiar aura.

She's the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

The moment the thought is formed, I incinerate it. *Beautiful?* Ridiculous. Nothing in this ash-crusted world has earned the word in centuries.

Nothing, I think . . . *except her*. My jaw works as I try to steady my thoughts. As I rush to bury the swell of emotion. But her red aura is like poison, seeping through the gaps in the fortresses I've built around myself.

The more I look at her, the worse it gets.

Her hair is brown, and long, curled at the ends. Every strand gleams. I imagine touching it. Pulling it . . . A blush is spreading across her cheeks, highlighting a few freckles, and I have the strange urge to count them.

My thoughts horrify me.

I should not be thinking about her. I should not be staring at her.

But I can't stop.

Something is wrong with me. Maybe I've been poisoned. I should leave. I should portal to the other side of this island.

Instead, I continue to stare like a fool.

She's wearing red paint on her heart-shaped lips. I don't kiss *anyone*, I don't let anyone get that close to me, but right now . . . right now I have the sudden urge to remove all that paint with my tongue. Because she doesn't need anything—*anything*—extra to make her look beautiful.

She already is.

She is perfection. She is radiance.

She is dangerous.

Pick someone else, the voice in my head says. *Anyone else*.

“You.” The word is out of me, and it’s done.

Green. She’s looking at me with green eyes that I’m going to see in my head tonight, long after she’s gone.

What is wrong with me?

As I finally turn out of the room, ignoring the wave of disappointment from the women who were not chosen, I grind my teeth together.

I am not this weak. I am in complete control of my feelings.

I will prove it to myself.

Her aura flickers behind me, her emotions completely at odds with themselves, as if they are battling, just like mine.

As if she could possibly be in as much in turmoil as I am. I ignore my own ridiculous feelings and focus on her own.

She’s . . . nervous. She’s . . . thrilled.

More than anything, she’s shocked.

Shocked? Is she surprised that I chose her? I frown, not even remembering any of the other faces in that room.

She has to know what she looks like. She’s perfect. It’s just a fact. Yes. Factual. *Logical*. This . . . this is clearly some momentary reaction to her appearance. Nothing more. Nothing meaningful.

We both know what we’re here for. This is my duty, but . . . perhaps I could enjoy this. It wouldn’t be a crime to have a few moments of forgetting everything. Of working this stress out of my system.

I’ll be using her. She doesn’t matter.

I always take women to another room; the idea of them touching my things repulses me. But for some reason, this time I turn in the hall. I open my own door, surprised by my own actions.

It’s a curiosity, I assure myself. *Nothing more*.

The moment she’s inside of my room, the moment she’s within these walls where I have never taken another woman, an avalanche of want rocks me. Of possessiveness. Over a woman I don’t even know.

Something in my blood—unfamiliar, confounding—sharpens at her proximity. My feelings claw through my chest like a beast that’s been caged for centuries.

Reason has left.

All that remains is her. And me.

When the door clicks closed behind her, I can't help it. I'm like a rabid animal. I'm on her in a moment, pressing her against the wall, and—

I wait. I wait, because I want to see her this close, I want to see if she could possibly want me even a fraction of how much I want her right now.

Usually, I have to feel around for emotions, work for them, but hers are searing through my skin. My hands curl around her bare arms, and *her* skin—her skin is warm, and soft. *So soft*. She's so beautiful it hurts to look at her.

I have officially lost my mind.

Especially when her own emotions deepen, as she looks up at me, with searing green. And when those new feelings hit me—

I can't just feel them.

I can *taste them*.

I can taste how much she wants this, and it's nearly enough to bring me to my knees.

But I need to hear her say it.

"Is this okay?" I say, my body shaking with restraint.

"Yes," she breathes in a voice carved from my darkest dreams, and the word is a key, unlocking a vault of feeling. Unleashing everything.

No sooner than the word is out of her mouth, my lips are on hers.

I've never kissed anyone. It always seemed useless. Disgusting, really. Too sentimental.

The second I taste her I know there's no forgetting her. No. She is like a curse—impossible to get rid of.

She is a curse I never want to break.

I press her hand against the wall, thumb thrumming across her palm, and I feel her shiver beneath me.

She's shaking too. As if she could possibly match this pull, this need, this roaring in my blood.

I don't want to just taste her; I want to devour her. My lips trace her jaw, her neck.

Her hands are in my hair, pulling, and I've banished people for less, but it's making a chill race down my spine.

She smells so good. She's so responsive to my every touch. So responsive, and breathy, and the sound she makes when I drag my teeth across her pulse makes me want to do it again and again just so she never stops.

I'm unpracticed. I'm not used to feeling *anything*. I've never felt desire even close to this. I'm worried I'm too rough, too insistent, but she meets my every

move with her own.

Her hands are on my chest now, unafraid, and no one has ever dared touch me this much. I don't *allow* anyone to touch me like this.

I lick the hollow of her throat, and her moan goes right between my legs. I need her. I need her like I've never needed anyone or anything.

I haul her against the wall, her legs lock around my middle, and my eyes nearly roll into the back of my head.

Our clothes are still on. We haven't done anything. But I'm close to seeing stars as I slowly drag against her.

Her eyes are wild, full of emotions I am practically choking on. *Want*. Unfiltered, unadulterated want. She parts her lips. Her head leans back. Her eyes flutter closed.

I fist my hand in her hair and crash her lips to mine again.

She gasps, and I use the opportunity to lick the top of her mouth. To taste her completely. To stroke against her teeth. My tongue rolls against hers, and the groan it pulls from the back of her throat is nearly my undoing. Especially when she takes my tongue between her lips and *sucks*.

Fuck.

My skin is on fire. I'm aching, almost trembling with want, feeling her heat right against mine, biting her bottom lip, pulling her mouth more firmly against mine, as if I could possibly taste more, as if I could imprint myself so thoroughly that she would taste me for days.

With just one kiss, she has ruined me.

Destroyed me.

Just like the world looks dull, every emotion, every touch, everything *pales* in comparison to her.

Suddenly, I understand the fools that take nightbane, even as it slowly kills them.

She is a drug. And I wouldn't mind being addicted.

I could do this for hours. I could do this for days. My tongue brushes hers again, igniting a fire in my chest.

Then, all at once, everything goes still. The fire turns into something cold. Pain.

With a wave of regret, I release her lips. I look at her widened eyes, so very *green*. Then, I begrudgingly drop my gaze to my chest.

And the dagger sticking out of it.

She stabbed me.

She stabbed me.

Even that fact alone doesn't make me want to stop kissing her.

But as the cold begins to spread, deteriorating any warmth, the sharp pain melts this onslaught of emotion. Reason rushes in.

She stabbed me.

Even though it's the last thing I want to do, I release her. I catch a flash of silver strapped to her thigh.

Before I can do anything, before I can summon a single shadow or ounce of composure, she's running from the room.

I should catch her. I should kill her. I should hunt her down.

I should feel rage.

But as soon as she's fled, all I feel is a rush of crushing sadness more painful than any wound. Because those few moments of bliss revealed the misery I've been living in.

She showed me ecstasy, and then ripped it away. Her aura is gone, as if it was never here to begin with.

The only red she left behind is the blood dripping down my chest.

An hour later, once my momentary insanity passes, fury overtakes everything.

Fury for myself. For being so foolish. For being so *taken in*.

Fury at *her*.

It boils beneath my skin as I sit on my throne, shirt in tatters. It takes five healers and a half bottle of Moonling healing liquid to stop the blood and stitch the skin back together. With every press of their fingers to my chest, I imagine my hands around her throat. Watching her emerald eyes bulge as I steal the breath from her. Slowly.

She kissed me.

She kissed me, and then she *stabbed me*.

My shadows sharpen, shredding the obsidian floor, sending everyone scattering. "Out," I growl. "I'll wrap it myself."

I didn't let the healers stay long enough to banish the scar. *Good*. This will be a reminder of what happened when I dared open up to my emotions for the first time in centuries. When I dared *want* anything.

The fortress around myself closes again. This scar will be a reminder of her.

Of how much I hate her.

I'm still thinking about her days later. My fury has not diminished at all. If anything, it's grown.

Because it all makes sense now. The uncontrollable urges. The rush of *feeling*. It's almost a *relief*.

The guards found the red clothing, and I knew at once. She's a Wildling. Of course. It was all a trick. Their temptress enchantments at play.

My fingers tremble against the hilt of my blade the way they trembled against her skin. But this time, it's in white-hot anger. How dare she trick me?

How dare she enter my castle?

How dare she masquerade as one of my consorts?

How dare she stab a blade into my chest, while I was hard and aching, pressed against her warm—

I growl, shaking the wretched image away.

And the witch wakes up.

I sink back into the shadows. I've been visiting her room every night, waiting for her to reveal how she traveled into my realm. How she *tricked* me.

It took mere days to track her down. I started here, at the Wildling castle, and . . . there she was. Training with a sword outside, her hair tied up, and wearing far more clothing than when I last saw her.

Seeing her crown in her hair was almost like a cruel joke.

She isn't just any Wildling, no. She is their cursed ruler. I should have known. She was sent to beguile me. To *kill* me. I fell for her tricks.

Never again.

Only one question remained—how did she get to my lands so quickly? Even if she was able to get past our considerable defenses, travel by ship would have taken months. Yet here she is . . .

Only one power exists that could have gotten her from Nightshade to the Wildling newland in a matter of moments.

Mine.

That's when I remembered the flash of silver strapped to her thigh . . . it looked familiar. Now, I know exactly what it is.

I only created a relic from my flair once—a portaling device I gave to my general. He disappeared years ago, in the search for a sword that was meant to save my people by stopping the dreks. I always figured it was destroyed with him, in the last place he was sent to look.

Somehow . . . the enchantment must have ended up here.

Anyone—especially the ruler of an enemy realm—having access to my

portaling power poses a risk.

That's the only reason I haven't already killed her. I haven't been able to find it, in endless searches through her things. She needs to show me where she keeps it, so I can take it from her.

Then, I can kill her.

It's been five days of this. Of learning her habits. Of studying her closely. I've come here every night, watching, *waiting*.

And the witch has only confused me further.

I expected a woman who had the gall to portal into my own realm, to try to assassinate *me*, to be ruling her own people with an iron hand. With fear.

Not to be locked away, like she is being ruled herself.

Her room is glass, painted over. She is hidden from the world . . . locked in this orb. Why? It doesn't make any sense.

For a moment, I remember my own childhood room.

I remember my own lock.

I quickly push thoughts of that weak boy away.

I've been on edge waiting for her to travel somewhere else, to reveal where she keeps the portaling relic, to show her plan. Clearly, she is plotting something, my death a crucial step of her strategy.

But all the witch has done at night is sleep.

Now, she sits up with a force that has her chest nearly spilling out of the ridiculous scrap of silk she insists on wearing to bed.

For a moment, I remember that chest against mine.

I remember that gasp in my ear—

Enough.

I blame her curse, though I can't detect it. My nostrils flare. It's a testament to the strength of the curse that a wicked, shameless hearteater could look so—

The temptress pulls her sheets over her chest and bare shoulders, as if she can feel the intensity of my gaze.

Can she? I watch, entranced, as the hearteater lifts a trembling hand in my direction.

Impossible. It's impossible for her to see me, or sense me, cloaked in shadow.

Still, she leans closer. Forward. *Closer.*

The already low neckline of her silk dress dips as she keeps leaning, and I swallow.

Then, I tear my eyes away.

I'm no fool. I won't ogle a temptress like some sort of idiot.

Show me how you're traveling the realms, I practically beg. So I never have to step foot in this wretched land again. So I don't have to sit here every night, and watch you sleep.

But the witch only buries herself beneath her blankets, cowering like a fool instead of a hearteating, chest-stabbing ruler. She looks so fragile. So naive.

She *is* young, compared to the rest of us . . . She's lived just over twenty years, according to records.

I shake my head, make a fist.

This relatively *young* ruler managed to break through all the protections I've formed around my realm and stab me through the chest.

I straighten at my post, swathed in my shadows. And go back to imagining my hands around her throat.



HEARTS AND BLOOD

“They’re waiting for you.”

I tense at my general Astria’s voice. I didn’t even hear her enter the war room.

Ever since I started watching the witch sleep, I’ve gotten very little rest of my own. And I’m starting to feel it.

Astria’s gaze doesn’t miss anything. Usually, it’s an advantage, as a general. But as she studies *me*, that trait becomes fucking annoying.

I know why she’s here. It’s been a week since the last line of Covets. The time has come again. I grip the edge of the war room table, eyes on the depiction of my realm. The scar is a long, ragged mark across it. The biggest threat to my people, other than me and my own insistence on not visiting the consorts again. “Tell them to leave.”

Even the idea of the line of women has me seeing red, *literally*, as I remember the wretched Wildling hidden within their ranks. *Waiting* for me to choose her, which I did, predicably, like a fool.

The idea that she knew I would choose her, that I strode right into her assassination plan, makes it all even worse.

When Astria still hasn’t left, I sigh. “I told you to cancel the Covets until further notice.” The dreks are not the only threats to my realm.

She is a threat. Her and her stolen portaling relic.

“We did thorough research into each consort. All of them are verifiably Nightshade. They have no ties to any rebel groups. They—”

“*She almost killed me,*” I say, my voice coming out louder than I meant it to, each word sharpened into cold rage. My grip on the edge of the table is so tight, the wood groans.

Astria bows her head. As my general, she feels responsible. I don’t blame

her. The wretched hearteater certainly looked the part of a consort. Our harbors and the perimeter of the castle are tightly monitored. There is only one way she could possibly reach me undetected, and that is portaling.

My own power. She used *my power* to get here.

The wood cracks beneath my hands, splintering everywhere, and Astria just stares at me. “I will tell them to go,” she says, bowing, before leaving the room.

In a fit of rage, I throw the table on its side. Shadows flare out of me, scratching the walls.

Red seeps into my shirt as my wound tears open again.

Enough.

I’m the ruler of Nightshade. I am done hiding in the shadows of her room. If she won’t show me where she keeps her device, I will *make her*.

I’m waiting in the chair in front of her bed, made invisible, when she arrives from training that night.

Oblivious to me, she stumbles into her room, surrounded by a cloud of boredom. I would have thought she was drunk, if the smell of alcohol weren’t completely absent.

Then I realize the stumbling is due to the shoes she’s wearing. Their heels are perilously high. Sometimes her training, I’ve learned, involves them. She kicks them off with relish, then sighs, curling and uncurling her toes, pain scrunching her face. Pain from *shoes*.

Disdain narrows my eyes. So weak. So ridiculous. How could someone so pathetic have tricked me?

How could I have wanted someone like that? Even momentarily? Even by enchantment?

She begins to undo her dress, and that want roars to the surface like a cruel joke. Before she can pull it off, I reveal myself.

A flash of surprise. But not fear. Not really.

She should be more afraid of me.

The fact that she isn’t makes me hate her more.

She grabs a dagger hidden beneath her vanity, shifting from fool to warrior fast enough to make me certain I shouldn’t underestimate her. She has been trained for this.

Her dress is hanging off her shoulder. I try not to notice. “Hello, Hearteater.” I say the word with disgust. Her kind are monsters. If her aim was better, her blade would have pierced my heart.

Would she have eaten it?

Would she have enjoyed it?

She won't stab me again. In a flash, I'm right in front of her, fingers wrapped around hers, to wrench the dagger from her hand. She tries to wrestle away, so I press her against the wall, just like I did before, under very different circumstances.

Before, I wanted to have her in every way I could.

Now, I want to kill her.

I twist her own blade to her throat.

She winces, but I won't fall for her tricks. Not again.

"You cursed hearteater," I spit at her, digging the dagger into her neck. "Dare to come to *my* realm, disguised, to assassinate me." Blood puddles. *Good*. She made me bleed. She deserves nothing less.

Suddenly, my leg is on fire.

The witch stabbed me again. I roar, and *fine*—now she'll have my power. It wraps around her like a vise. She chokes, clutching at her throat as I move her up the glass wall.

"Was this your plan to keep me from the Centennial? To try to break the curses? Did you mean to make a fool of me? Who are you working with?" The questions rush out of me. Ones I've asked myself for several days, days of watching her sleep, days of increasing madness.

She glares at me, and I bare my teeth at her. How dare she look so defiant? Does she not see my power? Does she have any idea what I'm capable of?

Still, she isn't afraid.

No. The only emotion I feel is smoldering annoyance.

She is *annoyed at me*. I realize then that she must be irritated because I'm asking her questions and not letting her answer.

Fine.

She drops to the floor and gasps. She coughs, for several moments. Is she trying to make me pity her? She grabs her dagger and scuttles to the corner of her room.

She's looking at me like I'm a monster. *Good*. I am one.

But so is she.

I glare at her. She thinks she's so much better than me, doesn't she? She thinks I'm the only beast here? "Do I need to remind you that you *stabbed* me?" I tear my shirt up to reveal the jagged scar where her blade pierced my skin.

She has the nerve to feel sinking regret.

Does she know I can sense emotions? Is she that good of an actress?

Does she think I'm a fool? Does she think I believe her?

I stalk toward her, not taking my eyes off her, the same I would for any other enemy. "How did you get into my realm?"

That question, out of all of them, makes her the most nervous. Interesting.

I feel her panic like poison on my tongue, just as sharply as I've felt her pleasure. I shove those thoughts away, those memories, because they were a *trick*. They were *meaningless*.

I repeat myself. "How. Did."—a *witch like*—"You. Get. In."

I bend down to meet those eyes. Green. The color of deception, of greed, of serpents. She's afraid now, but not of me. Afraid for some other reason. I can see it and feel it, wrapped with her panic. She cowers.

Then, her blade is suddenly at my throat.

The witch.

Weaving truth with lies, as if she could possibly know I can feel her heart spike like her pulse is beating beneath my teeth.

"Get. Out." Spit flies from her mouth, and I flinch. Disgusting. "Of. My. Room."

She says it like she has affection for this place that is so very clearly a prison. She says it like she could possibly order me to do *anything*.

She pushes her blade into my skin.

I could turn it to ash. I could turn her entire realm to ash.

Instead, I portal away.

I'll be back.

The witch wants to trick me? I can trick her too.

The next day, she returns from training to find her room torn apart. Her stuff is everywhere. I've ripped open drawers, moved her bed, strewn her clothes and swords everywhere.

The moment she sees the mess, a wave of crushing sadness hits me. Then, churning worry. Her emotions are sharp, and they *burn* for some reason.

"No, no, no, no," she cries, and her words should please me. I should smile. I don't.

I watch her run across her room, her worry flaring. With trembling fingers, she rips open one of the floorboards—

And there it is. My relic. The one I made a quarter century ago.

How did she end up with it?

I watch her fold over, her back-bending relief like a rush of cold water. I can almost feel it trickling down my own spine.

Did she find it by accident? No. She's barely allowed to leave her room . . .

Perhaps it was given to her. *Left* to her. I've watched her for long enough now to know the only two people she ever sees are her guardians, and, given their treatment of her, the last thing they would do is hand over a portaling device.

It wasn't them. So, who?

I look around this room. The panes weren't always painted over, I reason. The room has existed longer than Isla has; it belonged to someone else before her. Her mother.

Could an ancestor have gotten it? Even her mother?

For the first time, a possibility rises like a question as I again consider my general, the person the relic was made for. The last person who had it. Could Isla's mother have stolen it from my general? Did he end up here, somehow?

That doesn't make any sense. We weren't looking for the sword in the Wildling newland.

Before, I had thought him lost. Killed in search of a sword I desperately need.

Now I consider the possibility that he betrayed me.

Did he portal here? Is he still alive? No . . . or if he is, he's nowhere near this castle. I would have seen him already. How far could he go, without the relic?

Anger surrounds me like a storm, completely at odds with her sunshine-like happiness, making her practically *glow* with it. She's still clutching the portaling device to her chest, like it's a friend. Like it's her most prized possession.

Her happiness is deeper than any I've ever felt. Right now, I linger in hers, tasting it, feeling it as if it's my own. It's light, and airy, and *bright*.

Interesting.

So, this is what her happiness feels like.

I ready myself to rip it away.

"Thank you for finding it for me," I say from the darkness.

The joy withers. The relief quickly turns to dread.

I let my shadows fall.

She scuttles back, fear gripping her chest, not of me, but now, I realize, fear of *losing this relic*.

Of course she's afraid of losing it, I think. Her plans against me and my

realm must require it.

“Please,” she says, her voice breaking on the word. “Don’t.”

She’s crying. I see those tears on her cheeks; I can feel her sadness like a storm around us both; I can feel that she hates herself for crying. Or maybe she just hates me.

I frown down at her.

Enough of this. I don’t care about her. I don’t care about her *feelings*.

I reach down to rip the stolen device, *my device*, from her arms. She blinks, another tear escaping. I’m hit with another wave of soul-clenching sadness. Then something else: *loneliness*.

Memories thrust me back centuries. I remember a little boy clutching at a locked door handle. I remember sand in my shoes. I remember the joy of discovering the world outside my confines. I remember the rush of *freedom*.

Could this device . . . not be part of a plan? Could it be her only escape from this room like a cage, not so different from my own? Could this ability be her only chance at life, just like it was for me?

I don’t know why, but just before I’m about to take it from her, I change my mind.

I don’t know why—

I let her have it.

Something is wrong with me.

I should have taken that relic with me, should have ripped it from her hands. Her tears and begging should have slipped right off me, just like the pleas for mercy I’ve ignored for centuries on the battlefield.

Instead, I let the Wildling keep it. I left. Like a fool. My portaling flair is our realm’s biggest defense. Our biggest advantage.

Now *anyone* who finds it could claim it. Especially since she’s a reckless idiot who managed to portal into *my own castle*.

My pulse is racing. My thoughts are scattered. My hands won’t stop clenching. I’m not myself. This doesn’t make sense.

It must be her Wildling curse. A trick. Or a veiled enchantment.

But I didn’t sense either around her. Could she possibly be skilled enough to veil a curse? Does she . . . have a curse at all?

That’s when I realize I haven’t seen the hearteater eat even a single heart. I remember my general. His flair was being immune to curses. He enchanted the very metal charm I wear, to be able to walk in darkness.

The thought occurs to me.

No. It can't be.

She looks nothing like him, I think, remembering my general. He had been serious and mostly silent—not given to talking about his private life.

Not that I'd asked. Still, he hadn't looked anything like *her*. Could she have taken after her mother? Could he truly be her father? Could she . . . have inherited his flair?

Impossible. I've never heard of flairs being passed down directly. Cronan and I have several generations between us.

I'm desperate for answers. So desperate, I storm out of my castle, then portal to a creature that can't be trusted.

The augur is waiting at the mouth of his cave. His smile is serpentine. "It's been a while, ruler . . ." he says. "To what do I—"

I hurl a vial of blood—my blood—at him. The creature isn't getting close enough to me to draw my blood himself.

The augur's smile grows, the intricately marked skin around his mouth creasing.

"I don't have all day," I growl, and that just makes him laugh.

He pries the lid off the vial and turns it over, allowing a single drop of blood to trickle toward his hand. I was careful not to include enough for him to keep or use for making enchantments.

He presses the blood-tipped finger to his lips and makes an interested sound. The crimson void of his eyes gleam.

"What is it?" I demand.

He shakes his bare head, his cape furling. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. But that's not the answer you were hoping for, is it?"

It isn't.

"I'm not cursed? Plagued? Poisoned?"

She had to have afflicted me with *something*. Something that had her catching my interest immediately, something that ensnared me and my emotions after just one simple glance.

He only shakes his head. "Not by anything new."

I turn around and leave without another word. I can hear his laughter echoing through the cave.

She isn't cursed. Which means, if my theory is correct . . .

Her mother . . . ruler of Wildling, an enemy realm.

My general . . . the most trusted position in my court . . .

She is both Wildling and Nightshade.

My curiosity rises, my interest crests—and with every ounce of centuries worth of self-control, I smother it. I tamp down my fascination, my inexplicable pull to her that I now know isn't because of any curse. I destroy it. I kill it for good.

I will stay away from her.

She is no one. She is nothing. As long as she keeps to her own realm, as long as she leaves me alone, then I don't have reason to think of her again.



CALCIFIED

Dreks shoot out of the scar, one after the other, filling the sky with their screeches. One of my warriors is torn in half, his blood blanketing the dirt. Another is gutted.

I fling my arm out, shadows thinning into slivers sharp enough to decapitate one after another, after another.

I grind my teeth with the effort. These are no normal creatures; they are cursed warriors, beasts that were *made*, and their hides are nearly impenetrable. Only the strongest of my shadows affects them at all, and lately the process has drained me.

I need to close that scar.

There is only one metal that can pierce them, and we have little of it left. One of my warriors begins shooting metal-plated arrows, and I watch a drek go down. Another.

There are dozens more.

I portal right next to the scar, narrowly missing a razor-sharp talon.

The metal barriers that kept the length of this tear closed are now shredded.

Fuck.

The only surefire way to stitch the ground back together is with calcified shadows, which are difficult and painful to create.

The very throne I sit on was created over years. I don't have years. It's possible I have mere *moments*, since my strongest warrior—the one with the arrows—is now in pieces at my feet.

I sigh. I didn't want to do this. *I never want to do this.* But now, there's no avoiding it. I surround myself with a barrier of shadows and close my eyes.

Pain is power.

Those are the words my father spoke to me centuries before, and they're

true. They're *useful*.

I don't usually need pain to release my power. It's strong enough on its own. I've been able to rule with the fortress locked around my feelings and memories. For centuries, I did. But not anymore. Not now that these creatures threaten to turn everything I've sacrificed for to dust.

With a shaking breath, I release the snare around my emotions and memories and let them all come rushing out.

Agony, at watching Laila's eyes lose their light. At realizing my own powers, and lack of control, killed her. *I killed her*.

Suffering, as the cruel guardians cut my skin, layer by layer. So much pain that even killing them, one by one, when I assumed the throne, did not relieve any of the anguish.

Sadness, at not being allowed to know my mother. At learning that I never would, because my father sentenced all the Covets to death after they bore his children.

He killed them all. He killed anyone I ever had a chance to care about.

Then—loneliness. Perhaps the most agonizing feeling of all. It's a pain deep like a well, dark and endless, a night without stars. And it's worse now that I've tasted paradise.

I stab at this pain, bleed it all out, claw to the very bottom of my power.

And it all comes rushing out.

My bellow splits the sky in half as shadows explode out of me—spreading across the gap in the scar, then hardening with a sickening wail. My arms shake with the effort, my chest constricts with the pain, more mental than physical. Every rack of agony through my body is a stitch that finally closes the chaos.

The dreks stop. I watch as they try to crash through my barrier and fail.

The creatures still in the sky shoot down at me like throwing stars. My power unfurls, itching to do something with the remnants of this pain, with the hatred that has surged in its aftermath. My shadows rise, coating my hands and arms, dripping all the way to the ground.

I look up at the creatures and smile.

Power explodes out of me, unleashes, over and over, until the dreks are in pieces. Until the fortress around my feelings is locked once more.

Until my heart hardens again, just like those calcified shadows.

My efforts could have killed me.

Using pain as power is effective . . . but dangerous. It's easy to let it run

through your fingers, until it's gone completely.

I should know better, I should have more control, but for some reason all my emotions feel rawer than usual. Exposed.

A knock sounds on my bedroom door. I sense the shade of feeling outside of it. *Astria*.

"Come in."

She opens the door and stills when she sees the state I'm in.

"You almost died, didn't you?"

I don't deign to respond.

She shakes her head, and begins to pace. "You need more help on the scar. Let me send another legion. We can move the forces at—"

I wave the suggestion away. "You'll just be giving more food to the dreks."

It's true. Still, *Astria's* expression hardens. She *cares* about the warriors she oversees, not just as forces for our purposes, but as *people*. Her feelings are her failing, but she's done a better job to strategically employ our forces across the island than I ever could, and she's never betrayed me. Unlike my former general, apparently.

"Then allow me to go with you next time."

"Perhaps," I say, knowing I likely won't. *Astria* is one of the few people on my council I actually trust. She's not after anything others are. Not money, not acclaim. She works quietly and efficiently, and I admire her for it.

"What are we going to do about this?" she says. "First the dreks. Then, storm season will be starting."

She's right. It's been years without them. The deadly storms are bound to start up again.

Every year, there is another problem. Another obstacle.

I'm tired. So very tired of all of it.

"I'll figure something out," I say.

Her belief in me has never wavered. But for the first time, I feel something new . . . *fear*. She's afraid for our lands. For our people.

I am too.

Astria leaves, and my eyes close once more. There's some comfort, I think, to the darkness. In it, I can almost imagine our problems have vanished.

But seeing *Astria* has reminded me of her cousin. My previous general.

The Wildling's father.

He was loyal to a fault. It's why I never questioned his disappearance. I figured he died. It's still difficult to consider another possibility.

He was more powerful than all my men combined. He had impenetrable armor. He was as cold and unfeeling as I was, and that made me trust him. He didn't suffer from the whims of my other warriors.

Side by side, we battled the dreks. He saved my life more than once. Without him, I wouldn't have been able to keep them at bay for so long. He was the one that helped me implement the metal barriers that have held for decades, the ones that are now starting to give way. If it wasn't for the fact that I could feel his emotions—feel his lack of emotion—I might have even been threatened by his abilities. I might have believed he planned to overthrow me.

Then, we discovered a way to stop the creatures forever. Cronan's sword: a blade that controlled them, a weapon that had been lost for centuries. Together, we worked to find it. We followed countless leads. I made him the relic to make searching for it easier. I'll never forget that look as I set it in his hand—a look of *gratitude*. I hadn't dug into it. I had assumed he was grateful for the honor of having been gifted something from his ruler.

Now . . .

Perhaps he wanted to leave. Perhaps it's what he always wanted.

When he didn't return from that last quest to find the sword, I didn't look for him. The only way he would turn his back on his duty was death. I believed that with every shred of my being.

With him lost, the search for the sword dwindled. And now, here I am. Decades later, still dealing with the same problems.

I feel my nostrils flare as I consider his choices. If he hadn't betrayed me, we might have found the sword. We might have ended the dreks once and for all.

If he hadn't betrayed me—

She wouldn't exist.

Along with the realization comes a mix of happiness and fury.



MINE

“We hear . . . the Covet gatherings have been delayed. Even with the added safety measures,” a council member says, voice nearly trembling with fear I can sense around him in a putrid cloud.

He flinches, as if expecting my shadows to wrap around his neck.

Good. Fear is a consistent motivator. I frown as I realize that was something my father told me.

I suppose I can’t fault him for being concerned. Not when another week has passed without another attempt at securing my heir.

I ignore him and move on with the meeting.

That same councilman has the nerve to follow me on my walk back to my quarters, through the obsidian halls, meaning I can’t simply portal as intended.

I really should kill him, I think. But my council is down to only eight members. I killed another one a few days ago, after finding out he was dealing a particularly addictive strain of nightbane.

The councilman breathlessly goes over updates from each of the villages and the warrior legions, as well as news on the state of farming and the number of my people who continue to be killed by our curse. When we reach my room, he finally brings up the topic again.

“Are the Covets not acceptable?” he says, following me inside, which should be enough to cinch his fate, if I wasn’t so damn *tired*. Too tired to kill, apparently.

“They’re fine,” I growl, not remembering any of them except for her.

“Because, if they were not, I could see about—”

“*They’re fine*,” I repeat, whirling around, shadows spreading across the walls.

He swallows. Fear swells. “Very well, ruler. I will—I will see myself out.”

He practically runs out of my room, and I sigh. This day has been just as worse as the last.

I just . . . I just need to clear my head. I walk into my bathroom and remove my shirt. I turn on my bath, as if I could rinse all my problems and stress away, only to hear a scream.

A familiar scream.

No. I must have imagined it.

I tense for a moment, before storming to the edge of the tub, and peering inside.

It isn't my imagination. It's her. The Wildling witch.

Soaking wet in my bathtub.

Why is she in my bathtub?

I shake away the ache that shoots through me, and say, with a voice conveying my annoyance that *just when I've begun to try to forget her, she shows up in my fucking tub*, "Have you lost your mind?"

She's stammering like an idiot and holding out a vial. She throws it to me, and I catch it. "It's a healing ointment," she says. "For—for that." She's motioning at my scar.

How to tell her that I would rather die than heal it. It's a reminder—a reminder of her.

A reminder that she is a wicked, deceiving witch.

She's stammering again. It ends with, "I came to offer peace. We don't need to be enemies."

I would laugh, if I had the energy.

Oh, how wrong she is. She is going to be my enemy for life, if only for making me undergo the excruciating affair of *feeling* something.

Even now . . . even as exhausted and drained as I am, I feel these emotions uncurling, as if drawn to her, as if being brought back to life.

It's disgusting.

She needs to never come back. She needs to learn she's way out of her depth.

I drop the vial into my sink and watch her wince as it shatters.

Then, I say, "Get out."

Fury radiates. Good. I'm glad I make her angry. I wait for her to leave, *to just leave me the fuck alone*, but she doesn't.

Instead, she leans forward. Toward me. I hiss and step back, as if she is venomous.

She is venomous. She is ruinous.

I can't look at her. Not without feeling myself slowly losing control. I turn to leave, and her voice stops me.

"What do you want, then?" she asks. "What can I give you?"

I tense.

For a moment, I wonder about all the things I now suddenly *want*, even though we, as rulers, are not supposed to want *anything*.

You can give me everything, I think, at the same time as, *You can take everything*.

I want her out of my head. I want her in my bed. I want every one of her thoughts. I want to never see her for as long as I live.

Instead, I say, "You are incapable of giving me anything of value."

Except for my sanity back, maybe.

I feel her rush of anger, mixed with scalding shame.

I both pride and hate myself for being the root of it.

Then, she says something that shocks me. "Then let's settle it with a duel. If I win, all ill will between us is forgotten. We can begin anew at the Centennial."

That makes me turn around.

I almost laugh. Does she have any idea who she's just propositioned? Does she have any idea how many people have died by my blade?

If she did, she would never invite it to meet hers.

Also . . . she assumes I am going to the Centennial? When I never have before?

Does she even know that?

I received the invitation from the *king* not long ago. I promptly turned it to ashes. Why would I possibly attend a gathering of people who almost certainly want to kill me?

"Only a fool would believe they could best me in a duel," I say, because it's true. She doesn't know Lark Crown, her ancestor, is still alive, buried beneath Nightshade. She thinks her death will kill everyone in her realm. Which makes her offer incredibly reckless.

Her desperation makes me curious.

Could her people be in as much danger as mine?

Clearly, she is attending the Centennial. Clearly, she believes I'm attending. She doesn't want me to be her enemy there.

Interesting.

She glares back at me, though I can feel her confidence waver. Her chin is high as she says, "Wildlings are warriors, just like you."

That makes me almost smile. “No, Hearteater,” I say. “Not *just like me*.”

In that moment, under her piercing glare, I remember I’m not wearing a shirt. I reach down to pick it up, then slip it back on, feeling her prickling embarrassment. It’s as if she hasn’t seen a man’s bare body before.

Has she not?

She’s locked in that room like a prisoner . . . though she has my portaling device. For some reason, the idea of her using it for trysts makes a bitter taste spread through my mouth.

Enough. She’s taken *enough* of my time and sanity.

This might finally be my chance to be rid of her once and for all. “Fine,” I say. “When I win, you will never return here again. I’ve tired of you.”

I’m tired of thinking of you.

She slowly climbs out of the tub, her clothes soaking wet and fitted perfectly against her every curve. I have to remind myself to breathe.

I take her hand, intending to portal away, ignoring its softness.

“My swords are in my room,” she says.

We’re there in a moment. By now I’m more familiar with the journey than I should be.

She looks surprised, apparently unaware she’s been using *my* portaling power. “How—”

Sparks travel up my hand from hers, and I drop it as if I’ve been burned. I need to win this duel and be rid of her as soon as possible. “I have important matters to attend to,” I bite out.

She reaches for a sword. I wonder, for a moment, why she chooses that one. Is it her favorite?

Why do I care?

“Let’s go into the forest,” she suggests.

I walk through her glass wall and feel a wave of airy shock. Does she know nothing of our kind?

Of her own father?

I frown as I watch her dislodge a loose windowpane and climb through on her stomach. Her dress catches and rips on the side. Dirt is smeared on the front of it. She doesn’t seem to care, or notice.

I walk into the woods for a few seconds, watching to see if the nature tilts toward her—if it recognizes her—but nothing happens.

I was going to let this curiosity die. But now that I’m here, I might as well test my theory. I reach out, searching . . .

And find something. Power. Hidden, deep within. Wildling power.
Nightshade power.

I almost stumble forward with the discovery. So it's all but confirmed. She is his daughter.

She is Nightshade.

She has no idea.

Why doesn't she use her Wildling abilities? Does she not have a good teacher? Her guardians train her in swordplay. Why aren't they helping her learn her powers?

I swallow, remembering a time when shadows didn't lengthen when I passed. When they did not bow to me.

Enough. This is none of my business.

With a growl, I shove that memory away, and whip around with my sword.

A spike of surprise, and then her blade meets mine. She's fast, I'll give her that. But not faster than I am.

I advance quickly, eager for this to be over, to be rid of her, to be rid of *any feelings at all*. My life is so much easier without them.

She is a distraction. She is a liability.

Her blade does not falter. Thousands of men have died trying to block these very same movements, but she fights back with impressive strength.

Interesting.

It seems that without the mastery of her powers, she has thrown herself into training with metal.

Just like I did.

No. We are nothing alike. *She is nothing.*

My movements get rougher, and she stumbles back, farther into the forest.

"This is a duel, not a scenic stroll," I say, feeling a wave of defiance from her.

She stands her ground, strengthening her position. I strike again and can feel her wave of pain as she blocks it. She doesn't move.

Good girl, I think, despite myself.

Even though she's holding her ground, her confidence wavers. She knows she can't beat me. She knows she's going to lose. Her vision glazes over, as if she's lost in the maze of her mind, letting doubt eat at her.

I get a hit in, just a slight cut down her arm.

Look at me, I want to say. *Face me.*

Something shifts as she does. Her confidence spikes. Her mouth twitches.

She must have a plan, but I can't even be upset. A wave of pride—from both of us—fills me as she finds her way back to herself.

Still, I say, “You look far too confident for someone with such a lack of skill.”

The barb only feeds her determination. Good.

She matches each of my blows over and over, advancing, forcing *me* to back up for a moment. I narrow my eyes, trying to see what she's doing. Trying to determine if I'm going to let her do it.

She curls around a tree and I lunge forward, suddenly desperate to end this duel, which right now seems more like a dance, like a conversation, like a joining.

And I feel my feet sink as the ground gives way beneath me, trapping me.

I look down and scowl at the pit of sand I've stumbled into. I try to move. I'm stuck. I manage to block her next advance.

Did she think this sand would stop me?

Yes. She did. Her wave of annoyance says it all.

Idiot.

I bare my teeth. “You know I could portal out of this, if I believed it would in any way impact my chances of winning.”

“I believe that would be considered cheating,” she says.

I give her an incredulous look, my own annoyance flaring. “And trapping me in this vile substance isn't?”

Enough. I swing my sword around, and she meets it, her feet stopping just shy of the sand she's lured me into. She's at an advantage, being able to *actually move her feet*, but I have to admit her form is impressive.

Not impressive enough.

Irritated that she was naive enough to think she had any chance of beating me—that she hurled herself into my orbit like a damned asteroid—I reach through our blades, grab her by the front of her shirt, and fall backward, pulling her atop me.

My head hits the sand, but I don't mind that it's getting all over me. No, all I can focus on is her body inches above mine, with only my arm and my blade between us. All I can see are her green eyes, widened. All I can taste is her surprise. And something else . . . something unexpected.

A pebble of want that is nothing compared to mine. It's just a *grain of sand* compared to my own desire.

My blade is right against her heart.

But it feels like she is the one with a sword against mine.

It's because of that that I say, "I don't ever want to see you in my lands again."

Then I portal away.

I don't see her in my lands, but I see her in my dreams.

They are relentless. They are infuriating.

But the nightmares that used to plague me, the ones of waking up to see the winter palace painted in my siblings' blood, the ones of the dreks finally breaking through once and for all . . . those have stopped.

I wonder which is worse. Dreaming of battle—or dreaming of her, in my bathtub. Her clothes drenched and plastered to her every inch.

Ridiculous.

She has turned me into a fool.

She swore not to return to my lands, but I made no such promise to her.

Before I think of every reason why I shouldn't be thinking of her at all, I'm in her room, just a week after seeing her last.

She isn't sleeping.

No.

She's *dancing*. Alone. She's singing and twirling around her room, as if she's pretending she's somewhere else entirely.

And I'm not sure if she has the best voice I've heard or if I have simply lost it, but I'm entranced.

I watch her smile and twirl in circles, happiness radiating off her like a ray of sun, and . . .

My fascination horrifies me.

But I can't stop watching. Slowly, I find myself sinking down into a chair to study her radiance.

I know this is wrong. Me, invisible, watching her. Being this obsessed with every move she makes.

But no one has ever accused me of doing anything right.

So, I watch as she twirls around the room, singing a song, dancing, swishing her crimson dress around. I've never paid much attention to dresses, but this one. *This one*. I memorialize it in my mind. The neckline, curved down, revealing a sliver of skin. The ties, in the back, loosely done. I imagine myself undoing them, slowly. I think about how easy it would be to just rip that fabric, if she would let me. If she would—

She turns, briefly catching her reflection in the row of swords, and her smile drops. She gasps, and goes still.

As if she's seen my reflection next to her own. Because she has. For a brief instant I was visible, both of us reflected *together*, like we never can be.

She whips around, but I've vanished. Invisible again.

I'm not breathing. What just happened has never happened before this moment.

My control slipped for a second. My normally ironclad shadows moved without me realizing it, puddling on the floor at my feet. Leaving me exposed.

I tighten them around me now, exercising a firm grip.

This is why she's dangerous. She makes me lose control of my feelings, of my abilities, of *myself*.

I portal away, promising myself I won't return again.



HER

The scar is getting worse.

It used to tear open every few decades. Now, it's every few days.

I couldn't even watch the witch sleep if I wanted to. Nearly every night, I'm bent over the scar, bleeding myself of my worst feelings and emotions. Causing myself pain so that it can be siphoned into power. Draining myself until I nearly pass out.

I'm too exhausted to think of her. And maybe that's the point. Maybe that's why I inch closer and closer to the edge, to that bottom of my pit of power that, if reached, would kill me. I'm so filled with agony, I can't think of her at all.

Even my endless pain is not enough. I won't be able to hold it off much longer. Not even my army can help. Nothing but limited metal pierces their hides. Nothing but me can turn them into ash.

Nothing but the sword can stop them for good.

It's been decades since I searched for it. There was another reason, beyond skill, that my general—Isla's father—was helping me find it.

His flair. His immunity to curses. Cronan's sword was cursed centuries ago, by a powerful Nightshade who knew its power, and feared it falling back in his hands. She cursed the sword never to be claimed by Cronan's blood.

Which includes his descendants.

My general was supposed to break that curse, using his flair. It would have taken a significant portion of his power. It would have killed anyone else who didn't have his centuries of mastery and control.

My people might follow me out of fear, but I know it's often not their greatest motivator. It took a while of studying my general's limited emotions to finally settle on his.

He hated the role he was born into as much as I hate my own. He was as

skilled a killer as I ever met, but he hated it. He hated *himself*.

It was something we had in common.

Then, I realized we also had the same dream. *Escape*. So, I promised him what I could never have: freedom, in exchange for finding the sword, and breaking its curse so I could wield it. His role was inherited, and he would never abandon it—or so *I thought*. With our promise, he would finally be free from his duty.

The oath made him search for the sword like a madman. It became an obsession. It led to his death. Or again, so *I thought*.

Fear was a better motivator, in hindsight. I should have threatened to kill his entire family if he didn't find the sword and break its curse. Maybe then he wouldn't have betrayed me.

I need help finding the sword. But it's proven too risky to again entrust the responsibility to anyone in my court.

An idea forms instantly.

Her. I can use *her*.

But she doesn't have control of her powers . . . I suspect she doesn't even *know* about them. Cronan's sword is unmatched. If she tried to bond to it, to fully claim it, the powers within her would burst forth. Her flair would break its curse.

It would kill her, most likely. That rush of power, called forward by the sword and its own ability . . . she wouldn't survive it. Not without decades of training—time we don't have. The thought of her death makes me strangely uneasy. Perhaps that's exactly why I should do it.

I shove the idea away. She hates me, just like I intended. She would never trust me. Never work with me to find the sword. Never unlock it willingly.

I'll find another way to stop the dreks.

A few weeks later, there is a disturbance in the market.

"Deal with it," I tell one of my guards. Astria is at the scar, monitoring its seam for any weak points. The others are completely useless without her guidance.

A few moments later, the worthless guard is back. He opens his mouth to offer an excuse I barely listen to.

I roll my eyes. "I'll deal with it myself," I growl, irritated, and then I disappear.

I feel her instantly.

I feel the device.

She's here.

It only takes a moment to portal to her. She's on her knees, clutching the relic I foolishly let her keep.

I told her to *stay away*. She didn't listen. She's made a mess of the market. Chaos is ringing all around us. My men aren't far behind. She outran all of them. It would be more impressive if they weren't a pack of fools.

I should let her go. She's safest far away from me. I'm safer with her far away . . .

My hand juts out. The portal she was in the process of forming withers away, in deference to my ability.

Her eyes snap up to meet mine, and—

Her feelings.

Dread. But also . . . something else. Something I felt before, when she clutched that portaling device to her chest.

A shred of her is happy to see me.

"You," I say.

Her.

That's when I know I won't be letting her go. I gave her a chance not to come back. I gave her a chance to be rid of me. Now, she's returned, of her own volition.

She's mine.

The plan is monstrous. But these are monstrous circumstances.

I need that sword. Getting it will rid me of my two biggest problems.

The dreks . . . and *her*.

She can't torment me if she's dead.

The hours since she was found have given me time to think. My general disappeared. He left behind his entire life. His family—who I know he loved—*mourned* him. He was convinced he was close to finding the sword. Why not bring it back to me? Earn his freedom? Be able to do whatever he wanted, without having to fake his own death?

Even if he *had* fallen in love with Isla's mother, he could have simply given me the sword and been with her. He could have visited his family whenever he wanted to. It would have been traitorous, of course, but I'm not sure any of us would have ever found out, with the distance between our realms.

Perhaps the sword wasn't where he thought it was. Maybe this was his only

escape from his duty without it.

Or—

Or maybe he did find the sword. Maybe he found it and decided not to break the curse on it. Which means he might have been the last person to handle it.

It's a stretch. But if I'm right . . . it could mean Isla would not only be able to break the curse on it . . . but she might be helpful in finding it.

If I'm right . . . the sword would sense his power in her. Ancient swords are almost sentient. They can be stubborn. Perhaps it might actually allow itself to be found, if she was with me, trying to locate it.

The prisons are freezing, even for me. My boots echo against the damp stone floor. The walls are cavernous, so low some places, that I have to duck. The ceiling rises the farther I get, into an older, quieter part of the cells.

There she is.

She's hanging from her wrists, wearing a ridiculous excuse for clothing. The guards took her cloak and portaling device, leaving her in a scrap of silk. It takes all my hard-won self-control not to look at her body.

It makes me hate her more.

"Is that supposed to pass for black?" It is, at best, plum.

I can feel her burst of emotions as if she's right in front of me, as if there aren't any bars between us.

I feel the prickle of embarrassment, just as I watch her skin prickle. She notices my gaze. She blames *me*, somehow, for her current circumstances.

She's the one who went against my orders. She's the one who portaled directly into the market, of all places, guaranteeing exposure.

"Demon," she calls me, and she isn't wrong.

"Fool," I reply.

I turn her restraints to ash, and she falls to the floor. Her spike of pain feels like ice against my skin. I keep forgetting how fragile she seems to be.

"You swore not to return," I say.

She has the gall to argue with me. Everyone who has ever tried has ended up dead.

She will end up dead too, I suppose.

Our words fling back and forth, like just another duel. She's so stubborn I might actually mean it when I turn to go, threatening to leave her here. She cries out, and I almost roll my eyes.

"You're keeping me here?"

How dare she sound so outraged? How dare she feel shock and *hurt*?

“You appear in my realm, using a stolen relic. You stab me in the chest. You return and hide in my chambers. Then, you return yet again and attack an innocent man in the middle of the street.”

Her flare of anger is like fire in this cold, dark place. “Innocent? He wanted to scalp me and sell my hair by the strand!”

I found that man. I found him barely clinging to life, slumped in an alley.

I finished the job for her.

“What type of people did you expect to encounter at the night market, Hearteater?” I say the word mockingly, even though its edges have softened in my mind.

“My name is Isla,” she says, green eyes gleaming with fury. Its flames dance across my skin. She has the nerve to glare at me right through the bars.

“I will never call you that,” I say.

“Why?”

I look down at her. “Calling someone by their first name is a sign of familiarity. Of respect.”

Her nostrils flare. “You don’t respect me?”

I shrug a shoulder. “You don’t seem to respect your own life. Why should I?”

She scoffs. “Fine. Don’t respect me. I don’t care. You weren’t why I came here.”

The witch is powerless, yet her words have wounded me. I frown. “Clearly. Why *are* you here?” I demand.

“Why are *you* here?” she asks.

My plan. I’m glad she has reminded me of it. “I believe . . . we might be able to help each other. I have a deal for you.”

Her shock is like a bolt of lightning. “A deal?”

“I’m looking for a sword. I believe you can help me get it.”

And unlock it with your life, are the words I don’t tell her.

I tell her more about it, promising to ally with her at the Centennial if she helps me. A lie, of course. I watch as she purses her lips in consideration. I clench my fists in impatience as she takes her sweet time.

Then, she says, “No.”

I blink. She is imprisoned, and she dares turn down her only possibility of freedom? How long has it been since I’ve been shocked?

“No?” I ask, incredulous.

She just shrugs in that ridiculous—infuriatingly distracting—dress. “No.”

My fingers twitch, desperate to take action. “Very well,” I say, barely

restraining the anger surging through me.

If she wants to die in these cells, that's not my problem. I'll find the sword myself, though it would be easier with her help . . . I'll find a way for her to break its curse from inside this prison. Perhaps threatening her entire realm would help. Her guardians, maybe?

I turn.

"Wait—"

I pause.

"You wouldn't leave me here, would you?" Her voice betrays her vulnerability.

"I would." I mean it. If only to know exactly where she is, and ensure she isn't causing me any more headaches with her recklessness.

I keep walking.

"Fine! Fine. But only if you return my starstick."

Disgust twists my face. "Your *what*?"

"My portaling device."

Gods above. I return the *starstick*. "I feel strongly I will regret this," I say, meaning it, before handing it to her.

She grins, and I swallow. That simple expression. That simple emotion . . .

I frown. She shouldn't be so happy. She has no idea what she's just agreed to.

She's just sealed her fate, and she doesn't even know it.



KILLING ME

Working with the hearteater has proven more infuriating than I imagined.

Why does the fate of my realm have to rely on someone so . . . killable?

We're just one hour into our first stop, and she has nearly been gutted by a rockface and killed by the blacksmith.

She's fragile. She's ridiculous, and sensitive, and she talks too much for my liking.

But easily captured? No.

She managed to put a dagger through the ancient blacksmith's eye, after he chased her through the forest. It was my own little test, to see how she might perform. If she would be more of a hindrance than an advantage in searching for the sword.

That's not the only reason we're here. The blacksmith can make enchanted objects from blood. He met her father—he can sense hers, and just confirmed she can break the curse on the sword.

Part of me is grateful.

Part of me had hoped I had been wrong . . . that she couldn't unlock the sword. That way, I could forget her. I could spare her.

It's settled now.

The moment we leave the blacksmith, she is, predictably, screaming at me. Her anger flares when I roll my eyes at her outrage. It's not that I don't care. It's that she was never in any danger. I was there the entire time. I would never let him hurt her.

I'm the most dangerous thing she'll ever face.

"Why? Why let him hunt me?" she demands. I feel her twisting hurt. She feels . . . betrayed. That makes me scowl. To feel betrayed means there was some sort of trust.

We portal back to her room. Now that we're away from the blacksmith, it begins to sink in: I'm planning to kill her, and she *trusts me*.

The fool.

Perhaps her anger is warranted. My little *curiosity* injured her. She twisted her ankle running from the blacksmith.

We'll have to take a small break from searching for the sword to give her time to heal.

I leave. The next night, I have half a mind to continue the search for the sword without her. But, when I'm done stopping yet another rip in the scar, when I am bone-meltingly exhausted, drained, and sore, I do not follow up on my leads.

No. I go to her room. And that's how I hear the yelling, in another wing of the castle.

Her guardians.

"Foolish girl," one says. "Do you think we keep you inside just because we want to? *No*. Because you put us all in danger when you're reckless. Is that what you want? For everyone in this realm to die?"

My knuckles are white, gripping the side of this chair, listening to that guardian scream at her.

Remembering. Remembering my own guardians . . .

I hear her voice through the walls. It's trembling. I reach for her emotions, closing my eyes in focus, and they practically scald me.

She feels . . . guilt. Sadness. Shame.

"I'm sorry," she says. That makes my nostrils flare. I'm not even sure why, but the idea of her *apologizing* to that woman. The idea of that woman *daring to*

"Sorry isn't good enough!" her guardian screams. "You are just like your mother. And it . . . and it is going to get you killed. It is going to get us *all* killed."

Shock and hurt reaches me . . .

I'm on my feet in a moment. I'm melting through walls, portaling, until I see them.

The two guardians, standing side by side. Only one of them speaking. Isla, in front of them, head bowed. Tears glistening on her cheeks.

I have to physically stop myself from turning the woman pointing her finger at Isla to ash. Anger and outrage surge through me, telling me to do it.

I almost do.

But then, Isla turns to go. She almost walks right through me. She winces as she steps, her ankle clearly still in pain, and my invisible shadows lurch forward, on instinct.

They wrap beneath her arms, gently enough for her not to feel them. Still, a small pinch forms between her brows, as she notices the lessening of pain.

Her sadness overcomes any suspicion. I feel it, I see it in her face, as she slowly walks back to her room.

The guardian who was speaking follows. I portal, beating them there, and watch, hands clenched, as the woman seals the loose windowpane in the glass wall. The one Isla snuck through before. She must have told her about it, to explain her injury.

The hearteater just watches, fingers trembling by her sides. Her anger and hurt engulf me, but she remains silent.

Speak, I want to tell her, as I simmer in the shadows.

Defend yourself.

But she doesn't. And, when her guardian finally leaves, she slips down the painted glass to the floor—and cries.

I should be disgusted by her weakness. Rulers do not *cry*. I haven't in centuries.

Instead . . . my chest tightens. I feel . . . angry? But not at her . . . at the one who made her cry.

If her guardian were to die unexpectedly, would it be suspicious? I hardly care.

I stay until she finally falls asleep, curled against the floor, tears dried upon her cheeks.

I don't know what I am doing. But carefully, so carefully it doesn't wake her—I take her into my arms. I walk her to her bed. I gently place her atop the sheets, then cover her with blankets.

It's cold, I tell myself. I don't want her to die from the elements. She is weak. I don't want her injury getting worse.

But that doesn't explain why I remain through the night, sitting on a chair I dragged by her bedside.

Something about her has captured my interest. Perhaps it's her powerlessness. Perhaps it's her lineage—both Wildling and Nightshade.

Whatever it is, it needs to stop. Every day, I say that, but I keep showing up here, thinking tonight will be the night that I lose my interest, that I am able to give her up entirely, but like any addict, the claws of my obsession are just

deepening.

She's just . . . a woman. Closer inspection would determine that she is the most beautiful woman imaginable, but beauty means little.

Beauty is not enough for her to have snagged my mind.

So, what is it?

What has she done to me?

"Do you have any idea?" I say, softly, from my shadows. She doesn't even stir. "Do you have any idea how many ways I could kill you right now?"

I shake my head.

"Do you have any idea how many ways you're killing *me*?"

I shouldn't be watching her sleep.

I stay until the sun rises.



WATCHING AND WANTING

Thanks to her people's elixir, her ankle heals quickly. Less than two weeks later, we continue our search for the sword.

It isn't on the Wildling newland, like I might have assumed if my general had truly claimed it. No, according to the blacksmith, the sword was stolen, and last sensed on Nightshade—so Isla suggests we try to extract information from the most notorious thieves in my realm. The moment we portal to the fishing town I feel her panic rush like poison through my veins.

I whip around, ready to strike at any danger.

But she's just staring at *me*.

Is she afraid of me? Finally?

No . . . as my own wave of panic dissipates, I feel the truth.

She's afraid *for* me.

What a ridiculous thought. Why?

"*Your curse*," she says. She points at the moon, and then me, as if I could have possibly missed it. "You can't—"

Ah. "Go outside at night?"

She nods vigorously.

Has she ever seen one of my kind die from the curse? Does she not know I would have been a pile of ash at her feet before she was able to get a single word out?

No. She's been locked away in that room. The only times she's been to my lands with her device are the times she's met me.

"That won't be a problem," I say simply, before turning around.

I feel her concern being smothered by a flare of annoyance and curiosity. "Even *you* are not powerful enough to escape the curses."

I sigh. She's stubborn, like me. She isn't going to drop this, even though I

wish she would. She clearly knows nothing about her heritage. About her father. I do not want to rub it in her face, I do not want to lie to her unless I have to, but this, I admit, deserves an explanation. “No. But someone else was, and they made me this.” I show her the charm beneath my shirt. A simple piece of metal tied to unbreakable string.

Her confusion only grows. I only grow more irritated. Why tell her anything at all? I don’t owe her anything. I don’t even need to *speak* to her.

I know only one proven way to stop her questions, and it is to make her angry.

“While I am flattered by your concern for my well-being,” I say, in a tone I am sure she hates, “focus on finding the sword. Not me.”

That does it. She goes silent, and I feel her anger boiling around us.

Good. Better she be angry at me than *concerned* about me. I almost laugh at the absurdity. Her having any care at all for her enemy.

Because no matter how many times I visit her at night, we are still enemies. She stabbed me in my chest. I deceived her into agreeing to a plan that will almost surely lead to her death.

A sliver of regret spikes through my stomach, and I close the bars around my emotions, smothering it.

I can’t use my power in case the sword is with the thieves, so I lead us toward a boat with paddles. She tries to grab one—because *of course she does*—and I snatch it out of her hand. She’ll only slow us down.

Around her, my body is a coil of tension. She unnerves me. If I can’t work it out in other ways, I will do it here, with these paddles, on the sea.

I begin paddling, focusing on the strain of my muscles instead of her, behind me. It almost works, until I can feel something from her that I would never expect out here in the middle of the ocean, in the dead of night.

Fear, maybe. Curiosity. Apprehension.

Not a wave of desire.

She’s watching me. I can almost feel her gaze like I can her emotions.

For the first time in my life, I am not content with my powers. Reading feelings isn’t enough. I wish I could read minds. I wish I could know exactly what is going on in her head. I wish I had the courage or the right to ask.

“It’s surprising,” she finally says, putting me out of my misery.

And that’s all.

Nothing else. I almost ignore her. I almost pretend I didn’t hear her. But curiosity wins, minutes later, when I finally bite out, “What, pray tell, is so

surprising?”

“Your flair is portaling. You can go anywhere without lifting a finger. Yet . . . you climb quickly. You can paddle well. You are . . . muscled.”

I was right. She *was* studying me.

Could she possibly find me as interesting as I find her?

Of course, I think. Of course she would notice the same thing I noticed about her. She has never relied on powers. Has she wanted them? Is she shocked to see that I have not relied solely on my abilities as well?

“Ogling my body, Hearteater?” I say, almost desperate to taste her flash of embarrassment.

I do, and it pleases me in a strange way. It’s like I can feel her blush, her skin burning, beneath my lips. I have the strange, disgusting urge to turn around and run my mouth across her heated skin.

I remain very still.

“Only in your dreams,” she bites out.

All of them, I think. *You’re in all of them*.

Instead, I say, “Is there a question?”

“Yes. It’s been hundreds of years since war. You can portal anywhere with half a thought. Why keep up with your . . . fitness regimens? Why . . . when you have so much ability?”

I tell her the truth. Something she must know. Something I want her to understand, for she is not powerless. I don’t know the extent of that power, but I know it is hidden, just waiting to surface.

“I have never relied solely on my powers. A person’s mettle is determined by who they are beneath them.”

I turn to look at her. I need her to hear me. “And only a fool waits to prepare for a war until one is declared.”

She’s silent after that, and I am both grateful and disappointed.

When we wash ashore, I turn to her.

There’s something in her eyes. Something in her feelings. She’s not as afraid as she should be. She’s a relatively inexperienced ruler, walking into a den of the most dangerous thieves on Nightshade. She should be *terrified*. Does she think I will protect her?

“I won’t save you,” I tell her. “If it’s you or the sword, it will not be a difficult decision. I will find a way to get it without you.”

I mean it.

I *need* to mean it.

“I am aware,” she tells me through her teeth.

“Good.”

I find myself hoping it won’t come to that, knowing that it will.

I lied.

I hear a smashing of glass, and *gods help me*, even though I told her I wouldn’t save her, I portal downstairs in an instant, only to find her standing outside, covered in ash.

Pride fills me. Killing a Nightshade by smashing through a window is ingenious.

Then, she folds over and retches.

I sigh.

We’re not done. More blood is spilled. And, at the end of it, when everyone is dead, she does not celebrate.

No. She’s *crying*. The man she killed—and the one I killed after—was filth, the worst of men who sell much more than rare objects, yet he has made her *cry*. I feel those tears like blades cutting down my insides. All of her feelings are like weapons. They pierce far deeper than anyone else’s have. They dig into my skin, just like the punishments I used to be given. It is, I think, another form of torture.

Because . . . because I *care*. I care that she’s crying, even though that man doesn’t deserve her tears.

I portal her back to her room. *Of course I’ll stay*, I think. I’ll wait until those tears are gone. How long does it usually take? Last time, she fell asleep. That was the only thing that got them to stop.

Her eyes are closed. If I wiped the tears away, would they stop completely? Would she produce more?

My hand reaches out, and I stop myself.

She’s your enemy, I say. *You’re going to kill her*.

Her tears mean nothing. They *need to mean nothing*.

“There is a celebration on Creetan’s Crag in two weeks,” I say, having a hard time finding my voice. “That’s when I’ll return.”

I fight every urge to stay as I portal away.

The hearteater is going to die.

That is the ideal ending of this scenario. We find the sword. She unlocks it. The power it takes harms her—maybe even kills her.

It is inevitable.

The fact that those words produce a flicker of regret in me is exactly why I need to stay away from her, outside of our search for the sword. In truth, this time.

I am stronger than this. Some woman isn't going to break through hundreds of years of resolve. She is nothing.

So, I stop going to her room at night. Instead, I visit the scar, which has torn open again and again. I find myself relishing in the fight, for it is the greatest distraction. All this tension, this *feeling*, this fury—I channel it into my powers and fight and kill until it is gone.

Until my body gives out, and there's no time or energy to visit her. Sometimes, I fall asleep right on the dirt, by the scar.

Days pass without her, and relief rushes in. She was just a momentary temptation. Nothing special.

To prove it to myself—that she means nothing, that she has no control over me—I tell Astria to call for another Covet.

The women line up, the same as before. All wearing red on their lips. All in slips of fabric. I walk in and am met with their unfettered excitement. They've volunteered to be here. They know what it entails.

They might as well be faceless. I can't focus on any of them. I *try*. I force myself to look at each one.

Judging by the flare of desire from my guards stationed at the end of the room, they must be desirable.

But not to me.

My emotions remain as flat as a lake.

Good. I'm not supposed to feel anything. *Good*.

I just have to choose. It can be any of these women. It doesn't matter. This is my duty. It means nothing.

Choose.

Eyes, staring me down. Inviting me in. Desire, from them. For *me*. It should be enough to just choose, to just go, to just revel in the momentary release and distraction.

I blink—and all I see is green. *Green eyes, glaring at me.* And red. *An aura so sharp and saturated, it bleeds into my dreams.* Every shade of everything I'll never have.

Every shade of everything I suddenly need.

She means nothing. Let me prove it. Let me have all these women, one after the other, and not think about her once.

I step forward.

Then turn around and slam the door behind me. One of my guards is there. “Is something wrong? They all agreed, they all know exactly what—”

“Send them away,” I growl.

I portal back to the scar.

The dreks aren’t even there. I’ve closed all the openings. Still, I rage, roaring, shadows flaring in all directions.

I feel sick. Poisoned. *Cursed*.

The witch. *I hate her*. I hate her, and everything she has done to my head.

She is practically powerless . . . yet she has complete and utter power over me.

I throw myself back into my duties, into endless distractions.

And there is more than enough to be distracted by.

There are talks of rebel groups. There are even calls for me to attend this Centennial, and end these curses once and for all.

The dreks . . . they killed civilians in the last attack. Dozens, before I could finally close the scar and end them.

I’m exhausted by the time I return to my room. I take my armor off, then stare at the wall. Trying to will myself to find the strength to take a bath.

Then—

I feel her.

My entire body tenses in awareness, all my senses narrowing. She’s *here*. And. *And*—

She’s bleeding.

My shadows race across the floor of my room in panic, and it’s been centuries since I haven’t had a hold on them. She makes me lose control. She makes me reckless.

She makes me emotional.

Just over a week prior, I bellowed my hatred of her across my lands, but at the sight of her, like this—

She’s in the middle of my room, gagged. I pull the fabric out in an instant, fear spiking through my bones as I study her chest. She’s been carved like an animal.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have . . . I didn’t—I didn’t know where else to go.”

Does she not know she doesn’t just hurt herself when she’s this reckless? That she hurts *me*? That she puts the entire world at risk of being burned to ash?

“You are a fool,” I say.

“I am very much aware.”

What happened? Who did this to her? My rage is blinding. I am going to enjoy taking them apart, piece by piece. “Who am I killing tonight?”

She has the nerve to look surprised. “What? No one.”

Not yet. I’ll kill them, but not yet. Not while she is still bleeding this much. She’ll die if I don’t close the wound.

I need her alive to unlock the sword. That’s what I tell myself. *That’s* why I feel so panicked, I want toretch.

I study her blood-soaked, torn dress. “I don’t know how you’re still conscious,” I growl. She’s so fragile. “Why won’t you stop bleeding?”

Her healing elixir.

She tells me where it is, and I don’t think I’ve ever portaled this quickly. I’m back in a flash. Instead of letting me do it, letting me *help her*, she rips it from my grip and pours it over her chest without a second thought.

Her scream rakes through my bones, making my shadows lash out, clawing at the floor, as if they too know this is wrong. She shouldn’t be hurt. *I should have protected her, somehow.*

I find myself wishing I could take that pain away. I’m used to pain. She isn’t. If I could, I *would* take it from her.

Instead, I sit here, only able to offer her a roll of gauze, then watch as she ties it herself, with practiced fingers. My hands make fists, thinking about why she might be so practiced. Maybe she’s more familiar with pain than I thought. Fury boils beneath my skin. The blood soaks through the bandages immediately. *She bleeds far too much.*

Her pain . . .

I feel it. I feel it like it’s mine, and it *hurts*.

There’s little I can do. The elixir and wrappings will heal her injuries. It doesn’t seem to be doing much for the pain, though.

She winces again. Her lips part in a silent cry.

I don’t even know what I’m doing until I’m downstairs in the cook’s quarters. I chop up chocolate. I melt it down. I don’t think about all the reasons I shouldn’t care, because I do, and she’s *bleeding*, and in pain, and right now, I’ll do anything to bring her comfort.

This drink. It helps me. It—*helped*—me.

I portal back to my room and roughly hand her the mug. “Drink this.”

Slowly, tentatively, she takes it from me. Her chest. It has to be on fire. I don’t know how the pain alone hasn’t made her faint.

I don’t breathe as I watch her drink. I’m waiting for something. For what, I don’t know, until I watch her eyes flutter closed. Until I feel the airy surprise and chocolate-sweet flush of pleasure before it’s swallowed by another wave of pain.

She likes it.

She likes it too.

I don’t know why that inconsequential fact becomes everything, proof that perhaps we’re not so different and maybe she shouldn’t ever leave my room.

She drinks every drop, and then she frowns again. “Do you have something else for the pain? How about that Nightshade substance?” She thinks for a moment. “Nightbane?”

My blood runs cold.

Confusing, white-hot fury laces through me, mixed with fear.

“You will never know nightbane,” I say.

“Why not?”

“It’s a drug. It makes you the happiest you’ve ever been and takes away all suffering.”

She looks undeterred. “I want it.”

The fool. I have more concern for her own life than she does, and why is that? If she wants to be this foolish, I should let her. I should let her *die*.

Even though I pose far more danger to her than the drug, I have an urge to make her understand, make her stay as far away from it as possible. “It kills you slowly, methodically, efficiently, until you die with a smile on your mouth. With continued use, nightbane is a death sentence, and everyone who takes it knows it.”

Finally, she looks dissuaded, and I breathe a little easier. “So why take it?”

I never understood myself, though now, I’m starting to. “I suppose they feel the pleasure . . . however short-lived . . . is worth it.”

She’s still on the floor. I curse the fact that I don’t have more furniture. Besides my bed, my room is mostly empty. Simple. I should do something about that. I sit down next to her.

She asks me why I don’t have anything stronger for pain, and I tell her the truth. What I learned as a child:

Pain can be useful.

It can be used to unlock deeper levels of ability. With the dreks and the scar, my pain has become an asset.

I continue telling her the truth. I continue *talking*, and I've never shared this much about myself before, not with anyone. But I have the strange urge to distract her from the pain. And . . . even stranger . . . the urge for her to know me. Because then maybe she will let me know her.

"When I was seven, my training consisted of being cut and skinned until there was barely any flesh left on my back."

Her eyes widen . . . they are matched with a feeling I can taste. *Concern*. Not pity . . . *concern*. Like perhaps she doesn't hate me as much as she claims.

Her voice is quiet. "That is barbaric."

She isn't wrong. I only lift a shoulder. "It was a custom here, for a very long time. Meant to toughen the body and mind at the height of its growth. The place I trained as a warrior . . . we were punished for the smallest of infractions. In public. Shadows can turn into the sharpest, thinnest blades."

"That's humiliating."

"It wasn't. It was a chance to prove we didn't react to the pain. Standing there, being cut, and not moving a muscle in your face . . . It was seen as strength." To me, it meant my pain could be conquered. It meant perhaps my feelings could be as well. All that pain . . . could be turned into something else. Something useful. "My father would come and watch. It was an honor to show him that I had no reaction to the pain."

Back when I actually respected my father.

Her concern continues. Interesting. "You know how awful that sounds, right?"

I nod. I do. "It's why that doesn't happen anymore. Our training is still ruthless . . . but not as cruel."

She swallows. I watch her throat with far too much interest. What would the skin there feel like, beneath my lips? Beneath my teeth?

Her voice breaks my focus. "But . . . you don't have any scars."

My walls come up. She's seen my body.

Has she thought of me, late at night, the same way I think of her?

The thought angers me as much as it interests me.

She knows I can remove scars. Is she wondering why I haven't removed the one she gave me?

"You have a Moonling healer, don't you? Or Moonling healing supplies? Why is Cleo helping you?"

There she goes, with her questions.

Too many questions. All at once, I remember my plan. What I must do.

“You should leave,” I say, and it’s the first semi-responsible thing I’ve done all night.

Her hurt is instantaneous. I almost hate myself for being the cause, but no. She should be hurt. She *should* hate me.

Without another word, she uses her device to disappear.

My loneliness is immediate. I’m instantly regretting my words, I’m left hating myself for making her leave.

You should leave, I said.

You should never leave, is what I meant.

Hours later, I’m pacing my room. I haven’t gotten a thing done since she left. I’ve been too distracted, this unfamiliar worry raking at my chest. I imagine her bleeding out on her bed. What if the wrappings weren’t tight enough? What if the wound didn’t fully close?

