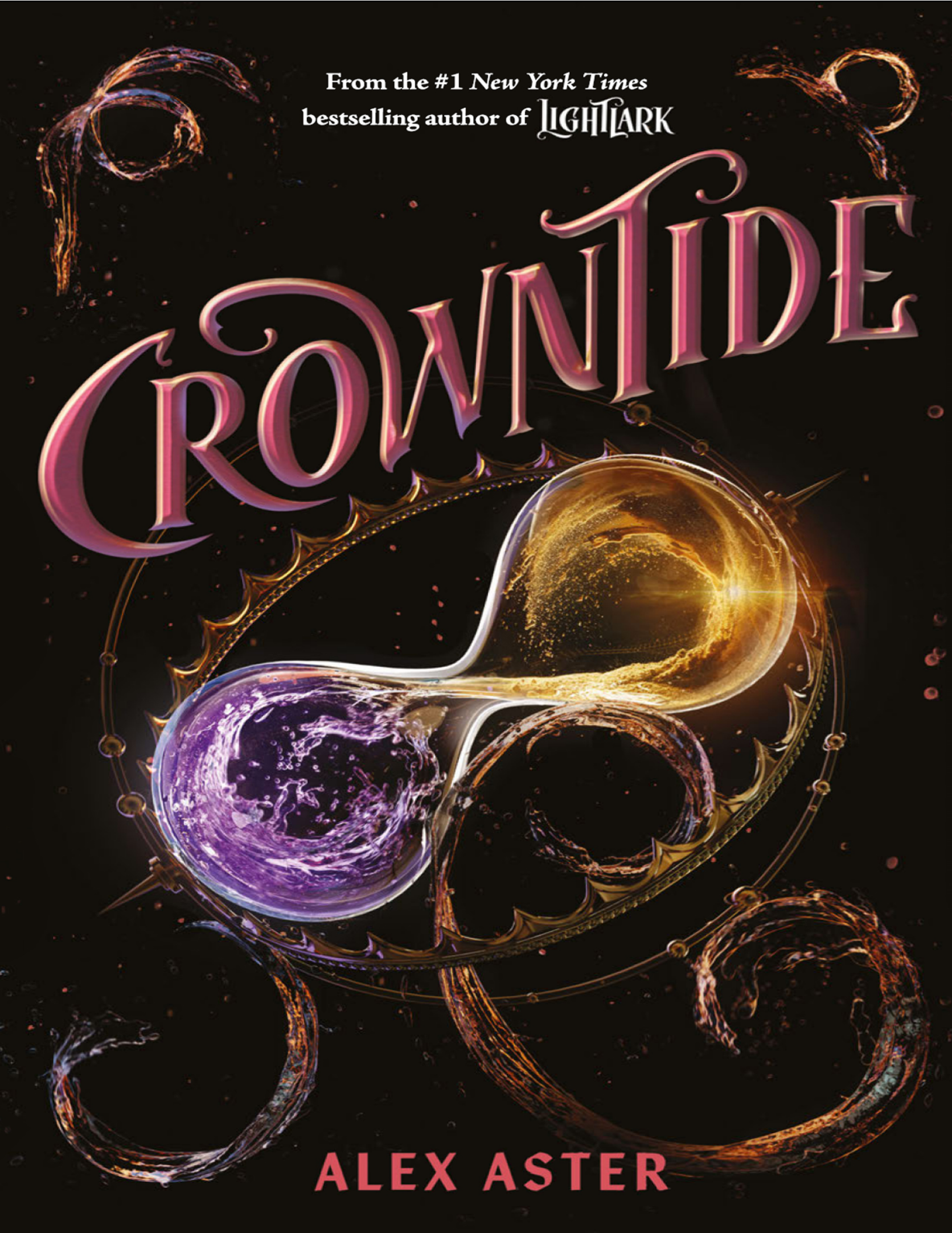
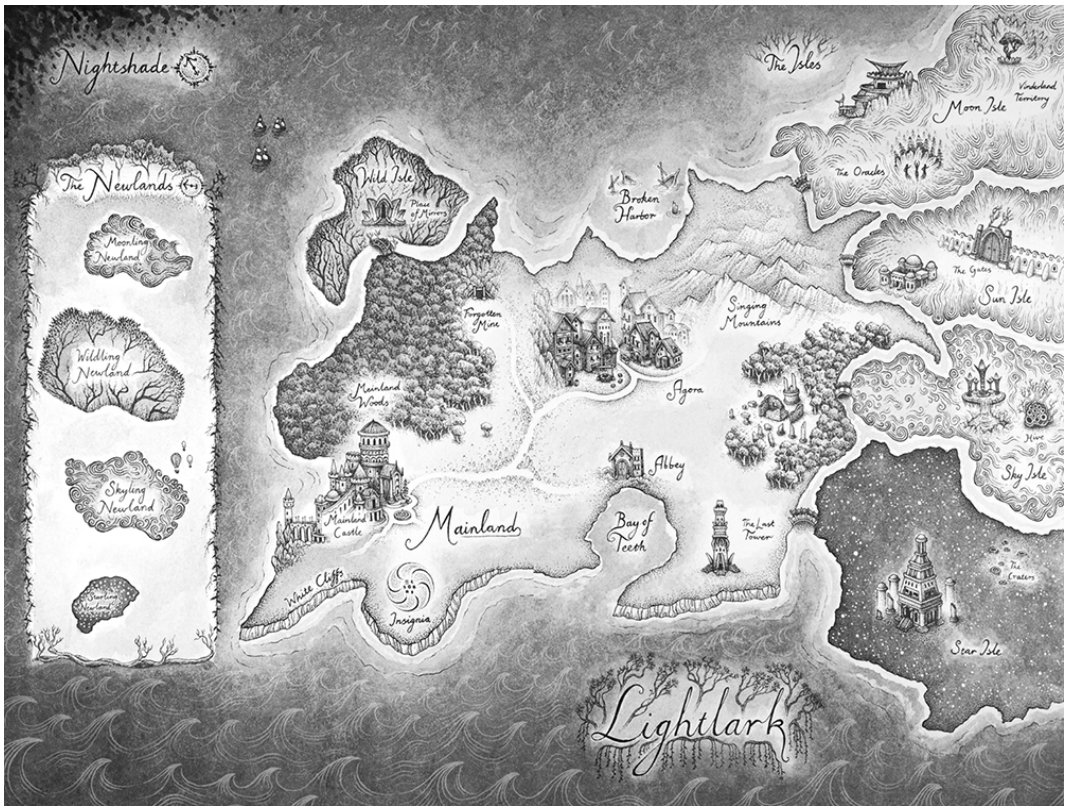
From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of LIGHTLARK

CROWNTIDE



ALEX ASTER



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ALEX ASTER

THE LIGHTLARK SAGA
BOOK 4



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ORO

Oro Rey never thought he would see Grim Malvere, demon ruler of Nightshade, cry.

But Oro watched as tears slid down Grim's face while he stared at the charred center of the maze. He held the remnants of a feather between his fingers—the only sign that she had ever been there. That, and the enormous panther roaring and scraping at the place where she had vanished.

Isla. She couldn't be gone. She couldn't have planned this behind their backs.

But Oro knew her. *He knew her*. He should have anticipated she would try to sacrifice herself in some way, to save them all from Lark Crown's destruction.

Nothing in this world could kill Lark, Isla's ancestor, so she found a way to save their world from her wrath—she opened this secret portal and brought herself to another realm entirely. The place Lark, and the other two founders of Lightlark, had originated from.

Oro had to hope there was a way for Isla to kill Lark in the otherworld, but he couldn't be sure. He couldn't even bring himself to move, not as Lynx lifted his head to roar again, the sound making the ground tremble. Not as Grim fell to his knees.

They sat in miserable silence, waiting, as if Isla would come back.

When she didn't, after what felt like hours, Grim slowly got to his feet. He took a shaking breath.

And he punched Oro square in the jaw.

Oro staggered back with the force of the blow. One he would have dodged easily under different circumstances, if all his energy hadn't left him in the wake of this crushing grief, and he hadn't already been injured.

But he wouldn’t let it happen again. Grim flew at him once more, but Oro stepped to the side at the last moment, connecting his own fist against Grim’s jaw, sending the Nightshade stumbling.

“Stop this,” Oro snarled. “You’re—”

Grim, of course, didn’t. He tackled Oro to the ground, knocking the breath from his lungs, and they rolled in the dirt in a mess of blows that had Oro spitting blood out of his mouth. They couldn’t use their powers in the maze, so they scrambled on the ground in a mess of limbs until Oro finally thought, *Fuck this*, and unleashed all his pent-up rage. It came out in a kick to Grim’s ribs, landing with a satisfying crack. In slamming Grim’s head against the ground. In pummeling Grim’s face, over and over, until Grim threw him off.

The Nightshade lunged and punched Oro straight in the nose with a sickening crunch. *Bastard*. He tasted the metallic sting of his own blood.

Grim wasn’t done. And it seemed he had grown tired of using restraint. In a flash, Grim’s blade was against Oro’s throat.

Oro stilled, the metal cold against his skin, his heart racing. Grim was right in front of him, his eyes narrowed. Somehow, they looked both overcome with emotion, and hollow, like part of his soul had been ripped away. Panic shot through him. Without Isla here, would Grim really kill him this time?

Lynx surged forward, baring his teeth. But the creature seemed torn about interfering. He was Isla’s bonded. He wouldn’t do anything that might hurt her.

And her heart was split between them.

The panther growled, but Grim did not drop his blade.

In this maze, Oro couldn’t summon his fire. He weighed the risk of moving now, of trying to break free, just as the sword’s edge pushed farther into his skin. Oro felt a flash of pain and his own blood running down his throat. He flinched, expecting Grim to finish the job and slice through his flesh completely. But instead—

Instead, all he said was, “Do you love her?”

Oro knew he should lie. Lie to this Nightshade on the verge of losing his own sanity, blood running from the corner of his mouth, eye already beginning to bruise. This Nightshade . . . who was her *husband*. And who currently had his weapon pressed right against his jugular.

But even if Oro wanted to, he couldn’t lie about this. His answer was immediate. “Yes.”

Oro expected anger, or pain, or a flash of retribution to cross Grim’s face, but instead . . . the Nightshade almost looked relieved.

“Good. I’m getting her back. And you’re going to help me.” He said it simply, like an order. Like a fact.

Then, he sheathed his blade and offered his hand.

Oro just blinked. Was this another trick? He hesitated, and Grim’s eyes narrowed. “I would gladly slit your throat right now, *king*. But I love her more than I hate you.” His gaze blazed with determination. “I love her more than anything. I will tear apart this world, and the next, and the one after that, until I find her and bring her back. Are you with me?”

Oro knew what a momentous task it would be to reach her, when they didn’t even know where to start and their own world was still fracturing around them.

But his love for her drowned out any doubts. Any fears. He remembered what he thought during the Centennial, after he realized she had survived the arrow through her heart.

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.

“I’m with you,” he said.

Centuries of hatred, and war, and—at one point—friendship hung between them. Only a woman they both loved could fuse their interests and turn enemies into allies.

It went against his duty, his honor, his instincts.

But he took Grim’s hand.

Because the only way they were going to get Isla back was together.

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GRIM

Grim Malvere had never known pain like this in his long life.

He stood alone at the edge of the maze, staring within its depths as if he could will Isla to emerge. Even when she had died, *died* in his arms, at least that agony had been useful. There was a way to revive her. An ancient, sacred, dangerous way of sharing life and power.

But now?

He didn't even know where to start. He was completely lost without her.

His portaling flair had always felt like a curse and a blessing. It was the reason all his siblings were dead. It was also his only escape from the role that had suffocated him for centuries.

Until *her*.

She was a breath of spring in the middle of winter. She was a guiding star in his dark sky, the axis on which his world turned.

And now . . . now, he didn't even know if she was alive.

No. He banished that thought. If she was dead, he would feel it. Right? He would be dead too. They shared a lifeline . . .

They shared a very *soul*. When they were together, he couldn't tell where hers ended and his began. They were one in every way.

She was alive. She had to be.

Only that faith—in her, in the persistence of *them*—kept him grounded in this endless sea of agony. The belief that one day, they would be together again.

"Nothing in this universe can keep me from you," Grim said to the night sky. He hoped, wherever she was, she could hear him. "I will rip down the constellations themselves to see you again."

Then he portaled to the table in his winter castle, where Oro was waiting. His clothes were still bloodied, but he had healed his broken nose. Washed his face. Grim hadn't bothered healing anything, and he didn't miss how the Sunling frowned at the bruise he could still feel blossoming around his eye.

If his father knew the king of Lightlark would one day be sitting here, he would have killed Grim himself.

But Grim didn't give a damn. Not when Isla's life was hanging in the balance.

Oro's irritating friends walked in a moment later. The redhead with the fiery wings. The thief he'd had the displeasure of spending far too much time with recently. The hulking Moonling who listened more than he spoke. He, at least, wasn't as annoying as the rest. Astria, his general, entered the room last. They all sat down—and looked to Grim.

"So?" Oro said, from the other end of the table. "How do we go there? How do we bring her back?"

Grim fought the urge to turn him to ash. Isla wouldn't like that. And the king wouldn't be much help as a pile of cinders, would he?

In a voice ground from the pit of his aggravation, he said, very carefully, "Do you think if I knew that, I would be sitting here, across from all of you? Do you think I would be doing anything else but going to get her?"

The redhead carelessly leaned back in a chair that was easily twice her age. "Your flair is portaling. Shouldn't you know?"

His shadows' edges sharpened, clawing against the floor.

"The portal is closed. The only other one is on Lightlark, and though I have no problem using it and destroying all of you, I know my wife would." He didn't miss the Sunling flinching at the word *wife*. Good. *Flinch, Sunling*. He looked directly at Oro when he said the next words. "I can feel her. The bond between us." The Sunling glared at him. He knew that Grim had bound himself to her in order to revive her. He should be *grateful*. He wouldn't even have *known* her if it wasn't for him.

And that was one of Grim's greatest regrets. Ever giving her the chance to love Oro. He blamed only himself for everything that happened after he had erased her memories. He had thought that he was helping her, but he had really taken away her choice. And even though she had forgiven him, he would never forgive himself.

“She’s a guiding star to the otherworld, then,” the thief, Zed, said. “Your . . . bond . . . is a map to her.”

Grim nodded. If he could only follow that thread across the universe to her. He had tried, of course, the moment he left the maze. But his portaling ability wasn’t strong enough. And Isla had taken the knowledge of how to create and close portals with her.

Grim sensed a flare of impatience from Oro, bright against the agonizing grief that echoed his own emotions. Oro seemed to understand that of course Grim had already tried to portal to her. His brows came together. “Your flair is our best shot at getting to her. So how do we amplify your power?”

Grim still wanted to kill the Sunling, but at least he wasn’t a complete idiot.

He shook his head. He didn’t have an answer.

Oro gripped the side of the table in frustration. “There isn’t anything here? Any relic? Anything like the heart of Lightlark?”

There was something—not that it would be much use to them. “Well, there is a stone. More powerful than anything else in this world . . . including your heart of Lightlark.”

Oro blinked. He clearly didn’t know what Grim was talking about.

Grim sighed. “According to myth, it’s the most powerful object in this universe, and even Cronan couldn’t claim it. Many of my other ancestors tried, over the centuries. My father included.” He frowned, picturing his father toward the end of his life, so frail that he could hardly keep himself upright on his throne. “The stone rejected him, cursing him instead.”

“Where is it?” Oro demanded, his words clipped and serious.

Grim leaned back in his chair. “It was on an island north of here, called Atlas.”

Enya’s fiery eyes narrowed. “Why did you say *was*?”

“Because I claimed it.”

Silence. Grim could feel the emotions in the room eddying together—flashes of surprise, of concern . . . of hope, from Oro.

“And where is it now?” Zed finally said, the words spilling out of him, tinged in irritation.

Grim’s eyes met Oro’s as he said, very slowly, “Around her neck.”

The Sunling’s jaw tensed. His hope withered into a flash of hurt.

Zed's hands slammed against the stone table. "You mean to tell me, the most powerful person we know of took the most powerful item in our world . . . into *another* world?"

His wife was certainly the strongest person in their history—possibly in the universe. She was the first to have access to all six realms' powers. She was the ruler of both Wildling and Starling. Through Oro's love bond, she had access to Sunling, Skyling, and Moonling abilities as well. Through Grim's, she had access to Nightshade. Not that she needed it. Her own father was Nightshade. It was in her blood.

And with so much power had come so much pain. His wife had killed many, many people. She hadn't had centuries to master her gifts. Not like the rest of them had.

It was part of why she left, he knew. The otherworld was rumored to be a place where the dead could be brought back as they once were. She wanted to reverse her mistakes. To right so many wrongs.

In a moment, Grim was overtaken with regret. He should have done more to comfort her after she had accidentally killed everyone in that village. Maybe . . . maybe she wouldn't have left, if—

The irritating Skyling was speaking again. "Let me get this straight. You claimed the most powerful object in the universe . . . and put it around her neck? What were you thinking?" Zed asked, looking a breath from breaking what was left of the windows.

Slowly, Grim turned to him. "I was thinking that the most important person in the entire universe should wear it."

Zed shook his head slowly before running his hands over his pale face and saying, "We're so fucked."

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GRIM

Grim wouldn’t sleep until he found her. So late that night, in the silence of the castle that was once full of her voice, he sat at the table and remembered the night he had decided to claim that gemstone.

It was right after he had asked Isla to be his wife. He was the first in his line to ever get married, but he knew tradition called for a diamond to place around her neck. She deserved only the most powerful stone in the universe.

She deserved Infinite.

Everyone who had attempted to claim the diamond had been killed in the process, including his own father, cursed until the end of his days. None of that scared Grim. He would risk anything to keep Isla alive for good after tying his life to hers—which he knew from the start was a temporary solution. The stone might be the only thing powerful enough to save her.

He had tried to portal directly to Atlas, the island where Infinite waited to be claimed, but there was a shield around it. No matter. He portaled as close as he could with a boat and would just have to paddle the rest of the way. The mere thought of losing her had him rowing at a frantic pace through the ice-cold water.

The bottom of his boat shredded as it washed upon a rock-crusted shore. Rising just beyond it was a wall of that same jagged stone. He tipped his head back but couldn’t see the top. It reminded him of his climb up to the ancient blacksmith, with Isla.

This place might have looked similar—but it felt decidedly different.

The moment he stepped foot on the rough crust of land, his every sense was ripped away.

He could no longer hear the waves crashing against the rock, the boat creaking with the tide. The brine of the sea vanished. His vision was

extinguished, like the moon and all of the stars had sputtered out above him. He could barely feel his own body.

He exhaled roughly through his nose as he took a hesitant step forward. The living night rippled around him, thick and heavy, pulling him like gravity.

With a flash of pain, the darkness pierced his mind and spoke in a voice that scraped the inside of his skull like a claw, circling around and around.

Take one more step, and your life will hang in the balance, it said. A warning. The last he would get, Grim figured.

But he didn't come here to cower at the first challenge. He took another step forward.

His senses returned to him in a rush. He was facing a wall of pointed black rocks. The cliffside he was meant to climb.

With a steadying breath, he gripped the pointed stones, flinching as they cut his palms, his blood running down his hands . . . and he began his ascent. He moved for several minutes without any distractions. Just him and strength that he had honed over centuries. Just the sharp bite of pain he was used to.

This wasn't so bad. Any climb was just repetition. If he could maintain this rhythm, he could make it to the top. He could do this. He reached for his next handhold—

And was on a battlefield, centuries ago. The ground at his feet was blackened ash. Before him lay a field of light green grass that was slowly shriveling away with his every step.

The legion before him was perfectly positioned. If he loosened his hold on his emotions and allowed himself to feel theirs, he had no doubt he would be hit with a wall of crushing fear. Good. They should be afraid. With a flick of his hand, his shadows shot forward, spiraling through the air like a dark wind, scything them down, then circling back, razing the entire battalion.

It was too easy. Almost boring. The men bellowed, some cried, some pissed themselves. All were soon bleeding out. Grim didn't care. They were faceless. Meaningless.

Solider after soldier fell—until only one remained. But instead of pointlessly raising his sword . . . the man raised his hands and sank to his knees.

“Please,” he said, his gaze steady. He did not seem afraid. Not for himself, anyway. “I have a wife and children I love very much. Please . . . allow me the mercy of returning home to them.”

Grim’s emotions had been folded away long ago. It was easier to kill without them. So, as the man’s lips parted in another plea—

Grim gutted him. The man choked, then looked down as his intestines fell into his hands. His expression was one of pure and utter sadness. Of surprise. Of momentous loss.

Grim stepped on his entrails on his way to the next legion he would cut down.

For years, that was his entire existence. He was his father’s sword. He lived without remorse. Without any feeling at all. Because the alternative was to be filled with regret and pain so fierce, he wouldn’t be able to withstand it. He wouldn’t be able to do what was needed, to ensure his sister’s death—along with the deaths of all his other siblings—wasn’t for nothing.

Grim’s stomach twisted, reliving the man’s demise. Seeing the desperation on his face. Now Grim knew he would do the same. He, the ruler of Nightshade, would gladly beg on his knees for a chance to spend even one more second with Isla.

The regret sunk below his ribs. And the wall seemed to sense that. It rippled back into his vision, all at once.

As he started to climb again, the darkness around him swirled. Through the quiet night, he heard the faint echoes of battle. Smothered screams. Slowly, he looked up and instead of the stars, he saw a tunnel of memories awaiting him, of all the people he had cut down during his centuries as a warrior.

Fuck. He would have to relive every death, every mistake. That was going to be his journey to claiming the diamond. He’d have to face this endless pain that he had pushed away for so long.

Everything within him pleaded to turn around. To start his descent . . .

But he knew what awaited beyond this test. That diamond could save Isla.

Isla. His wife. His world. His universe.

He thought of the way she had smiled in that field of nightbane, when he had gotten down on both knees to beg her to be with him forever. He never

knew he could feel such pure unfiltered ecstasy after centuries of misery.

She was his eternal bliss. For her, he would face anything.

So he kept going. Through the shame and regret and sadness, Isla's love was like a shield, protecting him from his worst self.

He climbed to the next death. The next. The next.

How they begged. How they fought. How they pleaded.

Over and over and over, he felt it all, crashing into him like a relentless wave, trying to pull him off this cliff. Centuries before, it would be enough to ruin him, to make him give up, to make him lose his grip on this rockface. But Isla was a rope, pulling him upward.

Reliving centuries worth of killing must have taken hours. Maybe days. He didn't know. It was still dark when he could finally see the edge of the cliff above him. He was almost at the top. His heart soared with hope.

"So," a familiar voice said. "You decided to try and claim Infinite."

He would know that voice anywhere.

Laila. His sister.

He blinked and his hands were far smaller, far smoother, as they moved up a snowy hill instead of a jagged rockface. He swallowed. Still, he continued, climbing with far less strength, before he finally reached the top of the frost-slicked mountain.

And there she was. Her cat-like eyes were twinkling with mischief. He took a shuddering breath, seeing her. He almost couldn't move. Laila was the one who had first told him about the diamond, about what *infinite* meant.

His sister sighed impatiently, shaking her head, her crudely cut hair swinging. "What is it? Still feel guilty for what you did to me?"

Of course, he still felt guilty. That guilt had nearly eaten him alive over the centuries. It was why he had turned his emotions off for years. The pain had been too great.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice that of a child. Of the twelve-year-old boy who had killed his sister when he lost control of his shadows. He was never meant to be the one who lived. He had always wanted it to be her.

Laila took a step toward him, and her smile dropped. "Sorry doesn't bring me back," she hissed, taking another step. "You knew I wanted to be ruler. You knew I would have put our realm above everything."

"I know," he said, meaning it. "I never wanted this."

She laughed, her head falling back. He could see the faint scars along her throat. “Yet, this is how it is.” Her cold eyes met his. “You promised yourself my death would not be for nothing. That you would follow your duty to protect our people.”

It was true. It was the only way he could keep going, past his hatred for his father. Past his hatred for *himself*, over what he had done.

Laila sneered at him. “Now, look at you. Beholden to one woman. Willing to risk everyone and everything for her life.”

In a flash, all those scars on her body broke open. Her throat was suddenly sliced across and gushing blood. Crimson began to seep through her clothes, until it was dripping onto the snow, dark and glittering.

“What about my life?” his sister asked, choking on the words. “What about the life you took from me?”

Grim couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t move. His body was numb, and he—no. It was too much, seeing her like this. Seeing what he had done.

She lurched toward him. He managed to break free from his panic to stumble back and heard ice falling down the steep slope of the hill. It clattered down the cliffside.

Laila didn’t stop. She surged closer and closer until Grim was nearly at the hill’s edge, and he could smell the blood on her. It puddled toward his boots. “What about our realm?” she demanded. “What about our legacy? What about all of us who died for you to become heir?”

He took another step back. He could feel the wind behind him.

She huffed a cruel laugh. “You bound your life to hers, and now every single person in your realm is at risk.” She looked at him with nothing short of disgust. “Father always said love kills kingdoms. Congratulations. It seems you’re close.”

Then, she shoved him right off the edge.

As Grim plummeted, reality suddenly returned to his vision and he saw a rush of black, his hands sliding down the rock—*no*. He gripped the wall with all his might, skin shredding in the process, and managed to stop his descent. His legs swung in the open air beneath him, his stomach turning.

Too close.

With a groan, he hauled himself higher, his palms slick with blood, his arms trembling. He found placements for his feet. His heart was racing,

right against the rockface. He closed his eyes against the memories, against the pain.

Everything he had tried to bury was rearing up, and he wasn't strong enough. He couldn't keep going.

But he had to. For Isla. For *them*.

He took a shaking breath. His soul was in tatters, but hers was forever bound to his, and he leaned on that strength. For he was not alone. He had her in his heart, and that was enough to make it through impossible journeys. It was enough to reach the pit of his strength and find that there was *more*.

This island had tried to break him. But it was no match for who he was when loved by her.

"Nothing, *nothing* you could show me will keep me from completing this climb," he said to the sky as he hauled himself up another few feet. His voice was hoarse from thirst but unwavering. "I don't care what you throw at me. I'm getting that diamond for my wife."

Through the star-speckled darkness, a voice as sharp as a carving knife spoke a single word into his mind: *Why?*

"Because I love her," Grim said, like it was the most natural thing in the world. "Which means I will do anything to save her."

The voice hummed, making his skull tremble with its resonance. *And just how strong is that love?*

"Stronger than you," he said.

The voice laughed.

"It is infinite," Grim said.

Before he could say anything else, a roar sounded from above. And a sharp, battering wind barreled right toward him. He clung to the rock, gritting his teeth as the tempest fought to tear him off. The storm howled around him like a beast. He tried to push against it, to haul himself up those last few yards, but he might as well have been fighting a hurricane. He bellowed, forcing himself forward a few inches—

And was thrust back into a whorl of memories. But they weren't his.

They were *hers*. Key moments in her life.

He saw the death of countless Wildlings, because she didn't know how to wield her powers.

He saw the village Isla decimated. Hundreds of people turned to ash. An entire village razed to the ground in seconds.

You love . . . her*?* the voice asked, shrill with cruelty. *This blight? This . . .* monster*?*

Even as this brutal wind fought to tear him away, Grim couldn't help but laugh. It echoed against the spiked shards of stone he couldn't see.

"Yes, I love her," Grim said. "I love her at her weakest, at her strongest, at her best, at her worst. Ours is not a perfect love but a bleeding one. Not a flawless love but a relentless one. I have seen the worst in her, and she has seen the worst in me. And yet . . . I love her as much at her worst as I do at her best. I love her for everything she is and everything she isn't. And that . . . *that* is why our love is infinite."

The voice seemed to consider his words. Grim felt it wriggling through his thoughts, as if searching for any hint of hesitation or deception. *And if she betrayed you? If she . . . killed you?*

He laughed again, a huff against the cold night air. "Then I would thank her for giving me any of her time at all."

The wind fell away. Grim almost fell with it. But he kept his grip, and the only thing that was left was that voice, buried in the darkest corner of his mind.

What do you want most? Why do you truly want this diamond? Power? Riches?

Grim didn't waste his time, hurrying up the rest of the rockface, and said, "I don't want power. I don't want riches. I want something far more precious. I want *her*. Forever. Until the end of time, and then a while after that. That is *all* I want."

He could feel a claw scraping through his thoughts. Through his very *soul*, with blade-like precision. Burrowing. Searching.

His body tensed as he felt a cut deep within himself, but he did not stop moving. And finally, that voice was ripped from his head. Along with a small, critical part of him.

Finally, his hand gripped the edge.

He pulled himself into a cave and collapsed against the ground, his heart hammering against the smooth, lustrous stone. He had used almost all his strength, both physical and mental. Finally, he looked up, dark hair

plastered to his face in sweat. And there, in the center of this cave, sat a magnificent black diamond.

He could feel its power in his bones, in his blood, in his soul. Endless, infinite power. Calling out. Drawing in. Awakening. Uncurling.

He was struck by how much he didn't want to claim it. He didn't want more power.

But it wasn't for him.

"Will this save her?" he asked the cave.

And in its echo, he heard a response. *It will give you your greatest wish*. Them. Together. Forever.

With that, he reached for the diamond.

And he claimed it.

In that moment, he knew for certain that it was the most powerful object in the entire universe. He could feel the ancient energy shifting within the gem.

The journey was worth it. All of it, every obstacle. This would keep her safe. It had to.

For Grim had the unsettling thought that Isla's troubles were only just beginning.

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ISLA

Isla Crown felt the force of this world in her teeth. The moment she and Lark were through the portal, she used all her abilities and every shred of power from the god-bone she had used to carve a skyre over her heart to seal it closed. Then, she hit the ground with a bone-breaking crash.

Only her father's armor, made of unmatched metal and fashioned by the blacksmith, had kept her in one piece. Sand scraped against her lungs, and she coughed, then sucked in putrid air, her ribs rattling as she attempted to breathe steadily. Finally, she retched.

Her throat burned with acid. It took several moments to blink away the fog over her vision, like a smear of tar, but then her senses sharpened as she looked up.

The sky.

It was a glorious swirling of color, mixing like paint to form shades she hadn't ever seen before. It was beautiful—like a sun had smeared itself across the sky. A band of silver threaded through it, sparkling like melted down stars.

She finally lowered her gaze, taking in the rest of the world before her. Her heart dropped. Panic seeped through her veins.

This world . . . It was not the one she had imagined.

There was nothing here. Nothing but ash spreading in waves in front of her as far as the eye could see. It felt almost like sand, but it was a dull silver, mixed with black, like she had landed in the middle of a shredded nighttime sky.

The last few moments slammed into her with full force.

Lark.

Isla whirled around and found her ancestor there, in the ash, convulsing and screeching. Her body had been torn open by the journey, but Isla

watched as her ancestor’s skin began slowly stitching together again—although noticeably slower than she had on Lightlark. The two sides of her split chest didn’t completely meet, but she managed to finally take a shaking breath.

Lark had funneled power from this place, through the storms. Isla had assumed her ancestor’s abilities would be heightened here, but they weren’t. This was her chance to end Lark once and for all. Isla rushed at her, then nearly collapsed, her strength drained to the dregs from opening and closing that portal. But there was something else. Something strange about this place.

This world . . . it was like a vise upon her bones, a second gravity, a weight on her mind and energy.

Her powers. She reached for them and found only the thinnest shreds. Something was blocking her abilities.

On instinct, she reached for the diamond between her collarbones, but, of course, nothing happened.

How was she going to defeat Cronan without her abilities? How was she going to bring back everyone she had killed? How was she going to save her own life, and Grim’s, after he bound his to hers?

She didn’t have much time. The augur said her limited life-force would only last until the end of winter. That was just days away.

The power that once could have saved her life was clearly gone. This was a world of ashes and ruin.

“You idiot,” Lark managed to say, even with her chest still gaping open.

Then the sand beneath them began to shift, razing her bare skin as it turned into ropes and chains.

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ORO

“She needs me,” Oro said. Isla had only been gone hours, but he felt her absence like a gap in his soul. It would be so easy to allow himself to go hollow, for the embers of himself to extinguish beneath this grief, but instead, he had to ignite. For her, he had to find his strength even within this panic.

“The island needs you,” Enya said.

Oro and his friends were back in their favorite floor of the Mainland castle. Grim had portaled them here, at Oro’s request, while he went to calm Lynx and his dragon. Both creatures had become inconsolable in Isla’s absence.

Enya was right. Lark’s turmoil had left the island in pieces. Most of his people were gone, portaled to the newlands, for their own safety. Many who had remained had already been turned into undead soldiers by Lark.

His duty was to his people and this island. He knew that.

And yet.

“I need to do this,” Oro said. “I need her.” He didn’t miss how his friends glanced at each other. He also knew they wouldn’t keep their thoughts to themselves.

“And what if this world is better off without her?” Zed finally said. At that, fire flared in Oro’s hands. Zed studied the flames and kept speaking. “Try to take your heart out of it, Oro. Isla Crown is now the most powerful person in our histories. Possibly, in the entire universe. Do we really want her back here?”

“Yes,” he said, without missing a beat.

Zed continued as if he hadn’t said anything at all. “Maybe . . . this was the best thing she could have done for everyone. She rid us of Lark. She

sacrificed herself to do so. Maybe . . .” Oro’s jaw clenched as he predicted his next words. “Maybe she doesn’t want to be found.”

He’d had that thought before, right after he and Grim had beaten each other to bloody pulps in the maze. Isla knew the danger of her powers. She knew the pain and havoc those abilities had already brought unto this world. She knew the prophecy and that it meant killing either him or Grim . . .

Maybe Zed was right. Maybe she was trying to outrun the prophecy. Make it so she wasn’t even in the same *world* as them. Maybe she thought it would be enough to change her fate.

But Oro knew, deep in his bones, that Zed was wrong. This world needed Isla. She had endless wonder. Endless hope. She always saw light where most would see darkness. It was why Oro had fallen in love with her. She was his reminder that this world could be better. She was his light in dark places. She was his eternal summer.

And this world would need her light and her abilities to rebuild. She was a worldmaker, just like Lark. She could restore the island to what it once was.

“We’re better off with her here. We need that power,” Oro said. He had to convince his friends that this was true. He couldn’t do this without their help.

Calder sighed. Everyone turned to face the Moonling, the wood of his seat sagging beneath the weight of his towering form. “She is the most powerful person to come from this world. She is wearing a necklace with a diamond made of pure power. We need her back.”

Oro sagged in relief, before Enya said, “And I bet there are those in that world who want that power for themselves. Other worlds too, maybe.”

Including Cronan.

There it was. His worst fear. That Isla would be in trouble, and Oro would be stuck worlds away. Terror crept through his blood like ice. The necklace she wore was bound by her marriage oath to Grim and could only be released with her death. What if Cronan found her? What if he wanted that diamond? What if he—

The thought had him gripping the sides of his chair until the wood broke off.

He stood. “I’m getting her back,” Oro swore, circling the room. “Not just because I love her.” He caught a flash of pity in Enya’s eyes. “But because

this world is better with her in it."

"And how far will you go?" Enya asked.

Oro remembered what Grim said. That he would tear apart worlds if he had to. Oro knew deep in his soul that he would do the same. As a rule, he tried not to lie. He wouldn't start now. "To the ends of the universe," he said.

That was when Enya finally looked afraid.

His oldest friend opened her mouth—but before she could say a single word, Grim appeared in a torrent of darkness. His shadows shredded the ground, circling impatiently, reflecting his storm-like mood. There was a long claw mark along his side, the fabric of his cape torn.

Clearly, Lynx was angry. Oro couldn't blame him.

"Well?" Grim demanded, completely ignoring Oro's friends. "Any thoughts?" When no one immediately responded, he said, "She was already close to death when she left. We have just days to get to her."

Panic bled through his chest. Oro didn't know how they were going to create a portal. Or how they were going to amplify Grim's powers. But the more he thought about Isla's plan to take Lark into the otherworld, the more he became convinced that she would have had help from someone who wanted her to succeed.

"We need to talk to Cleo," Oro said.

The Moonling, it turned out, wasn't hard to find. In fact, she was in the captain's quarters of her white oak ship as if she was waiting for them. When they portaled inside early the next morning, she didn't even seem shocked.

She looked between Oro and Grim with the faint air of interest. "Both loved her, and both lost her, is that it?"

Grim's shadows sharpened at her words. Oro stepped toward her, anger racing through his veins, hot and pulsing. "Yes, and thanks to you, I assume." His gaze traveled to her throat. The Moonling wasn't wearing her necklace. She had worn it all throughout the Centennial, and afterward. Isla had told him it had to do with the child she had lost.

Cleo didn't even attempt to deny it. She simply lifted a shoulder. "She offered me a chance to get my son back. I took it."

Oro mulled over her words. If the Moonling wanted to see her son again, that meant she had a vested interest in not only helping Isla make it to the otherworld . . . but also helping her *return*—with Cleo's son, brought back from the dead.

Though he had never liked Cleo, partially due to what had happened the first time they had met, empathy eroded part of his fury. He looked at her now and saw that she wasn't cold and heartless at all. She was a mother who would do anything to hold her son again. Just like he and Grim would do anything to save Isla.

"Then it seems our interests are aligned," Oro said.

Now that he was in front of the Moonling, he remembered a conversation he'd had with her many months prior.

"You told me during the Centennial that the oracle gave you alone an additional prophecy. She said everything would change, five hundred years after the curses were spun."

Cleo nodded simply. A wave crashed against the side of the boat, rocking them to the side, sea-foam melting down the cabin's windows. "She did."

Grim took a step forward. He had been quiet up until now—shockingly—but it seemed his patience had worn thin. His voice was scraped from the night itself as he said, "Tell us what else she said." Shadows filled the cabin, smearing most of the sunlight away, and pointing into a dozen razor-sharp blades, all aimed at Cleo.

She barely spared them a glance, instead gazing at Oro and Grim in disdain. Oro was momentarily taken back in time to when she was his merciless Moonling instructor. Always looking at him like he was inadequate. She had almost killed him during his first night of training.

"If you think these shadows scare me," she said to Grim, "then you are laughably wrong. I have faced the worst pain imaginable. *Nothing* scares me." She bared her teeth at him. "I want my son back. That's the only reason I helped her, and why I'm not throwing you both off my ship."

Grim's expression said that he would like to see her try, but luckily, Cleo kept speaking.

"The oracle said half a millennia after the curses, everything would change. This world would sit on the edge between complete doom and prosperity. She said someone born of life and death would decide the fate of this world. That this person would be marked by halves. Half curse, half

cure. Half day, half darkness. This person would need to choose one side—without losing themselves in the process."

He swallowed. This described Isla perfectly, and he was struck by how painful that would be . . . to live a life of halves. To be split.

He hated that she had been put in this impossible position, with an impossible choice. It had all been fated long before she had even been born. He had never wanted to be king, never wanted to bear so much responsibility on his shoulders . . .

But being king didn't compare to the weight she carried—the weight of this world.

"There was something else," Cleo said, almost reluctantly. "The oracle spoke of a war between worlds."

"Worlds?" Grim asked.

The Moonling nodded. "A war that would decide the fate of the entire universe."

Dread coiled through Oro's gut. Their world had been through enough, with the curses, then the war between Lightlark and Nightbane, then Lark. He thought back to before the battle, when huge stretches of land on Nightshade had been reduced to ruin. How Lark had made an army of the dead. How hundreds had already been lost.

They couldn't survive another conflict among themselves . . . let alone one *between worlds*.

"It has a name, this war," Cleo said, breaking the uneasy silence that had settled over the room.

"What is it?" Grim demanded.

"Crowntide."

He and Grim looked at each other. For a moment, Oro could see them as they were—enemies who would have to align not only to find the women they both loved . . . but to protect their world from destruction.

Cleo continued, "I always knew a portal would be opened someday. I never lost hope that there was a chance to get him back . . . I just didn't know which side would serve me best."

Oro ground his teeth. Cleo was a traitor. But he tasted the sweet honey of the truth within her every word. He didn't doubt that she was motivated to tell them everything she knew. "If war is coming," Oro said, "we need Isla here. On our side. How do we reach her in the otherworld? Do you know

anything? Anything that could amplify his portaling flair?" He motioned toward the Nightshade. His shadows were still sharpened into points.

Cleo leaned against her desk, her white dress pooling around her feet. She searched Oro's face before finally saying, "Your father was searching for a power his entire rule."

A fold formed between Oro's brows as he remembered how his father had sent countless emissaries and warriors out during his reign, clearly looking for something—for what, he wasn't sure. He always assumed his father was trying to discover more lands. Though his father was a strong king, Oro never agreed with his relentless pursuit of *more*, his greed for what lay beyond the borders of the island.

Begrudgingly, he realized his father and Grim's perhaps weren't that different, in the end. Both always wanting more, and willing to sacrifice members of their realms to get it.

Are you still pretending we're so different? Grim had asked him, centuries before. Oro brushed away the memory.

"How do you know that?" Oro asked. His father's actions were kept secret to avoid judgment from his people. Sending warriors away from their own shores would not have been a popular decision, especially when the war began with Nightshade.

"My sister," Cleo said. Of course. Her sister had been ruler of Moonling long before she was. "Your father enlisted her help, since his search involved the seas."

"What was he trying to find?" Oro demanded, a seed of hope sprouting in his heart. Maybe it was just what they needed to get to Isla.

"Not what," Cleo said. "Who."

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ISLA

Isla and Lark had been dragged through the desert for a full day.

A half dozen people in gray tunics with scarves wrapped around their noses and mouths had easily overpowered them. Isla had tried to fight, had tried to summon any shred of power, but just like the ash beneath her feet, it slipped right through her fingers. She didn't even have the strength to lift Cronan's sword.

They bound Isla's hands and took everything on her, including the sword, the orb containing all the storms she had used to defeat Lark, and the god-bone in her pocket. They even took her armor.

They tied her bindings to the back of a cart, with Lark strung up next to her, and then her and her ancestor were being launched forward. They both fell face-first into the ash. Isla's mouth was filled with it. Her chin was being dragged. It took every ounce of her little remaining energy to stand, and then, there was no choice but to walk.

In Isla's world, Lark had been unbeatable. She wielded ancient power, as the original founder. Here, she had been captured just as easily as Isla had. Her chest was still partially open. She was panting now, like it was almost impossible for her to breathe.

This world had brought even Lark to her knees. And that made dread spill down Isla's spine.

As they trudged on, Isla's head bent forward, away from the sun that seared even through the strokes of color. She studied the strange, glimmering ash for hours. It was similar to the desert on Sun Isle that she had trekked through with Oro. But this was not sand at all.

This was a place reduced to *ruins*.

The dunes shifted in color, from silver and black to faded stripes of green and blue that almost created a map. It seemed as if entire forests and

streams and fields had been turned to dust and ash in mere moments. As if this desert use to be a vibrant world that was flattened and extinguished.

The power she had come here for . . . the one that was supposed to undo all her endless wrongs . . . was gone. She felt just the whisper of it, like scattered flecks of rubble.

Something happened here. *Someone* happened to this place.

And she had a feeling that she was about to see who that was.

Good. That would lead her straight to Cronan, without having to use the blood in his sword to track him down. But then she took in her situation. Tied to a cart. Powerless. Weaponless.

If she was going to have any chance at surviving this, she needed to make a plan. She studied her captors. They never spoke to each other. They hardly even looked at their captives. One sat on the horse that pulled the cart—its contents covered with a thick fabric.

The rest of them were fanned out . . . almost like guards.

Guarding from what? If Cronan ruled this world, and they were being taken to him, who would dare come between them?

And if Cronan's power was portaling . . . could he not simply portal them to him?

At least their captors clearly wanted to keep Isla and Lark alive. They would've killed them ages ago if not. Instead, they were forcing them to walk, trying to tire them out.

Fine. Isla would give them what they wanted.

She took one more step, before stumbling forward and falling to the ground.

Her shoulders screamed as her body was dragged through the ash by her wrists. The ropes dug into her flesh. She waited for several minutes, wondering whether she had made an error in strategy.

Then, the cart stopped.

Whispers erupted around her. She couldn't make out the words, but it was clearly some sort of argument. If she could only hear what they were saying . . .

It wasn't long before the sand shifted with approaching footsteps, and hands were hauling her up.

Then Isla was roughly thrown into the cart. She was immediately hit with a stench that made her almost retch. After a moment, the cart began to

move again.

And Isla palmed the handle of the dagger she had just stolen from her captor. She got to work on her bindings and barely avoided cutting herself as she was jostled forward, her legs crashing against something solid beneath that tarp. A corner of it lifted.

An unseeing eye looked back at her.

She fought the urge to scream. She lifted up more of the tarp to reveal a face, twisted, bloodied, and mangled. Behind it was a mess of limbs in a clumsy pile. As if these people had been caught between portals and ripped apart.

These weren't Cronan's men, Isla realized. They were scavengers. Picking up anything that had fallen into this world. She swallowed down bile at the rot that permeated through the raised corner. It seemed her and Lark might be some of the only beings they had discovered who were still intact. That's why their captors hadn't injured them yet—they were more valuable alive. But to who? For what? The wooden cart itself was likely of extraordinary value, given the fact that Isla hadn't yet seen anything resembling a forest on this planet.