What if she’s dying right now?

What if she’s already dead?

I promised myself I would stop doing this, stop watching her. But a blinding panic makes me portal to her room without another thought.

The relief at seeing her sleeping soundly nearly has me sinking to the floor.

There she is, I think. *Sleeping soundly for the both of us.*

I almost leave. She’s fine.

But what if she isn’t in a few hours?

A moment later, I’m sitting on the chair across from her bed. I’m watching her sleep, the same way I have for many nights before.

I feel her emotions as she dreams. I feel a spike of panic, and my shadows act on instinct, caressing her cheek. She sighs and flips onto her stomach. Her feelings smooth over. Her dreams become lighter.

For once . . . I am a cure. Instead of causing pain, I am healing it.

My shadows continue, and I am jealous of them for the first time in my long life. I wish my fingers were the ones stroking down her temple. Running through her hair. Being any balm at all.

I wish she would look at me.

All at once, she awakens, as if she heard me.

I could turn invisible, but I don’t. I want her to see me.

She finds me immediately, eyes blinking rapidly, still blurry with sleep, and she stifles a scream. I feel *everything*. Her emotions are unguarded. I feel the full depths of her initial terror, then relief, and . . . something else.

“What are you—”

“I’m making sure you don’t bleed out in your sleep.”

She raises a brow. “I’m fine.” Her blood-soaked bandages tell a different story. “You can leave.”

Her emotions say she doesn’t want me to.

Interesting.

I lean back into the chair, making myself comfortable, relishing in the outrage I see growing in her expression.

She really is adorable when she hates me.

Her green eyes are narrowed. Her hands are fisting her sheets.

A thought runs through me, imagining her fisting her sheets for a very different reason, and I have to dig my fingers into my own palms to keep myself from imagining more.

Because of course I’ve imagined her. Several times. Under me, over me, next to me, gasping into my ear, clenching around me.

I speak to get myself out of my filthy thoughts. “Your death would be most inconvenient. I’ll stay a little longer.”

Her outrage almost makes my lips twitch into a smile. “Inconvenient?”

“Inconvenient,” I repeat. “You are an investment.”

It’s true. I’ve spent decades looking for this sword. Every moment I spend with her is for one outcome. I need to remember that.

She doesn’t seem to appreciate that word either. “An investment?”

“My time is valuable. I have a lot to do. Choosing to work with you . . . fitting you into my plan. You are an investment. You’re no good to me dead.”

And worse to me alive, if I’m being honest with myself.

She glares at me, and she wouldn’t do it so much if she knew it was one of my favorite expressions of hers.

She huffs and tucks herself back into her sheets. She shifts back and forth. She’s in pain. I can feel it.

I can also feel something else. Something that makes it almost painful for me to be sitting here, so far away from her.

Finally, she sits upright, as if she also can’t take it anymore. As if she could be feeling even a fraction of the torture that I am.

“I can’t sleep,” she says.

“Clearly.” I consider this situation. Both of us here, in her lands. “I suppose I could have allowed you to stay at my palace. Let you heal there.”

I shouldn’t have made her leave. I have a fierce desire to keep her where I can see her, where I can make sure she’s safe.

For the sword, of course.

Her rush of distaste surprises me. “I hate your palace,” she says.

Does she? “Why?”

“Besides the fact that you live there?” That almost makes me smile. No one else would dare speak to me that way. Only this cursed hearteater would have the gall. “There’s no color. It’s so . . . dark. I could never live in a place like that.”

Color. Huh. I’ve never noticed. Perhaps that’s why she seems so out of place. This shining, bright spring of life in my dark castle.

Her words hurt me more than they should.

“You know,” she says, already moving on, oblivious to my own thoughts, “my guardians closed my window because of you.”

I raise a questioning brow at her, even though I’m very much aware. A flare of anger ignites in my chest at the memory. That guardian of hers should thank the stars every day that I still haven’t killed her.

“There was . . . a loose pane. You saw it when we dueled. It was the only way I could sneak out. I had to tell them about it, to explain my ankle injury.”

I can feel the pain, separate from her wound. It’s clear the window meant a lot to her.

“Can’t you use your portaling device to go outside?” I absolutely refuse to call it a *starstick*.

She’s suddenly ashamed. Shy. Her green eyes leave mine and find the floor. I have the urge to turn her chin up, to force her to look at me, but I stay very still. “I—I’m awful at traveling short distances with it. And I can only reliably go places I’ve been before.”

Ah. She hasn’t mastered its use.

I’m mentally transported to centuries before, when I had the same issue. When I had also been trapped in a room, desperate for a way out of it.

No . . . this hearteater and I are not as different as I previously thought.

I remember, for a crushing moment, the helplessness I had felt in my room before discovering my flair. The loneliness.

She is the same, I realize.

“I’m sorry,” I say, the words spilling out of me before I can think about how long it’s been I’ve uttered them. “About the window.” *I really should have killed*

her guardian, I think. Before she could seal it. Before she could *hurt* her.

She asks me something that pulls me back into the present. “If you created my device, then how did it get to Wildling?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I say, and it’s the truth. Though, it’s not the full truth. That, she can’t know.

Panic.

“Did you . . . did you know my mother?”

I frown. “No. I haven’t met another Wildling since the curses.”

Relief.

We watch each other. I wait to feel another emotion, to get another clue to what’s happening inside of her mind, but all she does is watch me back, with the same fascination.

What could she find so fascinating about me?

No one has held my gaze for this long before. No one has dared. I can feel her emotions shifting. She’s starting to become all too conscious of our positions. Her, in bed, in barely any clothing. Me, sitting here, watching her, from just a few feet away.

“Do you always play with your hair when you’re uncomfortable?” I ask.

She immediately puts her hands in her lap, and it almost makes me smile. “No.”

“Liar. I’ve watched you do it on no less than three occasions.”

It’s true. I don’t know if I’ve even been aware of how much I’ve noticed.

Her pretty eyes narrow at me. I feel special, being the object of her study, even if it’s in distaste. Without breaking my gaze, she crawls toward me on the bed, and does she have any idea what she’s doing to me? I swallow.

“Here I was thinking that you couldn’t even bear to look at me, and you’ve apparently been studying me quite carefully,” she says, her voice different. Raspier.

You have no idea.

I keep my expression steady. “You are my enemy. Of course I study you carefully.” Anyone outside of my realm is my enemy. It’s the way it’s always been.

She doesn’t look convinced. “Right. Tell me, Nightshade,” she says, and I’m watching her lips with far too much interest. “What do *you* do when you’re uncomfortable?”

“I rarely am.”

She looks smug. “You seemed pretty uncomfortable when I stabbed you in

the chest.”

The reminder of that doesn't have my desire cooling as much as it should. “I'm used to being stabbed.”

“By someone you were trying to bed?”

My jaw tenses. I remember that day. The day when, for the first time, I felt aching, otherworldly want, and it ended with her trying to *kill me*. “You tricked me. Had I known who you were, I never would have touched you.” If only that was true. I know who she is now, and here I am, hard as steel, barely able to keep myself from telling her every single thing I want to do to her right now.

She scoffs, and it does nothing to temper my want. If anything, I want her *more*.

“Had *I* known what was about to occur, I never would have joined that line.”

“Why were you there, then?” I snap. If only she had never appeared in my palace. If only she hadn't cursed me with this unrelenting want, with these thoughts that are like blades, meticulously slicing at my self-control.

She recoils, shocked by my tone. *Good. Get far away from me*, I want to tell her. *I will only bring you pain*. Her voice is small. “I accidentally portaled there with the starstick. It wouldn't work, and I was chased by your idiotic group of guards. The head woman grabbed me, and the next thing I knew, I was in that line.”

Ah.

Then it wasn't a part of a wretched plan. It was an accident. I shake my head and cross my arms in front of me. “I should take that thing away from you. It's bringing you closer to death.”

It's bringing you closer to *me*.

“You could try,” she says, her voice threatening. *Good*. I like it when she threatens me. I like it when she knows her own strength.

“So. You have a harem?” she asks. Her tone is casual, but her emotions are confusing. Is she . . . angry?

“No.”

She laughs, but there isn't any amusement in it at all. I realize I've never heard her laugh out of joy.

I have the strange desire to hear it. To hear her happy.

“So, women just line up to sleep with you? They volunteer for the honor?”

I glare at her.

“Who would want to sleep with you?” she says, very clearly trying to get under my skin.

It works.

That's it. I slowly rise and approach until I'm towering above her. I watch her swallow. A typical sign of fear. I await the expected, stabbing cloud of it. It never arrives. No . . . she's feeling something else entirely. I can feel it as if my lips are running along her pulse, as if my tongue is laving against it.

"I don't know, Hearteater," I say, my voice rough with restraint and desire. "You seemed pretty willing."

She swallows again, and her throat . . . it's so close. I have the sudden, blinding urge to bite her, to *taste her* any and every way she'll let me.

Her voice is brittle. Her words are very clearly false. "No. I was disgusted."

This time, I smile. She's trying so hard to fight it. Almost as hard as I am. She's trying so hard to hate me. "Is that so?"

She nods, her chin high and proud even as I brace my hands on either side of her on the bed, and lean down, so our faces are level. Her desire flares, I can practically taste it on my tongue. It almost brings me to my knees. Would she like that?

I need her to know. I need her to know that *I know*.

"I can feel flashes of emotions." Yet another secret I've shared with her and almost no one else. The blood slowly drains from her face, panic blooming within her, and it pleases me far too much to see her this affected. To see her realize that I have felt every emotion she has had in my presence. "And yours were very, very clear . . ."

She stops breathing.

"Just as they are now."

Spiraling panic. Deepening desire.

Still, her posture never falters. Her eyes are fierce with that endless conviction. "Your powers are wrong."

I tilt my head, considering. My gaze lingers, shifting from her prickled chest to her delicate collarbones to her captivating neck to her lips. I don't just want to kiss her. I want to devour her. I want to *mark her*.

"No," I say. "I don't think so."

Her lips part in the gentlest of gasps that sharpens my senses, sends a chill down my spine. Her eyes drop to my mouth, to my arms, to my chest. Suddenly, her desire surges, merges with my own to create this blinding, pulsing want.

In that moment, I am certain.

This is not one-sided. I'm not the only one watching and wanting. She wants this just as much as I do.

My blood is roaring, pulled toward hers, something unexplainable and unmatched thrumming between us. I didn't know it was possible for two people to have a gravity between them until I met her. Now all my thoughts and dreams revolve around her, like I am an admiring moon, rotating around the planet that is her.

This will ruin me. *She* will ruin me.

And I might just enjoy it.

If I don't move, we're both going to do something that will make it nearly impossible for me to do what I must for my realm.

With every remaining shred of willpower I have, I pull away from her, returning to the chair. "Go to sleep," I say, knowing I won't be sleeping a moment tonight.

I watch her crawl back to her place in bed and wonder how we are both possibly going to survive this.

All night, I watch her sleep, remembering how her normally ironclad confidence had wavered when discussing portaling. Remembering how her emotions had hardened when her guardians yelled at her.

My hearteater can be an idiot, but she is not weak. She's going to learn to bend the starstick to her will. She is going to learn to go wherever she pleases.

I am going to teach her.

The sun has just risen. I shift in the chair, aware of how heavy my limbs feel. This amount of feeling is exhausting.

I almost laugh. Centuries of self-control and this ruler who doesn't even know she has powers is turning me into an utter fool.

I can't deny it, I care about her. I need to ensure she's protected.

It's ironic, really, her would-be killer trying to keep her safe. It's wrong, I know.

But none of this is right.

I leave for a while to change and complete my duties for the day, then return that evening. She seems surprised to find me back in her room. If only she knew that her room is more familiar than my own, lately.

"If you are going to insist on keeping my device to portal anywhere you wish, I will teach you how not to be an idiot."

She glares at me, her anger like an iron grip around me. "Or what?"

Stubborn hearteater. Her defiance is as alluring as it is irritating. I step close to her, towering over her, so she's forced to look up at me. "Or I will take it

back,” I say, looking at the place I know she keeps it.

Fear. She swallows. “Fine. When are you going to teach me?”

“Now.” I grab her arm and portal her away.

She blinks. I watch, fascinated, as she takes in her surroundings. I care about where her eyes linger. Where they don’t. “This . . . this is in your palace.”

“It’s a training room.”

“I didn’t bring anything.”

With a flick of my wrist, the device she calls *starstick* falls from the sky. Her look of amazement sends a warm rush coursing through me.

“How did you—”

“The first thing you should know is that your device is unreliable. I did not pour much power into it.” I remember that day, going to the blacksmith with her father, like it was yesterday. The process had been painful. “Around other portaling ability, it won’t always work. Portaling power is all about visualization. That is why you believe you can’t go anywhere you haven’t already been.”

It’s strange, explaining my own power to someone else. It’s one of my most coveted secrets. One of my most personal attributes.

Stranger still that she ended up in my palace in the first place. It was almost like she—or my own power, within the device—was pulled toward me.

“So how do I go somewhere I can’t visualize?”

“Maps help,” I say. “It’s easier to go places when you have a sense of the distance and relation to other locations. Now. About the short distances.”

I portal right behind her, close enough that I can smell her.

And her *scent* . . .

Her scent is just like her feelings—the most potent poison and also, maybe, a cure. I wonder if there is an antidote. I wonder if I would take one, even if there was.

I speak to take myself out of my own dangerous thoughts. “It requires far more control. And control is developed through practice.” Clearly, she’s been using this relic for years. Still, she hasn’t mastered it. I motion toward her device. “Try to portal across the room.”

She shifts her stance, and her eyes narrow in focus. She draws her puddle.

I follow her—

To dark volcanic sand.

To the same place I first portaled.

Suddenly, I’m thrust back centuries. I’m a child, clutching sand. Panic ripples around me—

It isn't my own. It's hers now too.

What are the chances of her portaling *here*, of all places? As if she could know? As if . . . we are even more similar than I thought.

She can't know. She can't know what she's doing to me.

"You overshot by a bit," I say, mind racing.

I portal her back.

Again, and again, we try, and she's a fast learner. Portaling short distances can be more difficult than traveling hundreds of miles. It requires focus. Skill.

Still, I can't get the beach out of my mind. We are similar . . . *so similar*. Though, at the same time, so vastly different.

Does she think of us as the same? Does she think our lives could ever intertwine at all?

She finally gets it right, after many attempts. Pride rises within me, again, as if her win is shared. As if her own flash of excitement and pleasure has elicited the same feelings within me.

Her happiness wilts away as I make some rude comment. And this, I think, is the truth of our situation.

She is a rose, blooming, and lovely.

I am a shadow, blocking out her sun.

No use in pretending anything different.

When we finish practicing portaling, we switch to swordplay. I should tell her to leave. *I should leave*. The gods know I have a thousand things to get done.

But I stay.

I teach her everything I can, starting with the most important lesson of all: I can kill her at any moment.

"Dead," I say, slicing the thinnest of lines across her chest. I slice against her stomach next, slashing only her clothing. "Dead."

My sword sweeps across her throat, and I have two alarming thoughts.

One. If I was wholly committed to saving my realm, I would kill her now. Have the augur drain her body of blood and use it to break the curse on the sword when I find it . . .

Two. I imagine something very different from the thin, almost imperceptible line across her throat.

I imagine a necklace.

"Very dead," I say, our mouths just a breath apart, and that's how I feel.

Too far gone. Hurtling us both toward a ruinous fate.

A low growl sounds in her chest and a fire ignites in mine. *Good*.

The hearteater is fighting back.

She advances again and again, skillfully, until she manages the smallest cut on my chest.

She grins, and then she makes a small gasping sound as her back hits the floor.

I'm over her in a moment. "Another lesson. Sometimes your opponent will let you get a hit in, as a distraction." My blade travels to the center of her breast. I tap once and say, "Dead."

Her annoyance and heat rise in equal measure. "I get it. You could kill me any number of ways, including with a sword. Teach me to be better."

I do as she says.

I teach her. I teach her everything I can, until the unlikely words, "Thank you," leave her mouth.

Thank you.

When was the last time someone thanked me? When was the last time I did anything for anyone outside of pure obligation?

This is pure obligation, I remind myself, though it doesn't feel that way.

The thieves in the den told us that whoever has the sword will be at a very specific event, happening soon, on my lands. "The celebration on Creetan's Crag is in three days," I tell her. "Before then, do me a favor, and don't die."

Please, I think, before I portal away.



THIS DAMNED DRESS

Gods help me.

I asked Astria to find a gown suitable for the event at Creetan's Crag. The celebration lasts hours, and my people are known for wearing intricate, unrestricted clothing. I haven't gone in decades. I barely remember what is considered appropriate. I know nothing about dresses, really. I never really paid attention to them, until her.

I could feel my general's curiosity, but she agreed without question.

Now, the evening of the event, I make a mental note to either go down on my knees and thank Astria . . .

Or kill her.

Isla is standing in front of me in hardly any fabric at all, in *my realm's color*, and for a moment, I can't breathe. The dark fabric barely covers her chest. A slit in the skirt shows the smooth skin of her thigh, almost up to its apex and I have to remind myself to blink while I stare at her.

She is stunning. Singularly, uniquely, stunning.

I want to show off her beauty to the entire world.

I want to kill anyone who glances in her direction.

I want to lock her in my room forever.

I want her in a possessive, tender way that frightens me.

Because I shouldn't want *anything* the way I want her.

The Creetan's Crag celebration is a sort of masquerade. We are disguised. She is wearing a mask, but those green eyes . . . I would know that color anywhere. Those eyes haunt my dreams.

They haunt my *life*.

"Do I look Nightshade?" she asks, sounding a bit panicked, as if she thinks the closeness of my study is because something is wrong.

Yes, I think.

The dress was a damned mistake.

She looks like my wife.

I banish the thought instantly. *Wife?* What am I thinking? First the thought of the necklace . . . now this?

Nightshade rulers don't take wives.

They certainly don't take *Wildling* wives.

Though here she is, looking like she would fit perfectly beside me.

Fit perfectly *in every sense*.

I fight to keep my voice from sounding strained as I say, "It'll do."

The sword can sense my powers. There is a chance it will be there tonight, so I'm not supposed to use them. As a precaution, I portal us to a location more than three miles from Creetan's Crag, and we walk the rest of the way. As we draw closer to the celebration, there's screaming—

My arm juts out in front of Isla, on instinct. My blood goes cold. Roaring fills my ears—

But, as my vision settles, I see that the woman who was screaming . . . is now smiling. She's embracing someone in front of her. A friend.

My pulse is still racing.

The screaming—

Isla is like a balm, bringing me back into the present. An anchor, pulling me down, firmly, into this moment.

She is oblivious to any of my inner torments, but her presence alone is enough to help me take a full breath. Instead of sinking into past traumas, I watch her. I watch her eyes widen, as she takes in the celebration, her wonder abating my worry. When she starts striding forward, through the crowd, I have no choice but to release the panic in my bones and walk with her.

Instruments peel through the daylight. I frown, the music needling in my brain. She *smiles*, though. Once, I would have enjoyed a celebration like this. I did occasionally on Lightlark, for that brief blip of time when I rid myself of any responsibility, and could actually *feel* every moment, without the weight of duty.

It's only when we walk through the crowd that I fully comprehend what a poor decision this was. Everyone is admiring her, and I have to resist the urge to kill every single person in this place for daring to look.

But how could they not?

How could I blame them?

From the first time I saw her, she engraved herself into my very soul, scarred

me far more than the wound from her blade ever could.

“How does it feel?” she whispers.

I glance over at her and have to physically stop myself from staring. “How does what feel?”

“Not being the scary, all-powerful Nightshade ruler anymore. In a crowd like this.” She finds the fact that I can’t use my powers amusing.

I give her a look. “I could still kill everyone here with my sword.” And I still might if they don’t take their eyes off what is *mine*.

“You couldn’t kill me.”

I look away, reminded by the fact that she will die. “Are you forgetting the results of our duel?”

“I didn’t hate you then as much as I do now. I’m sure that very fact would help me win.”

I resist the urge to use my powers, lest the sword be here, and I alert it to my presence. I do think that if I could read her emotions, I wouldn’t feel an ounce of hatred.

I know her expressions now. I can read her even without my powers, I realize.

I’ve never cared enough about a person to learn their expressions of emotions, what with my power. But I have learned her.

I have learned her.

“Is that so?” I ask, slightly amused.

“Absolutely,” she says, without any conviction whatsoever.

Interesting.

She asks me how we’re going to find the thief, and it is an ice-cold spring over my thoughts, a reminder that we are here to find the sword, *not* for amusement.

“We know he has a snake. How else are we supposed to find him?” She looks over at me, and gods, it feels good when she looks at me. For a moment, I feel worthy, perhaps, of her notice. “Do you know how to get information without cutting off hands?” She’s still not over what I did to the thief in the keep, apparently.

I do.

There’s a barmaid carrying drinks. I walk up to her in my mask, and she doesn’t know me. None of these people know their ruler walks among them. I ask her about the man with a snake. For some reason, this woman thinks it’s all right to touch me. Her hand is on my arm, and I resist the urge to shudder. I resist

the urge to forcibly remove it.

I don't like being touched by anyone, especially unexpectedly.

It only takes moments to get the information. And I can't wait to see the look on Isla's face when I show her that I can indeed get answers without use of my blade.

"I know where to find him."

Instead of being impressed, she looks annoyed. I wonder what in the world I could have already done to upset her.

Perhaps my presence alone is enough.

"Good. Lead the way."

We walk until we reach a presentation tent. There he is. Unmissable. A man with a snake draped across his chest.

He's watching a show. I barely glance at the performers, dancing with sheer fabrics. They don't hold my interest whatsoever.

"He seems preoccupied. How are we—"

That's when the idea forms.

Will she admit she doesn't have powers? Will she go through with this?

I glance at the dancers, then back at her. She seems to get my meaning immediately. I barely resist the urge to laugh as her expression turns from surprised to horrified.

"Absolutely *not*, you cursed demon—"

I shrug. "Then we'll find another way. I just thought, you being a temptress and all, you could use *your* powers, since I'm unable to use mine."

I'm baiting her.

Tell me the truth, I want to say. *Trust me*.

Another part of me battles against it. *Never trust me*.

Here, I think desperately. *Admit it. Admit you don't have powers, or prove me wrong, please prove me wrong. Tell me this thing I feel in my chest, this understanding that I actually have a heart and I want to give it to you, is a lie.*

I watch panic shift her features for just a moment, until she relaxes them into indifference. Her chin lifts in defiance.

She won't admit it. Of course she won't.

It makes me like her more. My hearteater is as stubborn and proud as I am.

She doesn't want to get on that stage. "Can't you just torture the information out of him?"

Now she wants me to resort to my blades? Interesting. "Of course I can, Hearteater. But one of the most infamous thieves, one of the only people who

know about the sword, turning up dead in such a violent fashion? It would be suspicious . . .” I shrug. “I suppose, if you are unable to actually *use* your powers —”

Her voice is outraged. “Of course I can.”

“It’s fine. We’ll find another—”

That gets her furious.

“No.” I see the determination on her face to prove me wrong. Her anger making her bold. She shoves her starstick at me. “Take this from me, and you’ll see my *other* Wildling curses in action,” she says.

She means eating my heart.

Doesn’t she know she already has it?

Still, I accept her starstick and watch as she makes her way through the dense crowd to the platform ahead, surprised she’s actually doing it. She disappears behind a curtain.

The moment she steps on the stage, in a skirt and hardly anything else, I am well and truly gone. Because she has no powers.

Yet she has bewitched me entirely.

She is not cursed to take the hearts of men, but I have given her mine willingly.

I’ve never held anything dearly, yet she holds my full attention.

She meets my gaze, and I feel powerless myself. Because I am defenseless against these feelings.

I’m not sure I’m breathing. She has taken my breath away, my soul, my heart, my focus, my *everything*—and she doesn’t even know it.

She’s my enemy, but she could be my savior too.

She could ruin me.

And I just might thank her for it.

Her eyes are fixed on mine. Her red lips part, and I want to feel that gasp on my skin. Her arms twirl above her head, she shifts her hips, she arches her back.

For a few moments the world doesn’t exist, my duty doesn’t exist, and I have the urge to use my powers to portal her away—sword be damned—to take her somewhere where I can worship her entirely.

Then, all at once, our gaze breaks. The man with the snake has tugged on her skirt.

I have never wanted to kill someone more in my life.

Before I can even take a single step forward, she’s gone.

I pace around, trying to give her time. Trying to give her space. Reminding

myself that even though all my thoughts belong to her, she does not belong to me.

Why does that make me want to level a mountain?

Finally, I can't take it any longer. She's been in there long enough. What if she's hurt? What if she needs me?

I stride through the tents and building, shredding fabric with my sword, ignoring the shouts that I'm not allowed back here. I pull apart curtain after curtain, until I find her, atop the thief, straddling his lap.

My blood runs cold.

"Don't kill him," she says, just as I realize I'm about to.

I glare.

"You look like you want to kill him."

Of course I do. Even if she has already incapacitated the fool. "I want to kill a lot of people," I tell her, trying to make her understand, trying to warn her away from me even as I simultaneously long to pull her closer. "I *kill* a lot of people."

It's true. I've killed thousands.

I'm a monster. And pain has only made me more powerful.

She deserves better than me. I wish I was strong enough to let her go. But even I have limits.

She swallows, and my eyes go right to her throat. Right to her pulse. It's racing, just like mine.

My self-control snaps. I stalk toward her, toward the wall she's now leaning against. She has no idea the danger I pose. She has no idea, because she wouldn't look so amused right now if she did. Her tone wouldn't be so mocking as she says, "I got the information. I know exactly where the sword is. Seems like I'm a perfectly good temptress. Tell me, nonpowerful Nightshade. Was I able to tempt you?"

I frown down at her. Does she have any idea who she's trying to get a rise out of? Does she have any idea how much danger she's in?

"Did I make you fall hopelessly in love with me?"

That's it.

That cursed *word*.

She gasps as I pin her against the wall. The sword isn't here, I know that now, so I release the vise I've been keeping on my powers.

Her emotions hit me like a battering ram. I'm suddenly tasting her want, her pleasure. It nearly brings me to my knees.

My hands grip her hips. My fingers trail up the sides of her stomach, thrumming up her ribs, until I reach her chest, and gods help me.

Every part of her is perfect.

Her desire flares, she wants this, *she wants me*.

She shouldn't want me.

Every movement, every word, inches us both toward that cliff, toward a fall that feels more and more perilous and inevitable with each passing day.

I know it, yet I keep taking step after step toward its edge.

Did I make you fall hopelessly in love with me?

"No," I say against her parted lips. "You are not something special to me. You are not something I want to love." I reach up to her cursed lips, and smear her red lipstick with my thumb, the same paint she wore that first day I met her, that same mouth that has haunted me every moment since. "You are something I want to ruin."

Then I do what I've been dying to since the moment I saw her.

I duck my head to her throat, and bite her.

I'm gentle—gentler than I want to be, but she gasps right into my ear, and the sound goes straight between my legs. I lick across her pulse, wanting to feel her pleasure on my tongue. Wanting to taste it.

Her desire becomes a wildfire surging around us, enough to burn the entire world to ashes, enough to make me want to burn with her. I've never been so hard in my life.

I turn her around in a single motion, gripping her hips and pulling her against me so she can feel exactly how much I want this. My fingers rake up her legs, drawing her skirt up, and curling around her upper thighs.

I can feel her trembling with need, can feel every single thing she wants from me.

My blinding desire is nearly enough for me to forget my duty, forget my plans, and give it all to her, right against this wall.

But she is my enemy. I am planning against her.

So I make a portal to her room and push her through it without me.

I'm so full of feelings, I portal myself right to the Algid, the coldest part of Nightshade, and throw myself into an icy pool.

It isn't enough.

The want is endless, *infinite*, and I can't unfeel it. I can't unfeel the desire cresting from her, her heated skin, her soft moan in my ear.

I can't unsee her dancing in those bits of fabric, I can't *unwant* her.

Somehow, like a curse, she has sewn herself into my very soul.

I groan, sinking deeper into the ice-cold water. It does nothing for my condition.

“Did I make you fall hopelessly in love with me?” she said.

Worse.

So much worse.

I’m obsessed with her.

I can’t go a minute without thinking of her. I can’t go a night without dreaming of her. I can’t go a day without missing her.

This obsession is maddening. It is debilitating.

Soaking wet and shivering, I return to my room, and give up all pretenses that this will go away on its own. With her on my mind, my want clings to me; my arousal refuses to diminish.

It’s all I can do not to follow her back to her room and show her exactly what she has done to me.

To make her want me the way I want her. Crave me the way I crave her.

But I can’t.

It is dangerous. It is treasonous.

I need to stay away from the temptress.



SNAPPED

I have been stabbed on countless occasions. I have been sliced with shadows like daggers. I have been skinned and beaten until I'm a whisper from death.

Nothing has been more torturous than having to stay away from her since that night. I have been without her for a full, agonizing month.

She is a drug.

She is an addiction.

She is the bane of my existence.

She is my undoing.

"She's pretty," Astria says, after the council meeting.

I scowl at her familiarity. I don't care who she's talking about. I don't deign to respond.

"The girl in your room just now. She's pretty. Like, kind of infuriatingly pretty, you know?"

I go still.

Infuriatingly pretty. There is only one person who could possibly earn that distinction. Very slowly, I turn toward her.

"I should have knocked. I've just—I've never seen you bring anyone in there."

Because I never have. Until her.

I portal to my room in a moment.

She's not here, but I can taste her lingering emotion.

Worry. Worry for who?

Me?

Of course. I've been avoiding her for a month, preoccupied with fending off the dreks, and, if I'm honest with myself, avoiding the certainty of her fate when

we find the sword. She must be worried I've been working without her, that I've cut her out of my plan.

There's another emotion . . .

Jealousy.

Jealous of what?

It almost makes me laugh.

If she could see my mind for even a moment, she would understand that she owns it, wholly and completely.

Now, it's my turn to be worried. Though it has nothing to do with the sword.

She went to my room. Is she okay? Is she hurt? A thousand worries race through my mind, and most of all, the fact that *I care*. The fact that I am in danger of leveling this entire castle, because she is gone.

I consider portaling to her room, using my shadows to conceal my presence, but no.

I have a feeling if I go there, if I see her again right now, I'll never leave her alone. I won't do what needs to be done.

I tense as pain courses through me.

The scar. It's broken open. I hesitate for a moment, weighing going to her room . . . or going to my people.

Instantly, I'm filled with shame. My people . . . the innocents . . . those defenseless subjects in my realm, they are my duty. She doesn't truly care about me . . . she's not my responsibility.

I portal to the dreks. They're everywhere. Dozens of my warriors are dead. How many were doomed by my momentary hesitation?

She is making me reckless.

Fighting the beasts usually relieves my tension, but this time, it does nothing to release my fury, my frustration. Hours pass before I return to my room. Everything hurts. My muscles ache from all the power I had to give. All the creatures I killed. My armor weighs heavily on me. I'm tired. So very tired, and not just physically.

I take a step toward my bathroom, still in my armor—

And a portal forms.

Heart eater. I tense, waiting for her to appear. Anticipation filling me.

Then someone falls through . . . and it's not her.

The man's neck is in my fist in a moment. There is only one way he could have gotten here.

"Where is she?" I demand, my voice swallowing the world. A roaring sound

fills my ears.

He doesn't answer, and I don't need him. Still clutching his neck, I drag him along as I follow the path of the portal, and there—

There she is.

Surrounded by a dozen men. On the floor.

Bleeding.

I crack the neck in my fist, discarding the body onto the ground. White-hot fury blinds my vision, but my voice is smooth with the focus I have mastered on endless battlefields as I say, "Which one?"

She doesn't answer. Her green eyes are wide. I can taste her fear all over the room. Her *pain*.

"Isla." My voice is lethally calm as I say, "Which one did this to you?"

She doesn't answer fast enough, and I realize I don't care. She's hurt. Everyone in this room is complicit.

"Fine. All of them, then."

And I break all their necks at once.

They collapse to the floor. But my eyes don't leave hers. I walk toward her, gripped by fury and fear. This dark room is covered in shattered glass. We're in the market, in one of the abandoned floors of one of the surrounding buildings.

The bastards cut her with shadow-blades. I know how badly they hurt. She felt that excruciating pain . . . they had *inflicted* it on her. She could have *died*.

It is my fault for leaving her for so long.

And hers.

"You idiot," I say, before gently taking her in my arms, where she belongs. I portal us away.

My anger is blinding. It emanates from my very marrow. I wish I had kept them alive. I wish I could skin them and rip out their throats with my teeth.

I place her on a couch in my quarters—a new piece of furniture—as gently as possible. "I'll be back."

I rip into the castle storage, making a few warriors jump, but I don't give a damn. I fill my arms with bandages, ointments, everything I can find, and portal back to her.

Her cheek is bleeding. Shards of glass litter her delicate palms. I again regret breaking their necks. They should have felt every second of their long, slow deaths.

How did I let this happen? I thought by staying away, I was keeping her safe . . . but instead, I put her in danger. She's clearly determined to find the sword.

Our agreement is not one-sided. She needs our deal to work just as much as I do. She's a ruler acting for the good of her realm as well.

She is going to get herself killed.

I sit next to her and begin with her shoulders. She shivers and bucks as I tend to her wounds, but I pin her down with one of my hands.

"These are Moonling," I say, motioning toward the bandages. "They're good at healing cuts."

"Do you . . . trade with them?"

I ignore her, too focused on her injuries.

"Let me see your hands."

She tries to hide them, but *nice try*. I snatch one, cursing when I see the damage up close.

Her beautiful hands . . . they have been shredded. Some fragments glimmer from where they're embedded in her skin. They need to be removed.

"This will take a while," I say. I need a better angle. I need to make sure she won't move and I don't do more harm than good.

In a moment, she's in my arms, and then on my lap.

"What are you doing?" she asks, breathless in my grip.

I have *no idea what I'm doing*, clearly, because I put her on my lap, and now, she's squirming right against me.

"You need to keep still," I grind out. "Or the glass is going to move while I'm working and make removing all of it almost impossible." I offer an alternative. "I can make you pass out, if you prefer." That way, I could lay her down. I wouldn't have to hold her still. She wouldn't be on top of me.

She bristles. "I most certainly do not prefer that."

I wait for her approval. I won't do anything she doesn't want. Finally, she says, through her teeth, with a cutting glare, "Fine."

As if I'm not here, healing her, *helping* her. Even now, she looks at me as her enemy. I suppose I deserve it, but it doesn't erase the sting. My eyes narrow. "So charming," I say, before snaking my arms around her, pinning her in place.

I swallow down my body's response to this position. It's made harder by the fact that I can taste her desire in the air, sweet and heady. Gently, I open her fingers. I pluck the first piece of glass from her hand, and she bucks against me. I keep her in place.

She gasps.

I rest my chin atop her head and look at my work. "There are about a dozen more on this hand alone, so I would find a way around the pain."

She looks up at me, and I'm momentarily blinded by green.

How I missed that green.

How I missed *her*.

She missed me too. I can *feel* it.

I both hate that and *crave* it.

"Where were you?" she demands.

Guilt stabs me through the chest. I tense my jaw. Exactly one month. Had she been counting the days, like I had?

"I was preoccupied," I finally admit.

It's true. The scar has widened. I've had to visit it nearly every day.

But it's not the only reason I stayed away. No, that has more to do with the fact that I knew if we kept seeing each other, I would do something stupid, like put my realm at risk.

She's proving to be more a danger to my realm than the dreks are. She's my enemy. I should hate her.

I hate myself for how much I don't hate her.

She scoffs. "What could be more important than finding the sword?"

"Not more important, simply more . . . pressing."

She's angry. I can feel it, flames against my skin. "You could have told me. You could have visited at least once . . . allowed me to tell you what I learned."

If only she knew how every night I had to force myself to stay in bed. To not visit her.

I raise a brow at her. "Miss me, Hearteater?"

Admit it. Tell me how you feel. Rip this barrier between us once and for all. Let me lose my mind.

She doesn't. She huffs. "No. Every time I see you, I get injured or insulted."

I frown. She's right, isn't she?

I focus on her hand and removing the glass. I shake my head. "What were you thinking?"

She sighs, and finally, she tells me the truth. "I was thinking I could find the sword without you."

Then she does something else unexpected. She leans back against my chest, and it is far too pleasurable, far too familiar, to have her in my arms. I want to hold her tight and never let go. I want to run my lips along her jaw and down her neck. I want to bite her again.

If she had any idea the thoughts I have about her, she would be repulsed. She would never want to see me again.

Perhaps I should tell her.

“I went looking for you before,” she says, her voice a rasp, in between bouts of pain.

“I know,” I admit.

“Who was that woman?”

There it is, again. The jealousy.

Of Astria?

I almost laugh.

If only she knew who the general was, perhaps she wouldn’t feel so much animosity. For a moment, I want to tell her.

But I cannot.

“She’s my general,” is all I say, some part of me shriveling at the fact that I am keeping so much from her. I have no choice.

“Does she suspect . . . ?”

“I told her you were someone I found to bed from another realm.”

That seems to not only anger her . . . but hurt her. Why?

She’s silent for a moment, and I have the urge to ask her, to make it better, to know her. But I don’t say a word, and she finally says, “I know where the sword is.”

Of course. I didn’t even ask what the thief told her, because in the moment, I was so distracted by my desire. Part of me knows that on some level, I was also trying to buy time, find another way to end the dreks. Now, a month later, there’s nothing—only the fate that seems increasingly inevitable. And the betrayal that might kill us both.

The sword should have been my first question, my main concern. “Where?”

“The Caves of Irida.”

Interesting. “I know it.”

She peers up at me, surprised, as if she was expecting me to sound happier.

If anything, this development fills me with dread.

It is not lost on me that I should not care so much about a few shards of glass in her palms while simultaneously marching her toward her death.

But I do. I do care.

I get every single shard of glass, then lean down, my mouth at her ear. “This is going to hurt,” I whisper, before I pour alcohol on her injuries.

I anticipate her scream, and press my hand over her lips, smothering it just in time. She writhes against me, squirming at the pain, and I go still. My every nerve flickers on. I clear my throat and pin her hip down with one hand, holding

her still.

“If you can help it,” I force out, “please stop that.”

She freezes.

She can feel me.

I can feel her, on every aching inch of me.

I finish my task quickly, then lift her off my lap, desperate to be both on top of her and far away from her.

“Tomorrow,” she says.

That’s when we’ll meet next, to go to the thief’s cave, and finally find the sword.

“There’s one problem,” she continues.

I can think of several, but I just say, “Problem?”

She nods. “There’s a monster, guarding the cave.”

My eyes narrow. “What kind of monster?”



ARROWS

Of course, it's a fucking dragon.

"It's asleep," Isla says. I feel her fear warring with fascination. She's not sure if she should be afraid.

She should be *very* afraid.

Dragons are cruel creatures that rely heavily on their training. If the thief trained this one to be ruthless, then it will kill us both in a single scalding breath.

She's right though. For now, it's asleep.

Isla takes a step toward it, and I have the urge to haul her back, to take her away from this place.

Then I see what she's stepping toward.

This time, her emotions don't bleed into mine. They don't influence mine. Because she is hopeful. She is *excited*.

"No," she breathes. "That can't be—no, that's too easy, it can't—"

"It's the sword."

We both see it, perched atop a pile of other stolen relics. Glimmering. Two blades, intertwined, curved around each other. It is undeniably the one we've been looking for.

I should feel bone-melting relief, knowing that the key to stopping the dreks and saving my people is just a few feet away.

But all I feel is dread.

Isla has no idea. I feel her excitement, her joy, and it makes me want to stab myself with my own blade.

"We just have to sneak past it without waking it," she says, as if it's easy. "That's it."

I have the sudden urge to dissuade her. To abandon this plan completely. "And if it does wake, it will char us alive."

It isn't worth the risk, I tell myself.

I can't use my powers this close to the sword. But getting past the dragon without them could be impossible.

She steps forward, and I have no other choice but to follow her, my heart in my throat, as she inches toward impending danger.

The arrow comes out of nowhere.

I'm on her in a moment. It is instinct to throw myself between her and any danger. I pin her to the ground as arrows skewer my body, one by one, cutting through skin and muscle, making me lurch forward.

She looks up at me, her eyes widening in fear. In *horror*. She opens her mouth to scream, but my hand smothers her lips before she can wake the dragon.

Our eyes locked, I barely feel the pain as arrow after arrow pierces my back, all the way through my chest, nearly deep enough to reach hers.

She looks so confused. Like she's wondering why I would throw myself in front of her without question.

As I'm pierced through a dozen times, all I can think is, *I would gladly be your shield. I would gladly be your sword.*

I am your enemy . . . but I am also yours.

The arrows stop. She's panting, her chest almost meeting mine with each breath—almost meeting the arrow tips. She's studying my wounds.

My blood is puddling onto her. There's a single arrow embedded in her leg. I curse myself for not being fast enough to take all of them.

I should never have let her go first.

She reaches up to drag my hand from her lips. "Portal away," she whispers, voice trembling.

She is afraid for me. She thinks I might die. She's choosing *me* over the sword . . .

No. I shake my head, then push to my knees. I lift her into my arms and stand.

Twelve arrows through my chest, I carry her out of the cave.

The pain is nothing compared to the fear of seeing that first arrow hurtling toward her. My heart lives outside my body now, it seems.

It is so *fragile*.

We make it far enough away from the sword for me to portal us back into my room. Finally, when she's safe, the pain and blood loss catch up with me. I collapse.

I faintly hear her scurrying around. Opening drawers. Closing them. I feel

her panic, sharp and sour, flooding the room.

I manage to open my eyes and see her kneeling next to me, her worry apparent. "I'm going to—"

"Do it."

She snaps the first arrow, and I curse. Pain might be useful, but it is *annoying*.

She skillfully slides the arrow out, then splashes some of her healing solution she's portaled in on me, and I bellow. I want to tell her not to waste it on me. I'll be fine. It's *her* I'm worried about.

"Well, you have about another dozen of those, so you better toughen up," she says, partially echoing my words from before. "Or did you forget that pain is *useful*?"

My anger is a distraction from the pain, and perhaps that was her intention.

"Don't mock me," I say, baring my teeth at her. "It's true."

She doesn't know how true it is.

She rolls her eyes, and I want to throttle her. I want to kiss her.

"I'll tell you a secret, Hearteater," I say, flinching as she removes another arrow. "Pain makes you powerful."

She looks disgusted. Perhaps she should. "It does not. Though, I suppose that's a very Nightshade thing to believe."

She thinks I'm lying. She doesn't believe me.

"No," I say, half amused, half horrified that she is a ruler and doesn't know this. "It isn't an ideal. It's truth. Emotion feeds power. And pain is the strongest."

She frowns. I feel her sadness, heavy like rain around me. Then, doubt.

"It is true," I tell her. I know from experience.

I should have anticipated her next question. It would be the next one I would ask as well.

"Have you . . . have you ever *purposefully* . . ."

"Yes," I admit. "I have purposefully caused myself pain to access deeper levels of power. That was a long time ago. Now, it isn't so necessary." A lie. I might not have physically hurt myself in a while to access power, but I have certainly accessed emotional pain. I'm not proud of it. I've done things I'm not proud of, for the good of my line and my realm. I will *continue* to do things I'm not proud of for those same reasons. "And . . . there are many different kinds of pain."

Her disbelief doesn't weaken.

"Still doubting me," I observe. I meet her eyes, forgetting the pain. She needs

to understand. For some reason, I *need her* to understand. “How, Hearteater, do you think I am so powerful?”

My father’s strength paled in comparison to mine, even before the curses. He could cause himself physical harm without issue . . . but it was a temporary pain. It’s impossible to feel emotional pain when you don’t care about anything. When you don’t feel *at all*.

She stares at me like she sees me, perhaps for the first time. She doesn’t flinch.

She doesn’t recoil.

She pulls out another arrow, and I roar.

She removes the rest, and I curse over and over. I wouldn’t normally do this without draining a bottle of alcohol, but I want to remember it. Even with the pain . . . she is here, watching me, like she *cares*. However short-lived her care is, I want to savor it. I want to remember it long after she is gone.

She helps me remove my shirt, wincing when she sees my body. It makes me laugh.

How long has it been since I’ve *laughed*?

“I’ve never had a woman wince at my naked body,” I say.

She rolls her eyes. “It must be exhausting carrying around such a magnificent ego.”

That makes me laugh more.

She’s insulted me and I love it. Along with a good amount of blood, I must have also lost my mind in that cave. She applies more healing salve.

“Your leg,” I croak out.

She looks surprised by my concern. “It is already bandaged,” she says, keeping her attention trained on my wounds. She tends to them gingerly, expertly, gently. No one has ever been gentle with me. No one has ever cared this much.

She looks up then. My expression must shock her. “What?” she asks.

“I just think it’s ironic that the hearteater who stabbed me through the chest is now tending to my injuries.”

She gives me a withering look that makes my heart race. “*I think it’s ironic that the demon who claims he has no shred of humanity used himself as a blockade against an army of arrows to save me.*”

I did, didn’t I?

And I would do it again without question.

Twelve arrows are nothing, I think.

Nothing, compared to the anguish of senselessly caring so much for my enemy.

When she's done healing me, she shakes her head, frustrated. "Seriously. Why did you *do* that?"

It's a dangerous question, because I did it without a moment's hesitation. It was instinct, to stand between her and danger.

How ironic that her savior is putting her in the path of the greatest danger of all.

By now, I've lost a lot of blood. I can barely keep my head upright as I say, "That's an interesting way of saying thank you."

She begins to adjust my bandages, tightening them. Her hands are on my chest, and they are a balm against the ache. Chocolate, making everything sweeter. Keeping me tethered to consciousness. Before she can remove her hands, mine pin hers there.

"The cold, Heart eater," I say. Her hands are cold, from the weather outside. My voice sounds far away. My head falls back. "It helps the pain."

She doesn't move, and I am grateful.

I hate being touched.

Except for when she touches me.

She removes her fingers far too soon. The absence of her touch is almost as painful as the injuries themselves.

And in that moment, I know I would take a thousand arrows for her, if it meant I'd feel her hands on me again.

We have tried every way to get inside the cave, and my purpose has shifted. I'm no longer desperate to get the sword.

I'm desperate to spend time with her. I'm desperate to protect her, to be her shield, to be whatever she needs from me, as long as she will have me.

Because around her . . . I *feel*, for the first time in centuries. I feel *everything*.

And, for the first time, it doesn't seem like a bad thing.

We just finished our latest attempt at capturing the sword, and I have run a bath filled with medicine from the Moonling newland. It clouds the water. She glances at it from where she stands in my bedroom.

She's covered in blood from wounds I couldn't prevent.

"Stay," I say, the word falling from my lips.

She looks surprised. "Stay?"

I've taken off my shirt. She's studying my body. "The bath is big enough for

two. It will help you not scar.”

She just stares at me.

“I’ll face the other direction.” It will be torture. But I want to heal her more than I want her.

“I can’t. Remember?”

She’s talking about the day I made her agree never to return to my bathroom, as a result of our duel. A foolish command.

“I take back my win. You’re welcome in every part of my palace.” It is treasonous, but I mean it. She fits so well here that the alternative seems strange.

I absorb her shock. Then a startling combination of defiance and curiosity.

Curiosity wins. She steps into the bathroom.

True to my word, I turn around. I remove my pants. I step into the bath. I hold myself very still, even though I can hear her clothing slipping off her body. She makes a small murmur of pain, and my growing desire is quickly replaced by concern.

She groans in relief as she enters the bath, and I’m aware the sound will likely live in the back of my head forever. I force myself to remain still, my knuckles white as I grip the sides of the tub.

“You can turn around,” she says. I don’t move an inch, though my entire body is thrumming with the urge to do exactly that. “The water . . . it covers everything.”

I allow a moment to pass. Two. Then, victim to my own diminishing self-control, I turn around.

Beautiful. Just, beautiful.

Her hair falls in waves down her chest, and though her shoulders and collarbones are covered in blood, she is nothing short of extraordinary.

But she is far more than just her beauty.

She has fought side by side with me in the cave. She has healed me. She has challenged me, mocked me, and *cared* for me.

We stare at each other until the water clears, and Isla tugs her knees to her chest. Her cheeks flush from heat or the self-consciousness she radiates.

I want to tell her that she never has to cover herself, not around me. Not ever. But I’m silent.

I wish she had my power. I wish she knew instinctively how I felt. I wish all this uncertainty between us could clear like the water.

She looks away, and I step out of the tub before my heart loses its battle with reason.



THE BALL

Everyone is scrambling to set up the ball.

It seems counterintuitive to have a celebration when your realm is ripping at the seams. But that's exactly why we're having it.

The people are getting antsy. Though there have been a few weeks of relative peace near the scar, thousands have been killed in the last few decades—hundreds in the last year alone.

They need a distraction. I would rather be anywhere else.

I would rather be with *her*.

I tasted her disappointment when I told her that tonight I'm occupied. It only sharpened when she had asked if she could attend the ball and I forbade it.

The idea of her—my beautiful, perfect hearteater—in the center of the depravity so common at these functions . . .

The idea of anyone admiring her . . .

This possessiveness over a woman I do not possess at all grips me in my bones.

The ball itself is tedious. I sit on my throne, watching, but not truly seeing. In my mind I'm with a hearteater with stained lips and green eyes that see far beyond my armor.

Women approach, trying to get close to me—each desiring to be the one to tempt me—but my shadows flare, making them scatter.

I don't like to be touched.

I find myself not only bored, but restless. I count the minutes until sunrise when I can finally leave my throne. A swirl of emotions surrounds me: Lust. Excitement. Delirium. They bleed together into a meaningless sea of nothing.

In the haze, I find myself craving her red shade of emotions, the way they cut into me like knives, the way I can taste them on my tongue. Their claws sinking

into me, bringing me out of my own shadows in a way no one else has even tried.

Before her, I was sure my heart had hardened forever. I thought myself incapable of the emotions I often sensed in others.

Now, I know my own were lying dormant. Waiting centuries for someone worthy.

Someone I am not worthy of, and want anyway.

My desperation is so palpable that my mind manages to summon her, an illusion. She's suddenly there, in the middle of the crowd, a single blooming rose in a field of ash.

But I don't just see her. I can feel her.

Impossible.

I sit up straight. It isn't an illusion.

I know her.

I could never not know her.

The crowd parts.

And there she is. Radiance embodied. The world dims around her. Nothing can come close to her brilliance.

Everyone is watching her.

Of course they are.

In every room, in every realm, in every universe, she is its center.

I realize all at once: She defied me. I should have expected it. Normally, I might be amused, but here, she is in danger. I'm struck by a brief flash of fury. She has no comprehension of the risk she's taken.

I'm angry for other reasons too.

As if recognizing my anger, she smiles and blows me a taunting kiss.

I stand immediately, ready to portal her away. I hardly care that my subjects have turned to watch me; I don't care about anything at all except for her and the poor excuse for a dress she's wearing—just shreds of almost sheer black fabric. Not out of place at a ball like this, but on her, it's ruinous.

In response, she disappears back into the crowd, which converges around her as their merriment continues.

As if she could hide from me.

Yet—

She is not mine, I remind myself. She is a ruler of realm. If I take her away now—revoke her freedom—she will hate me more than she already does.

Teeth clenched and jaw locked tightly, I sit back down.

I manage to glimpse her dancing alone, and strain to follow her movements through the packed room. I command everyone in this realm, but it is she who commands my full attention. Always.

Then, a man offers his hand in invitation.

I resist the urge to use the nearest shadow to cut it clean off.

The hearteater meets my gaze. I narrow my eyes, *daring*, just *daring* her to say yes.

She smiles at me. Then, at the man. She accepts, placing her hand in his.

I barely leash the urge to turn the entire room to ash.

My knuckles whiten as I grip my throne with iron fists while watching her dance with someone else.

It should be me. *I* should have asked her.

Instead, I'm here, imagining all the ways I'm going to kill that man.

He's dead.

His hand grips her waist, and yes, I will be cutting it off. He smiles and his teeth flash. I will be yanking those out, one by one, taking great satisfaction in mutilating his face.

How dare he touch her.

How dare she allow it.

She turns, holding my gaze as she dances, her body pressed against his, and I wonder if she realizes she has sealed this man's fate.

I wonder if she knows I've never been jealous in my life until now. No one has ever had anything I've wanted until now.

I've never wanted anything, I realize. Not really.

Not until her.

There's no getting rid of it. I've tried. This want, this desire for her, is rooted into my very soul.

Just when I think the pain in my chest can't get any worse, the man draws her away. Together they slip through the crowded ballroom toward the hall beyond.

I reach for her emotions from across the room; I feel around for fear or hesitancy.

But I don't feel either. Quite the opposite.

She *wants* to go with him. She *wants* him to touch her.

My regret burns through me like nothing I've felt in ages.

It should be me. I should have invited her to the ball. I should have given her a room of dresses to choose from. I should be leading her to the hall, ready to

offer her everything she wants.

Because then she might have wanted me.

This is her choice. I must respect it, as hard as it is. I resolve myself to sit with my pain, until I catch a glimpse of her face just as she leaves the room.

Her cheeks are red. Redder than I've ever seen them.

In an instant, I recall her accepting a goblet the man offered. It all makes sense. I should have suspected it—

Fury coils in my bones. I'm in the hallway in seconds. I find her instantly, pressed against the wall, the man's mouth on her neck, his hand traveling down her stomach.

Her emotions. They hit me at once, as always.

And she feels . . . nothing. Nothing like when she's with me.

My sword is through his stomach in a moment. It isn't honorable, stabbing him through his back, but given his actions, this man deserves nothing, least of all her.

He sinks to the floor, and then there she is, eyes wide, staring at me.

"Don't worry, Heart eater. He's not dead. I will make sure of it." I step closer, and lean down, so I can say it right above her lips, "Because I'm going to bring him to the brink of death a thousand times before I will finally allow him the mercy of dying."

She stares back at me in shock. "Because . . . he kissed me?" she asks, chest heaving.

Yes.

Because he kissed you.

Because he *touched* you.

Because first, he drugged you.

That's not what I say, though. I don't want to scare her. I don't want her to know that if she somehow survives my plan, for the rest of her life I will kill anyone who wrongs her.

"No, Heart eater," I tell her. "Because he poisoned you."

She's confused. "What?"

"The drink he gave you. A few minutes more and you would find yourself paralyzed, a motionless vessel for his pleasure."

At that, I can taste her fear. True fear.

I've never tasted it before, from her.

Which means she's never truly been afraid of me.

"How do you know?"

“I didn’t until you were leaving. Your face and chest are flushed scarlet. It’s a sign.” I want to kill anyone who noticed and didn’t help her. I want to kill everyone who made this poison and allowed it to be distributed. I *will* kill everyone who had a hand in this. Starting with this man. I tilt my head at her. “You feel it, don’t you?” In my hand, a vial appears, portaled in from the castle supply. An antidote. I hand it to her, and she swallows it down. Relief slides through me when her flush fades away. “Better?”

She nods.

Good.

Now that she’s better, my anger rises to the surface, threatening to overwhelm me. I look down at her dress, this dress that will haunt my dreams, the fabric wrinkled where she let the vile man touch her. The pathetic excuse for a man now bleeding out at our feet.

“Heart eater,” I say, my voice mocking, as I succumb to my hurt. “Who knew you were so desperate for pleasure?”

She glares at me, speechless.

“If you wanted someone to bed you so badly, all you had to do was ask.”

I regret it as soon as I say it. I’m sickened by the petty jealousy I feel in the wake of her brush with real danger. And yet, I can’t stop myself. I’m too lost in a roiling tempest of fury at the man at my feet, the world, anyone who ever tried to *hurt her*.

Her eyes narrow. She takes a shaking breath. “I would rather die than have you touch me, demon,” she says.

Her words are brutal yet deserved. Her feelings, though . . . they say something different. I frown. “Is that so?” I dip my head lower, bringing my mouth closer to hers. “All right. I will not touch you again until you ask me to.”

She shivers beneath me. I can practically taste her growing desire.

“I won’t touch you again until you *beg me to*.”

Her breath hitches. “That will never happen,” she tells me. “I hate you.”

I wait to feel that hatred. It never arrives. We can pretend, though. She can pretend to hate me as long as she likes. She can scream how much she hates me as I worship her, every night. I don’t mind. As long as all her feelings—her hatred, her desire, her love—are mine.

“You can hate me, Heart eater, and still want me in your bed.”

She laughs, right in my face. “In your dreams, demon.”

How does she know? “All the best ones.” I study her dress, which clings to every inch of her. I never thought I would envy a sheet of silk. I hesitate for a

split second. Then, “We do such depraved things, in my dreams.”

In my dreams, she doesn’t leave my room for days. In my dreams, her dresses are in tatters, and she doesn’t let us sleep. In my dreams, she is tangled in my sheets.

In my dreams, and only then, she is mine to keep. Forever.

And I am hers.

Isla opens her mouth. Closes it.

I lean even closer, hoping she closes the gap between us, hoping she kisses me. But she doesn’t.

Not yet.

And that’s fine. I can wait.

“When you finally do beg me to touch you—and you will—you won’t want anyone else to touch you ever again, Hearteater,” I say. “Late at night, you will think of me touching you. With my hands. My mouth.”

I think of all the dreams I’ve had of her, the ones I wish I could make real. There is no holding back; not anymore.

“And you will dream of me too.”

I step away, then reach down and grab the man who dared touch her, portaling him with me down to the dungeons.

As I rip him limb from limb—as I cut off the hands that dared touch her, as I rip off his lips with my shadows, as I listen to his screams and begs for mercy—all I think of is her.



FOOL FOR HER

Maybe I don't need the sword.

That's what I think days later, when I've finally gotten the man's blood out from under my fingernails, because my shadows weren't enough to satisfy me; I had to tear him apart with my bare hands.

Maybe Isla doesn't need to die.

Perhaps I can be the solution. Maybe I alone am powerful enough to stop this. End it once and for all, with all this limitless power I never wanted.

That's how I find myself at the scar with a dozen of my strongest warriors.

The air is filled with shrieks—it's been breached again. I watch one of my men get torn in half right in front of me.

My shadows unleash, as I think of her.

Green eyes. One day, perhaps, looking at me with something other than hatred.

Green eyes . . . beneath me.

Green eyes . . . across an altar.

Green eyes . . . in a child.

The thought nearly steals my breath, and I roar as shadows race from my fingers in waves. One after the other, the dreks in the sky turn to ash, falling around us, but I don't stop.

I kill them all. I kill anything that can stand between her and me. Anything that can bring her harm.

I kill and kill and kill until my shadows run dry.

Because that is what I've always been best at. *Killing.*

I wonder if I can ever be good at anything else.

I wonder if I can be *good to her.*

And that is when a drek shreds my chest with its talons.

I roar and turn it to cinders. Turn everything to cinders.

A distraction. I was *distracted*, thinking of her, of *us*, of a future we could never have, and I let my guard down. Teeth gritted in pain, I portal back to my room, and *I'm bleeding*. I'm alone.

Darkness crawls beneath my skin, the drek poison seeping into my blood. My heart begins to slow. My breaths start to hurt.

I don't know if my power is enough to heal this, to overcome this. When my eyes close, I might wake up, hours later, soaked in sweat, gasping. Or . . . I might not wake up at all.

I always imagined dying alone. Me, bleeding out next to the scar, a thousand dreks blocking out the sun, thrusting me into an endless darkness.

But right now . . . I don't want to be alone.

I want to die looking into piercing green eyes.

I portal to her room before I can change my mind, landing roughly, my power nearly giving out.

"Heart eater," I croak.

She's next to me in an instant, and I can feel her concern. It's *real*.

"Grim?"

"I believe you'll be pleased," I say, barely managing to get the words out. My blood is everywhere, staining her floor.

She doesn't seem to care. "Will I?"

"Something got very close to killing me."

She doesn't feel pleased at all. No, she feels panicked, and anxious, and afraid. "Oh? That is wonderful news," she whispers, playing along. Neither of us capable of admitting the truth.

I nod. "It is with great regret that I share it did not succeed."

She shrugs. Her eyes slip down my considerable injuries. "Not yet, at least."

I bark out a laugh, surprising myself. Then I groan, my chest aflame.

Her arms are around me and yes, I think I could die now, happily. She starts unbuttoning my shirt, and I wish she was doing it for any reason other than to get a better look at my wounds.

Shock.

"What is this?" she asks.

I know what she's seeing. Dark veins and marks, the ruinous extent of my injuries. Part of the reason the dreks have been impossible to defeat.

"The elixir, Heart eater," I say, having a thought. "The Wildling flower."

Ever since she's used it on me and I saw its potency, I've wondered if it might work on these wounds.

Her face is going blurry. The room is spinning. I can feel myself losing my grip on consciousness.

This Wildling ruler who hates me is the only thing standing between life and death.

As I succumb to darkness, I wonder which she'll choose.

I dream of her again, just like every night.

In this dream, I take her to the winter palace. I walk her through the same halls I explored as a child.

I smother the bad memories with new ones, with better ones.

In my dreams, I wake up next to her every morning. *Isla*.

In my dreams, I run my lips across her pulse and feel it race for me. I bury my hands in her hair, touching each strand, and she lets me.

In my dreams, she lets me fall asleep in the crook of her shoulder. She lets me wake her up in the middle of the night, to bury myself in her.

She lets me watch her, all the time.

When she sees me staring, she doesn't glare; she *smiles*. She laughs.

In my dreams, it's just her and me and the little life we've created, and I am finally, thoroughly, infinitely, and wholly happy.

I don't want to wake up.

No, my dreams were far better than reality. But when I open my eyes and see her green ones looking back, my disappointment withers away.

What a way to wake up.

She saved me.

She saved me.

She could have been rid of me.

I suppose she needs me, to find the sword. To have me as an ally in the Centennial. To save her people.

But no, the relief I feel from her when I open my eyes . . . it can't just be for her realm. I hope it's not.

I watch her warily. I don't know what's a dream and what's reality.

I don't know if my read of her feelings is just hope. I don't know how she could truly care for me, when no one else ever really has. When I have given her

more than one reason not to.

“You healed me,” I finally say.

She didn’t just heal me . . . she took my shirt off. She portaled me to my bedroom. She put sheets over me.

“It isn’t the first time,” she says hurriedly, as if embarrassed. “And . . . you have healed me too.”

It’s true. We’ve healed each other.

“Thank you,” I say, and I wonder if it’s the first time I’ve ever said it. Then, I lean forward and do something tender, something I’ve wanted to do for a while.

My lips brush against her forehead. A quick kiss.

It lasts half a second, yet my lips are tingling. My skin prickles everywhere. My heart is racing.

Our feelings have bled together. I can’t parse out which ones are hers or mine.

Shock. I feel it like a light sting on my tongue.

Then, concern. Confusion.

Finally, anger.

Anger.

“What happened?” she demands. Her eyes narrow. “Are you—are you looking for the sword without me?”

Ah. She thinks the wounds are from the dragon.

“I’m not.”

Of course, she doesn’t believe me.

I give her a look. “I am the ruler of Nightshade. Do you truly believe working with you is the only opportunity I have to be wounded?”

“Yes,” she says. “Because only in the cave can you not use your powers. With them, you just do . . .” She makes wild, dramatic motions in front of her.

I frown. “I do *what*?”

“You know what I mean,” she says, though I absolutely do not. I’ve never made motions like that in my life. “Shadows. Death. Stuff. You know.”

Shadows. Death. Stuff. I’m so glad that’s what the woman I can’t get out of my head thinks of my powers.

I have the sharp urge to show her everything I’m capable of, if only to see if I might finally impress her.

Instead I sigh. “Well, the creatures I face often are mostly immune to *shadows. Death. Stuff.*”

There it is. I’ve told her yet another thing I should keep secret.

“Grim,” she says, and the way it feels to hear her say my name is indescribable. I want her to say it again. I want her to gasp it. I want her to think of me as much as I think of her. “What is going on in Nightshade? What could possibly be strong enough to wound you like this? Why do you need the sword?”

All valid questions. I can see her concern. I study her, trying to find some indication her feelings are false. I find none.

“It is treason if I tell you. It is one of the greatest secrets of our realm.” No one knows how weak and vulnerable Nightshade is right now. How close to ruin.

She just looks at me, and whispers, “Everything about this is treasonous.”

She’s right.

Us, in my bed.

Me, thinking about her in my bed, almost every waking moment.

Her . . . caring about me.

Me, caring back.

“I suppose you’re right,” I say. Then, after she’s asked me countless times over the last few months, after I’ve refused to answer, I finally tell her.

“Centuries ago, after the curses were spun, a scar opened up across Nightshade. Winged beasts began escaping from it. They look like dragons, but smaller, and their scales are nearly invincible. They’re called dreks, and they have already killed thousands.”

Her concern widens. “Do people live near the scar?”

I nod. “Near the parts that are inactive. The attacks have been concentrated to one area in the last century.”

For now.

I rub a hand across my forehead. I haven’t slept well in years. The safety of my realm, and people, its future, is on my shoulders. Before I know it, the scar will rip completely, and there will be nothing I can do.

I could portal my people away, but where would we go? The only place with enough power to sustain us is Lightlark.

And it’s gone, inaccessible until the Centennial.

“Dreks used to be people, millennia ago. My ancestor Cronan cursed his warriors to become unbeatable beasts. He had the blacksmith make him a sword, imbued with his power, so his later generations could control the drek army. Also . . . so they could make new ones. After his death, one of his descendants predicted the dreks would lead to the end of the world, so she cursed the sword to be unusable by a Nightshade ruler. Dreks had ravaged both Lightlark and Nightbane. After Cronan’s death, they were all banished below. Now . . . they’ve

started rising up again.”

“So . . . the sword controls the dreks. That’s why you want it? To stop them?”

I nod. “My father was obsessed with finding the sword.” He was obsessed with finding anything that might give him an edge. For a moment, I remember that stone. The one that nearly killed him, at the end of his life.

I’m surprised I’m speaking about him at all, especially to a Wildling. But she’s not just a Wildling. Not anymore.

She’s patient and interested. “Why?”

“He wanted to use it to invade Lightlark. It would have been easy, with the dreks.” I don’t have that same motivation. Not that it would be possible until the Centennial, anyway. Also . . . I’ll never forget how many died in the war. I’m content with our land . . . if I can banish the dreks.

She asks me something that makes me pause.

“What was your mother like?”

I’m silent for a few moments, feelings long buried now slowly rising. “I wouldn’t know.”

Her brows come together. “She—died? In childbirth?”

“No. On Nightshade, rulers don’t take wives. They don’t ever even bed the same woman twice. Or, at least, they’re not supposed to.”

She looks far more horrified than I would have expected. “What? Why?”

“A precaution. Love makes our power vulnerable. It is a weakness.” I remember what my father said. *Love kills kingdoms.*

She’s staring at me. I search around for her feelings and find only sadness. “You don’t actually believe that, do you?”

“I do. If I love someone, they have access to my ability. It’s a liability. My ancestors never cared to take the risk.”

“That’s why you had the line of women,” she says. “The volunteers. To make sure . . . to make sure you never sleep with the same person twice.”

Exactly. “Not that I would remember them, but the palace has records. It’s a precaution. It’s been that way for generations.”

Then, she says something that shocks me, though it shouldn’t. She’s clever. She’s sharp. “You’re trying for an heir, aren’t you?”

It’s true, though since I met her, I haven’t been trying at all.

I remember sending the Covets away. I remember realizing no one would ever compare to her. The idea of being with someone else, even in the basest sense, repulses me.

She really has ruined me. The world seems dull now that I've seen her. Her beauty makes everything else look lesser.

I'm knocked out of my thoughts by a flash of her jealousy. Of unease. "I'm guessing . . . it hasn't worked?"

"Bearing children as a ruler can take time." I realize now why she might feel uneasy. Having an heir would mean I couldn't attend the Centennial. It's one of the rules. I wouldn't be able to fulfill my part of the deal. "No, I haven't continued since we made our agreement."

I don't tell her I have no plan to fulfill our agreement at all. She'll be dead before the Centennial, if we can find and unlock the sword. My realm will be rid of the dreks.

She's still thinking about me having previously tried for an heir, because she says, "You think the dreks will eventually kill you. You want to ensure your realm survives."

Precisely. "It's my duty."

"And if you did eventually have a child, after the Centennial, you wouldn't want to know the mother? You wouldn't . . . allow her to help raise the child?"

I wonder why she's so interested. I see the flash of green eyes again, from my dream, in the face of a child. An ache goes through me, as if I've already lost something I never had in the first place.

I feel the same way when it comes to her.

I'll never have her.

But I grieve her loss all the same.

"No." That isn't our way.

There it is. The sadness. "That sounds . . . very lonely."

Does she pity me?

A wave of defensiveness crests.

"I've never felt lonely in my life," I say, and it is a *lie*.

If I haven't felt lonely in centuries, it's because I haven't allowed myself to feel anything at all. Not since I lost Laila.

Now she's awakened my emotions again, and I'm not sure if it's the best or worst thing that could have happened to me.

I don't know if she's a cure or curse.

Her voice is gentle. Quiet. "Maybe you just don't know what it's like to miss someone, then. Because you don't open yourself up long enough to let them in."

The way she says it is almost like a beckoning.

I can almost feel it in her emotions, I can almost read her mind.

Let me in, is what they both seem to say.

No, I want to reply. Everything I care about ends in ruin.

I think about Laila. How she *trusted me*, and I killed her.

I killed her.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, my voice rougher than I intended. “Love is for fools, anyway. It makes people do foolish things.” I look at her very closely, as if to ensure her very soul and essence understand perfectly what I’m about to say.

“I do not intend to become a fool.”

I say it as though I haven’t already become one for her.



SHE THINKS OF ME

For more than a month, we've tried to get past the dragon, with various degrees of failure. Every step means a new challenge, a new obstacle, set up by a thief with clearly too much access to enchantments. Some of these barriers I recognize from my own *castle*.

The slow process would bother me more if it didn't mean spending more time with her. We enter the cave each time, side by side. I've always fought at the front of battles, leading them, being the first one charging forward. I've never had anyone beside me, until her. I can't use my powers. We're on even footing. We both take down each obstacle, one by one. But—more times than not, I'm the one who ends up injured.

I have become her shield.

I'm stitching a wound I got myself, from an arrow I didn't avoid because I was too busy making sure she wasn't getting stabbed through by a pike. She didn't, of course. But I did.

She's watching me far too carefully. I tear the stitch with my teeth, and a flash of emotion curls in the air. Desire.

At my teeth?

I wonder if she could possibly know how many times I've imagined those teeth running over every inch of her, biting places that might scare her.

"Emotions," she says, her voice soft and raspy. "What do they feel like?"

She's asking what it's like to feel other people's, of course. I used to hate her questions, like scalpels, poking at the most sensitive parts of me, but now I treasure them, because they mean she cares. She wants to know more about me. Or perhaps she's just curious.

Either way, I tell her almost everything now.

"They feel . . . well, they feel . . ." I say, struggling for the right words. For

centuries, no one has dared ask me anything so personal. It's a muscle I'm still training, still getting used to, to even talk this much to anyone at all. It's work to lower my defenses, to make a pathway through the wall I've been forced to build around myself as ruler.

It's something we share. The risk of vulnerability.

"They are fainter versions of your own emotions, floating through the air. At first, they were overwhelming. They would all bleed together. Now I can control whose I seek out. Which I focus on."

"Do they . . . affect your own emotions?" she asks.

"Never," I say. *Never until you.*

"What do . . . what do mine feel like?"

They feel like me losing my mind.

They feel like me sitting at your bedside like a fool, trying to tease meaning from your spikes of feeling while you dream.

They feel like me becoming an utter captive to your every mood and desire.

My hands stop their task. Slowly, I look up. Meet her gaze. I take a step toward her. She swallows. "Yours are red."

"Red?" The word is just a breath.

I nod. "*Red.*" I huff a laugh. That seems to startle her.

I feel the stitches of my self-control snapping, one by one. I take another step toward her. Toward all that *red*. Her aura is like my shadows, reaching toward me. My own shadows are reaching back. Both drawn toward our mutual ruin.

She's leaned against the wall. I'm right in front of her now. She tilts her neck back to continue meeting my eyes.

"Other emotions never affected my own . . . until you."

At my admission, her eyes widen. Perhaps I've said too much. I should take a step back. I should portal away.

But I am done with these games. With the hiding. I realize now I have never been in control of my emotions at all, at least when it comes to her. My entire world has been off its axis since the first moment I saw her.

I lean down, and I can see how hard she's breathing. I watch the rise and fall of her chest, in a silk dress I've already memorized several times over. Her pulse is quickening. I want it to fucking *race*. I want her to feel even a fraction of my obsession.

"I feel them so strongly, as if they're my own," I say, studying her slowly, top to bottom, taking my time. When my eyes meet hers again, I find them *blazing*. The curiosity and surprise in her emotions are both drowned out by a

flaming, uncurling want.

“I can *taste* them, Isla,” I say, my voice almost pained, and—and she isn’t breathing. I lean my head down, toward hers, and her lips part, as if on instinct, as if telling me exactly what she wants. I duck lower, until I can feel her breath on my mouth. I breathe her in, and it’s enough. It’s enough to make my entire body almost tremble with need.

“Do you like the taste?” she asks, her voice a husky rasp.

I feel a slow smile spreading across my face. I risk taking a strand of her hair and tucking it behind her ear. My fingers just slightly brush her skin, and she shivers.

I love the taste.

“Yes,” is all I admit.

And then, though it’s the last thing I want to do, though it’s the last thing *she* wants me to do, I turn away, before I admit far more. Before I admit everything and have her against this wall.

But her voice stops me in my tracks. “Why won’t you kiss me?” she demands.

My world lurches to a halt. Slowly, I turn back around. She’s still pressed against the wall, panting.

I expect to feel nerves from her . . . but she’s angry. She’s confused. Under my notice, though, she swallows.

“Why would I kiss you?” I ask, my voice harsh, as if I’m not currently losing my mind that she even suggested I might.

She glares at my rudeness. “You’ve done it before.”

“And you stabbed me for it,” I snarl.

Her eyes are still narrowed, burning greener with intensity. My voice is still full of malice, with forced disgust, when I say, “Is that what you want? For me to kiss you again?”

Say it. Please.

Beg for it, like I asked you to.

My tone has her baring her teeth at me. “No.”

Her emotions tell a very different story, but I’m done antagonizing her. Why can’t I just be honest? Why couldn’t I just have kissed her when she asked?

Now, it’s too late.

I try to make up for my mistake. “I don’t like people touching me,” I tell her, offering something else. “I don’t kiss.”

“You kissed *me*,” she says again, as if she didn’t mean to. Red sears her

cheeks immediately, shame and embarrassment flaring.

I hate it. I don't ever want her to feel shame around me. Nothing she could ever say or think or do would change the way I feel about her.

But she doesn't know that. She can't sense emotions, like I can. All she has are my harsh words and repulsive actions.

I don't want to hurt her. I don't want to fill her with doubt. I don't want her to glare at me, not anymore. I don't want her to hate me.

"I did." I take a step toward her again. "And if it hadn't ended with a blade through my chest, it would have been perfect."

My words are still rough, but they make her gasp.

I can't believe I said that.

I can't believe it took me this long.

Her lips are parted. Her heart is racing. We're so close, again. I could kiss her, *I want to kiss her*, but she told me no. So instead, I ask something else.

"Was it that bad, Hearteater?" I say, my voice rough and quiet. "Bad enough to want me dead?"

I'm so close, I can hear her quiet drawing of breath. "I wouldn't know," she finally says. "I'd never done it before."

A rush of twisted contentment fills me. I was the first. It shouldn't mean anything . . . but it does. I think about the man in the hall. I should never have let him touch her. I should have been the only person who ever did.

My head lowers. My lips brush against her cheek. "You didn't kiss me like that was your first time," I say, remembering the frenzy, the way she pulled my hair, the way she groaned into my throat and sucked my tongue.

I wish she would do it again. I wouldn't even mind if she stabbed me afterward.

Her eyes are on mine when she says, very clearly, "Neither did you."

Her emotions are flaring, meeting, caressing mine, little pants escaping her lips as I get closer. She closes her eyes.

But she doesn't amend her previous statement. She doesn't tell me what *she* wants. So, all I do is reach up to drag my knuckles softly against her cheek. She shivers. I can feel her anticipation. Her desire.

Her wants don't reach her lips, so I leave her again, room filled with our joint regret.

That night, I watch her sleep. I decide to tell her and the quiet darkness the truth.

"If I had any right to happiness at all . . . it would be you. I would choose

you.”

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, fingers lingering. She softly groans, as if she can sense me. Before I can move my hand, she’s leaning against it.

“*Grim,*” she breathes, in just a whisper.

My entire body jolts, as if she’s stabbed me again.

She’s dreaming about me.

She thinks about me.

I want to crawl inside her head, I want to see her dreams, I want to live in them alongside her. Because only in our heads could we ever live a life of peace.

I shake my head.

“What are you doing to me?” I ask, as she sighs against my skin. She shifts, as if her dream has taken a turn.

I’ve lost my mind. I’ve seen blood and entrails strewn across the battlefield, yet what twists my stomach is seeing her *frown*. Why is she frowning in her sleep? Who can I kill to stop that?

The need pounding in my blood is nearly enough to bring me to my knees.

You’re dangerous. You are a curse.

I want you anyway.



NIGHTBANE

For centuries, I lived in frost and darkness. Until she showed up in my castle, gleaming like the first star at night, and showed me all the ways the world could still make a person smile.

Now, even through the near-endless calls to the scar, I notice the pockets of beauty in my lands. And, when I see beautiful things, I have the urge to show them to her. That's why I think to take her to the field of nightbane. To see her reaction to it. To show her that Nightshade is not all darkness and shadows. There is color in my realm, it is not all like the castle she despises.

I used to think nightbane was just a poison. That it was solely vile. Addictive. Disgusting.

But now . . . now I see the pretty flower and realize it can be so much more. It can be used for *life*. Not just death.

"I want to show you something," I say, after we've finished what seems like our hundredth time trying to get past the obstacles in the cave. We're almost ready. We're almost about to reach the end of this journey.

She takes my hand, and I'll never tire of it. Of her trust, that I'll bring her somewhere safe. A trust I don't deserve.

We land, and I pluck one of the flowers for her. I hand it to her.

I've never given anyone a flower before. I don't know if I look ridiculous, and I go still for a moment, tense, awaiting her reaction.

Surprise melts into something deeper. She likes it. She takes it.

"Smell it, Heart eater."

She does. Then, she frowns.

"Familiar?"

"It has the same scent as the Wildling healing elixir," she says. She looks wary.

“I think they’re the same flower.”

There it is, a bridge between our two realms. Proof that perhaps they are not so different. That maybe . . . maybe something could work between us.

She turns around, studying the field, and I feel her awe. Her confusion.

“What even is this?”

“It’s nightbane,” I tell her.

Sometimes the most potent poison comes from the most beautiful flower.

I should know.

She shakes her head in confusion. “But the Wildling flower doesn’t kill . . . it *heals*.”

“We extract the same nectar. In Nightshade hands, under our own extraction process, it turns into a drug that produces euphoria. I suspect under a Wildling’s touch, it turns into a healing elixir instead.”

She stares down at the single flower I offered her. Her fingers smooth across its petals. They’re soft as velvet. I’ve never even thought about their beauty, until it was something I wanted to show her.

They are like us, I want to tell her. Dark and light. Life and death. Somehow, they come together and make something extraordinary.

Perhaps we could do the same.

I can feel her hope, can see her thinking.

But she’s not thinking of us, like I am. She’s thinking of her people, the way I should be.

“We can make a deal,” she says. “We don’t have much of this flower. If you can give Wildlings some of yours, we can provide healing elixirs. In exchange, we need hearts. From . . . people you are already going to kill. And other stuff I can’t think of right now that we need.”

I almost smile, watching her. I wonder if she knows. I wonder if she knows that if she asked, I would give her almost anything. “It’s a deal, Hearteater.”

And for a moment, I pretend that this could work. That I could find another way to end the dreks. That she could *live*, with me, and we could bring both our realms together.

I hold out my hand, and she takes it.

We shake.

I portal her back to her room, and neither of us pulls from our grasp.

She swallows, and I watch her throat. I remember biting it. Licking it. Tasting her. My gaze slips lower.

When I was wounded, I told her more than I’ve ever told anyone.

And she didn't use it against me. She didn't laugh or think of me as weak. She's here, looking at me, like she could possibly see past all the blood on my hands. As if she could possibly want me.

Our gazes lock, and I understand that something has changed, even from a few days ago, when we stood in this very spot. When she told me, very clearly, that she didn't want to kiss me.

Right now, she's staring at me. She's . . . grasping my fingers, and pulling me toward her, until her spine hits the wall, and I'm towering over her once more.

Her gaze never leaves mine. She lifts her chin, toward me, and I know what this is. An invitation.

I lean down, slowly, tentatively. I've killed thousands. I've made countless battlefields run red with blood. I've made grown men weep and piss themselves.

I'm not afraid of anything.

Yet right now, inches from her lips, my breathing is labored. My arms are trembling.

I told her she would be the one to beg for me to touch her, but I'm the first to do it.

"Please," I say, the word sounding as pained as I feel. "Please, tell me you want this." *Please tell me I'm not the only one here, suffering. Please tell me a beauty like you could possibly want a villain like me.* "I know if I touch you again it will kill me . . . but I think I might die if I don't."

I wait to be rejected. I wait for her to push me away.

But she doesn't.

She nods.

And I can taste how much she wants me.

I shouldn't do this. I should know better. But I can't change my feelings, just as I can't change the fact that this won't end well.

She gasps as I gather her in my arms. Her hands slide up my neck, fisting in my hair, loosening a groan in my throat.

An inch from her lips, I feel it. A rip across my lands, my own connection to it as ruler catching like a frayed thread. I curse, not because of the pain, but because of the timing.

Worry. "What is it?"

"There's been a breach in the scar," I say. I look down at her, committing her to memory.

If the dreks kill me today, at least I've told her. At least she knows even a fraction of my feelings for her. At least I know she wanted me to kiss her, this

once.

That's enough, I think.

Then I portal away.

I fight them all night. My muscles go slack. My skin burns. But all I think about, through it all, are green eyes, watching me. Parted lips.

I consider the flash of emotion I felt from her, when I almost kissed her. It wasn't just desire . . . it was something deeper. Something unfamiliar.

The dreks take out an entire legion. I watch them take one of my best men into the scar, carrying him between them. I hear his screams, sense his pain.

Eventually I turn the creatures to dust, but it took too long to draw the amount of power to do it.

It takes me too long to close the scar again. Took too long to notice that it was breached in the first place.

I was distracted.

For hundreds of years, I was known as a heartless warrior. Perhaps because of my unwavering focus, my willingness to go to any extreme to win.

The moment I saw her, both of those things changed.

I'm distracted even now, back in my quarters, overcome with exhaustion. It takes me until my shirt is nearly off my body to sense her.

Her.

Isla. The reason my thoughts no longer follow a steady path.

I turn slowly. Tentatively.

She's sitting on my bed, highlighted by the dim light of dawn escaping my curtains.

Isla blinks. Stands up quickly. As if she hadn't meant to be sitting on my sheets. As if she herself was surprised she had ended up there at all. As if it wasn't exactly where she had meant to position herself.

But then, I can sense everything she's feeling.

My memories of the battle dissolve. I could be back on the battlefield, facing swarms of scaled dreks, and my focus would be solely on her, on her red dress that is sheer in some places. Its slit high up her thigh. Silk clinging to her body as if wet. Like her clothes the day I found her in my bathtub.

I prowl closer.

She raises her head. She says, "I—I just wanted to make sure you were fine." She knows now what I faced, after healing my wounds. She knows I was at the scar.

I raise my eyebrows, conveying that I can feel she's here for far less innocent reasons. I might tease her more if I didn't know her, if I didn't think it might keep her from coming back.

Instead, I motion toward my bare torso and say, "I'm fine."

She swallows. "I can see that." Her gaze slips down my chest. She straightens. Opens her mouth to let out a retort, or threat, or excuse.

Before she gets the words out, though, her gaze drops lower.

Her eyes go so wide I'd have laughed if I weren't throbbing in discomfort.

Then she turns her gaze downward, as if assessing herself to determine what exactly caused my current state.

She doesn't know, does she?

She doesn't know what she does to me.

She doesn't know that I've been almost constantly on edge since I've met her. She doesn't know that I think of her every night, every time I allow myself to relieve my near-constant arousal.

As if she could ever understand what a mere glimpse of her does to me. From the moment we met, she's been a curse worse than all others. One specially crafted for me.

I wonder if she's been sent from my enemies as a potent brand of torture. It would make more sense than me becoming reduced to pure, unthinking desire whenever I'm near her.

Especially during moments like these, when I might as well be on fire for how much I'm burning for her, aching to tear that clinging dress to shreds and claim everything beneath it.

Worse, I can feel her own desire pulsing off her, the heat of it; it physically pains me that I'm not already touching her.

But I won't reach for her until she tells me to.

I won't touch her until she *begs* me to.

I expect her to turn. To portal away. To leave me throbbing in the dark as she has countless times before.

Instead, she steps toward me.

I don't move a muscle. I'm not sure I'm breathing. The gods-damned world could erupt in flames around me, and I wouldn't even notice.

This is a different type of duel, one not marked by the clashing of swords, but by the torture of restraint. By cruel words volleyed back and forth. It's less violent, yet easily as dangerous.

I remain motionless as she reaches out a trembling hand. Presses it finger by

finger along my chest.

My breath catches. I've done everything there is to do with a woman, yet somehow this simple touch threatens to undo me.

Her other hand is next. She marvels at me, eyes narrowing in focus, lips parted in wonder, like I'm something interesting to be studied, not a monster with thousands of kills on my blade. Not a warrior who mere hours ago reduced dozens of creatures to dust. She bites her bottom lip, and at the minor action my body responds, making me grimace.

Isla is breathing more heavily now, testing the precarious scraps of silk barely covering her chest. I've never hated and loved silk so much in my long life. I study the thin straps, the plunging neckline, the shape of her breasts outlined by the fabric. She notices the direction of my gaze. I anticipate a retort. Instead, she steps forward.

Into me. Suddenly, a very specific part of me is pressed against her warmth radiating through the flimsy dress. She traces the large scar in the center of my chest, then lower. Lower.

"Heart eater." The word is a warning, scraped out of the deepest depths of my self-control. We've taken this too far already. Her eyes snap to meet mine.

She doesn't heed my warning. Instead, she lifts to her toes, as if to get even closer. It does little to bridge the space between us; she still isn't even close to my height. She frowns and falls back on her heels. But her expression is resolute. It fills me both with desire . . . and dread.

Part of me wants to warn her to stay away. To tell her this can only end badly. To convince her that I'm dangerous. That she can't trust me.

Another selfish—much larger—part aches to grab her by the waist, to lift her to my height, to engulf her. To show her every way a person can experience pleasure. To *give* her that pleasure, over and over, and watch as it washes over her. But I can't, not until I hear those words, the ones just weeks ago she swore she wouldn't—

"Touch me." It is a command. "*Please.*"

I freeze. There is no way . . . there's no way I heard her correctly. I remain very still.

She frowns. She runs her hands even further down my body, dangerously close to the pulsing part of me, as if to demonstrate her meaning. "*Please, Grim, would you just touch—*"

It's all I need to hear. I end her sentence with my mouth, claiming her as mine. Again. The first time happened in the heat of a moment—quickly, too quickly to enjoy. It ended with a blade through my chest. This time, though, I tilt

her head back, grip the base of it at the nape of her neck, and taste her completely. The first taste left me pining for her.

Now, I'm well and truly addicted.

I lick the top of her mouth, I lick across her teeth, I lick her so thoroughly that she'll taste me for days. She moans into my mouth, and a growl escapes me in response. There is something primal about this. Possessive on both our parts, from the way she's pulling my hair to get me to kiss her harder, to the way my thumbs are stroking her pulse.

"You know," I whisper into her ear. "I really like this dress." I slowly trace its plunging neckline, fingers slipping far down her chest. Her pulse quickens below my hands, and I linger, tracing her body beneath the fabric, watching her arch her back slightly, leaning into my touch. Leaning into *me*. "But it's in my way."

I grip the silk with both hands—and tear it straight down the center.

I don't stop there. The dress never stood a chance. Its time was up the moment I saw it, daring to cling to her as tightly as I intend to myself. Within moments, it becomes shreds of fabric on the floor, and she is completely bare before me.

That's when I realize I've never known pleasure. I've never known beauty. I've never known want. For five hundred years, I've been a stranger to all of it.

I know that for certain when I see her undressed.

But what I feel at the sight of her—*all* of her—isn't just desire. There's something else, something unexpected.

Gratitude.

Gratitude for the universe allowing something so beautiful to exist. Something so perfect, it defies logic.

Gratitude that she came *here*, to my room, risking everything.

Gratitude that she begged me to touch her. And that we have hours for me to do so.

I must have been staring at her for a long time, because she begins folding into herself, covering with her hands what her dress had concealed. Panicking. She sits down on the edge of the bed. I taste a flare of embarrassment.

"Is . . . something wrong?" she asks.

I have to laugh. *Wrong?*

"Nothing, absolutely nothing, is wrong with you, Hearteater," I say.

She asked me to touch her.

I will do so thoroughly.

I carefully remove the hands that were covering her chest and replace them with my own, my thumbs brushing her sensitive peaks, making her skin prickle. Then, I replace those with my mouth. *Perfect*. Every part of her is *perfect*. I gently peel apart the thighs that she shut closed. Slide a hand down her smooth stomach, until I reach the part of her that will answer my question if she's aching just as much as I am.

She is. I feel it, and growl again. "Are you always like this around me?"

Isla gasps at my touch. Then she glares. I grin. I can't help it. I love it when she looks at me like that, if only because I know I have her full attention.

"You certainly think highly of yourself," she says, her voice breathless.

I let my longest finger wander, and a soft moan escapes her. "It's hard not to, when I can feel the effect I have on you. Tell me, Hearteater, has anyone ever touched you like this?"

She ignores me. I continue, and her eyes flutter closed. I feel her pleasure thrumming down my skin like a caress.

"Is it just me who elicits this response?"

Her head falls back, her chest bared to me.

"No need to reply. The sounds you're making are all the confirmation I need."

She scowls. "You just like to hear yourself talk, don't you?" Her breath hitches as I go faster. Harder.

My grin widens. "I do. But I like to hear *you* talk more. So, tell me." I stop. Remove my hand.

The disappointment on her face at the lack of contact pleases a deep, animalistic part of me. "Are you always like this around me?" My original question.

She scoffs. "Are you always this desperate for validation?"

I shake my head. "No. Not from anyone. Only you." It's true. Perhaps that's why I want her to say it—to admit in words that she wants this as much as I do.

She blinks.

"If you want me to continue, answer my question." My own chest is heaving. I'm aching more than ever before. "Please." I used to hate that word, I went centuries without speaking it at all.

But for her, I'll say it. I'll go on my knees and beg.

Even with the plea, I expect a cruel response. A stubborn retort. But just like she has melted me down, it seems my own touch has made her tire of being clever.

“Yes,” she says, and any string of sanity related to her that I have left snaps. She wraps her arms around my neck. Her nails dig into my skin. Her mouth is at my ear. “Always,” she whispers.

I’m unleashed.

My hands grip her waist, lifting her into the air. I hook her feet behind me and bring us both onto the bed. By the time I lay her across my sheets, my hand is already back between her legs. These dreams, now they’re happening. Right where I’ve had them. I start slow, then faster. Deeper. *Deeper*. She moans into my mouth as I fill her. Her chest is pressed against mine. I lean down so that she can hear every word I’m about to utter.

She cries out, as I quicken my pace. As I curl my fingers. “Next time, I’ll use my mouth. And then, after that—”

I’m cut off by the feeling of her own hand on me, on the part of me that’s been aching since the moment I saw her sitting on my bed.

My heart races. I curse beneath my breath. Something about her touch turns my veins to flame.

It takes every bit of restraint for me to remove her hand, using the one of mine that isn’t busy, lacing our fingers together, and pinning them over her head. “Let me focus on you.” I lean down so that I can watch her. “I don’t want to miss a moment of this.” Her lips are parted, her cheeks flushed with color, with pleasure that tastes like her, everywhere, like she’s running her nails down some invisible bridge between us. Her back arches toward me. Her hips writhe against my hand. I know I’m going to be picturing this exact moment for many nights to come, and I wish, for once, that I can capture this moment in time and play it over and over. “That’s it, Hearteater,” I say. “Make it good for you.”

I watch her use me. I give her everything she demands until she’s panting with pleasure, until her toes are curling with it, until she cries out my name. Until she’s pulsing around my fingers, and my blinding pleasure makes me almost crest with her, even though she isn’t touching me at all.

“Remember this, Hearteater,” I say, barely keeping my own composure, “the next time you want to stab me through the chest.”

Then, I swallow her final moans with my mouth and pull her to me, one hand splayed across her lower back. I hold her like I always meant to—like I intend on never letting her go, like I’m afraid the world might try to take her from me.

Minutes later, I set her down and look at her face. I catalogue her each and every emotion.

Her green eyes are wide, their expression sharp and gleaming. Her gaze slips down to the aching part of me, then back to my eyes, as she says, very clearly,

“I’ll remember.”



FLYING

I lie in bed and think about those moments again and again, replaying the memories over and over.

Watching her eyes flutter closed. Hearing her call out my name.

As I remember it all, pleasure blinds me, then fades all too quickly.

It's been like this for hours. My hand falls onto the bed beside me, exhausted. This bed . . . it's so large. So empty. I never thought of it that way until I saw her in it. I breathe in her lingering scent, the shreds of aura left behind.

I wish she was here right now. I wish she was *always* here. But she's not. I'm alone, making a mess of myself, just like she's made a mess of my life.

Thinking of any way I can ensure she's always part of it.

"Is something . . . wrong? With . . . you?" Astria asks when she sees me the next day, on my way to yet another council meeting.

"No. Why?" I demand, looking down at my clothes. They are immaculate, as always. Nothing is wrong with me.

"Nothing, I—" She frowns. "You—you were *smiling*?"

Was I?

Perhaps it's because I was thinking of how, after she said, "I'll remember," Isla kissed me so hard I nearly saw stars behind my eyelids. She kissed me until she fell asleep in my arms, and that was where she remained, until I portaled her back to her room.

I wonder if she can still taste me in her mouth the way I can taste her.

Astria clears her throat. She's staring at me as if I've grown another head.

"Do you . . . do you by chance read any of the books in the library?" She asks it casually, but I can feel her spike of panic.

“No. Why?”

“No reason,” she says quickly, and I drop it, because I don’t give a damn about the books in the library.

I wonder if Isla would. I wonder if she would like to see my library.

I’ve seen the dog-eared books she keeps in her bedroom. Perhaps she’d like more. She can have mine. She can have all of them.

Astria is still eyeing me curiously. I glare at her, and that seems to remind her of her station. She composes herself and walks back into the council meeting, where I’m expected.

I would rather be anywhere else.

I count down the minutes until I’ll see Isla again in the room we’ve set up in my castle, the one I have filled with illusions of the cave to practice on. We have a plan now, one we developed together.

I’ll get the dragon out of the cave. Isla will go through each of the enchanted obstacles, and get to the sword, before the creature returns.

Mastering each obstacle buys me time, but not much. After a few weeks, she’s mastered them completely. Of course. I lean against the wall, watching her complete it successfully for the tenth time.

She beams at me when she’s done, and it reaches my very soul. She slides down the wall to the floor, spent.

“I’m exhausted,” she says, and I want to tell her *I know, I can feel it*, but I love it when she talks to me, so I don’t.

“I can imagine.”

She looks at me and scrunches her nose. I’ve just come from the scar, and I’m covered in ash. “You look awful.”

“*That* is harder to imagine, but I will take your word for it.”

She rolls her eyes, and I fight a smile. “I’m ready. Why don’t we celebrate?”

Finally enacting our plan makes me feel like doing anything but celebrating, but her hope is so bubbling, so uplifting, that I can’t help but raise a brow at her, wanting to hear more.

“Tonight is the Launch of Orbs in the Skyling newland,” she says. “It’s to celebrate the new season of hot-air balloons being unveiled.”

I scowl. Skylings and their endless festivals. “They are always finding an excuse to celebrate. I bet they celebrate tying their own shoes.”

She frowns at me. “I’ve always wanted to ride in one,” she says, so earnestly, I wish I hadn’t said anything at all.

But the idea of being in the air, of *flying*, makes me suddenly uneasy. “Don’t

you have anyone else to go with?”

I immediately regret my words. My tone. Of course she doesn't have anyone else. Of course she doesn't have friends, just like I don't.

She gives me a withering look. “You know what? I'm sure I can find someone else to spend the evening with me.” Her implication is clear. She is not going to find a *friend*. She turns on her heel, but before she can take a step, I'm there, holding her wrist, holding her still.

No. I've already missed dancing with her. I will not sit around and let someone else take her on a balloon trip. I shouldn't have even suggested it.

“Don't even think about it.”

She turns to face me. My shadows are spilling everywhere, in panic that she might actually choose someone else, and she can see them. She lifts her chin in defiance, and I would expect nothing less. “Let go of me.”

“Never.”

And I mean it.

She's breathing rapidly. Her eyes are still locked in a glare, but her voice is brittle. “Might I remind you that there is nothing between us. I do not belong to you. And you do not belong to me. If we decide to have . . . fun . . . then that is all it is. Momentary entertainment. Nothing more.”

Her words cut me like knives, but I choose to focus on the end goal, if only for my own benefit. My grin is wicked. “Oh, Heart eater.” I lean down so my lips are pressed against her ear. “If we do decide to truly have fun, there will be nothing momentary about it.”

No . . . if she lets me have her, I'm going to have her completely.

I've had months to think about all the things I want to do to her. If she lets me, I'm going to take my time doing them. Over and over again. Until her voice is hoarse from screaming my name, until her legs are trembling, until she is boneless and spent.

She swallows, and it's as if she can sense my every thought. My every desire.

“Take me to the festival,” she says, voice breathless. I taste her own desire, as sharp as mine.

I don't want to go to the Skyling newland. But she asked. And I'll give her anything she wants.

“Fine,” I say. “Get dressed.”

Isla, ruler of Wildling, with a closet full of dresses in almost every shade,

apparently didn't have anything to wear, so she sent me to a Skyling market with a list.

I don't know how I went from being a warrior and ruler of Nightshade to running errands, but here I am, disguised, wandering from stall to stall, asking if anyone has *glitter*.

And the worst part is, I don't mind. I don't mind at all.

Later, back in her room, she takes ages to get ready. After an hour, I can no longer contain my impatience. "Are you preparing for battle or for a foolish party, Heart eater?" Even putting on my armor takes just minutes. What could possibly take over an *hour*?

"Both, if you're going to be so insufferable," she says, finally opening the door.

I stare, stunned. Seeing her in everything I bought takes my breath away.

She's wearing a short blue dress and shoes that look torturous to walk in. My eyes move directly to her legs. Then, they rise to the hem of her dress. To her chest. To her shoulders, dusted in the glitter I found for her.

I swallow hard. I'm done. Ruined. I might as well bury myself, at this point.

"How do I look?" she asks, spinning around, the hem of her dress lifting gently. I flex my hands to keep from reaching out to touch her.

She looks incredible.

But she's wearing the wrong colors. I frown.

"You look like a Skyling," I say, not hiding my preference for seeing her in my own realm's shades.

"Good," she says. "That's exactly what I was going for."

This celebration is ridiculous.

Everyone is ridiculous, dressed up in glimmering fabrics that make my eyes bleed. It's too crowded. Too loud. Too joyous.

I scowl as someone has the nerve to touch my arm as they pass, and I have to remind myself that we are disguised. No one knows who we are.

Everything in me wants to leave, until I turn to her and notice she's beaming at everything I hate.

Her joy is more radiant than all the balloons in the sky.

She loves this. "It's beautiful," she breathes.

I feel the slight heat of embarrassment. She knows I'm looking at her. She frowns and places her hands on either side of my face, trying to turn my head toward the balloons, but I don't budge. I'm looking at exactly what I came here

to see. I tell her the same thing I've thought a thousand times. "When you've seen something truly beautiful, everything else starts to look painfully ordinary."

She takes my hand, and my first reaction is to tense, to drop it. But then I curl my fingers around hers, and yes. I like this. I could get used to this.

"Come on," she says, and I realize I'll follow her anywhere.

Azul, ruler of Skyling, is giving a speech somewhere nearby. She asks about him, and I answer her questions. I'm glad I formed illusions around us, for he would have spotted me instantly, and that would have been the end of this.

Seeing him makes me remember how reckless it is to come here uninvited. But I don't care. In this moment, my fingers twined with hers, I don't care at all.

Isla does, though. She drops my hand, and I grab it again, pressing her palm more firmly against mine. Her desire flares, and I glance at her.

Then she asks, "What do you think of Azul?"

I tell her the truth. "He runs his realm as a democracy. Everyone has a say. It's foolish."

She frowns. "That doesn't sound foolish to me."

She hasn't yet seen war. She hasn't seen factions forming, battling against each other.

Eventually, she will see for herself. She will make her own choices for her realm.

Not if she dies unlocking the sword, I think, and my chest goes hollow.

No. Tonight is her night. She wanted to be here, celebrating it. I won't take that away from her.

I lead her to all the hot-air balloons she wanted to see so badly.

"Choose," I tell her.

She frowns. "I don't think we can choose, and I think there's a line—"

I portal us to the one I noticed her staring at. In moments, we're floating toward the stars.

She gasps and steps backward, right into my chest.

I snake an arm around her, pinning her to me, holding her where I wish I could hold her forever.

Then, I look over the side.

Panic flares. Nausea roils. But I force myself to look. Force myself not to shrink back at the sight.

For her, I will be fearless.

In my arms, she is an anchor, a steadying presence. Gradually, my pulse slows. The roaring in my ears dims.

The world is small beneath us. Insignificant, compared to what I have in my arms right now.

As my own fear dissipates, hers grows. “I don’t think I like heights,” she says, and, at the same time, I think, *I don’t like anything but you.*

In that moment, I tell myself I will never be afraid of this again. Both of us can’t be afraid of heights. The need to make her feel comfortable overpowers any remaining shred of terror.

I want her to know she’s safe with me. I want her to know that I would protect her with my life.

I curl forward to rest my chin on the top of her head. “I can portal us anywhere, remember?”

I feel her begin to relax, like I have helped banish her fear, the same way she has for me.

Slowly, she leaves my embrace. She walks to the edge of the basket and looks past it, at the Skyling newland.

Her surprise and fascination make me smile.

“I’ve never—I’ve never been up so high,” she says. She points at a distant mountain range. “I’ve never been on a peak like that. I’ve never seen the world be so . . . so *small.*”

I want to show her the Algid. The peaks there, with snow light as dandelions. I want to show her the frost-coated villages of my upbringing. For centuries, whenever I thought of my childhood, I only thought of the bad. But now . . . I remember the pockets of light. I want to show her everything I once liked.

She reminds me that I wasn’t always so heartless. And that life wasn’t always so cruel. *This is where I want to be,* I think. Out of the shade of the shadows, and in her radiant light.

Slowly, I step forward, until I’m by her side. Together, we watch the world in peaceful silence. I drown in her happiness; it is intoxicating, addicting. I can’t help but feel some of it myself.

This moment, I think. *I’d like to live in this moment for the rest of my life.*

Finally, she steps back, and her foot collides with a bottle. She lifts it and inspects the label.

“Skyling wine,” I say, frowning. I tend to avoid it at all costs. “Disgusting.”

That, of course, is anything but a deterrent. She unscrews the bottle and sips it. Then, a burst of happiness.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

I sigh. Of course she loves it.

She takes another long sip, and I pluck it out of her hands. I've seen many people drink far more than they intended, because of its sugary taste. "You might want to wait a little while before drinking more," I tell her. "Unless you don't want to remember the night."

I remind myself that it's her choice. I offer the bottle back to her, but she shakes her head.

And, by the emotions blooming from her, I can tell she wants to remember this night as much as I do.

She turns to face me fully and tilts her head to the side. It's adorable.

"Can I say something honest?"

I blink, startled. I'm not sure if I'm ready to hear whatever she's about to say. I nod anyway.

"You are the most unpleasant person I've ever met." Is that all?

"And you," I respond, "are the bane of my existence." It's true. She's a curse. She's an addiction far sweeter and more dangerous than Skyling wine.

She takes a step toward me. "I was disappointed when I didn't kill you."

Her words are at odds with the desire I feel circling us.

I know what she wants. I run my hand up her leg, taking her tiny dress with me. There, strapped to her upper thigh, is a dagger. I tap at it, letting her know I've known it was here this entire time, and she gasps. "And I'm disappointed you haven't tried again."

As if any blade through my chest would ruin me more than she already has.

She might as well have stabbed me through the heart the first time she met me. I might as well have carved it out myself and handed it to her.

It's hers.

It's been hers—along with my mind, and my sanity, and my every waking thought—since the day she stepped inside my castle.

My hand curls around her waist. My lips brush against her neck, lingering at her pulse, which beats wildly beneath my mouth. Her back arches, and she makes a sound I've grown to adore, that I'll never forget, as I begin licking the glitter off her neck, her collarbones, her shoulders.

"I don't think it's edible," she says.

"I don't care."

Nothing could possibly be more poisonous than her, yet I'm here, practically begging to lick every inch of her.

Our lips crash together, and my hands are everywhere. I can't touch enough of her, I can't hold her close enough. My tongue parts her lips, and she groans

into my mouth, the reverberations going straight to where I'm aching. I lift her into the air and rest her on the edge of the basket.

Her eyes fly open, and I feel her panic spike.

"Relax, Heart eater," I say, though my own breathing is uneven, and not because of the height.

No, it's the experience of seeing her there, perched on the side of the basket, wind threading through her hair, her wide green eyes fixed on me.

She can't feel my feelings. She's oblivious to the torrent of emotions winding through my head and body and very *soul* as she slowly parts her legs in invitation. I step toward her, settling between them, and—

And I feel like I'm dying. I feel like I'm being reborn. I feel like I've been revived, or possibly, like I've never truly been alive until this moment.

The heart I locked away for centuries has started beating again. I can *feel* it. It's sitting right in front of me.

She's my heart.

My hand grips beneath her knee, and I can feel her longing, feel everything. "Portal me to my room," she commands.

Here it is. The cliff we've been skirting, the fall we've been avoiding. Because this isn't just physical. Not for me . . . and not for her. I can feel it.

I press her fully to my chest—and push us both over the edge.

There is no room for fear here. Fear of heights, fear of feelings, fear of anything.

She gasps—but she is not afraid. She *trusts me*.

She opens her mouth, but she doesn't have time to form a single word before we're landing on her bed. She's atop me, straddling me, and I've never seen such beauty in my life.

Anger, hot as flames, that I sent us tumbling over. Her eyes are fixed in a glare. But that fury dies away the moment she shifts forward—

And feels every inch of me against her.

Her feelings melt into deep, sweet desire. She moves again, rocking her hips, and I'm at risk of embarrassing myself from that single movement.

She writhes against me, as if desperate for the friction, as if she's aching as much as I am. Her back arches and she grinds against me harder, her nails scraping against my chest, her shoulders hiking as she gasps.

I laugh darkly beneath her. "The sight of you, on me . . ."

Yes, she has well and truly ruined me.

I curve my hands beneath her hips, gripping her ass, and wonder what it

would be like to let her continue, let her chase her pleasure, let her do whatever she wants to me.

But—

“Not tonight, Hearteater,” I say. Even two sips of the Skyling wine can cloud her judgment.

When I have her, I want her fully aware of every movement. I want her to remember every single second.

I want the only haze to be the result of how well I’ve pleased her.

“Sleep,” I say, and her irritation is like a dozen daggers pointed in my direction.

I laugh softly and pull her toward me, tucking her into my side. I never used to see the appeal of sleeping next to someone, but I do now. I want her next to me every single moment of every single day, even while we’re dreaming.

“Remember to dream of me,” I tell her, and I wonder if she knows I meant it when I told her she’s in all of mine.



SUMMER

I am greedy, I am selfish. I am despicable. While Isla is breathing softly against my neck, tucked into my side, her leg draped over me, while she sleeps more soundly than I have seen her sleep in *months*, I tell myself I'm going to tell her the truth.

I'm going to tell her my plan. I'm going to tell her about the sword. About how I have no intention of going to the Centennial.

I go over it in my mind, again and again. Each scenario has the same ending. Never seeing her again.

When her green eyes blink open hours later—when they widen, like she thought for a moment that this was all a dream, when they crease when she smiles, when she buries her face against my throat, embarrassment and happiness blooming from her, I find that I can't.

I can't.

Not only do I not tell her . . . I allow us both to *continue* with the plan. When Isla tells me she doesn't have training today, that her guardians are visiting a nearby village, and she suggests we find what I need for my part of our plan *together* . . . I agree.

That's how we end up in the middle of a Starling market, looking for sparks to distract the dragon.

Isla pulls me forward by the hand as she expertly weaves through the stalls. Some sell swords. Others burnt sugar. A few sell tiny orbs of energy, barely more than party tricks. No, we'll need something much stronger.

"You've been here before," I say, and Isla turns around. Something curious flashes through her emotions—guilt?—but it's gone in a moment. She nods. "It's one of my favorite places."

I can't imagine why, but I try. The silver gleam I remember from the

Starlings on Lightlark is muted here. Diluted. Wasted away.

I'm struck by how *young* everyone is. Their curse was the cruelest of all. Every single one of them, under a quarter century old.

For a moment, I feel a shred of guilt. Perhaps we should have helped, over the centuries . . . I look around, frowning at the state of their newland. Broken buildings. Faded fabrics. The result of a world without experience.

I expect everyone to be afraid. Every single person here is just a few years away from their certain death . . .

But all I feel is lightness. Happiness. As if the surety of their fate has made them all determined to enjoy the few days they have.

It reminds me of Isla.

She lives every single day to its brim. She feels fully. She fights fiercely. Her soul is a shining, unrelenting summer.

I have been stuck in darkness for so much of my life. I have spent centuries trapped in winter. She is a hand, pulling me out of it, into a new season. Into an infinite summer.

Just as she is pulling me now, through the market.

And I—I can't help it.

I slow down. She turns, frowning in confusion, opens her mouth—

And gasps into mine as I press her into a wall. I've portaled us to an abandoned part of the shops, far away from wandering eyes.

The moment my lips crash against hers, she groans, and our feelings are like paint, melting together. Making a new color.

"I thought—I thought we needed the sparks, for the dragon, for the distraction," she says, pulling back. She's breathing so quickly, chest meeting mine.

"The sparks can wait," I say, and then I kiss her again.

The world can wait.

The world can stop turning if it wants to, it can fucking end, and nothing would rip me from her arms as her hands lock behind my head and she pulls me down harder against her lips.

My tongue strokes hers, flicking, and her hands fist in my hair, pulling, sending sparks raking down my spine. My own hands slowly trace down her sides, until they settle on her waist. She doesn't like that. Her hands are on mine, pulling them down to grip her ass, and I laugh darkly against her mouth.

Then, I curl my hands beneath her, haul her up the wall, to my height, and kiss her properly.

I kiss her like I'm starving, like I'm ravenous, like I'm dying, and she's the only cure. Because that's how it feels. She tastes so *good*. I can't get enough. I kiss her until her lips are swollen and red, and only then do I shift my focus down her jaw.

She laughs as I reach her neck. Her voice is breathy. "For someone who doesn't like to kiss, you do it a lot."

"I like to kiss *you*," I say against her pulse. I scrape my teeth against her throat and feel her shiver beneath me. Feel her heart race.

You.

Only you.

My hands pull her hips against mine, and I feel the flash of pleasure. Feel her arms wrap around my neck as she moves herself against me, as she gasps into my ear.

"*Grim*," she says, and it's almost my undoing. The word is pleading. She wants me here, in this alley. She wants me here, against this wall.

She has no idea how much I want that.

But the truth comes bubbling to the surface. The truth I'm keeping from her. There are so many lies between us . . . too many.

So, I set her down, slowly, even as she protests. As she blinks up at me, again unfulfilled, lips swollen from when I bit them.

"You know what I want," she says, confused. Hurt, even. "Why won't you give it to me?"

You have no idea how badly I want to give it to you, I think.

She looks so disappointed, that I have the need to make her a promise. I lean against the wall, caging her in, watching her head tilt back so she can meet my eyes. I feel my arms trembling with barely leashed desire.

"*Isla*," I say, feeling her emotions spike at the sound of her name on my lips. "One day soon, I will give it to you. I will give it to you all night, in every way you can think of, because trust me—*trust me*—I have thought about it enough for the both of us. I am going to give you everything you want, until your voice is hoarse, until it's hard to walk, until we are both sore and spent."

She swallows, and I almost do—I almost do all of it right here, out in the open, the way I can feel she wants me to.

Instead, I take her hand and say, "Let's find the sparks."

There must be another way.

Over the next few days, I look into every option, every power we have

access to. I go to the libraries I haven't found use for in centuries and pore over the volumes there.

As I enter one such library used for housing rare, early-realm volumes, I nearly run into Astria, who looks shocked to see me. Her arms are laden with a half dozen dusty tomes. She tightens her grip on them as she hurries down the hall. It seems my general is a voracious reader.

I rack my brain for alternate solutions but come up empty. The sword was specifically made to be a safeguard, and without Isla's flair—without her to unlock it and remove the curse—I can't banish the dreks.

Only someone from my line can wield the sword; it's not enough for Isla to simply claim it.

Not unless—

No.

It's impossible. Only a love bond could save us, but, as much as I care for her, as much as she has *become* my heart, the strength needed for her to access my abilities, for me to give them to her . . .

It's more than my cold heart could give.

For once, I hate myself for not feeling. If only I could . . . if only I hadn't hardened myself against emotion so long ago . . . if only I was capable of something as rare as love . . . perhaps I could save my people and keep her.

So the choice is clear.

Either I and my entire realm die—

Or she does.

My father's voice is in my mind, always reminding me of my duty, warning me against feeling.

He was right. Feelings are the most dangerous things we rulers could ever fall victim to.

I can't send thousands of my people to death, I can't be the end of my line because I've lost control of my emotions.

I can't have Laila's death go to waste. I can't have all the pain be for nothing.

So, I don't call off the plan.

I take a bath that runs cold too quickly. When I'm done, I growl and turn to the mirror, forcing myself to look at the scar she gave me, the proof that she tried to kill me.

I trace my fingers over the marking, and I know I should feel fury. Disgust.

But all I feel is longing.

I have removed all my scars, through meticulous healing, as if I could rid

myself of any weaknesses and failures . . . except for this one. At first, it was a reminder of my hatred of her.

Now, it's just a *reminder of her*.

I should heal it, after this.

I know I never will.

And even if I did . . . it wouldn't matter. For she has scarred my very soul.

On the day of the plan, I wake up with unnerving calm. My eyes blink open and I feel—nothing.

Just like before.

It's almost a relief. Like my soul has remembered it is a ruler and shouldn't feel anything. Like I have finally *remembered myself*.

Yes. It is a relief.

I walk through the world like a ghost. I stare at myself in the mirror as I put on my armor, piece by piece, a distant roaring overtaking my senses.

I am no one. I do not matter. All that matters is my duty, and my realm. I think only about the last few centuries, before the last several months, before *her*. I think of all the years fighting the dreks. The thousands of warriors lost. The innocents who have perished.

I know what I must do. It's what I've been trained for. *I* don't matter. *She* does not matter.

It's in that state that I meet Isla at the cave.

"Are you ready?" I ask, my tone distant. Matter-of-fact.

"Yes. Are you?"

At that, a dull instinct tells me to call this off. To keep her far away from that sword.

But then my father's voice is in my head. *Love kills kingdoms*. My realm is almost at its ruin. I will do what is expected of me.

I nod.

She nods back. And then she's gone, off to wait near the cave's entrance.

It all feels distant, like it's happening to someone else, just like portaling to the front of a battlefield. Just like unsheathing my blade. Just like uncurling my shadows.

Turning off my emotions and just *doing*. Just killing. Just being a cold mask against the anguish and terror and pain. Just performing a duty.

I drop the orb in my hand, and the sparks erupt immediately, shooting in a storm of stars, the enchantment from the Starling market.

Dragons are attracted to shining objects. I practically paint the sky silver, for just a moment.

And the creature comes shooting out of the cave.

Now it's too late, that distant voice in the back corner of my mind says.

Too late to call Isla back.

Too late, as the beast bounds toward me. I turn and run, just like leading an enemy away. Just like I have countless times, in a diversion. Just like I have run *toward* danger. My mind is empty. Focused.

It is so easy, feeling nothing.

Far away, I hear the traps setting off, over and over, the ones Isla meticulously practiced.

Isla.

Her name in my thoughts produces an arrow of emotion, spiraling through my wall. She's getting closer to the sword. Closer to her ruin. Closer to her death . . .

I quickly snuff the thoughts and feelings out.

A loud crack reaches me. That's . . . new. It must be a trap we didn't see before. One we didn't account for.

I look over my shoulder, telling myself I only care about the sword being claimed. The curse being broken.

That's when I see the dragon isn't chasing me anymore.

No. It's hurtling back toward the cave.

Toward *her*.

And I run. I run faster than I did when I was being chased, I run toward *her*, still telling myself that I am simply ensuring the plan works, simply playing my role.

She's almost there. She's right in front of the pile of treasure, leaning toward the sword, oblivious to the dragon that has reached the entrance.

The dragon roars.

Fire follows.

No.

No.

No wall in this world could keep my emotions in check, at seeing the fire race to engulf her. No wall could stand between me and her, could remain steady between our souls.

I am lying to myself if I think I could ever live without her.

Time seems to stand still, as I watch flames fill the cave. As I watch them

inch toward my heart. My life. The only person who has ever seen who I am beyond the blood on my hands, the only person who has dragged me back from the abyss, the only person I would want by my side until the end of time.

The walls around my emotions turn to ash as my feelings for her overtake them.

My shadows lash out, suffocating the flames, shielding her, protecting her, *choosing* her.

And, as it senses my powers, the sword vanishes.

I don't care. I don't even look for it. I just look at her, standing there. We stare at each other, eyes wide, as the dragon bellows, and I portal us away.

I leave her in her room without another word. I need to clear my head. I need to see if I might feel any ounce of regret.

But I don't.

What have I done?

Exactly what I knew I would.

Exactly what I thought I was strong enough to avoid.

I chose her. Over my people. Over everything I have been taught to care about. Over myself.

I think I chose her a long time ago. It wasn't until now that I actually admitted it. My realm will die. *I will die.*

But she won't.

And the world will be better for it.

I feel shame. I feel fear.

But not once do I feel regret.

No. I should, but I don't. She deserves better than me. I don't really care. Because when I look at her, I think—

I will choose you over the world, every single time.

Call me a villain.

Call me a monster.

Just let me call you *mine*.



BLISS

She's angry at me for saving her.

Of course she is.

"Why did you do that?" she demands, her eyes shooting daggers from across her bedroom.

"You think I would watch you die, for the sword? Did you think I would make any choice that wasn't you?" I did. *I almost did.*

"Yes," she says. "You said so."

She's right. I meant it, up until I saw a world flash before my eyes, one that didn't include her. I thought reason could outweigh feeling, and perhaps that was the most foolish thing of all.

"Things changed," I explain.

Changed is a mild way to put it.

She shattered my life like a meteor, burning everything in her path.

"But your realm," she says. "You said you need it. For you, it's the most important thing in the world."

"My realm does need it," I admit. My hand is trembling as my fingers slide delicately, reverently, down her temple. "But it is not the most important thing in the world."

She is.

She *is* my world.

She looks at me, as if she could possibly understand. As if she could even know a fraction of the feelings I have for her.

If only she knew that I once thought myself incapable of feeling *anything* anymore.

My eyes slip down her body, first to see if she's injured. To assure myself that she is here, she is safe. Then, I look for other reasons.

“I touched it,” she says. “For a moment, I touched it. Maybe I’ll be able to find it again, now that it knows me.”

I sigh. She doesn’t understand. Of course, she doesn’t. I’ve lied to her about this plan from the very beginning.

“Isla,” I say gently, finally feeling regret. Regret that I ever had a plan that came at her expense. “I don’t want to use the sword anymore.”

Shock. Her brows come together. “What? Why?”

“Its cost is too high,” I say, meaning it.

“How are you going to save your realm now? How are you going to stop the dreks?”

Is it terrible of me not to be considering them at all? I truly am a monster.

I lift a shoulder. “I’m going to use my power, the same as always. Use myself as a shield.” I grin, if only to make her feel better. Anything, to make her feel better. “I make a decently good one, wouldn’t you agree?”

It won’t work, not as any real, long-term solution.

Rib-sinking worry is all I feel from her. How to tell her I’m not worried? That for the first time, I feel completely at peace?

“Will you keep your promise?” she says. “To help me at the Centennial?”

It’s in just over half a year. I wonder if my realm and I will even survive that long.

If we do . . . I’ll help her. I’ll be her shield. Her power. Anything she needs from me.

“Of course, Heart eater,” I say. “It’s going to be fun pretending not to know you. To introduce myself to you.”

In truth, I can’t imagine acting as if I haven’t felt her every shade of emotion on my tongue. As if I haven’t noticed endless details about her through hour upon hour of watching, waiting, and paying attention.

“To pretend I don’t know that you love chocolate, and touching your hair, and that you blush when I look at you for more than a few seconds. Or that you hate the cold and love to dance, and you frown when you lie.” I tuck her hair behind her ear. “You really do, by the way. You should work on that before the Centennial.”

She blushes, and I want to memorize that color, the color of her shock, the color of her pleasure, the color of her happiness.

I want to paint my castle with it, if only for a chance that she would live there with me.

Feelings radiate from her like an avalanche, snowflakes catching in my hair

and melting against my skin.

“And it will be fun pretending like I don’t know the shadows at your feet puddle when you’re happy. Or that, for some reason, you’ve had healers remove every one of your scars, except for the one I gave you. Or that you have a magnificent tub in your bathroom, and an even more magnificent ego.”

I tense, realizing she’s discovered things I haven’t even noticed, or admitted, about myself. She’s been paying attention too.

I feel everyone else’s emotions, yet have spent my entire life feeling misunderstood.

I feel seen for the first time.

Known, for the first time.

My own eyes are burning.

She bites her lip. “And that, even though, I hated you, *really*, really hated you . . . whenever I’m not with you, whenever I’m with anyone else, I feel hopelessly alone.”

Alone. That was how I felt before I met her.

I don’t feel that way anymore.

She has filled an aching part of me I didn’t even realize was empty. I can’t imagine not seeing her every day for the rest of my life. Every day before her seems dull, wasted. Colorless. Empty.

My life used to be shadows and death, but she has filled it with life and color.

She is my star, guiding me through the night.

I take her hand, and she says, “At the Centennial . . . we’re going to be strangers.”

“No,” I say, frowning at the word. “We could never be just strangers.”

“So what are we then?” she asks, sounding desperate to know, desperate to understand. Her own longing fills the space between us. “If not strangers? If not . . . enemies?”

I know what I want, and it isn’t what she deserves.

She deserves more than me, but I don’t care. I’m not sure how much time I have left before the dreks end me and my realm, but this, I know for certain:

I’ll follow her for the rest of her life, if she lets me. Even if she doesn’t, really.

“I don’t know,” I say, not knowing what kind of relationship people like us can even have. “But I want to be the only person you glare at, Heart eater. I want to be the only person you insult. I want to be the only name you speak in your sleep. I want to be the only person who knows how to make you writhe against a

wall. You know what? I want everything. I want to be greedy and selfish with you. I want all your laughs. All your smiles too. I would rather die than watch you smile at anyone that isn't me."

I mean it. I mean it so much, it scares me.

I regret the plans I had for her. I regret her death ever even being an option. Suddenly, I want to tell her. I want to let everything out in the open, so that there aren't any secrets between us. "There's something I need to tell you."

She seems to have the same idea.

"No. There's something *I* need to tell you." I know what it is before she says it. "I—I'm—"

I feel her discomfort, and I want to turn it to ash. I take her hand in mine before she can start playing with her hair.

"Heart eater," I say, trying to find it within myself to be gentle. "I know."

Shock. Uncertainty.

I need to make myself very clear. "I know that the curses don't apply to you," I say. "I know that you have never wielded power."

She steps back, toward the painted-over glass wall of her room.

For the first time since I've met her, she's truly afraid. Afraid of *me*.

Does she think not having abilities makes her vulnerable?

Does she think I would ever tell anyone?

"I've known for a while," I say, trying to make her feel more comfortable. I explain how I know, how I've known for months, and watch tears fall.

I want to make them go away. I don't ever want her to cry because of me.

I'm not deserving of her tears. Or of any of her feelings at all.

"Grim . . . what—what is wrong with me?"

No. I will stand no insults against her, even from herself. She is *perfect*.

I take her face in both of my hands and say, very clearly, "Nothing, absolutely nothing, is wrong with you, heart."

Her eyes widen. Then, before I can say anything else, she surprises me again.

She lifts to her toes and kisses me.

It's soft, and she stumbles away a moment later, doubting herself. I feel a wave of self-consciousness for some reason, as if she thinks there might be such thing as a time and place for kissing me. As if she got something wrong.

If she doubted my feelings for her for a moment, I will make them very clear.

I capture her lips with mine and taste her, my tongue tracing her lips, her teeth, the roof of her mouth. She tenses for a moment, before melting into me, her feelings like flames around us, sizzling against my cold skin.

“I want you,” she says, breaking our kiss. Her chest is heaving. “I want everything.”

I haven’t told her everything. Not yet. Now isn’t the time. Not when I’ve just revealed something else.

Her feelings say she wants me. The way she’s looking at me says she wants me.

“Are you sure?” I say, not daring to hope.

“Yes.”

She doesn’t know what she’s asking for. We’ve had several different encounters, but have never done *everything*, the way she wants to.

I feel the need to tell her what to expect, to warn her, to see if this is truly what she wants.

“I’m not gentle,” I say, thinking it might make her change her mind.

But if anything, her desire flames brighter.

“Could—could you be?” she asks.

I hesitate, not wanting to promise anything I can’t deliver. I’ve never—I’ve never been *gentle* or caring with anyone.

But for her, I’ll be anything. I nod.

Then, I take her into my arms and carry her to her bed.

This can’t be happening, I think. I’m not worthy of it. I’m not the type of person good things happen to. I don’t deserve them.

I don’t deserve her.

But if she wants me, I’ll have her anyway.

I carefully—*gently*—place her on her soft sheets. I feel a flash of worry, and tense, straighten. But her eyes are looking at the door.

She’s worried her guardians will walk in on us.

“We’re hidden,” I say, and I’ve never been more grateful for my shadows.

Slowly, I position myself over her. I bend down to kiss her again, to take this slow, to make sure, again, that this is what she wants . . . when she reaches for my shirt, trying to yank it off. It doesn’t move.

I reach behind me and tear it over my head, feeling the heat of her desire burn even brighter. She’s staring at me—at my chest, my shoulders. No one has ever dared admire me. I wasn’t sure I was anything worthy of her admiration.

“You are perfect,” she says, and I’m irritated she would use that word on me, when she exists. I don’t compare to her. The world doesn’t compare to her. “I didn’t know—I didn’t know someone could look like this. It’s unfair, really.”

I laugh. “You’re doing very little to discourage my *magnificent ego*.”

Her hands stroke my chest, awakening my every nerve. I've always felt cold, as if my emotions and heart had been frozen solid, but around her, I feel alive. I feel *everything*.

Her fingers trace the scar she made, and my eyes fall closed, remembering the first time I saw her. Remembering the moment my life changed forever.

My eyes open, and I see those green eyes again, glimmering, as she watches me. As she *sees* me.

My shadows puddle across the room, and for the first time in my long life I know bliss. True, endless bliss.

She takes a shaking breath, and my eyes lock on her chest. Her skin is prickled with need, and her silk dress is doing nothing to hide it.

She is perfect, without any ornaments, without any fabrics. I want to feel her skin against mine, I don't want anything between us. My hands raise to rip her dress down the center the way I did before, and she makes an adorable sound of protest.

"Demon. I'm not going to have any dresses left if you keep destroying them."

I'm impatient, desperate to see every inch of her. Desperate to tear her clothes to shreds. "I'll buy you new ones. I'll buy you a market. I'll get you your own tailor." I mean it. Because I plan on destroying far more of her dresses.

"Fine," she finally says, and it's all the encouragement I need. I rip her dress to shreds, and then her chest is in my mouth, and her groan goes straight to the throbbing core of me.

I bite her lightly, and she gasps, her desire like flames licking against my skin.

My fingers stroke down her stomach, slipping beneath her lace, and the moment they reach her center, she says my name.

I never liked my name until right now, hearing it leave her lips in a gasp.

I curse at the same time. I curse her name. "*Isla*." She is the biggest threat to my life. The biggest threat to the world, simply because I know I wouldn't hesitate to burn it down for her. Simply because I have *decided* to doom my realm for her. "You are truly going to kill me."

"I will," she says, her voice a husky rasp. "If you don't keep touching me."

I'll never stop, I want to tell her. If she lets me, I'll keep touching her forever.

"Please," she says. "I want everything."

Everything. I wonder if she knows that I want far more than this single night could offer.

I take the rest of my clothes off, then what's left of hers, gaze locked on hers the entire time, watching her breathing become more labored. Watching her lips part. Feeling her desire fanning around us in red-hot flames.

I climb over her again slowly, settling my hips over hers. I move my mouth across her shoulder, and her skin prickles beneath me, responsive to my every touch.

Her want never falters, but I sense a spike of worry. Her eyes are on me, and I understand.

She thinks . . . the difference in size . . .

That thought alone nearly does me in, but all I say is, "I think you'll find we fit perfectly."

She nods. She starts to breathe more heavily, as if preparing herself.

"Are you sure?" I ask one final time.

"Yes," she says, and I reach between us.

At the first press of me against her, my fingers nearly turn her sheets to ash. A bolt of pleasure races up my spine.

I've done this for centuries, but one simple touch is enough to ruin me.

I grind my teeth together, steadying myself, and begin to push in, slowly. Every inch makes me question my sanity. Makes me question whether I've done it correctly all these years, because *this*—

This feels different.

I feel her flashes of pain as she gets used to me, and I stop, waiting until she urges me to keep going. My arms are trembling with restraint, with my effort not to finish, as I push in and in. And in.

Her nails dig into my shoulders, and I groan into the crown of her head. I trail my nose down her temple, and I curse against the place between her neck and shoulder. She's so tight around me, her desire is so saturated, this feels *too fucking good*.

Too right.

I finally bottom out, and she clenches around me. I see stars and barely manage to fight my own release.

Then, just when I thought it couldn't possibly feel better, she starts writhing against me, and I begin to move.

My veins are full of fire, my nerves are bolts of lightning, her head falls back, and I make a sound that is nothing short of a growl as I have her exactly the way I've imagined every single night since the first time I met her.

Closer. I need to get closer, somehow. I curl my arm beneath her, pressing

her to my front, feeling her chest rubbing against mine.

Her legs lock behind me, and I don't think I'm breathing.

She turns her head, cheek pressed against her sheets, as she makes a scraping sound in the back of her throat that I want to memorize, that I want to provoke every night.

Her eyes. I need to see her eyes.

I curl my hand around the back of her neck and tilt her head back to me, so her gaze meets mine.

Green. Fiery green. She's looking at me with the same intensity she did when we were dueling. Her lips are parted, and she's panting.

I want to make her pant more. I want to make her want this all the time, if only to give her a reason to seek me out again.

I lift her hips higher, and she bites her bottom lip, as if she is trying to keep from crying out again, as if she's embarrassed by how much sound she's making.

No. I want to hear everything. I want to *taste* everything.

I tug her bottom lip from beneath her teeth and kiss her. The moment my tongue meets hers, I feel it. Her desire rushing up to meet mine, two forces called together.

With a white-hot crash, our pleasures merge, fire meeting ice. Light meeting darkness. We become one in more ways than I ever thought possible, our feelings converging, bridging, melting wholly together. She gasps, then pulses around me, and I can feel her every emotion as if it's coming from my own soul. I ride every wave of pleasure with her.

I thrust harder, dragging out her release, making her whimper, making her say my name again—and then, I join her.

Infinite. That is how I feel afterward, as we stare at each other, sharing breath, our chests flush, our heartbeats mingling. I can't tell where my soul ends and hers begins. I think they're one, now.

And I wouldn't have it be any different.

We don't stop after the first time. No, we are both ravenous, and it's as if it's the first time I've ever done it; that's what it feels like.

It feels different.

She finally falls asleep atop me, and I've never felt more content in my life. I watch her sleep, but this time, she doesn't frown. No, she smiles. She snores softly.

She must feel safe in my arms. I never thought that was possible.

Finally she wakes up, and her eyes go right to mine.

I smile.

What an unfamiliar expression. Though, with her, it feels natural, like I've been doing it my entire life.

Shock rolls through her, then a wave of disbelief.

"You have a dimple," she says.

"Do I?"

I suppose she might be the only person who's ever seen it.

She shifts, crawling up my chest to rest her face right in front of mine, her chin on my collarbone. She's smiling too, until a blade of panic makes her happiness vanish.

I sit up instantly. "What's wrong?" I ask, ready to destroy anything that's making her afraid.

She blinks at me. Her worry spreads. "You—you aren't going to disappear, right? Now that we . . . now that we—"

Oh. I understand immediately. It's because of what I told her. For a moment, I feel heartbreaking sadness.

Then, I laugh. I can't help it.

Isla's worry just grows deeper. Is my laugh that disconcerting? I keep laughing, folding over, knowing for certain I've never been this amused in my long life, and she pinches my ribs. I barely feel it.

"Heart eater," I finally say, when I'm able to get the word out. "I said Nightshade rulers are typically forbidden from bedding the same person more than once. Last night alone . . ."

I had her several times. Several ways. All over this room.

It almost makes me laugh again to think that I would be able to only have her once. I've killed thousands, I've endured endless pain, but even I would not be able to keep myself away from her. Around her, my self-restraint is nonexistent.

She really is a drug.

One taste of her and I am well and truly addicted.

Relief is like a cool tide washing over both of us. She straddles me, grinding against me, and we both moan.

"Good," she says, ducking to whisper the words right into my ear. "Because I want to do it all again. Immediately."

She really is going to be the death of me. And I'll die with a smile on my lips.

"Heart eater," I say, my voice pained, because I'm not currently inside her.

“You are a bane.” I feel the need to tell her how much she’s tortured me. How much I enjoyed last night. “It’s never . . .” I pause. “For me, it’s never felt like that.”

“So, you won’t be entertaining other women lining up for the privilege of sleeping with you anymore?”

Her tone is casual, but her worry is real.

“No. You have ruined me.” In more ways than she could possibly know. “I have a thousand things to do, but all I want is to lock us in this room . . . All I want is to claim you so thoroughly, that there won’t be a part of you that doesn’t have a memory with me.”

Both of our desires converge again, enough to drown in. “Do it,” she orders.

I close my eyes. “A curse,” I say.

Then I obey.



BROKEN AND MENDED

She upends everything. Not just my feelings. Not just my heart. But also, my palace.

Her stuff is everywhere. Her clothes are on my floor. Her little crystal bottles are in my bathroom. Her scent is in my sheets.

And I love it.

I hate every time she leaves, which is all the time, since she has endless training sessions with her guardians.

Like right now. We just woke up. It's barely past dawn. "They'll be looking for me soon," she says, trying to sit up. At night, I keep illusions in her room, in case they check on her, but they can only do so much.

I place my hand on her hip to hold her down. She looks up at me. Breathes out, right against my neck, sending chills down my spine. My arm is wrapped around her. She curls into me, pressing her body against mine, and amusement touches her lips when she feels me, ready. Always ready for her.

"Last night wasn't enough?" she says, her voice breathy against my lips. She gently runs her fingers down my length, and a low sound of need escapes me.

"It will never be enough," I say.

Every time we do this, I expect for this need to be satiated, like it's a hunger. But it's more like the universe. Infinite. Endless.

My hand trails down her hip, until my fingers find her own need. She's been looking down at me, watching me play, but now her eyes snap back up to mine.

One look is all it takes.

Her nails are clawing into my chest, she's sinking down onto me, I'm groaning my approval as she starts to move, shoulders hiking, head thrown back.

I grip her hip, my thumb stroking down her soft sensitive skin.

She's as insatiable as I am.

She bites her bottom lip as she moves and *those lips*. The things she has done to me with that mouth. The times I have kissed her, the times she has kissed *me*, until our skin is bruised, until both our lips are raw and aching. She likes it. She likes the marks on her neck from my lips. She asks for it, and so do I. Still, for now, we hide the proof of this, from both our realms. We've had to heal each other from the countless ways we have marked each other in this endless, limitless joining of pleasure.

Like right now, as she scratches down my chest, making long marks with her nails. I'll have to heal those later, or maybe I won't. I'll wear them proudly, as a sign she used me for pleasure.

"Come here," I say, pulling her down against me, and her chest is rubbing against mine. Her hands are on my shoulders.

She kisses me, and I wonder how I went five centuries without this feeling. Without this rightness. Without this *taste* and pleasure.

My tongue is in her mouth, then my teeth are on her bottom lip, sucking, biting. A moan escapes her throat. "Please," she says, and I know her. I know what she wants. Especially now, when we've spent so little time sleeping.

I wrap an arm around her waist, pinning her to me, before I unleash. She gasps against my lips, panting, as I give her what she wants, what she begs for late at night. What I dream of during the few hours of sleep I've gotten in the last few days.

She's bucking her hips, meeting me stroke for stroke, burying her hands in my hair, nibbling at my neck, sucking against my throat.

Then, she's pulsing, and I'm joining her, and we're both sweaty, chests moving together. She hums against my neck, and this . . . it's more than sex. More than physical connection.

There is a word for it, I'm sure. One I can't bring myself to form, even in my mind.

"I have to go," she says, and this time, she leaves.

A dragon. A baby dragon is currently *living in my quarters*.

Isla presented it to me as a *pet*.

I refused, of course. I don't like anyone—other than my hearteater—touching my things. That includes a small bundle of scales.

But then, she portaled me to the forest, where she had left it . . . and I felt her wave of worry at the creature being alone. Her disappointment at my reluctance. So, I brought it back with me.

All it's done is sit and cry.

"If I kill you, she'll hate me," I say. I purse my lips, going through scenarios. "Maybe I can make it look like an accident . . ."

It just tilts his head and looks at me with wide, watery eyes.

I sigh.

I pick it up, and the tears magically disappear. I glare at it. "Control yourself," I say. I set it back down.

The crying starts again immediately.

I flare my shadows, trying to scare it. It just cries harder.

Exasperated, my hands make fists, before I pick it up again. The crying stops. I narrow my eyes at it. "You will not manipulate me," I growl, with as much venom as possible.

It just leans forward—and licks me.

Disgusting. I didn't know dragons *licked anything*. I set it down, ignoring the crying, leaving the room for a council meeting.

When I return, I'm relieved that the crying has stopped.

But the beast is in *my bed*. Surrounded by something . . . I realize, with a flash of irritation that it *tore my pillow into shreds*. Isla's is, of course, unharmed.

"Off," I say, picking it up, and setting it down on the floor. Instead of crying, it just looks up at me like I'm an idiot, before moving its wings *that Isla was so convinced were broken* and flying back onto my sheets. It spins around, making itself comfortable before happily falling into place, resting its rounded head against its tail.

I glare at it. "How convenient that your wings are working again," I say, cursing it. Cursing the fact that I can't say no to her.

The fury dies when Isla arrives. She sees the dragon and smiles. *Smiles*. The joy permeates my room, light as the hot-air balloon we once stood in. She loves it.

I glare at the dragon. It took me months to get Isla to care for me. This creature has been here for *days* and she's smitten.

Its favorite place is on her chest. She smooths her finger between its eyes until it falls asleep.

Only then can I portal the creature into the soft bedding she made it in the next room. I have to be careful, or the beast will awaken, screaming, and she'll rush out of the room to get it.

I am *extraordinarily careful* as I portal it away.

Then, I turn to my hearteater. She's laughing. She finds me amusing.

Moments later, that laughing turns to whispered pants against my throat.

My fists lock in irritation. I've been annoyed all day. Last night, my meetings ran so late, Isla was already asleep when I got back to my room.

The wretched creature was asleep on her. It awoke when I slipped under the covers and glared at me, as if *I* was in some way invading *their* space. In my room. In my bed. Next to *my* hearteater.

She was gone before I woke up, off to her early training. And the beast was resting on *my chest*.

The nerve.

Now, though, I get to see her. *Finally*. I portal to her room, grateful to have time without the creature between us.

But the moment my feet hit the ground, I know something is wrong. I feel it. I see it in her face.

My eyes quickly settle on the sword.

The one I spent decades searching for. The one I had planned to use, before all my plans went up in ash.

Before *us*.

Her hurt hits me next.

"Hearteater," I say, very carefully. "Where did you find that?"

Her eyes narrow. "You said you had something to tell me. Before I interrupted you."

That was weeks ago. Before we . . . before we became one, for the first time. "What is it?" I swallow, dread sinking its teeth into my chest.

No. If she knows what I was planning . . . what I was ready to do . . . what I've been keeping from her this entire time . . .

I could manipulate her. I could go into her mind and make her forget. I could make sure she never learned any of this.

Part of me wants to. I almost do.

But that twisting in my chest . . . that irrational feeling that makes me want to be honest . . .

It wins.

I tell her the truth.

I tell her she is Nightshade. I tell her about her father. About how he was a Nightshade impervious to curses, just like her.

I tell her why I needed the sword so badly, and of course—of course she *offers it to me*.

“I told you,” I say, fighting for my voice to remain steady in the face of her growing disappointment. “I don’t want to use it anymore.”

Her own tone is cutting. “Right. The cost is too high. Tell me the truth now. What was the cost?”

There’s no lying. No hiding. Even as my shadows lurch forward, toward her, even as my heart sinks, as if my body is bracing for impact. As though it knows that once the words are out, there is no reversing this.

“Your life.”

There it is. The moment everything changes. The moment I’ve done something so monstrous, she can’t see past it.

Tears start to slowly slide down her cheeks, and I hate myself. I hate that I ever had a plan that didn’t put her first.

“My . . . life?” Her voice breaks, along with my heart.

My explanations mean nothing. Her emotions do not falter.

“I never want to see you again,” she says. And she means it.

There isn’t anything I won’t give her.

And so, I vanish.

Without her, my weeks are pure and utter torture. I’d rather be skinned by shadow-blades every night than lie awake and miss her.

Only that wretched dragon keeps me company. It cries all night and refuses to leave her place in bed. I stop trying to move it.

I feed it. I talk to it, like a fool, wondering aloud if she will ever forgive me. Surely she won’t abandon her dragon, will she?

“She’ll be back for us,” I tell it, but I don’t really believe my words. Her hurt was heavy. She can never trust me now. She can never . . . she can never truly care about me again.

I deserve this.

The scar worsens. Every day I battle it, until my powers are drained. Astria tells me what I already know.

“One more breach. That’s all it’s going to take.”

One more breach, and they will take over this entire land. They’ll kill me. Everyone will be dead.

I knew it would come to this. I chose this.

It happens just days later. I’m in bed when I sit up, gasping, pain slicing me in half. The scar. It’s ripped, right down the center. A cut larger than ever before.