She didn't even want to think about what they planned to do with them. Isla slowly resumed slicing the rope around her wrists after glancing at the scavengers. They were hardly paying attention to her, still fixated on whatever awaited them up ahead.

Their constant surveillance, the way they kept their blades strapped to their fronts, how their arms were slightly raised as if ready to wield these sands at any moment . . . it made Isla wonder what, exactly, they were so afraid of.

The last thread of her rope snapped. She let out a choked whimper as the material fell away from her wrists. The skin was rubbed raw. Her bracelet with her mother's charm, the one that contained a piece of her flair, was cool against her stinging skin. It was a reminder of everything she had left behind in her world. All of her plans. All of her hopes.

She wouldn't let these scavengers come between her and everything she had fought for.

Isla turned to Lark and saw that her ancestor was in far worse condition. Her chest was still leaking blood. She may have had access to some power, more so than Isla . . . but clearly not enough. She wasn't healing.

Isla would like nothing more than to leave her here, but she needed to find a way to end Lark so she could absorb her power and bring back all the people she had killed.

So, with the bulge of the contents of the cart covering her from view, she began to work on her ancestor's rope.

The moment her dagger pressed against the cord, Lark's head snapped up. Her eyes met Isla's.

Green. Just like hers. It might have been nice to have a family member that was still alive, if this one hadn't tried to kill her on countless occasions. Not to mention nearly destroying her entire world. And turning people Isla cared about into monsters.

Isla looked upon her with nothing short of hatred. Lark simply smirked. She shook her head, almost amused.

Idiot, she had called Isla. Only Lark knew exactly what Isla would face with Cronan. Only she had known him, and what he was capable of.

And if he had been the one to flatten this world, to turn it to dust . . . she had already vastly underestimated his power.

Lark's rope snapped and she stopped walking. Her smirking face slowly got farther and farther away. Isla looked around, to see if anyone had noticed.

They hadn't.

She waited a few more seconds before reaching into the tarp, frowning as her hand brushed rotting skin. Her fingers searched until they finally locked around something smooth and solid. Cronan's sword. She set the dagger down and took this instead. She found the god-bone tucked against the well-worn wood. The orb of storms was next. Her armor was all that remained. It was in pieces, and she slowly rolled each one off the cart, into the ash. They landed soundlessly.

Then, with one last look at the captors, she lurched into the dust. She braced herself, sword in hand, ready to fight.

But the cart kept going. The scavengers walked on.

Only when she couldn't hear the wheels anymore did she slowly stand. She began following the path of her armor, collecting the pieces, cresting lazy dunes of faded color that finally led to Lark. Her wretched ancestor was simply waiting. Looking right at her.

Isla’s body felt boneless, but she hobbled forward. Her ancestor’s ribs were gaping open. Isla could almost see her heart beating, unprotected.

Maybe the god-bone would be enough to end her life. She gripped it in her hands, willing strength into her body. And then she lunged forward, the tip trained on Lark’s heart.

Her ancestor didn’t even move. She just kept smirking.

And before Isla could reach her, she was dragged back with breathtaking force, as if the ash-desert had turned into a hand that wrapped around her body. She slid through the dunes, until she reached her captors, who stood above her.

They clearly had power in this world, when Isla and Lark didn’t. Did that mean they were loyal to Cronan? Were they somehow immune to this vise she felt over her like a poison? She had carved a skyre into her skin from the metal of his coffin. It had allowed her to use power in the maze. Why wasn’t it working now?

The sword, bone, pieces of armor, and orb of storms were wrenched from Isla’s grip, and she was too weak to stop them. A sharp kick struck her side, and she gasped with pain.

And then she was hauled to her feet and tied to the cart.

Her side ached as she hobbled along. Her eyes began to close. She stumbled as she tried to keep walking, wishing she had just stayed in the damned cart longer, stench or not. Rest would have done her some good.

Isla blinked, eyes dry and crusted in sand—and before her, the endless expanse of desert and ash became a glorious mountain range, with flower-speckled glades and rivers spilling down its center.

She jolted and blinked again—but it was gone. Only faded blue and green and brown ash remained. Isla frowned. She remembered the desert she had been in with Oro. Skyshade was supposed to be the bigger version of Lightlark, and Isla had seen visions in that desert too. The sand had been laced with enchantment that had plunged her into memories, that had made her see things that weren’t real.

Was that what this was too? A mirage?

There was a rough pull of the cart as the horse sped up, and she saw it again—an endless forest full of colors so bright and vivid she could

practically taste the flowers. Redbuds, violets, magnolias, orchids, so many that they spilled over themselves.

In the next moment, only their ashes remained.

Isla frowned. No. This wasn't just an illusion. Somehow, she was seeing what this world once had been. As she walked, she could feel tremors of power, there, then gone, as if entire cities had been buried. Entire histories. Wars and creatures and relics and people turned to nothing but dust beneath her boots.

She couldn't help but imagine this happening to her own world.

No. She wouldn't let that happen. She was here to fight for everything and everyone she loved. Including her husband. He had given his life for her, he had started a war for her, he had been ready to turn their world to ash, just to save her.

The image vanished. And as Isla looked around this ruined place with nothing but dust for miles, dread crept through her stomach.

If Cronan had ruined this world . . . had he done it out of love? Or hate? Did the reason even matter, if this was the outcome?

Her life was nearly gone now. She needed to find a way to keep herself alive without needing to be tied to Grim's soul, so that he wouldn't have to continue with his destruction in her name. Because she knew he would do anything to permanently save her.

And she was afraid of what that might mean.

She shook her head, shifting her thoughts.

Oro. Instead of star-swept skies, his love felt like a beach, like summertime. They started as enemies, constantly bickering, and somehow, that hatred became trust. Then friendship. Then . . . love.

A part of her ached as she remembered when he first said that word to her. How he had held her through her nightmares. How he had been patient, and kind. How he had taught her control.

And then watched her lose it.

Still, even after all she had done, after she had left him for Grim to end the war, after she had remained there afterward, he still loved her. She could feel the faint string of that love now. Grim's too.

The prophecy said she would have to choose one of them. She would *kill* one of them.

She refused. She refused to be a pawn in a grand destiny written centuries ago. She would forge her own fate.

And it all started here.

She wasn't sure how she was going to get out of her situation, but she would keep going, keep walking, until she did.

The sand began to tremble. The cart stopped. Her captors whispered rapidly to each other, lifting their hands to wield. The guard closest to her took a step—then let out a gargled scream as her feet were dragged into the ground—

And her body was drained of all its water and blood.

It happened in half a second. One moment, she was there. The next, her body was falling forward, and all that remained was folded, shrunken skin. The scarf had fallen off her face. Her eyes were popped, as if even that liquid had been taken. Her skin was thin as paper, nothing but flaked tissue. Her teeth were parted in a lasting scream.

The creature was beneath Isla now. She could feel it, stirring the sand. She looked over at the cart, wondering if she should leap into it, or if her movement would make her more of a target.

Before she could decide, the scavenger closest to her dropped his dagger. The sand shifted as the creature raced toward him.

His body collapsed in a pile of folded skin a moment later—and, before the creature could claim another victim, another scavenger parted the ash with his power and stabbed his sword straight down.

There was a high-pitched wail. The ground stilled again.

Isla looked over at her ancestor. Lark's expression remained neutral, like even this didn't surprise her. It made her wonder what else awaited them in this world.

The bodies were left behind. And they kept going.

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ORO

“Your father was looking for a lost king.”

Oro frowned. His was the only royal line he knew of.

“Horus,” Cleo continued, speaking of Oro’s ancestor and one of the three founders of Lightlark, “left behind a record, and a map, with orders that it should only be used in the direst of circumstances.”

This was the first time Oro was hearing of it—yet another piece of knowledge that hadn’t been shared with him, since he was never supposed to be king.

Why had his father even been looking for a lost king? During his father’s rule, up until the war, things hadn’t been dire at all. They had been prosperous. Had he anticipated Nightshade would strike? Had he told Egan about this, and not him?

“I’m assuming my father never found him,” Oro said, remembering how the explorations were halted by the war.

Cleo shook her head.

Grim held out his hand impatiently. “The map,” he said, the words a firm order. And for once, Oro was almost grateful for his presence. Because learning all of this about his family had him unmoored. Distracted. Which he couldn’t afford to be, when every moment could mean life or death for Isla.

He fought to take a steady breath. What was she facing now? What did she need? It killed him that he didn’t know, the same way it had when she had left with Grim to end the war. Oro had flown for days just to see if she was alright. He wished he could do that now. He would fly for centuries to her, if he could. Millions of miles. No distance would be too far.

He knew the Nightshade felt the same, which made this circumstance even more frustrating. They both would travel any distance . . . but they

didn’t have a road. They didn’t know *how* to get to her.

Even through his panic, Oro still had a duty to his people. He still had to worry about this Crowntide Cleo spoke of.

Grim clearly didn’t care about an impending war between worlds. He didn’t care about Oro’s family’s secrets. He only cared about getting Isla back, and that, Oro knew, made him villainous—but it also would be an advantage.

Cleo frowned at Grim’s hand before taking it. Oro took Grim’s next. And as soon as he did, Cleo’s white-oak ship faded away in a stomach-turning mess of shadows. The pale wood floor became ice. The Moonling’s most mysterious and powerful relics floated below the thick layer of frost.

Grim had portaled them to the Moon Isle library. During the Centennial, Isla had come to this place in search of what she believed to be the bondbreaker. Oro knew because he’d had Zed follow her here. Before that, Oro had tailed her himself. He had followed her in the skies, from a distance, until his curiosity with her grew into a strange, distracting obsession. The night Isla went to Moon Isle, he had decided to send Zed in his place, thinking time away from her would help. It hadn’t.

No . . . back then, no matter how many times she lied to him, no matter how infuriating she could be, Isla had consumed his thoughts, his worries, his dreams. He had truly wondered if he was losing his mind.

Nothing had changed since then.

Cleo’s white boots clicked along the ice as she stepped over relic after relic. Beneath her feet, objects fluttered in the current, drawn to her power. Swords and daggers and shields glimmered as she passed them.

Finally, she stopped and knelt, as graceful as a cresting wave. Then she punched right through the ice, sending chunks scattering around her. When her hand emerged, it was holding a compass.

“I thought you said it was a map,” Grim said. Cleo simply tossed it to him.

Oro walked over as the Nightshade studied the compass. Closer, he saw there wasn’t an arrow inside . . . but sloshing water. The liquid defied gravity to pull toward one direction, as if telling them where they needed to go. As if this small bit of water was desperate to return to where it had been taken from.

Grim didn’t waste a moment before walking over to the closest column —and shattering the compass against the wall.

“What—”

Glass stuck out of Grim’s hand, but the Nightshade didn’t even seem to feel it, or the blood and saltwater dripping down his skin.

Grim didn’t even glance at Oro as he smeared the water between his thumb and finger, eyes narrowed in concentration. He seemed to be sensing the location of their destination by touch.

And fuck him, but Oro was impressed.

Without a single word, Grim outstretched his hand once more.

Oro and Cleo took it, and were gone.

They landed on an isle in the middle of the ocean. Before Oro could even blink, he was almost swept away by a massive surge. With his Moonling power, he split the water in half so that it missed him. It would have hit Grim right in the center of his chest, if the demon hadn’t made himself formless to avoid it.

Oro turned to see Cleo frowning at his stance. “You never were best in your class,” she murmured, as if she really couldn’t help herself.

The clump of rock they were standing on was almost too small to fit the three of them. Waves churned on all sides, sweeping over their feet and legs.

This was the place his father had spent years trying to find. The reason countless of his men had perished. Oro imagined even with the compass, they could never reach this place without an incredibly powerful Moonling.

The advantage of Grim’s flair was clearer than ever.

Still . . . there was no lost king here, that was certain. But Oro looked to Grim to find he was gazing *down* into the water.

“Somehow . . .” The Nightshade scowled. “Somehow, it’s—”

“Underwater,” Cleo finished.

All Oro could see was dark blue swirling in massive waves. The lost king must have been deep below. “How—”

Cleo took a deep breath. She sunk into her stance, her feet sliding against the rock, and yes . . . Oro’s paled in comparison to hers. Her white dress and its overly long sleeves whipped wildly in the wind. Her hair, its shade identical, was tied back into an elaborate single braid. She closed her eyes. Exhaled.

And the raging water before them went deathly still. The waves smoothed under her command. The sea was hers, pliant, ready.

Oro's throat went dry, shocked at this control. At the scale of it. Cleo was a famed wielder. Powerful. Skilled. But even this was beyond expectation.

She dug deeper into her stance, lifted her trembling arms—

And cleaved the sea in half.

The ocean roared as it parted down the center, creating two endless waterfalls on either side. The space grew and grew until it reached the horizon and rippled down beyond his view.

Oro craned his neck to look, but the drop was so long, he couldn't see the bottom. Only darkness. Still, he could feel it. A strange power slithering up from the gap that Cleo had made. Something—or someone—was down there. Waiting.

"Go," Cleo ground out, her eyes still closed. "I will hold."

Her arms were already shaking. The amount of power needed . . .

"We don't know how hard it will be to find him," Oro said. "It could take hours. *Days*."

Her eyes snapped open. "I will hold," Cleo said, her gaze fierce with determination. Oro could hear the words she didn't say.

I will hold for him. For her son.

Cleo. Ruler of Moonling. His former instructor, his subject, his *enemy* in the war against Nightshade, who had taken Grim's side.

Now . . . she might be their only hope at getting Isla back. Finding this lost king might be a fool's errand. But they each had a reason to try.

Oro turned toward Grim, who was considering the endless drop. There was no hint of hesitance in his expression before he jumped.

Oro followed.

He flew downward using his Skyling powers. Grim didn't have anything but his shadows, but they flared around him like smoke, slowing his descent.

They had to have traveled for miles until, finally, Oro saw a glimmer of the ocean floor.

All at once, he felt something in his blood be ripped away—like veins being torn from skin. The wind vanished. His powers guttered out. His eyes widened as the ground rushed up to meet him. He barely had time to get his hands in front of his face before he roughly crashed, Grim right behind him.

Fuck. Everything hurt. Slowly, he felt around to see if anything was broken. He breathed—and winced. A couple of ribs. Nothing else, at least, he thought, as he slowly got to his feet.

Oro swallowed as he looked up at a sky that had nearly been blotted out. Yes . . . they were *miles* below the surface. How were they possibly going to make it back without their powers?

Grim stood next to him, his face tilted toward the sky too. Blood was streaming down the side of his head. He didn't seem to notice. "If Cleo loses her grip on her abilities . . . we're dead," Grim said. He couldn't portal them away, and Oro couldn't fly them out.

"She will hold," Oro said, hoping he was right.

All they could do now was move forward. Oro breathed deeply, grimacing at the pain in his ribs and forcing his panic down. He needed to remain calm. Rational.

He turned to examine their path. It wasn't wide, but it was long, the craggy stretch of land marked with misshapen rocks. A small hill blocked the rest of his view. But this world below . . . it almost resembled the one above, as if someone had sunken an entire island down here. Why? What were they hiding from?

When an ancient bellow broke through the silence, followed by dozens more, Oro realized perhaps what was down here was not *hiding*—perhaps it had been *hidden*.

With one glance at each other, they ran up the hill—and stopped dead. Mile after mile, there were hundreds of people and beasts chained to the seafloor. Half-rotted, their clothing just color-leeched tatters. Oro looked to the side through the curtain of water and saw that there were more.

Shackled by their feet, they writhed in pain, grasping their necks. They twitched and eventually stilled, only to lurch to life a few moments later. Oro and Grim watched in silence as they drowned. Died. Revived. Only for the process to be repeated. Again, and again. For eternity, it seemed. An endless torture.

No, this wasn't just a land, hidden away.

It was an ancient prison.

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ISLA

Hours later, the horse began to slow.

It seemed these scavengers didn’t have much water. Isla’s throat burned with thirst as she watched the captors argue over a pouch before giving it to the horse. Another one of them looked up at the sky, eyes narrowed, shook his head, then stalked over to the cart.

He lifted the tarp, and Isla dry-heaved at the stench. With hurried movements, and yells of indignation from the others, he began tossing bodies onto the sand. All of them mangled. Some missing entire limbs. He threw them far and wide.

Then, they kept going. They only made it a few minutes, down the side of a dusty hill, when the same man suddenly tensed, body jolting. He turned.

An arrow was sticking through his brow. He stepped once more before collapsing.

Isla ducked as all hell broke loose.

Arrows whistled through the ash-heavy air, landing in the sand, until one pierced right through a scavenger’s chest. He went down. The dust turned crimson below him. Only two remained.

One of those two raised her arms, and the sand in the distance shifted like a blanket before dancing in the air like a glittering galaxy. A muffled scream sounded as someone was buried, and the arrows stopped.

Isla turned toward the sound of a battle cry as six people crested a dune, weapons raised. Their swords and daggers were no more than scrap metal.

Her two remaining captors swept their arms in coordinated movements, and the sand smothered them all like a tidal wave.

The desert trembled with their screams and attempts to claw their way out. It didn’t seem like they had powers . . . or perhaps they could not

access them, not like her captors could. The scavengers kept their hold, until the fight stopped. Only then did they retrieve their lifeless bodies. They picked at them, emptying their pockets. There was a shout of triumph when a canteen of water was found, followed by two others.

One of those canteens was roughly pressed to Isla's lips. This close, she noticed something around the scavenger's neck. A shard of glittering silver. Not shademade metal, no . . . almost like a piece of a storm. Was that why some could wield, and some couldn't?

Her hair was roughly pulled back, forcing her to drink. Not that she needed to be forced. She gulped the water down desperately. Some of it drippled over her chin, and the way her skin stung made her realize she was burning in this heat.

Lark didn't need water like Isla did, she knew that. Her ancestor had been trapped for centuries underground by Cronan. But the block on her abilities here had clearly taken its toll. Lark accepted the water, surprising Isla with her ability to keep still and quiet. Why wasn't Lark trying to get away? Was she saving her energy? What did she know that Isla didn't? When the scavenger left, Isla watched Lark's chest slowly piece together, a little closer to fully healed.

The bodies were left behind as the cart kept moving.

Isla needed another plan, another way to escape. Who knew where they were being taken, and what awaited them there?

Still . . . she wouldn't survive out here on her own. Not with the creatures that lurked in the sands, and the scavengers, and the clear lack of resources.

Though this world had been decimated, there were clearly survivors. They had to have food. Shelter. But where?

Did they all serve Cronan? Did they fear him? Could she try to make allies?

Who would listen to her? She wouldn't even want to work with her, powerless as she was. She didn't know anything about this world, beyond this wasteland. Maybe she could speak to her captors. She hadn't tried yet.

"Where are you taking us?" she said, her voice rough and hoarse.

They didn't even glance at her.

"Do you serve Cronan?"

Isla noticed the slight tightening of one of the captors' shoulders. Still, they all remained silent.

"What is that around your neck?"

Silence.

"Do you—"

Lark clicked her tongue. "My line certainly devolved over time. Coming to another world without a single plan . . ."

Isla flashed her teeth at her. "My goal was to get you far away from my world," she spat. "This is where you're from. You're home." Isla's eyes dipped to the still gaping chest. "It seems you're not welcomed here."

Lark said nothing. She just looked at Isla as if she was a fool with no idea what she had walked into.

Cronan, Lark, and Horus—the original Nightshade, Wildling, and Sunling founders of Lightlark—had escaped this world to build a better one. They had taken their people with them.

Only now did Isla wonder what, exactly, they had been escaping.

Had Cronan turned this place to ruin after he had returned? Or had this been why they fled in the first place? Why had the others taken Cronan with them?

Lark knew the answers to these questions. Of course, she did—she had been there. But Isla knew she wouldn't tell her. Lark only smirked, as if she could sense Isla's thoughts.

"So young. So reckless," Lark said. "Solving one problem by creating an even greater one."

Isla had a retort on her tongue when she felt something hit the top of her head with a force that made her jolt. An attack? No. A cool droplet of water slipped right between her brows.

Rain.

She slowly lifted her head to the sky, only to see that its color had abruptly darkened into violet and blue, closer to the sky back home. Other parts were purple and green. The rain picked up slowly, wiping her face clean of the dust that had coated it. She opened her mouth and nearly cried as the fresh water smoothed down her throat.

Though rain was a welcomed sight in a place like this, Isla knew something was very wrong. Because these scavengers had defended their loot for days. Against creatures. Against other scavengers.

But at the first sign of the sky turning, they abandoned their cart and prisoners—and ran.

The weather was intensifying into a storm. Isla could feel its energy, just as she felt the force of the ones that had formed over Nightshade. This tempest, though . . . it was infinitely stronger.

And though the storms on Nightshade—brought in from Skyshade and filled with shademade metal—had leeched her powers . . . the ones here seemed to have the opposite effect.

Her abilities awoke, one by one, and it felt better than the sip of water in the desert. It felt like sinking into a cold pool. It felt like she could finally fully breathe. She groaned, stretching out her fingers. She could feel her blood igniting, her strength returning.

She wasn't the only one.

Lark laughed, long and slow. She straightened, flexed her hands—and broke through the rope. As the sky began to shift, she rolled her shoulders back, and her chest healed before Isla's eyes.

Lark turned to Isla, gaze blazing. "You really should have stayed buried," she said. She lifted an arm over her head.

Above, a storm portal opened, as if called to her power. Through the swirling clouds, it looked like a window to another world completely, one with an endless stretch of enormous trees. A thick forest of towering pines.

Lark made a fist—and sent it all hurtling down toward Isla.

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GRIM

Now that these bastards weren’t being drowned, they were *screaming*. Grim guessed it was the first time they could, for possibly centuries.

He wished they would shut the fuck up.

This was clearly some sort of jail. He himself had been imprisoned long enough to recognize the shackles very well.

A flash of the past blinded him. He remembered that first day, when he had been thrown into the cells on Lightlark, after his father had lost the war. Grim had been ordered to live on the island, as part of the treaty.

And he remembered how Oro had come to visit him.

“What do you think they did to get sent down here?” the Sunling asked by his side, shaking him from the past. Neither of them had taken a single step forward, both studying the clawing, crawling prisoners below.

“It can’t have been good,” Grim said simply.

The closest man to them finally noticed their presence. He was scraping at the ground, hands bloody, as if he could possibly exit this cruel fate, when his head suddenly snapped to the side. A crab crawled through a hole in his decaying face. His flesh-rotten lips curled back, revealing long fangs.

He lunged toward them—then was thrown back as he reached the end of the shackles. He raged on, undeterred, snarling with foam pooling from his mouth. Grim noticed how the Sunling flinched away from the prisoner and almost laughed. *Coward*.

Some of these people, and these beasts, were clearly not of their world. Was this where the worst prisoners in the universe were sent? How had none of them known about it?

When Grim saw the metal of their shackles up close, he understood why their powers didn’t work here. It was the same type of metal that Isla once had made for herself to cut herself off from her abilities. Down here, with

hundreds of chains, they didn't have to be wearing the manacles to feel their effects.

He hated this material. Grim remembered the day Isla had walked into the dining room, wearing those damned shademade bracelets.

Seeing her in his head, even for that moment . . . it was enough to push him forward. Right toward that fanged man throwing himself toward them, over and over, hunger clear in his eyes. Did he feed on flesh and blood? It seemed like it. And it seemed like he was starving.

They all probably were, Grim guessed. He pulled his sword from his scabbard.

"Do you have a weapon?" he demanded, staring at the miles and miles of prisoners instead of at his companion.

"No," Oro said from somewhere behind him.

Grim rolled his eyes. Of fucking course not. He wasn't surprised that the ridiculous Sunling king would rely only on his power. With a long-suffering sigh, he threw Oro a dagger from his pocket, backward, with perhaps a bit too much force. He had half-hoped that the metal would pierce through his chest, but he heard the Sunling catch it.

Unfortunate.

Oro joined him, wincing as he moved. Grim guessed he had broken a few ribs on his way down. The idiot. To his credit, he didn't let that stop him as he nodded to Grim once—and bounded forward.

The fanged man shot toward the Sunling, claws extending toward his chest. Oro cut him down with a simple slice through the air.

The man fell to the sand, his throat slashed open. *Not bad*. Grim immediately buried that thought with revulsion.

Oro was busy fighting off the next prisoner. This one was covered in scales like a snake and had eyes red as rubies. The Sunling didn't see the man to his right, who had ripped a jagged piece of dead coral from the ground—and was lifting it over his head, ready to strike.

Grim sighed, hesitating for a moment before sending his blade soaring through the air. Oro tensed—then turned, taking in the metal going right through the prisoner's face. He glanced at Grim. The surprise in his expression—that Grim would save him—was clear. Grim almost rolled his eyes again. Obviously, he needed the Sunling's help to get his wife. He had made that clear. Otherwise, he would have let him die a long time ago.

He stalked over, ripped his sword from the prisoner who was somehow still standing, and kicked the corpse away, snarling, “Watch your back, so I don’t have to.”

Grim turned, faced the long stretch of prisoners straining toward them with unfettered hunger in their eyes—

And he smiled. Because he might have felt kind of bad about killing people before, after meeting Isla. But if these prisoners were standing in the way of him getting his wife back . . . well, they were fair game, then.

He stretched his neck to the side with a satisfying crack. Took a deep breath. And raced forward.

Blood spattered. Bones broke. Rotted organs and scattered limbs turned the sand scarlet.

Yes, he really was good at killing. It was too bad he had developed somewhat of a conscience recently.

It was also unfortunate that Oro was actually an asset. It would be far easier to despise him if he had continued to be deadweight.

Even with broken ribs and only a dagger, he cut down everything in his path. Side by side, they battled through the prisoners in their way, leaving only chained corpses behind them. In a place like this, he wondered if death was a mercy. If maybe they were doing them each a kindness. That was irritating.

“How do we know none of these are the lost king?” Oro asked after a stretch of wordless fighting. Blood sprayed as he cut a mountainous form down.

Grim shrugged. “We don’t.” He sliced the head clean off a creature with milk-white eyes that had tried to gut him with a jagged shell. “But I’m guessing if he’s powerful enough to help us, he won’t be so easily cut down.”

Oro raised a brow. He kicked away a prisoner who had thrown himself in his way. “But he’ll have gotten himself imprisoned?”

Grim sighed. Forget being grateful for the Sunling’s presence. He would have preferred the silence. “I don’t know, Oro. Why don’t you ask each of them before you kill them? Have a little interview while they’re trying to rip your throat open?”

Oro scoffed. He kept going, putting his dagger through the stomach of a horned creature with green, leathery skin.

They must have been battling prisoners for hours at this point. Cleo's arms had been trembling before they left, but he had to hand it to the cold witch. She was holding strong.

For now.

This was taking too long. He reached for the connection between him and Isla, the thread that had been strong as iron just days ago and now felt as thin as a spider's web. His powers were smothered here, but his love wasn't.

I'm here, he told her through their bond, as if there was any hope of her hearing him. *I'm coming for you*.

Grim fought with a renewed vigor, surging ahead of Oro. "Try to keep up, will you?" he said over his shoulder.

He was surprised to hear a laugh. He looked back at the Sunling, who was wiping entrails off his shirt.

"Still think you're better than everyone, I see," Oro said, shaking his head.

Grim scoffed. "No. Just you."

There was a huff of disbelief beside him as the golden king caught up.

"What?" Grim snarled.

Oro shrugged a shoulder. He sliced another throat. "It's surprising you think anyone is better than you."

No. Not just anyone.

"She is," Grim ground out as he buried his sword through a prisoner's half-eaten stomach.

The smirk on the Sunling's face vanished. Good. He hoped Oro would just shut the hell up, but he said, "It seems you changed your stance on love, then."

Grim was plunged back into memories of centuries before. When he had been chained to a wall in the prisons of Lightlark. The Sunling prince had come to see him almost every day—carrying rage and sadness with him. At first, his visits were taunts. He nearly burned Grim alive the first time.

But the more they talked . . . the more Grim saw they weren't so different at all. Oro realized it too, eventually.

Grim could feel the Sunling's emotions shifting over time. Rage diminishing. Annoyance turning to amusement.

Hatred . . . turning into friendship.

During one of those many conversations through the cell gates, Grim told Oro that love was for fools. *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*. The Sunling had laughed in response.

"No," Grim said, as he fought off another scaled beast. "I still think that love is for fools." He shrugged. "But she makes me not mind being one."

Oro was quiet for a few moments. They sliced through bodies in silence. Then, he said, "It must have been hard."

"What?" Grim said, gritting his teeth as he approached a prisoner with claws as long as the dagger in Oro's hand.

"Watching her fall in love with me."

Grim's fingers flexed against his weapon. For a moment, he lost his focus and hissed as one of those claws managed to slice against his arm. The pain brought him back into the present, and he buried his blade in the prisoner's stomach. He ripped it out, and blood splattered over his clothes.

He nearly turned his sword on the Sunling himself. He wasn't sure if Oro was trying to make him angry, or get back at him, or if he was simply having a conversation. Down here, he couldn't use his abilities to sense his emotions.

He cut down the next prisoner instead, not deigning to give the Sunling a response. Still, Oro kept speaking.

"You hurt her," he said, his voice filled with barely leashed fury. His movements became sharper. He dragged his dagger down a prisoner's midsection, then kicked him away. "You took away her memories. And when they came back . . ." He growled as a being with spikes on its palms tried to shred him with them. He threw his dagger into its eye and retrieved it in a flash before moving on. "I was by her side. And do you want to know what she did?" He didn't wait for Grim to answer. "She cried, almost every night. It was *agonizing*, having so much history rush back. Having an entire story she had lived erased and then returned."

Grim suddenly wished he hadn't saved the Sunling's life, but he knew he couldn't be so enraged. Oro was *right*.

Still, he whirled to face the Sunling. "You don't think I regret it every day of my life?" He blindly cut down the next prisoner. Then the next. "I was trying to save her. I thought—I thought you were the only way."

“What about the necklace?” Oro demanded, his hand covered in blood as he buried his dagger into yet another heart. “Its power?”

“It wouldn’t have worked,” he said simply.

Once Grim had claimed the diamond, he realized that he misunderstood its capabilities. The diamond only amplified powers that already existed. Isla’s life was tied to his—and barely holding on. Even if that, itself, was amplified, it wouldn’t have been permanent. No, they needed to go to the otherworld, where life could be brought back for good.

In the end, he decided to give it to her during the Centennial, when killing was permitted. He thought it was the best way to keep her safe, since he couldn’t openly protect her. All she had to do was pull the diamond, and he would come for her.

Now, he wondered if he had sealed her death the moment he clasped that necklace around her neck. Cronan must have wanted that stone . . . and his ancestor wouldn’t hesitate to kill Isla to get it.

Grim shook away the thought, gutting another prisoner. Oro frowned but kept fighting. They didn’t speak for a few moments, but it was like the Sunling couldn’t help himself.

“It didn’t have to be like this,” Oro said, roughly. “We were . . . we were . . .”

Friends, was the word he couldn’t say.

That made Grim pause. Suddenly, centuries’ worth of rage rushed to the surface, and he huffed a cruel laugh. “Yes. We were friends. Until you accused me of starting the curses. Until you *didn’t believe me* when I told you I didn’t, even though I *know* you fucking *knew* I was telling the truth.” He had guessed at the Sunling’s flair a long time ago, during his time in the cell. Oro had made it obvious, with his ridiculous questions.

Grim saw a hint of regret pass over Oro’s features.

It did nothing to calm his fury. “You were my only friend, and you didn’t believe me,” Grim said, turning to face him. “You didn’t believe your own power.” He bared his teeth. “It was as if you had been waiting that entire time for a reason to hate me.”

Grim supposed he had given him another reason, after taking Isla’s memories away. After invading Lightlark again. But by then he had long given up on their friendship.

Grim shook his head. “Even after you invited me to the Centennial, when you had another theory about who started the curses . . . you still looked at me like an enemy.”

Oro barked a laugh. “Yes, and good thing too, considering you were planning on *killing me* with Aurora.”

That had been his plan. To have Oro fall in love with Isla, gain access to his abilities, then for Oro to die. Open the portal. Save her for good. It hadn’t been personal against the Sunling, not really. At least that’s what he told himself.

They both glared at each other, before they started battling again.

“It must have been hard,” Grim spat, taking his anger out with every blow.

“What?” Oro said tersely. He seemed to be doing the same.

“Losing her.”

It was Oro’s turn to clench his jaw and grip his dagger so tightly, Grim thought he might break it.

“You know how hard it was,” Oro ground out, before he lunged forward once more.

Silence. Just their groans and the roaring prisoners as they fought forward an inch at a time. Grim tried to focus on the task at hand, tried to forget the Sunling was even next to him, but the same thoughts and fears circled his mind until he finally voiced them.

“Isla is my wife,” Grim said. “She chose me. She was living with me . . .” He turned to look at the Sunling. Their blades swung at the exact same speed. They were both dripping in blood, having killed hundreds of prisoners so far. “Why fight this hard for her?”

He needed to know the Sunling wouldn’t betray them. What if he planned to use the power they claimed down here for something else? He couldn’t take that risk.

Oro shook his head in near disbelief. His gaze locked onto his, for just a moment, and it was full of intensity. “Because I love her enough to want her back, even if it’s not with me. Can you say the same?”

The Sunling shot forward before Grim could respond, leaving bodies in his wake. Grim trailed behind, thinking about what he had said.

If Isla chose Oro . . . would he ever accept that? Would he ever stop fighting for her?

A few months ago, he would have said no. But now . . . after seeing the pain of taking away Isla's choice . . .

If she chose Oro, he would have to accept it. But he would never stop loving her. Never stop hoping she would change her mind.

He hated the flash of pity he felt for the Sunling, and the realization that, yet again, they were not so different.

"You've made the same mistakes I have," Grim said, back next to him.

"No." Grim could see the anger steadily building in Oro. If they weren't on these enchanted lands, he was sure that fire would be shooting from his palms. "I didn't take Isla's memories away. I didn't make decisions for her." Oro looked him up and down in pure disgust. "Isla deserves better than you."

"And what is that?" Grim scoffed. "You?"

"At least I've been honest with her. I've trusted her."

Grim's laugh lacked any mirth. "You love the Wildling part of her. The creation. The goodness. You resent that she's Nightshade. You flinch at her darkness. I love *all* of her. I don't recoil at her mistakes. Unlike you."

Oro returned the same humorless laugh. "And look what happened. She killed an entire village . . . for *you*. You fed that part of her instead of helping her find her way back to herself."

"It's who she *is*," Grim snarled. "She is both. Light and dark. Together."

"She might be Nightshade," Oro said, "but she is not a monster. She doesn't want to be. She runs from that side of herself, yet you . . . you bring it out of her. You *make* her the monster you want her to be, so that the monster within you isn't alone."

Grim recoiled as if he had been struck. No. That wasn't what he did. He *supported* her, no matter what. He didn't judge her. He wasn't making her into a monster.

Oro gave a bitter chuckle as he twisted his dagger, wrenching it from the ribs of a wailing prisoner. "You don't even know how you've corrupted her, do you? You just care that she's yours. You don't realize she's only yours because she's so ashamed of what she's done that she thinks all she deserves is a monster like you."

The breath shot out of Grim's lungs. That couldn't be true. Isla loved him. He knew that. Before everything that happened, before she destroyed that village, she loved him.

He shook his head, rejecting the Sunling's biting words. "She is my wife. I do not need to prove our love to anyone, least of all you. We will be reunited, and we will begin our life again. Together. We will have our family." Grim strode forward, slicing his weapon to the side, gutting yet another fanged creature.

Oro just laughed. "Family? You think you'd make a good father?" he said. "You, who was responsible for the deaths of all his own siblings? Who killed his beloved sister to ascend the throne?"

Grim stumbled forward, shocked into silence. He had told Oro that fact centuries ago, in confidence. It was one of the most traumatic events of his life. And for him . . . for him to *throw* it in his face . . .

Fuck this.

Fuck working together. Fuck *him*.

He growled as he whirled around—and hurled the Sunling through the wall of water. Oro's body was swept away, and Grim watched smugly as he had to fight back to land. He finally emerged a few yards from Grim, gasping and sputtering. A prisoner lunged for him, and he hardly stabbed the man in time. Oro looked up at Grim through his wet hair, eyes blazing with fury.

They both launched at each other, weapons lifted—until the ocean walls shuddered around them. Grim turned to Oro with open panic. They needed more time, they hadn't found the lost king yet. Never mind the fact that if Cleo lost her hold, they'd never make it back to the surface without their powers.

The sea roared, and Grim thought this might be the end, but then steps began punching out of the wall of water, over and over, forming haphazard stairs that hardened into ice.

They looked at each other, blades still raised. They didn't need to speak to know what this meant. Cleo was tiring out, and she was giving them a way back to the surface. They had to hurry.

Hot fury toward Oro was still burning under Grim's skin. But as they glared at each other, they shared a silent understanding. Their love for her came first. Hatred for each other came second.

So, they turned and started sprinting.

They fought recklessly, razing prisoners down in bloody arcs, not caring if they caught a claw or fang here and there, not slowing as guts coated

them from head to toe. They moved as one, Oro ducking to stab a prisoner in the shin to stop him in his tracks, Grim cutting off his head.

“He’s close. He has to be,” Grim said, as the prisoners became more creature-like. One was a scaled beast sitting on a pile of skulls. Grim wondered how he was able to feed down here, until he noticed the closest bodies to the creature were missing their heads.

Oro paused, realizing the same thing—that to reach those prisoners while chained itself, the creature must have a way to get close. They both came to a stop just as the beast opened its mouth, revealing row after row of teeth. He noticed something arcing above the creature’s head and realized it was a horned tail, cracking forward, ready to split them into pieces.

It was a scorpion. A giant fucking scorpion.

Grim gripped his sword and prepared to attack when suddenly a whip-like tongue shot out, heading right at him. He lifted his sword to cut the tongue clean off, but the creature was smart. Its tongue darted around his blade and wrapped around his body, pinning his arms to his sides. He heard his sword thud against the sand before he was being pulled forward.

The tongue’s hold was like a vise. He couldn’t move, and he roared as he tried. This monster would not stop him from getting to that king. From getting to Isla. But he didn’t have powers here. And without his sword . . .

The beast’s tongue constricted, and he felt a rib shatter. Fuck, it hurt. He should have given Oro more credit.

The barb came rushing down, straight toward his chest. Grim closed his eyes, anticipating the pain of being ripped apart and—

There was an ear-splitting howl as something shattered all around him.

What the—? Grim blinked, only to see a thousand pieces of silver raining down as his spine hit the sand, the beast’s tongue spasming next to him. Oro must have cut it off with Grim’s sword and blocked the stinger with the blade. And the stinger had *broken it like it was no more than a toy, and not an ancient relic*.

“Get off your ass,” Oro snarled, pulling him to his feet, just as the stinger came down again, right where he had been.

Grim stumbled after Oro and ran as fast as he ever had in his long life, the scorpion right behind them. Its chain was longer than the others. It didn’t seem to have eyes, and as the stinger cleaved down around them with little aim, Grim guessed that its tongue had been its main sense. Sand

scattered as the tail carved deep holes in the ocean floor. One strike missed his leg by only inches.

The scorpion was fast, nearly upon them now. “Jump!” Oro yelled.

Grim leapt forward as far as he could, rolling when he hit the ground and bracing himself for impact.

But it never came. He slowly looked back and saw that the chain had finally pulled taut. He and Oro laid beside each other, gasping for air, watching as the scorpion roared, its barb reaching just a foot shy of them.

“Thank you,” Grim breathed, begrudgingly.

Oro sighed. “Don’t say that.”

“Why?”

Oro turned to him. He looked tired. His crown was off-kilter and filthy. “Because then I’ll really think the world is fucking ending.”

Grim shook his head. He stood and offered Oro a hand. The Sunling had saved him. They had saved each other.

They were both battered and bruised, sporting broken bones and covered in guts. But together, they crested another craggy hill—and stopped in their tracks.

Because there, sitting alone in the distance, was the lost king.

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ISLA

Wood struck Isla in the chest, sending her flying. The moment the bark pierced her skin, sparks rippled down every inch of her body, as she took hold of the energy surging around her. The skyre on her arm that helped control her power ignited.

And that forest that Lark had sent at her roared as she shaped the trees into a thousand daggers, then threw them back at Lark.

The shards pierced her ancestor's head, her chest, her legs. Her bones split. Her skin tore. Isla tried to catch her breath, daring to hope that she had finally put an end to Lark once and for all.

But Lark stood before she had even fully pieced herself back together. Her broken face still managed to form a smirk.

Then, she shot forward, and Isla rushed to meet her. She rode a stream of energy, right toward her ancestor.

She called upon the objects that had been taken from her, and they soared from the cart on a current of Starling energy. Every slice of armor pieced together onto her body, gleaming, forming in seconds. The god-bone flew into one palm, and Cronan's sword appeared in the other. The orb of condensed storms floated in front of her, ready to be broken open.

Before Isla and Lark could collide, a bolt of lightning struck right between them, sending the world rattling and Isla careening away from Lark. Isla hit the sand then slid, her armor the only thing keeping her skin from ripping apart. In the sky above her, she could see portal after portal forming. As if called to both their powers.

Before she could react, the sky split in a roar of thunder—

And began raining creatures. Beasts that were just like the bodies in the cart—twisted and mangled, as if the journey from world to world had changed them. Still, most of them were alive. They screeched, their howls

as loud as the thunder itself. Jolts of lightning illuminated them in brief flashes.

Her eyes widened. These were no ordinary creatures. She watched as sheets of water turned midair into winged beasts, as if formed from the storm itself.

It was there, from her back, that she saw the first knight land.

He came in a beam of light, and the very ground quivered from the force of his arrival. As he stood from his crouch, she saw his armor seemed shaped into his very skin. The sword he wielded was larger than her entire body and made of pure, rippling shadow. Its hilt was shademade metal, but she could sense it had been reinforced with power, just as her own armor had been. The weapon seemed forged of storms, of pieces of other planets, of power she could feel in her skull.

He wore a helmet that covered most of his face, but through the slits that would reveal eyes, Isla could only see emptiness, a void dark as night.

And as she looked at him, she felt something in her pulled toward him, like her marrow was called forward. As if this knight and his weapon were *taking* something from her very being.

He took a step toward her.

Another knight landed in a flash of light. And another. Right between her and Lark.

This was not random. Whoever these knights were . . . they guarded this world. They had sensed Lark and Isla, somehow. Did they work with Cronan?

Slowly, Isla stood. The knight took his stance. She took hers.

He swung his blade of shadows, and she reached for everything the storm gave her—water, nature, energy, wind—and intertwined it all into a stream of glimmering energy.

Their forces clashed together, and thunder rumbled above. Her powers should have sent him flying back, should have shattered his weapon, but they didn’t. He stood his ground.

Another knight rushed at her.

Isla pulled him into the ash-sand, using her Wildling abilities to swallow him whole. But his blade broke through a moment later, and with a burst of energy, he shot up into the sky. There he remained, surrounded in crackling

power, wielding his massive sword in an arc. From its shadowblade, a wall of obsidian burst forth.

It struck her in the chest, and her armor shattered around her, breaking back into pieces. Leaving her vulnerable.

This was crafted of shademade metal. It had withstood every attack—even Lark's—back in her world.

But this was a different place entirely.

And even in this storm, even with the skyre on her skin that had allowed her to break through the hold on her abilities in the maze, as the darkness seeped through her chest, the seed of power within her withered. It was as if the knights were a void themselves, drawing her power away from her core. She felt the energy coursing off her and looked down to see her very aura being stripped, deep red lifting off her skin. Her soul burned, as if it was being fractured. *Taken*.

No. She tried to fight it, but the knight's power pinned her to the ground. Above, the storm became a mess of wings and teeth as the twisted creatures feasted on each other. Blood and skin and limbs rained upon them. A massive tooth skewered the place right beside her. A broken spine landed at her feet.

Lark was a few paces away, dueling three knights at once. Isla saw that same energy being leeched off her. Her ancestor's hold was loosening. She would soon fall.

Isla didn't know if this strange void-like power would kill her ancestor for good, but she knew *she* needed to be the one to end Lark, if she was to revive the innocents she had killed. This world was nothing like she had thought, but she had to believe there was still a way for them to return, still a *purpose* for this journey.

Just as the knight took a step toward her, another bolt of lightning split the sky in half. She saw the flash of another world, a portal forming there, and was reminded of looking into a keyhole . . .

Even as the knight lifted his sword to strike with that void-like power once more, she kept her eye trained on that portal, and realized it was different than the others. The larger ones were surrounded by far more energy, crackling around and around. But this one . . . this was a tiny tear in the sky. Through it, she saw the same strange shade of clouds that covered Skyshade.

This portal wouldn’t take them into another world. It would take them to another part of this one.

Using portals was dangerous. She could be ripped to shreds in the journey, should her theory be wrong. But down here, with the knights, her fate was sealed already. She had nothing to lose.

The knight had reached her. His shadows burst forth. And Isla focused on Grim, and Oro, and the hope of escape, as she clenched that seed of power within her, through the shadows smothering it—

And broke free.