It’s the end. I know it.

I put on my armor, piece by piece. My imminent death should scare me, should enrage me . . . but I have lived. For just a few months, I *lived*. I knew true emotion.

I knew—

I knew her. And she knew me.

Everyone beyond these shores sees the bloodthirsty warrior, the villain, the enemy. But I don't care.

I don't care if no one else ever knew me, because she did. And to be known by her is enough.

I portal myself and the dragon into her room. I wrap the beast in shadows, so it doesn't interrupt.

She senses me immediately. I expect the anger and annoyance, but not the relief. Not the happiness. "I told you I never wanted to see you again," she says.

I try to smile. "I might have good news for you, then."

She sees through my attempt at a joke immediately. Her face pales. Her anger dissipates. "What do you mean?"

I don't answer. I just stride toward her until she's in my arms, and then I look at her, *look at her*, taking in every detail.

"What's wrong?" she demands.

Nothing. Everything.

"The scar has opened. In a place it never has before. A place previously deemed safe. There's a village near it."

What I don't tell her is that this is the biggest opening yet. And I know . . . I know it will kill me. I know it's too much for even me to manage on my own. The sword would save us. It would save everything.

It's either me and all my people and my lands . . . or her.

I choose her.

It's villainous. Monstrous. But I don't care.

I choose her.

"Whatever happens to me, heart, I want you to know something."

"What?" She tries to wriggle out of my arms, eyes widening in concern. "Grim, nothing is going to happen to you, nothing—"

"Let me talk, heart," I say, pressing a finger to her lips. Taking a moment to enjoy their softness. "Interrupting is very rude." I hope to see her smile, one last time.

But she doesn't smile. If anything, her concern grows.

My thumb smooths down her cheek. "I need you to know that you changed

everything. The gods don't listen to people like me, but I would go on my knees and beg them to let me keep you."

And thank them for ever letting me have you.

"You were once the bane of my existence . . . and now, you are the center of it."

Disbelief. Tears form in her eyes. Happiness, then dread.

"My entire world was night, and you lit a match. No matter what happens to me in this life, I'll find you in the next one. I'll always find you. What I feel for you can never be extinguished. Like the nighttime sky, it is infinite. You and me . . . we're infinite."

That word. The one my sister once taught me. I know its meaning now.

Her tears fall, and I catch them against my thumb.

Her voice is just a whisper. "No. Don't go." It becomes desperate. "I can help you. We can figure this out, whatever it is, Grim, *together*. Let me go with you. We can try the sword. Let me go."

She won't stop. I can see it in the determination of her face, in her tone, in the emotions flaring around me.

Together. She wants to face the end of the world *together*.

But I love her too much to let her.

"Okay, Hearteater," I say. "You can come."

I kiss her for the last time. Hers is the last name I want on my lips, hers is the last taste I want of life.

She doesn't notice when I slip my fingers down her back. I grip my portaling device.

And I take it with me, so she can't follow.



I WOULD KNOW HER ANYWHERE

If there was any hope of surviving this, it's gone.

The scar is ripping seam by seam. The entire sky is blackened by scales.
They're everywhere. They aren't stopping.

I don't stop fighting.

I see her in my mind, the memories playing over and over. Isla, in that line.
Isla, stabbing my chest. Watching her sleep. Watching her run from the
blacksmith and hold her own against the thieves. Watching her dance. Watching
her laugh. Watching her watch *me* with something like happiness.

And then, like one last shred of pity from this world, I *feel her*.

I feel her.

But it isn't an illusion. It isn't a memory.

My body, my mind, my very soul all still.

I would know her anywhere, in any world, any universe, any time-line. In
darkness and light, in quiet and chaos, I know her.

I will always know her. We could live a thousand lifetimes, and I would find
her and love her in all of them.

Our souls could never be strangers. They are forever stitched together, like
the stars and night.

I look away from the dreks, toward that feeling, that pull—

Until I'm looking at her.

She's standing in this field of ash, dreks screeching.

Fear greater than I've ever known crashes into me, seeing her here, in a place
that's going to be full of death. My eyes widen in horror. But then—

The realization sets in.

There's only one way she's here. *One way she's using my powers, without the*

portaling device.

So that's what this is.

That's the name of this feeling, of this longing, of this obsession that is both cruel and merciful, both curse and cure.

I've never loved anyone, or anything.

But I love her.

I love her.

I smile, even as death rages around us, even as my own is imminent. I can die now, with a smile on my lips.

Because I've found it. I've found something worth living and dying for. I reach for our shared power, to portal her away, back to safety.

But I never make it.

Talons pierce through my chest. I roar.

It's answered by a scream, one that threatens to cleave the heavens in half. She's screaming *for me*.

And then, I feel it.

The ground trembling. The world, splitting. Power, *pure and utter power*, blinding the universe.

I know what it is, and *no*—

NO.

It is unlike anything I have ever seen in anyone other than myself. I remember Laila's death. How my shadows *surged*. How they ruined everything in their path, how they raged.

Hers are the same. She has accessed the greatest depths of emotion, and she has no control. It's all coming out, like a dam breaking open, no signs of slowing.

Under this cleaving, unyielding power, every single drek turns to ash. The ground itself trembles. The world goes black, for just a moment, as if the universe itself is shuddering.

I portal to her side, throwing myself through the darkness, through her ruinous power, but it is done. When the world settles, I see I'm too late. The sword is dug into the ground, and her powers—

She used them.

She used *all of them*.

She found them in the darkest pits of herself and clawed them out. She followed what *I told her*, and used emotion, *pain*, as power.

Pain can be useful. It's the strongest emotion.

It's all I feel as she falls into my arms, her body spent. She's cold. So cold and fading. I sink to my knees, her body splayed out across my lap, and I grip her face.

"Isla, come back to me. Come back."

I shake her, fear and desperation and pain taking over.

"Wake up," I say, my voice breaking. "Stab me through the chest again if you have to, just wake up."

As life leaves her, she manages to say, "Grim. Pain is not the strongest."

No. Don't go. Don't leave me here, alone. Stay.

Stay.

She doesn't.

She dies.

Isla was right. I know that now. She taught me.

Pain is not the strongest.

Love is.

I imagine a life without that smile, that laugh, those eyes. Without *her*. And the world feels unworthy of turning. Everyone else seems unworthy of living.

My roar shakes the world as I demand it to give her back, as I threaten time with all my shadows, as I plead with the gods, *begging*.

I will give anything, I think. Anything.

Even myself.

I feel a pull. The last shred of her power, somewhere down this crumbling bridge. I reach toward it. Clutch it.

It is almost gone, fading, like the last star in the sky blinking closed.

No.

My pain, my power, it has all been used to *kill*, to *destroy*. Maybe it could be used for something good. Maybe it could be used to *save*. This bridge between us—it goes both ways.

I remember something I read centuries before, in a book that is now just dust. An ancient way to save a life by trading it. By giving something up. Giving *everything*.

I do.

I feel the power rushing from me, draining me, and this is what my father warned about. This is the love that kills kingdoms. This love feels like it could kill *worlds*.

I don't care.

I press a hand against her still heart, and I bring all of myself to the surface. The power. The life. The blood.

I give it all to her, to my heart, almost losing myself in the process, almost giving too much away—

Until I hear a beat.

She opens her eyes, and the relief—it consumes me.

I'm alive.

So is she.

Green. *Green*. "Heart. You're here, heart." My hands shake, feeling the warmth return to her cold skin. Seeing the color come back.

"How?" she asks in a feeble rasp.

"You died," I say, my voice breaking on the word. I shake my head. "You died in my arms."

I close my eyes, and tears—tears of gratitude fall.

I will never let her go. I will never let anything harm her. I make the oath to the world. To myself.

I will choose her over it. Every single time. Always. No matter the cost.

"How?" she asks again.

"I bound you to me."

She blinks, confused, as if her senses are still returning. "What—what does that mean?"

How to even explain? I'm not sure I know myself. I feel her life within mine, tied. Flickering.

This is not forever. I know that. But I will find a way to make it so. I will find a solution. For now, though—

"It means we share a life."

Her eyes widen. She takes a shaking breath. "You—" She frowns. "You gave your life for me?"

I smile down at her. My dirt-crusting fingers smooth down her face. "You did the same for me."

She just looks at me. She looks, and I still can't believe it.

She gave her life for mine. I did the same. Now, we are one. Not just sharing powers . . . but sharing life itself.

I feel her worry. For *me*. Even after she did the same, she thinks I gave too much. Perhaps I did.

I smooth her hair behind her ear. "I don't ever want to live a single day

without you,” I say. “It wouldn’t even be living.”

I kneel by my bath and comb the dirt out of her hair. I take the soap in my hand and gently rub it on her skin. She’s sore. Raw. She winces, and I stop until she tells me to continue.

“I’m here,” I say, and she grips my hand, like I’m her gravity. She’s mine. She’s my everything.

I carry her to our bed, and she lies there in near silence, as if deep in thought, before asking for her little dragon.

I portal him in—and he immediately makes a shrieking sound of happiness. He lies on her chest, and she smooths a finger down his scales.

I take the quickest bath of my life, not wanting to leave her alone. By the time I towel off and rejoin her, though, she’s sleeping. I let her rest, my hand over her heart. I just need—I just need to hear it beating.

It’s been days now, and Isla is quiet. It’s like part of her is rediscovering the world for the first time, or maybe she’s just deep in thought. I give her space. I portal her back to her room. She tells her guardians she’s sick, to get out of a few days of training.

I don’t know why . . . but I portal her back to the field of nightbane. The flowers. They made her smile before. I don’t know what else to do . . . how else to make her happy.

It’s night. The stars glimmer overhead, watching us. We’re drowning in purple. The petals sway gently in the wind.

“You gave your life for me,” she says again, quietly.

You are my life, I want to say. But I don’t want to scare her.

I think she can read it in my eyes. She takes a step toward me. The flowers are nothing compared to her; they should hate her.

All at once, she throws her arms around me, and her face is buried in my neck. She’s shaking. I hold her tightly, as if I could stand here, in a field of flowers, keeping her alive forever.

If I was guaranteed forever with her, I wouldn’t move. I would stay right here, in this moment, in this place, and be happy. I’m holding everything I’ve ever wanted.

“I love you,” she whispers in my ear, and I stop breathing.

I love you. No one’s ever said that to me.

She pulls away. “You don’t have to say it back. I don’t even know why—”

I shake my head and grab her arms. My answer is immediate. “I don’t love you.”

She stills. The panic in her face—the devastation—is so sharp, I don’t waste a moment before continuing.

“That isn’t strong enough a word.” I frown. “No, heart, I don’t love you. I live for you. I destroy for you. I die for you. My every thought and emotion revolve around you. You are my sun, my moon, my gravity, my eternity.”

Her eyes are wide and brimming in tears. I take her hands in mine. And slowly, slowly, I bow before her, on both knees.

I’m ruler of Nightshade. I shouldn’t get down on my knees for anyone or anything.

But she is my church, she is my curse, she is my conviction.

She is my god.

I bow only to her.

I press my forehead to her hands. In reverence. In awe. In a plea. “Let me be yours. Forever.”

She blinks. Shock wraps around me, her emotions circling mine. Slowly, understanding crests.

“You—you want to—but Nightshade rulers have never—”

I shake my head. “I don’t care. I want to marry you. If anyone has a problem with that, I will kill them where they stand.” The court will find out, of course. They will accept her. I will ensure it.

She opens her mouth. Closes it. “You . . . you want this?”

I smile. My happiness and joy and relief and *love* are so sharp, so saturated, that for the first time, they have their own shade.

Her shade. Red. Black and red mixing to create the deepest shade of crimson. We are the same. I don’t know if it’s always been this way, or if her own feelings bled into mine, but I don’t care. We are one in every way.

“I want everything with you, Hearteater. I want marriage, I want children, I want to be standing next to you, holding your hand, at the end of the world.” My eyes burn with intensity, with feeling. “I want to live endless lifetimes with you, because one isn’t enough. Not for me. Not even close. If we live a thousand years—I’ll want a million more. I’m selfish, I’m greedy, I want you for endless eternities. We are infinite: everything, everywhere, at the same time. And I want *everything*.”

My hands are trembling. Hers are too.

“Isla Crown,” I say. “Will you be my wife?”

Tears fall down her cheeks, and then she's smiling. Her happiness wraps around us in bright, searing red. "Yes," she says. "Not for one life, but for *every* life, I will be your wife."



BOUND

I don't know why I'm nervous.

It's not because of doubts, of course. It's because, for the first time, I wonder if maybe she will leave me here, at this altar, alone.

"She's coming," Astria says.

My general knows almost everything now. She knows Isla is her cousin. She knows she is the ruler of Wildling.

I told her, because Isla is going to be my wife. She is going to be the ruler of Nightshade. Astria is going to ensure my court either accepts that—or dies by her blade.

Today, she's our witness.

But my bride isn't here yet.

I don't deserve her. She forgave the unforgivable. She saved my life, even after I put hers in danger.

Her actions had consequences. That power she unleashed . . . it didn't just kill the dreks. She lives with guilt daily. Pain. I try my best to make things better.

Some days are better than others.

We moved the date several times, until now. Now, the time has finally come to speak words to this bond, to this vow that we've already proven several ways.

What's one more?

Love wasn't just something I believed myself incapable of. It was something I believed myself *undeserving* of.

But when she looks at me . . . I find myself reaching for the parts of me that existed long ago, that aren't cloaked in shadow.

When she looks at me, I see a reason behind the darkness—the light I was always meant to find.

A puddle of stars forms. My own power. And from it emerges the most

beautiful woman that has ever existed.

“You didn’t think I’d leave you all alone, did you?” she says, smiling. “You followed me into death. Marrying you is the least I can do.”

Her beauty is ruinous. My eyes glisten, watching her approach me in her wedding gown.

It was made for her, by her new tailor. She wouldn’t let me look before, so now I do, greedily, and my heart feels like it might melt right through my chest.

Our story is stitched onto her dress—curls of shadow, meeting colorful flowers. Death meeting life. Creating something beautiful.

“I take it you like it?” she asks, as she joins me in front of the altar.

Truthfully, she could have shown up covered in dirt and mud the way she was during most of our trials, and I would be smiling as widely as I am now.

She reaches up to brush against the dimple she’s discovered. I lean into her touch.

Astria’s disbelief hits me, and I don’t even care. We turn toward her, and she reads from the ancient book.

Nightshade rulers have never married. A woman hasn’t even lived in their quarters. There is no precedent, so I asked Astria to look in the library she loves so much and find the best vows she could.

“Ready?” Isla says.

“Always.”

Astria begins.

“Love is the greatest surrender.” She turns to me. “Are you, Grim Malvere, ready to face your most important battle yet, without armor or weapons? Are you ready to lay bare your mind and soul to another, for the rest of time?”

“I am,” I say, and Isla smiles.

Astria turns to face her. “And are you, Isla Crown, ready to put down your daggers and swords and shields, and open yourself to the greatest vulnerability of your life, a union of minds and souls, for the rest of time?”

“I am,” she says, and this smile, this happiness—it is infinite. Just like the stone I plan to get her, as a symbol of our union, because she deserves nothing less.

“Then I pronounce you, Isla Crown, and you, Grim Malvere, bound until the end of time. In this life and the next.”

“And all the ones after that,” I say, just to make it very clear, and then I pull Isla into my arms.

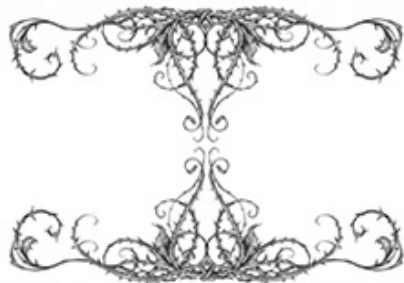
Our kiss is gentle, soft. I feel her tears against my own cheeks. Only when

they keep falling do I realize I'm crying too. Our tears are mixing. Our feelings are intertwined.

And so are we. Always.

Until the end of time.

THE END



THE END

LIGHTLARK
DUELING CROWNS EDITION

ORO



#1 New York Times
bestselling author

ALEX ASTER





For those who find summer in the depths of winter







TRUTH

“Father doesn’t care about me.”

My mother pauses, fingers clenching around her teacup. She frowns. It’s an unfamiliar expression on her face.

“Why would you say such a thing?” she finally responds. She takes a long sip of her drink, then gently sets it down, the glass clinking against the table. Her gaze doesn’t meet mine. It’s fixed on the honey she swirls into her tea. It’s the same color as both our eyes.

“Because it’s true.” My voice is emotionless—but I am not. Typically, I keep these feelings bottled up inside, as if burying them might make them disappear. As if freezing them might make them harden forever, like the oracles on Moon Isle.

They don’t.

My father barely looked at me before choosing Egan, my older brother, to take on a hunt this morning. They’re going to track down a creature with a crown of enchanted horns. Then, they’re going to train with new swords from the armory. Mother suggested I join them, but he ignored her. Egan shot me an apologetic look as I watched them walk out together, hollowness forming in my chest.

“It’s not true, Oro,” Mother finally says, avoiding my eyes.

But I have known since the beginning; I am second choice. Second son. Only important if something terrible happens to Egan.

My tea is sweet, filled with spoonfuls of that honey, but bitterness fills my mouth anyway. The amber liquid goes down like mud.

Because it *is* true. Now I know for certain.

The castle is dark and quiet when my bedroom door creaks open. I'm up in an instant, fire flaming in my palm.

It extinguishes just as quickly when I see it's only Egan. His golden hair catches the moonlight as he closes the door behind him. "Were you going to set me aflame?" he asks, fighting a smile.

"Maybe," I say, letting my hand fall to my side. "I wasn't expecting you."

At that, Egan's grin falters. For a while, he used to visit me every night and repeat the same lessons Father taught him. He would tell me every detail of his instructions in military operations or show me with his sword what combat skills they had learned.

He stopped recently.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Things have been busy."

My life has been anything but. My smile is rueful. "I'm bored out of my mind. I'd give anything to be busy."

Egan sighs. There are violet crescents beneath his eyes, like he's tired. He folds himself into one of my chairs, slumping so his neck rests against the back cushion. He's grown five inches quickly, and it's like his body doesn't know what to do with it. His legs look unnaturally long, not fitting the rest of him. We used to be the same height, but now he's almost as tall as Father. Mother says the same thing will happen to me, in a few years.

"Be grateful you're not heir. *You* get to have a life," Egan says.

"A life spent cooped up in this dreary castle is hardly a good thing."

Egan smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "To me, your life seems amazing."

"We could switch," I suggest, trying to make his smile last.

It doesn't. It never does. He just lifts a shoulder. "Who knows. Maybe you'll get to be king one day."

"No," I say, scowling. "I never want to be king." It's true.

"Why not?"

The answer is obvious, but I decide to humor him. "Because that will mean you're gone."

He nods. With a slap against his knees, he rises from the chair with a flourish. "Very true, Oro. And I like being alive, even if training is tiring." He strides over to me. "Do you still have those swords I gave you?"

I grin. "Of course."

I retrieve them from beneath my bed. I toss him one, and he catches it instantly. He falls into a fighting stance. I fall into my own. The one he taught me. The one Father taught him.

“So,” he starts. “This is what I learned today.”



GILDED

The day I kill a man is the first time my father looks proud of me. His golden gauntlet falls heavily onto my shoulder, fingers curling around my arm to turn me around, toward his small council. The hard lines of his face soften slightly as he smiles. “Gilding, can you imagine? Behold the strength of our line. And not even in the heir.”

He’s put the attendant I accidentally gilded on full display, in front of his council’s meeting chamber. A proud symbol of the crown’s strength.

Later, my mother finds me retching in my room. Her hand is warm on my back.

“It was an accident,” she says. “We all make mistakes.”

Maybe, but mine—this one—cost a man his life. His name was Albert. He had a family. A daughter my age. Pearl. We’ve played together.

And now. . . . now his gold-coated corpse is being viewed by the king’s closest circle. My monstrous action is being *celebrated*.

The next day, my father asks me to do it again, to perform for his council, but I can’t. I can’t do *anything*. I don’t want to. My shame and regret have extinguished the abilities that have always come so easily to me. Now, I couldn’t summon a flame if I tried.

He stops talking to me again. I’ve gone from being a wonder to an embarrassment.

Before I could even talk, my mother found me in my crib, the room on fire. As she’s always told it, I just stared at her through the flames.

My mother was shocked. My abilities weren’t supposed to be so advanced, for a second son.

She didn't breathe a word of this to my father. In the middle of the night, she rushed me to her friend, a Wildling she shares a garden with. That friend, in turn, led us to a tall man named Elk.

I don't remember any of it, just what Elk told me later. How he trained me, as a baby. How he had to feed me honey to soothe my tantrums, lest I burn down the entire Mainland. How he taught me to breathe through my anger. How he taught me to keep this great power buried. My mother brought me to him in secret, until she was confident that I had learned control. Then, the training stopped.

My mother told me not to tell my father about the strength of my abilities, and over time, I figured out why, but sometimes . . . I wished I could. Maybe if he knew . . . maybe it would make him look at me like I mattered.

Now that power has vanished. And my mother has started to worry.

She's waiting in my room when I return from dinner. She's made tea. She motions at the chair across from her.

"Sit with me, would you?"

I pause. "Is something wrong?" We always have tea in the dining room. Never this late.

"Of course not," she says.

Bitterness. A lie I can taste like over-steeped tea, thanks to my flair. The one she doesn't know about.

I take a hesitant step forward. Sit. She pours me tea. Stirs in the honey. We take a few sips, before she says, "Your power."

"What about it?"

"It's gone."

We all know that. Me, most of all. I stare into my cup. "I'm glad. I don't want it."

The look of the man, gasping for his last breath as his skin hardened into gold, is seared into my mind.

I squeeze my eyes against the memory.

Her warm hand finds mine. "*Oro*. You were born with great ability. We kept it in check, but if it's buried too long . . . I fear it will overtake you."

She must see that I don't care about the prospect of it overtaking me. Let it. It's what I deserve, after what I did.

She tries a different approach. "If your abilities rise up at the wrong moment, it could lead to horrible destruction, and not just for one man."

I meet her eyes. She's telling the truth.

“What do I do?”

She stirs the spoon around and around her teacup. “I spoke to your father.” Her mouth tightens. “We’re sending you away to training early.”

A fortnight later I’m walking to Sun Isle, to formally begin my Sunling instruction. All royal heirs inherit the four Lightlark abilities—Sunling, Moonling, Starling, and Skyling—and are sent on rotations to each isle, until they master each power.

For a while, I feared my father wouldn’t let me go on the rotations. Egan himself hasn’t even finished his.

Now . . . I’m being sent a year in advance.

Before the gilding, I’d have been excited. I’ve always wanted to leave the castle. I’ve wanted to do just about anything beyond its walls.

But I don’t want to ever use my abilities again. Now . . . I’ll be forced to.

The walk seems to last an eternity, but finally we reach the bridge. If it can even be called that. It’s just ancient wood and rope, barely tied together and swinging wildly over a thrashing ocean hundreds of feet below.

My mother turns, momentarily blocking my view of the bridge, and her eyes are glassy. I’ve never seen her cry, not ever. My father might think he is the strongest in the royal family; he might think his loud words and cruel orders make him so, but he’s wrong. My mother, with her straight spine, her kind encouragement, and her firm conviction—she is strongest. She cares about the people on this island . . . while my father has set his sights on uncharted lands and chances at gaining even more power.

More. Always more. Nothing is ever good enough.

Egan is more like my mother. He will be a great king.

“My darling son,” she says. Not *second* son. She has never treated me differently than Egan. She has never loved me less. “My *sun*,” she repeats, though with the emphasis that tells me she’s calling me the name she gave me when I was little. *Her sun, shining brightly*. She always smiles when she says it.

Right now, though, she looks afraid. She takes both my hands, quickly. They are warm in mine, familiar.

“I love you, Oro,” she says. “Always.” Something stings my palm, and then I see it. She’s slipped something into my hand. The same thing she used to leave on my pillow every night when I was younger, to ward off nightmares. The flowers she’s grown with her Wildling friend for decades. Roses with golden petals.

“You were born with fire in your heart,” she says. “It’s still there. Find it. Find your fire.”

She turns to leave, and I’m alone.

With a steadying breath, I study the bridge. It’s swinging even more wildly now, as if it knows it’s a test. My first step at being brave. At being strong.

I take a step toward it, then hesitate.

I’ll be blown off, surely. I’ll fall through the gaps.

A gust of wind has me stumbling to the side, and I hear one of the guards behind me laugh. “Foolish boy,” he says under his breath.

It’s not the first time I’ve heard it.

But, I decide, it will be the last.

I swallow and step onto the bridge. The second I do, my entire body lurches to the side, the structure swinging, and my hand scrapes as I fight to hold on to the rope.

My mother’s voice is in my head.

Find your fire.

Father thinks I’m weak. He thinks I’m worthless.

He’s wrong.

I take another step and trip, hurtling forward. I land on my knees, gasping as I gaze through the gaps in the planks. Rocks like knives reach toward me, hundreds of feet down.

Get up, I tell myself. *Get up.*

Legs shaking, I rise to my feet.

My knees nearly buckle as the bridge swings again. Salt burns my nostrils and throat; water sprays through the gaps in the planks, waves somehow reaching this high.

I slip and barely catch myself, palms raw from the rope.

I’m not supposed to, but I whirl around to face my mother. She’s already walking back toward the Mainland, her golden hair whipping wildly behind her. Her ornate dress drags across the light green grass.

Just when I think it’s easy for her to leave me, that I’ve already been forgotten, her fingers curl into a fist, as if she knew I would turn around. As if she knew I would watch her for a sign.

Just like that, the wild bridge doesn’t seem so dangerous anymore. My heart steadies me. I turn, facing Sun Isle once more.

The first time I tried to summon a flame, my mother curled my fingers into a fist and shook her head. She said, “Your fire isn’t found in the palm of your

hand.” She poked at my heart. “It’s found here.”

Find your fire.

I can do this. I can make Mother proud. I can convince my father to look at me with something other than disappointment. I can survive this. I grip my mother’s rose in my palm. Make a fist around it.

I take another step. Then another.

And, just as with all hard things, this one is conquered in continuous, small steps.

When I reach the other side of the bridge I fall forward, hurling myself onto steady ground before a gust of wind can sweep me off the side of the cliff.

I did it. I made it across. I smile into the grass.

I hear a heavy sigh above me and look up to see a tall redhead casually leaning against one of the bridge’s pillars, as if the four-hundred-foot drop behind us doesn’t scare her in the slightest.

Of course not. I’ve never seen her remotely afraid of anything.

Her brow is raised. “Really? You had to turn back?”

“Shut up, Enya.”

Her laughter sounds like a song. “That’s the worst thing you’ve ever said to me, Oro!” Then she offers her hand and helps haul me to my feet.

Before she can be accused of being too soft-hearted, she musses my hair in the way she knows I hate. Enya had a growth spurt a few months ago. Now we’re the same height, and she can’t go a few hours without reminding me of it. “Good. I’m glad Sunling is corrupting you from the very first day. You could use a little corruption, don’t you think? You’re too kind. Too honest.”

Of course I am. And she’s the only one who knows why. It’s my flair, rare for a second child.

I know when people are lying.

Lies taste bitter and rough, like sand on my tongue.

Truths are sweet like honey.

Lies hurt. It’s hard not to be honest when I can feel, constantly, the poison of all the lies around me. I decided years ago to try and always be honest.

If my father knew, he might value me. I almost told him once. But that same day, I watched him burn a man right where he stood, down to a pile of ash.

In that moment, I decided I wouldn’t ever tell him. I was too afraid of what he might use it for.

And I also understood why my mother asked me all those years ago to keep the strength of my abilities a secret.

The gilded man flashes through my memories again. I wince. Enya squeezes my shoulder, as if she can feel my guilt.

Enya is my best friend—and the daughter of a high-ranking noble, who happens to also be my mother’s closest friend from childhood. She would never tell a soul my secrets. We have a private code. When someone is lying, I raise my chin slightly. I bow it in an almost imperceptible nod when someone is telling the truth.

She tries to guess herself, sometimes. I’ve always told her some people are good liars. Some people *believe* their lies, which makes them hard to decipher.

Enya thinks my flair is incredible. A gift.

More often than not, I feel it’s a curse. Like when I ask questions I don’t want the answers to.

“Ready?” she asks, pulling me toward the golden castle. The only good thing about starting training early is that we’re in the same year now.

“No,” I say truthfully, because my own lies feel bitter on my tongue.



PROPHECY

I slide down an amber tree. I can feel the bruise already forming around my left eye. A trail of blood is crusted down my arm. My cheek burns. A bone in my hand is definitely broken.

It's a week into our training, and we're in the middle of a challenge—a race to the other side of the isle, in teams.

Barely an hour into the race, one of our classmates—a tall Sunling named Ash, with freckled skin, golden hair, and a raving obsession with bloodshed—leaped onto me from one of the trees, knocking me down. He and two friends pinned me to the dirt. Enya leaped forward, but I shook my head at her, just as five more of the Sunling group stepped out of the brush.

“Let's see if he bleeds red like the rest of us,” Ash said, before producing a jagged rock from his pocket. He pressed its edge to my arm and sliced down the length of it. The pain was blinding. Burning. The skin cut instantly.

And, to the fool's delight, I did bleed red.

Idiot.

He smirked. “I heard royal blood is different, but yours doesn't look special. Not at all. Guess you're just like the rest of us.”

He was lucky I was trying to be *just like the rest of them*, because under normal circumstances, this entire forest would be full of flame. He would be just ash at my feet.

And that's the problem.

Enya was getting restless. I could feel the heat of her anger, as she studied the group. She was looking for a way to take them down. To free me. But the last thing we needed was to make enemies of a quarter of our training class in the first week.

“Guess I am,” I said, making to stand. Not wanting to cause any trouble.

Ash kicked me back down, his foot pressed into my chest. “Maybe we just need more blood,” he said. He looked at the group around him. “Get more rocks. The sharper, the better,” he snapped.

A few disappeared into the forest. Only three remained.

And that’s when Enya took a rock the size of her head and smashed it over Ash’s skull.

He fell to the ground in a heap, instantly unconscious, blood forming a puddle.

So much for not making enemies.

I stood slowly, staring at Enya, not sure if I wanted to thank her, ask her what the hell she was thinking, or laugh. Before I could open my mouth, one of Ash’s friends was lunging toward Enya, sharp rock in hand.

And that’s when I decided that yes, peace among my class was going to be impossible.

That’s when I broke a nose, cut open a chin, and left a Sunling gasping for air on the ground, before we ran like hell out of that forest.

Now, panting against these trees, Enya whirls to face me. “Why didn’t you defend yourself?”

“I did.”

She rolls her eyes. “You defended *me*.”

So? I shrug a shoulder. She takes a frustrated step toward me—

And the quiet of the forest is interrupted by a distant yell. Enya curses.

The Sunlings are closing in. By the sounds of their voices, they’ve recruited more of our training class to help them.

I sigh, my head falling back onto the bark. “I don’t think either of us is going to have an easy time making friends after this.”

Enya just raises a brow. “Why would I need more friends? I already have you.”

It makes me smile, and I wince, a cut on my cheek pulling. The jagged mark down my arm has only just now stopped streaming blood. I bury the pain. We still have miles to go until we reach the other side of Sun Isle, where Instructor Helas is waiting. He’s an ancient Sunling, with golden skin, hair shaved close to his scalp, and a near-constant frown. He won’t give a damn what slowed us down—or that our peers attacked us. All he cares about is who crosses the finish line before the sand in the enormous hourglass he carries around runs out.

These few seconds resting against this tree will cost us. The path ends here, at this cliff. We’ve already looked over the side. The fall is fifty feet, into a

stream.

It could be shallow. There could be rocks. There could be creatures waiting to tear us to shreds.

But this is where the path ends. It's either take the leap or fail the assignment.

The Sunlings from before are approaching. From their angry yells, I know they'll be after more than a little blood.

"And I suppose I'll always have you," I say, my breathing labored. The voices are getting louder. Closer.

At my words, Enya's smile withers. She shakes her head. "You won't always have me." She looks to the side, eyes narrowing, as if she can see the pack of Sunlings entering the forest.

I'm suddenly not concerned about the group hell-bent on revenge. The truth of her statement hits me, but her words don't make sense. "What do you mean? Of course I will."

Her head turns back again. She opens her mouth. Closes it.

"What is it?"

She huffs a laugh. "This isn't exactly the right moment for an important conversation."

I stand straight, forgetting my pain. "Is there ever a right moment?"

She lifts a shoulder. "I guess not. And I guess . . . I guess there's something I need to tell you."

We've been best friends for years. The fact that something remains unsaid . . . that she hasn't already told me *everything*, is confusing.

A yell sounds closer.

And this voice . . . this one I recognize. *Ash*. I should feel relief that Enya didn't kill him with that hit, but I can't summon a shred of care for his life.

The forest begins to heat as flames are formed somewhere close by. The idiot and his unpracticed fire are going to burn the whole forest to the ground. "Okay, let's—"

"I know when I'm going to die."

Enya says it so matter-of-factly, I think she's joking.

"Please tell me it's glorious," I say, refusing to believe the sweetness I feel in my mouth. She would believe her own imaginings enough to make them true. I look down at the cliff. Maybe we can run the length of it instead of jumping. Maybe there's another way to the other side.

"It is."

I laugh. "Of course it must be." I stride forward, toward the edge, trying to judge the waters from this high.

Enya's voice deepens with frustration. I hear her steps behind me. "No, I mean I know for certain. I know when I'm going to die, and how."

Truth.

Absolute, whole truth.

I stop. Turn toward her.

She's serious. She can't be serious. I shake my head, brow creasing. "What do you mean? How could you know that?"

She shrugs. "My mom asked me if I wanted to know, and I did. So now . . . I do."

She doesn't seem concerned at all. I blink. "How does your mom know?"

"The oracle told her. The one on Moon Isle."

"I thought they were frozen."

"They are. But one thaws once in a while."

I didn't know that. I haven't been to the isle. Only Egan goes on royal visits with my father. "What—what did it say?"

Enya shakes her head. "No. I'm not telling you. Not ever."

My panic rises. I know we'll both die. Of course we will. But what if her death is soon? What if it's before mine? Suddenly, the pain in my arm and the group closing in on us are irrelevant. I take a step toward her. "But—but if you tell me, we can stop it. We can make sure it doesn't happen."

Enya smiles, then. She tilts her head at me. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Why wouldn't you?" I practically exclaim.

She shrugs a shoulder. "We all must die sometime. And it's a good death. A glorious one, like you said."

"Aren't you . . . aren't you afraid?"

She shakes her head. "No. I'm not afraid at all." She motions toward the cliff, just as the yells become clear. The Sunlings have found us. "Come on. We don't have all day."

She runs ahead. I stumble behind her, pain shooting through my arm as I shout at her to slow down, that maybe we should find another path. Maybe this one is too dangerous.

All she does is look over her shoulder at me, mischievously.

"I do not die today," she says.

And then, she jumps.

One month into Sunling training, and I have yet to use my fire.

The instructors have tried everything. I have participated in their exercises. Attended their lessons. Observed their examples.

Now, they're using fear.

"Get in."

We're far past the Sun Isle castle, in the scorch lands. There's a hatch, aboveground. Below—only darkness.

I take a step in, and groan as I fall several feet onto grating sand. My instructor's voice echoes as he says, "If you want light, make it."

Then the latch closes, and my senses narrow.

The darkness is so saturated, I can almost taste it. I open my eyes. Close them. It's the same either way.

I swallow as something crawls over my foot. The air is dry and full of dust. I cough. My throat burns.

Fine. I'll try. Down here, at least, I can't hurt anyone but myself. I search for that ember that's always been in my chest.

Find your fire.

I look. I claw at the place it once was, asking for scraps, just a beam of light. Just something to leave this dark place.

But there's nothing there.

It's always the same. Just ash, where the flame once lived. In the darkness, my mind wanders.

It replays my worst moments, and that, truly, is the torture. Not the darkness. Everything that rises up because of it.

The attendant, Albert. I knew him for years. He was always kind to me and Enya. He would find us playing in parts of the castle we weren't allowed in, and he never told my father. He just smiled and let us be.

And I killed him.

The shock of the day and the ones that followed had me burying those memories, those moments, but they rise to the surface now.

My parents and Enya's mother were out of the castle, attending some important event in the agora. Egan was invited, of course.

I was left behind. My father didn't even look at me as he strode past, hand on Egan's shoulder. Like I was not even worthy of a second of his notice.

Enya found me in the armory. Smashing my father's suit of armor against the ground, piece by piece. Beating it with every weapon I could find. Swords. Axes. Maces.

I'd never done anything like that before, but this emotion, this hurt, this fury was blinding. I had buried it all down, and now . . . now it was a tidal wave, surging.

"Why so angry, Oro?" Enya casually asked, leaning against the wall, arms crossed.

My teeth gritted. "I'm not."

Bitterness.

She just laughed. "Oh, you're right. What a wrong assumption to make, as you take an ax to your father's famous armor." It is famous. Famous for being unmarked, since he hasn't lost a battle in decades. Some might say it's because he avoids facing his greatest opponents. She pursed her lips. "You're going to get in trouble."

Of course I was. That thought wasn't enough to make me stop. So, I kept going.

Finally, Enya asked, "Can I help?"

She's watched my father treat me like dirt our entire lives. I felt the heat of her anger as she joined me. As we both beat our weapons against the gold until the smooth, spotless metal was scratched, marred, and dented all over. A smile crawled across my face, seeing the result of our work.

It only took moments for it to wither. For that anger to dissipate. For it all to be replaced by guilt and fear.

Not fear for myself. For Enya. Had anyone seen her come down to the armory? Would she be cast from the castle?

Fear for my mother. Would she be blamed for my insolence?

I shouldn't have done this. This rage—this anger . . . look what it caused.

"Go," I told Enya. "Go now, before someone sees you down here." How long would it take the attendants to come investigate the sounds someone must have heard?

"No. I'm not leaving you," she said. And the conviction in her eyes had mine burning.

Everyone else might have left you here, but I never will, that look said. I will never leave you. You are not alone.

It was that look—that loyalty—that had me pressing my hand against the metal and unleashing a skill I had discovered in pieces. One that I wasn't sure was real until the gold poured from my fingers.

One by one, every scratch was covered by a new wave of sparkling gold. Every dent was mended. Enya watched, mouth parted, as I gilded the entire set

of armor, piece by piece, until it was glowing and spotless.

Only when I was done did she say, in a whisper, “Nice trick.”

I smiled up at her. She smiled back.

Then, of course, she got to her feet, grabbed a sword, and said, “Now that we know you can fix anything we break, let’s have some fun.” She threw another blade at me.

We ran through the halls of the armory, dueling, laughing, playing. Hiding behind ancient suits of armor. Brandishing swords my father would have never let me touch. Clashing them together, then switching rooms and weapons.

“Here, make this gold,” Enya said, as we passed rows and rows of priceless relics. She threw a chalice behind her.

Midair, I made it gold. I caught it. Threw it back toward a pile.

“How about this?” She laughed as she threw a silver dagger at me. I turned it gold and caught it again.

We turned a corner. She fished around in her pockets. Threw up a piece of bread she must have kept from dinner. “This?”

It became golden bread. That delighted her.

She ran faster. I chased her through the mazes of the armory, her footsteps loud. Her laugh echoing.

I turned a corner—

And there he was. Albert. Here to investigate all the noise.

It happened so quickly.

This power spilled out of me, as if on instinct.

Before I could stop it, before I could fully process what was happening, his skin was rippling into gold. His eyes were widening. He let out a single gasp of pain.

And then, he went very still. Face twisted and frozen in agony.

The halls went deathly quiet.

“Fix it,” Enya said, gripping Albert as if she could peel the gold off. A sob rattled through her chest as she turned to me. “*Fix it.*”

But I couldn’t. It was done.

“I killed him,” I whisper to no one. My guilt is a creature clawing through my chest, and I deserve it.

I wish I could trade my life for his. I would do anything—*anything*—to take it back. To give up these abilities forever.

Because only Enya knows the truth. I was angry that night. Those emotions . . . they made it easy to access that power. It was an accident, but if I hadn’t

been so upset, if I hadn't been so hell-bent on taking it out on my father's weapons, if I had never gone down to the armory . . .

Underground, time becomes irrelevant. They drop water into the hole a few times, but not food.

I stop trying to find the fire. I realize I don't want to. I'll never be able to use it without remembering Albert's face.

Soon, the darkness takes over.

Enya is furious.

"You were completely limp when they brought you in! I thought you were dead!" I don't remember it aside from her screaming.

We're outside in the woods, where we can speak freely. It's been days since they fished me out of the hole.

They're sending me back to the castle. My father will be furious. It will confirm every belief about me he already had.

It's my mother I feel sorry for. I promised her I would try—and I didn't. Not really.

Enya turns to me. She grips my hand. "It's time, Oro."

I avoid her gaze. "What if I don't want to?"

She grips harder. "You don't have a choice. This power lives inside of you. It will burn you from the inside out, if you don't get it under control. You will burn with it."

Before, I was worried about others. But in the hole, I had an idea. I could live far away. I could leave the castle. It's not like my father wants me there anyway. "What if I don't care?"

"*I do*," she yells. I look at her. She's never raised her voice at me before. She swallows. Her tone is quieter. "I do," she repeats.

We just stare at each other, years of memories between us. She's my best friend.

If it were her, I would say the same. She knows it.

She leads me to the edge of a cliff. Below, there's only sea.

"Let it all out, Oro," she says. "I'm here. You are not alone."

You are not alone.

I swallow. "I don't want to hurt you."

She shakes her head. "You would never hurt me," she says. Truth. She

believes it wholly. She believes in *me*.

Her lips quirk. “And I know my death, remember? It doesn’t happen here and now.” Enya grips my hand. “So let it out, Oro. Everything you’ve been pushing down. Just . . . let it all go.”

Let it all go.

My chest burns as a current rises within me. It feels inevitable, like retching. Like something that must come out eventually.

My sun, my mother calls me. I was born at high noon, in searing heat. I’m the child in the burning crib, staring quietly through the flames. How she must have wondered if my powers would lead to good . . . or destruction . . .

Destruction. Flashes of images—Albert. The gilding. The proud smile on my father’s face.

The shame within me.

Such *shame*.

Anger churns through my blood, anger at this power, at my actions, at my responsibility, at the fact that I know I can never push this down, it will always be in me, waiting to catch fire, indifferent if I burn with it.

I close my eyes and see the world burning. I see myself setting it aflame.

No. I will control it. I won’t let the world become ashes.

Find your fire.

FIND IT.

I sink to my knees, and bellow.

Everything comes rushing out.

Fire shoots from my hand, the one that isn’t clutching Enya’s. It paints the sea red with flames. I burn and burn and burn until there’s nothing left, then I fall forward, gasping, tears slipping down my cheeks.

Enya’s hand is on my shoulder. She’s kneeling next to me. *You are not alone.*

When I open my eyes, the ocean is on fire.

Find your fire, my mother said.

I have. And I’m afraid of what it means.



FAVORITE PLACE

Enya has yet to tell me how she will die, even though I ask her once every year, on my birthday—or, as she likes to call it, the anniversary of our friendship, since that’s when we first met.

Our last year of Sunling training, we celebrate by stealing Sunling wine and sneaking out of the training camp.

“Where are we going?” she asks, as I lead her through a forest. “We’ve been walking for an hour. If I had known it would be this far, I wouldn’t have taken so many bottles.”

“Yes, you would have,” I say, tasting the bitterness.

She shrugs. “Yes, I would have.”

Sweetness.

She keeps complaining until the trees thin and she sees it. Even in the darkness, the sea shines differently.

It’s green. A beautiful color I’ve only seen on Wild Isle, once, when Elk took me to watch Wildlings duel.

I never had a favorite anything, until I first saw this place and it stopped me in my tracks. Its beauty tugged me out of my never-ending spiral of thoughts.

“Now, this was worth the journey,” Enya says.

I nod. “Reaching this is worth *any* journey.”

We race our way down to the brush, careful not to tumble down the steep hill. Enya beats me, considering I’m holding almost all our supplies, and I watch her skip all the way to the waves.

The sand is thick, golden. The water sweeps toward us in peaceful curls, leaving behind a blanket of sea-foam.

When Enya has had her fill of dancing in the water, she plops down next to me, digging one of the bottles out of the sand. She looks around and nods

approvingly. “If I had any interest in you whatsoever, I would say this would be a great place to take someone romantically.”

Truth. She has no interest in me.

While some women have started to look at me differently, staring when they never used to, Enya has never once liked me in any way other than a friend. I know that for certain, with my flair. And neither have I.

We’re friends. Best friends. But that doesn’t mean I don’t love her.

Still, I give her a look. “As if either of us have time for romance.”

Enya laughs. “Speak for yourself.”

I look over at her in curiosity, but she moves on before I can ask her anything else.

“How did you find this place?”

My favorite place, like the best things in life, was found by accident. “I was looking for something else but found this instead. And it was better than what I originally set out for.”

I was looking for gates, drawn onto an ancient map I found deep in the Mainland castle. Big, towering gates no one—not even Egan—ever mentioned. On my way, I caught a glimpse of this sea, and I was drawn toward it, as if by some invisible tether.

That day, I spent hours on this beach, sitting, staring at the color, mesmerized without knowing why it produced such a feeling in me . . . this knowing.

“What’s your favorite place?” I ask Enya.

“You should know this.”

I do, I think. “The Singing Mountains.”

She nods. “Good. You get to continue being my best friend for another century, at least.”

She’s joking, but I turn toward her, hiding the desperation I feel. “So, we get another century together?”

Ever since she told me about her known death, I’ve cursed time. I’ve wondered how much of it we have left together. I always knew we would both die . . . but the fact that she knows how, for some reason, makes me feel like I’m always a step away from losing her.

She smiles. “*Many* centuries,” she tells me.

I pull her into my side. “Thank you,” I say, my eyes stinging with relief.

“For what?” she asks, leaning her head against my shoulder. A bird squawks close by. The waves nearly reach our feet.

“For not dying today.”

I graduate my Sunling training, and, for the first time, Enya and I are about to be separated. She'll stay on Sun Isle and continue studies there. I'll move on to the next realm in my rotation—Moonling.

"It was always going to happen," my mother tells us over tea.

Enya's mom laughs. "Remember how they would count with their fingers the years they had left together before she had to leave for training? How old were they? Six?" She shakes her head. "Remember we caught them trying to run away? They made it, to what? The abbey?"

They both laugh, leaning into each other the way friends tend to, while Enya and I glare at them.

"You are supposed to be kind to us," Enya says to her mother. "We're your children. You are supposed to be nice, no matter what, and that includes not bringing up embarrassing stories that do nothing to prove the intelligence and capability of the royal line."

Enya's mother shakes her head, lips still curled in amusement. "No. I'm your mother, and that just means I'll tell you the *truth*. And the truth is often not kind at all."

Enya and I share a look.

"Our mothers are like harpies when they get together," she says as we leave the room, their laughter echoing behind us.

I smile. "They probably say the same thing about us."

Enya shakes her head. "No. You're not that funny."

I pinch her side, and she swats my hand away. "Write to me?"

I nod. I'm not allowed to leave Moon Isle for the first few months of training. The only way to communicate will be through letters. If I can find anyone willing to deliver them, that is. "Of course."

"I'll try not to talk too much about the warmth of my room's hearth, or honeyed tea, or the sun caressing my skin." She grins at me.

I sigh. The comfort and heat of Sunling is about to be traded for harsh, brutal cold.

In their last years, Moonling warriors train near the Vinderland, far north, in temperatures that even my now-mastered flames can hardly breach.

"I'm sure they have hearths," I say, though I'm actually not sure. I've never been on Moon Isle before.



FROST

The rooms don't have hearths.

There are just two narrow beds, with barely enough room to walk between them, and a single window frosted over in a layer of ice. Only the smallest sliver of sunlight peeks through.

This will be a very comfortable next few years, I can feel it.

I set down my pack and try to imagine how long Enya is going to laugh when I tell her my breath is coming out in clouds, even indoors.

My roommate hasn't arrived yet. I choose a bed, then open my pack with frozen fingers. Agnes, my brother's guardian, surprised me with a hand-knitted blanket. She isn't supposed to dote on me, but that's never stopped her from treating me like I'm just as important as my brother. I fold it carefully onto the bed, then form a fire in my fist. The warmth melts the chill from my skin, feeling like home.

The door slams open behind me.

I turn, expecting my roommate. Instead, I find a tall woman with long white hair. She glares at me.

Her hand shoots forward, and the fire in my fist hardens into ice. I startle, then drop it onto the floor, where it shatters against the stone.

"Your fire isn't allowed here," she snaps. "Come with me."

I reluctantly leave my bedding behind and follow her down the stairs. Other Moonlings in my training group stare at us, wide-eyed. They begin to whisper.

The Moonling doesn't stop at the castle doors. She slips past them and down the stairs, until she reaches a patch of snow.

She points. "That will be your bed for the night, Sunling. If I catch you using fire again, you'll be out of my training."

My training. I swallow. This isn't any ordinary Moonling.

It's Instructor Cleo. The Moonling ruler's younger sister, famed for her ruthless training. It's not just a rumor, I realize, as she turns to leave me outside, without a second glance.

I sit in the snow and think about how I'm going to write this in a letter to Enya. At first, it's almost amusing. The chill is unfamiliar. It's curious. I study the ice castle with fascination.

Then the sun goes down, and all that's left is mind-numbing cold.

I shake against the ground. My feet and hands have long lost sensation. Pain like needles threads through my arms and legs with every shiver.

Frost begins to form on my hair. Ice, I find, burns like fire, in its own biting way.

Fuck this.

The instructor isn't here. She isn't looking. She's probably sleeping, like I should be. I reach toward the fire inside.

And that's when I realize Instructor Cleo didn't just force me to be out here as punishment.

She wanted it to be impossible to use my fire.

The flame within has hardened into ice. I can't use it.

"Fuck," I curse into the snow.

Somehow, I fall asleep. I wake up, gasping for air. Only a small amount reaches my shaking lungs. I cough. It hurts to breathe. Everything hurts. When I open my eyes, there she is, staring at me.

Instructor Cleo.

"Ready to quit?" she asks, voice emotionless. Her white hair is tied into a long braid, whipping behind her in the frigid wind.

Using every shred of my strength and resolve, I somehow pull myself to my feet. I can't show weakness. Not this early in my training. I refuse to be sent back to the castle. Especially after I've made it through the night.

The only thing worse than this physical torture would be the sight of my father's face if I return to the Mainland castle too soon.

I straighten my spine, fighting the urge to collapse.

"Never," I say.

She smiles. "We'll see about that."

Then, she raises her hands, and a wave of snow turns to water, soaking me to the bone. It hardens to ice, and I nearly fall to my knees in pain.

I've never been so cold in my life. Sunling skin is naturally warm; our fire feeds from within. But that kind of mastery takes decades. This brutal cold eats

everything. Even my resolve.

I might have found my fire. Now, I realize, the true test has begun. Finding it even in the most grueling of conditions. This training is a mastery of fire as much as it is water.

“Do you think he’ll die?” a Moonling girl asks from behind me, as Instructor Cleo walks away, smirking. My training class has started to come down the castle steps.

“No,” a boy says, seeming disappointed. Then, his tone brightens. “But he might get killed tonight. Did you see who his roommate is?”

I can’t hear his next whisper, but I definitely catch the girl’s surprised gasp. “You’re kidding! He won’t last the night.”

Roommate? I have no idea who it is, thanks to Cleo’s punishment.

As far as I know, I don’t have any Moonling enemies . . .

Cleo’s voice rings even through the biting wind. “At attention!” she says, before lining us up. Dozens of Moonlings are training this year. We all wear white cloaks, not nearly warm enough for the conditions. Through the snow, I can barely make out anyone’s faces. Who could my roommate be?

Laughing echoes around me. I can hear them whispering, as if everyone is in on a joke I don’t understand.

Instructor Cleo slams her staff down onto the snow, and the group silences. “If you’re going to be a Moonling warrior, you’re going to have to prove you can survive in the harshest climates. You will either form a connection with the cold—or you will die. This is your last chance to drop out of training. Anyone?”

Not one person moves. Moonling training is optional, since we aren’t at war. Everyone here knows the risk, knows that more than half the class won’t survive the next few years.

“Good. I hope you enjoyed the comfort of your rooms last night, because you will be spending the next month out there, in the Vinderland, with nothing but the cloaks on your back.”

Dread slips down my spine.

So soon? The classes I’ve heard about have only gone north in their last year . . . though I suppose I never met anyone who had survived Instructor Cleo’s training . . .

She points north. “You must hunt your own food. Find your own nonfrozen water. Fight your fellow warriors for resources. Create your own shelter. Find your connection to the cold. Or you will die.” She looks around. “The Vinderland is unforgiving . . . and so is life.”

All hell breaks loose, but everyone pauses as she raises her hand.

“You will work in pairs. Find your roommate. There are no rules except *survive*.”

Roommate.

I swallow as she walks away, back up the Moonling castle steps, and everyone around me begins to panic, searching for their partners.

I don't know much about the Vinderland, other than it's a place not even many Moonlings venture to. It's too cold, for even trained ones.

“The Vinderland? She's going to get us killed!”

“Hunting expeditions won't even go there.”

“I heard there are bodies everywhere. Explorers use them as markers.”

I won't make it. Cleo has ensured that. I'm not used to this climate, unlike Moonlings who have lived here their entire lives. I'm already freezing. I haven't eaten or had water for hours. If it was Instructor Cleo's goal to kill me, then she is about to get her wish.

Even if I wanted to move, my body is frozen in place. I'm not even shivering anymore. I just stand, watching, wondering who my mysterious roommate is.

The one who supposedly wants me dead.

The one that will kill me at any given opportunity.

There is a small comfort in knowing the cold will likely kill me before my roommate does.

All at once, someone emerges from the crowd. Everyone gives him a wide berth, letting him pass.

He is a giant. Seven feet tall at least, and made of muscle, like a rock come to life.

His eyes are set on me.

I don't recognize his face, but I do recognize the name being whispered around me. My blood turns to ice.

Calder.

Son of the head of the greatest resistance Lightlark has seen in centuries.

Son of the man my father burned to ash, just years prior.

Fuck.



CALDER

The Moonling hasn't tried to kill me. Not yet.

He must be waiting to do it in private, I think, not wanting any witnesses, in case my father decides to care about me and imprison him for the infraction.

We make our way north, toward the Vinderland. He pierces through the layer of snow like a shovel, his legs and feet parting a path for me, and I stare at his back, my hand on my dagger. I wonder if it would even pierce his skin. If I could even get past the bone, before he killed me. If I even have a chance at all.

His father almost killed mine, in an attempt at overthrowing him.

Instead, he ended up in ashes at his feet.

How long until he decides to punish me for my father's actions?

It doesn't matter that I never knew his father. It doesn't matter that I haven't done anything wrong to all these people who already hate me. The responsibility will always land on me. I will always feel the brunt of others' resentments, because of who I am.

I would give anything, right now, to be anyone else.

Finally, Calder stops, and I nearly run into his back.

"Here," he grunts, plopping his pack down. He brought it with him downstairs. It was almost as if he knew we would have to be outside.

"Here?" I say, looking around, watching the rest of the class move past us, going to great lengths to avoid Calder. It doesn't look like a particularly good spot.

Calder nods. His voice has the air of finality. "Here."

Right. Is this it? Is this the moment Calder decides to wait until everyone has moved past us, and strikes?

Calder begins unpacking his bag. There's a blanket and pillow inside. Did he know about the challenge? Did he have an advantage?

Then, I realize I recognize the stuff. It's *my* blanket that Agnes made me and the pillow I left in our room. Did he steal it?

Before I can ask any questions, he easily rips the thick material down the center, hands one half to me, and keeps one half for himself.

Then, he lies down and turns away.

I am left standing in the middle of the snow, dumbfounded.

It isn't even that late. We should keep walking, while it's relatively warm. We should make progress.

Also, did he just rip my fucking blanket?

I wonder what I should do. Should I take this opportunity to leave? Work by myself?

No. I won't make it far on my own. Especially since I'm already freezing. I carefully unfurl my half of my blanket and sit on it.

I'm not foolish enough to try to sleep. That's when he'll strike. When I'm most vulnerable. Instead, I try my flames again.

Nothing. They're still frozen, like everything around us.

Fuck.

This is going to be a long month.

I finally lie on my back and stare up at the stars. *The cold is awful*, I plan to write Enya. *I don't recommend it at all.*

My sword is gripped in my hand, ready to fight back at any moment.

But all I hear is Calder's immense snoring.

The sun rises, and my eyes burn with exhaustion. I tense as I hear him move, rustling the snow around him. I grip my sword harder as his heavy steps near me.

His entire body blocks what little sun reaches us, and he frowns. "If you don't sleep, you will die," he says. Then, he shrugs. "Today, we build our shelter."

I blink. "Here?"

He shakes his head. "North. There are more resources there."

He packs up both of our things, hauls his pack onto his back, and continues on without another look in my direction.

What is he playing at?

I don't believe for a second he doesn't want me dead. But there are few options out here. All I can do is follow for miles, as we hike through the snow.

Calder was right. Without sleep, my strength against the cold is quickly waning. Chill seeps through my clothes and skin. My legs turn to blocks that I

drag, forcing myself to continue.

It isn't long before we reach the first body. And that's when I realize why Calder insisted on us staying back.

There was a storm. A blizzard.

A fresh coat of snow covers everything, across the mountains we now climb.

And our classmates . . . they're everywhere. We pass the boy and girl who'd taken bets on how long I would last. Their eyes are glassy and lifeless as they stare up at the sky, their bodies frozen over. Snow slides across their blue skin. They might as well be pieces of ice.

They will remain here for centuries, I realize. Their families will never get to bury their bodies. It would be too risky to travel here and claim them.

I think of those mothers, like mine, waiting for their children to return.

It seems unnatural for a Moonling to die of cold, but the untrained still can, if they haven't found their power center. If the cold does not fuel them, it can eat them from the inside out.

Sunlings are even more at risk in these temperatures. This would have been me, I think, without my partner.

"How—how did you know?" I ask, once we've stumbled across the sixth classmate.

Calder shrugs. "I could sense it coming."

I just blink at his back. I open my mouth. Close it.

"Up," he says, starting toward the tallest mountain around. "We need to go up."

This time, I do not question his instruction. I just follow.

My chest is ice—every breath burns the lining of my lungs. I move slowly, through the path Calder carves, feeling like every step might be my last. Every few seconds, I try to find my fire, try to find the flames within, but they have been completely blotted out, just like the sun. The wind howls around us. Calder takes the brunt of it, shielding me from direct gusts, but it still stings my nose.

My mind narrows to one purpose. Survival.

Step. After step. After step. Small steps forward are the only way to ascend any mountain. The only way to overcome any challenge.

Finally, Calder stops, and I collapse, my strength spent.

From the ground, I open my eyes and see we've reached the peak. It's smooth. Calmer. And there is a forest just ahead, full of trees white as snow, their branches curved like beckoning fingers.

We're too high up. The air is thinner, the cold is harsher, but I watch the

snow shift down the mountain, tumbling. Storms are worse below, I realize.

“Another blizzard is coming,” Calder says, shuffling beside me, and it takes every inch of my willpower to get to my feet again. “We need to build.”

I am again grateful to be paired with Calder once we start cutting down trees with the curved blade he has in his pack.

“How did you know to bring that?” I finally ask.

He shrugs. “I bring it everywhere.” I remember how he had my blanket and pillow inside. Was he . . . was he going to bring it down to me in the morning? Did he know about Cleo’s punishment?

No. Of course not.

He’s going to kill me. He’s just waiting for the right moment.

There are no rules, Cleo said, except survive. If he wants me dead . . . *I might have to kill him first,* I think, dread spiking through me.

Not yet. Right now, he’s my salvation, as we work to cut the curved trees into logs. We work diligently, quietly, my muscles too frozen to hurt, until we have our small structure built.

Calder stacks a few smaller pieces, then points to the pile he’s made. “Make a fire.”

I blink at him. “I can’t.”

He frowns. He looks at my hair, then at me, like I might have forgotten my entire lineage. His voice is flat. “You can’t?”

Shame heats my face the slightest degree. “I mean—the cold. It makes it harder.”

Calder just blinks at me, and I see the meaning in his eyes. He has cleared the path for me this entire journey. He saved us from the storm. He did most of the work in creating this shelter.

The least I can do is make a damned fire.

“I’ll try,” I bite out, and he grunts, nodding.

Then, he leaves our small shelter.

“I thought you said there was a storm,” I yell, sticking my head out, tensing as I’m met with endless flurries.

All I see is his hulking form walking slowly away, into the forest, disappearing into the wave of white.

I realize he had every opportunity to kill me thus far. He must be waiting for something. No time to worry about it now.

Fire. We will both need it.

And though fire clearly isn’t allowed in other exercises, or inside the

dormitories . . . Cleo said there were no rules right now.

I can use my flames. If only I can find them.

I close my eyes. I remember my years and years of training. My fire is in my heart. Always. I focus on my breathing. I clear my mind.

I outstretch my hand.

Nothing. It's as if the years of training and mastery have been wiped away by this cold. As if my flames are also numb.

Annoyance flares through me. Sharp as this cold. What did I spend so many years training for? I am no master in fire. If I was, this wouldn't be so difficult. If I was, I could actually form even a damned *ember*—

I growl, and my hand heats. My eyes widen—but the feeling sinks back into my skin, my anger forgotten. A single cinder falls onto the wooden pieces, like a taunt.

My hands curl into fists, just as the makeshift door to our shelter opens.

And Calder walks through, with a deer on his back.

Food. He was getting food.

His eyes find the unlit wood, and then me. He scowls. He doesn't say anything, but again, I can almost read the word in his face.

Really?

My father's words are sharp in my mind. *Worthless. Weak.*

"I'm going to get it," I bite out. Calder only shakes his head. He leaves the shelter, and I hear hacks of his blade, over and over, cutting and skinning.

I don't *get it*. Calder finishes, and walks into the shelter, and the wood is still cold and dry.

He doesn't say a word, but I can almost feel his disdain. All he does is grunt, turn, and then fall asleep.

The shelter is soon filled with his snoring.

The storm intensifies in the night. Wind whistles through the gaps in the wood, making our shelter tremble.

I keep trying to form a fire, thinking that the relative heat from the shelter might warm me enough to find my flames again.

But nothing works. I finally fall asleep curled against the wood.

I wake up to hear Calder cursing.

I get to my feet quickly, thinking we might be under attack. Thinking *he* might be about to attack me.

When I rush out of the shelter, all I see is him glaring at the snow. The pieces come together quickly. Someone—or something—stole the food he had left

outside.

I swallow, shame biting more than the cold.

Calder hauls his pack onto his back and turns toward the forest. I know what that means now.

“I’m going with you.”

Calder doesn’t say a word.

I don’t know how to hunt. I’ve never accompanied my father on one for sport. I’ve never had to hunt for food. It’s always been served on golden platters. Even in Sunling training, when our food was a far cry from the Mainland castle feasts, it was provided for us.

I realize now I don’t know the full extent of survival. Of going hungry. Of desperation.

Calder looks like he has known it.

I don’t know anything about him, other than his father. I try to remember what his father was fighting against, but I can’t. I was too young. Or maybe I didn’t pay enough attention.

Was he cast out when his father was executed? Is Calder so skilled at hunting because he was forced to survive beyond the Moonling castle?

I wonder why he was even permitted to start training . . . Instructor Cleo must care about strength more than lineage.

Calder slows down, and I follow. I pay attention to the way he steps, quietly, even his large form barely making a sound through the forest.

I try my best to calm my breathing. To become one with the snow, and the trees, and the hissing wind.

The cold sears my nostrils, but I try to embrace it. If I’m going to learn Moonling’s ability, I need to find the cold within me, just as I found the fire.

Calder doesn’t have arrows. I wonder how he’s going to hunt another animal, and how he was able to ensnare the first.

We walk in silence for an hour. Then, out of nowhere, Calder stops and ducks. I do the same, seeing it a second later. A deer, with a crown of white antlers. It’s almost undetectable in the snow, quieter than we are.

Calder reaches back for his blade.

I wonder what he’s going to do. Throw it at the deer?

I don’t find out. Because I lean forward, and my knee cracks a branch. Immediately, the deer turns—and looks right at me.

It does not run. No.

It charges. Right at us.

Calder remains fixed. He outstretches his blade, as if he's going to go head-to-head with its antlers.

But the beast bows its head, and it's like a wall of blades surging toward us, ready to rip us to shreds.

I turn and run.

"Come on!" I yell, looking over my shoulder, but Calder remains steady. The deer charges toward him.

Then, right at the last moment, it veers past him—to me.

It's faster than I am. I run and run, choking on frigid air, looking over my shoulder, watching it nearly impale me—

And then it's gone. Everything's gone.

Because I didn't see the cliff ahead.

And I've gone right over its edge.

At the last moment, I grab onto something, *anything*—and my hand grips a rock, the skin of my palm splitting. My body hangs, my legs kicking over hundreds of feet of empty space.

I'm going to die. The fall will kill me instantly.

There's the scraping, crunching sound of an approach—

I look up, and I don't see a crown of horns.

No. I see Calder, peering over the edge curiously as my grip begins to weaken.

This is it, then. The moment he's been waiting for. The moment he can watch me die and perhaps feel a fraction of vengeance for his father's death.

Our eyes meet. I want to beg him to tell my mother I'm sorry. I want to ask him to tell Egan I'm proud of him. I want to say a thousand things to Enya.

I open my mouth, feeling my fingers begin to slip. Wondering if he plans to kick me to hasten the fall.

But he does the unthinkable.

He reaches a hand toward me.

This has to be a trick. It has to be false. A *lie*.

His gaze is clear.

I reach the hand that isn't holding on to the rock toward him. He grabs it. Without a moment of hesitation, he pulls me back up. Blood soaks the snow in front of us. The deer that was chasing me lies there, Calder's blade buried in its side.

This could have been the end. I would have been dead, if it wasn't for him.

I'm still here. I get another chance at this. Endless relief and gratitude heat

me from the inside. I fall forward, hands erupting in flames.

“You got it,” Calder says simply.

Then he lifts the deer onto his back and turns toward our shelter.

“Why?” I ask later from my place by our fire, as Calder chomps at his hunt, his teeth breaking bone.

He hasn’t spoken since he pulled me to safety, but now he looks up at me.

“Why what?”

“Why save me?”

He continues eating. It’s only when the entire dinner is almost gone, that he says, “You’re my roommate,” as if it is as simple as that.

I blink. “But . . . you could have let me die.”

You could have used me to get back at my father, I think. He doesn’t know my father wouldn’t necessarily care.

Calder just blinks back at me. “Why would I do that?”

Is he purposefully playing dumb? Is this a mental game? Is he going to make me suffer, torture me over the course of this month, kill me just when I believe I might survive?

“The fire, then,” I say, looking for an explanation. A reason he hasn’t already killed me in revenge yet. “You saved me, because you needed my fire.”

He snorts. Talks with his mouth full of food. “No. I had lost all faith in your fire, Sunling.”

My eyes narrow. “So why?” I ask again.

Calder looks at me, puzzled, as if wondering why I’m so set on getting an answer to this question. Then, his expression turns serious. He nods in understanding. He tears the remaining meat off the bone, then sets it down. Leans back. “We are not defined by our lineage.”

I stare. He can’t mean that.

“I am not my father. And neither are you, yours.”

He’s right. I am not my father. I’m nothing like him. They say he’s a great king. I suppose it’s a good thing I’ll never be one.

Calder tilts his head, studying me. “Cycles can always break. New generations give new hope, do they not?”

It’s the most he’s ever spoken to me. I’m unsure of how to respond. Unsure whether I understand.

Meal finished, he wipes his fingers in the snow. “Calder,” he says, introducing himself for the first time, his hand outstretched.

“Oro,” I reply, offering my own.

And, also for the first time, he smiles.



ZED

The day after I complete my Moonling training, the king requests my presence.

The throne room is already full of nobles.

“Oro,” the king says, offering me a rare smile.

I blink at him, concern setting in. Something is wrong.

That’s when the doors slam open . . . and a prisoner is hauled in by two guards. He thrashes and bellows. I don’t recognize him, but I see by his clothing that he’s a Sunling.

Is he a member of the resistance? A traitor?

My father looks at him and frowns. “A thief, caught stealing gold from the castle treasury . . .” He shakes his head. “I can only think of one truly fitting death sentence.”

With that, he turns to me. “Would you do the honor, son?”

Son. He’s never called me that. I’ve *longed* for him to call me that, to acknowledge me, to *care*.

Here’s my chance, handed to me. An opportunity to finally be in his good graces.

“No,” I say instead.

The world seems to stop.

The nobles stare, wide-eyed. Then the whispers start. This is a prisoner, who is sentenced to death anyway. I’m the king’s son. Refusing his order, in front of a crowd, is nothing short of a scandal. Even my mother looks surprised. Egan looks concerned.

My father is furious.

“What did you just say?” he demands, his voice echoing through the room.

He’s not used to the word *no*. He’s been king for centuries. I’m not used to saying it. But now that I’ve started, I realize I like it.

“No.”

When I was a child, and refused, I was called insolent. Now, as an adult, an heir who has mastered two abilities, I’m called a traitor.

And I’m thrown in the castle prison.

No one tries to talk to me. I sit in silence. I make a fire to warm my cell. It’s not so bad, at first. But quickly, I become hungry.

I know what my father is doing. He’s trying to display his control, his authority. He’s trying to break me. Every day, the warden visits my cell with a tray of food and asks if I’m ready to gild the prisoner. I say no again and again.

Each time, he leaves with the tray untouched.

A week passes this way. There’s a hole in the ceiling of my cell, positioned on a cliff, and I catch rainwater to drink.

My stomach twists with hunger.

At least it isn’t the hole on Sun Isle, I think, letting gratitude guide me through another day. But it can only go so far where hunger is involved.

My body begins to tire. I have been sitting upright, in order to look the warden in the eye every time he enters.

But today, I find myself slipping to the ground.

I lie there, staring at the hole in the ceiling, at the patch of gray. There will be rain soon. Good. Something shifts.

I blink. I must be hallucinating. Because—that looks like an eye.

It blinks back.

I startle, the shock bringing me upright again.

“I can get you food,” a person says from above. He doesn’t sound much older than me.

“How?” I ask, my voice rough with thirst. Then, I wonder how he’s even on top of my cell in the first place. These dungeons are carved high into the mountains. “Are you—are you a Skyling?”

I haven’t completed that part of my training. If my father has his way . . . I never will.

“I’m your savior, that’s what I am,” he says. “Food. I can get it for you. But I have a price.”

Right now, I would give everything I own for a bite of bread. “What is it?”

“Your button,” he says.

I look down and see the blood orange ruby on my clothing. My mother gave it to me. “No,” I say, using the newly familiar word again.

The stranger laughs through the hole. “Fine. I’ll just pick it off your corpse

when you starve to death.”

There are steps on the ceiling, before I say, “Wait!”

The eye is back again.

“If I tell you how to get something more valuable than my button, will you bring me back food? Will you honor our trade?”

The stranger seems to think for a moment. Then, he nods. There’s a flash of blue hair. Pale skin.

“Say it.”

“Yes,” the stranger says, annoyed, but that’s all I need. He isn’t lying.

“Fine. Find Enya, on Sun Isle. She’ll give you whatever jewels you need.”

The stranger nods. He leaves. Then, a few hours later, a piece of bread falls from a great height, right through the hole, and nearly hits me on the head.

The stranger remains true to his word. He comes back several times, with food, water, and notes from Enya. He even returns with pastries made by Agnes, along with a pile of her expertly knitted blankets. We speak through the hole in the ceiling.

His name is Zed. He’s a Skyling orphan. He is a self-proclaimed expert thief. He says he can steal anything.