She shot forward, taking hold of Lark’s arm before soaring into the sky with every shred of Skyling wind she could summon. Her ancestor thrashed, but Isla used her Starling abilities to snatch her armor from the ground, and she forced the pieces over them both, fusing them together.

The knights were right behind her. She could feel her energy being pulled away. She could feel her grip on her powers loosening.

Just a little longer.

She stared up at that portal, its edges closing, and scraped the bottom of her strength to fly faster. Her body trembled with the exertion. Shadows grabbed at her ankles, as if to yank her back.

Before they could, Isla and Lark reached the rip in the sky, and it swallowed them whole.

As soon as they were through, Isla’s seed of power flickered out again, and she plummeted to the ground with Lark. She landed hard and rolled, pain racketing through her as her body bounced over what seemed like rocks.

The bits of her armor rained down around her, along with the orb of storms that was now barely pulsing power, as if it had been drained just by being near the knights.

Finally, she hit something solid and stilled. She was on her back, the breath stolen from her lungs. Slowly, she opened her eyes—

And saw trees. *Trees*. She might have thought she had traveled to another world entirely, that her theory about the portal had been wrong, if it wasn’t for that strange swirling color of the sky, distinctive to this place.

Her entire body ached. As she took inventory to make sure nothing was broken, she sensed something strange about this forest—an energy of some

kind. An old, deep-rooted ability. It circled her, as if in curiosity. She felt it like a finger stroking her cheek.

She tried to reach for it . . . but without a storm, she couldn’t. Somehow, Cronan must have put a sheen on this entire planet.

She stood. A voice sounded nearby. She whirled around—nothing.

There it was again, like someone had run past her, whispering directly in her ear but she couldn’t make out the words. She spun again, and this time, she saw something.

She saw—

Herself.

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GRIM

There he was. The lost king was just a man sitting by himself at the bottom of the sea, far from any other prisoner. His back was to them, but Grim could see a flash of silver hair and luminous skin.

He was tied down not by one single chain but ten.

They snaked around his ankles, his wrists, his neck, his waist. Even so, he wasn't fighting to get loose like the others. No, he seemed perfectly at peace, as if he hadn't even noticed that he wasn't drowning anymore.

This was him. Grim was sure of it.

They didn't waste a moment. They hurried closer, and when Grim could finally get a look at him, he observed that unlike the other prisoners, he was perfectly intact. His skin had not pruned and decayed over time. Sea creatures had not burrowed into his hair and skin.

The man's eyes, however, were open and unblinking—and missing their pupils. There was only swirling, misty white. His spine was straight. His legs were crossed in front of him. He made no indication that he knew he was no longer alone.

"How do we wake him?" Oro asked.

Grim shrugged and snatched the dagger from Oro's hand. He trained it against the prisoner's neck.

And the man's eyes rolled down from the back of his head. His pupils were silver, gleaming. Otherworldly.

He looked up at Grim and seemed almost disappointed.

"It's time, then?" he said in a voice that echoed along the tide-swept walls.

Grim frowned. "Time for what?"

"For my story to come to an end," he said simply. He gazed past Grim, at Oro.

“Three kings. Reunited,” the man said, under his breath. He huffed a strange laugh. “I suppose it came true after all . . .”

“What did?” Oro demanded.

The man ignored the Sunling’s question. He seemed unconcerned by the blade Grim still had trained at his throat. He just groaned as he stood, as if he had been sitting for a long while, even though he must have been floating before, when the water hadn’t been swept away. He stretched his neck with a crack.

Grim finally threw the dagger down. He didn’t have time for riddles, or games. “We—”

“I know who you are,” the man said, matter-of-factly. “I’ve seen everything.”

Grim wondered how that was possible, when this bastard had been stuck sitting by himself beneath the ocean for who knows how many hundreds—or thousands—of years, then decided he actually didn’t give a fuck. He said, “Good. Then you know why we’re here.”

The man nodded. He looked them both over. “You want to reach her.”

Her. Somehow, this lost king knew about Isla.

“Can you help us?” Oro asked.

He nodded again . . . then pursed his lips. “Though I’m not sure whether I’m going to.”

If Grim could access his shadows, they would be wrapped around this man’s neck. But he coudn’t. He reached for the dagger once more, but Oro gave him a look that said it wouldn’t be in their best interest to slice this being into a bloody mess, though clearly the Sunling was also considering it.

“Why not?” Grim ground out.

“The future is split, just as she is. I’m sure you know that already . . .” he sighed. “There’s still a chance he wins. And giving you what I have would only add to that chance.”

“Who? Who could still win?” Oro said.

The man looked over at Grim. “Who do you think?”

Cronan. And even his name in Grim’s thoughts sent a chill through his blood. The original Nightshade. The one who had started the tradition of all Nightshade rulers siring dozens of children who fought to the death to decide the strongest heir—and decide who would continue the line.

The ruler Grim, for centuries, had assumed was dead. But he wasn't. His coffin had been empty this entire time. It was a portal to the otherworld, where he had escaped.

Grim had inherited Cronan's flair. Portaling. It was their only hope now at getting her back. It, and this lost king.

The man then said the words Grim had been too terrified to truly consider. "Cronan will find her, if he hasn't already."

Grim's knees nearly buckled. His soul seemed to press against his ribs, as if in agony, as if begging to *go to her by any means necessary*.

Cronan was famed for his cruelty. He was also the most powerful Nightshade in history. Grim guessed that he, like so many of his ancestors before him, was desperate to claim Infinite. And now, the only thing that stood between him and that diamond was his wife's life.

Grim's vision turned black with panic. He would have fallen over, if it wasn't for Oro, holding him steady. He looked over at the Sunling and saw an understanding. They were both united in their worry. In their pain. In their love for her.

What a strange thing . . . to be grateful to a man for loving his wife.

"He's been looking for her, all this time . . ." the lost king continued. "Though he didn't quite know what he was searching for."

"Why?" Grim demanded, surprised he could even get the word out.

"She's his Worldkey."

"His *what*?" Oro said.

The man gazed upward, as if only now realizing that he could glimpse the sky far above them. He frowned. "Cronan has spent millennia tearing apart galaxies, looking for a single place. Only this world stands between him and what he wants. He was banished from here long ago . . . Isla is his key back."

"How?" Oro demanded.

"She has all six abilities, and wears the diamond Infinite, which cast him out. With her help, he could return. And if that stone were ever wielded together with his sword and crown . . . he would have the power to rule everything . . ."

Grim thought back to Cronan's sword, the weapon he and Isla had desperately searched for, for months. It was how they fell in love. He had needed the blade to control the dreks, the vicious monsters who had nearly

ended his realm. Isla had helped him. She had unlocked the curse on it. And the price had been her life.

Dread spilled through Grim's bones. This entire time . . . *he* had searched for and claimed everything his ancestor needed. As if he had been a pawn in a grand plan.

And now Isla was in danger because of it. When all he had ever wanted was to save her . . .

"In this world exists one last key, fated to unlock the entire universe, including the world he seeks. With it, he could conquer every galaxy. Join them. Control any and all power that flows through them." The lost king continued, "This entire world was a prison once, you know," the man said, looking lost in his mind again. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and only white remained. "It exists on a bridge between galaxies. Some of the most powerful relics in the universe were hidden here. It was no coincidence that Cronan portaled Lark and Horus and their people to this world. He was after the diamond. But the diamond was not like other items he had claimed. It required a soul. It required *love*. He thought he could trick it with a manufactured home and the motions of love, but the diamond was not fooled. When he tried to claim it . . . it cursed him. This world became a poison for him, and he was forced to flee . . ." He blinked, his pupils returning. The man's expression was almost pitying. "The universe would have remained safe if she had just stayed."

Oro took a step forward. "If she would have stayed, Lark would have destroyed this world. She made a sacrifice to save us all."

"And might have doomed the universe in the process," the lost king said simply.

Now. *Now* was the moment Grim was going to kill him. But the king turned and said, "After Cronan left, he tried to create his own world, using his tie to Lark's power. But it was twisted . . . wrong. Now, all who exist there are those who perished due to a curse derived from his power." He looked at Oro. "You've been to it."

Oro's brow furrowed. "No, I haven't."

"Where did you think the island disappeared to during the curses?"

"The storms—"

"Were part of that world."

Oro shook his head. “No. We could see the storms engulf the island. We could see the frozen shards of them off the coast during the Centennial.”

The silver-haired king simply shrugged a shoulder. “Worlds oftentimes bleed into each other. Especially when they’re portaled in and out of one another. That’s what we should all fear . . .” He peered at Grim and Oro. “Go to the cursed world, where the victims of the curses live, and find the knowledge that was lost. All the realms must play their role in this war,” he said. He exhaled deeply. “I have lived . . . a thousand lives. Right here.” Grim didn’t know what he meant. He truly *did not care*. “And it has all led to this.” He considered them for a long moment before continuing. “History repeats itself, again and again. Break the cycle. Be strong enough to make the right choice.” With those words, he beckoned for Oro to come closer and searched the Sunling’s face. Grim’s impatience was about to break when the lost king finally blinked, his previously wary expression now confident. Whatever he had found in Oro’s expression had seemed to allow him to make a decision.

The lost king reached out his palm. And gold rose from deep within his skin until it broke free to rest in his hand. A pile of golden, thickly woven, glimmering threads that looked almost like sand, fused together.

“One of the last remaining pieces Cronan needs to take over the universe,” he said. “The Threads of Time. It must not fall into his hands.” His silver eyes glimmered. “This is the key to breaking the universe . . . and to saving it. You must find a way to get it to her. It is the only thing that can help her right everything.”

Grim reached for the threads. . . . but the lost king seemed to hesitate.

“She becomes the villain of this world just as many times as she becomes its hero,” he said.

“No,” Oro said fiercely. “She is not a villain.” He looked pointedly at Grim. “She’s just a ruler who has been given too much power, too quickly. Any wrong she has done was done by accident.”

The lost king’s look was almost pitying. “And Cronan was once just a boy who killed his parents.”

Grim swallowed. Just like Isla. Just like *he* was once a boy who killed his sister.

And this pain . . . this rage . . . this regret . . . He knew what it was like to be consumed by it, to search relentlessly for a cure to undo what had been

done.

Was that what Cronan was after?

He remembered Oro's words. About how his love had corrupted Isla further . . .

"Who are you?" Oro asked the lost king.

He smiled weakly. "I am but a prisoner from another world, just like the others. But I chose this sentence."

"Why?" the Sunling said, clearly shocked.

The lost king gazed at the threads in his hand. "I wanted to live a thousand lives."

Grim reached for the threads at the same time Oro did. And as both their fingers locked around them—

The man vanished, leaving only a pile of chains behind.

Grim didn't know how these threads would help him get his wife back. The lost king had said they needed to get them to her—but he hadn't told them *how*.

The sea-swept walls around them began to tremble, as if the ocean was fighting its restraint. As if Cleo was losing her hold.

"We need to get out of here," Oro said.

Grim agreed.

Neither released their grip on the threads.

Oro scowled. "I want the same thing you do. If we're going to find her, we have to trust each other."

"I do trust that you love her," Grim said. "But I also know you love your people. Your friends. I would choose her over the world. Can you say the same?"

They glared at each other. Oro opened his mouth, then seemed to change his mind about whatever he was going to say. He let go. "She would never forgive you, you know," he said. "If you destroyed the world for her."

"I know," Grim said, which was the only reason he hadn't already done it to get her back.

The stairs Cleo had made were still yards away. Beasts stood in their path, including that scorpion.

He didn't have a sword anymore. Just the dagger he had lent Oro.

With a grunt, he pulled at the chains, seeing they ran beneath the sand. Oro followed suit. The lost king's shackles were longer than any of the others. They seemed to have run through the entire length of this prison.

They shared a look.

Together, they ran, tearing those chains from the ground. And when they came across that scorpion again, they didn't have to speak as they split up, the chain taut between them. When the creature lunged at them, they caught it on its legs, and the beast came crashing down with a sea-rattling bellow.

Grim used his dagger to slice away one of its massive, razor-sharp scales, and he tossed it to Oro.

Together, they rushed toward that wall of steps, cutting down anything that remained in their path. But when they finally reached the wall, the sea was shaking so forcefully, entire steps of ice were breaking off, nearly crushing them.

Grim jumped up, took hold of the bottom ledge, and began to climb. Oro was right beside him. The steps were massive, but far apart. They'd have to leap onto each one to reach the top.

There was a sickening crack, and Grim looked up to see a shard of ice the size of his body careening toward them. He and Oro barely lunged out of the way in time. It shattered against their step, tearing it in half, smashing against a creature that had been trying to reach them.

They shared an uneasy glance before they lunged for the next step. And the next. Grim jumped just as the stair beneath his feet fell away.

The entire sea wall was rattling now. The steps shook with it. Grim stumbled as the ice fractured below his feet. The moment he landed on a ledge, he leapt for another, his arms burning with strain, his pulse racing as he fought his way up as fast as he could. Ice rained down in pieces, slicing against his skin, but he didn't slow. Not when all the steps below him were gone. The ones above him were already crumbling.

"Just a little farther," Oro yelled over the roaring.

Grim jumped onto the next ledge, relief snaking down his spine as he felt the ice hold. Its cold burned his palm as he pulled himself up. There was only one step left.

He hoped it was high enough for them to get their powers back—or they would be stuck. The ledge would crumble, and they would fall back into the depths of the prison. The sea would bury them for good.

Grim jumped with all his strength—and his fingers locked around the cold edge. He pulled himself onto it.

And with mind-melting relief, he felt the shreds of his power awakening.

Oro was below. The step he was on had already cracked. It wouldn't hold much longer. "Jump," Grim said, crouching on the ledge, feeling it loosening. All he needed was to fully stand. He could do it now, and portal away. He could leave Oro behind.

Instead, he sighed and turned to extend his hand.

Oro just stared at it. Grim could read the emotions on his face. Distrust. Worry. The Sunling thought Grim was going to take his hand, only to drop it, and put an end to him once and for all. "Just fucking jump," Grim snarled.

And the Sunling did. With a grunt, Grim pulled him up onto the ledge with all his strength.

But it was too late. The step beneath them both fell away—

Grim took hold of Oro and used all his strength to jump as high as he could, with the Sunling weighing him down.

There they were—the embers of his power. He clutched those tatters and was able to portal them just a few feet higher, where his abilities roared to life. And then, he portaled them back to Cleo.

The moment they appeared, the Moonling's knees buckled. The ocean roared as it filled the gap once more, water shooting upward as the sides rejoined. Grim had doubted the Moonling, but he had been wrong.

Cleo had held.

She looked absolutely spent, her entire body twitching on the rocks of the isle. Still, she found the strength to peer up at them, long moon-white hair plastered to her face. "Did you find him?" she croaked.

Grim nodded.

The Moonling collapsed against the salt-licked stone.

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ISLA

“Where’s my mom?”

Isla was eight years old, and in the middle of dueling with her guardian, Terra. Dappled rays of sunrise peeked through the forest in broken fragments.

Terra’s metal met hers, and Isla’s teeth sung with the force. Her guardian’s sword was much bigger, but that didn’t mean she held back.

“She’s dead, Isla. You know this.” Terra’s voice was flat, though a rush of emotion filled her eyes before it withered. She turned, and Isla barely blocked her blade in time.

Isla did know that her mom was gone. But sometimes, she wished that when she asked, the answer might be different.

After all, the Wildlings could turn dry seeds into flowers. Dirt . . . into life. She always wondered if, somehow, the same could be done for people.

“And my dad?” Isla asked, gasping when she stumbled over a vine, then parried hard against her guardian’s next knee-rattling strike.

“He’s dead too.” Terra’s next hit was fast as lightning, easily outmaneuvering her defenses. Her unchecked sword sliced down Isla’s arm, right through the fabric of her training clothes, and Isla gritted her teeth against the pain. Hot blood gushed from the wound. She didn’t dare whimper. That would only make Terra wait an extra hour before she’d be allowed to heal her wounds of the day. “Stop with the foolish questions. You’re wasting time.”

Everything besides training, to Terra, was a waste.

She was a waste.

No. She was worse.

Isla was the reason so many Wildlings were dead. She was the reason why she overheard her guardians saying their realm had no chance of

surviving the next Centennial.

She was born powerless. Wrong.

Her eyes stung. She fought to breathe, panic clenching her chest the way it sometimes did. Taking hold of her mind.

What if they were right? What if all this training was for nothing? What if she failed her people, the same way she had failed everyone around her since she was born? What if—

She didn't see Terra's blade until it was too late. Until the hilt slammed against her temple. And when her head hit the forest ground, only then did her mind quiet.

When her eyes finally opened again, the sky was the pink bruise of sunset.

Sunset. An entire day wasted.

She had to move. But everything hurt. Slowly, she reached to feel the side of her head. She winced as her fingers slid through crusted blood. There was a thick puddle of it in the dirt beneath her sore arm.

The world turned as she tried to sit up. It took several minutes before she was able to finally stand. Even then, she leaned against a tree for support.

"Weak."

The word seemed to echo from the woods themselves. But when Isla blinked away the remaining blurriness of her vision, she saw Terra across the clearing. Arms folded in front of her in disappointment.

A pang of regret pierced her heart. "I'm sorry, I—"

"*You*." Terra took a step toward her. "You will be the end of this realm. *You* will be its ruin."

Isla's eyes burned. She didn't want to be weak. She would be better. She would try harder tomorrow.

No day could be wasted. There were only so many years before the Centennial. The number always felt large in her head, but Terra and Poppy insisted that it was no time at all.

Terra was right in front of her now, frowning at the blood on her temple and long wound down her arm. "Do you think I train you so hard because I enjoy watching you fail? Seeing you bleed?"

Isla wasn't sure if she should answer.

"*I do not enjoy it*. I do it because you are our only hope. And you . . . you . . ." She didn't finish the sentence, but Isla saw that look in her

eyes. The one she noticed often.

Like Isla was not just weak. But like . . . she had done something unforgivable, simply by being born.

Like she was monstrous.

“I’ll try harder,” Isla said, quickly. “I’ll . . . I’ll train earlier. Later. Everything. I promise—I promise I’ll get better. I won’t let you down.”

From Terra’s expression, Isla knew she already had.

Her guardian made her train through the night to make up for the time she had missed while she had been unconscious. Only then was she allowed a bath and healing elixirs.

Poppy, her other guardian, gently wrapped her wounds. “It’s okay, little bird,” she said. “You won’t scar.”

That wasn’t true. Some scars, Isla thought, weren’t visible at all.

By the time Poppy left her quarters, Isla slumped forward. Finally, she was alone. Tears stung her eyes, but she pressed her hands against them. There were only a couple of hours for her to sleep before training began again.

She slipped from her blankets, went into her closet, and pushed past the training clothes. There, in the very back, was her collection. Pieces she had found in her room, over the years, that together formed a mosaic of her mother.

There was the doll, shaped from wood, with its dress made of petals that were somehow still soft and everlasting.

There was the jagged broken comb. She slowly traced her finger along its edge. Did her mother hate when Poppy brushed her hair as much as Isla did?

Did she sometimes get hurt during training too?

Finally . . . there was a paintbrush. The wood was long and slender, with soft hair at the top. Bits of color still clung to the strands.

Was her mother a painter? She didn’t know. She searched and searched, but the room didn’t reveal any other secrets.

“I wish I could fall through time and know you,” she whispered into the darkness of her closet. “Maybe then, I wouldn’t feel so alone.”

Isla wasn’t allowed to leave her room, except for training. It was to keep herself safe. Her people could not find out their ruler was powerless. Their

realm was already in enough trouble. Without her power to inject into her lands, people were dying. Hiding her, Terra said, was an act of love.

Isla's only solace in spending day after day locked away was that she knew her mother had once lived here too. Isla would look for cracks in the wall, marks on the floor, any sign that her family had existed.

Isla fell asleep clutching the paintbrush, desperate to feel a whisper of her mother.

Isla swallowed, a knot formed in her throat—and blinked out of the memory. The child she had seen in the forest was gone.

What—

A branch broke behind her. Isla turned, only to see Lark leaning against a tree, folded over. Panting.

Maybe this was her chance. Isla still had Cronan's blade and the god-bone. Perhaps she could plunge both right through Lark's heart while she was weakened.

As if sensing the thought, Lark's head snapped up. Her green eyes were as bright as ever, even as her body was in tatters.

"That won't kill me, so don't waste your precious energy," she spat. Her frown deepened at Isla's incredulous expression. "I do not lie."

Isla wondered why Lark wouldn't have escaped while she had the chance. She knew Isla wanted her dead.

But Lark shuddered, looking haunted.

"You see them too," Isla said. "The memories."

Lark sighed. "This is a wicked place. The forest forces you to walk through your past."

"Which way do we go?" Isla asked. She spun around and saw nothing but endless woods on all sides. She didn't even know where her destination was.

"The only way out is through," Lark grumbled. She took a step—

And Lark's eyes went blank, like their spark had been smothered. She stood still as a corpse, her brow furrowed in concentration.

Was that what Isla had looked like, while she had walked through her memories?

Isla realized a person could be lost in these woods forever. Lost in their own mind. She exhaled deeply, the reality of her situation truly crashing

upon her. Lark was a monster. She had killed hundreds of people, including Wren. And Remlar. But they had to work together, to keep each other moving forward when the other was ensnared by the past. She could only hope that Lark didn't kill her when she herself was unresponsive.

Isla took her ancestor's arm, picked a direction, and started walking.

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ORO

“That king was fucking useless,” Grim snarled, throwing the golden threads down onto the table at Oro’s castle on Lightlark.

Oro frowned at him. They were both still covered in blood and guts. The stench was almost enough to make Oro gag. “He said she would need this to save the universe.”

Very slowly, Grim’s eyes met his. He took a step forward. “Do you think I give a *fuck* about the universe?” he said. “I care about *my wife*. The world can fall to pieces in the meantime.”

“My love is not lesser, because I care about this world,” Oro said. “She does too.”

“Which is the only reason it isn’t already ash,” the Nightshade growled. He shook his head. “She *is* my heart. Of course, your love is *lesser*.”

Oro wondered if that was true. But he knew Isla. He knew she cared about others. It was the entire reason she had left this world in the first place.

“I just want to get her back,” Grim said, hands in fists. Shadows raced across his floor, suffocating the gold tiles.

“I don’t think the threads are useless for that,” Oro said. He didn’t know much about the Threads of Time, but an artifact so powerful must be able to help them.

“Good. Then make *yourself* useful,” he said, gesturing to the threads on the table.

Oro sighed. “The lost king said we had to go to the cursed world. Can you portal us there?”

Grim lifted a hand. “If I had something of that world. A connection to it. A piece of it,” he said.

Oro thought about their conversation with the lost king. “He said that all realms needed to play their part in this war.” He started pacing. “Nightshade and Sunling.” Grim and him. “Starling and Wildling.” Isla controlled both. “Moonling.” Cleo had just helped them. “. . . And Skyling.”

Their gazes met.

“Azul’s husband died during the curses,” Oro offered. “If what the king said was true . . .” Then part of his soul was still in that world. Perhaps they could speak to him. A knot formed in his chest, thinking about everyone else who died during the curses. Everyone else who might be there . . .

“What would Azul’s husband know that could be important to us now?” Grim said.

Oro considered that. “He was a Moonling scholar, who worked with ancient texts.” If Cleo knew something useful to getting to the otherworld, she would have already told them. Her knowledge before the curses must have been limited, given she was never supposed to become ruler. “If any Moonling has information that could help us . . . especially if it was lost . . . it might be him.”

Oro continued pacing as he mulled it over. He didn’t want to cause Azul any pain by asking this of him. The Skyling had said his goodbyes, when the storm around Lightlark had vanished, after the curses had been cast. He had believed that his soul had been released . . . Now they knew that it was the island that had been released, back into this world.

But if there was a war coming that could destroy not only their world but the entire universe, then the lost king was right. They all needed to play their part.

“Let’s pay Azul a visit,” Oro said.

Azul had already taken on an enormous responsibility during the last battle. Almost all of Oro’s people had been portaled to his newland for safety. He was elected to rule his realm, which had resulted in a successful, efficient democracy.

Every important action was voted upon. But this was too crucial and time-sensitive for that.

“Let me do the talking,” Oro said, as Grim portaled them into the Skyling’s castle. He had at least taken a moment to change out of his blood-crusted clothing. Grim, expectedly, hadn’t bothered.

When the Skylings caught a glimpse of Grim, they scattered, shooting in all directions. The Nightshade scowled at him. “Yes, because you’re so good at talking,” Grim said dismissively, and Oro was struck by a memory. The Nightshade had said something similar centuries ago.

“At least I don’t incite panic with my very presence,” Oro grumbled, watching as everyone they passed soared away, fleeing the castle as if the skies themselves had fallen.

“Not everyone can make an entrance, Sunling,” Grim drawled before flinging the council room’s doors open with his shadows. Oro rolled his eyes.

Inside, the discussion a group of representatives was having immediately silenced. There were some gasps. A few murmurs.

Azul looked up from where he sat, expression tired. He sighed, then glanced between them, with not so much curiosity as dread.

The Skyling ruler excused himself, and the three of them walked into a different room a moment later.

The walls were sky-blue, painted with swirls of white that resembled clouds. The ceiling had been removed, now that they could fly again. Above, the sky was clear. Sunlight rained down.

As soon as the door shut, Azul demanded, “Where is she? What happened?” By his alarm, it seemed he knew something had to have gone truly wrong for Grim and Oro to be working together.

Grim didn’t give Oro a chance to answer before he barked, “You’re going to help us.” Oro sighed. This is why he had wanted to do the talking.

Azul’s normally tidy stubble had grown out. His typically perfectly pressed robes were full of creases. “I helped *her*,” he said wearily. “And now . . . now, I wonder if that was a good thing to do.”

Oro knew Isla had visited the Skyling. “What did you give her?”

“A ring, to capture a shred of the storm. And a stormfinch.” Oro had seen the bird in her room, when he had waited for her. “And, of course, the orbs of storms captured over the centuries. Our ancient collection.”

Oro remembered how those storms had erupted—how they had given them enough energy to defeat the creatures that Lark had summoned.

“Where is she?” Azul repeated.

When Oro told him, the Skyling slowly sunk into a chair. He leaned his elbows against his knees, his head in his hands. “We owe her a great debt,

then," he said.

It was true. As angry as Oro was at her for keeping this to herself, for *sacrificing* herself, Lark had planned to tear this world apart. She had already started, and she couldn't be killed. By portaling her away, Isla had saved them.

And now, it was up to them to save her.

"She's in danger," Oro said. "And it's not just about her—"

"Speak for yourself," Grim snarled, looking at Oro with nothing short of contempt.

Oro sighed and continued, "Cleo told us of a prophecy that predicted a war between worlds. One that would end us all. Every realm. Every subject. Reduced to dust. Crowntide."

"A storm to end all storms. Perhaps hers was only the beginning . . ." Azul looked at them warily. "What do you need now?"

Oro didn't know how to say the words. How to ask this of him. Grim, it seemed, didn't have any qualms with getting to the point.

"We need you to speak to your dead husband," he said, holding out his hand impatiently, as if this was already taking too much time.

Oro cast a withering look at Grim. Azul only blinked at the Nightshade's outstretched palm.

"My . . . husband?" he said, as if he could hardly speak the words.

Oro sighed. "We're hoping he has information that can help us get Isla back. And . . . we believe part of his soul might be in a different world. The one the island disappeared to during the curses."

Azul, for his credit, didn't ask any more questions. He just straightened, and said, "Take me to my husband."

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ISLA

An hour later, Lark gasped, released from a memory's snare. Isla wondered what her ancestor had seen. Centuries of memories? Only an hour's worth? She didn't know how the time lined up—if it was compressed, like dreaming.

Lark ripped her arm from Isla's grip the moment she was conscious.

Isla tried to keep her focus forward, as if that could prevent her from falling into another memory. Even if Lark needed her to escape the forest . . . what if they reached the end of the woods while Isla was stuck in her own mind? She would be an easy target for Lark.

"It must be strange for you. Being in a forest you have no control over," Isla said.

Lark gave her a scathing look, as if speaking to her was an unforgivable crime.

Isla just shrugged a shoulder. "I'm used to it. It was only recently that I had a connection to nature at all." She glanced at these strange trees. They were ancient, and even with her powers muted, she could feel the strange power that lived within them. "How did this place survive?" she asked. She had believed that Cronan had reduced this entire world to ashes . . . but clearly, parts of it remained.

Lark didn't respond. Not that Isla expected her to. Still, Isla clenched her fists in frustration. Her ancestor was *from* here. She knew Cronan. She had all the answers Isla needed.

But she was her enemy.

Lark was ancient. Untrusting. Isla had portaled them to Skyshade. Lark had left her for dead buried miles under the ground. The only reason they were allies now was because of these strange woods.

This could be Isla's only chance to ask her ancestor questions. Maybe . . . maybe if she just asked the right one, she could get her to talk.

She turned to Lark—but instead, she saw herself. Darting around a tree and vanishing from view.

No.

She blinked and was plunged back into time.

Isla was surrounded by the trees of a different forest—one she would know anywhere. She glanced down and found a sword gripped in her hand. A twig snapped in front of her, and she looked up to see Terra in an offensive stance with two blades pointed at her. By the level of blade she was using, Isla guessed this was maybe five or six years ago.

Before she could look for more clues of the time that had passed, Terra was upon her, swords slicing impossibly fast, and it took all of Isla's focus to deflect her guardian's advances. No matter how fast Isla moved, she couldn't block both blades.

Isla's world erupted in pain as one of Terra's swords tore down her side. Blood seeped through her clothing. Still, teeth gritted, she managed to avoid another strike—but then her guardian turned and stabbed her in the stomach.

A sob nearly spilled from her lips. She just barely closed her mouth against it.

But Terra could tell. Could tell she was about to break. And that was unacceptable. Terra advanced, struck again—and this wound was deeper. Isla's knees hit the ground as pain exploded behind her eyelids. She struggled to breathe.

Slowly, she peered up at her guardian. And for once, she felt not worthlessness, not shame—but rage.

"This isn't fair," Isla yelled, and she couldn't find it within her to regret the words. What would her guardian do to her that she hadn't already done before? Isla's voice was steady. "Two blades against one isn't *fair*."

Terra only smirked. "Do you think anyone will care about fairness at the Centennial? Do you think you will be fighting on equal footing?" She shook her head, then threw both swords to the side. "You don't want blades? Fine."

She raised her arms, and the forest swelled with her. The trees around them grew, curved, until they blocked out the sunlight. Isla was plunged

into near-darkness.

Vines slithered around her like snakes. They curled around her body, pinning her down to the ground. Her head hit the solid dirt.

A growl escaped her lips as she fought their hold, as she fought to command these woods the way she was supposed to be able to, as the Wildling ruler.

But the woods obeyed Terra, not Isla. She could hear her guardian's voice right above her.

"You will be fighting against *power*, foolish girl. And power is not merciful at all."

With that, the forest fell upon her.

Isla gasped as wood cut through her bones, skewering her to the forest floor. As leaves smothered her screams. As her own realm became a weapon against her.

She wished desperately she was the one who could wield it. That she was not pinned here, powerless. Bleeding everywhere. Gasping with hurt. But Terra was right. She was weak. Useless.

It might have been minutes or hours later when Poppy's voice broke through the pain. "What did you do?" she demanded. She had never heard her guardian so outraged. "You could have killed her! You could have killed us all."

She heard Terra's huff of a laugh. "Do you think I'm that unskilled, Poppy?"

No. Terra had mastered Wilding abilities, and she had ensured the trees had only pierced Isla's limbs. Painful—but not enough to kill her. Not anything the elixirs couldn't undo. "I think you're cruel," she said. "She . . . she would never have wanted this."

She. They were talking about her mother. The blood loss was dragging her under. She fought for consciousness, if only to hear more. But she was slipping away, carried off by the endless agony in her bones.

"If she was here, we wouldn't be dealing with this," Terra said, her voice sharp with emotion. "We loved her. And she betrayed us . . . she betrayed us all."

Isla knew that part of the story. The cautionary tale of her mother falling in love, despite the curse, leading to both her parents' deaths. It had happened the day Isla was born.

This story was a warning against love. It proved love was ruinous, especially for rulers. A message her guardians seemed especially eager to make clear, given Isla didn't suffer from her realm's curse.

She didn't eat hearts to survive. She wouldn't need to kill whoever she fell in love with. Not that she ever had a chance to, locked in her room.

It was the other reason she was hidden away, far from notice. If anyone realized she didn't suffer from the bloodthirsty Wildling curse, they might guess at what else she was lacking.

"Isla—she is not her mother," Poppy finally said.

Isla didn't know what that meant. If it was a good thing or a bad thing.

A bad thing, Isla decided, when she heard Terra say, "That's the problem, isn't it?"

With that, all the brush that was crushing her lifted away. Poppy gasped. Isla could hardly feel her body anymore. All she could do was blink up at the sun.

Its warmth was an anchor. A promise—that there would be light at the end of this darkness.

There had to be an end to this pain.

There had to be better days and nights ahead.

She decided at that moment that she would survive the Centennial. Not just for her guardians, or for her people, but for *herself*.

She would break the curse upon her people and then she would break herself out of this prison.

She clung to that the entire time Poppy pulled wood from her skin, splashed the elixir on her wounds, set her broken bones.

As she drifted into sleep, she thought about a world beyond her room. A world beyond the patch of forest she trained in. A world where she could finally be free to discover who she was, without the heaviness of this crown. That dream was shattered by a voice through the darkness.

"What is this, little bird?"

It took Isla a moment to fully wake. She wiped the sleep from her eyes and took in Terra standing in the center of her room.

Holding her collection.

The doll. The comb. The paintbrush.

Roaring filled Isla's ears. Her mouth went suddenly dry, and she swallowed. "It's nothing, I—"

“I found these hidden in the corner of your closet. It’s clearly not nothing.”

Terra examined the objects, frowning in recognition. “These were your mother’s,” she said.

Panic flooded through Isla’s veins, but she fought to keep her voice steady. “Yes. I—I just wanted to . . . I just—” She couldn’t find the words, didn’t know how to convince Terra to let her keep them. She didn’t know what to say . . . so she would beg. “*Please*.”

That one word seemed to seal her fate. Terra’s gaze slowly met hers again. “This is your problem, Isla. You are weak. You are foolish. You cling to”—she shook the contents in her hands—“meaningless things, when you should be solely focused on training.”

“I am focused. I just—” Her voice broke with a sob. “*Please*—”

Terra’s hand splayed—

And she turned the wood and bone to dust.

“No!” Isla screamed, the word a guttural rasp at the back of her throat as she lurched out of bed. Everything she had from her mother . . . *gone*.

She knelt and reached for the ashes, wishing she had any power at all to turn them back into what they were.

Terra only shook her head. She stepped over the pile, leaving Isla on her knees, sobbing.

Isla wrapped her arms around herself, rocking back and forth. “No. No . . .” she whispered. Her body ached as she moved, but she didn’t care. This pain was so much worse than any of her injuries.

“I want to leave,” she said to a quiet night that never listened. “I want—I want to get out of here. *Please*,” she begged anyone. *Everyone*. “I want, I just want—”

She clawed at the floorboards like an animal, as if she could claw her way out of this room, out of this *life*. Like if she just wished hard enough, someone would hear her and give her what she wanted—freedom.

She dragged her hands across the panel—and one of its corners lifted.

Isla froze, shooting a look at the door. It was closed. Terra and Poppy wouldn’t be back until the next morning for training. With trembling fingers, she slowly lifted the floorboard high. Higher.

Until it revealed a hidden compartment.

And she knew in her very soul that this was something left behind by her mother. For *her*. Isla reached inside . . . and pulled out a long, thin stick made of a strange material. It looked almost like her mother's paintbrush, without the end. It glimmered in her hand, shining silver before settling.

She felt a jolt, as if her blood was called to it.

She dropped the stick, and it clattered to the floor, rolling a few feet away. But . . . but for a moment . . . she saw it. A tiny window.

The flash of somewhere else completely.

Slowly, she reached for the stick again and pressed its point to the floor. There was a burst of sparks before a keyhole formed, and she knelt, pressing her eye to it.

There, she glimpsed a world with land that sloped high into the clouds. Mountains. She had only ever seen pictures of them in one of the books she got as a reward for training. Their tops were covered in white—snow, Isla realized. She wondered if it was as cold to the touch as her books said.

She spent the entire night looking through the keyhole, into another world, and, for the first time, she didn't feel alone.

Isla awoke from the memory to blinding pain and darkness.

Lark was killing her. That was her first thought. She seized, reaching for her sword—only for her vision to clear enough to see her ancestor had it in her hand.

She wasn't about to kill Isla with it, though. She was battling something above her.

"Nice of you to wake up," Lark spat. Her teeth gritted as she fought off a human-like creature with pallid skin, sharp claws, and fangs that were already dripping blood. It wore tattered green fabric and snarled at Lark.

Isla blinked—and the beast became a beautiful woman, with long, smooth hair, glimmering skin, and eyes like diamonds.

But in the next instant, the creature was back, slashing her claws across Lark's chest. Isla's ancestor folded over, the sword held loosely in front of her. She was either too weakened from this world and her injuries to fight, or she had never been skilled with weapons at all, having always relied on her powers.

Isla was no stranger to powerlessness. And perhaps that would now be the key to their survival.

She raced forward, wincing as she realized the blood on the creature's teeth hadn't been just from Lark. Her calf was torn almost completely. But she had been trained to fight, even with injuries.

She reached her arm out. "Throw it!" she said.

Lark hesitated. The creature lurched forward, and the Wildling wasn't able to block it before it sank its teeth into her shoulder.

She bellowed and heaved the sword to Isla.

Isla caught it. She smiled, feeling the metal against her palm.

With one fluid arch, the creature's head was on the ground.

Isla folded over. That one simple movement had cost her, and she panted. This entire planet was like a poison, draining both her powers and strength. She stared at the body, now motionless on the ground, remembering the flash of what she had seen. The bitter luster of this place clearly wasn't just affecting her.

"They weren't always like this," Isla said, and Lark scoffed as she pressed a hand to her shoulder.

Of course, Lark already knew that. She must have seen them when they were the glimmering beings Isla had only glimpsed.

Cronan hadn't only disrupted this world . . . he had cursed it. Isla could feel the sheen of darkness everywhere, like everything that had dared to survive had been changed. Distorted.

Would that happen to them, if they stayed here long enough?

Lark looked like she was going to say something. Perhaps make a comment about what this world used to be like. But the moment her lips parted—

She froze.

Not again, Isla thought, taking her ancestor's arm. Her shoulder was bleeding. Her chest was in ruins.

Isla had spent hours in her last memory. Who knew how long Lark would be trapped in hers? Isla could barely walk straight with her injured leg. Still, she sighed and dragged Lark along, hoping they wouldn't face anything else.

That was when the trees to her left and right began to tremble.

Something was coming. Isla gripped Lark's arm tighter and ran, her calf roaring with pain.

No. She was wrong.

It was already here.

Bark splintered around her as a woman fully broke out of the closest tree. Then another, from behind her. Wood cracked like thunder as figure after figure emerged from the forest on all sides. The women were half bark, half rotted flesh and sinew, holding gnarled roots shaped into weapons. Their eyes were onyx holes. Lifeless.

They controlled this forest. Isla took one look at them—

And ran.

Lark's feet stumbled next to her. She was still lost in her mind, but at least she could use her legs.

"Wake up!" Isla screamed, pressing into the wound on Lark's shoulder, hoping the pain would knock her from her mind. But it didn't work. And the whole forest was shaking now, as if an entire army awaited them in these trees. Isla raced as fast as she could, ignoring her injury with focus honed from years of training.

An arm shattered through the tree she was passing, gripping Isla's neck with a hand hard as wood. She dropped Lark's arm, and her ancestor stood there blankly, useless to help her. The bark-crusted woman lifted Isla into the air with extraordinary strength. Isla's legs scrambled for purchase, a choking sound leaving her lips. Her vision was starting to dim.

With every shred of energy she had left, she raised her sword hand—and cut the woman's arm clean off. Isla collapsed into a heap on the leaves and dirt and gasped for air. Her lungs felt like they could burst with the effort.

She only allowed herself a moment before she scrambled to her feet, dragging Lark behind her. But she knew there was no outrunning this. Tree after tree burst around them until they were surrounded by a legion. An army of women closing in.

And the women . . . they reminded her of—

There was a girl, in the back of the group. With green eyes, wild dark hair, and freckles splashed across her cheeks.

No. Isla clung to consciousness. Lark was already out. They would both die if she got sucked into another memory now. She ran to the closest tree and shredded her hand down it, hoping the pain would keep her grounded.

It didn't work. Her vision began to fog. The women began to close in, jagged blades lifted, sharp teeth bared. Closer. Closer. Isla lifted her sword, but even if she could remain awake, she was wildly outnumbered.

There was one moment of stillness, of silence. Then all the warrior women lunged at her as one, weapons lifted.

And as Isla was swept back into the past, she was certain she wouldn’t survive the present.

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GRIM

This was going to be tiresome. He could already feel it. Azul was filled with hope. Anticipation. *Love*.

Grim's hands formed fists, knowing Azul would want to speak to his husband for longer than they could afford.

He tried to remind himself that if the situations were switched, Azul would never rush him. But they weren't. And all Grim cared about was reaching Isla as soon as possible.

It had been easy enough to portal to this world after Azul had given them a ring that had belonged to his husband. He had followed the thread of it to portal them to this place, and as soon as they arrived, he already wanted to leave.

There was a heaviness here, like a storm without the rain. The air was thick with feeling—regret, sadness, fear.

This was not a place of peace.

Grim could hardly see an inch in front of him. Shadowy fog blocked everything. Storms rumbled distantly, but Grim could tell they were steadily getting closer.

"Don't take long," Grim snapped at Azul.

Oro shot him a scathing look, but Grim could *feel* the impatience radiating off the Sunling, similar to his own.

Grim glared back at the Sunling. "As if you don't also want him to hurry." He scoffed. "I thought you were supposed to be honest."

Oro looked away from him. "Please, as quickly as you can," he said to Azul. The Skyling nodded.

Oro always got to be the *hero*, just for pretending to be so different from Grim. Grim's honesty made him a villain, apparently.

Grim turned around, having seen enough of the Sunling lately to last a lifetime. The chill of the incoming storm seeped into his bones. Was this place similar to where Isla was? She got cold easily.

He frowned. Was she cold now?

The fact that he didn't know was almost worse than the fact that he couldn't help. *I love you*, he sent through a bond that he could barely feel any longer. *I'm coming for you*. He glanced over at the Sunling, who was also frowning at the surrounding mist. *We both are*.

He said it only because he knew it might make her feel better. To know that they hadn't killed each other yet.

Though he desperately wanted to.

Oro and Azul were facing different directions, walking purposefully, as if toward something. Grim shifted impatiently. He wanted to leave. He wanted to get the information they needed and go to her.

His fingers curled and uncurled. He tried to breathe, to settle his panic. It didn't work. No, she was the only person who could anchor him. The only person worth anchoring *for*. His mind was constantly racing, preparing for any contingency, stuck in the future, but she always managed to pull him down into the present. Because that was where she lived. And he wanted to be wherever she was.

She wasn't here, so he closed his eyes to sift through his memories of her. That was the closest he got to seeing his wife, so every moment he wasn't looking for ways to find her, he was reliving the past.

In the middle of reliving one of his favorite moments, he felt the air shift. He noticed a spot of near emptiness in the heaviness of the fog. He recognized the aura around it immediately. A near-hollow, near-colorless one that he hadn't come across in centuries.

Grim sighed as he opened his eyes. "Hello, father," he said.

Begrudgingly, he turned around, and there he was—his father, former ruler of Nightshade. His face looked as hollow as the last time Grim had seen him, but his being seemed as impermanent as a wisp of smoke. He was just a shred of putrid soul trapped in this cursed place.

He peered at Grim and all he said was, "Did you do it?"

Grim didn't have time for this. He looked around and spotted Oro and Azul wandering in the fog. "Do what?" Grim asked, impatiently.

"Claim it."

His teeth ground together. He remembered their final conversation. He knew exactly what his father was referring to. Infinite.

“Yes,” Grim said.

“Good.” His father’s aura shifted. For the first time in his long life, Grim felt a prickling of pride from his father.

And that bitterness Grim had buried away after meeting Isla, that hatred for his father, rose now. Part of him wanted to tell his father that he *had* claimed Infinite, but for a reason his father would have considered all wrong.

It would have angered his father to know that Grim claimed the diamond only to give it to his *wife*. It would have haunted his father for eternity. It would have been suitable revenge for the pain he had inflicted on Grim.

But Grim simply couldn’t muster the energy to care anymore. His rage toward his father . . . crested. Fell away. What was once as strong as a riptide faded to just still waters. This past hatred felt meaningless, when his life now had meaning. *She* was his new family. She was his joy, and the life he had created with her had smeared away all the bad that came before her.

That was what she did—she didn’t make the darkness go away . . . she outshined it with her light.

He didn’t want to tell his father any of it. He didn’t even want his father to know his wife’s name.