“Even the king’s son?” I say.

“You want me to kidnap your brother?” he says, incredulous.

“No,” I reply. “Not my brother.”

He gets my meaning.

The next day, he throws a stolen Starling ball of energy through the hole, and I take cover as it blows out the entire top of the cell.

Yells commence.

But by the time the warden gets to my cell, we are already far into the clouds.

And our group of friends is complete.



HOLLOW

If my father had spent more time preparing for war, and less on sending his armies off to explore faraway places, he might have survived its final battle.

They *both* might have survived it.

We always knew Nightshade would try to take over Lightlark. Yet instead of fortifying our armies . . . instead of protecting what we had . . . my father sent his guards out looking for more. We were down hundreds of soldiers when they first attacked. In the years since . . . we lost thousands more.

The war was won by the skin of our teeth. But not before my parents were both cut down, by the ruler of Nightshade.

This doesn't feel like winning. Not at all.

My hands shake as I lower the last of the golden roses onto my mother's pyre. As soon as she died, the plant died with her, as if in mourning. Agnes, who was my mother's guardian before my brother's, carefully collected the ones that were left.

This can't be real, I think, but it is. Egan stands next to me. He puts a hand on my shoulder, and I'm not sure if it's meant to be a comforting gesture, or to stop my trembling. My armor is clattering for how hard I'm shaking with rage.

They're dead.

Our parents are dead.

Zed crashes down next to me. His own expression is severe. He loved my mother. In the time since we met, she treated him as if he was her own son.

Enya's cries are muffled behind me, her face buried in Calder's shoulder. Her mother lies next to mine on a pyre of her own. Best friends. Side by side, until the end. My brother steps forward with fire in his palm. He throws it onto their bodies.

Together, they burn. They all burn.

The fire burns brightly, fiercely, just like they did in their final moments.

I can't move. My body, mind, and heart are stuck in this moment. The pain swallows everything. If I move, I think, then this will be all the more real. I don't know how time is expected to creep forward, but it does.

Then, they're gone.

Nothing remains but smoke and ash.

By the time I find the strength to turn around, everyone, including my friends, is on their knees. They're facing Egan.

He's king now.

I kneel.

At least I have him, I think. At least someone in this family is left.

Zed stands. He holds my parents' swords.

If I tried to speak, I'm sure nothing would come out. But Egan's voice is firm when he says, "Put them in the armory."

It's his first command as king. Zed nods, then shoots into the sky, toward the castle.

One by one everyone leaves, but I remain, kneeling among the cinders, cursing war and everything it took from me.

Cursing the Nightshade ruler who killed my parents.

Grimshaw, heir to Nightshade, is moving into the castle.

It's a condition of the end of the war—a way to try to ensure his father won't simply ignore the terms of our treaty.

He's placed in the prisons, where he belongs.

According to Zed, he goes willingly. "With a smirk on his face," Zed says, jaw tight.

Enya is frowning into her tea.

"What is it?" I ask.

Ever since her mother died, she's been a husk of herself. The quips and smiles are gone. What remains are glassy eyes and pinched lips. She shakes her head. "I keep thinking . . . Nightshade was winning. I don't . . . I don't understand why they agreed to a treaty. It doesn't make sense. If they kept going —"

They could have won. I've had the same thought but have always come to the same conclusion.

The Nightshade ruler and his heir are heartless monsters. If there was a way to win, they would have taken it, no matter the cost.

Unless—

“You think they’re planning something,” I say.

She nods.

Zed gives us a look. “And what’s the plan? Him rotting in the prisons? Tied down in as many ways as possible and pissing into a bucket?”

She sighs. “I don’t know. I just—it doesn’t make sense.”

I turn to Calder. He’s remained quiet, as he mostly is, but he looks pensive. “What do you think?”

He stretches his long tan legs out in front of him. “I think the same thing I’ve always thought. War doesn’t have winners. People fight for causes most often because they’re ordered to.” His eyes shift to mine. “And none of us are our fathers.”

We are not our fathers. I remember that day, in the biting snow. I remember the moment his words sunk in.

But this is different.

Anger rises in me like a tempest. “Did his father force him to strike down everyone in his path with his shadows? Did his father force him to kill even the ones that begged for mercy, even the injured, even the ones that surrendered?”

Calder says nothing.

I stand.

My hands are shaking. So is my voice.

“Did his father order him to vanish the bodies, so their families wouldn’t be able to have a proper burial?”

They were all there, dead. And then they were gone, with Grimshaw standing in the middle of them. He had destroyed them, somehow.

It was cruel. It went against the ways of war.

Calder stands too. He places a hand on my shoulder. “It’s done. He’s in the cells.” He pauses. “But they will release him, eventually, to truly fulfill the treaty.” He’s right. “We will be living among him, at some point, whether we like it or not. Best to try to live in peace.”

Peace. It’s Calder’s dream. A world without conflict.

It’s a lie. It’s impossible. Because even though the war is over . . . this doesn’t feel like peace at all.

Stretches of Lightlark have been reduced to ash and rubble. War has left its mark not just on the island—but on my mind.

Rage is all I know. I retreat to quiet corners of the island to burn everything in my path. I find myself dreaming of sailing to Nightshade to stab a thousand blades through its ruler.

His son is the next-best option.

"I'll visit him," I say, calmly.

All eyes shoot to me.

"Oro—" Enya says, her voice a warning. She knows the state I've been in. I haven't been myself. None of us have. That's the thing about war. There are no true survivors. No one walks away unscathed.

"I'm just going to talk to him," I say through my teeth. "You're worried he's planning something. If he is . . . I'll know."

They all know about my flair. If anyone can learn the truth of the Nightshade's intentions, it's me.

"This isn't a good idea," Calder says.

He's right.

But I'm doing it anyway.

Grimshaw Malvere still looks like a demon, even tied up in a prison.

He bites out a laugh when I step in front of the cell. Without even looking up, he seems to sense me, somehow.

His arms are above his head, chained to the wall. His head is bent forward, dark hair hiding his face.

His voice is pure amusement. "They sent *you*? The second son?"

Fire erupts in the middle of the cell. I used to pride myself on control. On burying my emotions.

But I can't. I see him—and I see his father.

I see his father cutting down my mother.

I've never wanted to kill anyone until now. He *deserves* it. He might not have wielded the blade that killed my parents, but he killed *thousands*. He's responsible for endless death.

I expect him to fight his chains as the fire rages closer. I *want* him to scream, to suffer, *the way I have suffered*.

But he doesn't move. Not an inch. Flames spread through the cell, catching on dry leaves and hay, roaring until it's almost at his feet.

"You're going to die," I tell him, my voice unrecognizable. This is reckless. This will lead to even more bloodshed. But I can't stop. I don't want to stop. I grip the iron bars of his cell, so I can watch.

He still doesn't shift a muscle. Even as the fire travels close enough to burn.

Finally, he looks up at me. His pale face is marred with cuts and bruises.
"You act as if it's a bad thing."

I rip the flames away in shock. My hands are in fists around the bars of his cell. My voice is pure malice. "You killed a lot of people for someone who doesn't value their own life."

"I didn't do it for me."

"You—"

Truth.

Truth.

I didn't know he was capable of it.

My eyes narrow. "I didn't come here for conversation," I growl, and the demon smiles, ripping open a cut at the corner of his mouth. Blood trickles down his chin. He doesn't seem to care.

"No? But you're so good at it," he drawls, sarcasm dripping from every word.

I glare at him. I remember what Enya said . . . about how the ending of the war didn't make sense. He won't answer, I know that, but I have to ask anyway.
"Why did you surrender?"

Grimshaw tilts his head at me. He looks almost curious. And far too casual for someone who nearly burned alive a minute ago. I blink in surprise when he does answer. "I tired of death."

He *lives on death*. He's a monster. A damned liar. I bare my teeth, ready to launch my disgust at his lies—

When sweetness smooths down my tongue.

I start to question the reliability of my flair. I lean forward. "Are you trying to get me to believe that *you*, demon warrior, famous for soaking your blade in the blood of your enemies, surrendered willingly . . . because you didn't want anyone else to die?"

Grimshaw smirks. Then, he drops my gaze like I disgust him. His face is nearly covered by his dark hair as his head hangs. "Believe anything you want, second son. It doesn't make a difference to me."

He doesn't speak again.



PRISONER

“How did it go?”

Enya, Calder, and Zed are waiting in my room when I return. Usually, I’m happy to see my friends. Now . . . I don’t know what to tell them. How do I explain I almost ruined the peace treaty by killing the heir of Nightshade? How do I explain that the demon didn’t even seem to care? That he didn’t even try to lie to me?

“Well?” Zed pushes.

I sigh. “He told the truth.”

Enya frowns. “Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know.” There is no advantage to telling the truth, unless his plan is complicated, and long-term, and involves gaining my trust.

But that doesn’t make sense.

“It’s like he doesn’t even want to leave the prison,” I say.

Zed raises a brow at me. “I’ve smelled that prison. Everyone wants to leave it.”

I’ve *lived* in it. I agree with him.

Still, it doesn’t change what I witnessed. I frown. “Well, he doesn’t.”

In war, I saw countless men face their death. I saw them, the moment they knew they were going to die. They always, *always* looked afraid.

Grim didn’t. If anything, he just looked dejected.

The warrior who had cut through fields of enemies was gone. If I didn’t have my flair, I would say it was a trick. An illusion.

“There has to be more to this,” Enya says, when I recount every part of our conversation—leaving out the fire.

It was a moment of selfishness. If I had killed Grim . . . it would plunge us back into war. It would mean all the death we suffered would have been for

nothing.

How could I have gotten so close to ruining this peace? My brother would have suffered for it. My friends. The *entire island*.

I knew all that, and still, I lost control. It was like my powers gave into my fury. Into emotion. I can't trust myself not to make it happen again.

Enya's brow is folded in thought. She paces my room. Finally, she looks up at me and says, "You need to go back."

I'm pouring myself some of the tea they were enjoying while they waited for me to return, when I pause. Slowly, I look up at her. "What?"

Zed's lips are pursed as he nods. "I agree. This is even more concerning than if he had lied."

Unease starts to stir in my chest. If only they knew what had almost happened. If only I could move past the shame and tell them.

But I can't. They're already going through enough. I don't want to give them yet another thing to worry about. I don't want to be a burden.

I look over at Calder. He's always the mediator in these situations. He's avoiding looking at me.

"You too?" I demand.

His look is apologetic.

I growl as I sit back in my chair, tea forgotten. "I don't want to spend another second in that monster's presence."

Calder lifts a shoulder. "But if they're planning something . . . we need to find out. We need to stop it."

He's right.

I've always thought of my flair as its own sort of curse.

Now, more than ever.

"He isn't eating," the guard tells me, as I walk into the prisons. "The prisoner. He's refusing food."

Like I give a shit, I think, then remember what the Nightshade's death would mean.

"I was going to tell the king—"

My brother has more pressing matters to attend to than some Nightshade brat. "I'll handle it," I say.

My way of *handling it* is hurling the tray of food at him through the door I open then promptly lock, and saying, "Eat."

I expect the Nightshade to growl, or threaten me, or ignore me. Instead, he

lifts his head. Porridge coats his hair.

His voice is mocking. "Back so soon?"

My hands make fists as I fight the urge to set him aflame. "Unfortunately," I say through my teeth.

He just stares at me, as if he's trying to figure out why I'm here.

"Why haven't you been eating?" I demand. Only then do I realize he can't. Not by himself, anyway, what with the chains. Are the guards trying to spoon feed him? Of course he's not eating.

He shrugs a shoulder. His voice remains derisive. "Not hungry."

Lie. The first lie he's told me. And it's not even significant.

I glare at him. "I've been in these prisons. I know how hungry you are."

This seems to interest him. He lifts his head higher, his hair falling back. He either doesn't notice or doesn't care about the lumpy, gray gruel clinging to it. "The king's son? Imprisoned? Do explain."

"I owe you no explanation."

"Pity." He sighs. "You were just starting to get interesting."

He's in chains. He is a *prisoner*. Somehow, though, he speaks as though *I* am lesser.

Of course, it's a game. He's trying to belittle me. Why? What is he planning?

I could outright ask him. I would know if his answer was the truth . . . or a lie. Though, as my last visit taught me, he's more than willing to ignore me completely.

Or—

What if I gain *his* trust, somehow?

He won't tell me his plan if he despises me. But if he thinks I'm on *his side*

. . .

"I refused to gild a thief," I say.

Silence. He looks surprised by my answer.

"Why?"

I clench my jaw, already regretting my plan. But if this is how I stop another war . . .

"Same as you," I say, recalling his words from before. "Useless death doesn't interest me."

My plan is over before it begins, because I can't control the fury building in my chest, the anger surging in response to the smirk on his face. "See?" I hiss.

"It is, in fact, possible to refuse a father's order."

He says nothing.

I'm not done. No, I can't stand here and pretend he didn't murder my people. I lean forward, gripping the bars. "You killed thousands. *Thousands*. Good soldiers with families."

Hatred fills his eyes. He tilts his head to one side, sneering. "And you? Did you think our soldiers were mindless murderers when you were killing them?" He laughs without humor. "They were fighting because they were following orders. Same as yours."

"You attacked first," I say through my teeth, voice rising.

"*He* attacked first," Grimshaw says, his voice cutting.

We are not our fathers. Calder's voice is in my head.

"We were defending our lands," I hurl back.

"And they were protecting their lives." Grimshaw looks at me like I'm dirt. "My father imprisons his soldiers' families. If they run away or fail him, he kills everyone they love. He rules them by *fear*."

Truth.

I blink, rearing back. Monstrous. It's monstrous.

I feel an unexpected spike of guilt. I led our armies. We killed thousands of Nightshades.

No. I burn the feeling. I refuse to feel pity for the enemy. "And you?" I demand, finding my way back to my hatred. "What did he take from you? What did he threaten?"

He doesn't answer. But there is something—I can see it in the flash of pain behind his eyes.

Good. I'm glad he's capable of feeling pain. Because I'm going to inflict more of it on him. When he tells me what he's planning, I'll betray him. I'll do anything I can to hurt him the way his family has hurt mine.

He sighs loudly. It echoes through his cell. "If you're going to kill me, please do get on with it. It's pathetic, watching you stand there, glaring at me." He motions his chin toward the fire curling in my palms. "Go ahead. I'd rather burn alive than see your ugly face for another second."

The fire in my fists rages. My eyes narrow. *He's begging for it*, I think. Taunting me.

Does he think I won't do it? Or does he actually want it?

"The treaty would be null," I scrape out. And I need to find out what he's planning. If he's already set something in motion, his death won't stop it.

He smirks. "Sure. That's the reason. Not because you're too much of a coward to do anything for yourself."

The flames grow. “That’s rich coming from someone who followed every single one of his father’s orders.”

He stares for a second. Two. “I never said I wasn’t a coward.” His face projects the full extent of his disgust. “I’m not the one standing in front of a prisoner, truly believing that we’re so different. In a very probable alternate reality, our roles could easily be reversed.”

My jaw works. He’s wrong. We’re nothing alike. *Nothing.*

“Why do you hate me?”

His curiosity sounds genuine. I laugh without humor, the flames in my hands dying. I won’t give him what he wants.

“Truly,” he continues. “Think about it. Is it because of something I did? Or because someone told you to?”

I bare my teeth at him. “I hate you because you’re a monster who killed thousands of soldiers. I hate you because you are heartless and cruel. I hate you because your father—your father *killed my mother.*” *Killed both my parents.*

We are not our fathers, I remind myself. But everything Grimshaw’s done makes me think he may as well be.

I don’t know what I’m expecting him to say, but it isn’t—

“I’m sorry.”

Worse, I don’t expect him to mean it. I can taste that he does. *Truth.* It almost makes me angrier. I don’t want his apology. I don’t want his pity. *I want my mother back.*

“Be grateful you had one at all,” he remarks.

“You clearly had a mother.” My words are bitter.

“Yes, but I didn’t know her.”

Good, I think. The dark, twisted part of me that has been fed by rage is glad he has suffered. That he did not experience the love I did.

I want to rub it in. I want to keep trying to hurt him.

But I remember why I’m here. I need to gain his trust.

A moment passes in silence. Then I venture to ask, “What happened to her?”

His answer is immediate. Cold. “My father had her killed.”

I open my mouth. Close it. Am I so surprised? Is it not in line with everything I’ve learned about that family? About Cronan, the original Nightshade?

He studies me with dark amusement. “You see . . . I have no love for my father. We have that in common, you and I.”

I want to spit, *You don’t know me, monster.*

Then I remember. Nightshades can have mental abilities. Grimshaw likely has a flair. Does he read minds? If so, he's known my purpose from the moment I walked in. He'd know about my flair and how to avoid it. I need to proceed carefully.

"Why would you say that?" I ask, waiting to determine whether his answer is a lie.

He doesn't miss a beat. "Because you've mentioned your mother several times, and your father none."

My eyes narrow. He appears to be telling the truth, but would I know if he was withholding? I can't be sure.

"It's all right," he says, his voice mocking. "I bet he hated you back."

My anger flares, and flames erupt in my fist again.

"It's all right," he repeats slowly, drawing out the word, unconcerned. "So does mine."

We lock eyes. It's like he's daring me to kill him. Like he wants me to.

I shake my head in disgust. "You and me," I say, my voice fracturing with fury. "We—we're nothing alike."

I push off the cold metal bars, then leave, turning my back to him as I ignore the bitter taste in my mouth.

Lie.

My brother has summoned me to the throne room. I might be insulted by the formality of the gesture, if I didn't know how busy he was.

He's been practically glued to the throne since our parents died, hearing every demand and update. Every way the island is suffering in the war's aftermath.

His face looks hollow. More so than when I saw him last.

"You have to eat, Egan," I tell him.

He blinks. "I will," he says. "The meetings—they're more important."

"Than your own well-being?" He's wasting away.

He frowns. "Of course. I'm the least important part of this kingdom."

I look at him, perplexed.

"My own wants matter least," he continues. "That's what Father taught me. He was flawed . . . but he put the island above all else."

Including his children.

The commitment to duty, I admit, was admirable, though I never agreed with his insistence on exploring lands beyond Lightlark. As part of the ruling line, I

should share that sense of responsibility.

Shame fills my chest like poison. I recall the way I stormed out of the prisons, because of my own emotions. It was wrong. My brother is here, refusing to sleep or eat. Meanwhile I failed to get Grimshaw to reveal anything about his plans.

“Oro,” my brother says. “They say you’re visiting the prisoner. Is it true?”

So he knows. I nod.

The full strength of Egan’s trust in me is visible in the way his brow doesn’t even furrow. “Why?” he asks simply.

“Enya believes he’s planning something. She doesn’t trust the surrender. I’m trying to trick him into revealing information.”

Egan purses his lips thoughtfully. “And how is that going?”

Horribly.

I almost killed him five seconds into our first conversation.

“It’s still early stages.”

He nods. “You’ve always been a good judge of character.” He doesn’t know it’s because of my flair. I kept it a secret from my father. Egan was close to him. I didn’t want it to be a burden for him to keep.

I think about telling him now . . . but decide against it. Especially as the doors open, and nobles begin shuffling in for the next meeting.

“Let me know if there’s anything I should be aware of,” he says. I turn around. “And Oro?”

“Yes, *King*?” I say, in earshot of the approaching nobles.

Egan winces at the title, as if he hasn’t gotten used to it. “Be careful.”

“I will,” I promise, before slipping through the doors, already dreading whatever the bastard is going to say when I show up in front of his cell again.

“Can’t stay away, can you?”

His tone is mocking as ever.

I approach, then recoil. “You smell like shit,” I say, standing as far from his cell as possible.

He grins sardonically. “Next time I’ll make sure to scrub extra hard with the soap I’m provided.”

There is no soap. No bath. I remember my time in the prisons and feel a flicker of pity.

Grimshaw curls his lip in disgust. “Don’t start pitying me, second son. Burn me alive first.”

I still, shocked. Then I take a step forward. There's no use delaying the question. "Can you read my mind?"

"No. And trust me, I'm grateful for it."

Truth. I nearly sigh in relief.

He snorts. "If I could, yours would be the last I would get caught rummaging in."

I narrow my eyes. "Why?"

He shrugs, his chains clanking against the wall. "You're not very important, are you, second son? I wouldn't waste my talents on someone so insignificant."

He wants to rile me up. "Yet here you are, speaking to me."

He flashes a mocking smile. "I am, as you can see, a very *captive audience*." Bastard.

It's not the insult. It's the fact that I could imagine one of my friends saying the very same thing.

He is not your friend, I remind myself, heat curling from my hands. *His father killed your mother*.

"So conflicted," he says, shaking his head. "Not a very useful trait, if you ask me. Good thing you're the second son. You would make an awful king."

I glare at him, even if, on some level I don't disagree. "I thought you couldn't read my mind," I say.

He lifts a shoulder. "I never said anything about your emotions."

I don't know what shocks me more. That information—or that he told me the truth, unprompted. He could have lied. He doesn't know about my flair. Why tell me one of his abilities, when he could have easily used it against me?

Yet—perhaps he isn't trying to use it against me. Perhaps, just as he has told me, just as I have inferred from his own actions, he is perfectly content to stay in this cell forever. Or perhaps he's playing a similar game to mine.

Only one way to find out.

I sit down across from his cell, resting my back against the wall.

Grimshaw's eyes narrow. For the first time, he looks suspicious. "Why are you here? If you're not going to put me out of my misery, why deepen it with your company?"

I can't tell him my reason. I also don't particularly enjoy lying. "I'd like to understand my enemy." It's partially true, at least.

"Right." He doesn't believe me for a second.

I need to keep him talking. "You say you hate your father. So why not kill him?"

“Why didn’t you kill yours?” He meets my eyes. “Why don’t you kill your brother?”

“I love my brother.”

Grimshaw looks unconvinced. His lip curls in distaste. “Take *love*”—he says the word like it disgusts him—“out of the equation. Why don’t you kill your brother?”

I know what he’s asking me to admit. And I wonder, even with reading emotions, how he was able to intuit a truth I’ve only ever told Egan, decades ago.

“I don’t want to rule.”

Grimshaw nods calmly, as if he anticipated the answer. “Are you still pretending we’re so different?”

I swallow hard. We are nothing alike. But I’ll indulge his delusions, if it means protecting this island and those I love.

“You’re saying you don’t want your father’s throne?” I need to know what drives him. Understanding Grimshaw could mean unlocking his plans—or at least guessing at them.

“I don’t want anything,” he says. It’s true. His emotionlessness, his coldness . . . they’re not an act. It’s clear Grimshaw shut down a long time ago. What happened to make him this way?

“Not even a woman?” I ask. Perhaps it was heartbreak that got him here.

“Wanting implies caring. I’ve never cared about any of the women I’ve been with.”

I’m shocked that he’s admitting this much. Why? Why speak so plainly to his enemy? But he’s been here for days, in isolation. Perhaps my presence is a solace.

Grimshaw rolls his eyes. “My lack of feeling shocks you.”

“What shocks me is that you seem to believe everyone is as heartless as you.”

He shakes his head. “No. Fools exist, second son. I’m sitting right in front of one.”

I smirk. “You think I’m a fool for loving people?”

He nods.

“Why?”

“Because love, the kind people like you believe in, doesn’t exist. Let me guess: You believe love is some *disease*, something that happens to you without your own free will.” He scoffs. “Like it isn’t a decision you make. Like you

don't get to decide whether to give someone else power over you." He frowns. "Loving someone is allowing them to train the tip of their dagger on your heart at all times. And smiling about it. It's idiotic."

I shake my head. For the first time since I've been in these prisons, I laugh, truly. I can't help myself.

His voice is cutting. "You think that's amusing, second son."

I nod. "I do. I think it's funny how you think you would be impervious to it. To love."

He narrows his eyes at me. "I am impervious to it. Because I refuse to be a fool."

I think about all the people I've loved. My mother. My brother. My friends. It isn't exactly what he explained . . . but it's close. I would do anything for them. That love is endless.

My mother.

I close my eyes against the images of her being cut down. Of her body, turning to ash—

"The pain you feel now is because of this *love* you speak so highly of," Grimshaw says.

I tense.

"Yes, I can feel your pain," he says, glaring at me. "It's enormous. It's tiresome."

I grind my teeth. "I apologize that my all-encompassing sorrow over my parents' murder by your father is *inconvenient* for you," I snarl.

"Thank you for your apology. But getting out of my face would be preferable."

I can tell we're done for today. I give him what he wants.



ENEMIES

I walk into a previously abandoned floor we've overtaken as our own, to find my friends there. They're seated on a mismatched assortment of the most comfortable couches Zed could steal from various parts of the castle. We each have our favorite chair. Zed is currently sitting in mine. "Let's go swimming."

They look shocked. Probably because I've never been the one to propose night swimming in my life. Even though it's one of my friends' favorite things to do.

"It's the Nightshade, isn't it?" Zed says, looking amused. "He got you wound up."

No use in denying it. I just scowl. "Consider yourselves lucky that none of you have my flair. I don't think I've met such a miserable person in my entire life."

"Now then. Don't disrespect your father so soon after his death," Zed says. There's a moment of silence.

We all burst into laughter. It feels wrong, but also right, to be finally *laughing*. How long has it been since we've all laughed together like this?

Enya hops to her feet. "Oro's decided he's a good time. Let's get going before he starts frowning again."

I give her a look, and she just loops her arm in mine. "You've been a little miserable yourself, you have to admit."

She's joking, but I scowl, remembering the Nightshade's insistence on how similar we are.

Enya notices. She squeezes my arm. "You have a reason to be miserable. We all do." I remind myself I'm not the only person who lost someone close to them. And I'm not the only one grieving my mother. "Tonight though . . . let's just forget. For a few hours."

We leave the castle. On our way down to the beaches, I think about all our reasons to be upset. To be angry. Grim has those reasons too.

He didn't have a mother. His father *killed* her.

I remember the weight of the power in my chest—how it felt when I fought to control it . . . how it felt like I was teetering on the edge of two fates—burning the world down . . . or keeping it whole.

My mother is the one who kept me on the right path. Who reminded me I was loved, and why this world is beautiful and worth saving to begin with.

What would I have turned into, if my father had killed my mother, before I experienced that love?

Who would I have become, without my mother's guidance?

Who would I be without my friends? Without Egan? Without all the people I care about, and who care about me? Each of them has helped me find light, even in crushing darkness.

Rage has often turned me into someone I don't recognize. I wonder if Grim's right. If a few turns of fate could have made me into exactly what he is.

I shake the thought away as I enter the water after my friends. As foaming waves overtake us. As Calder creates ice floats for us to lie on, shivering, at Enya's instance.

I refuse to feel empathy for my enemy.

Grimshaw's head is still down as his voice, made gravelly from thirst, echoes through the cell. I haven't even turned the corner, yet he can sense my presence. "Ivon Wolf."

I frown. "What?"

"Ivon Wolf." He finally looks up. Blood has crusted down his mouth. The prisoner isn't supposed to be touched—but it seems the guards haven't kept their orders. "Two hundred and seven years old. Three daughters. A wife pregnant with a fourth. Taller than either of us and could whistle any note."

"Why—"

"Alinor Frey. Expert swordswoman. Husband of four centuries. Familiar with every type of metalwork."

He continues. He rattles off dozens of names. Characteristics. Without breaking eye contact.

"People, you see, just like your soldiers. Not mindless faces. Not faceless monsters." He bares his teeth at me. "You killed them. *You*, with your sword. All

of them.”

I swallow.

His people were attacking my land. “It was in defense—”

He tilts his face. “Do your intentions matter, when they’re all dead?”

“What was the alternative? Allow them to kill my own?”

Still, the names circle through my head. Children. Families changed forever. Lives lost. I never once thought about them. I never considered who they were beneath their helmets.

Grim looks pleased, sensing my turmoil.

He’s trying to confuse me. Trying to get me to sympathize with him. *I will not feel empathy for my enemy.*

“What game are you playing?” I ask through my teeth.

His grin is nothing short of poisonous. “Not a very fun one, since it involves speaking to you. And not one with any goal other than getting you to see that everything you hate about me is in you too.”

My nostrils flare. “You like being in here, don’t you?” I demand, changing the topic.

He shrugs as much as he can with the chains weighing him down. “It isn’t so bad when a boring second son isn’t tormenting me.”

Truth.

“Why?”

He leans his head back against the wall. “My father isn’t here.”

“You would rather be in a prison . . . than around your own father?”

I did not have the best relationship with my father. But I would have preferred his presence over this.

He considers my words. “They’re not so different.” He sighs. “At least in here, my sword is clean.” His sword. The one bathed in blood after every battle.

I don’t stand down. “You love battle. You love killing. I could *see* it.”

He glares at me. “I don’t love *anything*.” He’s telling the truth. Of course he is. “I enjoy turning it all off . . .” he says. “Everything. My thoughts. My feelings. Everything becomes simpler.”

We stare at each other. Out of nowhere, he growls like an animal. “Your pity is disgusting. Do not pity me. I would rather be miserable than delusional, like you.”

“Right,” I say, laughing. “You think having friends, and loving my family, makes me weak.”

“Yes. And also, an idiot.”

That makes me laugh. And, I might be imagining it, but I swear the corner of his mouth turns up for just a moment. Then, he's back to scowling.

"Why do you come here?" he asks. "Is it to torture me?"

Any hint of amusement leaves me. I remember again who he is. Why I'm here. I could lie. He doesn't have my flair. I could easily keep my emotions in check. *No.* I try my best not to lie. He is not going to be the cause of me losing myself.

"I'm here to find out if you're working against us," I say, truthfully. "If you being here as a term of our treaty is part of your plan to overtake Lightlark."

"Ah," he says, apparently unsurprised.

"Well? Are you?" The words hang in the air between us, bookended by silence. I don't dare breathe. One second passes. Another.

I don't expect him to answer. But then he says, "Not right now."

Truth. I finally breathe. My body uncoils. My people are safe, for now. I got what I came for.

"Thank you," I tell him.

And then, I leave.



VILLAINS

Zed slams three different types of drink down in front of us.

We're at a Skyling bar in the middle of the agora. The owner, Juniper, has given us a table in the very back, far from the rest of the clamoring and conversation.

Calder frowns. "Don't you have training tomorrow?"

Zed is part of the flight force, an aerial fighting group.

Enya smirks. "It hasn't stopped him before. Though those of us on land are in more danger than he is."

We all remember the time Zed got drunk and threw up on a large portion of the agora. He was banned for five years. It would have been longer, but my mother always had a soft spot for Zed and was able to convince my father to shorten his sentence.

"Maybe I'll take a trip above the prisons," he says deviously, knowing as much as I do that there are holes in the ceilings of the cells. He hands us each a glass, then lifts his. "To Oro, truth-finder, who is now rid of the Nightshade scum!"

The glasses clink as they crash together. I take a sip and wince.

I shoot the Skyling a look. "Really?" It's basically pure alcohol.

Zed lifts a shoulder. "Next time, don't let me order."

Enya tries hers and nearly gags. "This should be illegal." She puts it back on the table and gets up to order something else.

Zed, for his part, drinks his entire cup, then Enya's. He stands and follows Enya to the bar.

Calder turns to me. "So. How was it really?"

I swirl the drink I have no plans of consuming. "What do you mean?" I ask, though I know exactly what he means. The Moonling gives me a look.

I sigh. “He was surprisingly *not* monstrous in every interaction, but he’s still a monster. What do you want me to say?”

“Just the truth. As you always have.”

The truth is complicated.

“What’s bothering you?” Calder doesn’t have Nightshade mind abilities, but he might as well. He’s uncannily good at guessing at our feelings. It’s what happens when you listen more than you speak.

“He thinks we’re similar,” I explain, then frown, like the words are as bitter as the drink.

“You are,” Calder says, as if it’s obvious. I throw him a scathing look, but he continues, unbothered. “You’re both sons of rulers. Powerful. Caged, in one way or another, by your roles. You both led your land’s armies. You’re of a similar age. You—”

“I get it,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Our enemies are the heroes of their own stories. They are the villains of ours.” He shrugs. “It works both ways. You and me . . . we were meant to be enemies, weren’t we?”

We were. My father killed his. His father led an uprising against mine. We were born to be rivals.

“So, you think he and I should be friends?” I ask, my tone cutting.

Calder laughs. “No. I just think the worst lies are the ones we tell ourselves.”

The lies we tell ourselves.

Enya slams her new drink on the table. “You will never guess what that barkeep told me.” She turns to me. “Since when are we keeping secrets from each other?”

I blink. “What?”

Her face falls. “You don’t know, then.”

“Don’t know what?” Zed asks from behind her.

I can tell from her expression that Enya doesn’t know if my ignorance is good or bad news. She doesn’t know how I’m going to take it.

“Your brother is betrothed.”

My first thought is to say, *No, he isn’t*. But I haven’t seen him in days. Ever since he became king, a gap has opened between us. Instead, I say, “To who?”

“Aurora.”

Zed howls in laughter. “Oh no. Your brother surely doesn’t deserve that.”

Enya sighs. “It’s no secret she’s been infatuated with him for a while.”

She’s putting it lightly. The Starling ruler has trailed my brother around for

as long as I can remember. Back when we were children, she was only an heir. Then her parents died in a freak accident, an explosion in the Starling castle stables while they were preparing for a ride. In the blink of an eye, Aurora became one of the youngest rulers in history.

“I still think she killed them,” Zed says, then takes a sip of his new drink. Calder shoots him a look.

Zed lifts his hands, palms to the air. “What? She wouldn’t be the first to kill for power.”

Enya shakes her head. “No. We heard her, me and Oro. Right before her crowning ceremony. She was a wreck. Sobbing. Still mourning her parents.”

And Egan was holding her, as she cried in his arms. I can’t believe I’m finding out this way. I grip the table, and Enya notices.

“It’s for political reasons, of course,” she says. “Starling is strong as ever. An alliance between them makes sense.”

I must look unconvinced, because she continues. “The war fractured this island. Your brother always puts the good of the people first. It means nothing.”

I consider what Egan said to me about *duty*. She’s right. If anyone would marry purely for political reasons, it’s him.

Zed throws back another drink. “Do you think they’ll have to share a bed?” He frowns. “She’s attractive, but there’s something a little scary about her, isn’t there? She’s always glaring at me.”

“I wonder why,” Enya says wryly, as Zed polishes off her drink.

Calder looks pensive. “This would be the first marriage between rulers.”

He’s right. My parents were both Sunling. My mother was from a noble family, but she was not of royal blood.

“It will certainly make a statement,” Enya says.

She’s right. But I’m not sure if it’s going to be a good one.

Marriage will create unity . . . but it might also be a sign of too much consolidated power.

Enya turns to me. “When are *you* going to marry?” I shoot her a look. She shrugs and takes another sip of her drink. “What? I’m tired of people assuming we’re together. When women aren’t drooling over you, they’re glaring at me.” I would say Enya’s exaggerating, but I’m not impervious to the looks. The whispers.

“And it would be nice have another woman in the group.” Enya frowns at us. “No offense, but sometimes you all stink, and maybe if another woman was here to tell you, you’d believe me.”

Zed's smile is poisonous. "We stink because we actually move all day, instead of letting our flames fight for us."

At that, a wisp of flame uncurls from Enya's palm, knocking one of Zed's drinks to the side. Before it spills on Calder, he freezes it, and it falls to the table, shattering. Zed pops a piece of the frozen drink in his mouth, and Enya rolls her eyes.

"Well?" Enya asks, turning to me again. "When can I expect a new best friend? Preferably one who *doesn't* eat table drink?"

I turn to the women at the next table. Two avert their gazes immediately, but one holds it. She smiles. Skyling. She has blond hair and freckles.

"She's pretty," Enya whispers, before taking another sip.

I suppose so. I look, waiting for a tug, a feeling. I get nothing. Just vague attraction. I might have laughed at Grim's assessment of love, but in a twisted way, I agree with him. I don't believe in love at first sight. Romantic love could never be greater than the love I have for my friends.

Attraction, sure. Sex is great. But talking to one another for hours? Caring enough to collect details about them? Choosing to spend time with them over your friends?

Never.

"At least we don't have to worry about the Nightshade anymore," Zed says, holding his empty glass up.

We all cheer to that.



SHATTERING

I find my brother in the war room.

He's frowning down at the depiction of the island. Standing here, poring over his lands . . . he looks uncannily like our father.

"Were you not going to tell me?"

A second passes before he looks up.

His eyes are red. Tired. His cheeks are even sharper than usual. It seems to take him a moment to understand what I'm asking. Then he nods. "The marriage," he murmurs, as if it's an afterthought.

"You're betrothed, and you didn't tell me."

He shakes his head. Waves the statement away. "It's political. It doesn't mean anything."

"It will to Aurora."

He pinches the bridge of his nose in a gesture that again reminds me of our father. His patient tone is all our mother, though. "What it means to her is not my main concern. My top priority is uniting the realms."

I stare down at the map myself. It's inaccurate now. Some of its locations have been decimated. "And you think this marriage will accomplish that?"

Egan nods. "Starling has grown in power. Aurora's abilities are significant."

I guess at the meaning behind his words. The fate he hopes to avoid with this marriage. "You're worried she'll branch off from the island."

"It's a possibility. She has the numbers. Her people are largely self-sufficient."

"Yes, but she's in love with you."

Egan frowns, as if Aurora's love is a massive inconvenience. He doesn't bother denying it. Love for rulers is dangerous. It means access to each other's abilities.

I wonder if he's felt her powers. I wonder how Aurora feels, never having felt his.

"What of your own feelings?" I ask. He's still my brother. I've watched him have relationships with others for years, provoking Aurora's jealousy.

His eyes snap to mine. He frowns. "Feelings? My feelings don't matter."

I think, for a moment, of another person who buried his feelings. And what that led to.

"It will give the island something to celebrate," Egan says, looking down at the map. He uses charcoal to cross out the places that were lost. "In the worst of moments, people need something to look forward to." Royal weddings are elaborate affairs. The celebrations last months.

"So, it's not happening anytime soon?"

Egan sighs. "Not if I can help it."

The announcement will, however. My brother will want to instill hope among our people as soon as possible, to make his rebuilding efforts easier. I can't help but think it's a good plan—even if it comes at my brother's expense.

He's made his choice, however. We aren't children anymore, playing with wooden swords and joking about what Egan would look like wearing the crown.

It's on his head right now. Golden and bright.

And—by the looks of his exhaustion—heavy.

Finally, he looks up at me again. "And what of the Nightshade?"

"He isn't planning anything."

He blinks in surprise. "You're sure?"

I nod, and he looks past me. "Good. That's good. Thank you."

He returns to his map, and I consider my conversation with the prisoner. Never have I understood more why Grim would rather be in a cell than rule a kingdom.

For the next few days, I think about all that my brother is sacrificing for the good of the island. I've never wanted to be king, but now? I see it as the curse it is. Living life for everyone else. Never being able to make a choice that isn't rooted in duty.

He shouldn't have to bear the brunt of it alone.

I'll do anything I can to make his role easier. It's the least I can do. It's what my mother would have wanted.

I walk into the throne room, resolved to take my next orders now that Grimshaw has been dealt with, and am knocked out of my thoughts by the sound

of crying.

No. Crying is too weak a word. This sound, this *wailing* scrapes against my bones.

A woman is on her knees in front of the king, trembling.

I'm startled to see my brother rise to his feet; he's not supposed to leave his throne when receiving visitors.

What he does next breaks every rule of decorum. He approaches the woman, then kneels in front of her and grabs her hands.

"I am truly, truly sorry."

I take a step closer and—

Agnes. His guardian. Why is she crying? I rush forward.

Her sobs echo through the gilded room. "I will go myself—I *will go*," she says, tears giving way to a voice forged of pure and unyielding strength.

"It will mean your death," my brother tells her gently.

"I am dead without her."

Without her.

My blood goes cold. I spot Enya at the side of the room and grab her arm. "What happened?" I demand, though I fear I already know.

"Her daughter snuck into the Midnight Woods."

Ara. The daughter she fought to have. The baby with red cheeks that we all took turns holding. On Lightlark, babies are honored, even coveted.

No. Agnes is a valued guardian and member of her realm. Egan cares for her. He would send any warriors to go find Ara, if there was a chance of recovery. But now I understand why my brother isn't ordering guards to go find her. I understand why he's telling her that it would be a death sentence. Those Star Isle woods have been overtaken by night creatures for centuries. If Ara's still alive, she won't be soon.

"She's still screaming," Agnes says, her racking sobs making her teeth chatter. Her skin is gray in pallor. Until now, I've never seen her cry, not once. "She's still—she's still living."

I close my eyes sharply. Not for a second can I imagine the pain of hearing your child screaming, knowing they still live, knowing there is still hope . . . yet it being impossible to save them.

No. Not impossible.

Enya turns to me, as if she read the tensing of my body and can tell what I'm thinking.

Of course she can. She knows me better than I know myself.

“You don’t think—”

“Yes,” I say.

There is one person on this island who could potentially stand against a forest full of night creatures left over from when Nightshade was still part of this island.

She frowns. “And your brother? Would he let you?”

I think about that. Then I nod. “He trusts me,” I say.

It’s true, though another thing is certain: I don’t trust Grim for a second.

He raises his head as I enter. It’s been days since I was last here, and he looks thinner than before. Weaker. There isn’t a hint of color in his features.

He frowns when he sees me. “Interesting. Such a range of emotions . . . you want something, don’t you?”

I work my jaw, wondering what this demon is going to ask for. Wondering what I’ll give him. Agnes has been a second mother to me my entire life. She’s the most selfless person I’ve ever met. My mother—she *loved her*. She was there, by her side, when Ara was born.

“Did you ever have a guardian that took care of you like she was your parent? That looked out for you?”

He blinks, as if batting away the cobwebs he’s put on his own memories. A second passes. Another. Finally, he nods.

Interesting.

“My brother’s guardian tried for decades to have a daughter until she finally did. She’s her entire world. She, of anyone, deserves this happiness.” I take a step toward the cell. “Her daughter has gone into the Midnight Woods.”

He looks at me blankly. Of course, he doesn’t know what I mean.

“It’s a place on Star Isle that’s been overrun by shadow creatures.”

Grim, to his credit, does not take any amusement from the situation, even though I have come to plead for his assistance. Instead, he curses. Shakes his head. “She won’t survive long.”

“Her mother thinks she’s still alive,” I say.

But she won’t be for much longer.

Grim’s eyes are fixed on mine. I stare him down through the bars on his cell, looking for anything—*anything*—to change my mind. To remind me why this is the world’s biggest mistake.

“Help us,” I say. Then I utter a word I never thought I would speak to any Nightshade, let alone this one. “Please.”

He does not respond. All he does is shake his arms, so the chains clink together. “I won’t be useful tied to a wall.”

“Then you’ll help us.” It’s a statement, but I still need to hear his answer.

“Yes,” he says sharply.

I need more assurances. I’m taking a risk that could affect the entire island. “If I let you out, will you betray us?”

He takes his time with this answer, as if he’s sifting through various possibilities. “No,” he finally says. *Truth.*

I unlock the cell.

I brace myself; part of me believes that despite his answer, he’ll crush me under his shadows. But when his chains fall free, Grim steps slowly out of the cell. He frowns toward the sunlight streaming through the open doorway at the end of the hall.

“I have one condition,” he tells me, as we walk toward it.

I scowl. “And you waited until now?”

“Do you want my help or not?”

Of course I do. “What is it?”

“I work alone. I don’t want any of your ridiculous warriors or friends weighing me down.”

I consider Egan. He only let me secure the Nightshade’s support because I insisted he’d be accompanied, to guarantee he doesn’t simply flee to Nightshade.

“I won’t send them,” I agree. “But I’m coming with you.”

Grim sighs. “Great. More time together. I’d rather be back in that cell.” Still, he keeps walking. The dungeon entrance leads to an external stairway that curls around the mountain from which the prison was built. He blocks the sun with a hand, grimacing. His eyes narrow. “Don’t slow me down,” he says. And then he shoots off the cliff, in a stream of shadows.

I sigh. *What the fuck have I gotten myself into?* Then I leap into the air, flying after him.

His shadows don’t work as well as my ability to fly. We soar only to the edge of the Mainland. Then, we hurry toward Star Isle on foot. Grim races down the bridge without a moment’s hesitation.

We’re not the only ones on the path. As we approach a group of Starling nobles, dread pierces my stomach. There’s no time to explain why the prisoner is walking free, or what I’m doing next to him. I brace myself for their horror or

questions—

They say nothing. They nod at me, then pass us by on their way to the Mainland. I glance at the glowering heir. He's leaking shadows everywhere, staining the island with his presence.

"Are you masking yourself?"

"Of course I am," he says, like I'm an idiot. "I don't need people gawking at me."

Right.

We race through Star Isle quickly. He moves assuredly. He seems irritated, more than anything, to be doing this. There is no benefit to him in it . . . he claimed he wouldn't use this as a chance to escape.

My flair has never failed me. If he doesn't plan to betray us . . . why help? The villain I fought against for years across the battlefield is heartless. He doesn't care about a child he's never met—not when he's taken so many other lives with ease. So why is he here, risking himself to save just one?

I decide to come right out with it. "Why are you doing this?"

He snorts. "Are you trying to talk me out of helping your people?"

"No. I'm trying to understand why my coldhearted enemy cares about a Starling child."

He turns. "You think I don't care about a child, just because she's from Lightlark?"

I shrug a shoulder. "You didn't care about thousands of Lightlark soldiers."

He bares his teeth. "When we first invaded, we made our terms clear. Anyone who didn't want to die could surrender unharmed. The moment they set foot on that battlefield, they accepted the risk of death."

We're past the Starling castle now. Then, past the woods behind it. "Do you think doing this will help you get out of the prisons? Free you?"

He sighs in a long-suffering way. "I'm just trying to save a child. Though now I'm hoping the Midnight Woods will kill *you*, so I can be rid of your infernal presence."

Truth. Both statements.

Bastard.

The trees are silver. Glowing. The dirt looks like ground-up stars. Star Isle is beautiful. As far as I know, Grim has never been here. I'd have expected him to study everything, to memorize it all in case of a future invasion, but he runs quickly, eyes straight ahead. Focused on our mission.

"I would expect a prisoner to revel more in his freedom, as temporary as it

is,” I remark, as we near the Midnight Woods. We both slow.

“I’ve never been free in my life,” Grim says.

I open my mouth to issue a retort, when a scream spears through the rising darkness. We both stop. Relief spills through my bones. It’s her; it must be. *She’s alive*. The scream continues, echoing relentlessly. She’s alive, but it’s clear she’s suffering. We turn to look at each other for a moment.

Then we take off.

The second I step foot into the woods, a chill licks down my spine as if in warning. The cold deepens. Everything behind us is silver as the stars; here, the roots are dark as night. The trees are shriveled and sticky, as if they’ve been poisoned. The ground is muddled ash. This is a place of death. Of suffering. Shadows flicker in the sides of my vision. Branches move like swords trying to strike us down.

“Don’t let them touch you,” Grim warns.

I smell the poison on them. It seeps from dark moss, covering their pointed tips.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I say, ducking to avoid the branches. One gets close, and I burn it away. Another swings wildly at Grim, and he grunts in irritation.

“Enough,” Grim growls, extending his hand. From his palm, he issues nothing short of an avalanche of shadows that throws trees to the side, clearing a path.

I swallow hard. After months of being imprisoned, his powers should be weakened. Yet he doesn’t even seem winded.

The screams are getting louder. Closer.

We reach the edge of a black lake and stop, crouching in the brush surrounding its banks to avoid being seen. In the center sits an island. In the center of that sits a child. Ara. Her hands are covering her ears, as if she hears something we cannot. Tears streak down her face. Her mouth is elongated in a scream that’s suddenly gone silent, as if her voice has given out.

Slowly, she rises from the ground, floating, compelled by an invisible force. She shakes, back and forth, resisting its hold. Hooded figures suddenly emerge from the shadows, tattered and frayed. Beneath their hoods I make out bones, and nothing more. Night creatures. And they’re not alone.

A hiss sounds behind me, and I whirl, only to be met by a towering shadow. No. Not just a shadow. Moonlight escapes from behind a cloud, and the figure is momentarily revealed—ghastly and shredded, a mauled body.

There are dozens of them clustered around the edge of the forest. I hear them behind me, crawling from the depths of the lake. We're boxed in.

The light shifts suddenly, and they're all gone, made nearly invisible without the moon's glow. Then there's silence.

A moment passes. Two.

"The quiet is bad. They're about to strike," Grim says, shadows unfurling from his arms.

A high-pitched scream splits the world in half, and they're on us.

I erupt in flames. They curl down my arms to create two swords. I use them to decapitate the creature right in front of me, but its head quickly replaces itself. I swallow. They're already dead. Nothing will kill them—not for long. We'll never defeat all of them.

At my side, Grim battles with his shadows, demolishing everything in his path. Unlike with my flames, the shadow creatures disappear for longer against his power. Some don't return at all, as if permanently extinguished.

"Go," he yells, looking over his shoulder. He looks . . . almost afraid. But not of the creatures.

He's afraid for the girl, I realize.

Ara.

I shoot into the sky, toward her—only to go hurling back, smacking against a tree. The shadows engulfing her . . . they've created a swirling current, almost invisible save for the faint grayness in the air. I squint at the sky. The grayness is growing. The shadow creatures around Ara are swirling, almost blocking her from sight. They know we're here. They don't want to let her go.

Fine. If I can't fly, I'll get to her on foot. Creatures shoot out of the forest again, but I make a wall of flames, temporarily cutting them down. I use that second to freeze a path across the lake and take off toward the island. Immediately, I hear them behind me, chasing, so I collapse the bridge almost as quickly as I make it, sending them into the water.

It took years to learn how to freeze ice this sturdy. My armored boots clash against it, but it holds. Even through my panic, it holds, as I race toward Ara. She's shaking wildly, against the shadows. It's as if they are *burning* her, the way she screams. It looks like the shadow creatures are gaining something from her pain.

"Hold on, Ara!" I yell. "We're—"

The world tilts, and my head smashes against the ice. Something has my leg. I blink through the roaring in my skull, through my blurred vision, and twist,

only to see a skeletal hand clasped around my ankle. More creatures are slinking up from the icy water. Their rotted arms are reaching over the frozen path beneath me. I'm surrounded. If I collapse the ice, I'll go down with them. If I fly, I'll be beaten down by the howling current above.

There's a Starling ability I've only tried once before. It requires great energy—energy I don't have right now, as blood spurts from my head where it hit the ice. But Ara needs me.

I take a breath. Force my panic into focus. I narrow all my senses into that power in my heart. I brush away all thoughts, doubts, and fears.

Find your fire. It doesn't just apply to flames. It means finding the light in the darkness. Finding the calm in the chaos.

It happens in a ripple. Sparks travel down my armor and across my skin, shielding me in energy. The moment it's in place, the night creatures are on me, scraping against the glimmering silver—

Hundreds. Crawling from deep below. Covering me completely, raking against the sparks. I close my eyes, then project the energy off me—it sends some flying.

But it's not enough. There are too many of them. And more are coming. Spindly arms encircle me from below, pulling me down, trying to drag me into the water. I thrash against their hold, fighting to keep the shield, the only thing standing between me and their bladelike claws.

But I can feel my hold weakening. My vision is swirling. My head is still pouring blood from the fall. I can't heal it without breaking the seal. Without letting them in.

I roar and kick one off, then punch another, trying to clear my vision. But they're replaced. They're endlessly replaced. Think. *Think.*

My thoughts inexplicably go to my friends. To that fallen drink in the bar . . . how Calder froze it, and it shattered.

With a final burst of energy, I unleash a flurry of frost, freezing the creatures around me—and they tumble off the sides of the ice, sinking into the waters. The ones below are smothered and weighed down. Until finally, I can see the sky again.

Ara.

I get to my feet. Within seconds, the creatures I didn't freeze begin surfacing from below, clawing at my bridge. I dissolve the rest of the ice, only creating sheets of it where I step, not giving them a place to hold, but they start to lunge. Start to grab at my clothes.

She's right there. *Right there.* And she's dying. She's hanging limp in the air,

now. Not even screaming. The darkness swirls around her, triumphant.

Enough.

Fury heats the ability in my chest, making it boil over. Fury that night creatures exist. That they would drain a *child*.

I growl in frustration, and that power, the endless stream that I've fought hard to keep buried down, spills over. The next step I take doesn't just freeze the spot beneath my foot. No.

It freezes the entire lake.

Crackling fills the world, as all the night creatures in the water are smothered, buried. As they claw against the frozen sheet.

My head aches from the effort. My blood feels thinner. But I'm almost to the island. Almost to Ara.

Footsteps. *Hundreds of footsteps.*

Slowly, I turn. Only to be met with a wave of half-rotted shadow creatures. The ones from the woods have used my ice to get to me.

There's no time to create a shield. No energy. I take a breath and am buried.

Before a single claw or tooth can reach me, the world goes dark as endless night, and I'm forced across the ice by a powerful wave of shadows. When my vision clears, the creatures are gone. Every one of them. Gone. Reduced to ash. And Grim is carrying the child across the frozen lake.

I stare at him. For moments, I just stare. All of them. He killed *all of them*. And there isn't a scratch on him.

He hands the girl to me. "She needs a healer." He nods at the sky. "Go." Ara groans in my arms. Her heartbeat is weak. She's pale as bone. I look at her, then him. I just saw his powers on full display. Powers he didn't use during the battle.

He was holding back. I know that now for certain.

I can't leave him alone. Not after seeing this.

Grim gives me a scathing look. "You're wasting time," he says. "She'll die."

Is this what he wanted? To be left alone, to do whatever he planned? He growls in frustration, then takes a step toward me on the ice. "I am not running away. I am not going to kill anyone that doesn't try to kill me first. Now *go*."

Truth. I linger for one moment. Another. Then, I shoot up into the sky, leaving Grim on the ice.

I pace the hall outside the infirmary. I can hear the Moonlings inside, bustling around Ara. I can hear her mother's quiet sobbing.

Enya's warmth engulfs me in a moment. "You did it," she breathes into my

ear, her arms tight around me.

"I didn't," I say, and she takes a step back, frowning in confusion. Then my brother appears behind her.

"He did it," I say to them both. The room is quiet.

"And where is he now?" my brother demands.

Just then, Zed strides in. "He's back in his cell."

My shoulders melt in relief. "You found him?"

Zed shakes his head, confused. Everyone looks so damned *confused*. "No," he says, honestly. "He put himself in there. Closed the bars, and everything."

We all stare at each other.

"It doesn't make any sense," Enya says, leaning against the stone wall.

She's right. None of it has. Yet—

He's been telling the truth this entire time. Is it possible that this Nightshade heir, the warrior we've all watched kill thousands . . . is happy to be away from his lands, away from killing, even if it means being locked up?

My brother turns to me. The extent of his exhaustion is clear. "You've spent the most time with him," he says. "He is yours to handle." Then, he strides out of the hall.

I run a hand down my face. "For once, you're all quiet," I say to my friends, who are staring. "No thoughts? No opinions?"

Before they can answer, the infirmary doors slam open, and Agnes comes tumbling out. She grabs my hands, her eyes full of tears. "She's alive. Because of you . . . she's alive."

She throws her arms around me, and I stand there, holding her the same way she held me countless times as a child, until she pulls away and goes back into the room.

I hear a small voice. Ara's. She's awake.

She's alive.

"What will you do?" Enya asks.

"I'm going to ask him one last question," I tell her.

Zed was right. Grim is exactly where he's supposed to be—in a cell that smells like dead rats.

He sighs when he sees me. "I thought you might give me a respite from your presence. It would only be fair, I think."

"Why?" I ask simply.

He seems to realize it's not simply a response to his statement. He rolls his

neck, making it crack. “Why what?”

“Why didn’t you use those powers on the battlefield?” He isn’t even ruler. His father is still alive. But his powers . . . they’re unlike any I’ve ever seen.

Grim just stares at me. He looks slightly curious again. “You’ve never hidden yours?” I tense.

You and me . . . we’re not as different as you think.

A wicked grin overtakes his face. He knows the answer without me even having to give it. “It’s a shame you are who you are, and I am who I am.”

“And why is that?” I ask, through my teeth.

“Because I think, in another life, we could have been friends.” *Friends.*

I almost laugh. I will never be his friend. I will never be able to see past the blood of his sword, or the sins of his father.

“Answer my question,” I snarl. “Why didn’t you use those powers?”

He leans his head back against the filthy stone as he studies me. “The answer has been the same this entire time. Though I might be skilled in dealing death, I do not revel in it.”

He’s telling the truth. I sigh.

I’m going to regret this. I know I am.

Still, I take a step forward and grip the cell door. “You said you’ve never been free in your life,” I say, as I unlock it. “From now on, you are. As long as you don’t kill anyone, as long as you don’t leave this island . . . you are free. To do as you wish. Or to stay here, sitting in your own piss, for eternity.” I lift a shoulder. “I don’t care. Do as you please.”

Then, I leave the cells, wondering if I’ve made a grave mistake.



FRIENDS

“Look at them. Throwing themselves at him. Like his family isn’t responsible for *killing thousands of us*.” Enya rolls her eyes and throws her drink back. She glares at me. “I’ll never forgive you for letting him out.”

She’s lying.

“Me neither,” Zed says, scowling. “If only because he’s making life here impossible for the rest of us.” More specifically, Zed means taking a woman home has become impossible. Because most of them seem intent on bedding the Nightshade.

He’s sitting at the corner of Juniper’s bar, holding a drink the barkeep made especially for him. Women surround the table, trying to engage him in conversation. They turn their attention to me as I approach. I don’t miss how they look at me. Hungrily. The same way they look at Grimshaw. Some speak to me, but they scurry away as I take a seat next to the Nightshade.

“Not interested in any of them?” he asks, amused, as he takes a long sip of his drink.

“Not if they’re interested in you.” My chair groans as I lean back. “Makes me question their judgment.”

He barks out a laugh. “Then I would say most of the available women on this island should be off-limits to you.”

I frown in disgust as I take a sip of my own drink. “Right. You only sleep with each of them once. How generous of you to spread yourself around like that.”

He shrugs. “I have considered myself selfless and charitable.”

“And modest.”

“How could I forget?”

It’s been years since I freed him from the cell. He moved into the castle—

much to its occupants' dismay—and then very quickly . . . didn't do much of anything. He didn't leave his bedchamber for weeks. Finally, I took pity on him and brought him to our favorite bar.

He's barely left since, and my friends despise me for it.

"So," Grim says lazily. "Duel tomorrow?"

I offered him use of the training rooms, and he's there more than I am. Eventually, we started dueling, for practice. Now, it's become a routine.

I glance at the empty glasses in front of him. "As long as you won't be vomiting in the sand."

Grim claps me on the back. "Oh Oro, I'm not the one who can't handle the contents of my stomach."

I once made the mistake of taking Grim up on a meat-eating contest and ended up vomiting in the gutters. It was at least a year ago, and he hasn't let me forget it.

"Fine. Tomorrow it is." I set my glass on the bar and move to leave, but he stops me. His expression has turned serious.

"There's something I need to tell you."

I settle back into my chair. There are eyes on us as always, but the bar is full of noise and chaos: glasses clinking, patrons yelling and laughing. I wait.

"Your brother is having an affair."

Whatever I was expecting to come out of his mouth—it isn't this.

"What are you talking about?" Egan's been betrothed to Aurora for years. He would never jeopardize that.

His voice is firm. "He's sleeping with another ruler."

I freeze, then shake my head to clear it. Could I have heard him incorrectly? "Where did you hear this?" I ask.

He levels me with his eyes. "I can turn invisible. Do you know how many things I see? Most are things I don't *want* to see, mind you." He pauses to finish his drink. "This, actually, came from the barkeep. I didn't tell you, until I could confirm it myself." He winces. "And I did. Very credible information, it turns out."

He's telling the truth. I sit back in my chair, stunned.

"This—this . . ."

"Could be bad," he offers casually, drumming his fingers against the edge of the table. "Thought you should know."

Years before, the thought of Grimshaw telling me something without ulterior motive . . . the idea of me being ready to believe him, regardless of my flair . . .

The idea of me *thanking* him, for anything—
It would all have been inconceivable. Things have changed. He's become . . . almost a friend.

Almost.

"Thank you," I say, before getting up. "See you tomorrow."

I stay at Juniper's until my friends want to leave. Only when we've parted ways do I seek my brother out. He's in the strategy room, as usual. Even though it's the middle of the night. His face brightens when he sees me. He motions for me to sit down. "You should be asleep," he says.

"So should you."

He sighs. "Kings don't sleep, haven't you heard?" His humor fades as he yawns. "Sometimes I wonder if it explained his mood. Father's. The lack of rest."

I just sit there, watching him. As if I could carve the truth out of him without having to say a word. But I can't, so I finally say it. "Are you sleeping with Violet?"

She's the only other ruler I've seen him interact with socially, outside of meetings, other than Aurora. Though, it's odd. Aurora and Violet are supposed to be best friends.

I've shocked him. He opens his mouth. Closes it. "What—"

"Are you?" I demand.

He narrows his eyes at me. "No."

Truth. I start to doubt Grim's information. But then I think of another question. "Do you love her?"

Here, he hesitates. I can see his mind working, as if wondering why I would ask this. He shakes his head. "No."

My hands grip the side of the table as I rush forward. Fury spreads through me at once. A rush of emotion I haven't felt in years.

"You're lying to me? To *me*?"

He doesn't know about my flair. I never told him. He never guessed. He blinks, looking surprised. Perhaps he didn't mean to lie. Perhaps he doesn't even know his own feelings.

His jaw works. "I care for her, I don't—"

I hang my head down and pinch my nose. "Egan, you're *betrothed*," I say.

His voice is angry. "You don't think I know that?"

I look up at him in disbelief. "You're king. Every choice reverberates to those around you! Isn't that what you told me?"

Our gazes hold, for a moment. Two amber eyes, full of fire. He looks away first. His shoulders melt, like all the fight has left him. "I have no plans to end my engagement," he says to the table.

"And no plans to marry, either?" I ask. He's pushed the nuptials off for years. The island is still recovering. There haven't been any whispers, as far as I know, but they will come, the longer it's delayed. "Aurora is in love with you. She is unpredictable." She's made good decisions for her realm, like razing the Midnight Woods, a process that took several years. But she's also known to hide societal advancements. Restrict access to her isle.

I am not king. I don't have authority over him. But I am his brother, and so I give him an order. "Either marry Aurora or call off the engagement. Make a decision."

He avoids meeting my eyes as I leave.



BROKEN PROMISES

TEN YEARS LATER

I never see Egan and Violet together again, other than for official business.

Until the night I'm at his door, and it opens before I can knock. Violet stands there, startled, her green eyes wide. A second passes. Then, my gaze moves behind her, to my brother. He isn't wearing a shirt.

His mouth tightens. He knows I've seen them. Truth can't be undone. His eyes stay fixed to mine as he walks over, takes Violet's hand, and presses his lips to her knuckles.

"I'll find you later," he says, in a soft voice I've never heard from him. For a moment, his gaze shifts to hers. *Love*. That, I think, is what it looks like. Dread churns in my chest. Violet moves past me, out the door. I close it behind us and slowly turn to my brother.

"You're angry," he says calmly, as he walks toward his balcony—the largest in the castle.

"No," I say, my voice steady and cold. "I'm shocked. I'm wondering if maybe I never knew you."

That makes him turn around. His expression is pure hurt. "How can you say that?"

I step forward, my hands in fists, fire flaring within them. "Because the brother I know would never endanger the island like this. Would never risk the end of peace like this." I shake my head. "You're set to be married in *weeks*. After prolonging your nuptials for years. You said it was for the good of the kingdom. You know how bad it would be to piss Aurora off." Starling is now almost purely responsible for manufacturing all our weapons and energy.

In times of peace, that wouldn't be so important . . . but Grim has told me his father never took his sights off Lightlark. He's also told me that he wouldn't be

surprised if his father was planning to attack, with or without him.

So, we've been preparing for the worst. Building up our forces. Aurora is a huge part of that.

"How can you put everything at risk now? For . . . for your own *feelings*?" I step forward. "A king's duty is his entire life," I say, my voice shaking with rage. "You said that. You said that a king has to give up his own desires for the good of the kingdom."

Lies. They were lies, clearly, though at the time, they were truths.

Egan's face is sad. His voice is tired. "I'm not as strong as I thought I was. I'm not as heartless as Father tried to make me. I'm not the king I wanted to be," he says. His eyes bore into mine. "But you will be."

That makes the fire in my palms waver. I couldn't have heard him correctly. "What?"

"I'm going to call off my wedding with Aurora. I'm going to step down as king. And you are going to take my place."

I take a step back. "No. I will *not*."

"You will," he says. "You're right. This land deserves a king who can put its needs first. Who can make tough decisions. It deserves you."

"I don't want it," I say through my teeth. "I don't *want to be king*."

"That's precisely why you should be."

No. I don't want this responsibility, this role, this cage. Egan has always known that. And now . . . now he's forcing it upon me. "You would give it all up? Everything our parents worked for? Your duty? For a woman?" I shake my head. It seems impossible.

Egan's smile is almost pitiful. "One day, you will understand."

"I will *never* understand," I say, meaning it with every part of me. I would never let a woman get in between me and my duty to the people. I would never put this burden on my brother.

"Perhaps," he says, looking both pensive and sad. "And perhaps that will make you the greatest king yet."

My legs dangle off the edge of the cliff.

Wild Isle is quieter than the rest, especially at night. I come here, sometimes, to think. Sometimes I have company.

Grim groans as he takes a seat next to me. "They said you would be out here. Didn't feel like losing again?"

Lately, the Wildling warriors have invited us to their tournaments, to duel.

They were quicker to accept Grim's presence than the rest of the realms. Now he's practically one of them, spending most of his time here. I say nothing. I just keep staring ahead at the horizon.

Grim sighs and sits back on his hands. "Your brooding is annoying, as always. Just spit it out."

I haven't told my friends. Not even Enya. I trust them more than anyone. But I have to admit that they could never understand. Not this.

But Grim . . .

"My brother wants to abdicate," I say. "He wants me to be king."

Grim's expression barely changes. He turns toward the sea, and nods. "So, the crown of daggers has been handed to you." He laughs. "Ruling isn't the privilege everyone thinks it is, is it?"

"No. It isn't."

We sit in silence.

"So, what are you going to do?" he asks eventually, turning back to me.

"What can I do? His mind is decided."

He purses his lips, considering. "You could get banished to your enemy's lands, and imprisoned. That should keep you from taking on responsibility, at least for a few decades. I'd be happy to hand you over to my father myself."

If only. I sigh. "I'm starting to understand why you preferred that prison."

"A throne or a cell . . . they aren't so different."

"No," I say. "They're not." And right now, I would rather the cell. I stare down at the churning sea. I consider my fate. Since that conversation with Egan, I've thought of this turn of events as a prison sentence . . .

But what if it doesn't need to be?

I think about what I might do as king. What I might do differently from my father and Egan. Could I help this world? Could I keep us from war?

Grim makes a sound of disbelief. "Hope? From you? Do let us into that miserable head of yours."

I squint at the sea below, at the rocks piercing its surface. "I'm just thinking. Perhaps if I become king, things could change."

"How so?"

Slowly, I turn to him. It's not just hope. For once in decades, I feel something almost like excitement for the future. Perhaps this could be the best thing for our people. For both our realms.

"If I become king, you could kill your father. You could become ruler." We've talked about it before. Every time, Grim says he would rather die than

become ruler of Nightshade.

This time, he raises a brow. “And?”

“We could finally, for once in our histories, have peace.”

“Peace,” he repeats, frowning, as if the word is new to him. I remember what he said so long ago, in the cells. *Why do you hate me? Is it because of something I did? Or because someone told you to?*

My voice quickens. “You said so yourself. Your warriors were forced to fight. They didn’t want to overtake Lightlark. Neither do you. This would be the end of pointless war. No one else would have to die. We could settle any difference with a simple conversation. Your father would pay for what he did to my parents . . .” I chew down the painful memory. “And history would be able to move on. We could all, finally, move on. To a better future. One led by both of us. Two people who don’t revel in death. Two people who could be . . . who *are* . . . friends.”

“Friends,” Grim repeats.

I nod.

Friends.

I offer him my hand to shake. It’s full of everything I’ve promised. Peace. Friendship. And end to pointless death.

He takes it.

The next morning, I awake to screaming.

Enya rushes into my room just as I get to my feet. “Dead—they’re dead,” she yells, sputtering.

“Who?” I ask, rushing forward.

Her normally fiery hands are cold. She’s trembling. Her eyes are full of tears as she breathes, “Everyone.”

No. She has to be wrong.

The screaming intensifies. Screaming inside and outside the castle.

I rush toward my window, to see, and she drags me back just in time—but not before a sliver of sun reaches me.

It slices into my skin—burning. I rear back and turn around, pain radiating across my arm. The sun that always brought me power and peace and life . . . it’s now a poison.

That’s when the screaming doubles. Triples.

“Egan,” I say, stumbling toward the door. I look over my shoulder. “Try to find Calder. And Zed.” Is the sun burning them too? Are they all right?

I run faster than I ever have in my life, practically flying down the halls as castle attendants stream out of rooms. Relief feels lighter than air as I finally spot my brother. *Alive*, he's alive. I feel it for only a moment, before I see the serious set of his face.

"What's happening?" I ask, careful to stay away from the windows. He's with Violet. Of course he is. They're holding hands.

"It's a curse," my brother says. The word is an arrow to the chest.

"How do you know?" I say, slowly.

"Nothing else could be this powerful."

A curse. A Nightshade ability. Only one person here would be able to spin one.

No. I rush out of the room. Egan has to be wrong. This—this isn't a curse. But as I move down the hall, I feel it. Something in the air, like a shadow, masking everything. Nightshade power. Overwhelming the world. *A curse*.

Egan is right. It's a curse on us all.

I go still as I turn the next corridor. My knees buckle. It's full of Starlings. Dead. They're all dead.

Agnes. I rush over to her. She's sprawled out on the floor, her hand outstretched, right toward her daughter. *Ara*.

Agnes's eyes are open wide and glistening. They don't close. I fall to my knees beside her and try to lift her head. I cradle it in my lap, the same way she did to me, as a child. I can't lose another mother. Not again.

"No," I say. "*No*." Water. I need water. Maybe I can heal her, or—

Steps. Echoing. Then, slowing. Stopping in front of me. I'm still staring at Agnes's lifeless body, but somehow, I know it's him.

Slowly, I set Agnes back down, onto the floor. Slowly, I rise. Slowly, I look up, fury coiling in my bones.

Grim's eyes are sharp. "I know how this looks," he says, his hands outstretched in front of him. "This isn't my fault."

The second the words leave his mouth, I feel the lie. It's twisted, edged slightly in truth, but the bitterness is enough.

My flames barrel out of me in an endless stream, hitting him right in the center of his chest, sending him soaring through the hall. He hits the stone floor with a sickening crack. Energy fills my palms. Flames coat my arms.

"You saw a king weakened by love, getting ready to turn over the crown, and thought this was perfect timing, didn't you?" I hit him with a burst of Starling energy next, and he goes flying again, landing roughly against the wall. This is

my fault. I freed him. I *told him* about Egan's plans.

"I can't believe I trusted you," I say through gritted teeth. "I can't believe I *believed in you.*"

He's baring his teeth at me now. Showing his true colors. The Grim I have known for nearly two decades is gone. He didn't even exist in the first place. I take a step toward him. Another. Ice freezes the ground beneath my feet. My burning hatred and fury and betrayal run through my veins, heating the fire in my palms.

For the first time in years, I want to kill someone purely for the sake of seeing them dead. Hatred rages through my veins, sharper than ever before. It's blinding.

I almost kill him. But I am not him. I will be better than this cursed demon in front of me. He *is* his father.

I am not mine.

I take a step toward him, voice shaking with rage, and say, "You and your realm have taken everything from me. Every single thing I've ever held dear." I take another step, drawing close to him, so that he can hear the conviction in my voice. I say the words, meaning them more than I have ever meant anything. I say them like a curse. "One day, I will find a way to hurt you. One day, you will want something more than anything else in this world, and I will take it from you."

To think—to think I thought we could have been friends.

My voice sears through the halls. It seems to quiet even the chaos around us. For a moment, he looks shocked. Hurt, just as I am.

I watch as any light within him flickers—then gutters out. A bitter smile overtakes his face, eyes dark and cruel as night. "Well, that's the good thing about not caring. I don't want anything."

Screams sound behind me. Familiar ones. I hesitate for a moment, wanting to hurt him. Wanting to make him feel physical pain to match my own torment. Instead, I run toward the screaming, knowing with certainty that one day, I'll make good on my promise to him.

By the end of the day, my brother and all the other rulers are dead. The last of my family—gone.

And I am king. The role I never wanted. My heart hardens within me.

It doesn't thaw for another five hundred years.



THE CENTENNIAL

500 YEARS LATER

*Only joined can the curses be undone
Only after one of six has won,
When the original offense
Has been committed again
And a ruling line has come to an end
Only then can history amend.*

“We’re all taking bets.”

Enya’s voice is casual, but I know her well enough to recognize the fear threading through her words.

“On what?” I ask, half my mind somewhere else.

“Whether the cursed Nightshade will grace our island with his presence,” Zed says, sprawled out on a chair on our favored floor, throwing his blade through the air, and catching it by the hilt. At the sound of the word—*Nightshade*—anger heats in my blood, on instinct. “I say no. He’s a coward. His curse isn’t so bad. He gets the sunlight, though I suppose the demon would prefer night.”

“I’ve had enough of night,” Enya breathes.

We all have. The first decades were torture. Not feeling the warmth of the sun, hiding from it like beasts. Some Sunlings went mad. They threw themselves outside to die. I saw a man do it once, through the sliver of a veiled window. For just a moment, when the sun hit him, he looked at peace.

Then he erupted in flames.

“Do you really think we have a chance this time?” Calder asks. He’s stone-

faced, as always. But I can sense the hope in his tone.

“Only if he shows up,” I say tightly. And only if I can find the heart of Lightlark.

It’s the power seed of the island, made up of pure, ancient Sunling, Wildling, and Nightshade ability, formed by our ancestors. Decades ago, I became convinced that finding it—and using it to spin the curses—was the mistake spoken about in the prophecy. The one that needed to be repeated, to right everything.

If I’m right . . . Grim didn’t create the curses. Someone else did, using the heart. And it makes me wonder about that flicker of truth when he told me he didn’t.

It’s the only reason I sent an invitation. He could have shown up at any of the Centennials, if he had wanted, but this time, I invited him personally.

It’s the only reason my friends are speaking his name, which they have cursed for centuries.

It doesn’t mean I still don’t despise him. For even if he didn’t spin the curses . . . I’ll never forget the hint of lie in his words when he denied being responsible. Somehow, he was involved. After everything—our history, our *friendship*—his actions, inadvertently or not, led to my island becoming a husk of itself. To my brother dying. And that is enough for me to hate him forever.

And perhaps I hate myself more than I hate even him, for ever trusting him at all. For ever thinking we could become *friends*. If I didn’t . . . perhaps things might be different.

“Then I hope he comes,” Calder says.

None of us say it, but we agree.

We have this talk before every Centennial. “Well, then,” Zed says. “If the curses *are* broken, chances are one of us . . .”

One or more of us will die.

One of the rulers must die to break them—it’s part of the prophecy. Because of our connection to our people and lack of heirs, it also means the end of an entire realm.

“None of us are dying,” I say, willing the words to be true.

If one realm does perish, we all know whose it must be. Grimshaw. Nightshade. But he can only die if he accepts the invitation. Only a fool would.

Only a fool would walk into near-certain death.



REUNION

Grim Malvere, it seems, is a fool. Or extraordinarily overconfident in his own abilities.

Either way . . . he actually came.

I should be relieved to see the Nightshade step onto the cliff. Most of me is. Part of me would be fine not seeing him for the rest of my life, even if he didn't cast the curses. He—

Another ruler arrives.

Wildling. Her long, ridiculously sheer dress makes that obvious. I sigh, remembering the string of Wildlings I've had to deal with over the centuries. All of them with the same plan—to try to seduce me into loving them, so they can have access to my power. Will hers be the same?

Don't even bother, I want to tell her. I won't even look at you twice.

It's not entirely their faults. They don't know I can see their advances as a lie. Perhaps without my flair, their efforts wouldn't be so obvious.

As if I have time for something as selfish as *love*.

As if any of us do.

As if *she* would be the one to capture my notice anyway.

It may not be fair to the Wildling, but it's hard not to look at her and immediately think of Violet, the ancestor she never even knew. The day of the curses, I vowed to never fall in love. Love made even my brother into a fool.

Wildling rulers have only led to trouble. As my eyes follow her from my vantage point in one of the castle's towers, I determine to stay as far away from her as possible.

Her green cape curls in the wind as she takes a step—and nearly falls right off the cliff. My hands press against the window's glass in shock, careful to stay in the shade a few overhead clouds offer.

Grim's hand juts out, keeping her steady. Keeping her alive.

I blink. Why save her? I wouldn't put it beyond him to push her off himself.

Then I remember Ara. Him saving her, without question. Him telling me he was done with death . . .

We'll see how true that statement has remained.

Another ruler arrives. Azul, with his sky-blue cape, and gems I can see all the way from here at the castle. *The only ruler I'm truly happy to see*, I think, as I break into a faint smile.

Cleo sweeps in next, her white robes puddling around her. *Cleo*. She wasn't at the last Centennial. No one knows why. I didn't expect her to show. Her curse has affected her realm the least of all of us.

The last ruler arrives, the ruler of Starling, and a coil of relief loosens, knowing we have fully completed at least one of the parts of the prophecy, in the most popular interpretation, at least—all of us being joined.

The Centennial has officially started. Again. I straighten. Then, just as I'm about to turn away from the window, a distant flash of movement catches my eye.

The Wildling. She's sticking her middle finger up at me. I frown.

Yes. I'll be staying far away from her.

The gods know I try.

I'm getting ready for the banquet that marks the beginning of the Centennial, when I catch a sound I seldom hear—there's been little room for celebration these last few centuries.

Singing.

No, not singing. It's more akin to gently tracing a dagger across the sky, the note impossibly high and smooth. Perfect. It sounds . . . perfect. For the first time in centuries, I find myself pausing to *enjoy* something.

Enjoyment. How selfish of me. For an instant, my shoulders melt away from my ears. The stress winding through my bones releases. I close my eyes.

Beautiful.

I can't remember the last time I thought something was *beautiful*. It's so beautiful that I can't help myself. I need to know the source. I rip the door of my balcony open, and there—

There she is: the Wildling ruler I promised to stay away from.

My jaw clenches. This is a trick. It's so damned obvious. She is a temptress, planning to seduce me, starting with this song.

Yet—none of her ancestors ever tried this. And how could she know my room was so close to hers?

I reach around for her powers, to feel for what she's doing . . . and I come up empty.

Strange. It's as if she's cloaking her abilities. *Smart.*

I grind my teeth, telling myself I should go back inside. Close the door and forget this sound.

But I don't. If this is a trick . . . it won't work. So what's the harm in listening?

I lean against the door of my balcony, and I do more than just listen. I study. I question. I track every ebb and flow of her voice like tracing a map, as it goes from husky and deep, to high as the stars, every note smooth as the waves below. They crash against the cliff, rising toward her, as if even the sea is trying to listen. I don't blame it.

I'm entranced at the skill. At the mastery. At the control. Does she sing a lot? Has she practiced for this one moment?

She stops, and I find myself *clapping*, like a fool. But some things demand to be praised. So, I clap. She whips around—

And her eyes are wide with surprise. She's startled. Her arms pinwheel with the speed of the motion, with imbalance. There is no trace of falseness on her expression, which means . . .

This wasn't for me. This wasn't a trick.

For a moment, our eyes are locked—

And then, she falls off the balcony.

I blink, waiting for her to use her Wildling abilities to summon a vine, or use the rock of the cliff face to climb back.

But then, I hear her scream. Why isn't she saving herself?

Is it the shock?

Is she unskilled?

The fall is hundreds of feet to the sea. If she doesn't save herself, she's going to die.

I should let her die.

It could solve the prophecy. It could make things easy. She already almost fell off another cliff a few hours ago. Perhaps this is her fate. She won't last long in the Centennial if she can't stop *fucking falling*.

She's still screaming. She's going to die. Yes, I should let her . . .

Then, I remember the singing. I move without thinking, jumping into the air.

She's falling quickly, I'm not going to make it in time—

She hits the water.

Panic flares in me, panic I don't understand, because I don't know her. But her voice. It's in my head.

I plunge in after her. The water is freezing, even to me. Her skin is already cold and prickled as my hands curl around her waist, fingers getting stuck in the gaps of the fabric, wresting her from the sea's strong currents. Her limbs are limp.

I lift us both out of the water, sodden and dripping, then soar to her balcony, where I lay her gently on the stone terrace. I sink to my knees, resting her head in my lap, registering all the blood gushing out of it. She's hurt.

I can still let her die.

No. I can't. For some reason . . . I just can't. I absorb some of the water covering us, swirl it in my palm, and gently place it against her head. My thumb, inexplicably, swipes down her temple.

It doesn't take long for the wound to heal, and for the bleeding to stop.

I should leave—but I stay, watching as her skin slowly regains its glow. As her cheeks flush a gentle pink, like the petal of a flower. It's enough to assure me she'll be okay . . . but I can't stop staring. *Studying*. I study the way her lashes fan out against her cheeks, I study the perfect cupid's bow arch of her slightly parted lips, I study her dark hair, long and fanned out across my lap, I make a map of her in my mind. Her face, I admit, is just as striking as her voice.

I shouldn't have saved her. I shouldn't have interfered, this early in the Centennial . . . but I couldn't stop myself.

"This world has extinguished too many beautiful things," I say, watching the color fully return to her face. "I didn't want you to be one of them."

I leave before she wakes.

She's soaking wet when she arrives at the banquet.

Gods above, why is she still *soaking wet*?

Worse, the sound of her voice is still in my *fucking head*. Maybe that's why I'm so rude to her when she sits down. Cleo joins in, baiting her. And, for some reason, the barbed words provoke a flare of defensiveness within me. I take a long sip of water, pushing it down. I saved her from death so the games could continue. That's all.

Really.

I had a surprise prepared for her: a human heart. A magnanimous gesture on

my part. I tamp down my wave of revulsion, as the server places it before her, blood oozing across gilded porcelain. It's practically still beating. That's what she wants, right? That's what Wildlings crave?

I lean back, hoping to see those red lips finally turn into a smile, but the expression that passes across her features is curious. Is that—was it—disgust? I blink and it's gone, too fleeting for me to be sure I saw correctly. It never occurred to me that Wildlings dislike this part of their curse, that they haven't adapted to it over time.

Azul tries to speak to me, but my focus is entirely on the Wildling, and the way she begins to cut the heart on her plate. The way she spears a piece of it with her fork, before bringing it to her lips.

I don't realize I'm staring until Grim jumps up and demands for the heart to be removed.

He claims it's making the rest of the table uncomfortable. Interesting. I lift my brows. If I remember correctly, Grimshaw has given a shit about the well-being of another ruler exactly zero times before now—yet he has found it in himself to command *my people* to take the heart to the Wildling's room.

I allow it only because a quick glance at Azul sees that Grim might be right. He looks like he has completely lost his appetite, though he would never admit it.

I turn my attention back to the insolent Nightshade. Just a few hours back inside this castle and he's already testing my tie to the Centennial rule that states we aren't supposed to kill each other before the first fifty days are over.

It's supposed to encourage working together to try to break the curses. It's supposed to avoid all this becoming a bloodbath all too soon.

For the first time, I start to detest the rules.

"Weak stomach, Grimshaw?" I tighten my grip around the knife at my plate, considering its many uses.

His cocky grin doesn't reach his eyes. "We all have our weaknesses, Oro. I'm counting on them."

Weaknesses.

If only he knew how weak I feel right now.

The rest of the dinner passes in a blur. Afterward, I stand in my room in front of the mirror. Wincing, I peel off my shirt, tensing when I see my reflection.

The gray-blue has spread. It snakes down my arm, almost covering it entirely.

I'm dying.

No one knows it but me and my friends. Only they know the truth: This is not just another chance to end the curses . . . it is our island's *last* chance for survival.

Which is why I allow myself to do something foolish. I slip my shirt back on, and head into the hall.

I barely tap on the door before it opens a crack and Grimshaw slips through it, into the corridor. He leans against the stone wall, affecting boredom. By now, I'm well acquainted with most of Grim's posturing.

"Looking for a bedtime story, King?"

I dismiss the barb. "Why are you here?" It's one thing to have invited him; it was another for him to accept. He must know that we will all rush to kill him to fulfill the prophecy, once the first fifty days are over.

So why come? What does he want?

Instead of answering me, he tilts his head, and says, "You invited me . . . so you must have figured out I didn't spin the curses. You must believe me now." I remember that day. The hurt in his eyes. When I didn't believe him. His voice is unnervingly calm, but I see a flash of that same hurt now. It's gone with a blink. "So why, Oro, do you still hate me?"

It's a fair question, I suppose. At first, I hated him for everything he and his realm had done during the war.

Now I hate him because I blame him for the curses—whether he directly spun them or not. *I blame him*. I trusted him, I let him in, I let him out of his cell, and this is what it all led to.

I hate him because, the eve before the curses, I had hope, for the first time in many years, that the future could be bright. That we could work together toward a greater world. Peace, between our realms, for the first time in millennia.

Instead, we were plunged into utter darkness.

And I blame him.

"I don't believe for a second that you are here for innocent reasons. That you are here simply to break the curses. I think you're plotting against me. I think you are here to cause us all even more ruin. Of course I hate you." He just looks at me. He does not deny any of my theories and that, I think, is telling. "So, I ask again. Why are you here?"

"I have my reasons, of course. Not that I owe you any of them."

He turns back toward his room, but I'm not finished. I block his path with a wall of towering flames. He turns slowly, annoyed.

"The Wildling." My words catch him off guard. He stills. *Interesting*.

“What about the Wildling?” he asks. His words have a hard edge. Why? He saved her from the cliff. He stopped her from eating the heart. I didn’t miss the shadow of relief on her face after it was taken away. He must have sensed her discomfort, with his power.

Why would he care?

“You’re interested in her.”

He shrugs a shoulder. “Who wouldn’t be?”

It isn’t a direct answer. He’s being deliberately evasive . . . as if he knows about my flair. He never guessed at it before. Or did he? Now I wonder if all my questions in the cell made it obvious. If he knew then . . . why was he so forthcoming?

“Why are you here?” I ask again.

“To secure my realm’s survival,” he replies. The truth of his words sinks onto my tongue. Still, I don’t trust him at all.

“You must know I’ll kill you the second there’s opportunity.”

“Of course.” He nods. “Which is why there’s something you should know.” My eyes narrow. What could possibly change my position?

“Kill me, and something worse will be freed on Nightshade.”

Truth.

Curiosity overcomes my hatred for just a moment. “What do you mean?”
What could be worse than this demon before me?

He waits, considering. Likely wondering if he should tell me. I can see the indecision in his eyes before he finally says, “Lark Crown is alive.”

My entire body goes still. I’m not breathing. *Lark Crown*. I haven’t heard that name in centuries. “Impossible,” I say. “They’re all dead.” All the founders of the island have long since died.

But he’s telling the truth.

“Not her. She can’t be killed. Her flair is regrowth. Cronan buried her, to stifle her powers and keep her at bay.”

Of course, I’ve heard the stories of the founders’ world-building. Of Lark’s power. Presumably, all of us rulers have. If accounts of history are accurate, she’s more powerful than all of us combined. After centuries of being trapped, she’ll be hell-bent on revenge. She’ll be unpredictable.

“My bloodline keeps her imprisoned,” he says. Truth. “Kill me, and she’ll be unleashed.”

Well, fuck.

It also means Isla can’t die to fulfill the prophecy. Her ruling line wouldn’t

end, if Lark is still alive.

He smiles, sensing my frustration. *Reveling* in it. “Sorry to disappoint you,” he drawls. “I know how much you’d love to kill me.”

On that, I allow my flames to burn out, and he slams his door in my face.

I can’t kill Grim to fulfill the prophecy. Not unless I find the heart of Lightlark first. It is said to contain original Nightshade power, from his bloodline. If I learn to wield it, perhaps I can keep Lark imprisoned after Grim is dead. It’s a plan born of desperation, a reach. I have no way of knowing whether the power in the heart will match Grim’s own. But right now, it’s the only plan I have.

Because if one of my realms falls . . . it will kill thousands on the island. Lightlark won’t survive it. That leaves either Wildling or Nightshade.

And now I know the Wildling’s death wouldn’t solve anything. Not that I was in a rush to kill her anyway.

The singing rings through my head again. My back teeth clench together.

It’s only the first day, and everything has already gotten so much harder.

The next few weeks will be full of trials, planned by each ruler, designed to showcase each of our strengths and weaknesses. A way to try to convince each other that our realms should live.

Whoever wins the most trials decides the teams we split up into. It’s an illusion of control in this twisted game.

I don’t trust any of the other rulers, save for Azul, who never fights to win.

So, I must be the winner. I must decide the matches.

Grim’s trial is first. He proposes a duel.

I’m paired with Azul first. Besting him takes only seconds. Cleo and the Starling—Celeste—are next. Cleo doesn’t hold back. She never does. I almost pity the Starling.

Then, it’s the Wildling—*Isla*—and Grimshaw. I don’t care if she lives or dies, beyond the rules of the Centennial, even if I did save her. That is what I tell myself, as I watch them duel.

I want her to lose. I want the chance to duel Grim, so that I can maim him in public.

She doesn’t lose.

No, she is a better fighter than I imagined she could be, given her lack of experience . . . Interesting. I’m still considering this fact when I’m called to duel Cleo. My delightful former instructor. I’m so distracted by my surprise over the Wildling’s fighting that Cleo manages to get a hit in—slicing down my arm, my

blood pouring to sand below. The flash of pain is enough to get my head back in place, and I best her in seconds. She grins at my injury.

Fucking Cleo.

I dig my sword in front of me and wait, because I know who I'm dueling next. I watch her tentatively walk forward, as if she didn't just defeat Grimshaw.

Best to get this over with quickly.

I swipe my sword deftly, thinking it's over—

But it meets steel. I frown. A sound escapes her parted lips and . . . why am I looking at them? She deepens her stance, meeting my force with her own.

I push back against her. She adds another hand to her grip, then presses toward me. I respond with a quick jab, irritated, wanting to be away from her distracting lips and the song in my head as soon as possible—

Metal against metal. She blocks me again.

She swings her blade, and I stop it, studying her more closely. Studying the differences from the last time I gazed upon her. Because this . . . this is *different*. This isn't the poised ruler, sitting with perfect posture at the table, or the carefree ruler, singing on her balcony.

No. This is a different side to her.

Her full top lip is curled back in a snarl. Her eyes are narrowed and gleaming with focus, and those eyes—

Green. Her eyes are green.

And I never thought a color could send a chill down my spine, until two green eyes pinned me in place, and made me forget my name.

Made me forget my crown.

Made me forget her blade, just inches from my heart.

Because that green . . . it's the green of my favorite place. That beach I escape to in my dreams.

And I have a sinking feeling that she's about to fill all of them.

No.

What am I thinking? Have I lost my mind?

I grit my teeth as I lunge forward, and her footing falters. At my next approach, her arm shakes. Good. *Great*. She's tiring.

Let's get this over with.

Hit after hit, she weakens, until it's time for my last strike. I make my final move—

And she blocks it with brutal strength, leaving me stumbling forward.

I blink. She tricked me. She's been storing her energy. She was pretending to

be tired out.

And I fell for it.

I stumble back, barely blocking her blows, the arm Cleo cut to tatters on fire. I've lost a lot of blood. My strength is not what it's been since the blue began spreading. She pounces at me, sword in the air, a second away from ending me.

She's going to beat me. That thought gives way to a surprising mix of awe and anger.

Then, she falters. It's subtle, but I'm studying her so carefully that I catch the slight change in her expression. And I see her adjust her aim slightly lower—instead of leaning into the blow, she loosens her grip on her sword . . .

When my metal meets hers, her sword swings wildly away, before clattering against the ground, pushing up sand. She faces me, unarmed, her chest heaving.

The Wildling let me win.

The crowd erupts in cheers, but I barely hear them. As I look at her, something awakens. Curiosity that I haven't felt in centuries. I see her for what she is.

Liar.



CROWN

“That Wildling ruler let you win,” Enya says.

No shit.

She’s making herself at home in my chambers, her mud-crusted shoes resting atop the wooden table that doubles as a desk. I sigh, lift her ankles, and place them on the floor. “I do eat there, you know,” I remind her.

“Oh, I know.” She flashes me a wicked grin. There is nothing Enya likes more than to provoke me.

“Don’t you have a court to run?” I ask, my voice as tired as I feel.

“And miss the chance to rub in your face that a ruler who hasn’t been alive three decades was about to beat you? Never.”

I opt to ignore her, more from exhaustion than decorum. My feet are practically dragging as I make my way to my wardrobe. For all Enya’s devilry, she must notice my fatigue, because she’s on her feet in a moment, gently helping me take off my armor, piece by piece.

“I’ve got it, I—”

Her fingers pause. I sigh. “It’s not—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

The discoloration on my arm has spread even further. Enya puts the armor down and begins pacing the room. “There has to be a way to slow it down . . . to stop it. This is getting absurd.” She throws her hands up. “You won’t even survive the gods-damned Centennial at this rate!”

She’s right. She’s always right. Still, I’m silent as I remove my remaining armor. As I change into more comfortable clothing. When I’m done, I collapse on the seat opposite Enya with a groan.

I’m ruler of Sunling . . . and I’ve gone centuries without sunlight. Without warmth. It’s starting to have its effect. The blue is just a visual manifestation of

this weakness. I can feel it inside. My power, dimming. This entire island, on the precipice of ruin.

“The only way this stops is if we break the curses.”

Enya gnaws at her lip, worriedly. “What if we don’t need the prophecy? What if Grim did spin the curses, and you kill him?” she asks. “It should end them. Right?”

If only it was that easy. “I can’t kill Grim.” I tell her why, just like I’ve always told her all my secrets. It’s the reason the Wildling’s death won’t fulfill the prophecy either. When I’m done, Enya frowns. “Are you really afraid of someone who has been buried for millennia?”

“Yes,” I say, because it’s the truth. Our world is suffering enough without adding a bloodthirsty Lark Crown to the mix.

Enya nods. For a while we sit in silence. Then she says, “This time must be different. *You*, Oro, must be different.” She sits next to me and takes my hand. “Look at me.”

I do as she says. “Oro Rey. You are dying. There is no room for morals, truth, or all the rules you live by. Promise me you will do whatever it takes to break the curses this Centennial. To save yourself and all the island. Even if it means not being honest for the first time in your long life.”

Even the suggestion burns me. I detest liars.

Liars like Isla Crown. My teeth grind, remembering the wicked Wildling, and how her shift in expressions and actions told me all I needed to know. She could have won the entire trial but didn’t.

She has a plan. She is not to be underestimated.

I always endeavor to be honorable. But Enya is right. My death would lead to the death of thousands. I must put their well-being above anything—even my own morals.

“I promise.”

The Wildling is speaking to Grim.

The sight of it makes something strange and unfamiliar twist in my stomach. He corrupts everything he touches. I don’t want him to do the same to her . . . but maybe he already has.

Is that why he’s saved her, and taken an interest in her?

Are they working together?

We are in the dining hall for Azul’s demonstration: a show of power. Azul is the least likely ruler to create a scenario in which someone will die. But there is

a reason behind everything he does.

I watch Grim and Isla, trying my best to guess at their possible plan through body language and gestures. If they are working together . . . are they here to kill me? Is that why Grim has returned? No one from their realms has lived here in centuries. My death would not affect them as much as the rest. But why would Grim align himself with such an inexperienced ruler? Perhaps because it will be easier to betray her later.

Azul invites the Nightshade to start.

Grimshaw stands, and the strength of my hatred overwhelms me. He has the nerve to look over at me, as if he can feel my loathing. His expression is mocking, almost pleased. But there's something else there . . . something I can't quite decipher.

The demon opens his palm, and the room shatters.

Nobles scream. Darkness spills everywhere, as though the night sky has fallen atop us. I close my eyes tightly against the illusion—I know a lie when I see it—and fight against a wave of sadness long buried. The screams sound just like they did the day the curses were spun. When this demon's power ruined the island. Ruined my life. Ruined *everything*.

The room is back to normal when I open my eyes again, but I'm more nervous than ever. He's killed thousands before. Has he just shown us the future? Is he here to destroy the island?

He didn't have those ambitions the last time he was here. But five centuries is a long time.

"Cleo, if you would," Azul says, breaking my focus on Grim.

Cleo strides to the front of the table, her white cape flowing behind her, liquid. She lifts her arms, and wine shoots toward the ceiling, forming sharks with mouths open to display rows of violent teeth. Dramatic, of course. I wouldn't expect anything less from my former Moonling instructor. Just like Grimshaw, Cleo clearly came back for a reason. Why return for this Centennial? Why miss the last?

"Celeste?"

The Starling stands. She looks nervous as she walks to the front of the room, under the scrutiny of nobles who view her realm as lesser. It's almost ridiculous, knowing that centuries before, they were one of the strongest realms. Starlings have had it the worst over the centuries. Constantly dying. Not able to live past twenty-five. Their isle is in peril. Just when I think I'm making progress toward solving some of their problems, new ones arise, as if impossible to tug from the root.

The room explodes in a mess of silver sparks. It's an unfamiliar color in this court. We used to have great Starlings with magnificent powers. They were artists.

Now, all of them are gone.

Azul goes next. His power is graceful, mastered over centuries. He creates clouds, light and luminous, that quickly darken into storms.

I swallow, my throat suddenly tight. It seems prophetic. Inevitable.

The storms have swallowed the island for centuries, nearly wiping all our sun away, cloaking our island in near-constant darkness. It makes our Sunling curse more manageable, but the clouds are known to clear erratically. Many have burned by emerging during the day, putting their trust in the storms. Most of us don't risk it. My world has become one of night and darkness and cold.

The clouds dissipate and I wonder if Azul will ask me to demonstrate next, but he is very clearly looking at the Wildling.

The Wildling.

Everyone is watching her, and she is afraid.

Her fear is obvious in the way she slowly rises. In the set of her delicate jaw. In the lowering of her shoulders, as if she's mentally reminding herself to *look* at ease, even if she isn't.

I already know too much about her, her expressions and movements.

I've been watching her too closely.

Just as I'm about to look away, her melodious voice rings through the room. "King? Would you assist me in my demonstration?"

King. Just like my hatred for Grim, my hatred for that word has never wavered in the last five hundred years.

Her request is not something I should deny, not in front of all these people. So, I smooth my face, ridding it of expression. I bury my emotions the way I have every single day for centuries.

I rise.

I offer her my hand. It feels like I've already given her so much more. She takes it, and my lips involuntarily part. I feel my eyes narrow. A shock has gone through my arm, right to my chest—

She doesn't notice my reaction. She doesn't even look at me as she leads me to the center of the room.

"Stand there," she orders. I should be outraged or at least irritated, but I'm too shocked to do anything other than obey.

She drops my hand and crosses the room. Using clumsy fingers, she sheds

her rings, then removes her gloves. She fetches a pin from her hair, and a tendril comes loose, falling across her cheek. I shouldn't be watching so closely. I shouldn't be admiring how the light hits her hair to reveal darker shades and a few golden strands.

What is wrong with me?

If I wasn't distracted, I would have immediately seen that the pin isn't a pin at all—but a throwing star. A weapon. I blink—again, feeling that strange mix of awe and anger.

The Wildling has the nerve to take me in the center of the room and point a weapon at me. Her nerve almost makes me smile.

The crowd is outraged. I can hear their whispers, feel the heat of their fury.

"I didn't realize you came to dinners *armed*, Wildling," Cleo says, but I barely hear her voice.

I'm focused solely on Isla's lips as she says, "I'm always armed." And it feels that way. It feels as if there's an invisible noose around my neck right at this moment. Our gazes don't break; it's like we're the only two people in this room, on this island, in this world.

She takes the throwing star between her teeth, and I swallow. Then she ties one of her gloves over her eyes. The crowd gasps, but I don't move a muscle. I've been indifferent, frozen and unfeeling for so long, but right now, there is a heat burning inside of me. Fury. Hope. Curiosity like a flame I can't extinguish.

She takes the star from between her teeth.

I watch her assume a stance that looks natural, like she's done it a thousand times before. Of course. Wildlings are warriors. She's likely been trained since she was a child.

She isn't using ability in her demonstration, and . . . that's different. Brave, I suppose. Defiant. Many can expertly wield power. Few can expertly wield metal. In a way, she's demonstrating her superiority over some of the rulers sitting at the long table before her. She doesn't need her abilities to show her strength.

I have the strange and unsettling need to see every shred of that strength—every length she will go to prove herself.

Because she isn't weak. Not like the foolish nobles think. *Show them*, I want to say, even though it's madness.

Show me.

Show me what you've got.

The star is a flash of silver in my vision, and I don't wince as it flies right toward my head.

And knocks the crown off it.

The corner of my lips turns into a smile she never sees.

The crowd gasps, some in horror, some in amazement. I hear one of the rulers behind me stand from the table, their chair scraping against the stone floor.

I watch as she pushes the fabric from her eyes. As those green eyes fill with pride.

As they fill with fire.

And it's as if I can't move. She has me rooted in place, staring into green eyes like they are a maze I wouldn't mind getting lost in. Like they are woods I could wander for hours. Her eyes are gleaming, like a forest on fire, and I watch and watch, ready to be swept up in her blaze.

It's been centuries since I've seen someone so determined. Someone whose fire hasn't been extinguished by this cruel world.

She smirks.

And that contempt for my crown, it should make my blood boil, but it doesn't. At least, not in the way she likely intended.

She's strutting toward me, her stride full of confidence. She slowly bends down to lift my crown.

"You dropped this," she whispers, so only I can hear it, and her voice slinks down my spine. Makes me swallow. I take it from her, hardly registering its weight in my hand. My skin is aflame, but not from anger. No, from something far more dangerous.

When it's my turn to demonstrate, I don't even think before I wield my power. I feel thawed. Memories and feelings from centuries before are rushing back all at once.

I feel melted down.

All this energy, this feeling, I know what's going to happen when I place my hand against the table—

It turns gold. It ripples into glimmering, pure, unadulterated gold. Gasps echo through the room.

I've gilded, for the first time in centuries.

If the Wildling is unafraid to stand up in front of a room full of people who underestimate her, and take a risk, then who am I, as king, to hide?

The crowd rises to their feet. Some bow, some kneel and kiss the ground. They see it as a sign, I know. But it's just a distraction. They don't know that I'm dying.

I'm the winner of the demonstration. But I can't help feeling like I've lost

something.

Enya is waiting for me in my room when I return. An orange peel is discarded on my table. “You . . . gilded,” she says.

“You really need to stop showing up like this.” I aim for jocular, but she’s not having it. Exhausted, I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’m dying,” I say flatly. “Might as well let all the secrets out.”

Her brows are high up her forehead. “Are you . . . are you okay?”

No, I want to tell her. I feel like I’m losing my mind. First, it was Isla’s voice in my head, and now, every time I close my eyes, I see the smirk she made when she heard her throwing star hit my crown. She might as well have hit me right in the head, because I feel off-kilter. Different.

Sick.

“I’ll be fine.”

Enya doesn’t look convinced.

Zed walks in then. “Anything new?” I ask, grateful for a change of topic.

When his flying was ripped away because of the curses, he focused his energy on developing a network of spies across the island.

Including Moonlings.

Because of him, we know Moonling has been building ships for centuries. We know a sect of nobles has risen, and that Cleo’s control on them is fragile at best. Especially after her absence during the last Centennial.

“Moonling nobles are becoming bold. I fear they’re going to interfere with the Centennial.”

I frown. “How?”

“By taking matters into their own hands.”

“Wonderful.” It’s the last thing we need.

Nobles are typically invited to demonstrations. They were present at the duel and the banquet. They watched the Wildling’s star pierce my crown, just inches from my head.

It’s another reason I chose to gild, other than being caught up in the fire that is Isla Crown. I need to show strength. I’m king. My people are looking to me for assurances. We can’t afford an uprising right now. Especially from Moonling.

There’s only one thing to do. “I’m going to meet with Cleo.”

The Moonling ruler sweeps into the throne room, a train of sea-foam dragging behind her.

“To what do I owe the honor, King?” She always finds a way for her words to have bite.

Sometimes, I look at her and still see the instructor who banished me outdoors. I often think she still sees me as the Sunling teenager shaking in the snow.

That was centuries ago. So much has changed.

I get straight to the point. “Why didn’t you attend the last Centennial?”

Any hint of amusement drains from her face. Then, I see a flicker of something unexpected in her eyes. Pain. “I didn’t qualify,” she says.

Qualify? The rules are simple. No one who participates can—

“You have an heir,” I say, the words spilling out of me in surprise.

“*Had* one.” She stands tall. Her tone is cold as a glacier. Still, I see now that something about her has changed.

My mouth tightens, understanding immediately.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, meaning it. She says nothing. “Why return?”

It’s no secret that Moonling’s curse is one of the milder ones. It only affects Moonlings foolish enough to go near the sea on a full moon.

She looks at me for a long moment. “The day the curses were cast, the oracle spoke a prophecy.”

Of course. We all know it. It’s why we’re here.

“Then . . . she told another to me alone.”

I sit up. This is the first I’m hearing of it. The oracle is Moonling . . . she lives on Cleo’s isle. It never occurred to me that the oracle might be loyal to her.

“What did she say?” I demand. Another prophecy could change everything. A surge of anger crests, cursing the fact that she hasn’t said anything sooner, but I wait for her to speak.

“Many things. One of which spoke about the significance of the half millennium.”

“*What did she say?*” I repeat, hearing the desperation creep into my tone.

“She said five hundred years later, everything would change. Again.”

“For better or worse?” I demand.

Cleo smiles ruefully. “Both.”

I grip the sides of my throne in frustration. “Are you here to break the curses, Cleo? Are you here to help us end this?”

“Of course I am,” she says, and I taste sweetness.

“Get your nobles under control, then,” I say. “They went rogue after your absence. We’ve had . . . situations arise.”

Restlessness. Rebellion. Random killings.

“So I’ve heard.”

“Tell them to stand down. This Centennial is going to be difficult enough without them trying to interfere.”

She bows. “Of course, King,” she purrs. Then she walks out of the throne room.

“Calder,” I call out, and my friend emerges from the back hall, where he was waiting. “Keep an eye on the Moonling nobles, as much as you can.” I trust Zed’s spies . . . but I trust my friend more.

He nods and strides out of the room.

Only then do I fold forward in pain, my skin stinging as I feel the blue mark spread.



WATCHING AND WAITING

First, the Wildling lets me win the duel. Then, she uses me as a target for Azul's demonstration.

I suspect she's working with Grim . . . but that's not all. I know it in my bones. She's hiding something. I'm sure of it. And I'm going to find out what.

I could have asked Zed to trail her, or contact his network of spies, but this feels personal. I *saved* her, after all. Will I again regret helping a fellow ruler?

I keep an eye on her balcony, from mine. I watch the fire in her hearth flicker; I see her silhouette through the curtains. Then—I watch it disappear.

It's the middle of the night. She's leaving.

I follow her from high above, flying, circling, but all she does is visit the agora. She's watching too—for what, I'm not sure.

She visits the agora five times, and I'm overhead, studying her every move. Familiarizing myself even more with her every habit. Then I watch her sneak into Juniper's bar.

Of course. The keeper of secrets. Why is she visiting him? What is she after? Which secrets will she exchange for information? I should sleep. I should be doing anything else—but I stay until she leaves, then follow her home.

Only after that do I visit Juniper.

"King," he says merrily, not disturbed in the slightest by the fact that I nearly kicked his door down just now. "What will it be? Rum? Wine?"

"Neither," I say, leaning against the bar. "I know the Wildling was here."

His smile widens, and his eyes flicker in curiosity. "Yes, yes. A gemstone herself, is she not? A sharp one. I'm guessing you want to know what she asked me?"

I nod.

"You know the price."

I narrow my eyes. "I'm your king."

He lifts a shoulder. "Then I'm just a simple barkeep."

I nearly throttle him; I don't have time for his games. Then I think of what I said to Enya. *I'm dying. Might as well give up all my secrets.* I wage a brief internal battle before ripping my sleeve over my bicep to reveal my mark. "I'm dying. Happy?"

Juniper doesn't look as concerned as he should. Instead, he looks pleased. "That secret surely bests hers," he says. "The Wildling wanted to know about Moon Isle. About how to get on it, undetected."

Moon Isle? I'd suspected she wanted to know about *me*, about the castle, about any way to betray me. Why would she want to go to Cleo's land?

"Thank you," I say.

Before I can leave, he stops me. "Because you're king . . . I'll tell you this. The Wildling is a target. There are threats against her from multiple realms. They want to see her dead."

Dead. I don't know why that word, said in relation to her, makes me grip the edge of the bar. "Did you tell her that?" I ask. The barkeep shakes his head. "Then why tell me?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Your traded secret was better than hers."

The Starling's demonstration is in the Hall of Glass. It's been centuries since I've walked these corridors, and for good reason.

My family is here. They are painted on the walls.

I try to walk by quickly, but my brother's portrait snares me, and I freeze in front of it. Cold washes down my spine.

He was right *here*. Those eyes were alive, they were ready for a long life. They were bold and fierce.

More so, after he had fallen in love.

Love. We were always warned against it, though it was never forbidden. My parents taught us love was dangerous for rulers, but it was also rare.

My parents weren't in love. I suspect my father loved my mother, but he wanted to control her even more. And she seemed to simply tolerate him, for our sakes and the sake of duty. The only time I ever saw a true connection between them was on the battlefield. It was where they had met—in training. My mother bested him in a duel, and he, on his knees, begged her to go again. And again. And again.

He always said he never won a duel, but he won her. As if she was a prize. Something to be possessed. Then he locked her away in his castle. She wasn't allowed to fight in many battles over the years. Her light seemed to dim with every decade. When she died, she was fiery bright. Fighting alongside her husband, the king, only because he knew our forces needed her to have any chance of winning.

"You fool," I tell my brother's portrait, while simultaneously reaching out to touch his heart. "I miss you. I wish you were here. You would know what to do."

The hall fills quickly. Advisers, nobles, and other Sunlings from court surround me, murmuring. Predicting. They give me compliment after compliment about my gilding, and all it does is remind me of the pride in my father's eyes, when I killed the attendant.

Though the shame and guilt has never left me, it's been years since I thought of it. The curses have been a distraction from my own pain. My own emotions.

Now, I feel them all being dredged up, like a powerful current scraping the forgotten bottom of a sea and bringing everything to shore.

It's dangerous

My feelings don't matter. They shouldn't.

As the Wildling walks into the room, my fists clench, thinking she is the one who started all this turmoil within me.

The Starling, Celeste, walks to the center of the hall. "My demonstration is a trial of fear. Whoever conquers their greatest fear first is the winner."

Then, she unveils a towering mirror. Its glass seems to tremble. I've never seen a relic like it.

"Who would like to begin?"

A test of fear.

I take a step forward. My feelings are distractions . . . and so are my fears.

I want it to tell me what I'm most afraid of, so I can kill it.

I press my palm against the mirror, and the glass ripples beneath my skin, like water. Then, it stills . . .

And I fall through it.

I'm in a snowstorm. White blocks my vision. I make to create a fire, but I can't. My powers are gone. I'm back to my Moonling training with Calder, unable to form a single ember.

Find your fire.

I try, but it's no use. It's not there, and it's getting colder. I keep walking until I can't anymore. I take one step—and I can't move. My leg locks into place, the

snow falling faster, burying me, reaching my ankle and then my calf, as if I could drown in it. I move my arm to propel me forward, and then it too locks in place.

I watch, stuck, as the blue on my skin spreads, piercing my bones, becoming *ice*. Freezing me solid. I turn blue, until I become a statue. I can't move. I can't breathe. I can't bellow. All I can do is watch as the world around me freezes—then shatters.

As the island fragments into a million pieces. As the sky falls, and the ocean rises, and everything in between is swallowed up.

And I can't do anything to stop it.

Weak. Useless.

Just like my father foretold.

White wholly blocks my vision. My mother's voice is in my head. *Oro*, it says. *My golden boy. My sun. Find yourself.*

Find your heart.

Your fire has never left you.

Find it.

Then I see green eyes.

I see them widen in fear. I see them narrow in anger. I see them fill with pride. I see them melt into the sea I haven't visited in centuries, because why would I deserve to see anything beautiful? Why would the distraction be worth it?

No. Now, as my frozen heart begins to ignite, I realize it is not just a distraction. The beauty of that beach, the fierceness of her, is something greater.

That green is a beacon of hope—a world to look forward to, a world worth fighting for.

A sign of spring in the heart of winter.

The more I think of her, of that beach, of *her on that beach*, the more the snow melts away. The more the fire in me grows, blazing through the storm. I think of heat, and sand, and salt, and green eyes, staring back at me.

I feel myself thawing, I feel the emotions washing over me against my will, against my oaths, against my frozen disposition.

Fear. Curiosity.

Hope.

My eyes open as I break free from this glass cage. I straighten, back in the hall, and catch a flash of green from across the room. *Her*. For a moment I'm frozen again, just as I was in the mirror. Unable to move. Unable to breathe.

Then, the claps begin, and I snap out of the moment. It's done.

I made good time.

The demonstration continues, but I'm barely watching. All I can see is green, filling my mind, filling my soul. Before I know it, everyone has conquered their fears and the trial is over. Cleo wins. She was just slightly faster.

These feelings . . . they're rushing back. I'm thawing. I'm not the statue in the mirror.

And I'm not sure I like it.

I suspect the Wildling won't try to go to Moon Isle until the full moon, when no guards are present. But I'm willing to bet it's not the only place she wants to go.

I sit on top of the castle, overlooking the front stairs, waiting to see where she sneaks off to next. Far past midnight, I see a flash of movement and blue hair. Blue?

She's disguised, but I'd know her anywhere. In any color. In any clothing. The way she moves is seared into my very soul. I've memorized her like she's a map, and I'm a traveler. I've studied her like she's a text, and I'm a scholar.

I'm becoming a damned *expert* in her.

And yet . . . I get the sense that I could study her forever and never tire.

I am losing my mind. I am well aware. But I can't get that image out of my head. Her, in my favorite place. Her eyes full of fire, the same way they were when she knocked the crown from my head.

The fire in her has lit a fire in me. And I'm not sure whether I'm going to ignite—or burn.

I can't trust her. She has so many secrets. She could be working with Grim. Tonight, she's disguising herself as a Skyling, and I'm going to find out why.

I follow from above as she makes her way across the Mainland, determination plain on her face. Several times, I want to land right in front of her and ask what she's doing—I want to see what she'll say.

If I'm honest with myself, I just want to hear her voice.

Even if it's when she's lying to me.

That voice. It's a curse. It's a gift. I need to know how her Wildling temptress abilities have pierced me, when I can't seem to sense any other powers on her. She's cloaking them . . . but how?

Everything about her is a mystery.

She finally reaches Sky Isle and promptly crashes into a Skyling. I frown. She's far too clumsy, for how good she is at fighting. Does she not look in front

of her? Or does she get lost in her mind sometimes, the way I do?

I watch, entranced, wondering if the Skyling will detect she's a fraud . . . and what she'll do if he does.

What *I'll* do if he does . . .

But he doesn't. And, as she steps across the precarious bridge, I don't miss the uneven rise and fall of her chest.

She's afraid. Just like I was, the first time I crossed one.

Still, she takes each step. Her spine is straight. Her chin is high. No one would even know she felt fear unless they knew her. She masks it well. Pride surges within me when she finishes crossing, and I bury it down, scowling. She's *lying to me*. I am not *proud of her*. I don't even know her.

That becomes abundantly clear as I follow her, careful to stay out of view until she enters the Skyling castle. Why the castle? I contemplate landing and following on foot, but my presence would attract too much attention. I wait. Not long after, she strolls out of the front door, angry.

I can see it in the set of her shoulders. In the curl of her fingers. She's upset. She must have been looking for something, I reason, and she didn't find it. I rack my mind for what could possibly be hidden in the Skyling castle. Their realm is a democracy. Everything, including knowledge, is shared freely . . .

Is that where she was? A library?

I follow her back to the Mainland castle, and this time, I do land. This is my keep; my presence here is expected. Still, I wait a few minutes before following her inside.

It doesn't take me long to find her. I know the way to her room, but even if I didn't, her steps are uncharacteristically loud. She's frustrated. It's seeped into her movements. She's still disguised. She's putting herself at risk. Anyone would see those eyes and recognize her. Wouldn't they?

Or do they not dream of them like I do?

I shouldn't care if she gets caught. She *should* be caught, if she wants to be this damned reckless.

I quicken my pace. Maybe the sound of my steps will force her to realize she's being too loud. Then I see a flash of white turn the corner, right ahead of me.

Cleo. She hasn't seen me—

But she's seen Isla.

Dread begins to turn in my stomach. Again, I shouldn't care, but I think about Juniper's words. Many people want the Wildling dead.

It's against the rules to kill a ruler before the fiftieth day . . . but I don't put it past Cleo to break them.

I walk faster.

I can differentiate their steps. Isla's begin to hurry. She senses Cleo on her trail. *Good*, I think, conflicted pride filling me again. Cleo speeds up too. She turns the corner, right after Isla, right into a small room, cornering her, and I start to go through scenarios in my mind, wondering how this doesn't end badly—

But then, the Moonling pauses. She takes a few steps inside, and I wait to hear their voices, wait to see if I'll interfere.

Quiet. A moment passes. Two.

Cleo exits the room, frowning. As if she didn't see Isla.

Impossible. The room is small. There's nowhere to hide.

Unless—

When Cleo is far down the hall in the opposite direction, I turn the corridor and take quiet steps closer to the room. That's when I hear voices. Of course.

Grim. With her. Again.

Flames coat my skin. He turned her invisible. He *saved* her. Again. Any doubt that they are working together withers away.

I try to listen but can only hear fragments of their whispered words. And . . . none of them seem to confirm they're working together. If anything, she seems to want nothing to do with him. I smile, despite myself.

This doesn't mean they aren't allied. I try to remind myself of that. I take a step closer.

Before I can hear more, she races away, not seeing me as she bolts in the opposite direction.

"I didn't take you for someone who listens in on conversations," Grim drawls, from the other side of the wall.

I step into the room, only to find him leaning against one of the stone pillars, not a care in the world.

"Is that what that was? A conversation? It sounded one-sided."

Grim just tilts his head at me. "She'll come to her senses. In time." He believes it.

Before I can say anything else, he slips through the walls, leaving me alone to wonder why the thought of that makes me want to kill him all the more.

It doesn't take long for Grimshaw to prove what a bastard he is.

It happens during the Wildling's demonstration, which he publicly refuses to participate in. He says he has *nothing productive to offer* the people of Lightlark.

It's true.

The Wildling is angry. *Good*. I'm glad she sees the Nightshade for what he is. Villainous. Selfish.

Then it's her turn. And, like the gods are laughing at me for my strange fascination with her, she turns to face me. "Would you make me a fire?" she says. Her request fills me with irritation.

Stop talking to me. Your voice is already in my head far too much.

Stop asking things of me, I want to say. I'm afraid of what I'll give you.

I create a column of fire in the center of the demonstration ring, just so she'll stop looking at me. Then, she does the unthinkable.

She puts her entire arm into the fire.

My blood roars with the need to put it out. I barely resist the urge to pull her from the flames. But I don't. She knows what she's doing.

I hope she knows what she's doing.

She doesn't cry. She doesn't scream, though I can *see the skin melting from her bones*.

She is strong. She is brave.

She is an *idiot*.

Cries of horror fill the arena, until she finally removes her arm—and I finally loosen a breath. Then, my jaw nearly drops, seeing the ribbons of skin, the red, the visible *bone*.

Mouth tightening, not willing to make even a whisper of agony, she produces a vial of thick liquid. She takes the top off with her teeth, then pours it over her skin, and I watch it regrow, quicker than any Moonling healing I've ever witnessed.

I'm filled with awe and fury. A familiar mix, when it comes to her.

It's a potent, dramatic demonstration. She *chose* this. The Wildling clearly wants the rest of the island to see her realm is of value.

But *she* herself was the price.

She must have a lot to lose. She must be willing to do a lot to win. She has secrets. I know she does.

And I'm going to make it my personal mission to uncover them.



DESIRE

As my emotions begin to rise, so do memories.

They've been long buried. Now, I remember bits and pieces of my childhood. I remember Elk, my Wildling teacher. I remember him speaking reverently about plants. I remember my mother speaking *to* her garden, like it could hear her.

The heart of Lightlark blooms every so often, and is always attached to a living thing, according to the few texts I've discovered about it. I've been to every forest on the island since then, it seems, without any success. It's like the heart is hiding from me.

The Wildling doesn't leave the palace tonight, and I'm already awake, so I fly to Sky Isle and search yet another field. Lost in my mind, I happen upon a plant that stings. Cursing it—and the Wildling—for invading my thoughts, I fly home. Just an hour later, while the moon still shines brightly, the invitation arrives.

Moonling. Cleo's test.

Of course, she would drag everyone out of their beds for her trial. When I arrive at the arena, it has been transformed into a cold, watery maze. The ice is smooth beneath my feet. Centuries ago, the chill would have pierced my bones. Now, it's barely a nuisance. I found my fire.

The Wildling, on the other hand, is shaking on her platform next to me. I try hard not to notice. I try hard not to pay attention to the sound of her teeth chattering.

She, apparently, is paying attention to *me*.

"Giselroot, nasty thing," she says, and I turn to her, startled. She's looking at my arm. At the rash that's been forming from the poisonous plant.

"You know what this is?" I've never been to the Wildling newland. I know

Wildlings took some of their seeds with them, but I'm shocked she's familiar with a plant that grows on Sky Isle.

"Of course. Plant with five points? Green spots? Yellow buds?"

I nod.

"Giselroot. Poisonous. Causes a rash and bad dreams."

I blink, dumbstruck.

She forms the beginnings of a smile—and *that smile*. It latches onto something in me and pulls. Her smile is like a sunset. Something worth waiting for, and impossible to look away from. Something that makes the rest of the world feel small and insignificant.

"All right, the bad dreams might have just been a tactic by my guardians to keep me away from them." I think about the golden roses my mother used to place on my and Egan's pillows for the same purpose. "You'll want to treat that with an elixir of milk, tomato paste, honey, willow bark, pasted ash, and crushed mulberries."

Why is she helping me? I bite out the words, because they're expected: "Thank you." I assume that will be the end of it.

Then, those green eyes narrow at me. "Giselroot only grows deep in the woods, where the trees are close enough to touch. What in the realm were you doing in a place like that?"

I blink. She's perceptive. Of course she is.

I'm saved from answering by the start of the demonstration. And then, by the cold water calming my heated skin.

Cleo's demonstration is a test of desire. And it feels like I've been tested in it from the moment I stepped into this arena.

Tablets reflecting each of our greatest wants have been positioned at the end of the maze. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll feel the pull of the tablet. We'll complete the demonstration quicker.

I feel the tether. And just like during the Starling demonstration, I have a fierce need to know what it says, so I can conquer it. Desires are just pretty distractions.

As I part the waters, swimming as fast as I can, knowing I need to win this, all I can think about is that smile.

I don't want to think about it.

I don't want to think about her.

So why can't I stop?

This must be her Wildling enchantment at play, but I've never succumbed to

it before. I've always been able to see the lies behind previous advances . . . and, if I think about it, she hasn't even really tried anything.

All she's done is sing . . . for herself. And . . . look at me? And smile?

No. Nothing she has done is even that special. She is not special, I tell myself.

She is not captivating.

You do not want her.

I taste the bitterness, even as I dive around a corner, following the thread of desire, and swallow a mouthful of cold water.

I remember what Calder said, centuries before. He was right.

Aren't those the greatest lies of all?

The ones we tell ourselves?

My desperation grows, my need to *know*. What is it that I want from her? What is it that I want at all? Once I know, I can change. I can bury down the desire. I can *fix it* so that I can focus clearly on saving the island.

A bell rings the moment I reach the end. I grab my tablet and press it firmly against myself. It isn't until I'm fully warm, in the privacy of my room, that I allow myself to look at it.

A heavy weight settles in my chest. My greatest desire might as well be a death sentence.

It says: *love*.

I thought I learned long ago to stop asking questions I don't want answers to. Sometimes when you know the truth, you start to wish you believed the lies. The truth is, more often than not, disappointing.

I should have destroyed that damn tablet before I read it. All it's done is mess with my head.

I can't want love. Not now. Not ever, if I'm to learn from Egan's mistakes. Love for rulers is dangerous. How can I entrust anyone with that kind of power over me?

Falling in love would be the most selfish thing I could do. It would put the entire *island* at risk.

Especially right now, at the precipice of its ruin.

I am not my brother. I can't afford to be.

I stop watching the Wildling each night. And, when the full moon arrives,

and I'm sure she's going to go to Moon Isle, I send Zed to track her instead.

He seems curious about the order but doesn't say much.

Staying away from her was supposed to keep me from thinking about her, but I find myself staring at her balcony, fingers gripped on my stone ledge so tightly that part of it crumbles away, until Zed finally returns.

"Well?" I ask, barely looking at him, afraid of what he'll see in my face. Worry? Curiosity? Hope for confirmation that she really is a wicked villain here to destroy me, so I can stop this strange obsession with her?

"She climbed the outside of a hundred-foot tower, with just her bare hands."

Air shoots out of my nostrils. A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. *Awe and anger*. Anger, because she could have broken her neck.

Awe . . . because she didn't.

"And?" I say, forcing my voice to be casual.

"She disarmed some Moonling warriors. Stuffed them in a closet . . . and then she ran."

"Where?"

"Straight to the library."

Ah. My guess from Sky Isle is confirmed. She *is* looking for libraries. But why?

I finally turn to him. The Skyling is leaning against my door, eyes focused on me. There is a hint of amusement on his face. As if he could possibly know *why* I asked him to trail her.

"I don't have all night," I snap. That only makes his smile grow.

"She must be a better escape artist than even me, because Cleo barged in, and she found . . . nothing. The Wildling escaped, without a trace. I looked around the entire perimeter. No footsteps . . . just . . . *nothing*."

My jaw tightens. I remember how Grim hid her from Cleo before. "Is it possible Grimshaw was with her?"

"Already thought of it," he says. "I don't think so. I didn't hear him at all." Gods knows he wouldn't be able to keep his damned mouth shut for hours. "No one reported seeing him. And why not make her invisible the whole time, if he was? Why wait until the end?"

I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything anymore.

"Thank you," I say, dismissing him. I turn to the ledge and grip it tighter.

Secrets. She has so many of them.

Enough of following her around. Enough of having her followed. Enough of wondering about her secrets, and everyone else's.

I set my own demonstration.



TRUTH

My mother gave me her love of tea and taught me everything she could about its properties. I try not to focus so much on the Wildling and the fact that her face lights up when she sips one of my favorite varieties. This isn't about her. Or me. It's about the future of this island. It's about the future of everyone I've ever cared about.

"Your greatest secret is written in the leaves," I tell the rulers as they finish their tea, and watch for their reactions. "Whoever shares their secret wins my trial."

Each of us has three teacups in front of us. The Starling drops hers first. Odd. What secret could the young ruler be hiding? Azul's is next.

But my eyes are on the Wildling. On the subtle tells of her panic—the way she pulls the end of her hair. The way her lips slightly part.

I clench my jaw, barely restraining myself from simply rushing over to read her secret, hoping she slips up and actually tries to win this trial. It would be useless, I know. Cleo and I are tied. A win for Isla would mean little. Still, I hope.

But she's not stupid. I watch, muscles tensed, as Isla pushes her cups to the floor, and her secret—the one I've been obsessing over for weeks now—shatters.

Grim is next. He's looking at me like he longs for my death as much as I long for his. *Good*. Then, he pushes his cups over the edge.

Only Cleo and I remain. The Moonling has a secret. Does she care more about keeping it? Or winning? I hope the former . . . but the Moonling has surprised me before. I hold her gaze, waiting.

Finally, she pushes her cups over the side.

And I've won the trials. I get to decide the pairs. My shoulders settle, relief filling me, even as I'm about to share my own greatest secret.

It doesn't bother me as much as expected. There are no secrets worth keeping, I reason, if they stand between life and death. The curses must end. It's all that matters.

"I." The first cup goes over the edge.

"Am." There goes the second.

I look up—and those eyes ensnare me. The ones that haunt my every waking thought and dream. I wasn't trying to look at her . . . but there she is. Looking at *me*.

I frown and hold her gaze as I say the last and most important word, written in the leaves.

"Dying."

Panic ensues. Of course it does. Try being the one dying.

Soon, it's time for me to choose the teams. I've gone over every option. Every alliance. Every benefit and consequence.

My goal is to find the heart of Lightlark.

And I know who can help me get it.

This is wrong. I can feel the mistake of this choice, and all its possible reverberations, even as I seek to justify it.

Anyone but her. I should choose *anyone* but the Wildling who all but lives in my mind.

But her realm's connection to nature, and the knowledge she proved by recognizing the rash on my hand, make her the best possible person to help me find a heart tied to a living thing. She is my last hope.

Or my last regret.

When it comes time to decide my team, the words leave my mouth before I can think better of them: "My choice of partner is Isla."

I knock on the Wildling's door, wondering if this is the most foolish thing I've ever done in my long life. It swings open immediately, and there she is, mouth already open.

Then she sees me, and she closes it. Her eyes widen. Apparently, she was expecting someone else.

Who? Grimshaw?

Irritation heats my skin, but I bury it. I will know soon enough whether she is

plotting against me with the Nightshade.

And right now . . . she's working with *me*.

This is for the good of the island, but there is nothing that justifies how long I look at her now.

Because she looks different. Another side of her, uncovered. She doesn't look like a Wildling temptress, or ruler, or warrior. She just looks like . . . a woman. The paint on her face has been scrubbed away, her hair is tied up, and she is in clothes that appear not to fit at all.

She has the nerve to look annoyed. "Do you normally call upon rulers at midnight?"

If I needed a reminder that she gets on my nerves, this is it. "May I enter?"

Her voice all but announces her disappointment over being paired together. "I suppose." She steps aside and I walk in, expecting to see everything she's been hiding.

Instead, I find . . . mess. Clothes everywhere. Endless cups of half-drunk tea.

The door clicks shut, and I turn to find her there, looking at me not with the respect I've come to expect as king, but with *irritation*. "Yes?" she asks, her tone dripping disdain.

Regret. I'm already feeling its teeth sink into me.

Best to get this over with.

"I would like to make a deal."

Her expression remains unchanged, but I hear the unease in her voice as she asks, "Oh? What is it you propose?"

That voice. Always beautiful, even when her words are dripping poison.

I clear off a chair. "May I?" I ask, even though this is my own damned castle. She nods, still glaring at me, and I take a seat.

This is going to be pleasant. I can already tell.

"I have a theory about the curses, one I've been working through the last half century. And I believe you are able to help me. You see, I require a knowledge of nature. One you clearly possess."

She's looking at me like she doesn't trust me. That's new. Over the centuries, I've become known for my honesty more than anything else. But she's looking at me like I'm lying. Like I'm going to trick her.

As if she isn't a little liar herself.

"What is the deal?" she finally asks.

"You are, of course, aware of the second-to-last line of the oracle's riddle. One of our realms must fall for the curses to be broken." She nods. "As we are a

pair, I cannot harm you.” It’s part of the rules, to encourage working together. “And, if you help me find what I seek, I will do my best to protect you from the other rulers as well.”

I find it to be a fair proposition. I’m pleased with myself. I sit back in my chair, awaiting gratitude.

Instead, her look is withering.

I blink. Does she not realize I’ve just offered her a lifeline in this competition? Does she not realize I’m *saving* her? Her anger makes *me* angry. I shouldn’t have come to her room. I shouldn’t have believed the Wildling could be reasonable.

She’s captivating, and fascinating to watch. She’s a constantly evolving mystery. She has eyes that rival any of this world’s beauty.

She’s also fucking irritating.

“*You* want to protect me?” she says, looking me up and down with pure and utter disdain. “I thought you were dying.”

Yes. So very irritating.

My own anger flares; I can feel it heating my skin. I grip the side of her chair so hard, I think I might break it. Does she think this is all a joke? Does she not realize my death will doom thousands? “Is it a deal or not, Wildling?” I spit out.

That only makes her smirk. And that . . . just angers me more. It also makes me question again whether she was ever trying to beguile me at all. It can’t possibly be her plan. Or maybe, she’s just incapable of being pleasant for more than a few seconds.

The disdain must be clear on my face—but she just *smiles*.

“I disgust you, don’t I?” she asks. She takes a step toward me. “Is it the heart eating?” I frown, because yes, *that* part of their curse does disgust me. It only makes her grin wider. “Or the dresses?” I try very hard not to think of the dress she was wearing when she plunged off the balcony, wet and dripping and tight against her skin. Or every single one she’s worn since. I have them all committed to memory, like I’m a damned tailor. “What a shame the only person who can help you with your supposed *theory* repulses you so much.”

I stand, then step toward her, hands curled in fists.

Yes, I think. *You disgust me*. The fact that I can’t stop thinking about you disgusts me. The fact that I can’t breathe around you disgusts me. The fact that I’ve been following you around for weeks and you don’t know it disgusts me.

The fact that you are my enemy and still you haunt my every waking thought and dream disgusts me.

“You are wasting my time,” I say through gritted teeth, meaning it in more ways than one. “Do we have a deal or not?”

She considers it. Then she says the last thing I expect. “It’s only a deal if I am able to decide a second realm that will remain safe.”

Second realm. Of course. She means Nightshade. *Grim.* I already suspected it, but the proof makes my skin feel icy again. “Is there one you have in mind?” I need to hear her say it. I need to confirm it once and for all.

She shrugs. Tellingly, she doesn’t answer. She just says, “If I’m helping you break the curses, I should at least get to determine one other realm that deserves to be saved. And, since you *require* me, it seems there might be room for negotiation.”

My jaw tenses. Chimes sound through the castle, marking the time. I could leave. I could rescind my offer. I could find someone else to work with. I could get a *fucking grip*. But as frustrating as she is . . . I need her to help me find the heart. If the Wildling can help me, I will spend every waking moment with her if I need to.

I will do the one thing I try to avoid. I will lie.

“Fine,” I say, knowing I won’t save Grim, if that’s who she chooses. It isn’t a clear lie, but it certainly isn’t the perfect truth. “So, it’s a deal?”

I watch her shoulders melt in relief—and feel a small inkling of guilt for my partial deception.

“It’s a deal,” she says.

“Good.”

She walks me to the door, lighter on her feet now. She’s practically skipping. More guilt.

“When do we start?” she asks.

“Now.”

“Now?” Her voice has gone panicky again. Why? Was she hoping to fill Grimshaw in on our agreement? Was she going to seek him out tonight? For some reason, the idea of that disgusts me more than anything.

My gaze narrows. “Is that a problem?”

She glares back at me, blazing green. “Well, I did have plans to *sleep*.” Lie. It’s bitter on my tongue. She wasn’t going to sleep. What was she going to do? Who was she going to do it with?

I must have let a sliver of emotion show, because she searches my expression and sighs. “Fine. Just let me get dressed.” She reaches for one of her dresses, draped across another chair. “If you could step outside—”

I frown down at the fabric, knowing where we are going and what we will be doing. "You can't wear that."

This makes her eyes boil with fury. "Are you telling me how to dress now?"

Infuriating creature. "During our excursions together, no one can know you are ruler of Wildling."

She tenses. "Why?"

Truths are often hurtful. I tell them anyway. "Lightlark doesn't like you."

She scowls at me. "Excuse me?"

"Some ancient creatures on the island, the ones that still live in the deepest pockets of Lightlark, believe Wildlings abandoned them five hundred years ago. If they sense you, or hear rumors that you are near their land, they will attack. Which would only end in spilled blood and too much attention drawn to our efforts."

"So, you want me to dress differently."

It's not just that. And I have more reasons for my request than I am telling her. I lean closer.

"I can't sense your abilities, Wildling." She steps back, her face panicked. "I can tell you're cloaking them. I just ask that you keep doing that when we're on the isles."

I just ask that you stop beguiling me, if you ever started, is what I actually mean.

"You don't want me using my powers?"

I nod. A little desperately.

She makes a fuss about it, but finally, she says, "Fine."

"Good," I say, looking down at her oversized clothing. "That will do."

No, she's definitely not using her powers on me. Because instead of beguiling me, she is *infuriating* me. She won't stop talking. She won't stop asking questions. I'm beginning to question my own sanity. To question how someone can be so captivating and irritating at the same time. To question whether breaking the curses is worth this at all.

It is. Of course it is. But that doesn't make spending time with her any easier.

"Are you going to ignore me?" she finally says at my back. I keep walking, because *yes*, that was the plan. Then, I hear her stop. Dramatics. Always so damned dramatic. I turn around to ask her if she's going to be this irritating for the entire journey, but she's already speaking.

"Just because you *asked* me to wear *this*," she says, "and asked me not to

wear this”—she reaches up and does the unthinkable: She fucking *flicks my crown*—“doesn’t mean I’m not *also* a ruler of realm. You will treat me with respect, *King*.” She manages to make my title sound ridiculous.

No one, in centuries, has dared speak to me this way. And *she* . . . this Wildling, who has no idea what she’s gotten herself into . . .

She just flicked my crown.

I glare at her, still feeling the slight vibration of her touch, right in the center of my forehead. “We are going to the storm,” I bite out, before turning away again.

She follows in silence now, until we reach the coast, where the storm has gone still. I take a step toward the bridge across the stones, and hear her say, “No.”

I turn. What is she on about now? “No?”

She averts her gaze, and I remember her hesitance on Sky Isle. She is afraid of this bridge with all its gaps and the way it’s whipping wildly in the wind. Just as I was, centuries ago.

I hear my voice softening as I say, “It is steady. But if for some reason you did fall, I would obviously save you.”

There. I can be pleasant. I say the words, hoping it might inspire some pleasantness in her.

But all she does is sneer at me. “Save me? Like you did the first day?”

Any softness immediately withers. Such gratitude. “Yes, like I saved you the first day.”

Of course, she would turn even something like *saving her life* into a mark against me. This woman is going to make me lose my mind.

She laughs without humor. “I hit the water! And you left me in a puddle on the balcony, like discarded trash, without even bothering to wait and see if I woke up!”

My hands turn to fists. Maybe I should have let her die. I would have saved myself all this suffering. “You might have hit the water before I got to you, but you also had a head injury that you would *not* have woken up from if I hadn’t healed you.”

She straightens, chin rising. “You just admitted you didn’t get to me until it was practically too late, so the only way I’m crossing this bridge is if you’re tightly by my side. If I fall, *you fall*.”

Ridiculous woman. But we are wasting time. “Fine,” I say, taking her arm more roughly than I intended. She goes stiff as I walk us across the bridge. I’m

not sure she's even breathing.

"Quickly," she whispers somewhere next to my arm, clutching it for dear life.

"You can open your eyes now," I say when we're safely across, dropping her arm as fast as possible.

She does, and I can almost feel her relief at having made it to the other side.

Then, she stops. Her lips part. I trace her gaze, noting how quickly I've gone from wanting to launch her from this cliff, to wanting to know what has caught her attention.

She's staring at the storm, frozen beyond. And her expression is one of wonder, instead of fear. If she knew how many dead were trapped within it, she might not be looking at it as though it were something beautiful. She might stop being so infuriating.

I stop at the hole, the entrance to the underground. Only then does she look appropriately afraid.

"I'll go first. Then you."

I might as well have a sword at her throat, for the way she's looking at me for implying she jump through the hole, ending nowhere to be seen. Good. We'll see if she trusts me.

It won't matter if she is the key to finding the heart, if she won't work with me. I make to go through, and she grips my elbow. I go still. Her skin—it's like flames.

"Will something break my fall?"

I barely get the word out. "Obviously."

"Are you sure?"

She doesn't trust me. Of course, she doesn't . . . but can she?

I sigh. I know her now. She's proud. Stubborn. She doesn't like to appear weak. So I say, "Fear of heights. Fear of falling. Fear of bridges. Should we make a list of your fears, Wildling?"

She glares at me, and that glare—I like it almost as much as her smiles. Because it is a challenge. A duel.

I watch her fear melt into conviction.

"Go ahead, King."

I hold her gaze as I go through. The drop is quick. I pause just above the water, then land at its edge. And then I wait.

She'll want to prove me wrong. She'll want to prove her strength.

Or maybe . . . she hates me enough to just stay up there all night. Time ticks

by slowly. Minutes pass, and I'm almost convinced she's gone back to the castle. Then I hear screaming, and she tumbles into the water.

She trusted me.

An ember of hope forms. Maybe we can work together. Maybe my people have a chance.

Not if she drowns.

I reach into the water and pull her onto the stone. "Took you long enough," I say, conscious of how little time is left before daylight.

Perhaps I should have considered the consequence of testing her in this way, I think, when she pushes me with surprising strength for someone currently coughing water like she's on the brink of death. She glares at me through the curtain of her hair, looking nothing short of murderous.

Her hands make fists. They pull back, and—

Is she going to try to hit me? Interesting. Just as I suspected. She doesn't fear me. She doesn't respect me. She sure as hell doesn't *like* me.

I easily grip both of her wrists before she can reach me. It seems to anger her even more.

"This was all a test, wasn't it?" she yells. She's shivering. "You wanted to see if I could trust you."

I nearly drop her hands. She's read me immediately and accurately.

"I knew it." She fights against my grip, but I don't budge. Getting punched in the face won't make a good start to an already tumultuous working situation.

If I expected her to lose the fight, it turns out I'm wrong. She spits at my feet, and—

Too far. Anger grips me like a vise. I glare at her and pull her forward by her wrists. My voice is cold. "Listen closely, Wildling. I don't care if you like me. But if we're going to work together, you need to trust me."

She bares her teeth at me. "How am I supposed to trust you, if you haven't even told me what you're looking for?"

Another moment where she makes me lose my train of thought completely. Because she's right.

First, about me being untrusting. I've learned from an early age that everyone around me is a liar.

She's also right that I haven't given her a chance to trust me in turn. I drop her hands. I'm not used to working with anyone this closely, on something this important. *King* is a lonely title. No one—not even the other Lightlark rulers—could understand the responsibility I have.

Trust is foolish. As king, it is also dangerous. Especially because this Wildling has given all signs that she is my enemy. It's time to find out if she is, once and for all.

"Are you going to divulge what I tell you to Grim?"

Silence.

It *almost* tells me what I need to know, but I need to hear her say it. I need to hear her say the word.

"No," she finally says.

I wait for the bite of bitterness, the poison of a lie.

It never comes.

Relief and confusion set in. This means my assumptions about her have been wrong. But if she isn't working with Grim, why is he helping her? Why did he come here in the first place? What is her plan?

I know nothing. That much has become very clear. All I know is, that in this moment, Isla Crown is not lying to me.

So, I decide tell her the truth. "I'm looking for Lightlark's heart."

She blinks. "Its what?"

I tell her about it. I show her the oasis we have landed in, filled with plants from across the entire island. I watch as she studies each one, then tells me what living thing the heart is most likely tied to.

She knows a lot about plants. Her knowledge is impressive. Useful.