He would leave him in the past, where he belonged.

His father reached toward him as if to press a hand upon his shoulder. But before he could . . . he disappeared.

His aura was gone completely from this place. It was like part of his soul had remained, in need of this last assurance. To see Grim’s fate fulfilled.

He turned, irritated once again. They had already been here for too long. He opened his mouth, to tell the others it was time to go.

But Azul and Oro were gone.

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ORO

Oro didn’t know what was pulling him through the fog—only that someone was waiting for him.

Egan.

His brother was standing there, beaming.

He appeared like a gleaming shred of light, one moment solid, and the next as transparent as the fog itself.

After five centuries . . .

He was seeing his big brother again.

For a moment, the centuries fell away, and he was back in his room, heart racing with excitement as Egan visited to teach him all he had learned in training that day. Oro had always looked up to him. He had always thought he would make the perfect king.

His eyes burned.

Oro finally found the strength to say, “You’re here.”

Egan’s smile grew. “I’m here. And so are you.”

Hearing his brother’s voice . . . after all this time . . . He had forgotten, he realized. He had forgotten what it had sounded like.

He wanted to embrace his brother, but he didn’t think he would be able to, given the half-corporeal quality of his form. It would hurt too much to try, only to be disappointed. So, Oro just stood there, grateful for what he did get—a glimpse of someone he loved and missed very much.

“What are you doing here?” Egan said.

Instead of answering, Oro asked, “Do you know where you are?” For a moment, he wanted to pretend the only problem in his life was that his brother was dead.

Egan shrugged a shoulder. “A snag between places,” he said. He looked around. “It’s not always like this. There is a place, beyond. One that glimmers. Sometimes, though, I’m here.”

“You’ve been here a long time,” Oro said, chest clenching with worry for his brother.

But Egan brushed him off. “Time passes differently here. Don’t concern yourself.” His eyes turned serious again. “Why are you here?” his brother repeated.

Oro looked over at Azul—and saw the Skyling was gone. He was likely speaking to his husband. He deserved that time, however limited it may be.

Oro would take advantage of this time, too. For he needed some guidance himself.

He told Egan everything. Everything he could, in the few minutes they had. The effects of the curses, and all that had happened afterward.

Including Isla.

He couldn’t help but realize it echoed another conversation—when Egan told Oro that he was stepping down from the throne because he had fallen in love.

You’ll understand, one day, Egan had said. Oro had sworn he never would.

Look at him now.

For his part, Egan did not interject. He did not bring up that conversation. He just gazed at Oro and said, “Our family’s responsibility has been to our people for a very long time.”

Oro nodded. “Because of nexus,” he said. The force that bound him to the very island itself. So that if he died, all his people did too.

Egan’s brow furrowed. “I had always wondered if there was a way to rectify that.”

Him, and all the rebels on Lightlark, he had learned. Oro wished there was. He didn’t want to be responsible for so many lives like this. It wasn’t fair to them.

“I’m sorry that I left you to deal with so much,” Egan said, his voice thick with emotion. “I have little advice to give. Except . . . sometimes, you have to lose something, to gain everything.”

And with that, a woman materialized by his side. She had long dark hair and green eyes.

Violet. Isla’s ancestor.

Egan had been engaged to someone else—Aurora. But it was purely a match of strategy, an alliance between Sunling and Starling realms. Egan had never cared for Aurora that way, though she had always loved him.

When Egan fell in love with Violet, Aurora’s best friend, he had planned to end the engagement and abdicate. But Aurora, in her fury, had other plans. It was the betrayal that had launched the curses and centuries of suffering.

Even so, the first words out of Violet’s mouth were, “How is she?”

Oro knew who she meant, but he couldn’t believe the question. “Aurora?” he asked in shock.

The Wildling nodded. “She isn’t here,” Violet said, looking around. Seeming distressed.

Of course. Violet didn’t know . . . she didn’t know her best friend had been responsible for their deaths.

Oro didn’t have the time to explain—and seeing the happiness on her face, and on his brother’s as he gazed upon her, he found he didn’t want to. He couldn’t take away their peace.

I thought you were supposed to be honest, Grim had said.

Damn him. Sometimes, there was a good reason to lie.

“She survived,” was all Oro said.

Violet’s eyes filled with tears of joy. “I—I had hoped she would. She was so powerful.”

Yes. The witch had been more powerful than any of them had suspected. “She lived a long, long life,” Oro said.

Violet smiled. “Good. *Good*. I miss her,” she said, and her voice echoed like a wind through a forest. And Oro didn’t know how the Wildling could betray her friend . . . and still care about her so much.

But he did know that love was strange and uncontrollable. And that though he might have judged his brother heavily for his decisions in the past . . . now, he understood them.

Oro wondered if Violet ever regretted it—choosing love over everything else. Over the world, in many ways. Not that she had known she’d had the fate of the world in her hands.

But *they* knew. Oro, Grim, and Isla were very aware that every decision they made would shape fate.

The fog began to stir, as if a breeze was flowing through it. The storm was coming. His brother was starting to fade. “Are you trapped here?” Oro asked, hurriedly.

He shook his head. “We stayed here because we wanted to.” He turned to Violet, and that expression on his face . . . it hadn’t changed since the day he told Oro he had chosen her over his crown. “Here . . . we have been able to finally be together. If only for moments at a time.”

Shreds of their souls had remained in this cursed place, just for the chance of finding each other again.

Oro swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Ready?” A deep voice cut through the fog, and Oro looked toward the sound.

Grim. Oro took a deep breath. He just needed a little more—

He opened his mouth to speak, but when he turned back, his brother and Violet were gone. Faded into the mist.

“Family reunion?” Grim said, coming to Oro’s side. He didn’t give him the satisfaction of a response.

At that moment, the fog parted with a gentle flurry of air, and Azul appeared. His expression was solemn, but Oro could see something within it. Something at peace. Wordlessly, he held out his hand. Grim and Oro took it.

A moment later, they were back on Lightlark.

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ISLA

Isla gasped as the forest stilled around her. But this wasn't how she felt when she was thrust into another memory.

No . . . it was as if something had reached out to keep her from hurtling into the past, tying her down to the present.

She whirled, bracing herself against the coming onslaught from the entire army of wood-women.

But they were all frozen in place, some close enough to touch. A bark-carved dagger was just an inch from her chest.

Isla suddenly remembered Lark, who was still standing next to her, eyes unseeing in her trance. One of the wood-women was held in thin air, caught mid-leap and angling to tear out her ancestor's throat.

How—

A light shined in the distance, past the frozen woods-warriors. The light grew and grew until Isla could make out a woman walking through the woods, an orb of energy around her.

She had silver eyes, and silver hair, reminding her of Starlings. But Isla did not recognize this woman. She was beautiful, radiant, and just slightly older than Isla.

She had no weapon. But Isla could feel the power radiating off her. She suspected this woman didn't need a weapon because *she* was one. With a simple flick of her hand, the wood-warriors all scattered, rolling through the woods like sand being brushed away.

Only then did the woman look at Isla, curiosity glimmering in her silver eyes.

"Who are you?" Isla asked, blinking.

The woman did not answer. She just offered a hand and said, "We don't have much time."

Isla only looked at it. “Time for what?”

All she said was, “Close your eyes.”

Isla’s rational mind was screaming that this was a stranger and she couldn’t trust anyone on this world. But this silver woman had saved her from the warriors. And more than that, Isla knew in her core that she didn’t mean her any harm. The opposite, really. For the first time since landing on Skyshade, Isla felt at peace.

She closed her eyes. She saw nothing but darkness there.

“Open them.”

Isla did and saw she was still in a forest, in the center of a wide clearing. The trees at its edge were taller than the others, thicker, more ancient. The breeze from before had been ripped away.

And a silver pool of water sat in front of her, between the size of a pond and a puddle.

Isla spun around. Lark was gone. “My ancestor, she—”

“Will be fine. For now,” the woman said.

She needed Lark. She should go back. But how had they even gotten here? Had they somehow portaled? “Who are you? Why did you help me?”

Again, the woman did not answer. She just said, “You came here for answers, did you not?”

Isla frowned. How did this woman know anything about her? “I came here to save my world. I came here . . . to change my fate.”

The woman looked upon her, gaze fixed on all the cuts and bruises she had managed to get in the day or so that she had been in this world. “I’m not doing a great job of it,” Isla admitted. The woman didn’t respond and continued her examination. Isla felt as though she could see through her skin, right into her very soul.

“Your prophecy,” the woman finally said.

That word was enough to make her blood still. “You know it?” How was that possible? They lived worlds away . . .

“Your prophecy is older than you can possibly imagine,” the silver woman said. She walked toward the pool. “It’s good that you found yourself here, in the Forgotten Forest. It only invites certain people inside—those who need to remember . . .” The woman paused, turning back to Isla. “The forest never forgets.”

Isla frowned. “What—”

“To fix your future, you must understand your past. You must understand what brought you here. Because, make no mistake, every one of your actions has led you to this very moment.”

Fix your future. That was exactly what she wanted to do. She didn’t care who this woman was if she could help her forge a new fate.

“How do I do that?” Isla asked.

She motioned toward the pool. Isla stepped beside her and peered into it. She winced at her reflection. Blood crusted her face. Her hair was matted, and her armor was filthy.

Then a single ripple formed from the center of the pool, moving out in perfectly positioned rings. Her reflection wobbled in the waves, distorting —

Until the surface of the water changed.

It became a mirror of all the memories she had just lived through in that forest. Her upbringing. Her training. It flashed before her like an entire childhood of pain and loss and loneliness was distilled into a single second.

And then the pool went still again.

Isla didn’t realize she was on her knees until she saw herself reflected once more. She didn’t realize she was crying until the woman placed a hand on her shoulder.

Now that she wasn’t in immediate danger . . . now that she was in this grove . . . so many emotions came flooding up to the surface.

Her training, her guardians. All the bones broken, all the skin shredded, all the injuries, all the responsibility, all the blame, all the isolation. All the betrayal. All the *lies*.

She couldn’t breathe—she felt like she was choking from the pain of it all. Before she could get a word out, the woman’s arms were around her in a comforting embrace.

And Isla sobbed.

“I was just a child,” Isla said, gasping out the words. The realization had really only come to her now. She had always thought her training had been fair. Necessary. She only got what she deserved. She was only trained so hard because she would have it so hard at the Centennial.

But now . . . seeing it all back . . .

She remembered how horrified she was when Grim told her about his upbringing. It was only now that she understood that her training had been

just as barbaric.

“I was just a child,” she repeated, her voice trembling. “Just a child who was alone and wanted to be loved. I was forged into a weapon, and I—I never wanted this,” she said, feeling like she was eight years old again, begging the world for mercy.

The woman nodded and hummed, smoothing her hair down like a mother would. “You were just a child. You never wanted this,” she repeated, and the validation of hearing it from someone else . . . It was everything.

“I don’t want to keep going,” Isla said, sputtering. And she knew it was a weak, horrible thing to say, after everything she had done to get here. After everyone she had killed. She knew she sounded like a child. “The road has been so hard already.”

But the woman didn’t judge her. She pulled away slowly in order to rest her hands on Isla’s shoulders and lock eyes with her. “It will only get harder,” she promised. “But you have only gotten stronger. And that strength . . . it has no limit. *You* have no limit. You are a sword. You will cleave through the present and shape your future to your will. Fate will fear you.”

Isla’s chin quivered, and she bowed her head. She didn’t want to be strong anymore. The woman cupped her cheek so Isla would look at her again. “This place will always be here for you when you need it,” she said. “When you start to doubt yourself, I want you to picture a pool, reflecting every moment you were brave. Every moment you fought, when it was easier to give up. This silver will remind you of your strength. It will be your shield. For this pool is bottomless, just like you. It was here long before me and will be here long after any of our names are nothing but a forgotten echo in the universe.”

“But I’m dying,” Isla said. “My life-force . . . it’s almost gone.”

With that, the woman pooled some of the silver water in her hands, and offered it to Isla. “Drink. It will give you a little more time.”

Isla didn’t know how a pool would help her, but she was desperate. She drank, and felt that silver water slide down her throat—then shoot through her veins, reigniting her energy. “Thank you,” Isla said.

“You aren’t saved yet,” the woman said. “I’m just giving you what everyone deserves—a chance to save yourself.”

As Isla dried her tears, she wondered how this woman, this stranger, could believe in her more than she believed in herself. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, the woman was there, waiting. “Tell me there is an end to this.” *An end to this pain. An end to this fight. An end to this suffering*.

“Night always turns to day, Isla.” The woman’s eyes flicked to Isla’s wrist. To the charm her mother had given her. “And you can see the end of this. When you’re ready.”

“Am I ready?” Isla asked. Needing someone to tell her, because she truly didn’t know what she was doing. Not anymore. Not ever, by the way things were working out.

“Not if you have to ask,” the woman said. She opened her mouth again —then her entire expression changed. She gripped Isla’s hands tighter and looked frantically over her shoulder. “He’s coming.”

He. Isla didn’t need to ask who she meant.

The forest trembled. The water rippled once more.

The silver woman’s voice was hurried as she met her gaze again. “Everything you have been through has led you here. Use your past as a guide to get you through. I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m—”

Isla blinked. And the woman was gone. The silver pool and the grove vanished.

She was back in the forest, surrounded by the wood-crusted warrior women. They were still frozen. But not by an invisible force.

Lark was standing in the middle of the army, her knees bent and arms outstretched, holding them at bay. Rain pelted her brow and melted down her neck. A storm had formed above them.

“Where is she?” Isla gasped, whirling around. “Where is the woman?”

“What woman?” Lark growled, as she flung the woods-warriors away, controlling them all at once. Her wounds were beginning to stitch back together.

Isla frowned. No. It had been *real*. All of it. “What—”

A resounding boom rang through the forest. Through the universe. The rest of this world seemed to shrink into a whisper.

Another. And another. It was like a giant walking toward them.

Lark’s power flickered out for just a moment. And in its absence, the warrior women did not attack. Instead, one after another, the women

scattered, rushing back into their trees. Sealing themselves into the bark.

But it was no use. The night stilled—then shattered, and darkness rippled before them in a wave that flattened the woods, turning the trees to ash. Then that ruinous void took the form of a man.

Not just any man. He looked so much like her husband that her heart stopped for a second. But she knew exactly who this was.

Cronan.

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GRIM

“Well?” Grim said to Azul, the moment they landed back on the Skyling newland.

He was impatient, restless. His skin felt too tight. Isla was in trouble, he was certain. His chest ached, as if his very soul was telling him something was very wrong.

When Azul didn’t immediately answer, Grim used his abilities to comb through the Skyling’s emotions. They were all over the place—peace, fear, trepidation, dread—though he was doing a good job of keeping his expression steady.

“Spit it out,” Grim snarled, when the Skyling remained quiet. He ignored Oro’s glare at his tone.

Finally, Azul said, “My husband told me that the oracles on Moon Isle had a mother, back in the otherworld. She drowned in an ancient, hidden pool of water. Her body was frozen in ice. Many years later, it was stolen. She was cut open, and the water in her lungs was taken to create other pools.” Grim didn’t know what a dead oracle’s lungs had to do with finding his wife, but he forced himself to stay quiet. “The Moonling ruler who joined the founders of Lightlark had a vial and poured it into a place on Lightlark. This water is all connected by an ancient enchantment. The original pool is in the otherworld. If it still exists . . .”

“Then we could use the connection between the waters as a portal,” Oro murmured.

Azul lifted a shoulder. His sky-blue cape rustled. “My husband wasn’t convinced it would work. Even if you found the pool on Lightlark, we still wouldn’t know how to make it into a portal.”

Grim would figure it out. Hope, as ruinous as it may be, blossomed in his chest. At least this was a start. Finally, *something* that could help him get

to her. “Did he tell you where the pool was on the island?”

Reluctantly, Azul nodded.

“Where?”

It took seconds to get to Lightlark. To portal onto one of its beaches. A white cliffside stretched above them, hugging the shore. Sea-foam splashed beneath their boots.

“I don’t see a pool,” Grim said, shadows puddling, searching, his knuckles whitening as he clenched and unclenched his fists. Everything and everyone were moving far too slowly. Did no one else operate with urgency?

If only he had taken the time to study the mind portion of his abilities further. Perhaps he could pluck all the answers he needed from the Skyling and save himself this torture.

“It’s only revealed in high tide,” Azul said. He motioned toward craters in the sand. “The ancient water is buried below. It rises when the sea fully rushes in.”

Grim bared his teeth. He didn’t have time for the fucking *tide*.

He whirled toward Oro. “Make it high tide,” he demanded.

Oro glanced over at him. “What do you think I am? The moon?”

In a flash, he portaled so he was in front of the Sunling—and the king’s throat was in his fist. He was done playing nice. His shadows sharpened into a dozen swords, all skimming the king’s useless golden armor. “You’re anything I tell you to be,” Grim said. He tightened his grip on the Sunling’s throat, relishing in the color leeching from his face as he choked—

Before his fingers were singed. Grim turned himself into shadow a moment later, but his hand fucking *burned*.

Oro’s entire skin was crackling with flames. The Sunling took a step toward him. “No,” he said, voice steady but as firm as Grim had ever heard it. “I’m king. You’re a guest on my island, Nightshade.”

Then, he shot toward him in a streak of fire.

Well, fuck. Oro clearly wasn’t as eternally patient and civil as he claimed to be. That was made obvious by the force in which he hit Grim straight in the jaw. Grim portaled away, but not before pain racheted through his skull. He materialized on the other side of the beach, bone still singing.

Oro turned, catching sight of him. The flames coating his body flared higher.

Grim enveloped himself in dagger-like shadows.

Azul just sighed and sat down upon a rock, not bothering to get between them.

They surged toward each other in streams of flame and shadow.

“What’s wrong, Skyling? Not going to help your dear friend?” Grim shot at Azul as his shadow-coated fist made contact with Oro’s temple, sending him soaring through the air, then crashing into the sand.

Azul shrugged. “The king of Lightlark doesn’t need my help.”

He said it just as Oro sat up—and unleashed a beam of energy from his chest that was so saturated, it went right through all Grim’s shadows. It sent him flying back, only stopping once he collided with the white cliff. The mountain shuddered. Rock crumbled as he slid down it.

But before he hit the sand, he shot forward. Shadows gathered in his hands, hardening into pure obsidian power. He was ready to send that calcified shadow right through the Sunling’s skull. He bared his teeth, moving to strike—

Then he went deathly still.

Oro did too. He stopped, just a foot away. His fire completely extinguished.

And in Oro’s eyes, Grim saw the same bone-melting despair that had him sinking to his knees, right into the sand. His shadows were washed away by a wave. All the fight had left him. His voice was a choked rasp. “Please—please tell me you can feel her.”

Oro’s own voice was hardly a whisper. “I can’t.”

Grim’s world was ending, right there on that beach.

Because he couldn’t feel her either.

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ORO

Love had always made Oro brave. His mother’s love had helped him get through the hardest moments of his life—through training, through even imprisonment at his father’s command for refusing to gild. His friends’ love had gotten him through war, through his mother’s death, and through the aftermath. His love of his people, and his duty, and his brother helped him get through the curses.

Even though he had been brave for centuries, his heart had turned to ice over the years. He had given up hope that the curses would ever be broken.

And then Isla crashed into his life, fracturing his cold heart. She was the first sign of spring after a long winter. Her green eyes were blazing with determination, with courage, with strength, and Oro couldn’t help but fight for a world that deserved to have her in it.

His mother had always told him to find his fire. He had. *She* was his fire—the reminder in his heart to always keep fighting for light even in endless darkness.

He refused to believe that she was gone. A fire like hers couldn’t simply be extinguished.

But neither of them could feel her anymore. Grim was on his knees, gasping for air. Clawing the ground. He was *shaking* in fear and heartache. Oro wanted to do the same—it would be so easy to crumble, but right now, he needed to be logical. *She* needed them to keep going.

So, he strode over and slapped Grim. Hard. The Nightshade didn’t even flinch. He just slowly looked up at Oro with an expression so devastated, it was like he was incapable of any emotion other than soul-rotting sadness.

For a moment, he almost saw his old friend in that look. A friend he would have wanted to comfort, in the middle of this pain.

Oro gripped his arms and hauled him to his feet. “If she was dead, you would be too,” he said. Grim had bound his life to hers in order to save her.

Grim shook his head. “You don’t know that, I could—”

Oro slapped him again. Grim’s head lurched to the side. This time, when the Nightshade faced him again, there was the hint of aggravation in his expression.

“You’re right. I don’t know for certain,” Oro said. “But what I do know is that Cronan will find her, if he hasn’t already. I know that there is a war coming that will most certainly kill us all. Kill *you*, if you don’t pull yourself together enough to face what’s coming. And I know you mostly just care about her, so let me make this clear. If she’s alright—which I have to believe she is—then *your death* will kill her.”

Grim looked to the ground. He took a ragged breath. “You’re—”

Oro made to slap him again, but Grim’s hand shot up and gripped his wrist. The Nightshade slowly slid his gaze up to meet Oro’s. “Touch me again, and I’ll eliminate the need for my wife to make a choice that fulfills this prophecy.” He tightened his grip nearly hard enough to shatter bone.

“There you are,” Oro said, the side of his mouth twitching. That was the Grim that he needed if they were going to save Isla.

Grim scowled, released his hand—and they turned toward Azul, who had the good sense to stay quiet throughout their whole exchange.

Oro knew he had to be the strong one right now. But inside, he was pure devastation. What if she was gone for good? What would he do? He would never love again, that was certain. His heart would harden. He would be forced to do what he had for the last few months, ever since Isla left him to end the war—exist like a ghost in their memories, reliving the best parts of his life knowing that they’d never be together again. He would sit alone on that beach on Sun Isle, staring at the sea the color of her eyes.

Never in his long life had he hoped to every god that Grim would stay alive.

He had to believe she was still out there. *I love you*, he thought, willing it to reach her, wherever she was. *Even with a universe separating us, I love you. Even on my enemy’s lands, I love you. Even if you never want to be with me again, I love you*.

He clung to those words as he closed his eyes and called upon the sea. He had never been the strongest Moonling, as Cleo had often reminded

him, but he had to be strong for Isla, so he simply *was*. He summoned every shred of his ability—

And changed the tides themselves.

Water rushed in, smearing the beach in salt and foam. Azul swept them up on a wind, and from this height, they watched all the pools fill, until one glowed a strange shade of blue.

That was it. It had to be. They landed upon a remaining crust of sand and walked toward it.

This was their portal.

Without a moment's hesitation, Grim jumped in the water. The current raged around him, waves splashing in and out, but he walked steadfast toward its center. His shadows spilled after him, turning it dark as ink, and Oro could almost see his flair working to form a portal.

Grim's eyes were closed in concentration. Sweat spilled down his temples.

Please work, Oro begged the universe. He offered up everything that was in his power to give. *Please*.

But minutes later, nothing had happened.

Grim roared in frustration, his shadows shooting in all directions, spearing ash through the sea.

Azul's husband had been right. Grim's flair and the pool itself weren't enough.

Oro wished he could allow himself to drown in his sadness. But Isla needed him to keep his head above water.

She needed him to find a way to make this pool into a portal.

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ISLA

Cronan Malvere’s eyes were as dead and empty as this world. He peered at Isla like she was a curious new planet to ruin. “So, you’re what I’ve been looking for,” he said, his voice flat and resonant, like Lark’s. An embodiment of ancient power.

His hair was dark as ink; his skin was pale as bone. He wore a crown of strange metals, spiked and jagged enough to be a weapon itself. The dark fabric of his cape seemed to leech all color around it. A sinister energy clung to him, like his soul was a relentless void.

He strode toward her, and ripples formed in the ashes that this part of the forest had been reduced to. Every step echoed, power undulating from deep within the ground. Isla realized she was wrong—he was nothing like Lark. He was something older, more formidable. Inevitable.

That was made even clearer when Lark took one look at him and lunged. In her expression, Isla saw not only utter rage, but hurt. Pure, bitter, millennia-old resentment. This ancient Wildling had nearly ripped her world apart, formed armies of dead, uprooted everything Isla had ever known and loved.

And Cronan didn’t even glance at her as he flicked his wrist like he was swatting a fly—and Lark was shredded into ribbons.

No. Isla gasped, watching as her ancestor was reduced to a pile of flesh and bone and blood. Isla had lost her chance to absorb Lark’s power. Lost the opportunity to bring everyone back—

But then Isla saw those pieces of skin and sinew begin to move, dragging toward each other through the blood-covered ash.

Cronan didn’t waste another breath on Lark. His gaze was fixed solely on Isla.

And yes. She had completely underestimated him.

She knew it was useless. Useless to take her stance, to raise his own sword, to draw upon the energy of the incoming storm and surround herself with all her abilities, to unleash the blizzards and hurricanes contained in her orb, to wrap herself in rings of stars and fire and shadow and ice. But she did.

And in a rush of darkness, Cronan broke through all her defenses like they were no more than wisps of wind. Before she could even blink, he was holding her by the throat, feet dangling above the ground.

He plucked his sword from her grip. He pored over it for a moment, seeming pleased. Then, he turned his attention to her while she thrashed and gasped for air.

He looked into her eyes only for an instant before his gaze shifted lower. To the black diamond necklace that rested right against her pulse.

And then this world-leveling immortal being with unfathomable power . . . laughed. The sound was devoid of any joy, just cruel amusement. It echoed through her skull, and her vision started to dim.

“Worldkey,” he said, looking at the sword, the stone, and then her. “I’ve torn apart the universe searching for you.” His mouth turned into a mirthless smile. “And you’ve brought yourself to me.”

Then everything went dark, like the stars themselves had been swallowed whole.

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ISLA

Isla awoke on the floor in the center of a circular room. The ceiling was domed and made of glass, revealing a swirling galaxy, stars, and planets intertwined in a mess of silver and purple and blue. They formed the shape of a crown, as if they had been forced there. Taken and tied together.

Isla imagined that if she could access her abilities, they would be amplified in a place like this. But without a storm present, she was on her own. Now, she knew why.

Cronan was a void. He had conquered this world, and his power was a sheen over everything, sucking it dry. Only the storms could break through. If Cronan was the poison, the storms were the antidote. Even her skyres couldn't pierce this malice. This was a bane unique to him, and Isla wondered if there was any marking that could break through.

"What an interesting turn of events . . ." Cronan said from somewhere behind her. It was only when Isla made to sit up, to face him, that she realized she couldn't move. She was pinned to the floor by his power. She couldn't even speak.

She could only blink as Cronan came into her line of sight, blotting out the galaxy behind him to peer down at her.

It was uncanny, the resemblance. Grim was beautiful like a god, and so was his ancestor. Cronan's hair was cut shorter, though, and topped by that strange, twisted crown, radiating energy like it was forged from a broken universe.

Isla couldn't look at it for too long without feeling a sharp pull in her bones, just like with the knights, as if her blood was the sea and his crown was the moon.

She wrenched her gaze back down to his face. She felt a pang of sadness, thinking of her husband.

She should have told him the prophecy before she left. She should have shared her plan. For so long, she had blamed him for making decisions without her. And though this wasn't the same, it also wasn't so different.

She hadn't told him for the same reason he kept her in the dark before the Centennial—she had been afraid he would stop her.

"My line has grown weak, it seems," Cronan said, words dripping with disgust as he stared at the diamond at her throat.

He clearly had the power to kill her and claim the stone. So why hadn't he already?

Isla wondered if he could hear her thoughts, as he said, "Killing you would be easy." He motioned up toward the sky. "I've destroyed many planets to consume their energy. But every now and then, I come across a planet that is more useful to keep alive. To *conquer*, rather than extinguish." He looked down at her, and Isla swallowed. She summoned all her strength to try and break his hold, but she couldn't move an inch.

"You, Worldkey," he continued, "are more useful to me alive, for now." A shadow emerged from his crown and snaked slowly toward her. "The diamond Infinite fights me still. It is an ancient, sentient power. It must *choose* to be claimed."

A rush of relief swept through her chest. If that was true, it gave her more time to think of how to get out of this. It meant he was incentivized to keep her alive.

That relief quickly withered when he said, "You wield Infinite. It accepted you to wear it . . . so I don't need to control the stone." His head tilted. "When I can just control you."

Fear slid down her spine. He had a vise on her blood and bones. Could he force her to do anything he wanted? "Look at you," he said, her very essence shrinking at his approach. "My greatest weapon yet."

No. She wouldn't do *anything* for him. She fought to move, to get out of his hold, but it was useless. Those shadows from his crown just inched closer.

"I know the world you come from. I helped create it. So I know that it has never produced someone as powerful as you. You, who wields abilities from all six realms, who consumes the souls of everyone you have killed, whose heart was fused together by the seed of power we used to make the island."

Isla’s eyes widened. How did he know that? Some Nightshades had mind abilities. Had he already plundered hers? Her chest burned, right on the starlike mark where the arrow had pierced her heart, where the Heart of Lightlark had stitched her back together. Right where the skyre that she had drained to close the portal had once been.

“I see myself in you,” Cronan said. “Such potential for greatness. For destruction. It’s already within you. But there’s so much more to discover.”

She could do nothing but watch in horror as the shadow struck her forehead—and her world erupted into pain.

Her vision pulsed white, her veins filled with poison. If she could move her body, she would have been convulsing in agony. But she could do nothing as those dagger-sharp shadows plunged into her mind, prying, opening, shredding as they went. Tears slipped down the sides of her face, puddling in her ears.

Cronan’s laugh echoed through her skull. “I know you came here to kill me. But you’re going to join me instead.”

Never.

He heard her objections, and said, “It doesn’t matter what you want . . . when I can shape your mind into whatever I need.”

The watery fear running through her hardened into conviction. No. She had been through far too much to be controlled by someone else. She couldn’t move, couldn’t fight, but she formed a fortress in her mind, blocking him out, one built of iron stones forged from her love of everyone she had left behind, and her sheer will to keep this monster from seeing them. She would be a wall between them. She would stand against him until none of her was left.

Because even if her powers weren’t—her love for them was infinite.

All at once, the shadows were ripped out of her head. Isla gasped in relief, choking on tears clogging her throat.

The galaxy above simmered and whorled as if connected to Cronan’s very emotions. Though his expression remained blank, it was clear he was furious.

In a flash, he forced her into the air, gripping her chin between his fingers as she floated there helplessly. From this angle, she could see the pieces of her armor in a pile in the corner. *Her father’s armor*. The god-bone sat atop it, along with her orb of storms. “You’re going to let me into

your head . . . or I'm going to force my way in," he said. "Every lock has a key. Anything can be broken."

She didn't doubt that he would get through her defenses. But she would fight him every step of the way.

Cronan tilted his head at her. "It's going to be painful. It would be easier for us both for you to simply . . . give in."

It took everything in her to break from his hold enough to whisper, "Never."

He dropped her suddenly, and she landed hard on her knees. She gasped for breath.

"You'll change your mind. They always do . . ." Cronan gazed up at his galaxy. "For every lock . . . there is a key . . ." he repeated to himself.

And Isla knew exactly what her key was. She knew what would get her to do anything.

The men she loved.

If Cronan could feel her bond with each of them . . . he might be able to find them. He might be able to portal them here. . . .

Isla wouldn't let him use them against her. She had already given him enough, just by being here. His sword. The god-bone. *Her*. She would not give him them.

The bonds between her and them . . . they glistened like bridges. One glimmering gold. One the shade of night. She could feel them, faintly, on the other end, even worlds away.

Love was always taught to be a curse, especially for rulers. It meant giving someone complete access to your power. Leaving yourself vulnerable. For the first time, Isla wondered if the unbreakable power-bond love formed truly was a curse, like nexus.

And if it was a curse . . . with her father's flair, could she choose to be immune to it?

She would do anything to protect them.

So, though it felt wrong, though it pained her to her core, though it took every bit of energy she could summon from the pit of her strength, Isla reached for those thin threads that still bound her to the men she loved . . .

And severed them.

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GRIM

He couldn’t feel her.

His heart . . . she was missing. At least that thin thread had been an anchor to her, a reassurance that she was out there, somewhere across the universe.

Now, it was gone completely. He waited to join her. He welcomed death if it meant being reunited with Isla.

But his heart kept beating.

Oro was right. She must be alive. Then why had both of their connections to her been ripped away? What had changed?

She must have found a way to sever the bridge. And, if he knew his wife at all—*which he did*—he could guess it was because she was protecting them.

From what? From *who*?

Cronan must have found her.

Shadows erupted from him, and for a moment, the world was plunged into night. His darkness smothered even the sun. Grim would carve through any obstacle that kept him from her. Even his own ancestor.

His power was ripped back into him. He would need it.

They tried everything they could think of with what they had, but nothing worked. Now, he sat on the edge of the cliff with Oro above the beach with the tide pools, watching the sea rage below them, trying to form a plan through this panic. The waves seemed as relentless and angry as he felt, crashing against the shore over and over again in a spray of foam.

Oro finally looked over at him. Grim couldn’t tell where Oro’s emotions began and his ended. They were both heavy with trench-deep despair, and hopelessness, and rage.

“We need to stop this,” Oro said. He had a split lip. A black eye. His golden armor was singed with ash.

“Stop looking for her?” Grim demanded.

“Never,” he said. He winced as he motioned his chin toward Grim. “This. Us. Fighting.”

Right. Grim couldn’t fucking feel his jaw. Not that it mattered. This physical pain was nothing—*nothing*—compared to the agony in his heart and soul.

“She needs us to be aligned. Especially . . . especially now.”

The Sunling, Grim knew, was right. This latest brawl was proof enough that they each truly hadn’t put their weapons down when it came to working together.

“There was a time . . .” Oro said, “when we would sit on a cliff, just like this.”

Grim remembered. Of course, he remembered. “A time when we were friends,” he said.

There it was. The truth between them that they both might have tried to forget. They *had been* friends. They had dueled every day, drank themselves numb, and talked about things no one else would understand.

He supposed Oro was the only person in this universe who could understand him now. A ruler whose entire being revolved around a woman who was worlds away.

“I’m sorry,” Oro said, and it was enough to snap Grim out of his thoughts. He looked at the Sunling, feeling around his emotions. There was nothing but true regret.

“For?” Grim asked, facing the sea again.

“For not believing you. When you said you didn’t spin the curses.”

Grim closed his eyes. That was the moment that had turned friends back into enemies. Oro had been the only friend he’d ever had. And it took only a second for Oro to break the trust between them.

Aurora had spun the curses because of a broken friendship. Grim almost understood her now. The pain, the betrayal . . . it had marked him. Closed him off for centuries.

Grim didn’t speak for a while, letting the roar of the ocean fill the space between them. Finally, he glanced over at Oro again.

“I’m sorry too,” Grim said, slowly, the words hard to get out. “For plotting to kill you. And starting a war against you.”

Oro just blinked at him. “No, you’re not,” he said.

That fucking flair.

Grim shrugged a shoulder as he turned his attention back to the horizon. “You’re right. I’m not. I would do it again. Because it was for her. And for her . . . I would do anything.”

With a sigh, Grim got to his feet. Enough wallowing. Now, it was time to figure out how to make a portal to another world and get to his wife. Oro stood too.

“Truce?” Grim asked, holding out his hand.

Oro just stared at it.

Grim rolled his eyes. “I won’t try to kill you, unless it helps me get to her.”

Oro stared at him blankly. Grim knew he could sense the honesty in his words, which, according to his emotions, wasn’t making him feel even remotely assured. Still, the Sunling sighed deeply, then his hand clasped Grim’s. “Truce,” he said.

“Good.” Grim rolled his shoulders back and straightened. “I’m going back to Nightshade to see what I can find. I’ll be back when I have something.”

He dropped Oro’s hand—and was gone.

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ORO

Oro was pacing back and forth in his throne room, a path of flames erupting from his every step across the gilded floor. Isla was clearly in trouble, and Oro felt like he was coming apart at the seams at not being able to help her. He needed to figure out how to open the portal in the tidepool, but where to start? Grim had left for Nightshade hours ago, after they had exhausted every theory, every resource . . .

The only other thing they had were these useless threads. They glimmered in his palm, coarse and heavy. That was about all they had done since he had gotten them. So far, Oro had no idea why they had been valuable enough for his father to spend almost his entire reign searching for them. Or dangerous enough to be hidden miles beneath the sea.

Oro had scoured his library for any information that could guide him, but he had no luck. He tried funneling power into the threads—nothing. He was a moment from throwing the damned things across the room—

When his finger caught one of the threads, causing it to unravel. He made to push it back in—

And heard voices. His head snapped up, expecting to see his friends walking inside. But these weren't his friends.

The people striding confidently into his throne room were strangers.

They were clearly Sunlings, dressed in gold. But their clothing was a style he had never seen before, the glistening fabrics whispering against the floor and flowing behind them like liquid gold. They continued their conversation as if Oro wasn't standing right in front of them—in fact, they walked straight toward him as if he wasn't in the room. He was about to protest, when they passed right through him, their bodies turning to glittering wisps of sand and smoke before reforming again behind him, like specters.

What was this?

They murmured, but Oro couldn’t make out their words. It sounded like everything was underwater. Then the chatter abruptly stopped, and everyone turned toward the throne room’s entrance.

A towering man with golden hair walked through the doors. He strode with purpose, right to the throne. Oro had seen enough portraits in the hall to know exactly who this was.

Horus Rey. His ancestor. One of the founders of the island.

Oro hurried to unravel more of the threads, faster this time, to test a theory, and the people around him disappeared in long columns of gold smoke. As he unwound, years flitted across his vision, the room changing, people traveling in and out. His mind burned, his eyes straining to take it all in. His body felt pulled forward, as if he was being dragged through a thick current.

Until he paused his thumb, and everything around him settled once more.

Oro’s heart wrenched as he recognized the woman in front of him. His mother was standing just a few feet away, younger than he had ever seen her. She was holding a glimmering sword and speaking to a man—his father. Oro couldn’t hear his response, but it looked like he was pleading with her.

His mother turned on her heel, and his father followed her like a lost creature, his expression pure adoration. Oro blinked in surprise. He knew that they’d had a great love story when they met. But he had only seen their relationship many years later, when all of that warmth had been extinguished. Had his father’s insistence on finding the Threads of Time pushed her away? Had it turned him into the cold and unimpressed father Oro had known as a child?

He—

“What are you doing?”

A voice clear as day startled him into dropping the threads on the floor. In an instant—his parents were gone.

Enya was in front of him, frowning down at the pile of gold string. “What is that?”

Warily, he bent to pick it up and winced. His head was throbbing. His body felt heavy and worn out, like he had been swimming for hours. Still,

the threads gleamed on the floor, as if in invitation.

"It . . . controls time. Supposedly," he said. His voice sounded ragged.

Enya lifted a brow. "Supposedly?"

His fingers curled around the threads, and they were warmer than before. "I think I just saw . . . thousands of years. Distilled into seconds."

Was the extent of these threads' ability to simply see the past?

"Sounds exhausting," Enya said. She frowned, looking him over. "You don't look so good."

"Thank you," Oro said, flatly.

Her lips twitched. "I mean, you look worse than usual."

"Again, thank you."

"I'm serious. You look . . ."

"How am I supposed to look?" he said, surprising himself with his tone. He hadn't meant to yell. He worked to soften his voice slightly. "The woman I love left months ago . . . then came back . . . and I . . . I hoped that maybe . . ." He didn't finish the sentence. He knew he didn't need to. "And now . . . she's in another world, and I can't feel her anymore, Enya. Neither of us can." His voice broke on the words. Suddenly, it was like he couldn't breathe.

"Hey," Enya said, grabbing him by the arms. Steadying him, like she always had. "You both are doing everything you can to get her back. But she needs you to be strong." She sighed. "You're her only hope."

He knew that. And it was exactly why he was so afraid. What if he wasn't strong enough to help her? What if he couldn't be what she needed?

As if sensing his doubt, Enya shook him by the shoulders and said, "You are king of Lightlark. Did you forget? You're the most powerful person in this world. More powerful, even, than him."

Oro didn't know if that was true. But he did agree, that having both of them searching for her was the most he could hope for.

"Now," Enya said. She glanced down at the threads. "Did you see anything good?"

Oro gritted his teeth, his head still pulsing in pain. "My parents . . . they used to *like* each other."

Enya had known his parents almost as well as he had. She made a face. "Really?"

He nodded. "I saw my father *smile*."

She gasped. “And the world kept turning?”

A laugh slipped out of him. It felt strange. How long had it been since he had experienced anything resembling joy?

He sighed. “This,” he said, holding the threads up, “is supposed to be a crucial part in all of this. It’s supposed to help her save the universe. But I don’t know how.”

Enya frowned. “Did you see anyone else? Other than your parents.”

“Horus.”

She considered this, working her lip in concentration. “Maybe that’s the key, then. Think about it. Lark and Cronan are alive and involved in this. The only founder of Lightlark missing is him.”

“He’s dead,” Oro said. He had seen his ancestor’s corpse himself, with Isla.

“I know,” she said. “But maybe he can still help you.”

Enya was right. Horus was from the otherworld. Of course, he, out of anyone, would have information they need. Oro just needed to figure out how to use these threads to find specific moments that might be useful.

“Thank you,” he said, wiping a hand down his face in exhaustion. Since the moment Isla left, he and Grim had worked tirelessly to get her back, and now, he was starting to feel it.

“Anytime,” Enya replied. She looked down at the threads. “Be careful with that,” she warned.

“I will be,” Oro said. He made his way back to his throne as she left the room. When he sat down, he realized just how tired he was. He should sleep. He should eat something.

But instead, he began unraveling the threads once more.

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ISLA

By the time one of the knights threw her into a cell, Isla's mind had been melted down. The wall she had formed in her head was only barely holding steady. She could hardly find the strength to cry, let alone catch herself, and her head smacked against the cold, damp stone.

She hadn't realized how much she had relied on those ties to Grim and Oro to keep her strong, until they were gone.

She heard a rasped laugh. "I told you, you are an idiot."

Lark. Isla didn't have the energy to even look at her. Barely found the voice to grind out, "Wow. You really can't be killed." Her ancestor had been in a hundred ribbons the last time she saw her.

Judging by the rattling, wheezing sound of Lark's breathing, she hadn't been left unaffected. "In this state, I wish I could be."

Isla should be reveling in Lark's suffering, after everything she had done to her and her world. But here, against Cronan . . . they were almost allies, aligned in their hatred of him.

Besides, even if Isla knew how to kill Lark and absorb her power, she wasn't sure how to use her abilities to bring back all the people she had killed. The people Lark had resurrected on her world had turned into shells of themselves, monsters intent on destruction. Here, it was supposed to be possible to truly bring someone back to life, exactly as they were. But was that before Cronan's ruination?

She wasn't sure of anything other than her own uncertainty.

Isla dragged herself painfully into a sitting position against the wall. It hurt to think. To breathe. When she finally saw Lark, slumped against the opposite corner, hidden in shadows, she nearly gasped.

Her ancestor had barely stitched herself together. She was gaping in several places, her abdomen barely containing her innards. Her ribs were

visible through her patchworked skin, the broken bones almost glowing in the darkness. Her face was just a cruel mosaic of blood and flesh. He had done this to her. Without a thought.

Cronan was the most powerful person Isla had ever met . . . but everyone had a weakness. And Lark knew him better than most.

There is a key to every lock.

"What happened?" Isla asked. "Between you and Cronan. You loved him."

Lark scowled as best she could. "And look where that got me."

Even before this new tortured existence Cronan had inflicted upon Lark, Isla knew that they had a long history of betrayals. He had buried her beneath Nightshade for centuries and siphoned her for power.

"We need to work together to defeat him," Isla said, trying to reason with her. Not that she was sure Lark could be reasoned with. "That's the only chance we have."

Lark gave her a withering look, clearly not moved by Isla's words. "I don't care that you're of my line. If I had the strength, I'd kill you right now."

"I know," Isla said. "If I knew how to kill you, I would too."

Lark just stared up at the ceiling. Isla didn't think she would say anything else, but after nothing but the sound of something dripping and the scuttling of small vermin between them, she whispered, "He wasn't always like this."

Isla couldn't imagine him any other way. His eyes were fathomless, just an immortal blankness.

Lark must have sensed her doubt. "He was always cold, yes, but there was something buried below. I could feel it. There was life, in him. Light."

Isla blinked at her ancestor. It was hard to believe that *Lark* was ever anything but merciless and cruel. She had tried to end her world to make a new one. She had tried to kill *everyone*. "You killed hundreds. Wren. Remlar. You are the opposite of light and life."

"So narrow-minded." Lark scoffed. "Nature is *cruel*. Life cannot exist without death. It is an endless, inevitable cycle." She smirked. "You think being Wildling is only about creation. But *all* living things must die, in order to create more. Life is built on bones and ashes. A new world grows from the ruins of an old one. Death has always been a natural process."

“So that’s what it was?” Isla asked, trying her best to bury her rage. “You both decided you wanted to create a world together?”

Lark gazed at her for a long while. “I knew Horus first. He was like you . . . he wanted only the easy part of creation. He didn’t realize that death was necessary to make something new. I was a worldbuilder. I could create entire lands, in realms that already existed. We dreamed of somewhere else, somewhere we could make the rules . . . Then, there was Cronan. And he understood the sacrifices that have to be made. He was willing to do what Horus was not. Together . . . the three of us could create something new.”

Lark sighed heavily. “Of course, I didn’t think Cronan would be the end of this place. What I didn’t know, was that he had his own reasons for wanting to create Lightlark. The world we went to already existed. It was a prison between galaxies. There was little there . . . so I created the island. The life. He used both of us to get to that world, to find a power he had already been searching for . . .” Her eyes slipped to Isla’s neck. “That diamond . . . you have no idea what you wear around your neck.”

Isla swallowed, remembering how Cronan had looked at it—hungrily, like it was truly the key to everything. “Then tell me.”

Maybe if Isla knew what it was Cronan was after—

Lark laughed. It was a sputtering, painful sound. “You think there’s still hope. You think you could possibly defeat him.” She smiled humorlessly. “Foolish, foolish girl. You’re going to give him everything he ever wanted. You are nothing but a pawn. It’s all you’ve ever been . . . and all you ever will be.”

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GRIM

His wife had spent months trying to open the portal before she succeeded. If Grim was going to do the same . . . he needed to retrace her steps.

He began in the winter palace. Isla had been injured by that creature in the maze. He remembered the book she had with her.

The book of skyres.

It wasn't hard to find it in his castle, right where she had left it. At first he thought the pages were blank, but then he realized there was an enchantment on them. He sighed impatiently, flipping over and over, until intricate shapes began to form.

It only showed a few symbols at a time, in pieces, and he couldn't make sense of any of them. This was an art that had been mostly lost . . .

He barely contained the urge to turn the book—and the rest of his library—to ash.

None of this was useful. But he knew of someone who might know. Someone his wife had visited several times, in her attempts to find and open the portal.

The augur startled as Grim portaled right through his waterfall of blood. He took in Grim's massive form and his jagged mouth curved into a smile that showcased his sharpened teeth. "Ruler. Of course."

A moment later, the augur was pinned against the wall by Grim's shadows. But the creature only smiled wider. "I know why you're here. It wasn't that long ago when you came to me with a vial of your own blood, asking if you had been cursed . . . It was because you had fallen for her, wasn't it?"

After Grim had met Isla, he thought he was losing his mind. He couldn't sleep, instead spending night after night at her bedside, cloaked in shadow, watching the gentle rise and fall of her breath while she dreamed. She

infected his every waking thought. It had to have been a Wildling trap, there was no explanation.

But he was wrong.

“Because of you,” Grim said to the creature, “my wife is across the universe.” His shadows sharpened, their tips a breath away from painting the wall with the creature’s blood.

The augur’s bottomless pit eyes only seemed to swirl darker red. “No, no . . . that was *you* . . . She never would have needed to leave, if she hadn’t ever met you.”

The creature’s words knocked the breath from him.

Was he right?

Grim worked his jaw. That didn’t matter now. What mattered was getting her back. “You taught my wife about skyres, didn’t you?”

The augur nodded.

“Tell me everything you taught her.”

The augur peered over at him. He tilted his skeletal head. “I wonder . . . if you knew you were hurtling toward your doom . . . would you still run so quickly toward the abyss?”

Grim didn’t have time for these riddles. But since the augur seemed unconcerned with his shadows, he played along. “If the abyss was her . . . then yes.”

“Interesting . . .” he said. “Fate is fragmented. Split in half . . . I wonder if the king feels the same way . . .”

Oro loved Isla—that was clear. But Grim knew the king had a moral compass they did not share. That was the difference between them.

It was why *he* belonged with Isla.

“I can’t help you with a skyre to get to the otherworld and your wife . . .” the augur said. “But when you get to Cronan’s world . . . you will need one to help you survive.”

“Why?” he demanded.

“Cronan is a void. He can remove power, just like enchanted shademade metal—but stronger. You’ll need a way to get around it.”

“How?” Grim asked.

“He has a skyre. One he uses to amplify his power. If you carved it into your skin with a powerful object . . . you would maintain your abilities.”

Grim blinked. His ever-present concern for his wife flared. “Did you tell my wife this?”

The augur shook his head.

He portaled in front of the creature, curling his fist around his thin, papery throat. “Why not?”

“I did not know.”

“How do you know now?” Grim asked.

The augur tilted his head. “She told me.”

“Who?” His wife?

“The silver girl. The one who sees,” the augur said. “She speaks in a wordless language, and some of us are able to listen. She sees more and more as the days go on . . .”

Grim didn’t know what this creature was sputtering on about. He didn’t care, unless it helped him get to his wife. “Has this girl seen anything to help Isla?”

“Only this,” the augur said.

“What is Cronan’s skyre?” Grim demanded.

The augur lifted a shoulder. “No one knows. You can imagine he kept it secret. But you’re of his blood . . . if anyone can figure it out, it’s you.”

“What do I use, to make it?” he asked. Isla had Cronan’s sword. There were other ancient relics, but he didn’t know of any nearly as powerful.

“The same one your wife did.”

Grim shook his head. “The god-bone is gone.” She took that with her too.

“Not the god-bone,” the augur said.

And that was when Grim remembered that Isla *had* left something behind.

The feather. The one with the sparkling tip.

“Thank you,” Grim said. His shadows released the augur.

And he portaled back to the winter palace to get it.

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ORO

Oro had watched thousands of years play out in his mind. It took great focus and practice, but soon, he was able to hear the conversations of the past. It no longer sounded like he was underwater.

Nothing had helped with finding out how to create a portal yet. But that didn’t mean he hadn’t learned something.

The lost king was right. The past informed the future. He started to notice cycles that always repeated. So many events were entirely predictable. How could people not see it as they were living it?

How had he been so blind to the obvious?

The more he watched, the more he understood, as if the truths of the world were being laid out in front of him. Every second was priceless. He couldn’t bring himself to stop.

Even when hunger forced him to take a quick break in the kitchens, it was like the threads were calling to him. He found himself racing back to his throne, to sit and watch. And *learn*.

For this . . . it was the ultimate knowledge. He understood now why the lost king had been in that trance. Why he had lived a thousand lives, sitting right there on the ocean floor. So far, Oro had only explored the past here, on this island. Was it possible to look at the history of other places too?

He tried to control where he went in his mind in order to follow Horus. But time often jumped. Even when he did hear conversations featuring his ancestor, he hadn’t been able to learn much about portals. It wasn’t surprising—the Founders hadn’t *wanted* to return to the otherworld. Lightlark was their new beginning.

But that didn’t stop Oro from trying. He knew he had to sleep—he hadn’t since Isla had left. But when he tried to pry himself off the throne the next time . . . he just couldn’t.

He sat back and was lost in time again. He was starting to feel more familiar with the past than the present.

He was in the middle of a council meeting a thousand years prior, listening as—

There was a flash of blinding pain, and he was thrust from his mind. The golden sand and smoke of the past vanished.

His friends stood in front of him. He growled, furious at having been ripped out of such an important moment . . . before noticing the worry on their faces.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded. Had something happened?

His friends only stared at him. Finally, Zed shot forward in frustration.

“What’s wrong?” he snarled. “Those cursed threads almost ended us all, *what’s wrong*!”

Oro blinked. What? What was he talking about? Calder was approaching him with a pouch of water. He shifted—and winced. His arm was throbbing. He looked down to see his skin had been cut open from the crease of his elbow to his wrist, and his blood was gushing onto the gold floors. It was everywhere, and Oro didn’t know how he hadn’t noticed it at first.

“The threads had woven into your veins . . .” Enya said, her face pale, her freckles starker than usual. “You were in there too long. We had to pull them out.”

Oro’s brows came together. How long was he gone? It couldn’t have been more than a few hours. He looked around . . . and saw darkness outside.

“*Days*, Oro,” Enya said. “We left you two days ago and came back to find you like this.”

He had spent *days* in the past? How many years had he swept through in that time?

He winced, the full weight of the exhaustion hitting him. He blinked, his vision blurring. His skin stung as Calder worked the cold water across the gushing wound.

The pain and tiredness was worth it, though.

“The things I’ve seen . . .” he said, shaking his head. “You have no idea. The knowledge . . .”

Enya bared her teeth at him then. “I don’t care *what* you’ve seen, Oro,” she snarled. “I don’t care what you think you know. Because you were almost bested by a few pieces of damned *string*.”

Calder had finished healing his arm and shook his head. “It can’t be healthy, seeing so much, so quickly . . .”

Healthy? Oro didn’t care. “You don’t understand,” he said. None of them did. Why couldn’t they just get it? “I’ve seen every triumph. Every mistake. That’s how we save everyone . . . we learn! We don’t repeat history!”

His friends didn’t seem convinced. They were still looking at him like he had gone mad.

Oro shook his head. They weren’t listening. They weren’t *understanding*. “Here,” Oro said, lunging for the threads. “I’ll show you.”

Enya shot forward, flaring her fire-wings between him and the threads. “No.”

Oro frowned. What did she mean, *no*? He struggled to keep his tone patient as he took a step forward. “Move.”

Her gaze did not drop his as she very clearly repeated, “No.”

He lunged before he knew what he was doing. Only Zed and Calder holding him back prevented him from reaching her. He thrashed in their grip, all his powers unleashing. A wave of energy sent Calder against the wall, the stone splintering on impact. Zed flew into the air to avoid a stream of flame—but the edge of the heat caught his arm. When he landed, his skin was raw, slipping off his muscle.

“What is wrong with you?” Enya demanded. She held the threads now. And she was the only thing standing in the way. Oro could turn her to ash in —

Oro blinked, horrified. Enya was his oldest friend . . . He looked around and stumbled back. *Calder. Zed*.

He had hurt them.

“I’m s—sorry,” he said, stammering. “I—I don’t know what happened.”

“*This* happened,” Enya said, throwing the threads across the room. “That thing is evil. It seeped into your mind.”

Oro took a breath. No. It wasn’t all evil. It had already shown him so much. It was going to help him get to Isla.

But he couldn’t deny that the Threads of Time had turned him into someone he didn’t recognize. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Calder got to his feet. He healed Zed’s arm. His friends assured him they were fine.

They led him out of the room, escorting him to his room to rest.

Oro tried not to look at the threads on the floor, though he could hear them calling to him.

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ISLA

Isla shivered against the cold, polished floor. She stared up at glimmering galaxies beyond the window, tears blurring the stars together.

For days now, it had been the same routine. A knight would drag her from her cell into this room. Cronan would pin her down, and his shadows would plunge into her head, crashing against the wall in her mind, trying to break through.

She could hear his steps ringing out as he approached her. Her heart raced instinctually, her body bracing for the pain. The tears were near constant now.

“For your own sake, let’s hope you’ve decided to let me in today.” His voice echoed around the room, rattling her tired mind.

“No,” she said, as firmly as she could, for her voice was the only thing she had left. After that first day, Cronan released his hold on her just enough so she could speak. She suspected it was because he enjoyed the sound of her screams.

“Then, breaking in it is . . .” he said.

“I cannot be broken,” she said. The words came out weaker than she intended.

He laughed. “Anything can be broken.”

Then, without warning, his shadows pierced her skull.

The feeling of his shadows crawling through her mind . . . it was worse than any physical torture. Worse than an arrow through the heart, worse than burning flesh, worse than being stabbed or starved beneath the ground.

And he was right. Anything could be broken. She knew that for certain when a stone in her wall finally came loose.

She could not keep him out forever. But she could choose what to show him.

She felt his surge in satisfaction as if it was her own, as his shadows felt that gap in her defenses. And plunged through it.

Isla gasped with pain, so sharp she couldn't even form a sound, like a pike had been driven right through her skull.

Through the agony, her vision was replaced by memories. The ones she had allowed him access to.

She saw herself in the Wildling newland, training with Terra. Being cut to pieces. Injured. Locked away.

Cronan tutted in her mind. "A ruler . . . being commanded by a mere subject. How shameful."

She watched as Terra threw down her double swords. As she raised her hands, about to collapse the entire forest atop Isla.

But instead of being crushed—

Isla knelt, grabbed the swords, and cut Terra's head clean off.

She tensed, watching her guardian's head hit the ground first, before being joined by her body.

That wasn't what happened, he—

"That is what you should have done," Cronan said. "Your teacher failed you."

He wasn't just shuffling through her memories. He was *reshaping* them. No—

The scene shifted, and Isla was on Lightlark, at the Centennial. The people of the agora were gawking at her. Whispering to each other. Looking upon her like she was a monster.

Instead of simply walking past them, red burning her cheeks, like she did at the Centennial, the powers Isla hadn't realized were within her burst forth, and every one of those people were turned to ash. Screams filled the market. Roots were pulled from deep below the island's crust, rising, shattering stone buildings. The ground rose like a wave, rippling, until the market was no more than a pile of ruin.

Isla watched as her own eyes glowed dark—almost black—and she smiled.

"That . . . didn't happen . . ." Isla managed to say. If he had the power to reshape these moments . . . he could reshape her. He could meld her into the weapon he wanted.

Cronan’s shadows dug deeper into her mind and she cried out. “No, but it should have . . .” he said, his voice an ancient whisper. “Your subjects . . . all these people . . . they hate you. They fear you. Why are you so desperate to save them? When they would rather see you dead?”

Isla swallowed. He wasn’t wrong. The people of Lightlark, and some of her own subjects, *did* despise her.

“This could all be over,” he said, right into her head. “Join me . . . and you will never know shame again. Never know fear. For you will be what brings the universe to its knees. Just give in. Just . . . give up. Don’t think anymore. Let me do the thinking. Be my sword. Be . . . my weapon.”

She could feel her mind melting around his shadows, reshaping, rethinking. He was right. They hated her.

Why was she fighting so hard to save people who would kill her if they had the chance?

“Yes . . .” Cronan said. “Don’t save them . . . rule them. Rule them all. Then they can never hurt you again.”

Hurt. She had felt so much hurt . . .

Another stone of her fortress fell, and Cronan rushed through it to another memory.

It was the first time she had ever portaled into the Starling newland. By accident, of course, right when she was learning how to use her starstick.

Isla watched herself materialize before a girl with a star-strung crown in her hair. The girl’s eyes flicked to the one that was still knotted in Isla’s.

“Did you just . . . did you just *appear* in my castle?” the girl said.

Isla blinked. If she wasn’t going to portal away, she thought, then she had better answer. “Yes,” she said, quickly. “I did.”

The girl’s smile grew. “You’re the ruler of Wildling, aren’t you?”

In a few years, they would meet again, at the Centennial on Lightlark. Best not to make an enemy so soon. Isla nodded.

“I’m the ruler of Starling.” She offered her hand. “Celeste.”

Isla stared at it. Poppy had taught her the social convention, of course, but she had never needed to use it. She never met anybody new.

The Starling laughed lightly at Isla’s hesitation. “I won’t hurt you,” Celeste said, her voice melodious and kind.

Slowly, Isla reached for her hand. Shook it.

“You need a friend, don’t you?” the Starling asked.

Isla nodded shyly. It was the truest thing she had ever done.

The girl beamed. “I could use one too. Being a ruler is so lonely, isn’t it?”

Yes. It was. But it didn’t have to be, Isla learned.

Cronan hummed with interest, thrumming through years of memories. Sitting by Celeste’s hearth, talking about life, training, their guardians, everything. Hours spent laughing.

It was nice having someone who could understand the pressure, the monotony, the anxiety of the approaching Centennial. It was nice to talk to someone who didn’t point out her flaws like her guardians did. It was nice not being alone.

It was nice to have a friend.

Cronan landed on a specific moment a while later. Celeste was braiding Isla’s hair. “You have so much,” she said, as she twisted it all into a crown. “I’m jealous.”

Isla chuckled. “And I’m jealous of the fact that your guardians don’t watch over you every moment.”

In fact, Isla had never even seen Celeste’s guardians. In a realm where everyone died young, they were only a few years older than Celeste and left her alone most of the time.

“Oh, and the sparks,” Isla said. “I’m jealous of that too.”

Celeste rolled her eyes. When the Starling lost a game of cards, fireworks went off in her room, glittering ribbons that fell to sparkling ashes.

“I’m sure creating flowers is much more impressive,” Celeste said. “You can paint the world with color. Isn’t that exciting?”

As Isla watched, she could remember how Celeste’s words made her chest tighten.

“Okay, I’m done. Go look at yourself,” she said, sounding proud.

Isla got up and walked over to Celeste’s mirror. She looked at her reflection, studying the intricate design her friend had made. One large braid that circled her head, where her crown should be. Celeste had added flecks of stars, brightening the dark brown strands.

It was one of Celeste’s favorite things to do, whenever Isla came over. Isla always had to undo it before going back to her realm, of course. But it was fun while it lasted.

Celeste's face fell as she noticed Isla's frown. "You don't like it."

Isla blinked and forced a smile. "No, no. I love it."

"Then what's wrong?" Celeste demanded.

This was the moment when Isla had decided to trust Celeste with her biggest secret. After all, she knew her. She knew her favorite games. She knew when she'd had a bad day, because her room would be slightly messy. She knew that her friend spent hours in her own markets, in search of rare relics. She knew that, as assured and confident as the Starling was, she had needed Isla too.

Her secret affected her entire realm, but maybe she didn't have to carry the weight of it alone. "Can I tell you something? And do you promise . . . do you promise you'll never tell anyone?"

Celeste nodded, taking Isla's hands. "You're my best friend. You can tell me anything."

It took minutes to even get the words out, but the Starling was patient. Her eyes remained locked on Isla's, steady with strength. And some of that strength seeped into her. It made the truth finally spill from her lips. "I don't have power," she said.

Celeste just blinked, confused. "What do you—"

Isla took a deep breath and said, "I can't wield nature. I've never been able to. There's . . . there's nothing there. I've tried. And . . . and I don't have the curse either."

Celeste bit the inside of her lip in thought.

Isla smiled weakly, tears sliding down her cheeks. "It means I don't really have a shot at the Centennial. And that's fine, because . . . because maybe if my death breaks the curses, then you won't die." It had been looming over her that her best friend was just a few short years away from her death. This Centennial was Celeste's only chance to live.

At that, Celeste's face hardened. Her grip on Isla's hands tightened. "No," she said. "I refuse. You are not going to die at the Centennial. And I'm not dying either." She pulled Isla into a crushing embrace. "We're going to come up with a plan. Together. You're not alone. You have me, forever," she said.

And Isla believed her.

"How foolish . . ." Cronan said, his voice echoing through her head. "You can never trust anyone," he said. "Not unless you control them."

One minute, Isla was watching herself holding her best friend, the next, he had flipped to her last memory with Celeste—Isla stabbing her right in the heart. He hummed again.

"Good," he said, voice echoing. "But too late. You should've killed her *before* she hurt you. Anything can be broken. Especially friendships." He said the word like it was stupid.

Isla hadn't let herself remember how much Celeste's friendship had meant to her. Like so many other things in her life, she had pushed it down. But seeing it all play out before her made her heart feel like it was shattering.

"Such pain . . ." Cronan drawled. "Let me in. I will teach you to never hurt again . . ."

She was filled with sorrow. And regret. She questioned every decision she had made. She was supposed to be fighting him, giving him only the memories she could part with, trying to protect the people she truly cared about from Cronan, but how could she when all she did was make mistake after mistake? Trusting Celeste. Coming *here* and giving Cronan everything he needed to destroy Lightlark.

Lark was right. Terra was right. She was a fool. Weak.

She had never felt more alone. The two halves of her split heart were a world away, her connection severed.

Perhaps she was always destined to be alone. It was what she deserved. She had killed so many people—even her parents, with her first cry in this world. She had been a curse from the very beginning. The world she had left was better without her. Sure, she had broken the curses . . . but with everything that had happened afterward—the war, the destruction—it was clear she was nothing but a plague.

Give up, Cronan's shadows seemed to urge, easily slithering through her mind now that her resolve was slipping.

Give up. Cronan was bringing all this agony to the forefront. Manipulating her thoughts and emotions.

Maybe she should give up? It would be so much easier . . .

Just then, the silver woman's words sounded in the back of Isla's mind, in a hidden pocket that Cronan's shadows could not access, one wrapped in light.

When you start to doubt yourself, I want you to picture a pool reflecting every moment you were brave. Every moment you fought, when it was easier to give up. And Isla did. The silver pool appeared in her mind, and she saw herself train every single day since she was a child, she saw herself breaking the curses, she saw herself shattering the manacles Lark had shackled her with. She saw herself bleeding and broken and crawling, yet not stopping. Never stopping. Then, the waters went still again—and a little girl rose from the center of the silver pool. It was herself, at eight years old. Holding a dagger in her hand. She stepped toward her. “We are strong,” the little girl said. She reached for her hand. “Never forget.”

Isla blinked as the galaxy became visible once more. Cronan’s bared teeth came into view, his shadows having been pushed away.

“I have been caged my entire life,” she said, and she could hear the echoes of that little girl within her speaking. “I have been used and manipulated and lied to. You will not be the one to break me.”

Cronan narrowed his eyes at her. And as she was dragged back through the room toward her cell, he said, “We’ll see.”

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GRIM

If Grim had a skyre, it would be an infinity symbol.

With Isla, he felt infinite, for the first time in his long life. Even now, she gave him strength from worlds away.

The wind crackled as he portaled to the Algid in search for Cronan's skyre. He was standing right in front of where he used to train as a child, along with his siblings and the other noble children.

Back then, he believed he was destined to die young. All he knew was preparation for the Gauntlet—the tournament where he and his siblings would fight to the death to determine the heir. He was under no pretenses that he would win. Not when he could barely summon a single shadow.

Grim couldn't access power easily, so instead, he relied on swordplay. His shadows might have failed him, but his metal never did. He didn't know, of course, that his abilities were great. They were simply hidden.

Just as Isla's had been.

When they finally emerged, it was in a path of endless ruin.

Just like Isla.

It was strange to think how much they had in common, when they seemed, at first glance, so different. He was reminded of it now more than ever, as he portaled across his lands in rapid spurts, looking for hidden symbols.

Instead of skyres, all he found were reminders of her. This was where they had fallen in love, and their memories were everywhere. They had painted over all the pain of the past.

Before Isla, Grim's life had been stuck in winter. She was his spring. The moment he met her, his world finally woke up. Meeting her made him understand why people bothered falling in love.

He had lived centuries before her—but his life had only truly started after her.

He never wanted to go back to that cold darkness again.

So he portaled to every ancient ruin, searching for the skyre. When he still couldn't find it, instead of leveling an entire swath of land, he took himself to the field of nightbane. Not because of Cronan's skyre . . . but because he wanted to feel close to her.

The endless violet was now ash. But once, it had been a field that had made Isla gasp with wonder. It was where he had gotten down on both knees and asked her to be his wife.

"I want everything with you, Hearteater," he had said. "I want marriage, I want children, I want to be standing next to you, holding your hand, at the end of the world. 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*."

They were forever bound. Nothing could keep them apart. Not even the universe itself.

He wouldn't rest until he found that skyre.

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ISLA

Isla had told Cronan he would not break her. But he was intent on trying. From the morning until night, he pierced his shadows into her brain, battering the walls she had put up. He couldn't go through them—so he whittled her strength down, over time. Scraping, scraping, scraping, the shadows were like knives, peeling fruit of its skin. She didn't want to scream, but she couldn't stop, until finally—her voice gave out. Or, Cronan grew tired of the sound and put a vise on her throat. She wasn't sure.

All she knew was that this pain was unbearable. To make it stop, she gave him insignificant moments, letting bits of her fortress fall. The relief only lasted seconds. He knew there was more. He kept trying. Until her mind became a blurry haze, logic gone, leaving only feeling. Emotions, which had always been her downfall. After hours of torture, it was instinct to think of the men she loved. She realized her mistake immediately. But before she could shift her thoughts, Cronan latched on. He lunged for the parts of her mind where she kept them. And she was too tired to stop him.

Cronan went through every moment between her and Oro and Grim as she thrashed as much as his hold allowed, tears running down her cheeks. And he began to laugh, slowly and cruelly.

"Did you think I didn't know where you got access to such ability?" he asked, his voice as cutting as his shadows. "The king and my own progeny . . . what fools they are. And you . . . you are the greatest fool of them all. Having such power, such access, and bringing it all to me . . ."

Isla tried to fight it, fight *him*, but she couldn't find the strength. She tried to picture that silver pool, but her mind was flooded with darkness.

She remembered how he had twisted and manipulated her other memories, and she begged, *begged* the universe, that he wouldn't alter these. Anything but that.

Cronan flipped through her precious moments as if searching for something specific, until a memory fully crystalized, and she saw herself bleeding . . . using pain as power. The ground around her burst forth as her abilities exploded around her. Isla's eyes were dark pools. Glowing. Filled to the brim with power.

This, Cronan hadn't changed. It had really happened.

"Look at you," Cronan said. "Rising to your full potential. Losing control. Finally showing who you really are . . ."

A flash of gold bled into the memory. Oro, waking her from her trance. Telling her he didn't recognize her.

Isla turned to him—and plunged her entire hand into his chest. She squeezed, watching his eyes bulge . . .

And ripped out his heart.

His body fell, lifeless. She just watched, a bored expression on her face. His still beating heart was in her fist. She slowly brought it to her lips . . . and took a bite.

No.

No, she—

Isla watched as power surged from the Isla in her mind. Her abilities were blotting out the sun, the entire sky. She was unstoppable, formidable —

No.

Seeing herself kill Oro, the pain of his body lying dead at her feet, it sent her thoughts scattering, her mind closing.

Cronan wrenched it open again and dove back in. Suddenly, she was seeing a village. She was watching darkness spill out of her like an endless night, tearing through it. Destroying everything.

"Yes . . ." Cronan said. "You see, we are not so different, you and me . . . Your flair . . . we both consume"

No. She wasn't anything like him. He reveled in destruction, and this . . . this was the biggest regret of her life.

He wasn't done. Cronan flipped to where she was in front of Grim, on their wedding day. Saying vows. Holding hands.

Instead of completing the ceremony—Isla shoved her hand through Grim's chest, stabbing her nails right through his heart.

No.

Seeing her kill both of the men she loved . . . knowing this was what the prophecy promised . . . it was too much. But instead of making her crumble, it summoned her strength from its hidden depths.

It sent a wave of defiance through her brain, forcing Cronan out.

She gasped, and she was back on the cold floor. Cronan was staring down at her. He looked entirely too pleased.

“Interesting . . .” Cronan said. “Is that what you were so desperate to hide? That king . . . and my heir?”

Isla didn’t say a single word. She held her chin high even as her entire body was trembling.

He lifted her with his mind to his height—and she spat in his face. He tightened his control over her body to the point where she could barely breathe and studied her closely, as if seeing her for the first time.

“This lock . . .” he said, “has *two* keys . . . I wonder if they’re looking for you.” His mouth turned into a cruel grin. “I wonder if they’ll be foolish enough to come and get you . . .”

Her stomach dropped as she was swept backward, flying through the room before she hit solid metal—one of Cronan’s knights. Cronan’s laugh echoed through the room as the knight hauled her back, her boots dragging against the floor.

“If they do . . . if I find them . . . then I’m willing to bet you’ll become whatever weapon I need you to be.”

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ORO

His friends were right. He needed sleep. The moment he collapsed onto his bed, he drifted into darkness.

She was waiting for him, on their beach, staring out at the horizon in front of him.

It wasn’t unusual. He’d had dreams of her since the Centennial. But when she turned around, she wasn’t smiling like she usually was. Her eyes were wide. There was a mark on her forehead, like something had been seared into it.

Her hair was ragged. Her clothes were filthy. She looked like she had been imprisoned. *Tortured*.

“Oro,” she gasped, and the word was filled with such relief, he knew, *he knew*, this was no ordinary dream. She was really here somehow.

Oro’s first thought was how relieved he was to finally see her—and that she was *alive*. But then horror struck him—he had fought off sleep for days using the Threads of Time. He had been trying to help her, but now, he realized she might have been waiting for him, in a place they could communicate.

Before he could say a single word, her arms were around him. She was warm and solid and real. Slowly, afraid that he would wake up if he moved too quickly, he raised his arms to hug her back. He could feel her tears seeping into his shirt. She shook her head against his neck. “I didn’t—I didn’t think I’d see you . . .”

As much as he wanted to hold her forever, he gently pulled away to study her face and the dried blood he now noticed running down her temple. “Isla, what’s happening? Why did you break the connections between us?”

Her look was sharp. “Because I don’t want to give Cronan more than he already has.”

Oro’s heart stopped as his worst fears and suspicions were confirmed. Cronan had Isla.

“He’s trying to break my mind and turn me into a weapon,” she said, her grave expression shifting into one of fear. Oro put a hand on her cheek as her eyes welled with tears. “I’ve been trying to hold him off, but—” Her voice cracked, and Oro pulled her in again. Her eyes closed at his touch. “He’s so strong. He got in. And I’m . . . I couldn’t—”

Oro had never felt so helpless. This was his worst fear realized—she needed him and he wasn’t there. But maybe he could help be her light, just as she had been his during some of his darkest moments.

“You’re stronger,” he said, ducking his head to look straight in her green eyes. *Those eyes*. “You are the strongest person I know.”

She shook her head. “That’s not true.”

He raised a brow at her. “Do I lie?”

She swallowed, looking up at him. And it was almost like they were back at the Centennial, covered in dirt as they searched forest after forest for the heart of Lightlark.

He placed his hands on her shoulders, his fingers curling around them. “You’re the same woman who showed up to the Centennial without powers. You’re the same woman who ended the curses. You’re the same woman who became the ruler of two realms. You’re the same woman who opened a portal and took the biggest threat to her world out of it, without knowing where she was going, or what she would face there.”

Isla smirked. “What an idiot,” she said.

“*No*,” he said, fiercely, slowly lifting her chin so their eyes met again. “You’re a hero.”

That made her laugh sadly. “I’m the villain, Oro. I’m the reason so many people are dead—”

His hold tightened. “You are the reason so many more people are *alive*.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“You are the bravest and strongest person I have ever met,” he said. “Cronan might be in your mind, but he doesn’t know you. Not like I do. I’ve seen you rip barbs out of your back. I’ve seen you fight with two swords at once. I’ve seen you survive the unsurvivable and overcome the

impossible. He has no idea what he's going up against. But I do. And that's how I know that I'll see you again."

Isla's lip trembled as she looked up at him. He gently placed his hand against her cheek, wiping a tear with his thumb.

"And you are not alone, Isla. We're doing everything we can to find you. We're coming. I promise, love."

"We?" Isla asked, brow furrowed.

"Yes, we," Oro said. "Grim and I have been working together. We found a place that might be able to become a portal, and—"

For a moment, awe and disbelief bloomed across her face—but it quickly turned into terror. "No," she said, and she was crying in earnest now.

Oro hurriedly brushed her tears away. He didn't understand—he just knew he wanted to make whatever was hurting her stop. "What is it?"

She grabbed his wrists and looked up at him, her gaze steady. "Don't."

He frowned. "What?"

Her voice was firm as she said, "Don't save me."

He couldn't have heard her right. "What—"

"It's what he wants!" She shook her head. "Please—please promise me you won't come find me. I've already . . . I've already given him so much of what he wants." She started crying again. "I didn't mean to. I was . . . I was *trying*—"

"I know you were," Oro said, pulling her into another embrace. He smoothed his hand over her hair as she shook against him.

And even though he often swore he would give her anything she wanted . . . this . . . *this* he could not give.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't make that promise."

And then she and the beach vanished.

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GRIM

“Heart.”

This was not a memory. He had combed through all of them, reliving their story a thousand times in his mind, if only to see her again.

That’s why he knew this was something else. It was *her*. Somehow, she had found a way to communicate with him in his dreams.

He hadn’t even realized he had fallen asleep. He had been searching for the skyre . . . his body must have simply given up on him. He hadn’t slept in days.

Isla rushed over to him. She looked just as she did every night she spent by his side. Her long hair was out of its knot. She wore a short silk dress that she swore was comfortable. But a starlike burn marred the skin on the center of her forehead.

He caught her in his arms and ran his thumb over the mark. Yes, she was in his room, the way he always wanted her to be, but this wasn’t real. She was in trouble. “What’s happening? Tell me how I can help.”

She sighed against his chest. He realized he was wearing the outfit she had bought him in the Algid markets instead of the armor he fell asleep in. If she could change this . . . was she changing her own appearance? Were there more injuries than this mark, that she was hiding from him?

He waited for her to say something. He wrapped his arms around her and thought this was how they always should be. Hearts beating against each other. Together.

“I was given more time to live, but . . . he has me.” Grim’s arms tightened around her reflexively, as if he could protect her from his ancestor a world away. “He’s trying to get back into your world. He’s trying to reshape my mind . . . to make me into his key. His . . . weapon.”

Fury lanced through him. But one word caught his focus. “Why did you say *your* world?”

She took a step back to look him in the eyes. “I can’t come back. He *wants* that, and—” She swallowed. “I don’t want to see it ruined.” Her voice was thick with emotion, like she was trying not to cry.

“By him?” Grim asked.

“Or by me.”

Finally, those tears fell. And Grim remembered Oro’s words. About him . . . making her worse. Making her into a villain.

“You are not going to be this world’s ruin,” he said, because he believed it. His wife cared about her people, and his. About *everyone*. If she didn’t, then her grief wouldn’t weigh so heavily on her.

“I might be,” she said, and he knew she was thinking of the prophecy. The one she had kept from him. “I’m sorry,” she said, as if sensing his thoughts. “I’m guessing Oro told you what the oracle said. I should have—I should have told you.”

Grim smiled, faintly. “I have no right judging you for keeping something from me.” Not when he had kept so much from her.

She took a shaking breath. “There’s—there’s something you should know,” she said. “When I was with Oro, in the desert. We . . .”

“Isla,” he said softly, stopping her. He could feel her shame and sorrow. “I don’t care what you did or didn’t do.” He meant every word. “I’ve apologized for before, and I will a thousand more times, but I blame only myself for the fact that you fell in love with him.” He stroked his hand down her cheek. Though he regularly wanted to kill the Sunling, he couldn’t even blame him either. “I should never have taken those memories from you. I know your heart is split, that you love him too. And though I hope you’ll always continue choosing me . . . it’s my own fault if you don’t.”

“*Grim*—” she said, and he shook his head.

“And I forgive you,” he said. “For everything. Just as you have forgiven me. Because I know you, and I know us, and nothing can break that.”

“You still love me,” she said incredulously. “Even after I made this plan without you. Even after I kept so much from you . . .”

“I *always* love you,” he said.

Her lip trembled, but her eyes blazed. “If you love me . . . then stop looking for me.”

Grim reared back. He felt like he had been stabbed. “I can’t do that.”

“Even if it’s my choice? If this is what I want?”

He looked at her. Really looked at her. “If you are in danger, then I *will* find you.”

At her indignation, he said, “Tell me that if the roles were reversed, you wouldn’t do the same. Tell me, and I will stop looking.”

He knew her. He really, really knew her.

She didn’t even try to lie to him. “But the prophecy—”

“I don’t want to live by prophecies,” he said, stepping closer. “No oracle, no fate, no power, no person could ever change how I feel about you. I’m coming to get you. So tell me, Isla. Right now. How can I help you?”

“Remind me,” she said, her gaze searing into his. “Of everything that comes after.”

He knew what she meant. Slowly, he leaned down until his lips brushed hers, and it made a jolt spread through his body. She reached up to wrap her arms around his neck and groaned.

That sound . . . made right into his mouth . . . if he wasn’t already aching with want, now he was trembling with it. His tongue parted her lips, and met hers and—

This. This was its own language. Its own conversation. He kissed her deeply, thoroughly, the way that made her pulse race, which he had learned through countless practice. It was the way he had kissed her in that Starling market, before they were married, when he had portaled her into an alley and pressed her against the wall. When she had asked him to have her right there, so consumed with want that she didn’t care they could still hear people, streets away.

He groaned too, because every kiss was an echo of the memories they had and ones they still had to make. His hands reached down, hands curling under her, to lift her up to his height, and he turned, toward the bed.

“Like this,” she gasped against his lips, her ankles locking behind him.

He stilled. “Like this?”

She nodded, and—*whatever she wanted*. That was what he would give her. All night, if that was what she asked for.

Her lips met his again, as she reached down. He felt her undoing the buttons of his pants and lowering herself and—

He could fucking die from this. Die from this perfection, from the feeling of her, on him. She moaned and he swallowed the sound, hands trembling against her hips as she moved, slowly, then quickly, writhing against him, and all sense of time and space and reality shattered. It was only him and her and this insatiable energy between them, a want that had never diminished, no matter how many times they did this.

He met her every movement with his own, helping her, giving her everything she asked for, everything it seemed she needed, and she pulled his mouth back onto hers once more.

“I love you,” she whispered against his lips, between pants. Her hand was wrapped around the back of his neck, using him to keep moving. “I love you . . . and that’s why I don’t want to lose you.”

“You have me,” he said, his heart racing “I’m yours. Always. You will never lose me.”

She didn’t seem convinced of that fact, but she sucked his bottom lip into her mouth and bit, and he saw stars. It had him pulling her even closer, moving her against him. A shot of pleasure like lightning raced up his spine as she bucked.

She gasped into his mouth, and he kept moving, giving her everything he could, so she would never have to plead for more. Her moans echoed through his room, and he wanted her louder. He wanted her more flushed. He wanted her completely satisfied. He unleashed, listening to her every command, to go faster, to go deeper. Her head fell back as she gasped, as she stopped moving and just took. Until her eyes tightened, and they both broke, together. He took her through the end, until the tremors stopped, and she sighed against his chest.

He held her there, their hearts beating wildly together. He stroked a hand down her back. Slowly, he lowered her to her feet. She was still panting. Still flushed. Her hair was in waves around her face.

She led him to their bed, and they just lay there, intertwined. Finally, he was at peace. For these few moments, he could pretend everything was better again. His eyes drifted closed.

When he woke up, he was alone.

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ORO

Grim crashed into Oro’s throne room, shadows blazing behind him.

The Nightshade was soaking wet, his hair and clothes dripping. He didn’t seem to care.

Oro narrowed his eyes at him. “You tried the portal again, didn’t you?” He supposed he couldn’t really expect anything different. “And it didn’t work.”

“Obviously,” Grim snarled.

Oro considered keeping his dream with Isla to himself. He wanted to. But as much as Grim was clearly comfortable working on his own, working together would be the best way to get Isla back. “I saw her,” Oro finally said.

Grim paused. “What do you mean, *you saw her*?” he asked, very slowly.

“In my dreams.”

Oro could see the tensing of his shoulders. Grim obviously wasn’t thrilled that his wife had been in his dream. Still, his voice was steady as he said, “What did she say?”

“She asked me to stop looking for her.”

Grim nodded. He didn’t seem surprised.

“She visited you too,” Oro guessed.

“Of course she visited me,” Grim snarled. “She’s my wife.”

The word burned him. Grim seemed to know that. Revel in it. Still . . . he didn’t ask more about the dream. Oro didn’t know why he felt the need to say, “That was all. Nothing else—”

“I don’t care what happened,” Grim snapped.

Oro just looked at him as bitterness coated his tongue.

“I don’t enjoy it, of course,” Grim clarified, scowling. “The thought that you care about her. That she . . . cares about you.” Grim’s shadows were spilling behind him, clawing the stone floor, like a representation of what the Nightshade wanted to do to Oro. “But it is no one’s fault but my own.”

That last sentence sounded so dejected, so unlike Grim, that Oro could only blink. But he was telling the truth. Oro felt the sweetness of it, on his tongue. “You actually mean that.”

Grim glared at him. “It would be a waste of breath, I think, lying to someone who could sense truths.”

Oro hated Grim. He had been at war with him twice in their lifetimes. Once, just months ago. He was a villain. He had cruelly killed thousands.

But Oro was almost ashamed to admit that he didn’t hate *all* of him. No . . . being here with Grim, in this castle . . . it was easy to fall into the friendship they had shared for decades. Before the curses. Before . . . her.

Strangely, she had brought them together again.

Perhaps that was why guilt swirled through Oro’s chest. He couldn’t keep working with Grim without making this admission.

“In the desert. A little while ago. We . . .” Oro frowned. He and Isla hadn’t necessarily done anything. Not everything he had wanted to, anyway. He remembered running that melting ice down her skin, watching the goosebumps erupt at his touch. He had been helping her get relief from the heat . . . but he knew very well that wasn’t all they were doing.

Grim scowled. “I know about the desert. She told me.”

Oro blinked. “She . . . did?” He considered whether he should be readying himself for another fight.

But Grim only nodded. “She is halved. Part of her, the part of her that fell in love with you, is not my wife. I know that. I take full responsibility for it.”

Oro couldn’t believe these words were coming out of the Nightshade’s mouth. Grim seemed to sense his surprise, because he said, “Loving her has made me better.” His gaze was piercing. “Even if you believe my love has made *her* worse.”

The Grim he knew before would have never been this forgiving. He had held a grudge against him for centuries, after all. It was true. Love had changed him.

Grim motioned toward the threads on Oro's table, clearly done with this conversation. "What's your progress?"

He shook his head. "I can't use it anymore. The last time I did, I hurt my friends," Oro said.

Grim just stared at him blankly. "I don't care about your friends," he said.

And they all knew it.

Oro sighed. "I didn't find anything you would consider useful." He leaned against the side of the table. "I watched through thousands of years, and I never heard anyone talk about creating a portal."

Grim studied the golden relic. "It's called the Threads of Time . . . one would assume you'd be able to actually *go* to the past."

Oro shrugged a shoulder. "One *did* assume. But no matter what I tried, nothing worked. I just sat there. Seeing, but not interacting."

"Because you can't portal." He said it matter-of-factly.

Oro blinked, long and slow. Of course. He hadn't thought about traveling to the past as a sort of portaling. He glanced from Grim . . . to the threads. "Do you think you could help me use it?"

Grim gave him a withering look. "*I* will use it. Since you're so worried about your *friends*."

The last person Oro wanted to be able to go into the past and potentially change it was Grim. His friends weren't in front of him now. And the Nightshade could handle himself.

"We need to speak to Horus. And he's certainly more likely to give me answers than you," Oro argued.

Grim considered that. "Fine." Oro was surprised he conceded so easily. "Portaling is draining under normal circumstances. Traveling through thousands of years? It could kill you." Oro wasn't deterred, especially as he remembered the state Isla had been in. She was covered in injuries, and weak. She needed them . . . and they were at the end of their rope. If anyone knew how to build a portal, it was Horus. He and the other founders had done it before. Grim continued, "How do we know you're strong enough to make it back? How do we know you won't just get stuck thousands of years in the past like a fool?"

"We don't," Oro said. This entire conversation, the threads had been calling him forward. As his hand reached toward it, the voices became

louder. More insistent. He remembered what he had done, and the horror on his friends' faces. No, he wouldn't lose himself. Not this time. He would be strong, just as he had promised Isla she was. There was a jolt through his veins as he grasped the threads again. "But she's worth finding out."

He thrummed his thumb against the threads, and immediately, the connection was made, as if the threads were eager. Hungry. His vision began to blur. The castle around him turned to sand, crumbling around him. The strands pierced his skin and slid into his veins. His blood burned.

Grim's power hit the threads, and Oro jolted, the flaming becoming a wildfire of pain. A portal began to form around him, a circular door crackling with lightning-like energy. Then it multiplied, again and again, until there were thousands of layers behind him, connected like an endless tunnel. He frowned. "If I—"

He didn't finish his sentence before he was thrust backward. His shoes slid against the floor, and he was falling through those portals, dragged through room after room, thousands of years, until finally, his body lurched to a stop.

The force of the travel hit him at once. He stumbled forward, landing on his knees. His hands flexed against the familiar floor. Gold. The same as his throne room. Only this one was gleaming. Untarnished.

"Who are you?"

Oro's body tensed. He knew that voice. He had heard it often these last few days. Heart racing, he slowly got to his feet, and turned.

There he was. Horus Rey. The original king of Lightlark. One of the three founders of the island.

Horus' eyes went straight for Oro's palm, and Oro looked too. The threads were visible through his skin, as if they had replaced his veins. They shone gold.

Then his ancestor's gaze shifted to him. He studied him meaningfully. "Huh," he said. "I'm guessing you're my grandson."

Horus . . . didn't seem surprised at all. As if he had seen far stranger things in his lifetime.

"Several times over," Oro said, his voice a croak.

A variety of different emotions flickered across Horus' face. Oro was sure he had a thousand questions, but he landed on, "Why are you here?"

"I need to know how to create a portal to the otherworld."

Horus stilled. Oro did not miss the flash of fear that went through his ancestor's expression. "To Skyshade?"

Skyshade. He hadn't known the name of the otherworld until now. Good. The visit to Horus had already been useful.

But then his ancestor shook his head. "I'm sorry. I can't help you." He made to turn around, but a tower of flames stopped him. Horus paused. Anger seemed to coil through his body, but he did not move to strike back. Slowly, he faced Oro again.

"History has repeated itself," Oro said. "You, Lark, and Cronan. Now, it's me, Isla, and Grim. We are on the precipice of ruin because of the other founders."

Horus' jaw worked. He couldn't meet Oro's eyes as he spoke. It was almost like he didn't want to know what was going on in the future.