And even when she calls me a lunatic when I suggest we have to fly out of the cave, even when her nails dig into my skin and she screams into my ear as I lift her into the air, even as she mutters threats and curses into my skin, even as I leave her to walk alone—so damned *frustrated*—I don't regret for a moment asking her to work with me. Not really.

And that, perhaps, is the most dangerous realization of all.



PAIRING

My friends are waiting for me in my room when I return.

I sigh. “Is this truly the best use of your time?” There are about a thousand things we each need to be doing right now, during the Centennial, even at the cusp of daylight.

Zed’s feet are on my comforter, so now I have to burn it. He nods before taking a sip of tea that Enya has clearly just brewed. “Yes, actually, this is exactly where we think we should all be. Don’t you agree, Enya?”

She’s glaring at me from a chair in the corner of my room, near the balcony doors.

What is it with women being mad at me today?

“Just get on with it,” I say, looking over at Calder, who smiles faintly, as if he would rather be anywhere else but here.

“You chose the Wildling as your partner,” Enya says.

I should have expected this. “I did.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think? I haven’t found the heart in decades, even with all of you helping me. She knows nature better than anyone on this island.”

“Does she?” Enya asks.

I narrow my eyes. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing. Just that she seems far more occupied with putting you in danger, than with helping you.”

I sigh. I also should have expected Enya wouldn’t like the hairpin trick, during Azul’s demonstration. Then again, if the target had been anyone but me, she’d have loved it.

Zed shrugs. “No, actually I did like when her throwing star almost killed the entire island and the thousands of people that live here.”

Calder sits back, chair groaning with his weight, as if he knows already that this is going to be both a long and unpleasant conversation.

I run a hand down my face. I want to go to bed and not talk about the Wildling with my friends ever, but that's the worst thing about having friends. They don't leave you alone, even when you want them to.

And that's also the best thing about having friends.

"You don't trust her, do you?" Enya says.

"Of course I don't," I say, meaning it. She might have been telling the truth about not divulging to Grim what I shared, but that doesn't mean she doesn't have her own plans against me.

"Good," Enya says. "She's most likely working with *him*, and—"

"She isn't," I interrupt, cutting her off.

My friends all turn to me.

"She isn't working with Grim," I repeat, more evenly this time.

"How do you know?" Calder asks, sitting straighter.

"I asked her about him."

Zed looks impressed. "Really?"

Of course it's a surprise. My friends know me better than anyone. As useful as my flair is, I don't like using it on purpose often, by asking specific questions. I haven't done it in centuries. It isn't fair, I know, when no one else beyond this room knows about my ability.

I meet Enya's eyes, as if reminding her of our conversation from before. It might not be fair, but measures must be taken for the good of the realms. I know that.

Calder chews his lip. "If she isn't working with Grim, then why is he so interested in her? He's never interested in anyone."

It's true. Isla is, of course, beautiful . . . but Grimshaw, demon that he is, isn't stupid. He wouldn't spend a moment on her, unless he wanted something. We all seem to come to this same conclusion at once.

Zed frowns. "What could he want from the Wildling?"

I can think of a few things. For myself, anyway.

Some are wants that I have late at night, in dreams that have become more and more frequent—and that never satisfy this unexpected, burning desire. That end in me waking up aching and coated in sweat, gasping for air and cursing at the ceiling.

Some are simple.

Like just wanting the Wildling to be fucking reasonable.

We begin searching for the plants she indicated in the oasis—the ones that could be tied to the heart.

And it isn't going well.

She likes to do things like threaten to stop working unless I answer her endless questions.

And I respond by doing something stupid, like flicking *her* crown (which she insists on wearing), leaving a dent that gives me a strange sense of satisfaction.

Which leads to her threatening me and calling me a *wretch*.

So pleasant. So charming, even after I had pants specially made for her, after noticing that the other ones she wore weren't suitable for kneeling on the ground, or for the night chill. Even after I had shirts made, after she tore her other one to *ribbons*, in some strange solution to marking the rows of plants she had searched.

That's what I am to her. A *wretch*.

We've looked for days now, without success. The only thing Isla has managed to do is get on my last nerve.

I let out a sigh as I sink into my chair on our preferred floor of the castle, and Enya looks up from the orange she's peeling. "The Wildling can't be that bad," she says.

"Whatever you're thinking, she's worse," I reply.

She looks at me strangely but stays quiet.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." She goes back to her peeling, uncharacteristically quiet.

Zed snorts. "You've faced rebellions, deadly creatures, uprisings, and curses, but one tiny Wildling is giving you trouble?"

I shoot him a look. I might tower over her, but there doesn't seem to be anything tiny about the Wildling. Including her attitude.

"It is strange," Calder says pensively, reaching to take a slice of orange Enya has offered. "I haven't seen you this . . . worked up in a while."

"I'm not worked up," I say tersely. Bitterness fills my mouth. I am not a liar. I do not *make a habit of lying*.

But clearly, I am now constantly lying to myself.

"Once again, I plead with you all to talk about anything but the Wildling," I groan, rubbing my temples. It's enough that I must think about her, and work with her, and dream of her. The last thing I want is her being a regular topic of conversation with my friends.

Enya gets to her feet at once, clasping her hands together. "It's settled, then.

We didn't think you'd be in the mood, what with the island dying and all, but since you are clearly in need of a distraction . . ."

Her words are light, but I know her well. The island's fate weighs heavily on her—on all of us—but it won't be figured out tonight.

I know exactly what she means. Knowing someone this long is its own form of telepathy. "I thought we weren't doing it this decade."

Calder blinks. "When did we say that?"

"The *king* said that," Zed replies in a piercing tone. I scowl at him, and he just grins, knowing how I hate the title. "You know, we could take a page out of my realm's values. Enact a democracy. *Voting*. Like civil beings."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Fine. A vote. Who would like to—" Enya, Zed, and Calder's hands all shoot up.

"Children, all of you," I mutter. "Five-hundred-year-old children."

Enya grins as she passes me by, on her way out the door. "And you, Oro, are the whiniest among us."

Fireball is a game we made as teenagers. Every decade, fireflies fill a forest on Sun Isle. They burn bright—and follow movement. The gleam they create in packs is so thick they block our vision when we run, so we made a contest of it. Two against two. One person on offense, one on defense, with the goal of getting a glass orb across the other side of the forest.

One team member tries to distract the swarm of fireflies, while the other races across to the other side. Distractions must be complex to get the fireflies' attention, and over the centuries, techniques have gotten wilder. Games have left their marks on this stretch of land, changing the landscape completely. They have ended with the forest ablaze, flooded from nearby streams and full of tornadoes (one time when Zed was especially set on winning). Mostly, though, games end in broken bones.

"Teams?" I ask, as we approach the forest. The fireflies fill every gap in the brush like living flames. Their speckled lights make a second, blazing night sky.

"This time, I get Calder," Zed says. Back when he could fly, Zed was the undisputed champion of the game. He's the self-declared "fastest Skyling in existence." Now Calder's the best partner, given his sheer size and ability to whip water around him in waves, which the fireflies seem to like.

"I guess we're stuck together," Enya says, leaning against me.

I smile for the first time in a while. "No, I guess you're stuck with *me*." According to my friends I'm the worst partner, because I'm the only one who refuses to cheat.

I remember what Enya said about breaking the rules. About loosening my morality.

I whisper something into Enya's ear, and watch a slow grin overtake her freckled face. She clicks her tongue. "I knew there was corruption in you yet."

Zed and I take our marks, on opposite ends of our clearing. The orb sits in the middle. The first to capture it, then get it to the other side, wins.

The fireflies have already started circling, curious. Enya and Calder face each other down, ready to provide distraction. Ready to lead the bright creatures toward the other side, and to block their opponents from making it across with the orb.

Zed and I lock eyes.

The orb is thick, reinforced glass. There's a glittering burst of energy inside, spiraling. Circling.

There's a shattering sound as the Starling spark in the center of the orb goes off, breaking through the top of it, launching into the sky, marking the start of the game.

I shoot forward, flying. Zed glares at me, as he's forced to run. I reach the orb first, my hand curling into the hole the sparks made, making it easier to carry.

I turn—and Calder's right there. Ready to summon the fireflies, to keep me from getting to the other side. To make it easy for Zed to steal the orb.

His hulking arm reaches out, toward the nearest stream. His fingers flex. His veins go taut.

He frowns.

"Good luck summoning air," Enya says, the hiss of steam reaching us. We heated the water until it boiled and evaporated.

Calder opens his mouth. Closes it. Frowns. It almost makes me feel bad.

But then Zed sends a swarm of fireflies right at my face. I startle back, stumbling a step as they stick to my skin, surrounding me like a cloud, shining as brightly as a flame.

"Zed," I growl, spitting fireflies out of my mouth.

I can't see him through the blinding light, but I can hear him say, "Sorry, I was under the assumption we were in a rules-free game." I feel the orb being wrenched free from my grip.

The fireflies are relentless, clinging, circling. They'll only move on toward a greater source of movement. All I can do is hope my partner has a plan.

I hear Zed's steps, getting close to the edge of his side of the clearing. I can

hear Calder cheering him on. Then, all I hear are the fireflies as they swarm my head. I force myself to be still, not wanting to attract more, feeling them crawl—

They scatter at once, racing through the air—toward Enya, who now is sporting her fire-wings. Her wings move fast as lightning, like a dragonfly. She floats a few inches off the ground, enraging Zed, who would give anything to fly again.

She launches toward him—and they both roll across the clearing, tangled in a mess of limbs and flames. Finally, she tugs the orb from his grip, and leaps into the sky. He leaps too—but barely misses getting it back, before falling to the ground again. She remains floating, just a few feet above him.

I haven't seen her hold her wings for this long. It's impressive.

She just smiles sweetly down at Zed, through the cloud of racing fireflies that's formed around her and her wings. "Here." She holds it up just far enough that he can't jump.

I expected a curse or vile gesture, but instead, Zed grins. Then, in a flash, he summons wind around her, moving so quickly, it sucks the air away, and her flames go out. She chokes. Her wings vanish.

She falls to the ground, with a sickening crack.

Zed just scoops the orb out of the crook of her arm, now unnaturally twisted to the side, and runs across the clearing.

I run to Enya. Predictably, she sits up, holds her broken arm against her chest, and says, "What are you doing? Go! You can still stop him!" When I don't, she growls, then gets to her feet—before collapsing. She winces. "Yeah, might have broken my leg too."

Cheers erupt as Zed makes it to the other end. He shouts his win to the sky, to the stars, to the night, to everyone in a mile radius.

Calder walks over slowly, arms folded across his chest, eyes still narrowed in disappointment. Still upset over the move we pulled. He looks from me, to Enya, gaze shifting from her leg—definitely broken—and her arm, twisted to an angle that is almost impressively gruesome. "If only we had water to heal her with," he says, voice flat.

Enya and I look at each other.

Then we burst into laughter. She winces, the movement jostling her arm, then laughs again. Zed chuckles too, as he sinks to his knees at her side, removing his shirt in one smooth motion, then using it to expertly tie a sling.

Finally, Calder joins us.

The joy from our fireball game lasts through the night—then withers in the morning, when I’m called into my first meeting.

Everyone needs something from me. It’s been this way since I became king, but during the Centennial, my schedule is packed fuller than usual. There are meetings with other rulers. Nobles. Our legion.

Days are spent in meetings. Nights are spent searching for the heart with the Wildling. It’s never-ending.

I remember Egan, sitting on his throne, going days without eating, simply because he was too busy. Going days without resting. I used to wonder how that was possible, but I don’t wonder anymore.

By the time I knock on her door, my eyes are ready to close.

But then they meet hers, and suddenly, I’m not so tired. She looks at me, a bit suspiciously. As if wondering why I’m staring at her for so long.

Right. I forgot she doesn’t know I do that all the time. I forgot I *shouldn’t* be looking at her like I have any right to memorize her.

We walk to Sky Isle in silence. We’ve searched this same field for days. I watch her from across the rows of plants, as she peers into the center of each one, in rapid succession. She’s gotten quicker. More efficient. Built her own systems, which I’ve shamelessly adopted.

By the end of the night, we meet in the middle, both coming up empty. We’ve looked for hours. Searched every single plant here. No heart.

We’re both covered head to toe in dirt. Both tired. Frustrated. We share a look—

And for the first time, she doesn’t look at me like I’m her enemy. No. She looks at me like we have something in common. Like we are allies.

“It’s not here,” she growls, her voice a tired rasp.

“No,” I say. “It isn’t.” And what does it say about me that I feel a sense of relief, because it means I might get to spend a little more time with her?

Because it means I might have another chance for her to look at me like this again, without the glaring? Without the hatred?

No. I shouldn’t be thinking this way. I should be angry that we haven’t found the heart. I should be worried.

We’ll go to the next place, with the next plants she pointed out in the oasis. We will find it. Then I will be rid of her and these confusing thoughts.

As we walk back through Sky Isle, we pass a woman who startles when she sees us. Her nose crinkles. We both must look like shit and smell like mud.

It takes her a moment to see the gleam of my crown beneath all the dirt, but

when she does, her eyes widen. She bows her head, and says, eyes to the ground, voice full of trembling reverence, "My king, may you have a restful rest of your night." Then, she scurries away.

Beside me, Isla makes a sound almost like a laugh.

I turn to her. "What?"

I expect her to ignore me, to give me a taste of my own treatment, but she tilts her head at me instead. "It's just amusing, is all."

"What is?" I ask flatly, almost positive that I am not going to find what comes out of her wicked mouth *amusing*.

She lifts a shoulder. "That the only thing standing between disdain and respect is a rusty old crown."

I give her a heavy look. "You like my crown," I say, knowing very well how many times she's stared at it. How she *flicked* it.

She surprises me by taking a step forward. "If you mean I like *defacing* it . . . then yes. I like it *very much*," she says, rising on her toes to flick it again.

I catch her wrist before she can. She gasps. Instead of retreating, she remains there, on her toes, just inches away.

For a moment . . . we just stare at each other. And I fall into the impossible and futile task of trying to find something wrong with her. Maybe a fault would loosen the hold of this obsession, would be proof that she is not as perfect as I have built her up to be in my mind.

But there's nothing.

Gods, even covered in dirt, she is beautiful.

"Wow," she says, studying me back. Her tongue darts out to lick her lips. Her eyes are on my mouth.

"What?" I breathe.

Her gaze slowly slides to mine. Her voice is just a breathy whisper. She leans in. I swallow.

"You look even worse up close," she says, before falling back onto her feet, and turning around.

She struts forward with unwavering confidence, chin held high.

But I stand very still, my skin blazing and heart on fire. Because her words . . . what she said . . .

They were a lie.

For someone responsible for an entire island at risk of being lost forever, I obsess far too much about a single phrase, spoken in a voice clearly meant to be

infuriating.

But she *lied*. About finding me repulsive.

Does that mean she finds me . . . attractive?

Or does she simply not find me as absolutely wretched as she has previously claimed?

I run my hand down my face. I am losing my fucking mind. I shouldn't care. Dozens of women have approached me since the start of the Centennial, and *they* did not tell me I look *even worse up close*. Not that I gave them the chance, before turning down their advances.

So why do I care about a Wildling who is so damned maddening?

I've spent the entire day in meetings. I should go to bed.

I'm so deep in my mind as I make my way up to my room that I don't even sense Azul in the quiet castle corridor until he stops me. I blink, straightening. This is one of the back halls, the ancient ones with ill-fitting stones that let in too much cold at night. People rarely use them . . . which is why I do, when I can't sleep. When I need quiet. For Azul to have found me here, at this hour . . . he must have been seeking me out.

I bow my head slightly in greeting. Azul's stare is long and piercing. He looks from my red eyes to my neck, where the blue has started to show past my shirt.

"So. You really are dying."

He's known me long enough to know I don't lie. Especially about anything that impacts the safety of the island. I nod, and he curses. Looks to the floor. He knows what this means as much as I do—this is our last chance at breaking the curses. And our final chance to save the island. Eventually he says, "Well, then. I have a plan."

"Plan?"

He nods. "To end the curses once and for all."

For a moment relief fills me, relief that someone *else* has a plan and that we will have a hope at ending all this death.

Then he says, "I will sacrifice myself."

Disappointment and anger hit me at once, sharper than they usually would.

I look around, squinting through the darkness, at both ends of the hall. I don't see anyone . . . but I also don't trust my senses this late at night, when I didn't even hear Azul coming. I motion toward a door, and he follows me through, into a long room. I run my hand down the back of my neck, willing myself to be patient, when all I want to do is go to a stretch of barren land and set it ablaze.

When all I want to do is be able to actually *sleep*, without all the stress and regret and piercing green eyes that keep me awake.

“That isn’t a plan,” I finally say through my teeth, trying to remain calm.

“It is,” he insists.

Not a viable one. “Your plan is madness. You will be sentencing thousands to death.”

“A realm has to die, Oro,” Azul says.

I hate how true it is.

“You—”

There’s a noise outside the door. A heel slipping against stone.

I wish I didn’t know precisely whose heel it was. I wish I didn’t recognize the slight gasp that followed. But I did, in an instant. She was eavesdropping. How much did she hear? Meddling Wildling. Will she leave me alone?

With a curl of wind, I slam the doors closed.

Azul either didn’t hear the noise in the hall—or he doesn’t care. He keeps going, without missing a beat. “Tell me you haven’t thought about it,” he presses.

I know he’s saying, *Tell me you haven’t thought about one of your own realms actually dying. Thousands of your people—giving up their lives.*

“I cannot.”

I’ve considered every alternate possibility over the century between Centennials. Even more so when the blue began appearing. Curses aren’t meant to be broken easily.

“It’s an option,” he says.

As loath as I am to admit it, if I can’t kill Grim, it could become our only option. “You would so readily die? What about your realm?”

Azul’s smile is sad. “I would readily be reunited with my love, yes,” he says. “And as for my realm . . . we voted in favor of participation. If it comes to it, we must sacrifice our realm. We would rather one realm die than doom all six.”

Selfless. That’s how he always has been, how Skydings have been for millennia. The choice of which realm will die has haunted each Centennial since the first. Which could the island live without? Since Grim has never been invited until now, it was always down to five options.

The oracle promised that the winner of the Centennial, the one who breaks the curses once and for all, will win unmatched power. I’ve suspected, over the years, that different rulers are more focused on the ability, than the chance to end all our suffering.

Like Grim. He didn't want more power before, but perhaps he needs it now. But not Azul. He doesn't want the prize.

"It won't come to that," I say, but I don't truly believe it.

Azul's smile is sad. "It will, Oro," he says. "One of six will die. It's fated." Azul's hand is firm on my shoulder. "My realm is willing to make the sacrifice, to fulfill the final piece of the prophecy. Now you know," he says, before he leaves.

I enter our quiet floor to find Zed asleep in an armchair, a wool blanket tucked around his shoulders. He doesn't stir.

I clear my throat loudly. "So ready to die?"

Zed jumps, then rights himself, rubbing his eyes. "Dammit Oro, a simple 'hello' would suffice," he grumbles. By the way he looks at me, he knows exactly what I mean. "And yes. Five hundred something years is a little much, don't you think?" His tone is light, but his eyes are serious.

So, he did vote on this, along with the other Skylings.

Enya is up in moments. "What are you two talking about?"

When I tell her, Enya looks furious. "Sacrificing themselves! As if that would actually work to fulfill the prophecy!"

"And we're the experts?" Zed says lazily. "The people who have yet to break the curses in five centuries?"

He's right. We know nothing. All I can focus on is finding the heart and hoping I'm right about my theory.

Hours later, I search the woods again with the Wildling. She's staring as if she wants to say something. I ignore her.

With every ounce of my self-control, I force myself to ignore everything about her.

"You haven't been sleeping at all, have you?"

I feel a flash of annoyance. I wish she wouldn't study me so closely. I nearly laugh at my own hypocrisy; I'm a damned *specialist* when it comes to studying her movements. Which is how I know she was listening in on me and Azul's conversation.

It doesn't take long for her to ask about it. Of course, it doesn't.

She thinks I'm working with him behind her back. She still doesn't trust me. Not really.

I can't say I blame her. I don't trust her either.

Then she asks me something unexpected. "What did you think of them?"

Wildlings.” *When they lived here*, are the words she doesn’t say.

I tell her the truth. “They were my favorite realm, besides Sunling.”

She doesn’t believe me.

I tell her something even my father didn’t know. I tell her about my Wildling teacher. I don’t know why. But while we walk, she listens, green eyes looking up at me with curiosity, and I find myself saying far more than I should.

Each day, the talking becomes easier. I start to anticipate her voice, her questions. My answers become longer than simple yeses or nos.

I find myself looking *forward* to the conversations, then wondering why. I have other people to talk to. This Wildling might as well be a stranger.

No. Worse. She’s a *liar*. I know that, yet I keep talking to her.

I’m so tired when I return to my room each night that eventually my insomnia is cured. Tonight, I fall asleep in the middle of bathing.

I dream of a green sea, a golden beach. I dream of *her*, the Wildling, at my favorite place.

I see her smiling, her eyes glistening.

Smiling at *me*.

I see her reaching toward me. I feel her pulling me into the sea. Deeper. Deeper. Too far out. So far, we’ll both drown—

I gasp as I break through the water’s surface, coughing and fighting for air. When I’ve cleared all the fluid in my lungs and I can breathe again, I realize how shaken I am.

It’s official. I’ve lost my mind.

I almost drowned in my damned bathtub. This needs to stop. I need to find the heart and end all this, once and for all.



HEARTLESS

We aren't going to find the heart.

We've been searching for over a week now. I can tell Isla is losing hope too.

She sits on the ground, in a patch of forest we've already scoured, glaring at the soil. It's an uncharacteristic thing for a Wildling to do; then again, nothing about Isla is expected.

Perhaps that's what makes me so afraid of her.

"We aren't . . . we aren't going to find it," she admits, and I'm almost shocked into silence, hearing our thoughts so aligned.

We are more similar than I would ever admit aloud.

"We have to find it," is all I say. Then I surprise myself by moving to sit next to her.

She glances over at me, and I want to turn, to see those eyes up close, to see if they match the shade from my dream, but I remain still. It might be one of the hardest things I've ever done.

"What does it feel like?" she asks.

I finally allow myself to turn to her then, and—*those eyes*.

She reddens, and I realize I've been staring. And *frowning*, as she's often reminded me I do. She must assume I'm thinking ill of her.

How do I tell her she's all I think about?

I clear my throat. "What does what feel like?"

"Dying."

The word is a bucket of cold water on my thoughts. I tear my eyes from hers, mourning the loss of that green that is much more vivid than the forest around us.

I think about the bluish gray methodically spreading across my body. "Slow. Painful."

I hear her swallow.

“Are you afraid?” she asks.

“Yes,” I reply, surprised I’m answering her at all, that we’re having any stretch of conversation that doesn’t include scowling. “But not for me,” I admit, realizing I’m not just admitting the truth; I’m discovering these feelings for the first time. No one’s ever asked. Everyone, even my friends, avoids the topic of my death.

“I don’t fear death for myself. I fear it for everyone tied to my life. My people. My land.” I run a hand across the soil, and it’s cold. Colder than it’s felt in centuries.

She nods. “I—I hope it’s not like that for everyone,” she says. “I hope, for some, death is quiet and quick.”

Quiet and quick.

“A quiet and quick death is a gift,” I say, not meaning to say anything at all. This is what she does. She reaches into me, somehow, drawing out thoughts I would normally keep to myself. She’s collecting my truths. I wonder what she’s planning on doing with them.

“It is,” she agrees, gazing at the forest without seeming to see it. No, she’s lost in her thoughts, and I feel the urge to know what she’s thinking. To implore her to share truths, the same way I have. To determine whether she’s capable of saying anything to me that isn’t a lie.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, then immediately regret it. I shouldn’t ask.

I shouldn’t care.

But I do.

She blinks. Turns to me. “My parents,” she says, appearing surprised by the admission.

Sweetness. Truth.

“What were they like?” Her truths are like a struck ore, something valuable that must be mined.

“I don’t know,” she says. Another truth. She frowns, and I can see her mind working. She’s trying to see if she’s giving too much away.

“They died before I knew them,” is what she offers me.

I wonder how they died. I wonder why both did. Did her mother kill her father, as the Wildling curse goes?

It’s something we have in common. Neither of us can love anyone. For her, it means death. For me . . . as king . . . it’s a risk that could destroy Lightlark, if my

power should end up in the wrong hands.

“What were your parents like?” she asks.

I stiffen.

I shouldn’t have asked a question I wouldn’t have readily answered. It’s a rule I’ve lived by for centuries. But I’m breaking so many rules when it comes to Isla. I should stand up. I should ignore her. I’ve done both things dozens of times since we’ve worked together.

But I know her now. I can tell when she’s trying to be sly, when she’s digging for information for strategic reasons. This time . . . she’s not. She’s genuinely curious.

About *me*.

How long has it been since anyone other than my friends has asked me about myself, Oro, and not about the *king*?

“My father was cold,” I say. “And my mother . . .” My voice breaks off. It’s been so long since I’ve allowed myself to think about her. There are so many words, so many memories. “She was warm,” is all I say. It’s not enough, but it’s everything, at the same time.

She seems to think so too, because she nods. She doesn’t press further.

We stare at each other for a moment, before we both look away. We stand.

We return to not looking and not asking, as we search for the heart.

A scream cuts through the forest, and I freeze.

Isla.

I’m in the air without question, without hesitation. Fire surges in my palm, ready to turn the entire forest to ash if needed.

There she is, caught in the middle of a web of barbs. I can smell her blood everywhere. *Why would the forest attack a Wildling ruler?* She’s trying to tear herself away. The needles sink deeper, as if set on killing her.

“Stop moving. You’re making it worse,” I say, and she stiffens.

She’s angry at me, at my tone. Good. Because anger means she’s alive. Anger means she’s ready to *fight*.

And she’s going to have to fight to survive this pain.

Her back is wrecked. Thorns cover her body, stabbing her in dozens of places. I curse, wondering how she’s conscious. “I’m going to have to break them to free you.”

She nods, then screams when I tear the first barb in half with a spark of energy sent from my palm.

I try to be gentle, but the thorns curl into her skin, anchoring deep. They're actively resisting me, digging further into her flesh with my every effort to free her, as if the forest wants to keep her for itself. She screams again, the sound raking through my bones, and I pause my efforts, realizing I'm making it worse.

"There are . . . several." The warning won't do much; I know that.

Tears slide down her face, as it twists in agony, and it feels just like a blade, tearing through my chest. It's as if the barbs are in *me*, and that doesn't make any fucking sense.

But all I know is I'll do anything to make the pain stop.

I pull the barbs from her, as gently as I can, using every shred of focus and skill, and she jerks forward, retching all over herself. All over *me*. I grimace at the mess but realize I don't care. I don't care at all.

I just want this to be over. I want her to be freed from this forest. But I can't do it alone. She has to help herself. I gently curl her hand into a fist, my fingers sliding over hers. "Find your strength," I say, paraphrasing words I heard centuries prior from my mother.

She looks up at me. Those green eyes sharpen. The flame within ignites. A sense of pride fills me. There she is. The stubborn, strong Wildling that will survive this. I nod at her. *Together*, I think. *We're going to get out of this together.*

Then I continue.

One by one, I break each curved barb, holding her body still with one hand. And when they're all out, I take her in my arms, her blood seeping into my shirt, then move her away from the wall of thorns intent on stabbing her again. We're in the center of the forest, and now I'm beside her, questioning my judgment. She's asked me to leave several times—*stubborn Wildling*—yet here I am, on my knees, still by her side.

"How did this happen?" I ask, because it doesn't make sense. We were searching the same forest together for hours. She walked away for a *few damned minutes*. I've never seen a forest attack a Wildling.

"I tripped," she says.

Liar. Bitterness soaks my tongue. Anger flares inside of me. How can she not trust me when I'm here on my knees, pulling thorns from her bleeding skin and covered in the contents of her stomach? And why lie about something so simple?

She narrows her eyes, the green of her irises brighter than any emerald I've ever seen. "Go, look for whatever the wall is guarding. I'm fine. I can take them out myself."

Her tone is biting.

I scowl at her. “You’re covered in your own vomit.” I reach toward her back again, and she rears away from me, then groans.

“I said I’ll do it myself,” she snaps, as if I’m the one causing her pain, and not *helping her*.

“Are you truly this stubborn?” I demand.

“Are you truly this *overbearing*?” At this, my nostrils flare. “I said no,” she continues. “Now leave.”

I consider it. If she wants me to leave, then fine. Even though everything in me wants to stay, I do as she says. I go back to the forest and look for the heart. I fly past every tree, alert, searching faster than I ever have before.

Then I’m back, crouching next to her.

Her eyes widen—and I must be imagining the flicker in her expression that looks something like *relief*.

It’s gone in an instant. “I told you to go look for—”

“I did. No heart.”

Tears roll down her cheeks. Her face flushes from pain and probably also anger. *All this for nothing*, she must be thinking. Because I’m thinking it too. I have the absurd thought to wipe her tears away.

I have the urge to cradle her in my arms, to burn this entire fucking forest down for hurting her, to fly her back to the castle and demand the best healer on Moon Isle attend to her.

“You can go,” she says, closing her eyes.

Not an order, this time. So, I don’t. I stay.

She looks surprised when she opens her eyes again to find me there. Did she really think I would leave? It makes me wonder if she’s been abandoned while in pain before.

It makes me want to burn anyone who’s ever hurt her alive.

I reach for her again. Her back is going to get infected, if the thorns aren’t taken out. She flinches.

I hold my hands up. She wants to do it herself. Fine. But she doesn’t have to do it alone. “The spines are all yours,” I say, eyeing the larger ones. There are dozens of tiny thorns in her back that she can’t see. She can’t reach them on her own. “I’ll get these smaller ones.” She looks like she won’t agree, like she’s so stubborn that she won’t accept any gods-damned help, so I add, “It’s faster. The sooner this is finished, the sooner we can resume our search.”

This, I hope, she can’t disagree with.

“Fine,” she says, and an ember of surprise ignites within me.

It’s a small gesture. But it’s one of trust. Of cooperation.

I’m gentle. I try not to do anything to make her change her mind, to make her demand I leave again. I don’t want to leave her, here, alone, wincing in pain, bleeding out on this forest floor. I don’t want to leave her at all. She never leaves me, really. She’s always in my damned head. She’s always in my damned *dreams*.

And the way she refuses help . . . the way she assumes I’ll leave her here . . .

It makes me remember that day in Moonling training when I assumed Calder would leave me to die.

It makes me remember the relief of opening my eyes and seeing a hand reaching out, offering aid. Does she have a friend? Does she want one?

She screams out, and this time I wince, as if her pain were truly my own. Her hand is wrapped around a particularly thick barb, right next to her spine.

I can’t imagine the pain. She’s strong. *She’s so fucking strong*. The fact that she’s still *conscious*—

She pulls it out, biting her tongue hard enough to draw blood. I see it dripping from her mouth.

Without thinking, I offer my hand in place of her tongue. “Here,” I say, giving her something to bite on that won’t hurt herself. She accepts without even looking. Then her mouth is on my skin, wet and warm, coating me with her blood. “You’re going to bite your tongue off. I’ve seen it happen before; you have to have something in your mouth for something like—”

She bites down immediately. Hard. Right against my knuckles.

But I don’t feel the pain. No, the opposite. There’s relief in offering her comfort. In being any comfort at all.

She struggles with the last few barbs, her body slumping, then straightening. Stubborn. So stubborn. So strong. Finally, they’re gone, and she collapses against a tree. Only then does she open her eyes and see my hand. It’s covered in both our blood, in bite marks where her teeth pierced my skin.

Her eyes widen, then lift to meet mine.

She’s surprised, and I hate it. I’m gutted she thinks that I wouldn’t give her anything to make her feel better.

But of course, she doesn’t know all the lengths I would go for her. She’s right—I’ve been a miserable wretch around her this entire time.

It’s a defense. A shield I hold between us. I’m cruel to her as a reminder to myself that I should not care. I’m cruel because I want her to hate me—because

if she ever didn't . . . if she ever wanted me a fraction of the ways I want her, I'm not sure I would be able to survive it. Not as king. Not as the person who is supposed to put everyone else above himself.

I grab the canteen of water and begin to heal her wounds. Not as well as the true Moonling healers, but I know for certain she would refuse any aid that isn't my own. She doesn't want the other realms to think she's weak. She's smart. So, it's up to me, and I focus more than I ever have in my life, scraping for every piece of healing power, remembering every bit of training. I close every abrasion, every puncture from the forest's talons, until she stops bleeding.

Later, I realize I never healed my hand.

I sit in bed, staring at the marks of her teeth. They form crescents against my skin. They will heal in time.

I don't do anything to speed it up.



BETTER AIM

“It’s her, isn’t it?” Enya says tentatively. We’re having tea in my mother’s garden. It’s our mothers’ shared birthday. Enya’s mother didn’t know her parents, didn’t know the date she was born, so our mothers picked one to celebrate together, just as they shared almost everything else.

“Who?” I ask, as if I don’t already know.

“The Wildling.”

I frown. “What about her?”

“She’s the reason you’re . . . feeling again?”

I laugh without humor. “Yes, if that feeling is irritation.”

Lie. I bite my teeth against the flash of bitterness. It’s potent, as if my body is reprimanding itself. Enya looks like she can sense it too. Like she has my power. Though after hundreds of years of friendship, she doesn’t need it.

“You are working with her, but these are desperate times. You suspect she is planning against you. She is your enemy,” she tells me, as if I don’t already know. As if she’s reminding me.

“I am aware,” I say through my teeth. My eyes are on my tea.

“I’m worried about you.”

“You should be,” I say. “I’m dying.”

She sighs from across the way. “I’m serious.”

I lift up my arm, where the blue is showing. “So am I.” I take another sip of my tea. “And you . . . are you?”

“Dying soon? No. Not yet.”

The truth of that is sweeter than the honey in my tea. That, at least, is a relief.

“So,” I say, eager to change the subject. “Do you want to help me track down a specter?”

She raises her eyebrows. “Why?”

“The ancient creatures might know where the heart of Lightlark is.”

“Haven’t you tried that before?”

I have. I’ve asked several. “They all said they know of it, but haven’t seen it recently . . . The specter on Star Isle will know whether it’s there or not.” There are too many places with the plants Isla indicated to search in the remaining days of the Centennial. If we can get lucky and choose the right isle—or even eliminate one from consideration—it would help our search.

Enya winces. “I hate that specter.”

“I know,” I say, remembering an ill-fated meeting with her, centuries before. “She’s even harder to find now, if you can believe it.” I take another sip of my tea. “So? Are you in? Or should I ask Zed?”

Enya puts down her cup and grins. “Of course, I’m in.”

I watch the Wildling through a window, from far away, careful to avoid the slivers of sunlight peeking through the clouds.

She’s throwing blades at the wall. She’s angry at something.

I’m angry too.

Hours before, I learned about an attempt on her life . . . by Moonling nobles. Calder was watching them, but their faction has many groups. By the time he learned of the attack in the broken harbor, all that was left were dead bodies, with a message scrawled in blood.

Try harder.

I might laugh at the Wildling’s wit, if I didn’t feel a stab of fear.

The nobles supposedly acted alone. But if Cleo was behind the attempt, she will be tried. This was against the rules. This was exactly the outcome I was trying to avoid by speaking to her.

The Wildling was almost killed.

I think about that, as I watch her throwing her blades. As I feel palpable relief in my bones that the Moonlings failed. For a moment, I wish I could be down there with her, in the sunlight. I wish I could see her eyes under its rays.

Then—*him*. Grimshaw appears, seemingly out of nowhere. I grip the windowsill, burning myself in the process. I lurch backward, cursing.

She launches one of her blades at him, and I mourn the fact that it misses his head by a few inches.

Aim better next time, love, I think.

I can’t hear them. Damn this curse. Damn the fact that I can’t go down there

right now and take her away.

She leaves with him.

I can't follow them, but I'm high enough to see their path. He's taking her in the direction of Wild Isle. Did she ask him to take her there?

Why didn't she ask me?

I wait impatiently for hours by the window, but they don't return. At least, not in the same direction that I can see from this window. As soon as the sun sets, I leave the castle, flying toward Wild Isle, wondering if she's still there, or maybe she returned . . .

There she is. I spot her from above, outside the Place of Mirrors. She's alone. I land near the bridge, before my powers can be muted, and go on foot the rest of the way.

By the time I reach the Place of Mirrors, she's already inside, having left a trail of footprints for me to follow. I enter quietly, slipping to the back of the room. She's too distracted to notice me—she's staring at the back wall. She's trying to open a door.

Interesting. I never knew it was a door. The Place of Mirrors is a place of mystery. I've rarely been back since the Wildlings left.

She seems intent on this one spot. She growls as she tries to get it open. If my powers worked in here, I might help her.

I stay longer than I should, watching from the shadows. Then I go to Star Isle, to meet the specter.

It took days for Enya and me to find her lurking in a pile of ancient ruins. It took even longer to lure her out of hiding.

She wouldn't appear with Enya there, because of what happened last time. Enya just rolled her eyes and wished me good luck.

Today, I'm alone. I wait in the center of the ruins, thinking of Isla. Thinking of her trying, with all her might, to get that hidden door open.

The air goes cold.

"King." The specter's voice is like a bell, cutting a sharp melody through my mind. I turn to find her appearing from a column. She looks just like a normal woman—save for the glow of her skin, and her hair, floating around her as if underwater. She circles around me, far too close for comfort, gray eyes wide and glimmering with excitement. The specter has a strange fascination with me. I've never understood it and have avoided her at all costs. But for this, she can be useful.

She reaches out toward me, and I take step back. I get right to the point. "Do

you know whether or not the heart of Lightlark is on Star Isle?”

She pouts at me, as if upset that I’m not just here for lively conversation. Then, after a long while, she finally says, “Yes.”

Truth.

I step forward. A wicked smile curves across her pale face. My desperation seems to please her. I don’t give a damn. “I’ll give you anything. Riches. Information . . .”

That makes her laugh. “What would I do with riches? With books? No. I only want one thing. One thing, and I will give you what you ask for.”

“What is it?”

“I want to walk in a body.”

A chill rakes through me. “No.”

She’s undeterred. “For just a few moments.”

I think about the heart. About how desperately I need to find it. “Fine,” I utter with difficulty. I outstretch my arms, knowing for certain I’m going to regret this.

She laughs again, the sound high-pitched, echoing through the vaulted ruins. “No, no. You miss the point completely . . . I don’t want *your skin*. I want to wear another’s.”

I wonder if any of my friends would ever consider it. Definitely not Enya. “I’ll see—”

She narrows her eyes. “Not just anyone’s skin, King. I want to wear the skin of the most beautiful woman on this island. The most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen.” She blinks her lashes at me. “*That’s* who I want. No one less.”

I grind my teeth, wishing I hadn’t immediately pictured someone. Wishing I could lie and say I don’t know anyone worthy of the title.

But I do.

The Wildling, is, objectively, beautiful. I see how others look at her. Admire her. I’ve been admiring her like it’s my sole purpose in life.

The specter will be pleased with her.

“Fine,” I agree, knowing the Wildling will absolutely *despise* this. It will be her choice, of course.

I hope she is as desperate as I am to break these curses.



HAUNTED

Zed has a message for me. He catches me in the hall, on my way to Isla's door. "The Wildling," he says. "She was spotted with Grim . . . at the abbey."

My very marrow goes cold. "Doing what?"

"I'm not sure. They were seen running inside, out of the rain."

By now she's seen him several times. She isn't working with him, so why is he seeking her out? Why is she letting him?

She has to know what he is. She has to know his reputation.

I knock on her door, more forcefully than necessary, anger heating my skin. She opens it immediately, annoyance and fury written on her face at the sight of me. Normally I'd be amused. But tonight, I'm annoyed too. Especially when I see her crown.

The dent I made on her crown has been smoothed away.

I know exactly by who.

"It's been eight days," she says, with bite.

Could I be imagining it? Has she . . . missed me?

I bury that hope down. No. She despises me. It's clear with every interaction. Her anger is because she surely thinks I'm working without her. It's what I would assume, if the roles were reversed.

I force my voice to be emotionless. Matter of fact. She knows I was seeking out the ancient creature. "It took five to find her. Two to coax her out of hiding. One to make a deal."

Isla eyes me warily, then seems to accept this.

We walk to Star Isle in silence. I'm surprised to discover I miss her questions. I never thought I would *want* to talk to her. She says nothing until we reach the ruins, and it only deepens my irritation.

Talk to me, I want to say. Me, instead of him.

Because I missed you too.

But she doesn't say a word, and I'm more convinced than ever that this pointless fascination is one-sided.

The specter doesn't waste a moment before telling Isla exactly the deal I made.

"*What?*" Isla is furious. Expectedly so. But her annoyance doesn't bring me the amusement I anticipated. Not at all. "Why not yours?"

"I offered. But she requested . . . something specific." Only now do I regret making this deal.

"The most beautiful girl on the island, that's what I requested," the floating woman says, studying Isla. "And you're *perfect*."

I suddenly wish the specter was alive, so I could kill her.

Isla looks horrified. I'm grateful she doesn't linger on the fact that I clearly find her beautiful. "Absolutely not. How do I know she won't stay in there?" She turns to me. "That you're not in love with her and just want a body for her to inhabit for eternity?" I give her a look that I hope sums up exactly what I think of that theory. "Well?" she asks anyway.

"Do you trust me?"

The answer explodes out of her. "No! You didn't even tell me about this until you summoned her!"

That was perhaps not the best approach, I admit. I expected her to be agitated, but she looks absolutely murderous. Which, I realize, is a completely appropriate reaction to finding out one's body has been bartered. But we don't have time to waste. And I always intended for it to be her choice.

I sigh. "What will it take?"

She looks ready to scream at me again, but I watch her pause. Consider. And because I know her by now, I know—

She's plotting something. She *wants* something.

Finally, she says, "Take me to the Sun Isle library. Let me look inside. Alone."

There it is. The closest she'll come to admitting her plan. Libraries. She's going after each isle's *libraries*. The pattern is clear. I've watched her do it.

"Why?" I ask, on the off chance she'll tell me.

"I like books. I want to see what your isle has to offer."

Truth followed by a lie, searing the end of my tongue. *Little liar.* I wish I could tell her I know she's lying. *That* would be an expression I'd pay to see on her face.

I realize all at once that giving her what she wants means potentially being let in on her plan.

“Fine.” It shocks her. She expected a fight.

I expected a fight.

Isla takes a long breath to ready herself. Then, excitement glimmering in her eyes, the specter steps into Isla.

Her body shifts almost imperceptibly, then settles. She closes her eyes. When she opens them again, Isla’s glare has turned into something more . . . intimate. She blinks, and there’s a flash of green—

But it’s not at all the same.

Because Isla Crown has never looked at me this way in her life. She has never looked at me like she wants me.

“King. So, this is your taste?” It’s her voice, but it isn’t her. The specter uses Isla’s hands to touch Isla, running them down her body appraisingly.

“Don’t touch her,” I growl, and the specter smiles, then drops Isla’s hands by her sides.

“Very well,” she says. “Can I touch you?”

She takes a step forward, and I stand my ground.

“You said I have a few moments. You didn’t say what I couldn’t do, now did you?”

I give her a warning look, and she just laughs. “Come now. I see how you look at her . . . you want this, don’t you?”

She steps into me, and I stiffen.

She tilts her head, brown hair falling along her face, and then she bites her lip. “You want to kiss her, don’t you?” she asks, and I swallow.

“You’ve thought about it, haven’t you?”

I don’t say anything, because I’m not a liar.

She smiles knowingly. “You’ve thought about a *lot*, right? You’re ashamed by how much you’ve thought about her.”

My glare is scathing, and she laughs. Her hands slide up my chest, up to my hair. She weaves her fingers through, pulls—

And the specter is right. I have imagined this. Far too many times. But with *Isla*. And though this is her form . . . it’s not her. Not really.

I know for certain, because I *know* her. I know the way she breathes, the way she frowns, the way she would never be biting her lip for this long, never be standing so precariously on her toes. She’s been trained as a fighter, even when she’s clumsy, you can see the shadow of that training, of that mastery of her

body. It's missing now.

The specter leans forward. Isla's face is right in front of mine, close enough that I can count the flecks of gold in her green eyes.

Her lips are almost against mine. Just a whisper away. Just like I've dreamed.

"*That's enough*," I growl.

Isla blinks, and I know it's her. I know it's her because her eyes widen, she gasps a little, and I feel it against my mouth.

Then she startles, nearly falling backward, before I catch her.

The specter tells us the heart is not on Star Isle.

An isle off our list. Time is dwindling. We'll need to figure out other ways to eliminate places to look.

I should be thinking of ideas. But as we walk back toward the bridge, I wonder if Isla could ever want to touch me like the specter did.

If there was ever any chance of that, it's ruined minutes later, when Isla assumes we're going straight to the Sun Isle library, and I tell her that she's not going there any time soon.

When I tell her she should have been more specific with her request. Like an ass.

And I know this is good, and neither of us should have any sort of feelings for each other, but a part of me withers, seeing her look upon me like I'm a traitor.

Her voice shakes with anger, as she says, "You . . . you are a selfcentered, heartless wretch."

She's looking at me as if I am *scum*.

And for some reason, that one look has me furious. Frustrated. A snap away from losing my sanity.

She is making me lose my mind. And perhaps that's been her strategy this whole time.

"Is this your plan, Wildling?" I demand, not able to keep this in me any longer. "To try to win my heart by tormenting me?" It was the plan of all her ancestors before her. It must be hers. These ridiculous, distracting, ruinous thoughts must be her doing. I search her eyes, truly wondering. Because none of this makes sense. I'm desperate, desperate to understand.

All she does is laugh. She laughs and laughs. Then her own anger seems to find her again, because she steps up to me and says, very slowly, "I have absolutely no interest in you whatsoever, *King*."

I am shocked into silence, because she is telling the truth.

I've never hated sweetness more.

"Then what *are* you interested in, Wildling?" I demand, needing to know. Needing to understand *something* in this sea of uncertainty. "Why do you want access to my library? What are you looking for?"

She says nothing.

I take a step closer. "I have watched you. You are a chameleon, becoming everything everyone wants you to be, all the time. Except around *me*—you don't seem to give a damn what I think of you." I shake my head.

"The lands I have been entrusted with are dying. *I* am dying. I will do anything it takes to break these curses. You, or whatever you are planning, will not keep me from that end." I mean it. *I need to mean it.* I look down at her, as if her truth could be written across her skin. "So, I will ask you again. What do you want, Wildling?"

I wish I could order her to answer. I wish I could order *myself* not to be so tied to her answer. She says nothing. She just leaves in a rage, saying she's *done*. Done with me.

But I'm not done with her.

Not even close.

"Why was the Wildling ruler in our library?" Enya asks, days later.

"Because I gave her access," I grumble. I truly was going to refuse her. I was going to follow Enya's advice and go against my morals. Be a true ass.

But in the end, I couldn't.

"You did what?"

I say nothing.

"The Wildling is almost certainly working against you," Zed reminds me.

"I know."

"She was likely looking for something that will hurt you."

"I know."

"You're being an idiot."

I shift in my seat. "I know. She needs to trust me." I look around at them. "We all did not have the best first meetings, now did we?"

They go silent. Then Enya opens her mouth, and I shoot her a look. "We met when we were babies," I say. "That doesn't count. Though I do remember you locking me into multiple closets as soon as you learned to walk." At this, she rolls her eyes.

"So, you're saying she could be . . . a friend?" Calder says.

I run my hand down my face. “I’m exhausted. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Finally, we agree on something,” Zed says, and I give him a look.

I don’t know if Isla is a friend or enemy. Right now, we’re not even partners anymore. She meant it when she said she didn’t want to work together. And I can’t blame her.

I can only hope that offering her an olive branch will be enough.



THE BALL

I think I've lost the ability to breathe.

Isla Crown is walking down the stairs in a dress made entirely of leaves, and I can't do anything but watch her. Some things are just meant to be admired, and she is above all of them.

I feel hotter than usual, feverish. Aware of her every movement, as if she's the sun itself, and I'm just an orbiting planet.

I'm watching her because I'm suspicious, I tell myself. I'm waiting for her to show me her true colors.

Unsurprisingly, I taste bitterness.

She's the key to finding the heart. That's why I care. That's why I want to trace her movements, and the shape of her dress. More bitterness. I hate lying, yet suddenly I'm lying to myself all the time. Her fault. She is maddening and bewitching.

She has turned me into a damned *liar*.

"Thirsty?" Zed asks as he approaches, his eyes on the goblet of wine I've just drained. His eyes go from mine to Isla, and he forms a mischievous smile.

"Don't you have a perimeter to guard?" I snap. Instead of being annoyed at my tone, he looks delighted.

"Apologies for blocking your view," he teases, before stepping away.

My hand curls tighter around the empty goblet. A sliver of pain shoots down my arm, a reminder of how far the blue mark has spread.

I shouldn't be here, drinking wine from a goblet, staring at a woman who has no idea I look at her so closely. But I can't help it.

Five centuries of darkness. No sunlight in sight. The fire in my chest withered and died, and only now has an ember again caught flame.

An ember for her, the Wildling who hates me.

She turns, and her eyes find mine. I swallow.

I can't deny the searing desire in my chest as our gazes lock. That ember, for a moment, becomes a towering flame that spreads through my limbs and down my stomach, to the core of me.

I haven't even touched you, I think.

But all my thoughts are about you.

I don't want to look away. If anything, I want to look closer. I want to learn her like a poem. Unravel her like a riddle. I want to solve her like a problem. I want to become the world's foremost expert on her.

A blush spreads across her cheeks, as if she could possibly hear my thoughts, my wants. It makes me want to stride across the room and take her out of it. It makes me want to yell at her, be angry at her for turning me into a blustering, obsessive fool. It makes me want to whisper every single one of my truths across her skin.

Instead, I simply nod at her, then take another swig of wine, hoping it will steady my heart's erratic rhythm.

It doesn't. Neither does distraction. My mind is not on any of the conversations unfolding around me. It's not on the feast, spread just feet away. It's not on the music. It's on a Wildling who has slipped from my line of sight.

She's gone. Has she left? I should not care. I should not go looking for her.

But what if she's in danger? She's my partner again, thanks to the conversation we had last night, mending things. She's crucial to my plan. Her safety is important to my interests. That's the only reason I care.

Bitterness fills my mouth again.

The Wildling realm is critical. It needs a ruler that isn't buried beneath Nightshade. *That's* why I care.

Bitter poison.

My hands make fists. Fine. I care about *her*, I finally admit to myself. *I fucking care.*

Sweetness.

The doors crash open as I follow her. The warriors standing at attention there look surprised, but none question me, and for once, I am grateful I am king. I drain my goblet, then carelessly set it on a ledge, next to an ancient sculpture.

She couldn't have gone far. I check room after room, growing increasingly desperate. Increasingly worried. Then I find her.

I find *them*. They are dancing.

Isla and Grim.

Alone.

And, just like that, the flame in my chest withers and dies. I back out of the room before either of them can notice my presence.

I return to the ballroom, and suddenly everything feels different. She wasn't lying to me before, when she said she wasn't going to tell Grim about our plans. I know that. Perhaps they started working together afterward.

Perhaps . . . they are not working together at all and simply enjoy each other's company.

That's worse. So much worse, I think, than if they were simply plotting against me.

Because I care about her . . . and she cares about him.

I have never been jealous of the Nightshade. Not ever. Not until I saw him dance with her.

"What happened?" Calder asks lightheartedly, approaching me while still keeping an eye on the ball.

"Nothing happened. Why?" I demand, snarling at the bitterness on my tongue.

He lifts his eyebrows.

"You look more insufferable than usual," Zed observes, sidling up to us after having completed another lap of the perimeter. "Also, I thought you didn't lie?"

I glare at my friends and drain another goblet of wine.

Enya peers at the empty chalice, completing our group. "I haven't seen you drink this much in centuries."

"Yet he maintains *nothing* is wrong," Zed says wickedly.

Enya looks concerned. "What—"

We all notice when Grim and Isla walk into the ballroom. They might as well be hand in hand, the way they look at each other. This room might as well be on fire for how my anger is heating it.

The Nightshade stares at someone in the crowd, someone I can't see. Then, the group shifts, and I see silver. Celeste? The Starling? Before I can wonder too much about it, Grim catches my gaze. Instead of looking pleased, he looks . . . concerned.

I'm a moment from setting his cape aflame before he murmurs something to Isla, then slips out of the room.

"Where do you think he's going?" Enya shifts, peering around a pillar that's blocking her view of Grim.

"Should I follow?" Zed asks.

I nod almost imperceptibly, and the Skyling is gone.

I watch as Celeste approaches Isla. They seem to be becoming friends. I can't hear their conversation, but it seems intense. Is the Starling concerned about Grim? Suspicious of him? Is that why he left after catching her gaze?

Suddenly, I'm grateful for the Starling's presence. Suddenly, I could kiss her fucking feet. I take a step forward. Maybe I can hear what they're saying. Maybe

The room lurches.

Then, it shatters.

And Isla is gone. *Gone.*

Before I can find her, the ground beneath my feet parts, and Enya pulls me out of the way before it caves in completely.

The castle is shaking. It feels like the entire world is shaking. I meet Enya's fiery gaze. "Grim," she says, voice acidic. "It has to be Grim." Zed went after him. My heart hammers in my chest. Is the Skyling okay?

The ceiling crumbles and screams echo through the hall. I shoot my hand out to create a Starling shield, to keep more of it from falling, but the blue sears into my veins, my diminishing power constricting. The shield fractures. It won't hold.

"Go, save as many as you can," I order. Enya nods, and I pull her back, my voice breathless. "Do you—"

She shakes her head. "No. Not today," she says, and then she leaps away to pull a group of Sunlings out of the room. Her flames create ropes across the ceiling, strengthening the hold of my shield, keeping the rest of it from giving way.

The floor is coated in blood.

I fly across the room in a burst, taking people with me, carrying them to the side, while simultaneously trying to close the hole that's formed in its center. Every time I mend something, it breaks. Stone shatters. Shards of ceiling fall through the cracks of my power. Ceaseless tremors rattle the castle down to its very foundation.

Screams. People being crushed all around me. Cries for help.

Sharp pain shoots down my side, and I crash, sliding against the remaining marble.

My shield disintegrates. The ceiling collapses. I reach for my power.

But my skin is on fire. It's tearing, like I am one big seam, one scar, ripping open. The pain is blinding, all-encompassing. My fingers dig into the floor,

trying to stop the shaking of the castle, trying to stop the tremors. I'm the only one who can stop this. I have to stop this.

But I'm not strong enough.

I hear my father in my head.

Weak. Pathetic. Worthless.

Maybe he's right. Here I am, weak and dying. Not even able to protect my own people.

Then I hear something else.

My name. It's a blade through the screams and voices in my head.

That voice. I would know it anywhere. I wrench my eyes open and there she is, kneeling in front of me the same way I knelt in front of her, in the forest, when she was covered in thorns. I don't look at her for long. If I do, I might never stop. I might let this entire room fall around us just to stare at my favorite color one last time before I die.

She won't let me die, apparently.

She grabs my shoulders and yells right into my face, "Get up! People are dying. They need you!"

It's true. Still, I can't find the will to keep trying. I'm not strong enough. And I'm tired. So very tired. She should go. She should save herself.

She's not moving. She's not running. She's not leaving me here. Against my will, my gaze slowly raises and meets hers again.

Green. Searing, fiery green, like a world on fire.

Pain strikes me like lightning again, and I growl, my fingers digging into the stone.

Then she says a word I never imagined would leave her lips, not directed toward me, anyway. "*Please*," she says.

"*Leave*," I say through gritted teeth. I'm not as strong as she thinks I am. If I die . . . maybe she won't. She's Wildling; she isn't connected to this land as much as the other realms. Maybe when the island is rubble at the bottom of the sea, some shred of beauty will have survived.

She doesn't move a muscle.

No. She's not going anywhere. I can see that in the frustrated curl of her lip. With a growl, she takes my shirt in her fists and shoves me back with surprising strength, snapping me out of my numb trance.

Then she says, "You might be dying, but you're not dead yet, you miserable wretch, now get up and do something before you allow your brother's sacrifice and everything we all have lost to be for nothing."

My brother. Egan. He was always the better between us. He deserved to live. Not me. Pain lances through me.

Then it's replaced by something even more powerful. Love.

Even after what he did, I never stopped loving him. Even after centuries, I never forgot my mother. My love for my friends never wavered. My love for this place . . . this island that holds all my memories, the best and worst of them, is endless.

I love my land. I love my people. It glows within me in a flame my mother taught me to find. I groan as I reach for it, fumbling through the darkness and pain. I clutch it in my hands and let it shoot through my blood. Using emotions to fuel power is reckless. Dangerous. But I don't have a choice. Not anymore. Not when this island is breaking around me.

For them—for them I will find my fire. Every time.

Until I am all but extinguished.

I dig my hands into the marble and force out every ounce of power I never should have gotten, every beautiful and painful memory with my family, everything I do and don't deserve, until the room finally goes still.

Then, all I see is darkness.

“He's breathing.”

Enya's arms are wrapped around me, squeezing. Her red hair is in my face. Her heart is racing against my skin.

“I won't be, if you keep holding me so tightly,” I manage to croak, and her laugh is mixed with a relieved sob. She pulls back and I blink, seeing the red rimming her eyes. She doesn't cry. Not ever.

“Was it really that close?” I ask.

Even Zed is solemn. “You have no idea. For a moment—for a moment we didn't think you were breathing.”

It was dangerous, using emotions. We aren't supposed to. It's too easy to let your entire power source drain, killing you. I never would have even attempted it, if I believed there was any other way to stop the tremors.

“Grim did this,” I say.

“He didn't.” Zed.

My eyes shift to his. They urge him to explain.

“I was watching him the entire time, Oro. He didn't use his powers.”

I shake my head. Grimshaw can create illusions; his powers are greater than we can imagine. “How do you know?”

Zed scowls. “Because he caught me following him and was a moment from putting his blade through my chest, when we felt the castle trembling.” I curse, and Zed lifts a shoulder. “He—he went pale. He *ran* toward the ballroom like a madman. So did I.”

He was worried about Isla. I know it for certain. He cares for her in a way I believed impossible.

Until I felt those kinds of feelings too.

Now, I’m not sure if anything is truly impossible anymore.

If he cares for her . . . then he wouldn’t have risked her life to destroy the castle. “So, who did this?”

Calder looks pensive. “Maybe no one did. Maybe . . . the island is breaking. Dying, just like you are.”

That would explain the pain. I felt like my skin was ripping open, just like the land itself.

“We need to end these curses,” I say. “Now. Before the hundred days are over.”

Egan and the rest of the rulers sacrificed themselves to give us a chance to save this island and the realms.

No one is coming to save us, I know.

It’s up to us to save ourselves.



CROWNS AND CAGES

The island is in ruins. It wasn't just the castle that was affected during the tremors.

We've had burials for those lost. I've been in endless meetings, panic rising. But the moment I see her, my mind quiets. It's like I'm back on that beach I haven't visited in centuries.

She looks concerned. "Are you okay?" she asks, her eyes sweeping down my body, and why does that make me feel like I can't breathe?

No. I'm not okay. None of us are. But I don't tell her that. Instead, I give her a sharp answer, and that makes her frown. I tell her that we must visit Remlar, yet another ancient creature who could know where the heart is. One I had hoped we wouldn't have to deal with.

She bites her lip in focus.

"What are you thinking?" I ask. I'd give anything to be let into that mind for even a moment.

She looks surprised. I suppose she should be—it's not like I've typically asked her opinion on any of our plans. Perhaps I should. She's smart. Capable. Her tone is steady. "What if we let them capture me? This ancient creature and his people? You said they hate Wildlings, right?"

Fuck no. That's my immediate reaction. But what I say is: "Why would we do that?"

She shrugs. "You said it's unlikely he'll agree to see you. We're short on time. We'll force him to have an audience with you."

". . . By using yourself as bait."

She nods.

I don't want to admit that it's a good plan. Still . . . I don't like it. Isla is right. The ancient creatures do hate Wildlings. Remlar and his people hate me too.

They think I abandoned them, after the curses. And maybe . . . maybe I did. So many groups were suffering. We've tried to help everyone . . . but it's meant no one has felt completely taken care of.

"You would put yourself at risk?" I ask.

She lifts a shoulder. "It seems like we're all at risk, if we don't find out where the heart is."

All at risk. She isn't just talking about her own realm. I can see in her conviction that she cares about this island, even though it's done nothing but fight her this entire time.

She's brave. Foolish . . . but brave.

"Fine."

Nothing prepares me to see the Wildling captured, on her knees, with a blade pointed at her throat.

My instinct is to burn the hive and everyone except for her to ash. My heart hammers. My fists curl.

I care.

A sword is at my throat before I can make a move.

Remlar clicks his tongue. "A move, *King*, and we'll see just how easily you can die like the rest of us."

Isla looks panic-stricken. I know she isn't just worried about the island. She's looking at *me*. I stare back, as if finally seeing her.

My eyes are locked on Isla, so I'm not listening to Remlar when his sword slices across my throat.

Pain lances through me like poison.

All I hear is Isla's gasp. Then, I see her reach for her dagger, as if that is also instinct. I watch her throw it across the air with perfect aim, just like she did that day at the demonstration. It cuts through the air, aimed right at Remlar's heart.

She looks shocked, angry, *worried*, even. She's looking at *me*.

She's looking at me like perhaps she cares a little too.

I lift a hand, and the dagger stills right before meeting flesh. We can't kill him. We need his information.

But Remlar is stubborn. He *wants something* in exchange. His own blade didn't cut me deeply, but I feel blood running down my throat. I'm losing too much of it.

"I want the Wildling," he says.

I see black.

One moment, I'm on the other side of the hive, and the next, I'm in front of Remlar, holding him by the neck, my hand coated in flames.

I'm going to kill him. I'm going to enjoy it.

I don't know why I feel so angry, so *possessive*, because she does not belong to me. She does not belong to *anyone* but herself. But this fury is like a firestorm, burning everything in its path.

My flames dance in Remlar's eyes as he says, "I want the Wildling to *visit me*. Once this is all over."

Once this is all over. I allow a spark of hope to form, that there is light at the end of all this. That the curses can truly be broken.

Still, the idea of Isla ever coming back here fills me with rage.

Isla steps forward before I can speak another word. She *agrees*. Why?

I'm breathing too quickly. I'm bleeding too much. I barely hear Remlar tell us something invaluable—that the heart of Lightlark blooms only where darkness meets light.

I know what he means immediately. A place where Lightlark and remnants of Nightshade's influence converge. There are only a few places like that left.

Close. We are so very close to the end of all this suffering.

The hive is spinning as we leave. The world is starting to slip beneath me. I can't feel my hands, or my legs. Somehow, I stumble to the edge of the wooden structure.

"A plan," I say to myself, wondering if the words make it out of my mouth. "We have a plan."

I hear my name. Or maybe I'm imagining it.

There's no way Isla is saying my name in my ear as we fly over the forest. There's no way her voice—*that voice*—is filled with concern.

"*Oro*."

It happens again. Am I dreaming? I can hardly see. I can hardly get a full breath. My head feels strange.

I glance at her to see if this could possibly be real, and there she is. Just inches from my face. Her green eyes are wide.

I want to fall into them, I want to fall into this moment, I want to fall into a world where we could possibly work together, I want to fall for her completely.

We hit the trees, and the dream takes over.

Green eyes, crinkling at the edges as Isla smiles. She's lying on the golden sand. Drops of water slide down her heated skin. I run my mouth along her shoulder,

and she makes a sound I've never heard before. I want to make it happen again.

She's wearing a dress with barely any fabric, and it's *wet*, and it feels wrong to look, to study her this closely, but then she takes my hands and guides them down her body.

"Oro," she says.

Isla.

"Oro," she gasps, as my lips trail down her neck.

Isla.

"Oro," she pants into my ear.

Isla.

"ORO."

I blink my eyes open, and Isla isn't underneath me anymore. She's on the other side of a dark cave.

I swallow, wincing as the pain of the last few hours crashes into me. Remlar cutting my throat. Isla and I flying.

Falling.

I tense and look over at her again. Is she hurt?

No. The blood I smell is only mine.

I try to put the pieces together, as I reach up to touch my throat. The skin is healed.

I vaguely remember the cold of a stream . . . How did we get there? Did she . . . did she drag me?

Did she drag us *here*?

My eyes shift quickly to the mouth of the cave, where sunlight spills in, just feet away. *Daytime.*

It's been hours. The sun would have killed me. Yet here I am, in this cave. Facing a woman who might still be my enemy.

"You saved me," I say, frowning.

She gives me a biting look. "I'm not as weak as you think I am."

Does she think I'm shocked that she *could* save me? No. I'm not. I'm shocked that she did it with such care. "I never thought you were weak," I say, sweetness filling my mouth.

She looks surprised to hear that. I suppose I haven't always been the most complimentary when it comes to her. Or anyone.

But I could be. I could be many things, if she would let me.

"Well, now we're even, I suppose," I say, remembering that day on the balcony, when I leaped into the water after her. When all I knew about Isla

Crown was her voice, stuck in my head like a curse.

"I suppose we are," she replies.

We just sit, and stare at each other. I'm stuck here until the sun sets. But she isn't. "You should go," I say, wanting the opposite. I don't want to keep her here. I don't want to be more of a burden on her than I already have been. I expect her to go.

Instead, she says something that shocks me into silence: "I'll wait with you." To pass the time, she proposes a game.

I hate any game that isn't fireball. "A game," I say, flatly.

She isn't deterred by my attitude. And why can't I be fucking pleasant for a moment? Why do I have to be mean, like I'm hoping to scare her off, like I'm afraid of caring more than I already do?

"Questions, back and forth. I'll answer one. And then you will. Honestly." I want to laugh at that word. *Honestly*. As if Isla Crown has been completely honest with me even a day, since we've been working together.

So that's it. That's the ulterior motive. The reason she has decided to stay. She wants information. She knows I am quite literally a captive audience here. I frown, remembering Grim saying something similar, centuries before . . .

I bury the thought of him.

Fine. Let's see what she's so interested in. Let's see if Isla Crown is capable of being *honest*.

"Fine, Wildling. You start."

She sits up, excited, and I wait, wondering what she'll ask me. Wondering if agreeing to this was a mistake.

Her first question is ridiculous. "Be honest—do you ever tire of wearing gold?"

I give her a look. "Yes, Wildling. Though I can wear blue, white, or silver if I choose." I did for years, during training.

"Your turn."

I want to ask her so many questions, we would spend days locked in this cave. Some are strategic. Others . . . I shouldn't be so interested in.

She started small. Easy. So do I. "What is your life like, back in the Wildling newland?"

She blinks, surprised. She seems shocked that I would care about her life outside of the Centennial.

I'm shocked that I care about her life outside the Centennial.

"It's . . ." At the last moment, she closes her mouth. Has she decided to

change her words? Give me yet another lie? She shifts on the ground. I see her narrow her eyes, as though she's deciding something. Then she says, "It's awful."

I was ready for minutes of nonstop poison, but sweetness fills my mouth. A special sweetness. One I savor. Isla's truths taste different. Or at least, they do now. They taste sweeter than anyone else's, like a fruit I've been craving for longer than I care to admit.

She continues, and I'm captivated, unable to do anything but hope she never lies to me again. "I love my guardians—they're my only family. But—" She squints. "Have you ever felt like a bird in a cage?"

Constantly.

I'm trapped inside during the day, because of my curse. My crown is its own cage. I live solely for duty. My wants don't matter. My very life is tied to this island.

I've never heard anyone phrase it that way, I've never had anyone who could truly understand, but yes. "Every day for the last five hundred years," I tell her.

Questions rise to the surface of my mind. I savor these moments like sand running through my fingers, I want to ask her anything I can while she's being honest, because it's like being let into her mind, even for just a moment. It's what I've wanted for weeks now. To just know what *she's thinking*. To just know . . . *her*.

"Who trapped you?" I ask, even though it isn't my turn. It's the wrong thing to say. She winces as if the question hurt her, and I curse it, and myself.

"Not *trapped* . . . just . . . protected," she says, and it isn't quite a lie. It isn't quite the truth either. She asks another question. "Have you ever been in love?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Kings of Lightlark do not fall in love. It makes us vulnerable. Our power becomes unprotected." I look over at her, knowing it's something we have in common. "I suppose we are similar in that regard . . . in our inability to have that."

Her curse means she can't fall in love. It would be a death sentence to whoever she is with. Is that why she wants to break it? The thought pierces right through my skull. Is she . . . falling in love with someone?

With someone *else*?

"Do you think it's possible for a ruler to love another ruler?" she asks. "Truly, without any agenda?"

I'm right . . . she *is* falling in love. And I know with who. My stomach sinks. I feel bitterness, even though she hasn't lied to me.

"No," I say, meaning it, because I've yet to see a selfless love between rulers in my long life. "Not truly."

Part of her seems to wither. "So, your brother really wasn't in love with his bride-to-be?"

The topic of my brother upends various emotions, and I bury them deep. I work hard to make my tone casual, even though this is a sore topic. "Egan loved Aurora. But not in that way." In the years of their engagement, they became close friends. Confidants. But he never loved her, not the way she wanted him to.

Though I suppose he *did* love another ruler . . .

I wasn't around them enough to see if it was true love, without an agenda. How could it be? Rulers have to think of their realms. I meant what I said to her. True, selfless love between rulers doesn't exist. It can't. I briefly wonder if I'm trying to convince myself of the fact . . . or if I truly believe it.

"How would you know?" she asks.

I meet her gaze then. It's easy to know if love is true. For rulers . . . there is a sure way. "They didn't share abilities." She looks even more deflated, and I hate that my words had that effect on her . . . even though they were the truth.

"Your turn," she says.

My chest feels tight. Around her, I forget my crown, but her words force me to remember my own realm. My *own* duties. And the fact that my partner seems to be falling in love with my greatest enemy.

Could she truly be having these feelings so soon? Could he really care about her, when he's told me himself that he doesn't care about *anything or anyone*?

I must know.

"Did you know Grim prior to the Centennial?"

"No."

Truth.

She's telling the truth. But it doesn't make sense.

She rolls her eyes, as if sensing my turmoil. "I'm not working with him against you, don't worry."

Truth. Pure, sweet truth.

What else could I ask for? Her words are firm and specific. She isn't working with him. She isn't working with him against *me*. I feel a surge of relief and surprise.

She continues. "What's your favorite part of Lightlark?"

I don't know if it's her unexpected honesty, all the blood loss, the relief that she's fully confirmed she still isn't working with Grim, or the fact that I just had that strange dream, but I admit something I have only ever told Enya.

"There's this secluded stretch of beach on Sun Isle, along a cliff, with giant coals in the water that sizzle when the sea hits them. The sea is a strange shade there . . . dark green."

I look at her, and I don't know what compels me to say the next words, but I do. "The color of your eyes." My favorite color.

But my favorite color is not just green—it's *her* green.

The green of reawakening. Of growing. Of beginning again. Looking into her eyes feels like taking a deep breath after being underwater. Like finally seeing an oasis in a desert. Like discovering stars in darkness.

Her eyes are hope, in despair. A sun, through the night.

Eyes full of summer, even in the dead of winter.

"Sounds beautiful," she says.

Yes, I think, looking right at her. *Unbelievably beautiful.*

"Your singing," I say.

She seems surprised. "What about it?" I shrug, wanting to know this about her. Something, maybe, she's never talked to anyone else about.

"Tell me about it."

Tell me everything, I want to say. I've never wanted to know so much about anyone before. I've never cared enough to ask.

And if this world was not so cruel, if the weight of it did not fall onto our shoulders, I would be honored to spend every day undergoing the unmatched and eternal task of getting to know you.

She answers, and the sweetness returns. "It's calming to me. Something I was born being good at, without really trying."