But Oro had not traveled all this way for his own ancestor to refuse to help him. "Your legacy will be for nothing if we can't build a portal. Trust me on that."

Horus shook his head again. He and Oro wore matching crowns. "You should have left the threads alone. Some powers are better left unused. They destroy the balance." The balance between light and darkness. The one that was supposed to have existed, before Nightshade and Lightlark became enemies.

"There is no balance in a world of ashes," Oro said.

Horus went quiet. Finally, he spoke. "Even so . . . I can't help you. What you seek . . . is nearly impossible. We made it difficult on purpose," he explained. "The portal was built into the very foundation of the island. Meant to be used only as a last resort."

"You said *nearly* impossible," Oro said. "So how do we build a new one?"

He did not drop Horus' gaze, until finally, his ancestor sighed. "What is your flair?" he asked.

"I can sense truths," Oro said.

Horus' eyes narrowed, peering at Oro closely, as if searching for something. "Our world has already almost ended," Oro said. "But we have survived countless trials. Countless obstacles. I refuse to let our world die now."

Horus looked down at the threads. Oro got the sense that he was about to turn around again.

But instead, he sighed, and said, “First, you need to know the world’s name.”

Oro took a step forward, memorizing every word he spoke.

The world’s name was *Skyshade*. He knew that now.

“Next . . . you need portaling ability.” Grim’s power. Cronan’s.

“Massive amounts of energy.” That . . . they would figure out.

“A living piece of the other world.” Living?

“And, lastly, and most importantly . . . great Sunling, Nightshade, and Wildling power.”

Isla. They would need her to reform the love bonds to access her Wildling abilities. If only they could convince her to help them.

Still, Horus shook his head. “Even then, with all of that . . . the journey would kill you. The bridge between worlds, the one that brought us here, it was built for a reason. Without a bridge . . . you wouldn’t survive the journey. Tears between worlds have teeth. That’s what we say . . . and we learned it the hard way.”

“What if we used linked sacred waters?” Oro asked.

Horus considered that. “If they were truly linked and of the same waters . . . they might protect you. But you would still need everything else. And even then—”

Oro could feel his energy waning. The throne room was slowly turning to sand, melting all around him. He was falling away, pulled back to his own time.

“Thank you,” Oro said hurriedly. His ancestor frowned with worry. He opened his mouth—but Oro was flung through thousands of years before he could hear what he had to say.

Grim was the first person he saw when he landed. He caught him by the shoulders, keeping him from falling on his face.

As soon as he was steady on his feet, Oro dropped the threads. He gritted his teeth as the strands were pulled through his skin, into a bloody mess on the floor. They shifted into a pile of sand, then back to string again.

“Well?” Grim demanded. “Did you get what we need?”

A slow smile crept across Oro’s face as he said, “I did.”

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GRIM

Grim mulled over everything Oro had just told him they needed to create the portal.

“This is good,” Grim said, pacing. Now, at least they had a lead on how to get to her.

“I think I know where we can get the energy,” Oro said from his throne. “But where do we get something living from the otherworld—from *Skyshade*?” The Sunling said the word like he was trying it out.

Grim scoured his brain. He tried to remember everything else Isla had been searching for on her own quest to find Cronan’s portal—and he thought of something Azul had said. He had mentioned a ring. Grim remembered it. Isla had wanted to use the ring to capture a shred of storm, to try and find the portal.

He remembered how she had pushed Grim to fly Wraith higher and higher into the skies, despite his protests—

How it had nearly killed them all.

She had succeeded in capturing part of the tempest—but she had dropped the ring, in the fall. He told Oro about it now.

“If we found the ring . . . it would be our piece of the otherworld that is living,” Grim said.

“How are we going to find it?” Oro asked.

“With help,” Grim said.

Wraith hadn’t opened his wings since Isla had left. The dragon knew she was gone and was mourning her loss just as much as Grim was. He had been refusing to fly, and so Grim had portaled him back to the stables, along with Isla’s panther.

When Grim portaled himself and Oro there, Lynx leapt and would have bitten Grim's arm clean off if he hadn't made himself matterless at the last minute. The cat bared its teeth at him, as if still blaming him for Isla's disappearance.

He blamed himself too.

When Lynx saw Oro, though, the treacherous creature had the nerve to bend its head. Grim would have been more irritated if he wasn't so consumed with worry for his wife.

While Oro spoke to Lynx in serious, soft tones, Grim turned to his dragon. It didn't seem too long ago that he had been a tiny bundle of black scales with a penchant for shredding his pillow.

After Isla left them, after the Centennial, Wraith had cried for hours straight. They both loved Isla. They both missed her, and that shared grief created a bond between them. And that connection . . . it made the dragon grow exponentially.

Even though the creature was larger than a wing of his castle, in his eyes, he saw that same pain as when he was a baby.

"We're working on it," he said, pressing his hand to Wraith's snout. The dragon bowed into his touch. "We need your help, though. We need . . . you to fly."

Wraith tilted his head at Grim, as if questioning his request. "We need you to help us get her back."

With that, Wraith's wings began to slowly unfurl. They all followed him out of the stables—where his wings spread wide, nearly crashing into the surrounding buildings.

"There's my Wraith," Grim said, filled with pride. They were both willing to do whatever it took to reunite with Isla.

Grim spoke to both the dragon and Isla's panther now. "We're looking for a ring that Isla lost. It would have her scent on it." Grim would search his lands from the skies, on Wraith. His dragon had excellent eyesight. Oro got on the panther's back. Lynx had a superior sense of smell.

Both creatures dipped their heads in understanding.

Then they were off.

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ORO

Lynx was grieving as much as Oro was. When Oro looked into his eyes, he saw the same bottomless sorrow that he felt. The creature knew exactly what had happened. He had gone through the maze with them to find her before she portaled away. He had seen the blackened circle in the center. He had watched on as he and Grim had pummeled each other into bloody messes.

It had been several days since then, and Oro hated the fact that he had barely made any progress, and hadn't been able to bring Isla back to Lynx. The events since she left felt like a blur in his mind. Seeking out Cleo. Battling through the underwater prison. Going to the world of curses. He felt bad that he hadn't involved the panther more. He was her bonded. Of course, he was worried about her.

Lynx seemed grateful for a chance to help. The panther leapt quickly, bounding across land almost as fast as Wraith shot through the skies. His nose was turned toward the ground, tracking Isla's scent.

They rode through fields of overgrown grass, then reached a stretch of field that had been all but ripped away. Holes puckered the ground. This place had been marked by battle.

And then, the stench hit Oro like a battering ram. The mountainous heads of decaying beasts, the ones they had slayed in the fight against Lark, were strewn across the field. They had dropped from the sky, upturning everything around them.

It was a reminder of everything they had already been through. Oro felt like he'd been fighting nonstop. For his people, against Lark, and now . . . for Isla. He hadn't had a chance to process everything that had happened. There's wasn't time. He just had to keep moving.

Lynx ran straight through the fields of flesh and blood, dodging creatures that had split apart on impact. Oro worried the smell would make following Isla's scent harder, but Lynx's steps did not falter.

The panther suddenly picked up his pace, and Oro leaned forward against the wind. That was when his vision was blotted out.

No. Replaced.

Oro was seeing a dark cell. Through the dim lighting, he could make out a mangled Lark, propped in the corner.

He was seeing . . . Isla's hands. He would recognize them anywhere. They were being dragged forward by a towering knight in shining shademade armor.

He saw flashes of a hallway made up of ancient rock. Then he saw a circular room, with purple and blue swirls of a galaxy out the window.

Then . . . his face.

Cronan. It had to be him. The resemblance to Grim was uncanny, but Cronan had a bottomlessness to his eyes, like they were made up of pure darkness.

He wore a crown that looked like a mess of broken blades.

Lynx growled beneath him; the creature's muscles wound tight. Oro didn't say a word, he didn't move, in fear that it would stop the vision. He searched wildly for any details that could help them from here. He watched powerlessly as shadows burst forth from the crown, headed right toward Isla.

She screamed on impact. Oro gasped, and the image was ripped away. The *pain—*

Lynx had stopped. Oro blinked, the field returning. In front of him, Grim and Wraith were landing. The Nightshade looked pleased. Oro saw the glimmer of something in the grass between them. Lynx and Wraith must have found it at the same time—Isla's storm ring. Oro could barely summon a shred of relief, still filled with the echoes of Isla's agony.

Grim sensed Oro's panic instantly. "What is it?"

Oro slid down Lynx's back . . . then turned toward the creature. The panther's eyes were wide with concern.

"I . . . I saw her," Oro said. "He showed me. His connection to her . . . it must be going in and out. He's seeing almost everything."

Grim strode toward them. "I wonder if the connection goes both ways."

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ISLA

A storm rattled the castle. Bits of rock in the dungeon fell atop her head, waking her.

Her power flooded back into her at once. She tried to smash the cell bars to pieces—but no matter how much energy she summoned, her abilities died as soon as they reached the metal.

Shademade. Of course. It was threaded even through the walls. But the skyre she had carved into her skin to get past the metal's block in the maze didn't work here. No, this material was altered, as if it had been infused with Cronan's own void-like force. It didn't matter that she could use her powers inside if the box she was in was impenetrable.

She slumped down to the floor, ignoring Lark's labored breathing as her broken body began regenerating. But not completely. It was like the shadows Cronan had used to tear her apart were still threaded through her bones, keeping her from completely healing, even now.

It wasn't long until Isla was back in Cronan's galaxy room, staring up at the stars. He was making his way through her memories, and she was trying her best to keep him from seeing that the night before, she had found a way to visit Grim and Oro in their dreams.

He couldn't know they were close to finding a portal and intent on using it to come to Skyshade for her.

So, she gave him other memories, trying to distract his piercing shadows. And he went through them with fervor, twisting and distorting each as he went. She tried to fight it, tried to keep them whole and correct. But he seemed to revel in the battle between their minds, and he aways won. He would reshape moments beyond recognition.

Worse—sometimes, he would simply shred them apart.

It took all of her strength to keep fighting back, through the agony—and every time she slipped, another memory was destroyed.

With Grim. With Oro.

With her people.

Gone. *Gone*.

She nearly passed out from the pain more than once, but he kept her awake. He kept her mind wide open.

Give up. Give up. Give up, his shadows sang as they barreled against her walls relentlessly. As they tore and mauled and destroyed.

She imagined the silver pool. She fought to center herself in this chaos, remembering what Oro had said about being strong.

She tried anything she could to hold on, but those memories had been her anchors, her most prized possessions, her *everything*.

And as they slipped away, she felt herself slip with them.

Just when she felt the wall in her mind about to finally crumble, an image flashed through it.

She knew it wasn't a memory because she didn't recognize this place. It looked like a field of wildflowers on Nightbane. It must have been one of the only stretches of land that hadn't been destroyed by the storms or the battle.

The image was so shocking that the pain and despair all but vanished, for just a moment.

Only when she saw the edge of a massive paw did she know what this was.

Lynx. Somehow . . . he was sending this image to her. Just like he had before, when she had touched his furs.

Her bonded. Their connection had survived even this distance. Even Cronan's power. Even her own snapping of the bridges around her soul. Just that fact alone was enough to strengthen her resolve.

But then . . . she saw them both.

Grim with Wraith. Her heart burned for her little family. Her chosen home. Just the sight of them made her spirit soar like she was flying with them.

Lastly, a figure moved into Lynx's vision. He turned, and there he was. Oro. She felt tears cascading from the corners of her eyes. It was almost

like he was staring directly at her as he said, “We’re coming for you, Isla. You are not alone, and we are coming. Hang on.”

He must have figured out that Lynx was connected to her. He knew she could see them.

Grim portaled next to Oro in a moment. He looked at her, and said, “You are infinite, heart. Never forget.”

And seeing them, side by side, fighting their way to her . . . she felt the resolve within her double. Triple. Until she was endless.

The silver-haired woman’s words danced in her head. *You have only gotten stronger. And that strength . . . it has no limit*. You *have no limit*.

It made the shield around her mind not only harden but surge. For the first time, she felt stronger than Cronan. She felt like she could break free.

And that’s exactly what Isla did.

She gasped as the vise around her body and mind were suddenly ripped away. She . . . could move. She flexed her tiniest finger. It was the smallest motion.

But it was enough. Because it was proof that even the strongest shackles could be broken.

Cronan was standing above her . . . snarling. He looked down at her, and Isla wondered if he would simply kill her. It looked like he might.

But then his shadows came crashing back down, and—

Picture a pool.

Her heart became silver water, rippling and endless. She let it fill her up, shielding her mind from Cronan’s attack. The pain faded away. Everything faded away.

Until her vision was replaced with the image of a leaf-swept grove with a pool in the center, its surface shining like melted metal in the moonlight. A silver-haired woman stood next to it, her aura casting a soft glow in the darkness.

“Who are you?” Isla asked. By now, she had realized every interaction with her had solely been in her head.

The woman simply motioned toward the pool, as if in answer. Isla took a step forward. And in the silver water’s reflection, in a matter of moments, she saw . . . everything. An impossible existence.

When it ended, she stumbled back, blinking, then turned to the woman in awe.

“All of this,” the woman said, “has led to you.”

Isla swallowed. It was all she had heard, ever since she was a child. She had always been different—either a curse or the only cure.

She wished she was neither.

“I don’t want this,” Isla said, because she knew now that this woman would understand.

“I know,” she whispered, grabbing grabbed Isla’s hands. “I didn’t either.” Her silver eyes gleamed. “I’m sorry that this is your burden to bear.”

Isla closed her eyes tightly before reopening them. “I’m sorry it was yours.” Seeing the other woman’s journey . . . it reignited Isla’s determination to keep going. To keep fighting against the darkness. Just as she had—and so many women before her.

“You have impossible choices to face. And I will try to make them easier for you.” She motioned toward the glistening water.

“What is it?” Isla asked. “Does it show the past?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “But so much more than that.”

From the water’s edge, Isla saw herself reflected in this single moment in time. She saw her dirt-crusted cheeks. Her unwashed hair. Dried blood along her temple, and a burn on her forehead, like Cronan’s shadows had left a mark.

Then, the pool seemed to break, like it was made of glass, fracturing into a thousand pieces. In each shard, Isla saw her own familiar face yet slightly changed. Each herself, but different.

“This is the Pool of Possibilities,” the woman said. “An ancient place that is only found by those who are chosen. Ask a question, take the plunge, and you will see how things might have been different.”

Isla didn’t know how walking through possible paths would help her in this situation. The woman seemed to guess at Isla’s reluctance, because she said, “You can only move forward once you have made peace with your past. This pool can provide that clarity.” She paused, gazing at Isla intently. “Sometimes the hardest journeys are the ones we face within ourselves. It can be dangerous, piercing that deeply into your soul. Often the truths revealed are not pleasant.”

Truth. Isla could never hear that word and not think of Oro.

“On the other hand . . . Some get lost in what could have been. Many have drowned in the pool, wanting to live in the past forever,” the woman continued. “You must have a strong enough reason to come back.”

Isla thought of Oro. Of Grim. Of Lynx, Wraith, her people, the people of Lightlark, the friends she had loved and lost. Of every single person she had left behind.

“I have a reason,” Isla said.

With one last squeeze of her hand, the woman gestured to the waters.

Here, in Isla’s mind, with this pool in front of her, she was in control.

With a brush of her hand, she was no longer in the tattered, filthy clothes and dirt-crusted boots she had been wearing since she arrived on this world. Her gossamer gown, plucked from her Wildling room, was as light as air and as green as the forest around them.

She dipped a bare foot into the pool, a shiver shooting up her leg, straight to her heart. She rested her foot fully onto the smoothed rocks below the water, then took another step. Another.

And she found that this wasn’t water at all. It was something strange, thick. Glimmering. As she waded through toward the center, her senses felt like they were coming alive in a way she didn’t have the words for. It wasn’t like anything she had ever felt before, even on Lightlark and Nightshade. The more she studied it, the more the pool revealed itself, becoming a color she had never considered. The rippling waves sounded like an instrument she couldn’t name. The water slid over her skin like a fabric she couldn’t describe.

Her dress billowed around her as she turned back to the woman. “You’ll have to submerge yourself,” the woman said.

Isla floated on her back, her gaze up at the night beyond the trees, and the pool held her with invisible hands. *Peace*. This was what eternal peace felt like. In her mind, the sky was all stars, dancing and forming patterns in the inky darkness. She studied them until her mind felt heavy. Until her body began to slowly sink into the water.

Until only her face was above the surface.

That’s when she felt a bolt run through her as if she had been struck by lightning. Isla seized, her blood ablaze.

And she was pulled down to the bottom.

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ISLA

“Where’s my mother?”

Isla was eight years old. She blocked a blow with her sword, and she felt the impact in her teeth.

But the person in front of her wasn’t Terra. It was a man with pale skin and dark hair. He smiled as her blade met his, his eyes crinkling at the edges, and Isla recognized her exact grin on his face. She had only ever seen this man through Lynx’s eyes. Through his memories.

Her father.

“Your mother?” he said, his voice deep and warm. “She’s getting everything ready for tonight, remember?”

Isla did remember. Tonight was her turn to bond with her own creature. The thought made her chest constrict. She couldn’t imagine loving anything more than Lynx, who she had been riding since before she could walk. But the panther was her mother’s bonded, and Isla needed her own.

What kind of creature might she connect with? Nerves and excitement danced in her stomach.

They sparred for a few minutes before her father straightened. “That’s enough for today, Isla.” He beamed with pride. “My daughter is going to be a better warrior than I am.” He pulled her into the crook of his arm, and it felt familiar and easy. Like home. She smiled, knowing her training had paid off. She had been practicing in her room, repeating all the moves he taught her.

Together, they walked down the sloped trail through the forest. And as Isla moved . . . the forest bloomed. Flowers opened at her approach, vines swung in her path, creatures crawled down from their branches to look at her.

They walked side by side, her father laughing as she animatedly told him about a glowing frog she had found in her latest explorations through the forest, until they reached the closest village.

The preparation for tonight was in full swing. A Wildling stood in the middle of the street, painting each house with ivy and wisteria and roses. When Isla approached, she turned. “The guest of honor has arrived,” she yelled playfully.

Isla blushed. Her father smiled down at her reassuringly.

A Wildling woman burst from her home down the street. She was holding a small flower in the brightest pink Isla had ever seen. “Tell me I’m the first,” she said.

“You’re the first, Wren,” her father replied, laughing.

Wren got down in front of Isla, smiling. “Then may I offer you, Isla, your first bonding day flower?”

Isla nodded, unable to stop herself from grinning. Wren carefully tucked the flower into Isla’s hair. “There. Perfect,” she said.

“She was perfect to begin with,” her father said, and she knew he meant it. Her heart swelled at his words.

Wren shook her head and stood to face her father. “You’ll put your blade through anyone who breaks her heart, won’t you?”

“I won’t have to,” he said, ruffling Isla’s hair. “She’ll stab them herself. Isn’t that right?”

Isla nodded happily, the thought of love and heartbreak sounding so far away.

Wren clicked her tongue and motioned for them to keep walking. It seemed every step, she was offered another flower, from everyone they passed. The stems were tucked right into her hair, until her loose brown curls were smothered by glorious color.

Finally, they reached the end of the town and ventured farther through the glades. Toward the river.

And there, seated on Lynx, was her mother.

Her hair was full of wildflowers. It always was, not just on days of celebration. And when she saw Isla and her father, the blooms doubled, tripled, dripping down past her elbows. The flowers reflected her mood—her dad always said that he knew he was in trouble when she was wrapped

in thorns. But today, her mother's smile was the pure radiance of unfiltered happiness.

"How was training?" she asked, as she slid down Lynx.

"Our girl is just as skilled as her mother," her father said, staring at his wife like he would never tire of looking at her.

Isla's mother beamed. "So, we're both better than her father, then?"

His smile grew. "In every single way," he said. He leaned down to pick Isla up, and they both hugged her mother. Isla laughed as the flowers in her mother's hair grew even more, and as her father's shadows wrapped snugly around them all.

And they were happy. Perfectly, endlessly happy.

Isla gasped and choked on the silver water as she surfaced. The stars above blurred as she blinked, her mind still whirling with what she had seen. A sob wracked her chest—she had already faced the reality of the harshness of her childhood, but now she mourned the upbringing she could have had. If only she hadn't killed her parents. . . .

The Pool of Possibilities . . . it was cruel. Showing her how happy she could have been in another life. But there was no way for her to have that. It wasn't real.

As if hearing her thoughts, the woman said from the shore, "But it is."

Isla frowned, and felt a surge of anger for this stranger. "How can it be?" she demanded, wading toward the edge. "My parents are dead. I . . . I *killed them*."

The woman's expression softened. She took Isla's hand once she was close enough to reach. "With your flair, you didn't just capture their powers, Isla. You captured their *souls*. They live in you. They can speak to you in a place like this. It is *real*."

Part of her was really with her mother and father. That love . . . that endless, unconditional love . . . it lived in her.

As if in proof, the pool became a field of wildflowers that brushed against her ankles. She looked up to see her mother, sitting in front of her. Isla watched as her green eyes filled with tears.

"You have made me so proud," she said. She reached over and ran her thumb across her cheek. *Her mother*. She was *here*.

Isla shook her head. "I have been a fool. I have made mistake after mistake . . ."

At that, her mother's eyes went fierce, like a fire still blazed inside of her. She gripped Isla's hands in hers, and Isla could feel the strength inside, calling to her own. "You have had the weight of fate on you since the day you were born. You were just a child with a crown. You have had to make choices that no one should ever have to make. You have been betrayed by everyone you have ever loved. Even when you were alone . . ." Her voice shook. "I was always with you. And I was always, *always* proud."

"Why?" Isla asked.

"Because through it all, you endured," she said. She reached toward her heart. "Your heart endured. Your hope endured. Your love for your world endured."

"I don't know if I can endure this," Isla said, feeling that pain, faintly, about to rush back.

"Endure, Isla. Persist. When the world pushes you—you push back." Her mother squeezed her hands. "Wildflowers bloom even in dead places. There are those who tried to bury you deep, but you are a seed. And you are only now growing. They are going to regret ever thinking you were anything different."

Tears streamed down Isla's face, and her mother brushed them away gently. "Endure, Isla," she said. "Every world is better with you in it."

Her mother fell away. So did the pool. So did the woman. All that was left was Cronan's smirk, as he stared her down, like she was just another planet he was intent on breaking.

But she would not break.

Her mind felt plundered, scraped dry, but her wall hiding the pool had not crumbled. He had not seen what she did. The pool and her mother and everything the silver woman had told her—it was her secret.

And now she knew how she would defeat him.

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GRIM

They had a shred of something living from Skyshade. The only thing left was energy—and Oro said he knew just where to get it.

Grim flew back to the winter palace on Wraith's back, feeling hope for the first time in days. It wouldn't be long now before they could use the portal. Wraith seemed joyful on their flight, darting around to slice through clouds, as if he could sense Grim's optimism.

"I'm going to get her back," he said, placing his hand against his dragon's scales. It wasn't the first time he had made this promise.

But he had always kept it. He *always* went after her.

He just hoped she would always come back to him.

Clenching his teeth, Grim thought about what Oro had said. Isla had visited him in a dream too. Grim had meant what he said to his wife—he didn't blame her for her actions at all. He only blamed himself. It wasn't jealousy he felt right now, or anger . . . but fear.

If she chose Oro, he didn't know what he would do. He wasn't known for his willingness to share, but he would rather take any piece of her that she was willing to give than lose her completely.

But the prophecy was clear. There was a choice to be made. She couldn't have both.

As much as he wanted her to choose him, he thought about all those words Oro had hurled at him. They had hit him like daggers.

If Grim made her a worse version of herself . . . then maybe she was better off without him.

No. He couldn't think like that. But he could admit, as much as it pained him, that he just wanted her to be happy.

And if a future with Oro made her happier . . .

He shook away the thought. Isla and Grim were infinite. He had to believe in the strength of their love. Especially now. It was the only thing he had left.

Wind howled around them as they circled the grounds of the winter palace. Wraith loved to fly here—he liked the snow.

Flurries fell now, in gentle sweeps. Wraith made a circle around the grounds. Then another. Then another.

Grim was about to tell his dragon it was time to go home, when his eyes caught the maze. The one he had entered a hundred times before. The one he had escaped to as a child. The one that his father had burned to the ground. The one that had grown back, like a stubborn weed.

The one his wife had left him in.

He had never studied the labyrinth from this perspective before though. From this height, it had a distinct shape . . . not unlike the drawings he had seen in Isla's book of skyres.

Of course.

Once Wraith landed roughly on the ground, Grim didn't waste a second. He portaled off Wraith's back, pulled that singed feather from his pocket—where he had been carrying it, should he figure the shape out—and stuck its point into his arm.

His skin stung, and blood burbled. But he gritted his teeth and began to carve. With each line he drew, the pain mounted, until it was pure agony, nearly bringing him to his knees. Fuck, this hurt. Was this what Isla had experienced?

Wraith was at his back, shifting with worry. Grim's shadows puddled around the creature in comfort. He made the marking as best he could, even as his hand shook.

Until finally, he connected the last line to meet the first, completing the symbol, and it gleamed, hardening into silver.

He was right. This was Cronan's skyre.

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ORO

Energy. The only thing that stood between Oro reuniting with his love was a source of energy. But all the great Starling masters were dead, and Isla, as the ruler of Starling, had the most power. They already needed her to give them significant Wildling ability. Anything else might hurt her. They needed an alternative solution.

Luckily, Oro knew just the right person to ask.

Grim had portaled him to the Skyling newland, but it had taken a while in the skies to find her. As Oro touched down from his flight and approached the young Starling, regret sunk through his chest that they were bringing a child into this.

“Where is she?” Cinder said. She was sitting cross-legged on a cliffside, her back to him. Sparks were dancing around her like a thousand stars, like she had created her own miniature galaxy.

Oro stilled. She hadn’t even turned around. But as if sensing his confusion, the girl said, chirpily, “I can feel your energy. I know who you are.”

Oro shifted on his feet. Cinder had become infinitely more powerful in these last few months, and she had already possessed abilities Oro had never seen in someone her age.

The Starling finally turned around, her sparks sputtering out in irritation. “Well?”

He knew who she was referring to. Cinder had been fascinated with Isla for a while. Oro felt a pang of sadness at what he had to tell her.

“She’s gone. In another world,” Oro said simply. He wondered if that was too vague. If Cinder would even understand—

But she nodded. “I assumed as much,” she said, sounding wise beyond her years. “I can barely feel her anymore.”

Oro frowned. “You feel . . . everyone’s energies?”

Cinder nodded again. “I used to only be able to feel people on Star Isle. But now . . . I feel them other places too. Other . . . worlds.” She frowned, her eyes worried.

“What do you feel?” Oro asked gently.

“*Him*,” she said. “The man who wants the universe.”

The man who wants the universe. Dread spilled through his chest. Oro was about to ask another question when an orb of energy shot straight toward him. He raised a hand to stop it—but before he could, Cinder brushed the orb away as if it was nothing more than a cobweb. She rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically.

“I’m not a baby! Stop acting like it,” she told her cousin. Though the way she stuck out her tongue didn’t really help her case.

“Hello, Maren,” Oro said, turning to face the Starling.

The Starling leader and head of a rebel group on Lightlark was glaring daggers at Oro. He couldn’t blame her. Maren had fought for a long time to keep her cousin’s abilities a secret. They had already asked so much of the child in the war against Grim, just months prior.

Oro felt a tinge of regret, remembering his own childhood. How his power had forced him to grow up too quickly. How it had led to one of the greatest mistakes of his life.

But he had never wanted his abilities. Cinder . . . she seemed to revel in them.

“Leave,” Maren demanded.

Oro hesitated for a moment . . . then nodded. Maren was Cinder’s guardian. She was just trying to protect her, and Oro wouldn’t force either of them to participate. He turned to go.

“No!” Cinder called out.

And her voice was a boom that shattered the air around them. Her energy burst forth in a wave that knocked Oro off his feet. To keep himself from being hurled across the cliff, he had to exert the same amount of energy in return. It was an *extraordinary* amount of energy.

How could Cinder produce so much with simply a *word?* She was not of the ruling line. Isla was the one who had absorbed all of Aurora’s incredible power. But Cinder . . . this young . . . seemed to have more Starling ability than all of them combined.

He remembered Isla asking about it. He had told her that this sort of random power outside a ruler's lineage was rare but not unheard of.

Maren had been knocked onto the ground from Cinder's outburst. She had nearly reached the forest of sky-blue trees with thick curling branches.

The little girl was standing on the cliff's edge, chest heaving. "I want to help you," she said. "I've seen a place in my dreams my entire life. Something there . . . is waiting for me. It's calling me. I need to answer the call."

"Stop this," Maren chided, getting to her feet. And through her irritated tone, Oro saw fear. This was clearly not the first time Cinder spoke of this. "You're going to bed. I shouldn't have ever let you—"

"*NO*."

A tide of power exploded from the girl. Oro barely created a shield around himself and Maren in time. But the grass and forest behind them was flattened as if cut down by a scythe. Sparks of energy swirled around them like a storm. A roaring filled the world.

When the sparks settled, all they saw was Cinder, curled into a ball, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean—"

Oro released the shield, and Maren bounded forward, collapsing on her knees in front of Cinder and pulling her to her chest. "I know. I know, sweetheart," she said soothingly, stroking her silver hair. "Deep breaths. Ten, remember? Do them with me." They counted them down. When they were done, Maren asked, "Do you want to rest?" Cinder nodded. Her head was bowed, her eyes on the ground. Oro could almost feel her shame. "Let's get you home."

Maren scooped Cinder up, even though the girl was nearly too big to be held. She shot Oro a scathing look as he followed them down the hill in silence.

But the Starling did not tell him to leave—so he didn't. He waited outside the small cliffside cottage they shared—with a sloped roof, wooden door that barely fit its frame, and lopsided window—as Maren tucked Cinder in for the night. When she reemerged, she sighed, leaning against the door with her eyes shut.

"I'm sorry," he said, because he was.

She shook her head. "It's not . . . an uncommon occurrence," she said. That was when Oro noticed a long scar snaking down Maren's arm.

Maren opened her eyes and tracked his gaze, rushing to pull her sleeve down. “It was an accident.”

“I never said it wasn’t.”

Fear bloomed across Maren’s expression again. “She’s a child. She—she will *learn*.”

Oro raised his hands. “I’m not going to imprison her.”

Maren didn’t look convinced. “Azul has been kind to all of us Starlings, but we can leave. We can pack enough supplies and go somewhere far away, even more isolated—”

He put what he hoped was a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I know what it’s like to lose control. To make a mistake.”

An image of the attendant that he had accidentally gilded flashed through his head. Oro had been a child when it happened, too, around Cinder’s age.

Maren searched his eyes. “What do you want?” she asked, warily.

He explained everything as best he could. Where Isla was. What Azul’s husband had said. What was coming. Maren’s mouth tightened in worry the more he spoke. He knew she wasn’t concerned about herself but about the little girl asleep in the room behind her.

“How much time?” she asked when he was finished.

“I’m not sure,” Oro replied. “But the longer she’s there . . .” He frowned. “She’s in danger. We need to get her back as soon as possible.”

“How do you know she’s still alive?”

He explained the life bond between her and Grim. How he would be dead if she was. How they had seen her in their dreams. And in the images from Lynx.

Maren shook her head. “You know . . . Cinder has asked about Isla almost every day recently. Sometimes more often than that. It was like she could sense something was changing.” She paused. “It’s been hard not to tell her my true feelings. About Isla.”

“Which are?” Oro ground out, knowing he wouldn’t like her response.

Maren straightened, her voice rising with conviction. “That she’s a traitor. She had us prepare for war . . . against a side she was already on. Then she stayed there. They say . . . they say she’s his *wife*.”

Every time Oro heard that word, a part of his soul fucking died. And though anger blazed through his veins at the Starling’s words, he could not

fault Maren for her assessment.

“Am I wrong?” she asked, almost hopefully.

“No,” he said. “But things are more complicated than you realize.”

She scoffed. “What’s complicated about being married to your supposed enemy?”

“She is two people. The person I met during the Centennial . . . and the one from the past who married Grim. Who . . . died.” He took a deep breath. “It would be enough to drive anyone to madness.”

Maren considered that. “And is she? Mad?”

“No,” he said. *Not yet*, were the treacherous words that entered his mind. Because who wouldn’t be on the road to that fate, with this sort of split life? With this much pressure on all her choices?

“You once tried to recruit her to your cause,” Oro said. “To kill me.”

Maren didn’t deny it. She shrugged a shoulder. “To end nexus. Can you blame me?”

Strangely . . . he couldn’t. Nexus was the curse that bound him to the island. That bound rulers to all their people, so a ruler’s death would kill their entire realm. It was cruel.

“I know you don’t want to help. And trust me, I hate asking. But war is coming.” If Cinder could feel people beyond this world, perhaps she had already sensed what Cleo had told them was imminent. “I’m guessing Cinder has told you as much?” Maren was quiet, and Oro continued. “In a war between worlds, we need Isla here. This might be the only way to save us all.”

Maren looked over her shoulder at the door behind her. When she faced him again, her eyes were fierce. “What do you need?”

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ISLA

Isla visited the silver pool in her mind for the next few days while Cronan tried to break her. And each time she plunged into the cool waters, she lived thousands of possibilities.

If she had never accidentally killed her parents with her first breath and got to be brought up by them. If she had never found her starstick and portaled to Grim's room, or to Celeste's. If she had never fallen off that balcony at the start of the Centennial to be saved by Oro.

And though the pool did not offer information on how to defeat Cronan, the woman was right. It did provide clarity.

Because with every change in decision, even small ones, the outcomes were transformed. And Isla saw that in most circumstances . . . her mistakes had actually avoided even greater bloodshed.

There was one mistake in particular that she was desperate to examine. *What if I had never saved Grim from the dreks?* she asked the pool. *If I had never destroyed that village?*

Isla saw it play out in her head. She watched Grim die, unable to fight back against so many beasts. And Nightshade did not crumble—they hadn't known Cronan was still alive, still anchoring his bloodline.

But the dreks . . . without Isla breaking the curse on the sword, the dreks weren't stopped, and they infiltrated Nightshade. The fate Grim had always feared came true as they destroyed everything and everyone. All those people in the village she had killed . . . they were torn to pieces just moments later.

And they weren't the only victims. The dreks slaughtered thousands, *everyone* they could find—before moving on to the rest of the realms.

She watched as Azul tried to fight them—and was slain, plummeting from the sky. His entire people died with him.

Cleo attempted to flee—but her ships could not outsail these winged creatures. In a last resort, she and her people escaped below the sea. But not before many Moonlings were killed.

Wildlings were next. Bonded creatures tried their best to protect their people. . . . but couldn't. Most of her people didn't survive.

When the Centennial started, Lightlark was next.

They were unprepared. Most people hid inside, but the dreks waited them out. It took a while, and everyone fought fiercely, but eventually . . .

Oro was killed—and the island fell.

Isla gasped as she fought her way to the surface of the pool. She was panting, her heart racing.

The woman was waiting for her. "Now you see," she said. "You have saved more than you have destroyed." Oro had said something similar.

"For now," Isla said. She rubbed her eyes, trying to erase those images from her mind.

The woman sighed. "Yes. For now. But you must forgive yourself in order to move forward. It's the only way your mind will be focused enough to make the right choice next."

Isla wanted to believe her. She knew, after seeing what she had in the pool, that she was right. But her shame lived in her very marrow. It was deep, and insidious. She would never forgive herself for what she had done. Not until she was able to bring them all back.

"Don't let your mistakes haunt you, Isla. Use the past to fix the future." The woman was right. Isla needed to learn from her mistakes, not live by them.

She had asked the pool to show her all her regrets, to see how different choices might have changed things. But that was the thing about life, she realized. There was no perfect scenario. Sometimes, the ending was inevitable, no matter how many times she tried to change it.

If her choice decided the fate of the world, she needed to make it after she had forgiven herself—as well as those who had hurt her. And maybe those same people could help her now.

Isla closed her eyes. The woman had said she could speak to people in her soul. People she had killed.

That was how she ended up walking into a familiar room.

And seeing a familiar figure with long, silver hair.

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ORO

“Who’s this kid?” Grim asked. Oro had brought Grim to Maren’s cliffside cottage to meet the Starling who would help them reach Isla.

“I’m not a kid!” Cinder said, energy flaring around her in anger.

Grim raised an unimpressed brow. “Yes. You are.”

She glared at him, then whirled to Oro. “I don’t like him.”

“Join the rest of the world,” Oro grumbled, and Cinder laughed. Grim glowered at them both.

Cinder tilted her head at Grim, then. “Hey! You’re her husband!” she said. “You’re . . . the villain! The one we were preparing to fight against!”

Grim nodded without a word. If he had feelings about being called a villain, he didn’t show them.

Cinder made a face. “But she’s so nice! Why would she marry . . .” Her nose scrunched. “*You*?”

Grim looked over at Oro. “We really need her?” he asked flatly.

Oro nodded.

He sighed. “Isla . . . likes her?”

Oro nodded again, narrowing his eyes at the Nightshade since Cinder could obviously hear them.

Grim ran his hand down his face, looking monumentally irritated. Then he sighed again, knelt to her level, and said, “I have a dragon. Want to meet him?”

Oro rolled his eyes as Cinder proceeded to retract all her previous assumptions about Grim, correct as they were. With a flick of Grim’s hand, Wraith appeared in the skies above, making the ground tremble when he landed.

Cinder screamed with joy, sparks streaming from her in ribbons. Fearlessly, she hurled through the air on a stream of energy, landing between the dragon's eyes, her arms wide in an embrace.

Wraith went cross-eyed then sighed, settling on the ground. He didn't seem to mind as Cinder clumsily climbed onto his back. "I want to fly!" she commanded.

Grim began to protest—when Wraith shot into the clouds. Grim and Oro looked at each other, frozen, their eyes wide.

A moment later, Oro was shooting toward the clouds as Grim portaled away.

Oro raced through the skies like an arrow, cursing Grim, cursing Isla for marrying him, cursing Cinder for being so impressed with a dragon. But mostly hoping Cinder was okay. Almost worse than that fear was the realization that Maren would skewer him if she heard about this.

But when he reached them, he found Grim on the dragon with Cinder. And the girl was lighting up the sky in silver, her joy permeating even the clouds.

Oro sighed, his entire body melting in relief. He slowly made his way back to the ground. They didn't have time for this, he knew. All their futures were uncertain. But Cinder was only a child. This moment of joy was worth it.

Wraith managed to dredge up half a field with his talons as he landed. Cinder was beaming. She slid down Wraith's nose and landed on her feet. "I always wanted to ride a dragon!" she said. "I've seen so many of them!"

Grim frowned. "You have?"

"In my dreams," she said confidently.

Grim glanced over at Oro, who shrugged a shoulder. "She says she's been dreaming about another world her entire life."

Grim's brow furrowed, like he was deep in thought. He looked over at the girl again. "You want to help us?" he asked.

She nodded vigorously.

"Good," he said. "Because that wife of mine you mentioned? The one who's very nice?"

She nodded again.

"I would like to get her back."

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ISLA

Aurora was sitting in front of a hearth, her hands splayed out on her lap in front of her. She turned as Isla appeared, and she looked exactly as Isla remembered her. It was as if no time at all had passed. For a moment, they just stared at each other.

Then Aurora broke the silence. “I can’t feel it, you know,” she said matter-of-factly. “The fire. It’s always cold here.”

Isla swallowed. She didn’t know where *here* was exactly. It looked like Celeste’s room in the Starling castle but blurred around the edges, like she was dreaming. She didn’t know if this was just a piece of Aurora’s soul and if the rest lived elsewhere.

“Come,” Aurora said, motioning beside her. “Sit.”

Isla didn’t want to *sit*. She wanted to stab her through the heart for the way she had betrayed her. For the years of deception and lies. For every single person her decisions had killed.

But . . . she also wanted to hug her. Because Celeste had once been her only friend. Her *best* friend. And those feelings didn’t just die. A love like that was not simply lost.

Aurora sighed. She stood, wiping her faded gray dress to rid the cinders from the hearth. “I wasn’t always like this,” she said. Isla stared at her blankly, not following. “Villainous.”

Isla’s eyes narrowed. “Forgive me for not trusting a word you say.”

Aurora nodded. “Smart. You were always smart. Except when it came to love.” She smirked. “Love made you an utter fool.”

A flash of anger roared to life in Isla’s chest—then withered. Isla didn’t have the strength for hatred. Not anymore, after everything. And especially not for someone already dead. “Love made *you* a murderer.”

Aurora had been in love with King Egan. Once she realized he loved her best friend instead, she spun the curses, killing thousands in the process. She plunged the world into five hundred years of misery.

For a moment, Aurora's eyes shifted. Her confident expression faltered, revealing the scared and sad woman underneath. One who had killed her best friend over a man. One who perhaps felt . . . regret.

But in the next instant, her resolve hardened again. She pursed her lips. "My soul was split, too. Just like yours," Aurora said, looking over at her. "It happened when I was young. When my parents—when they died."

Isla had never heard this story. Celeste had never spoken of her parents, and Isla always avoided the subject—because of the curses, they would've died when her friend was very young.

Aurora continued, "That loss . . . it split me for good, leaving me to teeter between good and evil. But I let it feed my power, harnessing more energy than anyone could ever fathom possible." She winced. "Violet . . . she understood what I struggled with. She made me good."

As if plunged into Aurora's head, Isla saw it. Her ancestor and Aurora as friends. It reminded her of her own relationship with Celeste.

The Starling's eyes hardened. "And then . . . when she betrayed me . . ." Aurora turned back to the fire. "She got what she deserved."

Isla could see those two sides of Aurora as clear as day. Was that Isla's destiny too? To be torn not between two men but between becoming a villain or a hero?

"When it came to choosing between vengeance and love, you know which one won out."

Isla didn't want revenge, though. She would always choose love. But it was the result of that love, of what it would do to the world, that reflected on her. That made her either the one to save the universe . . . or end it.

She could sit here and scream at her friend for hours. She could ask her a thousand questions, could demand explanations and apologies.

But she didn't have time for that. And now that she had explored her past, she was ready to fix the future.

"Cronan is alive," Isla said. "Do you have any idea how I can kill him?"

If Aurora was surprised by the revelation, she didn't show it. Aurora was more familiar with the founders of the island than she had originally

realized. Isla had found the feather that could communicate with Lark hidden in her room after her death.

Aurora was still for several minutes, her gaze on the heatless flames as if hypnotized. Eventually, she said, “The founders transferred parts of their power to an object. It was an ancient practice, long forgotten by now, that would amplify their abilities and give them access to more power than a single person could ever hold within them.”

“Like the feather,” Isla said.

Aurora nodded. “That was Lark’s. Cronan likely has one as well. If destroyed, it would weaken him. He would be vulnerable.”

Isla wasn’t sure what Cronan’s object was, but she felt a surge of hope. Aurora had given her a chance . . .

“Thank you,” Isla said. She turned to leave.

Aurora’s voice stopped her. “It wasn’t all pretend, you know,” she said softly.

Isla swallowed the knot in her throat. She remembered the hundreds of times they had sat in this room before the hearth, laughing and braiding hair and making oaths. Tears pricked her eyes. “I know,” she said, before she walked out the door.

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ORO

Oro found her waiting for him in his dream that night.

And for a second, everything went still. His problems simply disappeared with the sea-foam. His world became only green eyes and dark hair and red lips and a smile that never failed to force him to mirror it.

He was king of Lightlark. He wasn't supposed to want anything, but damn him, he wanted her. He *still* wanted her.

Because he could not forget the months they fought, and bared their teeth at each other, and bared their souls, going through dangers that sanded down their edges and broke down their walls, and forced themselves to face each other without fear or armor.

She had seen him weak and vulnerable and strong. And he had seen her covered in her own vomit and sobbing and triumphant.

They had seen each other's scars, and made new ones, but in the process, somehow, they had also healed themselves—and each other.

Life was cruel and hard and as edged as a blade, but she made him want to live it. Together. There was no one else he would rather face the end of the universe with.

He just wanted her back. Even if she chose Grim again, even if nothing had changed, he just wanted to be in a world with her in it.

They had everything Horus said they needed to build the portal. The tide pool. Cinder's energy. The ring, with a shred of something alive from Skyshade. The name of the place itself.

Now . . . all they needed was Isla. She would finish the bridge between them.

She stood as he walked over, reaching for his hands. He held them tightly, as if he could hold on to her forever. His gaze swept over her, memorizing her every detail like it might be the last time he could.

“You’re still coming for me,” she said, her green eyes piercing his.

“Always.”

She sighed, looking out at the emerald green sea. “I wish this place was somewhere I could close my eyes and return to whenever I’m sad. Like I could keep it in my pocket.”

Oro smiled and squeezed her hands. “You can come here whenever you want. It’s yours.”

She turned to him with a sly smile. “No, it’s *yours*. Or did you forget that you’re king?”

He took a step closer until they were a breath apart and she had to tilt her head up to meet his gaze. Just like he did at the end of the Centennial, he took the crown from his head and placed it atop hers. “Everything I have is yours,” he said.

“Everything?”

He nodded.

“Even that cape?”

He made to undo it, and she gripped his wrists to stop him, laughing. “Gold isn’t my color,” she said casually.

His voice wasn’t casual at all as he said, “It was. Once.”

Isla’s expression turned serious as she looked out at the horizon. He wondered if she was remembering the same moment he was. When she had invited him to gild the dress she wore. Her faith in him had let him conquer his fears, his trauma. He had painted her gold, and he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

“I see it so clearly,” she said. “Our life together. If things. If . . .” She smiled, as if she was seeing it in her head.

“Isla. We have everything we need. But to get to you, we need your Wildling abilities. We need you to restore the bonds.” Her jaw set. Her eyes did not leave the sea. “I know you asked us not to come. Have you changed your mind?”

She was the missing piece. In the silence, his chest was clenched in panic. What if she still insisted on keeping them out? What if she was set on sacrificing herself?

Waves crashed upon their feet. A salty breeze wove through their hair.

Finally, she faced him and said, “I have. Tomorrow. Will you be ready?”

His relief nearly sent him to his knees. “Yes.” He wanted to hug her, realizing he could *really* be touching her in just a matter of hours. They could be together outside of their heads. But Isla’s expression turned heavy. “What is it?”

“I’m only bringing one of you,” she said.

Oro frowned. “But *both* of us—”

“Someone has to stay behind. You can’t both leave, since I’m already gone, too. What if—what if—”

What if something happened to all their people, were the words she didn’t say.

Oro closed his eyes tightly. He, more than anyone, understood her reasoning.

“Have you made your choice?” he asked when he finally opened his eyes.

“No,” she said, and he tasted sweetness. She was telling the truth.

He took a deep breath. Something in him, and in the way she said her words, made it feel like more than just a decision on who she thought could help her defeat Cronan. It seemed almost final.

“Then I guess, I hope to see you soon,” he said, before the dream washed away in a wave of salt-slick sea.

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ORO

She’s only choosing one of us to go through the portal,” Oro told Grim the very next morning. The sun bled along the horizon behind the tide pools where Grim had just portaled them. He recounted everything Isla had said in his dream.

If the Nightshade was upset that Isla had visited him again, he didn’t show it. He only said, “We obviously both feel it should be ourselves.”

Oro sighed. “What we feel doesn’t matter. She’s the one reopening the bridge—it needs to be her choice.”

Despite the truth in his words, Oro desperately hoped she would choose him. She already *had* chosen him, after the Centennial. But was that a decision made out of affection or hurt, after being betrayed by Grim?

Oro burned the thought. It had been real, he was certain. He knew truth better than anyone else, and not one moment between them had been false.

They had been *happy*.

Until she had started to remember.

At the end of the war, she had made a different choice—to stay with Grim. But she had been trying to save Oro, and everyone else. In that case, was it even a choice at all?

But Oro couldn’t forget what he found after flying for days to check on her after he felt his connection to her weakened. He had assumed she would be miserable or imprisoned . . . but she wasn’t. She was *happy*.

And that truth had been the most painful to accept. That she did not hate Grim, even after everything.

That she loved them *both*.

Oro couldn’t blame her. Isla was trapped between a past life and a present one. Anyone in her position would have been confused. Especially with what was at stake with the prophecy.

But now . . . now she would have to make a choice between them.

Her final choice.

Oro was knocked out of his mind a moment later when Grim portaled Cinder to the tide pools. Oro's friends were waiting on the cliff with Maren, should anything go wrong.

No reason to delay. Oro raised his arms—and the high tide rushed in.

Water crashed into them both, but they were ready with shields of flame and shadow. They both walked assuredly, cutting through the sea like blades, right toward the blue glowing pool.

He knew Isla. If she was willing to make the connection, and let one of them in, it was because she was in trouble. She needed them.

And one of them was going to be with her in just moments.

The pool glowed brighter as Oro and Grim stepped into it. They dropped the ring and the Threads of Time that Isla would need inside and watched as they sank to the bottom.

Then they faced each other.

"Whatever choice she makes . . . thank you," Oro said, outstretching his hand.

Thank you for caring about her as much as I do. Thank you for helping me get to her. And if she chooses you—thank you for saving her.

Grim took his hand, his grip firm. "Thank you for making her life better," he said.

And he meant it.

They shared one last look, one last moment as allies.

Then Oro turned and nodded at Cinder. He and Grim sank into the pool, floating on their backs. From this angle, Oro could see Cinder close her eyes and take a deep breath. With a crackle, swirling energy surrounded her, swelling and raging until she was lifted off her feet. Her eyes burst open—and they were blank, pure light. Oro heard Maren's sharp gasp from the clifftop.

Cinder raised her arm. Pointed at the tide pool.

And a bolt of pure energy struck the water.

Side by side, Oro and Grim jolted. Oro's vision was replaced by blinding silver as power sharp as a sea of daggers set him aflame. It flayed through his skin, burned through his blood, and buried in his bones. His every sense

was ripped away, replaced only with endless light. The world roared like a storm had overtaken it.

It was working.

He could feel Grim pouring his power inside, his flair and his Nightshade ability. Oro did the same with his Sunling power. The tide pool whirled with energy, splintering and fracturing and reforming as a door.

Now, they only needed Isla to make her choice and open it.

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ISLA

Today was the day.

Isla had her plan. She just had to be strong enough to go through with it.

Aurora had given her all the information she needed.

She would kill Cronan. She would reopen one of her bonds. Then she would figure out how to kill Lark, who could barely breathe in her current state. She would figure out how to use her flair to bring everyone back, and all her mistakes would be undone. Her world, and the entire universe, would be saved.

The knights came for her that morning like they always did. She let them drag her through the dank corridors and push her into the galaxy room. She did not wince when those loud, resonant steps echoed. She lifted her chin when he finally faced her.

And this time, for the first time, when Cronan's shadows sunk into her mind, she did not fight him.

She gave him everything he wanted, while she clung to the present, fighting to keep her eyes wide open. For someone like Cronan would only bind his power to an object that he kept close at all times . . .

And it hadn't taken long to figure out what that was.

Cronan must have thought Isla had simply given up. She felt a jolt as he reached the very back of her thoughts, everything she had tried to hide. All that energy it had taken to form those walls, she held on to it now.

And without the pain and force of keeping him out, she realized something she never had before. When his shadows were invading her mind, he was creating a bridge between them. And she could feel the shreds of her power, glimmering.

Slowly, she began to smile. Her plans started to reshape. As he retreated from her head, his own face twisted in sick satisfaction, she clung to their

connection, keeping a thread of his shadows between them. He didn't seem to feel it. It must have never occurred to him that this entire time he was torturing her with his mind abilities . . .

She was learning.

She just needed more time. More time to awaken the tatters of power within and shape them into something she could use. "Why?" she said. "Why have you torn galaxies apart? Why use this power for destruction?"

He smirked down at her as if she was the greatest fool in existence. "Some worlds deserve to be destroyed."

She didn't believe that. "*Every* world is worth fighting for."

"Well, your fight has been in vain," he said simply, like it was fact. Like she was just an inconsequential speck in his immortal life.

And now, she would be just a memory he would soon forget.

His shadows lashed forward, reaching for her. He had already plundered her mind, and now he would break it and reshape it into whatever he needed. He would use her as a weapon to wield the diamond around her neck, the one he couldn't claim himself.

He had her pinned down with his shadows. They were firm as iron, threaded through her bones. But she was stronger now, more focused, having plunged into the Pool of Possibilities and made peace with her past. She was a sword who would cleave her own future.

"Anything can be broken," she whispered, as she broke through his hold. Before he could make a single movement, she curled her fingers around the dagger of energy she had been forming in her palm—

And stabbed it through his shin.

He roared, his knees hitting the ground. His shadows burst forth, shooting right at her. But her energy was faster, as it reached across the room, and all those broken pieces of her father's armor came together, forming a shield as they flew. She stacked each sheet high and covered it with her own energy, amplifying the power the blacksmith had poured into it. His shadows met the steel and were deflected, striking Cronan's forehead and plunging into his own mind. Prying it open. His face twisted in horror and pain, and inch by inch, Isla's body returned to her. She stood slowly and stepped before him. His eyes were wide and unseeing. With a flick of her finger, those pieces of metal reformed around her, a puzzle coming together on her skin, until she was gleaming.

“You may think my heart is my weakness. *Love* is my ruin,” she said as he groaned in agony. “It’s easier to shut your heart off. To consume and destroy rather than give.” She smirked, just as he had countless times at her. “But only one thing in this world is infinite, and that is *love*. Not power. Not *you*.”

She took a step toward him. “And I am not alone,” she said. She could feel the whisper of all those souls within her, including her mother and father. She could feel Grim’s and Oro’s souls intertwined with her own—she could feel their strength, calling to hers. Reinforcing hers. “I am not alone,” Isla repeated. “But you are. Because all you do is destroy.”

She was not strong enough to face him on her own, but *he* was. Cronan roared as he fought his own mind. He twitched in place as he struggled to move. But there was nowhere to run. This enemy he was battling was within.

“All you have is this. And now . . . it’s mine.” He gnashed his teeth at her but could do nothing as she reached for his crown—and took it.

The second her fingers touched the metal, she knew for certain this was the object his power was bound to. Energy thrummed beneath her skin, burning so hot that she almost dropped it. The moment it left Cronan’s possession, he bellowed, as if something critical had been stolen.

She sank the crown onto her head, and the metal seemed to melt into her skull, searching for a host.

Instantly, power rocketed through her body. Power so fierce, so saturated, it called to her own, releasing it all from Cronan’s void-like prison.

It awoke more than enough Wildling power to send through the bond, to help complete the portal. She saw the silver pool again in her mind’s eye. But for the first time, it was not empty.

Grim and Oro were both submerged in its waters. Both halves of her heart were fighting to get her back.

Isla reached for one of them, on instinct. But the silver woman appeared in her path and stopped her.

“There is something else you should know,” she said. She seemed sadder than Isla had ever seen her, which was surprising considering that Isla was finally breaking free of Cronan. The woman looked from Oro and Grim in

the pool to Isla. “Throughout history, in times of great upheaval in the universe, souls have been matched.”

Isla blinked. *Matched souls?* She didn’t understand.

“These pairs are matched not only in soul, but in power.” The woman looked at Isla with true heartbreak in her eyes. “You are the first to have two souls bound to yours. Two perfect, fated matches. Your soul is split, Isla. It will continue to split. Until you die—or kill one of them.”

Isla’s eyes burned. She didn’t know anything about fated matches, or bound souls, and she didn’t care—she loved *both* of them. Despite reason. Despite circumstance. But hearing this made her understand why it felt impossible to choose.

“It is the cruelest thing in the world, to have to kill your soul’s match,” the woman continued. “But it is certain. One of you three *will* die.”

“No.” She was tired of this prophecy. Tired of hearing she would have to *plunge a blade through the heart of the man she loved*.

The woman sighed deeply. “You’ve been preparing for this your entire life. Your fate was written before you even existed.”

“I’m going to rewrite it,” Isla growled.

The woman only smiled softly. “You act as if fate is just something that happens to you. But *you* are the one who is crafting it. You are writing your destiny with every choice you make.”

Isla froze, turning those words over, shifting her gaze to where Oro and Grim were floating in the pool. She couldn’t imagine anything making her *choose* to kill one of them. She just couldn’t.

“I *can’t*,” she said. “I’m not—I’m not strong enough.”

“But you are,” the woman said, fiercely. “You are strong enough to save not only your world, but the rest. And it starts with this choice. You have seen your past and gained clarity from it.” She brushed a finger against Isla’s wrist, where her mother’s charm rested. It held her mother’s flair—the ability to see the future. “If put in the pool, you will see your two futures. And what will happen if you choose one . . . or the other.”

Tears ran down her face because . . . she didn’t want to know. She didn’t want to *see*. She was afraid of what she would discover. “Are you ready to see?” the woman asked.

“No,” she said.

The woman nodded, in both disappointment and understanding.

“But I’m ready to choose. Once and for all.”

Isla blinked, and the woman was gone. Only Grim and Oro remained, still reaching their hands toward her in the water.

Her hand shook at her side. This felt *wrong*. Her very soul seemed to protest, like it was tearing at the seams. But she had to.

Her chest rattled with a sob as she reached forward. Not to them both . . . but to only one. Her fingers grasped his.

She loved them both. But one had just a little more of her soul.

“I choose him,” she said. “I choose *him*.” Isla felt the bridge between them ripple into existence, stronger than ever, as she led him to her. Her chest burned, her soul on fire, as her vision was overtaken by swirls of silver energy.

She blinked. It had only been one moment. When her vision cleared, Cronan was there, still on his knees, like he couldn’t fully stand. He lunged toward her. Toward his crown.

Isla took it off her head and used every shred of remaining ability to throw it across the room.

It shattered, and Cronan seized, as if stabbed a thousand times through the chest. He roared—in agony, in fury.

But instead of going for his broken crown—he went for her. He grabbed her by the neck and slammed her down on the ground, her head cracking against it. His other hand closed around the diamond at her throat. His expression wasn’t cold any longer—it was crazed.

His grip tightened around her neck and she choked, feebly kicking her legs under him. Without his crown, without the connection of their minds, Isla was powerless once more. Her vision started to go dark around the edges. Her limbs felt heavy. He was seconds from claiming her diamond once and for all. From using it to break into her world and suck it dry.

“Love is nothing but a weakness,” he said, looking mad with fury. “And you are nothing but a fool for breaking my crown, thinking that would be my end. But I always rise. I will make a new crown. And this diamond will be right at the center of it.”

Isla knew she was losing the battle to stay conscious. His face had blurred. Her lungs burned, as if filled with flame. Darkness bled into the edges of her vision.

But before she could succumb to shadow, something in this world . . . broke. And Isla felt a power that could rival even Cronan's, especially without his crown. Cronan must have sensed it too, because he looked up so frantically that his grip eased ever so slightly. She sucked in a ragged breath.

"What is that?" Cronan roared at his knights, who had started spilling in to the room. The castle shook. The skies split.

Isla could feel *him*, cleaving through the world like a blade, racing to her in a great burst of energy.

Blood spilling from the corner of her mouth, Isla smiled and said, "That's my husband."

And the room shattered as Grim landed in the center of it in a streak of onyx shadow. The knights were sent flying back, and Cronan himself was launched from his feet.

Grim paid no attention to his ancestor. He didn't spare a glance at the army of knights strewn around the room. He didn't seem to notice the galaxy beyond the glass ceiling that was currently spilling around them.

No. He just looked at her, like they were the only two people in the universe.

"Heart," he said, his lips hardly moving. But she could feel that word as if it was carved into her very soul.

She was broken and bleeding, but her lips turned up into a smile that he echoed, and every jagged piece of herself finally clicked into place. The bridge between them was full and final, gleaming. She couldn't tell where his soul began and hers ended.

This was a love to rival time and space and destiny. This was a love that would shape fate and galaxies.

Now that he was in front of her, she wondered how she had ever survived being a world apart.

But it didn't matter anymore. He had found his way back to her. Just like he had always promised.

Tears pricked her eyes as she looked, and looked. A thousand apologies and promises sat on her tongue. But she didn't need to say a word.

"I know," he said, and she felt like he really did. He *knew* her. Every part of her.

Cronan’s crown was still on the other side of the room, in pieces. He was on the opposite end, struggling to stand. As he bellowed orders to his knights, Isla scrambled to her feet and ran toward Grim as he moved toward her.

It was over. This torture had finally come to an end. They were together, and nothing, *nothing* could come between them now. Not even Cronan. With their powers joined, they’d be unstoppable. Their world would be saved. Every piece of her plan would fit into place.

She reached for him. He reached for her. Their fingers were just feet apart. But before they could meet, a shadow snaked through her mind and spoke.

It wasn’t the pain of the intrusion that made her eyes go wide—it was the words.

You think this love is infinite? Watch how easily it is broken.

No.

Time seemed to slow, as Isla reached for Grim, trying to bridge those inches between them. Her husband’s shadows were spilling through the room, killing everyone in their path. Half the knights were already dead. They were nearly at Cronan’s neck.

But Isla saw the exact moment Cronan broke into Grim’s mind. It happened so quickly, she couldn’t even say a word. Couldn’t even warn him.

And Grim stopped in his tracks. His shadows dissipated.

Grim blinked, gazing around the room in confusion. His eyes landed on her, and—

She didn’t see even the slightest glimmer of recognition.

Look how easy it is to take one’s memories, Cronan said, into her mind. *You should know. But this time, it’s permanent. His memories of you are gone for good.*

Cronan’s cruel laugh echoed throughout her skull.

Anything can be broken.

Impossible. Isla refused to believe it. Nothing could break them. *They were infinite.*

But as she reached for her bond with Grim that had been forged through countless obstacles, adventures, and memories, like a mosaic, like all of the

tiny decisions that had turned into *everything*, she fell to her knees with a raking sob.

The bond between them was gone.

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GRIM

There was a woman on the floor that he had never seen before.

She had the strangest aura around her. It was *red*. Like roses and hearts and blood. He had never seen an aura that color. Or one so saturated.

Her green eyes were wide as her emotions hit him like a battering ram.

Soul-shredding sadness. Bone-deep despair.

Lastly, and strongest of all . . . *Love*.

For him.

Impossible. Grim would never get close enough to a woman that she would care about him this way. She was a stranger. Why would she love him?

Then he felt something else. Her *powers*. She was Wildling . . . and *Nightshade*. And Starling. Somehow, she also had access to Sunling, Skyling, and Moonling abilities. There was only one way he could think of how . . .

“Do you know her?” A deep, resonant voice said from across the room. Grim turned to see a man who he recognized as Cronan, his ancestor. Grim knew he was in another world, the one in which the founders of Lightlark had once lived. But he couldn’t remember why. He searched his memories, brow furrowing. Had he really been working with Oro, his enemy, as well as the Skyling and Moonling rulers? They had wanted to bring someone back to their world . . . could it have been this woman?

No. She—although glaringly beautiful and disturbingly powerful—was a stranger.

“No,” Grim said.

At his response, sadness surged from the woman. Tears rolled down her flushed cheeks. Grim studied her, fascinated by the enigma of her.

That fascination only grew when he noticed what was around her neck. The diamond Infinite. How was that possible? Could it be an illusion of some kind, a trick? But he could feel the power that was radiating right at him. Had she claimed it? How?

“This woman is the reason your realm is facing ruin,” Cronan said. “She is in love with the Sunling king.”

Yes, that was what he suspected, after feeling her arsenal of powers. Then why was she looking at him this way? Why was she so sad?

Grim felt around for both Cronan and the woman’s emotions, trying to make sense of this situation. Cronan’s were almost nonexistent as if eroded by time, his aura a pulsing, near-colorless void. The woman was the opposite. She felt so much, she seemed to bleed with it. But right now, those emotions did not surge in defiance or outrage. She did not even try denying Cronan’s words. And she certainly was strong enough to ruin his realm.

Is that why Grim had come here? To stop her?

“That’s right,” Cronan said as if he could read Grim’s thoughts. And maybe he could. “She will be the end of you and everything our line has worked for. She tried to kill me, and you will be next.”

“*Grim*,” she said, and *that voice*. It pierced right through him. If he hadn’t had a vise around his own emotions, he might have been moved by it. But he didn’t care about her. She shook her head against the lack of recognition in his gaze. “You know me,” she said, choking a sob.

He didn’t.

“Kill her,” Cronan said.

And Grim did what he always did—he eliminated any threat to his realm.

He unleashed a curl of daggers, sharpened into blades, right at her throat.

That diamond would be *his*.

Her eyes widened. That one look thrust him back in time, to when he had killed someone else with these same shadows. Someone he actually *had* cared about. It was almost enough for him to call them back.

Almost.

A moment before the shadowblades struck, the woman lifted her arms, crossing them in front of her face—

And power exploded out of her in a surge that hit him straight in the chest. He was knocked back by the force of it, sliding across the room, until he hit the wall. He watched her look at him, her expression one of pure devastation, her aura soaked in it, before she shot up, breaking through what remained of the ceiling, and soaring into the glittering sky.

A second later, thunder rumbled. A storm had formed above them.

“Hunt her down, and bring back her corpse!” Cronan bellowed.

Grim peered over at him. Cronan was his ancestor, but Grim didn’t take orders from him.

Cronan’s eyes narrowed at his defiance. “She will be the end of you and all your people. Are you going to let her get away? When she wields that diamond? Only you can stop her.”

Grim had spent centuries keeping his realm from destruction. If it fell, it would mean all that pain and suffering would have been for nothing. He wouldn’t let one woman ruin it all.

Shadows engulfed him as he shot out of the room after her.

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ORO

She had chosen Grim.

Oro surfaced from the water, gasping. He was alone, so it had worked—they had opened the portal. A wave washed over him, pulling him down into the depths of the pool, salt burning his throat. The sea had gone wild, the tide rushing in nearly strong enough to drag him away.

He almost wished it would.

He and Grim had given her a choice . . . and she had made it.

Oro crashed through the surface again, the reality of his situation settling into his blood and bones. His heart pulsed with pain he had not known for centuries. Soul-crushing loss. Devastation. He grieved the future he had imagined for them both—a glistening, golden life that now felt like a cruel joke.

She had chosen Grim before, but it hadn’t seemed permanent until now. He always knew that the love he shared with Isla was real, but her love for Grim was real too. And apparently, it was stronger.

Oro closed his eyes, and, for the first time since Isla had disappeared in the center of that maze, he allowed himself to finally break. The tears sliding down his face were a foreign sensation. He hadn’t let himself cry since his mother’s death over half a millennium ago.

Oro had well and truly lost Isla.

A tear hit the water, and the entire island trembled. He was tied to it, irrevocably, by the curse of nexus. And as his heart and soul fractured, the very island seemed to break with him.

The white cliffs to his side began to collapse, falling into the sea in clouds of dust and ocean spray. Oro heard shouting in the distance but ignored it as a massive tidal wave crested the horizon, rushing right toward him and the island.

Power seared through Oro’s veins. He knew the danger of using emotions as fuel for abilities—he knew it was too easy to take too much, to scrape every last morsel of power until he had nothing left. But this loss had finally shattered the locks on his self-control.

The wave reached him and became steam on impact—his body had turned to flame. He soared into the air, wind wrapping around him, mixing with his fire, creating a flaming tornado.

He was king of Lightlark. The most powerful person in this world.

He had never truly allowed himself to delve into the depths of his power before. Maybe he would find something there, something that could stop this pain.

Fiery wind surged around him and the cyclone swelled, taking Oro higher. Below him, the ocean boiled in rings of crackling energy. A bolt of lightning flashed above him, the boom of thunder reverberating through him.

“Oro!” someone bellowed, over the roar of flames of sea and wind. He looked down—a figure had stepped through the fire, into the eye of the tornado.

Enya.

He closed his eyes. He didn’t want to see her—he didn’t want to see anyone. He couldn’t listen to what they had to say.

Oro knew it had been foolish to continue loving Isla through everything, even after he learned she was married. But all his rules and safeguards and trepidation burnt to ash around her. She was his constellation, and he had hoped that they would find their way back to each other.

Now that she was gone . . . now that he knew she would never be with him again . . .

Only power could fill this gaping hole in his chest. For almost his entire life, he had pushed down the very thing that made him great. He had refused to give into his unprecedented strength, to lose control over himself. But now . . .

His tornado grew, energy coursing through his veins like lightning. It felt *good*. He lifted even higher into the sky, pulling rocks and trees into his tempest. He would destroy everything in his path. He would pour himself out until he was as empty and hollow as she had left him.

“*Oro*.”

Enya's voice was a desperate gasp. He opened his eyes and saw his friend on her knees, grasping at her throat. The air in the center of the tornado was being sucked up too forcefully for her to breathe. It had already extinguished her flames.

Her eyes were wide. Pleading. He had known her for his entire life, and he had never seen her so afraid of him. Not when they were children and he had accidentally gilded an attendant. Not when he had set the sea aflame.

"Your eyes," Enya said, and he looked up at the water that had joined his tornado. He made a sheet of ice. And in his reflection, he saw flames dance in his irises.

"You're not—alone," Enya croaked, and Oro blinked. It was true that he had never felt heartbreak like this.

But his heart was not only Isla's. It belonged to his friends too.

Enya. Flashes of their friendship chiseled through his vision, chipping away at his devastation. That love stretched like roots to ground him, pushing away the anger and pain that were fueling his powers.

Enya collapsed on the ground, her red hair gleaming against the sand. Was this how she died? No. *No*.

He crashed down to the beach, his tempest suddenly falling around him. He knelt at Enya's side, flipping her onto her back desperately. She looked so still—had he done it? Had he really killed her? Oro couldn't breathe over the panic clutching his heart, at the horror of his actions, as—

Enya coughed. Oro could see the slightest rise and fall of her chest. She was alive, but barely.

He nearly wept in relief as he pulled her toward him. Only then did he remember that they had not been alone. . . .

Cinder and Maren. Zed and Calder.

He looked toward where the cliff had been and spotted them hovering on a slice of wind Zed had summoned. Without the Skyling, they would have all fallen into the sea along with the rocks. They would have *died*. Maren was holding an unconscious Cinder in her arms—the energy she had used to make the portal must have made her faint. The Starling looked at him, eyes hard and serious. She had seen everything.

I know what it's like to lose control, he had told her.

He had been referring to what happened centuries ago. Oro was supposed to be better than that now. But this . . .

He looked around at the destruction he had made. At the scar he had left on this island he ruled. He had nearly . . . he had nearly . . .

He couldn’t let this happen again.

Oro was ready to smother his powers, to bury the memories with Isla, to put it all in a box and hide it in the darknest corner of his mind, just as he had centuries before, when he had lost control.

But then, the tide pool rippled. Oro frowned, looking into it.

A form began to emerge, taking shape, and he almost allowed himself to hope that it was her. That she was safe. That they had managed to overpower Cronan and return.

Instead, a claw reached out from the depths of the pool. Another.

And the water shattered as a creature burst through its depths with a sky-splitting roar.

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ISLA

Grim was coming after her. She could feel his power careening toward her like a darkness that could smear the sun from the sky.

He didn’t remember her.

This couldn’t be real. She wanted to believe it was a nightmare, another one of Cronan’s mind games. But she had seen the cold disinterest in Grim’s eyes. She had felt the emptiness where their love had once lived.

Cronan’s words were clear. Grim’s memories of her weren’t just hidden, they were *gone*. For good.

Grim would have killed her if the storm hadn’t formed in time for her to deflect his shadows. She had waited until the very last moment to block them, so sure in their love, in *him*, up until it almost caused both their ruin.

And now, his shadows were closing in. She soared higher, fleeing her husband until she felt the rumble of thunder in her bones. As portals split the sky into open seams and creatures began to emerge, Isla scanned the night for a smaller swirl that wouldn’t take her to another world, just miles away from here. Like the portal she had escaped through when the knights found her and Lark in the ash desert.

There. With Grim’s shadows at her heels, she flew with all her speed, pushing herself harder and faster, until she shot through a glimmering whorl of color—and was gone.

She crashed hard into a sand dune, her body tumbling head over heels until she finally lost momentum. She gasped, coughing up the dust she inhaled on impact. Her throat burned. She sat up, retching.

Her armor had been strewn across the sands. As the storm above her began to vanish, she used the last dregs of her Starling energy to melt the metal down into a bracelet of plate-like scales that clinked alongside the

one her mother had left for her. There they were. Her last two remaining possessions.

Slowly, she stood, taking in the endless sea of sand and ash around her. *Not again*, she thought. She had no water, no weapon, no destination. The portal was now closed above her, and away from the storm, she had no powers either.

But then she noticed something in the distance. A crater, with flashes of green and blue. Another vision? No. She blinked, and it was still there.

A village? An oasis in this endless desert?

Movement sounded behind her. She whirled in a flash, ready to strike—but it wasn't Grim. It was a desert mouse, scurrying away from a snake. It burrowed into the sand, and the snake's tail rattled in fury as it chased after it.

Grim didn't know where she was. And she couldn't let him find her, not until she could figure out a plan. As much as it pained her already shattered heart . . . she broke the bridge between them again, in case it might lead him to her.

How had things gone so wrong? For a beautiful, triumphant moment, she had thought she had won. She had freed herself of Cronan's grasp and managed to injure him. She had made her choice and brought Grim to this world.

And now . . .

She shook her head, trying to stay focused on the present. It was the only way she was going to get through this. Because if she thought too hard about the blankness in his expression . . . about how he had almost *killed* her without a second thought . . . she would collapse and cry until dehydration did her in. And that would be a pathetic way to die, after surviving everything else.

On shaking legs, she dragged herself through the sand in the direction of the massive crater. As she got closer, she heard the clinking of glass and murmuring of voices. It was, in fact, a village. The sun was setting as she slipped down into a market, and it seemed like the town was coming alive. The people here must have preferred to operate during the cooler hours, without the unrelenting sun. It reminded her of the agora during the Centennial, watching from a distance as the Sunlings filled the streets, their curse preventing them from exploring it during the day.

The thought made Oro’s face flash in her mind, and she felt a stab of pain. She hadn’t wanted to hurt him, she never wanted to hurt him. Even now, after she had made her choice, she knew he would always have part of her soul.

But most of it belonged to Grim. Still.

She wove through the stalls in the market, swiping a few sheets of fabric in order to blend in. It wouldn’t disguise her against Grim, of course. But she suspected Cronan would send his knights after her as well. She didn’t need to raise suspicions with any of these villagers in case they turned her in.

The market stalls were made of adobe and glass—far more available materials than wood, Isla thought, in a place like this. The oasis only had a few trees, but they were given a wide berth. She watched a few people kneel before them in reverence.

A single pool of water sat in the center of this crater, and Isla wondered if it once filled the entire hole. Perhaps this—just a tiny pool not much larger than a puddle—was all that was left.

Isla joined that line, and as she moved closer, she noticed the water glowing faintly, but nothing like the pool in her head. When she got to the front, she realized she didn’t have anything to drink out of.

“Here,” a voice said behind her. Isla turned, and the woman next in line handed her a glass cup. “I have one to spare.” She had honey-colored eyes and slightly tanned skin. The fabrics she wore were thin but intricately designed, in waves that could be water or sand.

“Thank you,” Isla said, taking it from her. She filled her cup and moved out of the way to drink. She had been in the desert for only an hour, but the water was a welcomed coolness down her throat.

“It never gets old, does it?”

Isla lowered her cup to see the woman who had done her this kindness. She finished her last gulp and handed the glass back to her.

“The sacred water is better than any other I’ve ever tasted,” the woman continued. She studied Isla. Isla imagined she looked awful, having been kept in a cell for days. “Though, I’ve never seen you here before.”

In a small community like this, Isla supposed her new clothes weren’t enough to make her blend in.

“I’m . . . hiding,” she said, searching for an explanation that would make sense.

The woman frowned. “From who?”

“My husband.” It was the truth, after all.

The woman nodded, knowingly. She reached for Isla’s hand, squeezing gently. “I’m Jessel,” she said, leading Isla back through the market, “Would you like something to eat?”

Isla blinked, shocked by this stranger’s immediate kindness. She should refuse. She should keep moving. What if this was a trap? Cronan ruled this world, and she didn’t know what that meant in a small village like this.

But Isla hadn’t eaten in days. She was exhausted and devastated. So she followed Jessel back to her house.

The structure was built underground, beneath the crust of the crater. Isla assumed it was to protect against the storms. It was a wonder any of the trees had survived them.

The main room was small and cool, with a hearth in the corner and seats carved out of the walls. A fire flickered softly. After days in a cell, a warm, comfortable place like this almost brought tears to her eyes. This felt like a home, and it was remarkable that some semblance of peace had remained in this world of ruin.

Isla startled when she heard a yelp, and then a child came running into the room. Another soon joined him.

“Prelis, Agor. Say hello to our guest,” Jessel said.

“Hello,” Prelis said happily.

Agor stepped toward her. “Your eyes are like treetops,” he said, his tone skeptical, almost like an accusation.

Isla supposed it wasn’t a common color found here. Their own eyes were like the woman’s—amber.

“That’s right,” Isla said.

“Why?” he demanded.

Isla didn’t know how to respond. She couldn’t exactly share that she was from another world.

Luckily, Jessel stopped her from having to say anything at all. “Agor. I’m making pepper pie. Do you want to help get some from the sands?”

The little boy lit up, immediately forgetting about Isla’s strange eyes. He ran outside, Prelis at his heels.

“Sorry about that,” Jessel said.

“It’s okay,” Isla said, trying to form a smile. “Your children are adorable.”

“Oh, they’re not mine,” she said. “Not by blood anyway.” Isla could fill in the blanks.

Jessel motioned toward a bench formed from the stone wall. “Sit,” she said. She peered at Isla with a mixture of curiosity and wariness. “Because I do want to know how you have eyes the color of treetops.”

Isla hadn’t expected to be so honest with Jessel. Maybe it was because she just needed someone to talk to. But she found herself telling her that she was from a place where green was everywhere, and flowers bloomed in every color imaginable.

And Jessel just sat and listened. It didn’t seem like she could be shocked by anything.

“This world was like that once,” she said. Isla couldn’t imagine living in the wreckage of a world like this. Finding, occasionally, signs that it had been something different.

Would that happen to her own world if Cronan got his way? Or would he simply consume it until there was nothing left?

“I’m not old enough to have seen it, of course,” Jessel continued. “It’s been like this for a long, long time. But there are tiny pockets of what once was. And there are some beings . . . that remember.”

Remlar had said something similar—he was of this world too and remembered what few had. Isla swallowed down the jolt of pain at the memory. Remlar’s death still felt unbelievable, that a creature so ancient could just cease to exist. He had died for the chance at a better world. And Isla had failed him, just like she had failed every single person that had believed in her.

“When I first arrived here,” Isla said, “I was captured by a group of scavengers in the desert. They were able to wield power. But I haven’t seen anyone in this village do anything like that . . .”

Jessel shook her head. “There are many factions in these lands,” she said, “and I don’t know much about them. But they trade in artifacts they’ve collected from other worlds that end up here—it’s possible they found a

way to harness the storms though one of those, to get through . . . the block.”

Their necklaces must have been like Azul’s rings, then.

Isla paused, deep in thought. “What do you know about *him*?”

A shadow fell upon Jessel’s expression from where she stood kneading dough. Isla didn’t have to clarify who she meant. “I know he’s the reason for all this ruin. Him . . . and his knights.”

“Has anyone ever tried to oppose him?”

She huffed a laugh. “Of course. But anyone foolish enough to try never came back.” She nodded toward a crudely made game in the corner, built of glass and carved rock. It belonged to the boys. “That’s what happened to their parents.” She sighed. “They fought . . . and for what?”

Jessel frowned like someone whose hope had been drained. She looked at Isla, sidelong. “Is that why you’re here? To destroy him?”

Isla nodded. She didn’t know if it was unwise, telling her this. “And to save my world.”

She was doing an awful job at both.

Still, Jessel just stared at her. “Save ours, while you’re at it, will you?” she asked. Her lips curved into a crooked smile. Her tone was lighthearted, but Isla didn’t miss the desperation beneath it.

The boys returned just minutes later, and the room was filled with laughter and chaos. For a single night, Isla could almost forget the agony of her current circumstance. She could eat. She could wash the dirt and blood from her face and rest.

Jessel offered warm blankets and a soft place on the floor. For a few hours, Isla allowed herself to sleep, while the rest of the household left to run their stand in the market. But when the sun was hottest, and everyone returned, and the house went quiet, Isla slipped out the door without saying goodbye.

It was only a matter of time before Grim found her. She did not want him—or Cronan—anywhere near Jessel and her boys. This was Isla’s mess to face.

Isla emerged to a sky smudged in crimson and gold. The market was empty. Only a few people walked by. She avoided attention as best she could, wandering aimlessly. She had no idea what to do next—just that Grim would catch up with her eventually.

We could never be just strangers, he had told her, before the first time they had truly had one another, and she had believed him. But now, he had forgotten their story. He looked at her like she was no one.

Isla found a quiet alley, leaned against the wall, slumped to the ground . . . and finally allowed herself to cry. The hurt bubbled up in her chest and spilled out of her, in broken gasps.

She was alone. Utterly, completely alone.

She rested her forehead against her curled-up knees, wrapping her arms around her legs. And then she heard a voice. Golden, like a sunrise turned into a sound.

Oro.

She heard him talking, but she couldn't make out the words. Was it a memory? Was it him, now, like in their dreams?

She reached for that thread between them, wondering if it was still there, even after she had chosen Grim. She didn't dare breathe as she looked for it. She braced herself . . .

But it was there.

Still.

And as she accessed it, she was immediately hit with a wave of unrelenting sadness. It was so intense that it formed a barrier in their connection. She had never been able to feel his emotions through the bridge before. She didn't know how this was possible, but her heart broke to know that she had caused this pain, and she desperately wanted to reach him, somehow.

She pulled the thread between them like a rope, walking it like a bridge. She used every shred of focus and concentration, until the noises of the nearby market disappeared. Until she stood, shakily, and turned—

There he was. Standing on a crumbling cliffside and battling against a wall . . . a wall of beasts. Massive creatures with fangs and claws and scales. His eyes were glowing strangely, like fire. There was a power around him, an incredible force of wind and energy and water that she had never seen before.

He was wielding with emotion. With sadness.

Because of her.

"Oro."

His name sounded muffled, as if swallowed. But he immediately turned to face her. For a moment, his eyes blazed brighter, and the energy around him seemed to ripple. But then he blinked and his eyes settled back into their usual amber. “Isla,” he said so gently, and something inside her broke.

She had never been able to do this before, just as she had never been able to communicate with Grim and Oro in their dreams. Something about this world had strengthened the bonds between them. Isla thought about what the silver-haired woman had said, about bound souls . . .

Oro didn’t question it. He pored over her and frowned as he noticed the tears that still clung to her cheeks. “What happened? Where’s Grim?”

Isla pressed her hands to her eyes as if that would make her stop crying. How could this man still care about her so much after she didn’t choose him? She didn’t deserve it.

“He’s here, but—” Her voice cut off, strangled by emotion.

“What?” he asked, his expression haunted—already expecting the worst.

Isla swallowed. “Cronan, he—he erased Grim’s memories of me. It’s—it’s irreversible. The bond . . . it’s gone.”

Oro closed his eyes and cursed. He knew as well as she did that Isla needed Grim and his portaling power to get back home. His hand was still outstretched, his power shredding creatures even as he fully faced her.

“He’s hunting me down, now. I don’t . . . I don’t think I have much time,” Isla continued. The edges of this vision were fading, like the shadows of the alley were stretching. Expanding. She reached toward him, desperate to stay in the light. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry for not choosing you. But you deserve someone who can be wholly yours. And too much of me will always belong with him.”

He didn’t say anything, but she could almost read the words in his eyes. That he didn’t care, that he would take whatever shreds of her heart that she could offer him. But that wasn’t fair.

“Isla,” he said, his voice deadly serious. “You need to get through the portal. We’re holding it open, and . . .” She could see what was being let through. Beasts from this world. The same she had faced.

As they barreled against his wall, weakening it, she raced forward, as if she could possibly join him in his fight against them.

But she couldn’t leave without portaling power. Now, she didn’t have access to it at all. She would need to face Grim. *Survive* him. She knew him

well, perhaps better than anyone, but she hadn't fought him, not really. Especially not with powers.

Oro had.

"What are Grim's weaknesses?" she asked hurriedly, Oro's shape already blurring. "In battle?"

The look Oro gave her was one of devastation and acceptance. A roar sounded nearby, but it was muted. "He only has one that I know of."

"What is it?"

He gave a sad smile. "You."

Footsteps approached from the mouth of the alley. She turned toward the sound, meeting the gaze of a scavenger who barely glanced at her before he kept moving.

When she looked back toward Oro, he was gone.

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ORO

Oro and his friends had been battling beast after beast for hours. The tide pool had ripped open the veil between worlds, allowing twisted creatures to come through.

The first had been serpentine, with claws, and a scaled tail so long, he couldn't see the end of it as it slithered out of the pool. Zed had flown Enya and Cinder to safety while Oro, Calder, and Maren stayed to fight.

It took an hour to get the beast down. And just as one creature was defeated . . . it was replaced by another. And another. They needed to close the portal. And soon.

Even though he had just seen the repercussions of using emotion to fuel his powers, Oro had no choice. The monsters were insurmountable otherwise.

When he had seen Isla . . . he had expected to feel fury. Hatred. But he didn't. All he felt was love—unrelenting, stubborn love, and he cursed himself for it. For his inability to forget her.

But then . . . after what she had said . . . He felt just as stuck as he did before she made her choice. All he wanted was to help her, but he was trapped a world away while Grim *hunted* her.

"FUCK!" In his distraction, a creature with claws the length of his body sliced his side, cutting right through his armor.

The metal was weighing him down anyway. In the air, he tore it off, watching the golden pieces spill into the water.

Now, he was angry. He was angry, because even now as his heart was breaking, the woman he loved *still wasn't safe*.

Fucking Grim. Oro knew that he loved her, maybe more than he loved himself. That only meant that Cronan must be more powerful than any of them had ever imagined. Powerful enough to have turned Grim against Isla.

Oro made a blade from Starling energy and cut the creature's claws clean off.

He shook his head. *Fucking. Grim*. Oro hated that he felt even a shred of worry for the Nightshade. But after spending so much time with him lately, it had been easy to forget all the betrayals between them.

So all Oro could do was worry and pick up the pieces that Isla and Grim had left behind. Only he and his friends stood between these beasts and the rest of this world. And, as Oro roared, diving back toward the raging creature, he wondered how long they would be able to hold.

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GRIM

It only took two nights to find her. He portaled all over this strange world until he finally spotted that unmissable crimson aura.

Did she really think she could hide from him?

She was disguised in the same desert fabrics the rest of the people in this tiny village wore. She wove seamlessly through the oasis market, not attracting any notice beyond a few people who gaped at her eyes.

They were the green of emeralds. Of serpents. Of deception. She moved like a snake herself, slithering around corners. He watched her, wondering what her next move would be. Wondering if she was truly foolish enough to think she could avoid him forever.

She turned a corner and finally spotted him.

To her credit, she didn't even look surprised. Or afraid. No, if anything, she seemed determined.

Fool. Did she really think even with those powers, she stood a chance against him?

He portaled directly in front of her—

Right into a dagger she had clearly found in this market, a twisted piece of metal that was now sticking out of his stomach. As if she had known exactly where he would portal, exactly how he would attack.

"I know you," she whispered, leaning in close. She twisted the dagger, and he growled at the shot of pain. Before he could strike her down, she was gone, darting through the market. There were gasps as the people around spotted him and the knife and the blood dripping down his front. He paid them no mind, his gaze locked on the fabrics she had worn that now fluttered through the air, the only remnant of her.

Blade still in his stomach, he followed her in a burst of shadows.

The witch fucking stabbed him. How could he have let that happen?

He should have snuck up on her and slit her throat before she even had a chance to see him. *He* was at an advantage here, he reminded himself. He could see her aura. He could portal. His shadows were far stronger than hers.

And he had learned something critical in this interaction—without a storm present, she was unable to use her powers. He wouldn't let her surprise him again.

There she was. He saw her, scurrying across the dunes, attempting to hide behind them.

With a snarl, he shot a shadow at her back and watched her fall. She slid through the desert with the force, sand sputtering, until she finally went still. Now was his chance.

He portaled to her with his shadows sharpened, ready to end her once and for all. But before he could, she fell through the sand as if swallowed.

And above, the sky swirled. He rolled his eyes. This ridiculous world with its storms that were called to any shred of power. Right now, this storm was called to his own.

His shadows seeped around him like spilled ink as he turned in all directions, searching for her. In a flash, she surfaced, surrounded by flames.

Right. She had Sunling powers because of Oro.

"He loves you," Grim snorted. "What a fool."

Her eyes blazed as intensely as the flames around her as she shot a stream of fire right toward him. His shadows raced forward to meet them. They converged in between them, hissing, creating a blinding silver light. "*You* love me," she replied, teeth gritted with effort, and he laughed.

"Do you feel any love, Wildling?" he said.

That devastated expression returned. He might not have felt anything other than aggravation toward her, but he could sense an all-encompassing love in her. He refused to believe it could be for him—it must have been for the Sunling king.

"My name . . ." she said, in ragged gasps, "is Isla." That aura of hers surged as she dug deeper into her powers. As those flames grew.

Isla. A name that sounded like the hiss of a snake. Fitting.

Her name didn't matter, though. She would be dead in mere moments.

He aimed another stream of shadows toward her, but she met it with a surge of silver, glimmering energy. Both of her arms were extended and

shaking. But she stood strong, in a stance not so different from his own.

Just as he was about to shoot forward, take her off guard and hope for an opening, the sky grumbled. Swirled.

She looked up. Her power didn't falter for a moment, but he felt it—the moment she was about to leap. She had used the portals to escape from him before.

Not this time.

A funnel dropped from the skies, as if drawn to her energy, and he shot forward, hitting her just as it swept them both away.

They catapulted through the air together, colliding and rolling, until they were released. Then, they were crashing onto soft snow instead of scraping sand. He landed on his back. She was atop him.