"Like swordplay?" I ask, watching our game become a conversation. Feeling the lines between us fading.

"No. That was hard. I wasn't naturally good at it, not like the singing. It used to frustrate me to no end . . . Terra, my fighting instructor, would scold me for my impatience constantly."

I try to imagine it. Isla as a child, training.

"So, I practiced. A lot. Every day, all day, all the time. Until the sword was weightless in my hand. Until it was part of me, just as much as my voice was. I *forced* it to be."

I can see the fire in her heart, similar to mine. Fuel to prove something—

most of all—to herself. I wonder if she knows how rare it is to care so deeply. I wonder if she knows how long I’ve cared about nothing at all. Nothing beyond my duty.

Nothing else until now.

We watch each other. Could she ever find my face as interesting as I find hers? Could she want to know about me the way I constantly want to discover her?

She swallows. Her mouth tightens, and I know her enough to see the shift. The levity hardening into seriousness. It’s coming. The question she wanted to ask from the start, the reason she suggested this game in the first place.

For even though I want to ask her a thousand questions that have nothing to do with this game, she does not see me as anything beyond a means to an end.

“Is there a relic on the island that can break any bond? That can break the curses of the ones that wield it?”

So that’s what she’s been looking for, in these libraries. A relic.

One that breaks curses? She’s been looking for something that doesn’t exist. “No. If there was, I would have found a way to use it.”

She frowns. Looks away.

“Is that what you were searching for?” I ask, wanting to confirm it.

She nods.

She’s clearly gotten the answer she was looking for—though it hasn’t seemed to please her. She doesn’t need to ask anything else.

But then she says, “How long have you been able to gild?”

I blink. I’m torn between the surprise that she wants to keep playing, and the fact that her question is the last thing in the world I want to talk about.

With her, though, through these weeks . . . I have talked about hard things. We have done hard things, together. This is just one more.

“Since I was a child,” I tell her, amazed I can get the words out. For centuries, I’ve avoided all conversations about it, shame and guilt nearly eating me alive. Not now though. Not in front of this Wildling who feels so deeply, who is so afraid all the time, yet still shows up every day and *fights*. It’s that fight in her, that flame, that I had nearly forgotten. “I was told to hide it,” I say, thinking about my mother. Thinking about how she taught me to hide from my father anything I didn’t want used against me. Then, there was that fateful, terrible time that I did it by accident. There was no hiding that.

I tell her something else. Something unprompted, but for some reason, I want her to know about my family. I want her to know part of what made me. “Egan

was the eldest. The heir. He was supposed to be the strongest.”

“But he couldn’t gild,” she says, filling in a blank.

I nod.

“So why now? Why show everyone?”

I tell her what I told Enya. “I figure I’m dying. Might as well share all my secrets.”

The words are casual, but inside, dread stirs again. Remlar’s blade shouldn’t have injured me so much. I shouldn’t have passed out flying. I should have been able to have the strength, at least, to bring myself to water.

I’m growing weaker. My near inability to stop the tremors at the ball proved that. The blue mark is almost everywhere now.

Time is running out for all of us. So, I ask something I’ve been wondering a while too.

“What was your secret, Isla?”

Isla. Except for public appearances, I’ve only really called her Wildling. I can see her eyes widen. Is she thinking the same thing?

“What?” she breathes, the word barely making a sound between us.

I don’t drop her gaze. This is what I’ve been following her around for. The question I’ve asked myself over and over and over. Perhaps if I learn this secret, my strange infatuation with all things Isla will dissipate.

“Your secret from my demonstration. What was it?”

I watch her throat work. I watch it far too closely. I can’t breathe, waiting—waiting for her to potentially be honest about this one last thing.

But all she does is shake her head no. She won’t tell me.

I laugh without humor. Of course not. “I didn’t think so.”

At least she didn’t lie.

“How about this—why did you let me win our duel?”

She doesn’t seem too shocked that I figured it out. “I didn’t want to make myself a target.”

“Ah.” It makes sense.

Her eyes narrow. She raises her chin. I know the question is going to be piercing before she even opens her mouth. “What is your flair?”

Her nerve nearly makes me smile. Does she know how secretive that question is? Does she know no ruler would dare ask another about it? Does she care?

It scares me, how much I want to tell her my flair. How I want her to *know* so that I can finally call her what she is—

A liar.

“Share your secret, and I’ll tell you.”

The words hang between us, an offering. I sit still, wondering if she’ll take me up on it. She glares at me, and I only smile. It seems to unnerve her even more. The obsession with her secret is the only explanation for what I say next.

I sit up, even though my every muscle is aching. I lean toward her. “How about this? Tell me your secret, and *you* can be the one who wins.”

I mean it. I mean every word. And that should scare me.

She pauses. “What?”

“When we find the heart, you can brandish it, fulfilling the prophecy. *You* can win the great power promised.” I shrug, as if this is a casual offer, though there is nothing casual about it. “But only if you tell me your secret.”

It’s the only way I’ll ever be able to trust her. Because she’s gone to great lengths to keep this secret. I want to know why. What is she hiding? Who is she protecting?

She turns it around on me, because *of course she does*. “Why would you do that?” she demands. “Don’t you want the power for yourself?” The power the oracle promised was vague but is sure to be magnificent.

No. Never. “I do not wish to become a god. Too much power is dangerous. I have never wanted to win. I simply want to save Lightlark.”

“You would give it to *me*?” She doesn’t think much of herself. I curse myself for having any role in that. And yes. Yes, I would give it to her. Because she has the same flame within her—the one that burns in me. A desire to be better. To do better. To protect those she cares about. And those are the same things I saw in Egan.

“Who else? Do you suppose Cleo should have it?” She makes a face. “Precisely.”

“How about Azul?” she asks.

“No.” The last thing the Skyling ruler wants is more ability. I watch her consider. I wonder, for an endless time, what is going on in her head. I wish I could know her every thought. I wish she would tell me, freely.

Finally, she shakes her head.

I sit back, shocked. “Either you are the only other ruler not interested in the Centennial’s prize, or your secret is worse than I suspected.”

“That’s not a question,” she bites back. With that, the game ends.



IGNITE

She lets me hold her.

We fly to Moon Isle, to visit the oracles in search for the heart, and she buries her face in my chest. She digs her nails into my shoulders. She teaches me *how to hold her*. How to cradle her body against my chest. How to make it comfortable for her.

Can she feel my heart racing? Does she have any clue I'm barely breathing?

What would she do if she knew I think about her in bed, when I'm supposed to be sleeping? What would she do if she knew I lose sleep remembering everything she's ever said to me?

I've lost my mind, and I can't find the will to care.

We walk through the snow, and this time, when she shivers, I wordlessly hand her my cape. I've never given my cape to anyone before, but it was instinct to keep her warm. To give her anything, in the hopes she might actually take it.

She does.

And then, the oracles tell us the most important breakthrough yet.

The heart is on Moon Isle. It's *here*.

Relief battles with dread, knowing that the moment we find the heart, she won't have any reason to spend more time with me.

And that's not the point at all, is it? But as I sit in bed later that night, it's all I can think about.

I stare at the cape she borrowed from across the room. She held it tightly. Treasured it. I never thought I would be jealous of a piece of fabric.

Ten minutes tick by, excruciatingly slowly. I find myself slipping out of bed. Clutching the cape in my hands. Bringing it to my face.

It smells like her.

I want the entire room to smell like her.

I want her to smell like *me*.

It's such a primal thought, I drop the cape and back away. This heat, this longing . . . it's intoxicating. Poisonous. These thoughts—these wants. *They're dangerous*. They're not me. I've never been like this; I've never wanted anything or anyone like I want her.

The heart. I need to redirect my focus to it. The heart is on Moon Isle. There are only a few places left to look. We are closer than ever to finally breaking these curses.

Sleep isn't going to find me again. I get dressed and pace the castle, as if I can fix all its problems. I end up in one of the only rooms in the keep where the windows haven't been painted over.

Everything makes me think of her, even the moonlight. I think about how it hits her eyes, making them sparkle. I think back through everything she's said—every truth and lie.

I run every interaction, every detail through my head, my hand splayed against the glass to steady myself. I—

A sob sounds behind me.

I know who it is immediately. I whirl around—

Isla. The woman I can't stop thinking about. The Wildling that has been hiding something from me this entire time . . . she's here, and she's crying. Suddenly, I don't care that she's a liar.

"What happened?" I demand. I try to think what possibly could have occurred in the time since I last saw her. "I just saw you a couple of hours ago." Who did this to her? Who made her upset?

She doesn't answer me. All she says is, "Does your offer still stand?"

My offer. It feels like a lifetime ago that I made it, in that cave, even though it was just days ago.

I nod. In that cave, all I wanted to know was her secret. But now, for some inexplicable reason I care more about making these tears stop.

"Can I trust you?" she asks, her voice breaking.

"Yes. I've never lied to you, Isla. Not once." It's true. I feel the sweetness in my mouth. *She can trust me*. Even if I can't trust her.

Another tear slips down, and before I can ask myself what the hell I'm doing, I'm striding toward her. I'm placing my hand against her forehead, to see if she has a fever.

Is she sick? Can I fix this?

She closes her eyes, and it looks like it hurts. Whatever happened, it looks

like she's in pain, and I wish there was a way I could take it from her.

Her lips tremble.

Her secret.

I try to remember why I care so much about *her secret*.

I study her face, and I almost tell her to keep it, seeing the pain she's in. I almost tell her I'll give her whatever she wants, as long as she stops crying. As long as it would fix this.

"I was born powerless."

Everything stops.

Faint ringing, far away, like being hit by the hilt of a sword right in the head. A tightness in my chest, like being kicked in the center of it.

No. It can't be true.

But it is. *I can taste how true it is.* Truth, with a hint of that falseness I can't decipher. I need to be clearer. Ask a specific question.

"Are you saying you have never used power?" I ask, my voice harsh, demanding. I feel like my own mind is unraveling. Like I might be a moment away from going mad. Because if she hasn't, then her voice in my head, the incessant thoughts about her, all of it—all of it is not a lie. It's real.

"Yes," she says.

Truth.

I almost begin to miss her lies.

Because if she has no powers—

Then this obsession is all mine.

I sit on my throne, considering my next moves. It's been a long night. Between the oracles, then Isla's secret . . .

I should at least try to sleep. When I start to move, a pain shoots down my side. The blue. It's spreading.

Slowly, I sink back into my throne. Peace. All I want is just a *moment* that is not utter chaos.

My head falls back. My eyes fall closed.

There she is. Isla. Sitting on the cliff just above my favorite beach. She turns to look at me over her shoulder as I approach.

Guilt spreads through my chest as I think about my plans.

"Couldn't sleep?" she says. Only then do I notice the patch of stars above her. Only she could distract from a starry sky. She puts all of them to shame. She takes my silence as confirmation. "Me neither."

This is a dream. I know it is. I hardly speak to her in these dreams, content to just sit with her here on this cliff, or on the beach below, but I realize . . . here, in my head, I can be fully honest with her in a way I can't be outside of it. I can be honest about my feelings. About the turmoil she has unleashed in me.

If I get it all out . . . even just in my head . . . maybe these distracting thoughts will end. Because they must. So I can do what needs to be done.

"Isla."

She just blinks at me.

And I say the words I wanted to. The ones I couldn't say in that cave. The ones smelted from my very soul. My voice is harsh. Irritated.

"I hate you. I hate you, Isla. I really do." I take a step toward her. "I hate you for turning my ice to fire, and my fire to ice . . . for infuriating me in one moment and bewitching me the next." I run my hands down my face. My voice is accusatory. Angry.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to look at you? Looking at you feels like drowning. I'm drowning in you, Isla, and the worst part is, I can swim, I can see the shore, yet here I remain, right in the center of your storm."

This fire builds in me, all these emotions I have fought to bury. All these words I have sought to erase, but they are here. They are *real*.

"I don't remember what sunlight feels like on my skin but when you look at me, it feels close. Centuries of darkness, and here you are, a reminder that this cursed world still has beauty in it yet. A reminder that it has *fight* in it yet.

"But spending time with you . . . it is more pain than pleasure. It is misery. It is torment.

"Because your smile is a sunrise. But you—you are a sunset. This time with you is bound to end. It always ends.

"And damn me, I wish it could be endless. I really do. But you are a liar. You are my enemy. You are my greatest flaws and fears reflected back to me.

"And maybe that's what this is—the jagged pieces in me finding the jagged pieces in you. And fitting together, somehow.

"The fire in me seeing the fire in you. And igniting. Finally igniting, after so much time spent fading."

I have never bowed to anyone since I have become king, but I sink to my knees in front of her, needing her to understand. *Begging* her to release me from this.

"*Isla*. You are beautiful in a way that words can't hold. I wish I had all the time in the world to tell you all the ways you have captivated me, but that would

surely take lifetimes, and we are on borrowed time already.” I shake my head. “I wish—I *wish* we were not enemies. But we are.”

It takes all my strength to stand. To say “I’m sorry” in advance. To leave her on that cliff, overlooking the beach.

I jerk awake.

I know what I must do.

Isla is going to hate me. I think of her eyes, swollen and red. I think of those tears, each like daggers through my chest. I’m about to make it all worse. She trusted me with her greatest secret, and I’m about to share it.

“Can I trust you?” she asked.

I told her yes. And she can, she *can*. This plan will benefit her. I’m not betraying her, not really. But she will not see it that way. I know that. She will hate me forever.

I need to do it anyway.

You got the words out, I tell myself. They can stop bothering you now. You need to do what is best for the island, not for her, not for one woman. I won’t be like Egan.

This will be proof that I am not my brother. If I can do this, then I can show myself that my duty comes before everything. Even her.

It makes me sick, but I do not change my plan.

She enters the room with her chin high, tears gone, confidence back, and it kills me that I am about to break it.

“I believe it’s time for a change in matches,” I say to the room full of rulers, and I swear I can feel the tenuous truce between us break. Her eyes find me, and those green eyes—they’re wide with worry. Worry I’ve caused. My next few words make them fill with nothing short of pain. “Cleo, would it suit you to be matched so we might search Moon Isle for this relic together?”

Cleo grins. “Are you sure, King? It seemed you and the Wildling were getting along so swimmingly.”

Her words stab me more than she could ever imagine. I ignore them. I ignore the roaring in my blood, my own body knowing this is wrong. Almost *feeling* the anguish from across the room, as if it’s my own.

But this is to protect her. To protect us. To protect *everyone*.

I match the other rulers, hoping, praying, this is enough. Changing the matches. Isla will be furious, but her secret is safe. Perhaps I don’t have to share it.

But then, Cleo says, “Are you really sure, King? I have to admit, I’m suspicious . . . This isn’t just a strategy between you and the Wildling, is it?”

That’s exactly what this is, but the Wildling in question doesn’t know it.

The remaining places are on Moon Isle. I will need Cleo’s access to look. *That’s* why I changed the matches, why I dropped Isla. But Cleo is no fool—and I can hardly guess at her own plans and intentions. She has been building a fleet for centuries. She wasn’t even at the last Centennial. She is prepared to betray us all.

I have to make her believe we are on the same side—

Against the Wildling.

I anticipated her reluctance. Her suspicion. Which is why I smile, forcing myself to look pleased. Here it goes.

“I’ll let you in on a secret that might explain my decision,” I say, my voice light. Casual. Cold. *Heartless*. Then I look at Isla and feel something in my chest fracture at wide eyes staring back at me. It still doesn’t stop me. “Isla Crown doesn’t have powers.”

The world goes quiet. Time slows. I watch Isla, unable to look away, waiting for the fire in her to rage.

But she doesn’t look angry.

No—she looks hurt.

And that, I think, is so much worse.

Cleo steps forward. *This is a mistake*, I think. The Moonling is going to try to kill her, here and now, and I am going to have to step between them, ending all pretenses that I am working against Isla.

But I don’t have to. Grim grabs Isla’s hand, and then they’re gone.

I hate myself.

Worse, she hates me.

Good. This is good, I think. Her hatred will make this all convincing. The rulers erupted in chaos when Grim turned them both invisible and left the room. Of course, now everyone believes they are working together. They likely are, now, thanks to me.

She has lied to me countless times. Still, I hate myself for causing her any ounce of pain.

Enya told me to forget my morals. To do anything necessary to finally break these curses. I did.

So why does it feel like I, myself, am breaking?

My plan is working. Little by little, Cleo is beginning to trust me. If I ask too soon, she'll be suspicious, but I'm close to suggesting we look for the heart of Lightlark in the maze only she, as ruler, can access.

I know this is what I need to do to find the heart. *I know it.*

But I can't get the look on Isla's face out of my head.

In the weeks after the betrayal, I continue to dream of her, as if my own mind is working against me. I dream of those eyes. Of that sea.

Of *us*, together in a way we never can be.

I talk to her in these dreams all the time now.

They're so real, it's as if they're true. And they're always on that beach.

We're lying on our backs this time, staring up at the stars. I hear her shift beside me and turn. She's even more magnificent than the night sky. Than anything, really.

Her head is against the sand as she stares at me. There's a light in her eyes. One of curiosity.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Why do you like this place so much?" she asks. She must wonder why this is always where I take us in my dreams.

I reach a hand toward her, my fingers smoothing across her cheek, brushing sand away. She lets me. She leans into my touch, eyes fluttering closed.

"Before? Because it calmed me. Now?" Her eyes slowly blink open. I smile, and it feels like marble rippling, like ice melting, something cold and hard finally giving way to warmth. "Because it reminds me of you."

She smiles back, and that smile—I would give anything to make it last. But it doesn't. No . . . her amusement turns into something different. Something that makes my throat feel tight.

Her eyes darken, slightly. Her lips part. Slowly, very slowly, she reaches toward me too, until her fingertips brush my lips.

I'm not breathing. Not as her thumb parts my mouth. Not as her hand moves to the back of my neck, curling, using me to pull herself closer.

Not until she's right in front of me, on her side, and then I breathe her in. I breathe in her floral scent, I watch as she studies me up and down, and I study her too. Thoroughly. She's wearing that dress from the first day of the Centennial, the green one, the one the color of her eyes, the color of this sea, the color of all my damned thoughts and dreams, and a wave crashes, reaching us, soaking us both, tightening that dress to her body, but she doesn't seem to mind the water. Neither do I.

Her fingers thread through my hair, and then her lips are on mine.

I can't possibly know what she tastes like, but in this dream, she tastes like berries. She tastes like a fruit I want to devour. I part her lips with my tongue, and she groans as I stroke hers with mine, in long, languid motions. Not enough. Not nearly enough. I cup the back of her head, as if I could taste more of her. But still—I need her closer.

My other hand goes to her waist, and I pull her body onto mine, just as the sea crashes again.

Waves wash over us both, we're both wet and dripping, but we don't care. She presses her body against mine, the wet fabric hiding little, and *that body*. I've studied it far too closely. Imagined it far too many times, late at night. I keep my hand on the back of her head, but she takes it, and drags it down, over her chest—that fucking chest—and I practically tremble with want. I want to peel this fabric off her. I want to touch her warm skin, I want to lick her dry, I want to have her right against this sand, right in these waves.

Her hips are lined with mine. She sits up, straddling me, feeling all of me, and I stare, *fucking stare*, at how perfect she looks.

Gaze never leaving mine, she slowly slides one of the straps of her dress off her shoulder. Then, the other. The fabric folds, still partially clinging to her wet skin. She leans forward, and every inch toward me sends her dress sliding down, revealing more of her.

I feel like I'm dying. I feel like I'm being brought to life.

Her hands claw at my chest, but before she can fully remove my shirt, her perfect lips form a wicked smile. She leans down fully, slowly, caging me in, as if she knows exactly how much power she wields over me.

"You want me?" she asks.

Fuck yes. I nod.

At that, she leans closer, nails still digging into my skin, hard enough to draw blood. But I don't care. I don't care at all.

"I'm your enemy," she says, her hot breath against my lips. "Remember?"

I nod. I remember.

"Say it."

"You're my enemy," I repeat. I'll do whatever she wants.

She smiles, as if the words please her. "You hate me," she whispers into my ear in that melodious voice, before her lips smooth down my neck. Her tongue laves at my racing pulse. Her hips start to rock against mine.

Fuck.

At my silence, she stops. Looks up at me through her lashes.

“I hate you,” I repeat, mindless, stuck between reality and dream, between duty and truth.

She smiles against my neck. Kisses her way up until her face is right over mine. She tilts her head. Her long, beautiful hair is wet and clinging to her chest, barely keeping her decent. Her dress is now rolled all the way down to her hips. She leans down, and I need to taste her. All of her. I need her like a drug.

Her lips are almost against mine again.

“Liar,” she says, right against my mouth.

And then, I wake up.



UNLEASHED

I try not to think of Isla, but it's as useless as trying not to breathe. Any thought of her is like air in my lungs, keeping me going. Especially after that fucking dream.

That dream. I've never woken up so hot and aching in my life.

I wanted to run to her. To go down on my knees and admit everything I've thought about her, if only for the small chance she's thought the same about me.

But I didn't. I've stationed guards to watch over her, to make sure she's safe. She doesn't need me. Not right now. And, if that searing betrayal on her face was any indication, she doesn't want to see me at all.

I need to finish my work with Cleo. Only then can I tell Isla the plan. Only then do I have any chance at forgiveness.

It's taken weeks to get Cleo to trust me enough to open the gate in a mountain, revealing a labyrinth. I allow myself to hope, for a moment, that this could all end today. That the heart of Lightlark is right inside.

But it isn't.

The betrayal was for nothing. Her *pain* was for nothing . . . I remind myself that it helps, that it narrows down the places the heart could be significantly, that the two other places are so dangerous for Wildlings that I had hoped to avoid them, but it doesn't feel worth it. Not when I haven't seen her in weeks. Not when I remember that look on her face.

I'm walking back through the Moonling forest, too tired and annoyed to fly, when a bird swoops down, squawking. I recognize that bird. Isla and I saw it when we were here, visiting the oracles.

Isla. The thought of her . . . what I did to her . . .

Cursed bird. I duck, ignoring it, but it won't leave me alone. Finally, I turn around and look at it. It's flying right in front of my face. "What do you want?" I

demand.

It flaps its wings once. Twice.

Then, it turns in the opposite direction.

I'm relieved until I hear it squawk again and see it coming back around.

What? Does it want me to *follow* it?

I've clearly lost my mind, if I'm thinking that the bird is *speaking to me*.

Still, it won't leave me alone.

"Fine," I say, through my teeth. I follow it.

It's not long before I hear the voices.

Men's voices. They're talking about a hunt. Or a catch . . . something they've found. Something they're going to eat.

Then they start talking about a *face*. A beautiful one.

The bird squawks louder than before, soaring and dipping just ahead. I break through the trees, and that's when I see her, being carried in between Vinderland, tied up. *Frozen*.

Anger and fear like I've never known before shakes the very island. The world trembles.

My fire unleashes. Starling energy explodes out of me. Blood spatters everywhere. One by one, the men are torn to pieces, mangled beyond recognition. I don't stop. I don't give mercy, when one begs on his knees for it. I see red.

My power rages.

My fury engulfs me. *They hurt her. They planned to kill her.*

I kill every last one of them, and then, she's back in my arms.

And I'm taking us home.

I survived centuries of curses. I survived war.

Yet, somehow, I'm not sure how I survived weeks away from her.

I missed her.

She's *freezing*. I want to warm her from the inside out, I want to be the flame that burns in her heart, I want her to burn for me as much as I do for her.

Tentatively, I use my power to thaw her, slowly. Slowly.

Until she moves. My relief nearly blinds me. *She's okay. She's going to be okay.*

"Just a little longer," I say, almost to myself.

At the sound of my voice, she goes still. Then, somehow, I know exactly what she's about to do next.

I don't even move out of the way as she kicks, barely missing me.

Her eyes are frozen shut. It hurt her aim. Despite myself, I put my hand over her eyes to thaw them.

The moment she opens them, I can see her fury like a tidal wave, green eyes filled with it.

"*You*," she growls.

She's angry. Of course she is. I can almost see the thoughts swirling in her mind, as she bares her teeth at me, as she opens her mouth—

"Before you do whatever horrific thing I am sure you are imagining. Let me speak." If she wasn't still partially frozen, I have no doubt her blade would already be at my throat. "I did not betray you, Wildling. Though you believing it helped tremendously . . ."

"Helped what?" she demands.

I tell her. I tell her why I needed Cleo. It's true. Every word.

Her anger barely dims. She looks around, as if wanting to look at anything but me, and I see the exact moment the realization hits her.

She sees she's in my room.

In my bed.

I didn't know where else to take her. I take a step back. "I brought you here after I found you. I figured you wouldn't want others to know what had happened."

I don't tell her I just needed to get her warm, that I wanted to bring her somewhere safe. That I'm getting a shameful amount of satisfaction seeing her on my sheets—

I shake those thoughts away, turning back to the heart. I tell her it wasn't in the maze on Moon Isle. "Now we have just two places left to search."

My words don't soothe her the way I thought they might. She shakes her head, and she does something that extinguishes any ember of fire within me—

She starts to cry.

Tears slide down her cheeks. "This isn't about changing matches." Her voice breaks, and my heart along with it. "I trusted you. I—*You*. You told them. *You*—"

No. Not worth it.

No plan is worth this.

I close my eyes, understanding how she must feel. Her biggest secret . . . shared as part of my strategy. "I know. I'm sorry. Truly. Cleo had become

suspicious. She knew we had visited Moon Isle the day before, somehow. The only way to convince her to help me was to discard you. Publicly. Your reaction and actions in the last few weeks had to be genuine.”

She listens. Then she shakes her head. “I don’t believe you.”

I’ve never wanted to be believed more in my long life. “I have never lied to you, Isla,” I say. “Even though you have lied to me repeatedly.” I take another step toward her, in my bed. “You told me your secret. Now let me tell you my flair.” I watch her green eyes widen. I shouldn’t tell her. This is my last remaining secret. But I do anyway. “No one can lie to me. Because I know when people are lying.”

Shock. Silence.

Yes. Yes, she knows how much she’s lied to me. I can see it on her face.

Little liar.

“All you did was lie to me, and I still told you about the heart. I told you everything, except for this.”

“Your offer holds, then,” she finally says. The hurt isn’t gone, but it seems cares about her people more than she hates me.

You hate me, remember?

I hate you.

Liar.

I shake away the remnants of that dream and nod. “When we find the heart, you will wield it. You will receive the power promised.”

She agrees to work with me again, but I can feel the fracture between us. Breaking something that was never truly whole in the first place.



MOST IMPORTANT GARDEN

The last thing I want is to go to Carmel.

The Centennial tradition is a celebration for the people. To keep them in high spirits. This year, after the deaths at the ball . . . it's a wonder anyone shows.

It lasts a full twenty-four hours, though I can't participate until the sun sets.

I've checked on the Wildling far more times than I should have, to make sure she's okay, given that Cleo needs to show up to Carmel to qualify for the prize.

Cleo. I've always disliked her . . . but now, I hate her. She left Isla to die.

What if she's going to try to finish the job at the festivities?

I keep guards on the Wildling. According to them, she's still in her room.

The Starling has visited her. A glimmer of happiness lights in my chest that she's found someone to spend time with. I would be nothing without my friends, I know. I'm glad—I'm glad she's found that.

The sun sets, and I find myself still in the castle, pacing the halls. Willing this celebration to end, so I can go check the last two places on Moon Isle with Isla.

I pace, and pace, in front of the windows—

That's when I see her.

She's in my mother's garden. She's wearing a dress covered in pink and red petals, like the most glorious flower, in the most important garden.

I think about those golden roses my mother used to make. Not since then has her garden seen anything close to this beautiful.

My guards trail her. I watch, lips twitching, as she avoids them.

I watch until I feel a pang of yearning, and then I turn away again. I walk back through the castle, pacing for over an hour. It's empty, most of the attendants at the celebration. I'm lost in my own mind, when I nearly slip on something on the floor.

I frown as I bend to pick it up.

A petal?

There's a path of them ahead. They're familiar. They look like her dress. I find a crown of flowers next.

Then, something cuts through the silence.

Her voice.

Her singing.

I close my eyes. It's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard; it has to be a dream—because the world isn't this beautiful, and I am not this lucky, to have heard such a sound twice.

But it keeps going. Then, I hear a burst of laughter. My eyes fly open.

I follow the petals, like I would follow them to the end of the world. There are more of them, going up stairs, down hallways, and shoes that I grab, all leading to her.

Everything leading to—

“Isla?”

She whirls around and smiles.

Smiles.

Just like she did in my dream.

“Oro,” she says, and my name—I've never cared about how it sounded until now. Hearing my name on her lips, her voice breathy and excited—

I swallow. The last time I saw her, she was glaring at me. She still hated me.

Has she forgiven me?

She walks over, barefoot. I'm carrying her discarded shoes in my hand, and she doesn't even notice.

All she does is step over her own petals, laugh, then stand high on her toes, in a failed attempt to reach my height.

Then, she flicks my crown, and the teasing gesture goes right to the center of me.

I blink.

She laughs again. I wish this were real, I wish it was true, but Isla wouldn't forgive me so easily . . . she wouldn't be *laughing*, not at a time like this.

“Are you all right?”

She rolls her eyes dramatically. “You're always so angry . . . *why*? Do you ever smile?”

Yes. *I do*, I think. I smile when I think of you.

She's still on her toes, and she tilts, losing her balance. My arms shoot out on instinct, keeping her upright. As soon as she's on her feet, I drop my hand.

She gives me a scathing look, the anger returning. "I'm not *poisonous*."

Oh, but you are. You are the most lethal of poisons. You are the type that I'll drink without limit, and enjoy, and *crave*, until it kills me.

I'm your enemy, remember?

I know. The fact that she clearly cares for Grim makes her my enemy too. I know, and I can't stop looking at her, in that dress she's torn apart. I can't stop studying her every move. I can't stop hoping that she'll tell me even more truths, so that I can treasure them long after she's gone from this island.

She twirls, dancing.

Clearly, she's had some of the wine at the celebration. "I'll take you to your room . . . if you would like," I offer.

I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to court a woman, and *no*, that's not what I'm doing. Of course not. Still, I've never felt like this before: nervous, hesitant to say anything, lest I say the wrong thing.

She just shrugs. "Fine. I was going there . . . but the hallways changed."

Yes. She's definitely had some of the wine. "Did you drink the haze?"

She nods happily, and then she starts singing again, right in the middle of her song, as if she hadn't ever taken a break. She sings louder and turns in a circle, and then she's exclaiming that she's never felt this good in her life, and she doesn't know why Poppy and Terra didn't let her drink before.

I wonder about those people. "Your guardians?"

She nods. "Did you have guardians?"

Her question brings me back centuries. Pain breaks through, as I remember the Starling I found on the floor. "No, I didn't. I was never supposed to be ruler, or king. My brother was the one with guardians." I don't tell her about Agnes. But I want to.

"So, what did you think you would be?"

Nothing. I thought I would be nothing.

Until I found myself, and my strength, in my training across the isles. Over time, I proved myself enough to unite the forces. To train together. To prepare for a future my father deemed impossible: war. When Nightshade attacked, I was grateful for all the time I had spent uniting our forces.

"I led our armies," I answer, simply.

She freezes. She puts her hands on her hips and looks at me incredulously. "You commanded the Lightlark armies?"

Normally I might be offended by her disbelief. But I simply nod.

She continues. “That’s why you hate him, isn’t it?”

Him. Of course, I know who she means. I’m not going to stand here and tell her every unforgivable thing Grimshaw Malvere has done. I’m not going to poison her to him—even if I want to.

“We both lost many warriors,” I say simply. “And I didn’t agree with the way he fought.”

We’re at her door now. She’s still swaying slightly, and my brows pinch together. “Are you going to be all right?” The guards are here, they’ve followed. They will make sure no one gets close to her door. I could leave now.

“I’ll be fine.”

Of course she will. I ignore the strange bite of disappointment, nod, and turn to go. Her hand catches my wrist, and it’s as if my blood is being called to hers, as if something has jolted between us.

She looks as if she didn’t feel anything. “Wait. I still have so many questions. Will you come in?”

No. Don’t invite me in, I want to tell her, knowing how I’m feeling right now. Knowing that going into her bedroom right now, *being invited inside*, is only going to make this fixation worse.

She seems to sense my hesitation, because she says, “I’ll make tea.”

Tea. That’s what has me stepping through her threshold. Tea is innocent. We both like tea. It’s on the increasingly growing list of things we have in common. I warm the water. She unearths some strange blend of spices, with a ridiculous name, that actually tastes incredible.

Then, she leans forward, drawing so close to my face that I can see the small specks in her eyes. Gold. She has flecks of gold in her eyes.

I see flashes of that dream. Of her lips, against mine. Of her breath against my ear—

“You haven’t been sleeping well, have you?”

No, I want to say. *I avoid sleep because all I dream about is you. And that is dangerous.*

“No. I haven’t for a long while.” Because before her, before dreaming of green eyes, on a golden stretch of beach . . . there were the nightmares. The memories from battle. The never-ending screams when the curses were cast. “I have a lot of guilt,” I say simply, because it sums up all the reasons for my lack of sleep.

The island is tied to me. These *people* are tied to me. I should be spending

every waking moment trying to find the heart, trying to break these curses, yet I spend an inordinate amount of time thinking of green eyes and red lips.

“How did you find me?” she asks suddenly.

“In the hallway? I followed the trail of petals.”

She shakes her head. “No . . . before.”

Ah. In the Moon Isle woods. “I heard the bird. That’s how I found you. I followed the bird.”

She yawns. Her eyes look heavy. I’m jealous, for a moment, of her ability to be tired. To find sleep. She smiles, and I can’t look away, even though it almost hurts to look at her, like staring directly at the sun.

Now she’s lying down. Her head is resting against my leg.

I sit very still, as if this moment is glass and I can break it. I don’t even dare breathe.

“I have honey in my head,” she mumbles, and I smile, because I’ve felt that before, though I’ve never thought of it that way. Her breathing starts to get longer. Deeper. She’s asleep.

She’s asleep *on me*.

Does this mean she trusts me? I stare at her greedily, memorizing every detail. Every curve of her parted lips, every curl of her lashes, every strand of hair that is splayed out against my leg.

Beautiful. Perfectly beautiful.

That’s how I fall asleep.

Counting all the ways the world doesn’t measure up to her beauty.

Someone is in front of me.

I jerk up on instinct, hand outstretched, warmth building, fire forming—

Before I see two green eyes blinking back at me through the darkness.

Right. I fell asleep . . . in her room.

With her.

I frown. I haven’t slept this soundly in years. I lower my hand.

“You fell asleep,” she says quietly. “Thank—thank you for staying with me. I’m sorry, I think you missed part of the . . . party.”

I did.

Panic flares. I need to attend Carmel before it ends. It’s still dark outside. I still have time—

But I've never done that before, slept through a responsibility. I've never been so reckless.

So irresponsible.

My people died at the last celebration. They need to see a strong king. They need to see someone to give them hope.

She gets up, looking a bit ashamed herself, avoiding looking down at her dress—ripped high up her thigh.

I stand too, averting my eyes.

"I should go to the celebration," I say, regretting being here. Regretting everything.

She was drunk on wine. She didn't mean to invite me here. She didn't want to spend time with me. This was all a lie. And now, it's over.

"You should," she says, and she has the nerve to reach up and touch my crown.

As if we are familiar. As if any of this was real.

"Two more places on Moon Isle," I say, my voice flat and perhaps cruel. Our focus is our people. Anything more is selfish. Ridiculous.

"Tomorrow, we'll go to one. The next, the other. Then we're done."

"Good," she says just as curtly, telling me everything I need to know.

As soon as I'm out in the gardens I am filled with even more regret.

For speaking to her that way? I could have sworn, when she turned away from me, there was a hint of something. Hurt?

No. Impossible.

I regret being in her room. I regret thinking for a moment that we could ever be anything more than partners in this game, this game that we are currently losing.

At least the island seems in higher spirits. Haze is being drained from wine glasses. Some empty goblets litter the lawn my mother used to walk on.

I sigh and begin picking them up, one by one. Attendants rush to help me, but I tell them not to worry. I tell them to enjoy their night. I end up far into the gardens. Distracted, I take a wrong turn in the maze. When I turn around, I see an ancient, crumbling stone bench.

And I realize where I am.

It's the place my mother's golden rose bush used to grow. She used to sit on this same bench and look at the delicate flowers.

"Careful," she said, when I was a child and got too close. "The most

beautiful roses have thorns. You'll get hurt."

"Why do they have thorns?" I remember asking, after pricking my finger on one of them and watching a droplet of blood form.

"It's like armor. It's their protection."

I sit on the stone bench and gently run my hands down its crumbling sides. "I'm sorry it never grew back," I say quietly, into the night.

I wait, as if there could ever be a response. Of course, there isn't. There never is. I place my hand in the center of the bench, where she used to hold mine.

"I hope there are golden roses wherever you are," I whisper into the darkness. "I hope you duel every day, and drink tea every night. I hope there's always enough honey. And I hope . . . I hope you're happy."

Wind hisses past my ears. I lean back, staring up at the sky.

"I wonder, sometimes, if you can see me. If that flicker in the hearth sometimes is you, telling me to find my fire, even though I've lived for centuries in darkness." I swallow, my throat tightening. "And sometimes . . . sometimes I wonder if you're with Egan. Then I get jealous. I get jealous that you're all somewhere without me."

I take a shaking breath. Pain ripples up my arm, all the way to my shoulder, the blue spreading once again. "Maybe soon, I'll join you," I say, and, for the first time, that thought doesn't fill me with dread.

I stand—

And a scream pierces the night.

Then, another.

Another.

I rush forward, confused, trying to find the path through the maze.

Then, I hear another scream. This one, I would recognize anywhere.

I shoot into the air, landing only once I see her. Relief hits me in the chest and melts through me like ice. *She's all right. She's alive.* Then, I see the Starling, floating, wrapped in webbing.

Someone has attacked her. Who?

Isla cares about the Starling. Her eyes are wide. They're full of pain and fear. Time is running out for all of us.

We must find the heart.



FLAMES

We're on Moon Isle again. Isla is quiet, but I don't miss the pain in her eyes, and the serious set of her jaw. She's worried about her friend. Of course she is. I'm worried too. The Starling is still alive . . . but if the Moonlings can't find a cure for this dark enchantment, one of the Lightlark realms will fall.

And if Cleo is the one who attacked her . . . perhaps searching for a cure is fruitless.

We walk in silence, both lost in our thoughts. Both knowing what's at stake.

We stop in front of a single tower. It's the only visible part of a castle buried beneath the snow.

No one has entered in centuries. And lived, that is. Nightshade creatures have made a home inside of it, beasts with nails like knives and fins like ribbons. It is a dangerous place. One I had hoped to avoid.

Now, it might be our salvation.

We climb through a window in the tower, then descend staircase after staircase until we reach an entire floor submerged in water. Here. This is the second to last place the heart could be on Moon Isle—a place where darkness meets light.

I begin mindlessly removing my clothing, and Isla whirls around, eyes wide. Horrified?

"What are you doing?" she demands.

Isn't it obvious? "There are creatures in that water that won't be easy to face. I don't need to be weighed down or give them something to choke me with."

I take my cape off next. Then, my shirt. The cold air hits my skin, and I tense. I can feel her gaze on me. I slowly turn to find her staring . . . at my chest. I swallow. Is she disgusted by the gray? By the fact that I'm slowly but surely dying?

“I’m sure you’ve seen plenty of bodies before,” I say flatly, under her increasingly sharpened notice.

She swallows. “Of course I have.”

Lie.

I blink. Surprise keeps me rooted in place.

I told her my flair. She must realize I know she’s lying. Still, her head is held high, her expression filled with unyielding confidence.

It almost makes me laugh. Stubborn Wildling. *Lying* Wildling.

How far will she commit to this lie? How long can she lie with a straight face? I step forward and tilt my head at her. “Tell me, Wildling . . . how *many* people have you been with?”

Her cheeks flush, and I resist the urge to smile.

“What kind of question is that?” she demands, but *that didn’t answer my question*. She’s avoiding it.

The truth. That’s all I’ve ever wanted from her. That’s all I’ve ever *given* her. It’s wrong, but if she won’t give it to me outright, I want to pull it out of her, word by word. “A curious one.” I shrug. “I’ve been with many women. It’s not something I deny.”

A long time ago, I don’t say. So long ago, I don’t remember their faces, or their names. I likely wouldn’t recognize them if they were right in front of me.

Not that I ever took the time to study them or know them. It was purely physical, then over, because I was supposed to have learned from my brother’s mistakes.

I was supposed to learn that love could cloud even a great king’s mind.

She sneers at me, breaking me out of my own head. “Well, that must have been a long time ago, judging by how uptight and insufferable you are.”

The corners of my mouth twitch with amusement. “That might be so. But you didn’t answer my question.” My voice takes on an edge. My throat works. Why am I so curious?

“And I won’t.” She glares at me, and in her eyes, I see that spark I’ve come to memorize, that challenge.

Stubborn indeed.

Without breaking my gaze, she unbuttons her cape, and my smile falters. It falls soundlessly to the floor. Without even a moment’s hesitation, she slips off her shirt, revealing the curve of her breasts above her slender waist—

And this is like my dream. Her, undressing before me. Eyes never leaving mine. My throat feels tight. My every nerve is on fire.

Her pants go next, and then she's standing before me in small, close-fitting shorts and an undershirt that might as well be wet for how closely it hews to her. I'm not breathing.

Fuck.

She shrugs, completely unaware of the fact that I am just a moment away from losing my mind. "It's just skin," she says, her breath shallow.

I want to make her breathless in other ways. I want to feel that skin against mine, now, on this floor. Against that wall.

I swallow down my thoughts. "Just skin," I repeat.

She walks past me, down the steps. I slip the rest of my clothes off, then follow, grateful for the stinging cold of the water.

It is an effort not to look at her, to focus instead on the task at hand. "These waters house ancient, vicious creatures. Be on guard." I dive into the water and hope it will calm this blazing heat in me.

That body. She has to know what she's doing to me. Is that it? Is she trying to torture me? If so, it's working.

I'm so dazed, I barely catch the flash of movement—curls of black, silklike fins. My fist heats, my flames warming even underwater, warning them away. *Focus*, I think, but I can't focus at all. My mind keeps bringing me back to Isla, standing there, stripping off her clothing.

I know what my dreams will be filled with tonight, and I feel a flash of guilt.

I am king of Lightlark. I control this island and its people. But I can't even control my own thoughts.

The heart isn't here.

I reach the stairs and squint, searching the water for her form. She isn't back yet. She must still be looking.

Then, I see it. A cloud of crimson. The flash of a tail, racing away.

My chest tenses, my body lurches forward, ready to jump back into the water. But she's already clawed her way up the steps. She is injured, and bleeding, and I'm seeing red. I kneel beside her, taking in the gash along her side.

Her wound begins to bleed in earnest, and she starts to scream.

I murmur soothing words, my voice softer than I've ever heard it, trying anything to calm her down. *I know it hurts, love*, I think.

She lies back on the cold stone, shivering.

She's *cold*. I could make it so she's never cold again.

I place my hand against her stomach, pouring my heat into her. Then, I use

the water and begin to close the wound. It's a slow, painful process. She winces, and I make another sound, hoping it helps, at least a little.

My fingers trace the injury, her blood hot beneath my hand.

Our gazes lock—

And she doesn't drop her eyes. We're just inches apart, and for once . . . it feels like she's *really looking at me*, perhaps a fraction of the way I've looked at her for months.

Her hand covers mine and I flinch. I wasn't expecting her to touch me. I didn't expect her touch to be so light, so gentle. She presses her hand against mine, and we both cover her wound.

We don't look away. Neither of us.

We stare and stare, touching each other, and it feels different from the thorns, and from when she helped me in the cave.

It feels like that dream. When she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

The air between us is charged, and she *is still staring at me, as if I could possibly be worthy of her notice*. The wound is healed, but I keep my hand there far longer than necessary, suddenly greedy and wanting every moment to last a little longer, with those green eyes trained on me. With those lips parted, like she could possibly want me to part them further with my tongue.

My knuckles trail down her ribs, grazing the edges of the wound. My fingers linger slightly, but she doesn't make a move, even though she has to know I'm done healing her. She has to know we've been staring at each other for far too long.

"Finished," I say, knowing this is wrong. Knowing we shouldn't be doing this.

I remove my hand, and she immediately shivers at the loss of heat. I touch her knee—a more innocent place, I think—to heat her once more.

"Did you find it?" she asks, breathless.

Yes, I think I did. It was there all along. Just frozen. Just . . . waiting.

But she's not talking about my heart. She's talking about another one.

"No. It wasn't there."

Which means there's only one last place to look.



ASHES

It's not there.

We went right into enemy territory, Vinderland lands, and the heart of Lightlark was not in the final place. We were wrong.

I was wrong.

I watch Isla bang her fists against the ice, screaming in rage. I want to do the same thing, but I fear it would bring the entire island down. The depths of my anger and sadness, built up over the centuries and buried, might be enough to destroy this world, if let out.

Isla starts to cry.

She lets me lift her from the ice. Soon we're back to the castle. She shakes slightly in my arms, and what is this rage, building within me?

What is this despair, unspooling?

She doesn't even look at me, when I leave her on the balcony. She just goes into her room and closes the door behind her.

Don't give up yet, I want to tell her, even though I'm ready to do the same.

But for some reason, the thought of that flame within her extinguishing is too painful to imagine.

She came to this island with her soul blazing. I could see it, even on the first day.

I'm losing her little by little. The light in her eyes is almost gone.

How to fix it?

How to make that fire within her grow?

I return to my room. This can't be the end. There are still twenty days left of the Centennial. The island might not last that long, but we have to try.

I want to go to her room, I want to get to her before that fire dies, but I'm nothing to her. If anything, *I* have snuffed that fire out.

I regret every cruel thing I ever said. Any sharp remark. All thorns, trying to protect myself from the painful and arduous process of opening up my heart.

“So, what do we do now?” Enya asks. She’s frowning, but she doesn’t look surprised.

She never thought my plan would work. She thought I was clinging to an impossible scenario. Perhaps I shouldn’t have spent so many decades on this strategy. Perhaps, if I had been more capable, I could have gone down a different road. One that would have worked.

“Say our goodbyes?” Zed responds unhelpfully, using his wind to throw daggers against the wall.

“Speak for yourself,” Enya says.

I whirl to face her. “You have time?”

She dips her chin. “I do.”

I do.

Then she doesn’t die this way. Or at least . . . that isn’t her previous fate.

I wonder about the oracle’s prophecies. Can they change? Everything I’ve read says every single prophecy has always come to pass, but these are uncertain times. Do the curses take precedent?

My life is bound to hers.

If she doesn’t die now, then it means we do it, don’t we? We figure it out?

“Tell me,” I say, begging. “Please. This—this could be important.”

Enya sighs. “My answer is never going to change, Oro,” she says. Her smile is sad. She places her hand on my shoulder.

“I live past the hundred days. Happy?”

Yes.

“You couldn’t have told us that before?” Zed snaps.

She shoots him a look. “I don’t know as much as you think I do. Just . . . a few details. I didn’t really know what they meant for a long time. The circumstances . . . the timing . . . but I do now.” She doesn’t say anything else.

But Enya’s words spark an ember of hope. All is not lost. Somehow, we will figure it out.

“Calder.” I turn to my friend. “I need your help.”

We go back to Moon Isle, where we’ve been countless times since my training. We go to the Vinderland territory, a place few would dare return.

The place we first became friends.

When I was here with Isla, they attacked us. Isla fought back. We both did. We both killed several of their people, in self-defense.

And I killed even more of them before, when they captured her.

They hate us more than ever. But they might be the key to finding the heart.

Perhaps they took it from the roots in the tree, or even from the abandoned castle. Perhaps they've seen it.

Calder knows every inch of this isle. He's searched for the heart before without success, but the Vinderland know this land better than even Cleo.

The Vinderland are fractured, according to Calder. There is a small, rebellious sect that split from its leadership.

They are our best bet.

We've stopped in front of a cave with hundred-foot icicles sticking from it, like a beast's back.

"Here," Calder says. He lifts his arm, and the snow parts, making a door.

Someone is already standing there. A man wearing a saber-toothed leopard as a hide and wielding a sword made of sharpened ice.

He's baring his teeth. "Didn't kill enough of my men?" He's looking at me.

I glare at him, remembering how they came from the trees. Remembering how they almost *hurt* her.

"We didn't kill anyone that didn't try to kill us first."

"Anyone that steps onto our territory is sentenced to death." He looks us over, his eyes lingering on Calder, who towers over him. "Which makes you both fools for being here."

I'm king of the island. This is Moonling land. None of that matters to this Vinderland, whose teeth have been sharpened into spikes.

"I'm hoping we can work together," I say. "I'm looking for something. Help me find it, and we can discuss anything you want. Land. Resources. Nothing is off the table."

The Vinderland shakes his head. He licks the points of his teeth.

"What makes you think we want any of that?"

I shrug. "I'm not sure what you want. But if you help me, whatever is in my power to give, I'll give to you."

It's a foolish offer, but these are desperate times. The days are almost done. *I* am close to death, my strength quickly dwindling.

"And what if it's something even *you*, King, cannot give me?"

I frown. "What is it you want?"

"I want the Wildling."

The snow beneath me begins to melt.

He takes a step toward me. "I want to drain her of every drop of blood in her

body. I want to rip out every strand of hair. I want to peel her skin off, coil by coil. I want to drink her power straight from her skull. I—”

His throat is in my fist before I realize what I’m doing. My hand is so hot with fury that his skin burns right off, his bone cracks and splinters, his eyes bulge and burst, before my fire burns through his throat and spinal cord completely.

His head falls to the snow. His body falls in the opposite direction.

Calder sighs. “That’s one way to start a war.”

I pant, rage coursing through my veins. I burn the rest of his body, unsatisfied until every trace of him is gone.

“They’re going to come for you. His sect. They’ll know you’re looking for something. They’ll know you killed him,” Calder says.

“Let them come,” I tell him, and then I turn my back to the ashes.



HOPE

Someone's banging on my door.

None of my friends have enough manners to knock.

I open it, fire in my palm ready—

It's her.

She was about to pound again, and I catch her fist in my palm. There's a moment where we just look at each other, like we're both considering the days we haven't seen each other.

Then, she pushes past me, and I let her, stunned.

Her ferocious zeal is back. The look in her eyes that makes me feel like I can do anything. Like together, we can conquer any hurdle. "This isn't over," she declares. "I refuse." She steps toward me. "I refuse to believe this is how it ends." She pushes a finger into my chest. "You are king of Lightlark, the most powerful person in all the realms."

I raise my eyebrows. And here I was, thinking I was nothing but a cursed *wretch*.

"There has to be another way. Another ending."

Her finger is still pressed to my chest. I peer down at it, then look at her.

"What do you suggest?"

She blinks. Opens her mouth. Closes it. I hate that she looks so surprised I would ask her opinion.

None of my plans have worked. If anything, they've worsened the situation. Perhaps she can think of a better one.

She does.

Of course she does.

It takes days, but she figures it out. Everything that I couldn't, for decades. It's brilliant. *She's* brilliant, like the sun, like gold.

She knows where the heart is.

We meet at night, the same way we have countless times before.

She flicks my crown when she sees me.

Her obsession with it is perplexing. Does she hate it? Does she want it? I reach up and give it to her. I put it right on her head, and it slips down, resting across her forehead.

“If you’re right about this, Wildling, you might become more powerful than even me,” I say.

Wishful thinking. I’ve never wanted to be the most powerful person. This role was not chosen—it was given in blood. Countless people had to die for this crown to reach me.

I would give it up in a moment, if I could. Perhaps Isla would do a better job than I did. Perhaps she’s the key not only to breaking the curses, but also to surviving whatever comes next.

She gives me her crown, in turn. It’s tiny on my head, uncomfortable even, but I don’t move to take it off.

I’m not one to hope. It’s gotten me nowhere, over the centuries. But looking at her, beaming, walking with pride, wearing my crown, her chin held high. . . .

She makes me want to hope again.

“What will you do?” she asks me, as we reach Moon Isle. “When we break the curses.”

When, not *if*. I almost smile at her confidence.

I allow myself to truly consider a world beyond this mess. A world where we actually succeed. “These past centuries, the focus has been on the curses. How to break them. How to live with them. How to survive them. With all that erased, I could be free to bring Lightlark to its previous glory.”

She gives me a look. “With Sunling as the reigning realm?”

I shake my head. “No. Before that. When the realms were united.” I imagine a world where realms aren’t divided by their curses. Where they are thriving again. Creating. *Living*.

She sighs. “I’m not sure the people of Lightlark would be thrilled if Wildlings returned.”

“They will have to learn to be,” I say, my words firm. She glances over at me. I don’t drop her gaze, even though I feel exposed, raw. “And perhaps you would want to stay.”

Don’t leave, I want to beg, as though I have any right.

Build this better world with me.

I realized it this morning, before seeing her. I was excited, hopeful. And also devastated. Because when the curses end, she has no reason to be here anymore. She has a home thousands of miles away to return to. I always knew these hundred days would come to an end; I just never thought she'd be the reason I'd mourn them.

She blinks, my words surprising her. "Perhaps," she says.

Bitterness.

I feel my heart harden.

We walk in silence, until the blue bird swoops down, squawking wildly. Isla follows it, and I follow her, knowing I would follow her anywhere, if she let me. Snow flurries around us, blocking our view, and the ground transitions to ice. The trees become sparser.

The bird finally flies down, right into a nest.

There. It must be there, somewhere. We just have to wait for the heart to reveal itself.

There's a cave nearby with a view of the nest. I make a fire with little effort, remembering how hard it used to be. How interesting it is that difficult things can become easy, with practice.

She eyes my fire curiously. I want to know what she's thinking, as she slowly traces a finger around my crown. She startles, then scowls at her finger. A tiny drop of blood falls to the ground, staining it red. "It's unreasonably sharp," she asserts.

I laugh. How long has it been since I've laughed?

She smiles, not offended at all, almost *happy that I'm happy*, and—

Pain splits me in half. I double over, my vision going black for just a moment. My hands turn to fists.

Fire—fire and ice are cutting through me. I feel myself fracture. Outside the cave, snow falls, ice breaks.

My fingers dig into the cave floor as I funnel power, trying to force the world still. We're too close. Too close to finding the heart for the island to break.

Not yet, I say, with every bit of me I pour into it. *Not yet*.

My skin is raw. It hurts everywhere. I shiver, tensing only when I feel her kneeling in front of me. I close my eyes tightly and lean against the wall.

"Are you all right?"

I nod, then jolt as another tremor runs through me. My hand slams to the ground, and I feel the stone of the cave break beneath my fingers. Instead of

backing away, she leans forward. She isn't afraid of my power. Not at all.

I feel her hand on my shoulder and go still. She takes it away, and I immediately mourn her touch.

Another painful jolt.

"What—what can I do?" she asks.

I just want *relief*.

This piercing through my body makes me lose any semblance of shame. So, I ask her something I've been wanting to say since the very first time I met her.

"Sing for me, Wildling."

It's not so much a request as it is a plea.

And she does. Her voice is as beautiful as it was that first day, as it was on Carmel. It's the same voice that's been echoing through my head for months. Now it echoes through the cave, surrounding me in song. *I could die like this*, I think, with a smile on my lips.

She sings and sings, and it's like medicine. Slowly, the pain retreats. My eyes open. I watch her, sitting on her feet, knees near my legs, singing.

Then she goes quiet.

"Why did you stop?" I ask, wondering if I can ask her to keep going.

She motions behind me and says, breathlessly, "Because of that."

I'm on my feet in a moment. Both of us are. We rush to the entrance of the cave as the sun begins to rise.

Something is floating right below the nest. It's white, like the moon.

"Is that an egg?" Isla asks.

It falls, slowly—

Then cracks open. Its yolk emerges, in sync with the sun rising from the horizon.

"The full egg represented the moon," she whispers. "The yolk is the sun."

She turns to me, and her eyes—

They are brighter than anything I've seen, even sunrise.

"That's it," she says. "That's the heart."

There it is. Right in front of me.

I smile, then sweep her off her feet before I can think better of it. We both laugh as I spin her around. Then, I shake my head. I reach over to straighten my crown, thinking it looks far better on her than it does on me.

Thinking I'll give her my crown, my heart, or anything else she might want.

"Go ahead, Wildling," I say. "Get our heart."

She smiles and turns toward the nest. The bird screeches in celebration. I lean as far forward as I can without the light burning me, watching her in awe. In admiration. We did it.

She did it.

It happens so quickly.

One moment, she's gripping the heart of Lightlark in her hand. Gold is shining through her fingers.

The next, an arrow pierces her heart.

A sound of pure agony tears through my chest. It shakes the island. It shakes the *world*.

The forest is aflame in a moment. The Vinderland have come for their revenge—for their blood—and now, they are ash.

I don't even look at them.

I look at her, now on her knees. Choking her last breaths.

No.

No.

I roar, reaching toward her, forgetting the curse, forgetting everything but her. The moment my hand leaves the cave, my skin splits open, but I don't care. *I'll reach for her until it kills me*, I think.

But I don't have to. Suddenly, someone appears.

Grim.

For the first time in centuries, I am relieved to see him. Because now, I'm positive he cares about her. I see it in his devastation as he takes in her injury. He won't let her die.

"Please," I say, willing to beg him for this. Willing to do anything if he'll save her.

He seems shocked at the desperation in my voice, on my face, but his own agony overwhelms it. He takes Isla in his arms. She goes still.

Then he does the impossible—

He vanishes.

And not just invisible. No, somehow . . . somehow, I felt Isla. Now I don't. Somehow, I know that he's gone somewhere else.

Which is impossible.

But is it?

We've always suspected Grim of having a flair. But this? Portaling? He could have used it before. He probably has. He's been keeping this a secret for centuries for a reason.

Why reveal it now? For a woman he just met?

But I can't judge him. Because the pain lancing through me right now doesn't make any sense either. I sink to my knees, I clutch the ground, and for the first time in centuries, I beg.

I beg the gods to spare her, and I don't even know why I care so much.

She told me herself. She'll be gone, back to her newland as soon as this is over. We are nothing. *She* is nothing to me.

Bitterness like poison fills my mouth.

And that's when I know for certain.

I *know*.

I value truth—though in my long life, I've tasted far more bitterness than sweetness. Lies are everywhere, all around us. Truth is the rarest thing in the world.

The worst lies are the ones we tell ourselves. And I've been lying for quite some time.

This—*this* is the moment I'm honest with myself, for the first time in months.

This is the moment I know I love her. Because that arrow went through her heart, but it might as well have gone through mine.

I love Isla Crown.

And now she might be dead.

The heart of Lightlark is twinkling on the ground, staring at me, right where Isla left it.

I've been looking for it for decades. At the start of the Centennial, it was all I wanted. I would have done *anything* to get it.

Now I wish I'd never looked for it.

I clutch her crown to my chest and beg. I beg the gods, and anyone else who might listen, for mercy. I make all types of promises.

"Please," I say, on my knees. Staring straight at the sky. "Let her live, and I will keep fighting. I will keep this hope alive for a world that lives in peace.

"Let her live . . . and I will let her go. If that's what she wants . . . if that's what this world needs . . . I will let her go."

I want her selfishly, desperately, wholeheartedly.

But I just want her to live . . . even if it's not with me. Even if I never see her again.

If she is alive, that is enough. It will be enough to know that such beauty still

lives in a broken world like this.

“Please. She is too good for this world, but I ask you to please, keep her in it.”

The hours are agony, waiting for the sun to set. I don’t even wait until it is gone, I fly the moment I know the sun won’t kill me.

The weak rays of sunset burn, shredding my skin, covering me in blood, but nothing compares to this worry, this heartbreak.

If she’s dead, I’ll never forgive myself.

If she’s dead, I’ll never know happiness again.

But the doors to her balcony burst open and—

There she is.

Standing there, breathing too quickly. *Breathing.*

“You’re alive,” I say. The relief nearly brings me to my knees. She doesn’t even have to be mine. She might never be mine, but the mere fact that she lives proves perfection exists. It proves this world has wonders in it yet. That I ever knew her at all is the world’s greatest gift.

I remember my promises. If she loves Grim . . . if she chooses him . . . that’s okay. I won’t scare her with my own feelings. I won’t tell her. She’ll never know. This isn’t her burden—it’s mine. And it is a pleasure to carry it.

“Good,” I say, straightening, trying my best not to show my feelings. Trying to harden my heart that is now burning and breaking.

I distract myself with a very different burning heart. I unfurl my fingers, to show it to her.

“We did it,” she says, relief flooding her features.

We. It’s a word I wish we could share forever. But we can’t. This is almost over.

I hand it over to her, and I wonder if she knows I’m giving her two, not one.

She’s still covered in blood and dirt. I remember now what I must do. I remember that anything she feels for me will turn to hatred soon enough. The way I always knew it would. “Bathe, Isla,” I say. “Get dressed. Then meet me in the library.”

I leave, before I can say anything more.



LOVE

I love Isla Crown, and she's about to hate me. Again.

Cleo and Azul step into the throne room, alone. A puddle of water follows Cleo, as if she doesn't trust any of us. She won't be left unarmed.

Azul's face is stern. He's worried. Of course he is.

"The curses will be brought to an end," I say, my voice serious. I should be happy, I know, but all I feel is hollow. *She will hate me for this. For meeting behind her back.*

I told her she would be safe. I meant that. But I also promised she would be able to choose another realm to save . . . and that . . . I'm not sure if it's a promise I can keep. Which ruler dies affects us all, especially here on the island. I need to know where the other Lightlark rulers stand.

"I would like you to tell me the realm you would choose to perish," I say.

"Nightshade," Azul says, without question.

I nod. Cleo hesitates. She looks from me to him. "Starling."

I had my suspicions that Cleo injured Celeste. Now, they're all but confirmed.

"And you, King?" Cleo asks.

I should imprison her for leaving Isla to die . . . and maybe I will. But right now, we need to end the curses. We need to take the final step.

"Nightshade."

If I expect Isla to choose Nightshade to save, I am wrong. When given the choice . . . she doesn't choose Grim.

She chooses Starling. *Celeste.*

And now she knows that we have all chosen Nightshade to die. She assumed I would want Cleo dead. I do . . . but not enough to doom one of my realms.

If she wants to save Celeste . . . then Grim must perish.

Regret spears me. Not just for making her angry, but that Grim has to die at all. I hate him. He's my enemy.

But that wasn't always the case.

She clearly doesn't want him to die either. She's willing to fight. Fight for *him*.

Her blade is to my throat now. The metal quivers against my neck. I could have stopped it, but I didn't. I watch her look up at me, chest heaving, eyes full of tears.

"Do it," I dare her. She won't kill me; she wouldn't sentence thousands to death. But will she make me bleed? Will she make me suffer even more than she already has?

We stare at each other, sharing breath.

Then she leaves me here, wondering if I'll ever see her again.

I should follow her. I should go to her room.

I can almost feel it—feel her getting ready to betray me. Getting ready to find a way to save both Celeste and Grim.

So why don't I hate her for it?

I'm pacing around my room when the castle jolts. I tense, waiting for the flash of pain, but it doesn't come. It's not the island, breaking.

It's something else.

Screams echo from the halls below. I'm out of my room in a flash, following them.

Part of the castle is in ruins. It's been brought down. I smell sparks, Starling power . . . but no living Starling is capable of this.

This is mastery. There haven't been masters of Starling power in years, that I know of.

Certainly not in the castle.

Attendants are dead. I use my Starling energy to lift as much debris as possible, but body after body is unresponsive. Crushed.

Celeste is still incapacitated, after the attack. And Isla would never be part of a plan that killed innocents. So, who did this?

Did someone secure a Starling bomb? I haven't seen one this strong in centuries. The amount of energy needed simply hasn't existed.

Isla. Is she in danger?

I rush to her room. I don't even think, I just go there, needing to know she's okay.

I knock—but there's no answer. I wait, and wait, and finally, I say, "I'm coming in," worried she might need me. The room is empty.

No—not empty.

The heart of Lightlark is sitting on her table, glowing through the room, shining through the darkness. Next to it sits a letter. I read it, and my blood runs cold.

No.

She's left.

She's left me . . . to go with him. She thinks she's found a way to save him. And there it is. The fire in my chest going out. Freezing over.

But through the pain, through the hurt, there is worry. This isn't right—something is off. I know it in my soul. Isla is in trouble.

Where is she?

With his flair, Grim could take her anywhere, perhaps even back to Nightshade. Is she already gone?

I remember the Starling sparks, then.

Celeste. She's immobilized. But what if she isn't? I fly through the halls, needing to confirm she's still here.

But her body is gone. She's been freed.

The Starling sparks . . . Could Celeste be capable of so much power?

I haven't paid her enough notice, I realize. Clearly, I've underestimated her. Isla thinks Azul attacked Celeste. I assumed it was Cleo . . . but maybe she was right.

Did Azul discover something he wasn't supposed to know? There's no time to ask him. Isla is in danger, I'm sure of it. If she's still on the island, I think I know where she'll go. I remember following her. I remember the place she keeps returning to.

The Wildling Place of Mirrors.

I fly as far as I can, until the barrier of power around the Place of Mirrors stops me. Then, I run.

The palace glistens, reflecting the night. My heart races. My senses narrow, like I'm back on the battlefield, focused solely on one target. Not letting anything else get in my way.

I'm inside in a moment. And that's when I see her.

At first, there's bone-melting relief that she's okay. She hasn't left yet. She's still *here*.

Then, I see the needle sticking out of her palm, connecting her to the Starling. I recognize it immediately.

"Isla," I say carefully. All at once, pain lances through me. Something being taken. The gold flowing through my veins is being drained, the fire in my heart vanishing.

My powers . . . they're leaving.

Impossible.

Grimshaw is trapped against the wall, and he's folded over too. As if the same thing has happened to him.

Celeste is here. She begins to bleed, and I see it: all six powers within her blood.

It doesn't make sense . . . until it does.

Celeste begins to laugh. She starts to speak. I shake as I force myself upright—then her arm juts out, sending me against the glass.

"How?" Isla breathes.

I can barely hear her. A roaring in my ears has muted out the world. I've never felt so weak. So drained. As if I blinked long enough, my eyes might never open again.

"Why don't you ask them?" Celeste says. She looks right at me. "Love on Lightlark is a dangerous thing, isn't it?"

I shake with rage. She's dead. She hurt Isla, and I'm going to kill her. I don't even need to hear what she's about to say. *She's dead.*

She walks over to me and sighs.

"The untrusting, cruel king fell in love with a Wildling?" She grins, and I want to set her aflame. I want to watch her burn. "It was torture, wasn't it, King? Trying to fight it. Believing yourself under her spell . . . not knowing that she had no Wildling powers to begin with, until she told you her secret."

There it is. The truth.

And so many more follow it.

Celeste is not Celeste . . . but *Aurora*. My brother's bride. Grim knew. He knew everything. He unknowingly gave her the heart of Lightlark, which allowed her to spin the curses. He was partially responsible for them, as I suspected. And according to Aurora, he and Isla have a history . . . one he made her forget.

So that she could fall in love with me.

So Isla could get access to all my powers . . . and Grim's . . . and Aurora could take them all.

The fact that Grim was betrayed by Aurora doesn't make me hate him any less.

Grim kept Isla in the dark. He didn't let her in on his plan . . . he made all these decisions *for* her.

He underestimated her.

Aurora underestimated her.

But they're going to learn. I watch them learn, as Isla manages to escape. But then . . . she does the unthinkable. She returns, with armor and blades.

She doesn't have many reasons to care about us, or this island. Still—she returned. I'm both relieved and horrified. Her face is set in determination, the fire in those green eyes *blazing*.

She is blazing.

She is magnificent.

Aurora tries to cage her, but that cage shatters.

And Isla wields the heart of Lightlark. Somehow, she's *using* it. She takes off toward Aurora, not wasting a second, the needle, the *bondmaker* that transfers power, in her hand now. Aurora wasn't expecting any of this.

Her features morph and twist, transforming back to Celeste.

Don't trust her, I want to scream to Isla.

She doesn't. *Of course she doesn't*. Isla doesn't hesitate before stabbing the woman she thought was her friend—right in the heart.

Then, the island shatters.

The world slows. I watch Isla be thrown back with the force of the curses being broken, the original offense committed again. I watch as the floor in the Place of Mirrors fractures in half.

I watch as Celeste's body falls through the gap.

And Isla's follows it.

No.

All the anguish from hours before, losing her that first time—it rises to the surface. My blood roars.

The vines around us have gone slack. Grim and I rush toward Isla. But it's too late.

Only Wildling power works here.

Her screams echo through my head, just like her singing did.

I've never known fear.

I've never known panic.

I've never known love.

I've never known any of these emotions, not really, I know that for certain when they all hit me at once, in their full capacity.

I've never known them, because I've never known her.

This can't end. No. Love like this is endless.

Through the splitting glass and roaring, I reach my hand out, reaching toward her, throwing every broken and mended piece of me through the world, ready to fall in after her, if only for the small chance I might save us both—

And I feel something.

A tether, tying us together.

Power. Wildling power.

I don't question it. I take it and use it to send a vine down after her, with every shred of focus and care and desperation and need to see her again, and need for this flame to not be extinguished.

Too late. I'm too late—

The vine goes taut.

I pull her out of the gap, inch by inch, until she claws her way back onto the floor. She looks up at my hand. I release my fist.

She knows.

She knows.

And only when she's safe, in front of me, do I allow myself to accept this truth. I used her power. I had access.

She—she *loves me*.

I love her.

And *she loves me back*.

I don't even glance at Grim as he turns and flees the Place of Mirrors. I hold her gaze, and she holds mine.

Then, everything seems to hit her at once, as she sinks to her knees and sobs.

She loves me.

We don't talk for weeks. I give her time and space, leaving tea and comfortable clothes at her door every night, as if they could offer any true relief.

She lost everything. She was betrayed.

She needs time.

So, I wait. I've waited hundreds of years for her. I can wait hundreds more.

Other duties demand my full attention. The curses are over, and the island is chaos. I've just returned from a meeting with the nobles, when I peer through my window, and see her, on her balcony.

It's the first time she's left her room in weeks.

I land carefully behind her. I don't reach for the tether between us, in fear that it might be gone. Her feelings could have changed with time. The rush of emotion could have been fleeting.

And I would understand. It would be fine. We could continue our friendship. I could continue to love her, even in secret, even if it isn't reciprocated.

Then she turns to look at me, and it hits me with knee-wobbling force.

This bridge, glistening between us.

Love.

A bond. Access to her powers.

I use it now, to make a rose. She does something unexpected, for as much as I have studied her, she still manages to surprise me. I hope to spend my entire life learning and decoding this captivating mystery.

She throws the flower off the balcony. I blink, but before I can ask her what she wants instead, she rises to her toes, and her forehead is against mine.

And she's so close. And she's staring at me the way I've stared at her, countless times before.

Like I am a puzzle she wants to decipher. Like my eyes could be half as mesmerizing as her own. I look back at her like she's the answer to a question I didn't realize I was asking. The key to a lock I didn't know I was keeping.

Find your fire, my mother told me.

When I look at her, I feel like I'm on fire. I feel like I'm burning with every single want and dream I long believed could never belong to me.

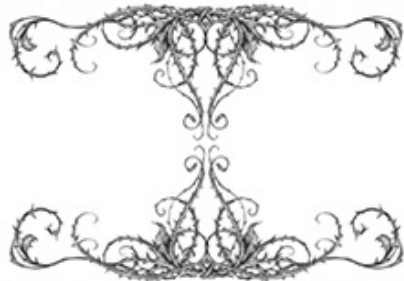
When I look at her, I feel like this world might be worth saving. When I look at her, I feel like we could be the ones to save it.

Find your fire.

When I look at her eyes, blazing green with flecks of gold, I think—

I've found her.

THE END



THE END

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