Her face was just an inch from his. Her lips parted, and his eyes tracked the movement. He swallowed, momentarily frozen. She was even prettier up close. Like this, he could see how full her mouth was, and all the shades of green in her eyes. He noticed a constellation of freckles across her nose.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life.

She was also his enemy.

His shadows wrapped around her throat, but she flew backwards before they could take hold.

Snow raged around them on this mountaintop, frost hitting his face. As he searched for her, Grim had portaled all across this world, and he had seen what Cronan had done to it. This place had been ripped to shreds. He had turned most of it to ash. The parts that remained were brutal. Dangerous.

This peak was no different. The mountain beneath them was constantly moving, breaking and reforming, freezing and unfreezing, as if it was trying to fit itself back together.

He lunged toward her, only for the ice beneath his feet to vanish. His shadows flared, turning to claws, keeping him grounded. She surrounded herself in flurries, rings of snow and wind and frost spinning around her, like she was a planet. Then she sent that ball of energy toward him, and his shadows barely blocked it.

"This reminds you of the Algid, doesn't it?" she said, through the roaring of the wind.

He frowned. How did she know about the Algid?

“You took me there,” she said, as if she could read his thoughts. The mountain crumbled beneath her, and she leapt into the air, forced to land closer to him. She shifted her stance, and water wrapped around him, freezing, pulling him toward her. He portaled out of it, and the ice fell, shattering against the snow. He appeared right behind her, but she was already turning, as if she anticipated where he would materialize. Their powers met once more. “You showed me the maze. You told me you used to hide there as a boy. Hoping never to be found.”

His eyes narrowed as his shadows surged forward, sending her feet sliding back across the peak. Why would he have ever told her that? Her? A *Wildling*? He stepped closer. Closer. Leading her to the edge. “You must have done a good job tricking me then.”

She shook her head. “You told me about your sister,” she said.

Those words made him stumble. That was impossible. There was *no chance* he had told her about Laila. He hadn’t told almost *anyone* about her. About . . . what he had done. He had spent centuries fighting hard not to think about it, burying it in the back of his mind.

“Liar,” he growled, though how would she know about his sister, then? Had she somehow gotten into his mind?

Or . . . had Oro told her? Of course. He had been foolish enough to trust the Sunling with that information in the few years when they had been friends.

“Yes, I am a liar,” she said, her blue-tinted, white-hot flames crackling against his shadows. “But not about this.”

The mountain between them crumbled away, and his hold on his shadows slipped. She saw the opening and took it. But instead of delivering a killing shot, she flew forward, right at him, knocking him onto his back. They slid against compact snow, and she was atop him again, pinning him down with her power. Freezing his shadows. His chest rose and fell against hers, her breath hot against his face, and he was confused by the chill that snaked down his spine.

She roughly removed the dagger that was still sticking out of his stomach from when she stabbed him in the oasis. He jolted from the pain and braced for another blow—maybe she’d slit his throat this time—but instead, like a smothered scream, the pain settled.

She could have killed him, right then and there. But instead. . . . she was healing him.

And that . . . that, he couldn't explain. Her eyes never left his. She must have seen his confusion there, because she smiled softly. "You showed me the licorice store," she whispered, her words coming out in clouds. Her long brown hair whipped in the wind against her cheeks, made pink from the cold. The snow was thick, whirling around them both, and it was almost like they were the only two people in this broken world. "You gave me hot chocolate when I was injured." Her eyes roamed his face, searching for something. "You took twelve arrows through the chest for me. You . . . you gave your *life* for me."

He shook his head, vehemently. "I would never do that," he spat, as his skin fully stitching together beneath her touch.

Her smile was sad. "You did it for me."

The moment his wound was healed, he closed his fist. She gasped, clutching her throat, as his shadows wrapped around her windpipe, crushing it. She was lifted off him, into the air. With more distance between them, he could finally breathe.

"Then I was a fool who deserved to die. I'm glad I don't remember," he said, rising. She fought hard against his hold, her expression twisted in rage. Her feet kicking wildly. He almost felt disappointed that a fire like hers would be smothered. He hadn't had a worthy opponent in centuries. Perhaps, never. It had been thrilling, dueling someone as skilled as she was.

He frowned at those thoughts. *Nothing* about her was worth praising. He went to snap her neck to end her for good, but a blizzard swept them both off the mountain, right into another storm portal.

They landed in a forest. The remnants of one, at least.

He heard the Wildling fighting for breath. Good. It would be easy to kill her now. He was relieved to almost be free of whatever curse she had put upon him. She was clearly dangerous—Cronan was right.

He took a step toward that gasping, choking sound—and the breath shot out of his lungs as he was launched through the forest. All those twisted, gnarled trees . . . they were hovering in the air, their roots ripped from the soil. And she was standing in the center of them all. Blood dripped from her nose. Her eyes narrowed in concentration.

She was using emotions as power.

Fine. Grim dropped the vise around his own.

His power surged, fed by the pain and regret of his past, of his worst mistakes. His long-buried memories.

But without that wall up, new emotions came to the surface too—like his curiosity. All his thoughts turned to this woman who had uprooted *an entire fucking forest*. Who was she?

Her eyes seemed to glow with power as she forced those trees together, forming a massive blade that she hurled right at him. She seemed to know that compacting her power would make it more likely to break through his shield of shadows.

Fascinating. As he watched the tree-spun blade approach, Grim almost let it take him down. It wouldn't be a bad way to die, at the mercy of the universe's most intriguing woman.

Then he turned that thought to ash. She was his enemy. She had been proving everything Cronan had said right.

Grim transformed himself into shadows, the roar of the hundred compressed trees passing through his body. When it crashed behind him in a ground-shuddering thud, and she was temporarily spent, he flew toward her, knocking her down. With her pinned, he reached for his sharpened shades to skewer them through her chest.

But the moment his shadows touched her, something strange happened.

A force ignited between them, splitting the storm above them in half. And as a bolt of lighting struck them both, Grim was plunged into a moment in her mind. A *memory*.

A bloodied battlefield. Countless dreks falling through the sky. Then him, on his knees, roaring in agony. Not from a physical pain, though. From her, lying lifeless in his arms.

He jolted away from her, but not quickly enough. They were both sucked through a portal in the tempest, then roughly deposited onto a beach that once must have been glorious but was now just a craggy shore.

In his shock at the memory, he didn't catch himself before he slid against the rough sand. Isla landed in the water.

She did not surface.

She must have gone unconscious, he thought. Good. The ocean could put an end to this for him.

But that vision flashed in his head again. The pure and utter pain he saw across his face.

There was clearly something more to this than Cronan let on. There had to be a reason for his actions. And if she died . . . that explanation would die with her. As much as he wanted to claim Infinite for himself, he wanted answers more.

Grim stepped into the shallows. From here, he could see her body floating just beneath the surface. She was in his arms in a moment. Her head lolled to the side as he carried her toward shore. This was the first time he had seen her so still, and she looked almost peaceful.

He brushed a wet strand of hair off her face and portaled them both back to Cronan.

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ORO

Oro hadn’t been asleep long when he was thrown out of bed by a violent crash. He had returned home after the creatures had finally stopped coming through the portal, at his friends’ insistence that they could handle anything that broke through while he got some rest. But this felt like something had hit the castle.

Pain lanced through him and as Oro gasped for air, clutching his chest, he realized it felt like something had hit the *island*.

Immediately, he was out his balcony doors. Zed joined him in the night sky seconds later. They both turned—

And stared.

Oro had never seen his friend stunned into silence until now. It took several moments before the Skyling was able to utter the words, “What the hell is that?”

The sky was being ripped open by what appeared to be massive teeth, as large and jagged as cliffs tearing through the night. A flash of lightning revealed the body that the teeth belonged to.

“Fuck,” Oro breathed.

It was unlike the other beasts they had battled at the shoreline. This creature was as large as a mountain range, covered in obsidian scales. It blocked the stars, creating what looked like an eternal night.

It flew, but Oro couldn’t make out any wings. Then he felt the pulsing energy that wrapped around it. And when its teeth parted, a scream cleaved the skies in half. Rain fell as if the beast commanded the elements itself.

Oro’s first thought was to be glad that he hadn’t moved the rest of the realms back to the island, though some Nightshades remained on the isles. But that notion died at the realization that it wouldn’t take this creature long to reach the newlands.

He shot toward it. Zed flew past him, moving so quickly, he became a streak of daylight sky in the heart of night.

Crackling wings soon joined Oro—Enya, with fire curling from her back. He felt a surge of guilt, and relief, seeing her. It had taken two days for her to get back to her former energy. After he . . . he nearly . . .

“It’s still above the water,” Enya said, bringing his focus back to the beast. “Let’s try to keep it there.”

Oro nodded. He couldn’t succumb to misery. Not now. They soared forward—and were stopped by another sky-splitting roar. This one was accompanied by a ripple of energy that sent Oro hurtling back. Enya’s wings nearly went out completely.

The beast . . . it could manipulate energy.

Beneath it, the ocean began to churn, forming a wave. And atop it was Calder, his arms moving in smooth, practiced movements as the water broke free, rising into the shape of a massive dagger.

Calder’s seablade was as large as the creature itself. His friend’s arms shook as he managed to turn it, forming dozens of jagged ice spikes along its side.

Calder swung, but the beast pulsed another beam of energy from its entire body that made that blade implode. Calder disappeared beneath the waves, the sea pulling him under.

Calder was Moonling—Oro knew that he would find his way out of the water. But dread sunk through Oro’s chest as he watched the creature’s attention shift down, toward the ocean, as if it was searching for Calder. Tracking his energy. Oro hurtled toward them. He needed to get there before—

The beast lunged.

Then roared as Zed flew circles around it, daggers carving through the creature as he went. He moved so quickly that moments later, long lines of its scales had been shredded. The Skyling was too fast for the beast to catch. And it seemed to require a few moments in between emitting blasts of energy.

Zed had given them an opening. Oro shot forward, unleashing a torrent of flames. Enya did the same from the opposite side. They both released an inferno between them, and the creature bellowed.

Enya’s wings lengthened as she spun in the air, her wings merging to create a single beam like a sword, made of the strongest fire. She cut right through the creature, and it roared again. It swiped at her and blindly shot out energy, but she didn’t falter. She kept spinning and digging in, her wings piercing deep, as Oro kept launching his own streams of flame through its weak points. The beast tried to move, to escape, but Zed kept it still with a massive wall of wind.

Just when Oro thought it was nearly over, he noticed the beast’s scales glimmering. Changing. Filling with the slightest tint of silver.

“Move!” he yelled—just before the creature unleashed another explosion of stored energy, this one far greater than the rest. The surge hit Oro and nearly knocked him out of the sky. He surrounded himself in a Starling shield at the last minute.

Enya tried to shield herself in a ball of flame. But when that energy struck her—her flames went out. So did her wings.

And she was falling.

Calder emerged from the waves, rising toward her. Zed soared from the side, Oro close behind him. Between the three of them, she would be fine.

But before they could catch her, the creature turned, shot through the air —

And swallowed her whole.

No.

Oro’s entire world fractured as he bellowed, his devastation surrounding him in flames and ice and energy and wind. He flew straight toward the creature, dodging as it tried to swing its tail at him.

He didn’t attack its scales this time. Surrounded by blue-tinged flames, Oro crashed right through its armor and spine and innards, until he saw a wisp of red hair.

He didn’t dare hope. He didn’t dare breathe as he caught her, as he wrapped her in his protective fire, as he shot all the way up through the creature, out through its teeth, with Enya in his arms.

He looked down. And she was staring up at him.

Alive.

Somehow . . . she was alive.

“You didn’t die,” he said, in disbelief.

She scowled. “I could have told you that.”

Oro turned in time to see the creature jolt once, letting out a strangled roar. Then, it fell.

It was so large that half of it crashed into the sea, and the other half crushed a forest, turning a cliff to dust.

Oro landed on the beach, in front of the hole he had made in the monster. He could almost see all the way through it. Enya slipped from his arms as Zed touched down nearby. Calder used a wave for passage, joining them.

Zed sighed, deeply. “Wow, Enya,” he said. “I really thought that was how you went.”

Enya gave the Skyling a sidelong look. “Did you really think my glorious death was in a beast’s stomach?”

Zed shrugged a shoulder. “Sounds pretty glorious to me.”

Enya huffed. “Trust me. My death is far better than that.”

Oro couldn’t even focus on their words, or on his relief to have slain this creature. He was too horrified by the creature itself. It could *control power*.

He looked to the sky, as if he could see all the way to Isla and will her to return before there was another attack. If this kept happening . . . he didn’t know if the island would survive it.

All he could do was hope that she was on her way.

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GRIM

“Why isn’t she dead?” Cronan asked, as Grim walked back into the room with the stars beyond the ceiling.

“I decide when she dies,” Grim said. He expected his ancestor to lash out, but Cronan only smiled.

“Perhaps my line has not weakened after all,” he said, “if you have the gall to stand up to me.”

Grim looked pointedly at his broken crown, now back on his head. “Don’t concern yourself with *my* strength.”

Above, the galaxies swirled as darkness grew between them.

“Careful,” his ancestor said. His eyes narrowed as he looked him over, and Grim felt those shadows breach his mind again. They retreated quickly, though. “You don’t care about her. So why keep her alive?”

“I think she can be useful yet.” Useful against *him*. Grim kept that part to himself.

“How so?”

“She is powerful.” Grim saw that power in action when they dueled. “I think she can be convinced to join us.”

Cronan shook his head. “I tried, but it was pointless. She can’t be manipulated or broken.”

“Let me try,” Grim said.

“You think you can succeed where I couldn’t?”

Grim shrugged a shoulder. “She cares about me. I can use that against her. It shouldn’t be much effort.”

What Grim needed was time. Time to learn more about what Cronan’s plans were . . . and what Grim was going to do about them.

“You’re underestimating her,” Cronan said. “Her flair is absorption. Within her lives the power of everyone she has ever killed.”

Grim frowned. She was more powerful than he had thought. “That makes her even more useful.”

“Yes. She would be the ultimate weapon, if controlled.” His ancestor’s head tilted. “She could be useful in other ways too . . .”

“How so?” Grim asked.

Cronan turned to him, his eyes gleaming. “A child between the two of you would be the greatest heir to have ever lived.”

A child? Grim had never wanted children because of the very tradition Cronan had started, where only the strongest heir survived. And . . . a child with *her*? Never. But he didn’t tell Cronan that. He would indulge him in his delusions. He said nothing, letting his ancestor prattle on.

“I myself was the child of two great powers . . .” he said, his eyes going flat, as if he was lost in some distant corner of his mind. He blinked, and the full weight of his stare returned. “Very well. She lives . . . for now. Let’s see if she can be swayed.”

Grim sighed as Cronan passed him. He didn’t know why he felt so relieved, like a knot within him had loosened. “Come.” Cronan led Grim to the center of the room. He motioned at the ceiling, which Cronan had pieced back together in the time that he was gone.

“This is what I have collected throughout my lifetime. Some of the most powerful planets in the universe. United. Under me. Under *us*,” he said, smirking at Grim. “These are the worlds I let live . . . for they have their uses. They are led by those who chose to bow, instead of fight. Together, they form my Astral Council.”

Grim stared blankly at the planets. He didn’t really care. He had no desire to be part of any more fucking councils. The meetings he attended with his own court were tiresome enough.

But he feigned interest as his ancestor kept speaking. “I’ve conquered much of this galaxy already. But there are more. And to get the rest . . . I need something.”

“The diamond?” Grim asked.

“Yes,” Cronan admitted. The galaxy above was overcome by a dark void, matching the cloud of irritation that surrounded his ancestor. “And more. Your world sits between two galaxies. My Astral Council and I can

only access it by going through your planet. The diamond cast me out. I need it to let me back in, so we can feed on that next frontier.” Above, the stars glimmered. “But that is not my only ambition. There is a place where all worlds meet. A place that would allow me to conquer the entire universe, every galaxy. But to access it . . . I need a key.”

“A key?”

Cronan nodded. “A choice I made once long ago kept me from it. I need to either go back and change things . . . or find another key throughout the universe. And then, only the diamond can make me powerful enough to link all worlds together. Into one world. One universe. And I will rule them all.”

Go back in time. Just a few days prior, he had helped Oro go back in time. With an artifact he brought with him. He didn’t remember what he was supposed to do with it, though.

All he knew now was that Cronan was clearly wary of trusting anyone. If Grim was going to stay a while, his ancestor would eventually find out anything he had in his possession without disclosing it.

Better to earn Cronan’s trust now.

“Then it sounds like you need this,” Grim said. He reached into his pocket—and pulled out a pile of threads.

Cronan’s eyes widened in unfiltered surprise. “The Threads of Time,” he whispered in awe. The entire room trembled with the energy that came off him in waves. “Where did you find it?” he demanded.

“Underwater.”

Cronan grabbed it from his hand like a greedy child, and golden light spilled between his fingers. The threads uncurled, as if reunited with an old friend. Instantly, they shot into his skin. Only one remained visible, pressed against his palm.

He turned to Grim with pure satisfaction splashed across his face. “Now all I need is the Pool of Possibilities.”

Grim just blinked at him.

“An ancient source of knowledge,” he explained. “It knows all. It has seen all. Those who are allowed to bathe within it can see every possible outcome to any choice in the past. With it, I can run through millions of scenarios to see which one would have left me with the key.” Cronan sighed deeply. The stars above seemed to breathe with him. “The pool shows us the way. The Threads of Time will help us go back and change anything

needed. And the Infinite diamond . . . it will give us the amplification of power to shape the universe to our will."

Grim didn't know how to feel. The world had been cruel to him, that was certain. Did it matter to him if it ended, beyond the survival of his own people? He wasn't sure. As he watched Cronan revel in his power, he didn't know if he cared enough to stop him.

His entire life, he had been weighed down by duty and the fierce need for his realm to survive. Beyond care for his people . . . there was a void within him. He had the strangest feeling that something had been there once, something else worth fighting for.

Cronan wanted his line to continue on, for his legacy to be unstoppable. It was another way of making himself eternal. Yet Cronan was alone. Unfeeling. He had nothing truly to live *for*, simply the desire to gain as much power as possible. It seemed like a sad existence.

His head snapped toward Grim. "I think it's time for a little reunion. Bring in the Wildling."

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ISLA

Isla woke up shivering. She was soaking wet, dripping onto a familiar cold stone floor. Her eyes flew open—

And met Lark's, across the dark cell.

"Interesting how history repeats itself, little Wildling," she croaked, smirking. Isla blinked, frowning at the soreness of her muscles and bones. "I watched your husband throw you in here like you were no more than a sack of grain."

Isla swallowed, pain flaring again. It all came rushing back. Nearly defeating Cronan. Summoning Grim. Then . . . what had happened afterward.

Isla remembered dueling Grim in the forest . . . and being pulled into a portal . . . but nothing after that. She must have passed out. Grim easily could have killed her then . . .

Why hadn't he?

Isla tried not to cling to the hope of what that might mean. Especially as Lark said smugly, "He's just keeping you alive for leverage. It's obvious. Then he'll be back to finish the job."

"And that will make you happy?" Isla snapped. "Your heir, dying? Cronan, winning?"

Lark gave her a withering look. "The day you die is when I'll feel my last shred of happiness." She scowled. "The only death that would make me happier would be his."

Her ancestor leaned forward, but Isla still couldn't fully see her in the darkness. "So, now that your *husband*"—she spat the word with utter disdain—"doesn't remember you . . . I imagine you regret everything."

No. Isla had to have faith that everything would be righted in the end, and that they would find their way back to each other. She clutched the

necklace with her cold fingers. The fact that he didn't remember their memories didn't make them any less real. Loving Grim had changed her, and that was all the proof she needed. He pushed her to be stronger, never treating her like she was made of glass. He never flinched away from even her darkest parts.

She couldn't lose hope. He hadn't killed her. And that had to mean something.

It wasn't long before Grim was in front of the cell again. A million moments hung between them, like stars strung on their own galaxy, a constellation of memories. But he just looked at her like she was nothing. Lark laughed, a bitter croaking sound that echoed through the cell, as he opened the door and dragged Isla out.

There was no affection in his touch. His grip was punishing. He barely spared her a glance.

"*Grim*," she said. He had to have heard the way his name was so familiar on her tongue. But he said nothing as he pulled her through the dank, silent tunnels of the dungeon.

"You—you're the man I fell in love with. This isn't you. You would never do this. Why do you think you're here in the first place?"

"*Silence*," he snarled, his grip tightening, and the words died in her throat.

She would show him, prove to him, that their love was worth saving. She just needed to get him to *listen*.

"He's going to kill me," she said quickly as they reached the end of the hall, wondering if the idea of her death, which had made him bind himself to her, would bring the memories back.

But his look was blank as he said, "*I'm* going to kill you. But not yet."

Then, he shoved her into the blinding light of the castle.

He held both of her hands behind her back in just one of his own as he steered her down another hall. That touch that used to be so soft, and used to make chills ripple down her arms, now felt like walking the edge of a cliffside.

She was never in the castle corridors this late in the day and was surprised to see it bustling. Cronan was not alone here as she had thought. They passed not only faceless knights in their altered shademade armor but

also swaths of people dressed in strange, otherworldly clothing in a variety of glistening shades.

They looked dressed for celebration . . . was something happening?

Most were caught up in conversations and didn't even notice her walking by. But a man wearing scaled green fabrics watched her and smirked. He had pale skin and hair cut close to his scalp. He had the air of a man used to being bowed to. She felt his energy reach out, almost tasting her, and she nearly vomited. If she had full access to her powers, she would have incinerated him where he stood.

But she didn't, and she was dragged through the hall until the tall doors of the galaxy room were opened, and then she was pushed inside.

Cronan was waiting, his back to her. He was looking up at his domed ceiling, at all the worlds he had conquered. From this angle, his crown pointed at her like a dozen daggers.

Part of it was noticeably broken, as if he hadn't gotten all the pieces to fit.

His voice echoed through her as he said, "My progeny has convinced me you still have more use. And it's true that you still have something I need . . . I was going to pick it off your corpse, but now . . ."

He turned, and she was pulled by an invisible source straight toward him. Her heels screamed against the polished floor as she tried to fight it. When she almost reached him, she was thrust onto the ground. Her head bounced off the cold marble, her hair puddling around her. She gasped, seeing a flash of light, before her vision slowly bled back into that black expanse above, dotted with those glimmering planets.

Cronan approached slowly until he was right above her. Only then did she feel herself go taut, fully under his control. Her arm lifted sharply, toward the ceiling, as though she was no more than a puppet.

Then her mother's charm slithered up from the cover of her sleeve.

No.

"Yes," he hissed, his voice pure satisfaction. "I saw this in your mind, before you attacked me . . . I'm certain you thought I wouldn't live to use it."

The charm her mother had left her, full of her flair—the ability to see the future. The silver woman had told Isla to look, to see the two paths she

could have taken, but she hadn't listened. *She should have listened*. And now she'd lost the chance to forever.

Cronan broke the chain and plucked the charm clean off. The rest of the metal fell onto the floor, useless. He snapped the rest onto his crown, and it melted into the metal, fusing completely.

Gone. Her mother's power . . . her only gift . . . it was *gone*.

Cronan jolted, his posture rigid, his eyes changing. Transforming. His irises slid back into his skull. Slowly, his lips turned into a sickening smile.

All at once, shadow and smoke swallowed the room as illusions swept through it.

She saw herself. Standing in front of Grim. Smiling. Telling him she loved him.

Then plunging an unfamiliar blade through his heart. She watched as his face drained of color, as crimson pooled on the ground below him, as he collapsed against her, knee to knee.

Isla's blood roared. She fought the urge to be sick. Tears stung her eyes.

The shadows cleared, and Isla saw Grim standing behind Cronan, glaring at her with even more hatred than before. She tried to protest, to explain, but her throat was constricted. She couldn't move.

Cronan set a hand on Grim's shoulder. The two of them next to each other looked like a ruinous pair, with unmatched power. Isla could feel any last hope in convincing Grim of their love story vanish as Cronan said, "You see, this is your future. She *will* kill you. She will be the end of this dynasty. She must die. Unless . . ."

The smoke cracked like a whip, swept toward the ceiling, then changed. Isla saw herself again. But this time, she was plunging that very same blade into Oro's heart. She watched the light fade in his amber eyes.

Bile crawled up her throat, and she nearly choked on it.

"Unless she joins us. Unless she throws away all loyalties to her previous life and helps us reshape the universe . . . together."

At once, the illusion broke, and she was forced to her feet.

Cronan turned to address her now. "Your world will fall. I've already decided it. Everyone will die." He said it lightly, casually even, but Isla didn't miss the almost imperceivable fold that formed between Grim's brows.

He didn't know. He thought Cronan would spare his people.

Her gaze flicked back to Cronan's. "My council and I will travel through to the next galaxy, where endless power and more planets await. You have a chance at joining us at greatness, at being part of an unprecedented legacy . . . and being with the man you love." He said the word like it was a joke. "But only if you surrender yourself to me." He motioned toward his crown, and in a moment, it shifted into a halo of bones. As if it was made up of dozens of skeletal pieces.

"Offer me a bone . . . and you agree to serve me for eternity," he said. It wasn't an offer he had made before, when he had tried to simply melt down her mind.

He seriously believed she would actually consider joining him.

Cronan had invaded every crevice of her brain. He had to have known how unlikely it was that she would align with him. In a flash, his shadows shot through her head, sinking through her skull. He spoke directly into her mind as he said, *This is the only way you'll be able to stay with your husband. He's here now, with me. Forever. If you truly loved him the way you said . . . this choice should be easy*.

He was out of her head a moment later, the sockets of her eyes burning with the momentary invasion.

"You have three weeks to make your decision. That's when I take your world, and everything in it," Cronan said, and his crown became metal once more. His shadows swept toward her again, and she braced for the now familiar burst of pain. But instead, they slid down the curve of her skull, caressing her hair in a mocking reminder of what he could do with little thought. "I'll know what you've decided."

Deception was impossible, with him. If she planned against him during this time, he would know.

He released her from his hold, and she fell roughly to her knees. She heard Cronan leaving the room as the metal-plated arms of two knights hauled her up. They dragged her toward the doors.

She fought to catch her husband's gaze before she left, but he was turned away from her, facing the remnants of that vision, as if he was frozen.

"*Grim*—" she said. The doors slammed between them, smothering her explanation.

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GRIM

Even long after the Wildling was dragged from the room, Grim couldn't bring himself to move. There were still wisps of smoke in the air, tatters of the futures that charm had displayed. Only the blade that stabbed through his heart was still whole . . .

The fact that the charm had held the future was fascinating, but clearly the bracelet meant something to the Wildling beyond its power. Her aura had practically extinguished with sadness as it had been ripped away. It must have had sentimental value.

Just more evidence of the woman's foolishness.

"Taking away your memories was a gift," Cronan said as he reentered the room. Grim blinked, wondering how long he had been standing there, watching. Attendants scurried in, their eyes blank as they began setting up for what looked like a dinner.

Cronan joined his side. "I've done you a favor. Mistakes in your past are why that future is even a possibility." He felt the weight of Cronan's hand settle on his shoulder. Grim clenched his jaw. He didn't like to be touched.

"I've given you a second chance at life." He looked down at the Threads of Time in his hands. "Just like you've given me a second chance. Because of this, we can both correct the mistakes of our pasts."

Our pasts. Grim wondered what mistake Cronan had made. Why he was doing all of this.

He also remembered what Cronan had said. He was going to destroy their world, and everyone in it. Even Nightshade.

Grim wouldn't sit around and let that happen. But it was clear his ancestor was powerful. He had only three weeks to figure out a way to stop him.

Cronan was oblivious to Grim's thoughts, when he wasn't piercing his mind with shadows. He didn't feel a whisper of suspicion from his ancestor. Only a flicker of satisfaction and . . . hope. "While you were hunting her down, did you happen across a silver pool?" Cronan asked.

He didn't wait for a response. In a flash, his shadows surged, and Grim felt them pierce his mind. His own darkness lashed out in defense, forcing Cronan's shadows from his skull. Grim bared his teeth at his ancestor in fury.

Cronan only pursed his lips, seeming unbothered. "No, you didn't . . ." Cronan started pacing. "I want you to search for it. The pool has purposefully hidden itself from me, but perhaps, it will reveal itself to you."

Grim forced himself to nod. It was all he could do not to wrap his shadows around his ancestor's throat. But to gather all the information he could, Cronan needed to believe him deferential—willing to enact all his plans, the same way Grim had for his father.

"What if she's seen it?" Grim asked.

Cronan shook his head. "I've been through her entire mind. I would have known."

Grim was foolish enough to feel a bite of sympathy for the Wildling. That one instant of Cronan's shadows in his brain had felt worse than some torture he'd endured. Cronan had only gone through a few days' worth of Grim's memories. A lifetime?

How had she not broken yet?

No. He refused to feel sympathy for the woman who would be his downfall. He had seen it with his own eyes. She was destined to kill him. He didn't care that there was another equally possible future.

As long as she existed, she was as much of a threat to him and his realm as Cronan.

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ISLA

Isla sat with her back against the damp wall of her cell. Cronan had given her an impossible choice. Join them . . . or die. Choose to abandon her world and all its people. Choose to kill Oro instead of her husband, who didn't even remember her and was actively trying to *kill her*.

Or take her last breath here, by Cronan's hands.

Neither option saved the people she loved. She had traveled here for more options, for more chances at survival. To bring back those she had lost. To save herself.

She wished she could forget how hopeful she felt when she had finally seen Grim crash into the galaxy room. He had been there to save her, and together, they would have saved everyone.

Now all that foolish hope had been extinguished. She pressed her lips against a sob.

"Finally realized that no one is coming to save you?"

Lark. Her voice was a scratch along the stone wall. Air wheezed through her words, as if her throat was still gaping.

Isla said nothing.

Lark managed a scoff. "It took me years to lose hope. But I suppose it's foolish to expect anything resembling strength from you."

Her ancestor's words sank right through her armorless skin.

Without waiting for a reply, Lark continued, "You think this cell is bad?" Her laugh was half-crazed. "Imagine being buried miles below ground."

At that, Isla's head snapped up. "I don't have to imagine. *You* buried me."

"That was *nothing* compared to my tomb." Her green eyes glowed through the dark. "You were there for mere *days*. I was imprisoned for thousands of years. In metal that was molded to my body so that I didn't

even have an inch to move or breathe. No power. No light. *Nothing* but the darkness."

Isla swallowed. As hopeless as she felt in this moment . . . she couldn't imagine that existence. Unable to die. Death, in that state, would have been a mercy.

"The only thing that kept me going was the promise of vengeance," she continued. "And now . . . look at me."

Lark was ancient, and unbelievably powerful. Isla had seen everything she was capable of. "So why haven't you at least tried to break out yet?"

Her ancestor turned to her, catching the sliver of moonlight coming in from far above. Isla swallowed. Lark's face was half-gone. One of her eyes was hanging where her ear should have been. Her throat was in tatters. Her chest was gaping open, her organs shoved crudely together. "Does it look like I'm capable of breaking out of anything?"

Isla took a shaking breath. Her ancestor's condition was worsening.

Anything can be broken. Even Lark, it seemed.

"Why can't you break through his hold on your powers?" Isla demanded. If only they could find a way to reclaim their abilities, they might be able to escape. Together, they might be able to stop him.

Lark shook her head. "You don't understand. Cronan's tie to this world is deep rooted."

"But you're from this world, too," Isla countered.

"Yes, but this is not the same world I left," Lark said. "I've been away for thousands of years. And in that time, Cronan has poisoned it against everyone but him."

"Is that why Grim can use his abilities?" Isla asked. "Because of his bloodline?"

"Perhaps. Or because Cronan allows it . . . though that would be a surprise." Lark sank back into the shadows. "Cronan controls everything in this world, isn't it clear? He is woven into its very fabric."

Isla was starting to understand Lark's anger when she had realized where she had brought them to.

"Except for the storms," Isla said.

Lark grunted. "He cannot control some of the other worlds that filter in. At least, not yet."

That meant Cronan had a gap, a weakness. If he had a way to stop these storms, he would have by now, wouldn't he? Whatever he had done to the universe had clearly damaged it, causing rips between worlds.

With that, Lark stopped speaking.

Cronan said the diamond was still resisting him . . . and that he had been locked out of her world. Clearly, something was fighting his hold. Something was *winning*. Which meant perhaps there was a chance at stopping him.

As soon as that hope formed . . . it withered.

There were only three weeks left until Cronan was going to consume her world. She was powerless, trapped in a cell with the woman who had nearly destroyed everything she loved, and her husband had been turned against her. She was alone.

How would she possibly stop what seemed inevitable?

Curled in the back of her cell, in this endless darkness, she tried to remember the light. To remember why it was so important to keep fighting.

She closed her eyes and saw that silver pool, like a mirror in her mind. She stepped into the water and saw memories that were like pockets of sunshine, hidden in the back of her head.

She was in a forest of wildflowers, fields of color that she had created. She was learning to control the tidal wave of power behind her ribs. To use it to create life. He had taught her.

Him. She turned to the side and found gold hair and amber eyes and glittering armor right next to her. He was showing her how to turn ash into seedlings. Darkness into light. Her own fears into strength.

Cynicism into hope . . . and hatred into friendship. Into more.

That was always their power, wasn't it? Reshaping hard things into shared weight that they carried together.

She could talk to him, and he would listen. He was patient and kind, the truest friend she had ever known. As she saw him in her memory, she wished now, more than ever, that she could still count on that friendship.

I'm lost, she said in her own mind. *I'm buried in darkness*.

And in the quiet trenches of her despair, a voice echoed back, like a hand pulling her to the surface.

Find your fire, it said. And it was *his* voice. She didn't know if he had somehow heard her plea across the universe, or if he was saying the words

to himself, but she took them. She took them like embers she could feed to the nearly extinguished flame in her chest.

Find your fire.

He had seen her do it before. He had seen her lost and found again. He had seen her at her lowest—and at her best.

She had endured so much to get here. And she thought about how it all would have been for nothing if her story ended here, in a cell on a ruined world. She had survived plenty of hard things before, and she could do it again.

Anything can be broken.

Cronan was wrong. She would not flicker out, like a forgotten fire. She would not become another world that Cronan plundered and left hollow.

She would find her fire. She would ignite.

And when she did, Cronan would burn.

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ORO

Oro sighed when he saw her.

“First my dreams . . . must you haunt my waking hours too?” His voice was gruff. “How are you doing this, by the way?” He had just gotten back to his throne room after a meeting with his friends and Maren. Cinder was needed in the defense against the beasts from the portal, and some days, she was the only reason any of them were still alive.

But they couldn’t keep doing this. They needed help.

It was only then that he realized he needed Grim to get it. And now that he was gone . . .

But Oro forgot all of that when he saw Isla—part of him felt a sharp longing at the sight of her, as if his mind hadn’t fully understood that she had left him. She didn’t answer his question.

“How is Grim?” he asked, tightly.

She closed her eyes at the sound of his name, as if the reminder of him hurt, but she quickly buried the emotion. “The same.”

Before he could ask more, she was speaking again. “Cronan thinks he can turn me to his side,” she said. “He’s going to destroy our world in three weeks, Oro.”

He cursed. The worst part was he didn’t even know if their island would survive three more weeks of the beasts’ attacks.

She must have seen the dread on his face, because her expression twisted with concern.

“Are you—are you okay?” She leaned forward, as if she could somehow reach him.

A wave of defensiveness rose within him. “Do you think I’m okay, Isla?” Fire flickered around him.

Now that he was using emotions to wield—something he had warned Isla against so many times—his felt unmoored. Sometimes he wondered whether his feelings were fueling his powers, or his powers were controlling his emotions.

Her mouth tightened. She had the decency, at least, to look regretful. The concern didn't leave her eyes as she studied him, though, and he wondered what she saw. "You've changed."

He stood from his flaming throne and strode toward her. He felt his skin ignite. The floor around him burned. "If I've changed," he said, "it's because you changed me."

Her eyes widened, glistening with unshed tears.

And that made this new, uncontrollable rage within him flame. "I wish I never met you," he said. "I really do."

A tear slipped down her cheek.

Oro just shook his head. Usually, he would bury these words and feelings down, but they all spilled out of him, messy and raw. "I wish I never met you, because even after everything . . . I still. Fucking. Want. *You*," he said, and he felt ready to sink to his knees, as if he could beg her to release him from this bond.

"Even if you don't want me too. Even if you kill me. I realize now . . . there is nothing that could make me not love you. And I am afraid of what that love will lead to."

The flames around him roared higher. Soon, the room was full of them. He stood at the center of it all, in front of the woman who still had his heart, even though she was the one who had broken it.

He closed his eyes, and when he couldn't see her, he finally got a hold of these feelings. He swallowed, taking a breath. Trying to shove it all down, until he could speak more clearly.

His voice was softer now. "I can't save us from this," he admitted. "You're right. I'm not myself. Our world deserves better than me. But there's no one else."

He opened his eyes again, and she gasped. He guessed they had changed again. He didn't really care. His newly changing eyes were the least of his worries.

But Isla did not look afraid, not like his friends did. Instead of turning away, she moved closer, toward the flames—toward him.

She reached out and took his blazing hand, like she wasn’t afraid of getting burned.

And he could feel her as if she was truly right in front of him. A force jolted through his blood at that touch, and it was undeniable. Something still existed between them, a bridge that remained on both sides.

She squeezed. “You are lost . . .” she said. “And I’m so sorry that I did this to you. But you are still the noblest, strongest person I have ever met,” she said. “I see it now, even if you don’t. No storm can uproot you. No tide can unmoor you. I will remind you. Just as you reminded me.”

Oro remembered those days, trying to train Isla in powers he himself had never wielded. He had been the picture of control for centuries. And now, he was splitting at the seams. Breaking when the world needed him most.

He winced. He didn’t want to lose control. He didn’t want all of this and his ancestors’ sacrifices to be for nothing.

She squeezed his hands. “Don’t look at the past,” she said. “Look at me.” He did. And he fell into endless green. His spring. His summer. His life. His love.

She might not be his ever again, but he would always be hers.

Slowly, the fire around them dimmed. The flames coating his skin fell away. Until it was just them, clutching hands. “You are strong. Never forget.”

Oro watched her gaze drop to his wrist, where he kept her golden rose necklace wrapped around and around, against his pulse. It was his most prized possession. Her lips parted, before she blinked. “What do you need?” she asked. “What can I do?” She said it even as she sat in a cell, imprisoned, on a different world.

Oro focused on calming his breathing, his pulse settling, and that was when he realized there was, possibly, something she could help him with.

“Your portaling device. Do you know where it is?” He needed it to warn the newlands and get help to fight against the beasts.

She frowned, as if trying to remember. It had only been days, but it felt like so much longer. “Lark had it,” she finally said. “Neither of you found it?”

Oro shook his head.

She looked to her side. Oro wondered what she saw. “Let me see what I can do.”

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ISLA

Isla couldn’t pretend that telling her where the starstick was would benefit Lark at all. But maybe . . . maybe there was something else Lark wanted.

“What do you want?” Isla said. “Name your price.”

Lark looked over at her. “Cronan’s heart, on a platter.”

“I’m working on it,” Isla said. “What else?”

Lark considered. She took a deep, rattling breath. Silence stretched, and Isla wondered if her ancestor would refuse to answer in immortal stubbornness. But then she spoke. “My feather,” she said.

The object Lark had used to store her abilities. The feather Isla had found in Aurora’s room.

“It’s here,” Lark continued. “Your *husband* has it. I can feel it.”

Isla winced, thinking about the last time she had seen Grim, hours before. He had made it overtly clear what he thought of her.

But Oro wouldn’t have asked about the starstick if he didn’t desperately need it. The beasts were only coming through because he and Grim had opened the portal to save her.

“I’ll get it for you,” Isla promised.

As Grim steered her through the dungeon hours later, it seemed like he was trying to stand as far away from her as possible. It wasn’t hard to wonder why. He had seen his destiny as clearly as she had.

But if she was going to have a chance at defeating Cronan, and if she was going to get that feather, she needed Grim to be on her side. If it was impossible for him to regain his lost memories . . . then they would have to create new ones.

When they had first met, they had both been in prisons. She was locked in her Wildling room, trapped by the role she had been born into and by her

powerlessness. He couldn’t escape his duty to his people and his monstrous reputation.

Somehow, together, they had broken free.

That same Grim who fell in love with her was somewhere in there. And wasn’t this just the truest test of love? Seeing if they would be able to fall for each other, again and again?

During the Centennial, even with her memories erased, she had started to have feelings for him. She had to believe he could do the same.

She wouldn’t accept the deal Cronan offered. She’d find another way. She wasn’t leaving here without her husband.

“Your hope is pathetic,” Grim snarled, his deep voice rumbling through the tunnels of the dungeons.

“It isn’t,” she whispered. “You will find your way back to me. I know it.”

At that, he whirled her around so she was facing him. They were at the end of the tunnel, and light poured through, illuminating his face. It was clean—hers was covered in a layer of grime.

He gripped the front of her shirt and dragged her before him so they were just inches apart. But there was absolutely nothing loving about the movement. He bared his teeth and said, “You are nothing to me. You are *no one*.”

Her mouth tightened as she fought to keep her gaze steady against the words coming from his mouth. “That’s—that’s not true. Just because you don’t remember, doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“Is that so? Tell me—what happened? Why are you so desperate to convince me you care for me when you’re going to kill me?” His eyes searched hers almost desperately. And Isla realized it had nothing to do with her or their love. It was an urge to understand.

Of course. Part of his mind was missing. He must want to know what it contained.

She opened her mouth. Closed it. She didn’t know how to convince him that he had known that she might kill him but still came to save her anyway. He was right to doubt it. Their love didn’t make sense. It never had.

But that didn’t mean it wasn’t real and worth fighting for.

At her silence, Grim looked her over with nothing short of disgust. “Right. Forgive me for not taking kindly to my future murderer,” he said.

With that, he dragged her into the halls of the castle. But instead of going straight toward the galaxy room, they made a turn. He shoved her into an unfamiliar room. “Get her ready,” he snapped at someone behind her, before slamming the door closed.

Isla sighed and dropped her head. If he would just *listen* to her . . .

She turned around, only to be met with five beautiful women with skin that glistened like smeared starlight. Their limbs were long and lithe. They reminded Isla a little bit of the forest wraiths, but without the claws or fangs.

“Who are you?” Isla asked, stepping away as they approached, and they gave no indication that they had heard her. “Can—can you help me?”

Their eyes were blank. Emotionless. Had Cronan gotten into their heads? Had he permanently broken them, the way he had tried to break her?

The only answer was the sound of water running from somewhere close by. Isla was firmly pushed into another room. The door was closed behind her.

A porcelain white tub had been filled with steaming water and swirling suds of soap. Her instruction was clear—she was to bathe.

Isla’s mind spun, and she wanted to refuse. Why would she need to be bathed? What was Cronan planning?

But she would have to keep playing his game in order to have the time she needed with Grim.

And she could use a bath.

She had just peeled off her filthy clothes and stepped into the deliciously warm waters of the tub when the doors opened, and the women slipped in. Various types of soaps were cupped in their hands. One reached for her hair, and Isla slid away. “I can bathe myself,” she said, and the women either didn’t understand her or didn’t care, because they started working the soap through Isla’s hair until the strands untangled. They scrubbed her raw, aching skin, until finally she snatched a bar out of one of their hands and did the rest herself.

After she stepped out of the bath and was dried off, she was eased into a chair in front of a mirror. She took in her reflection, surprised at how different she looked. Her cheekbones were sharper. Gaunter. Her skin was paler than usual, as if Cronan’s vise on her and this world was costing her more than just her abilities.

Perhaps she shouldn’t have been shocked that her appearance had changed so much—after all, *everything* had changed in her time here.

She sat still as they combed her long hair and styled it half up in a crown-like braid and left the rest in a dozen loose curls. She allowed them to put paints on her face that weren’t so different from the ones that Poppy had taught her to use, masking the signs of pallor.

The dress they presented was ridiculous, even by her standards. The thin silk had diamond-shaped cut-outs at the sides of her waist, and a low neckline that nearly reached her navel. It allowed all her skyres to be seen. The one on her arm that helped her control her powers. The one that had allowed her to break through the hold on her abilities in the maze. And the barely visible remnants of the one over the starlike scar on her heart. This was clearly meant to make her uncomfortable, meant to show her off—but to who, she didn’t know.

When she looked at herself, she did not see a woman in a revealing dress, primped and painted like a prop. No. She saw a warrior in her armor. This was the battlefield that she had spent her entire life preparing for ahead of the Centennial. She was in her element now and was ready to fight.

She wasn’t only fighting for Grim. She was fighting for her world and what was coming for them. She was fighting for Oro, who was doing his best to defend it. She was fighting for everyone she had killed. And she would fight for this world too. For these people and creatures whose home had been turned to ash.

Cronan thought he had everything under control. But Isla was used to being in a cage.

And she had broken out before.

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ISLA

The women walked Isla out of the room and down the hall in the direction of the galaxy room. She had no idea what to expect when she got there. Why had Cronan insisted she be dressed this way? He had never given the smallest impression that he cared about her appearance. What did he have planned for her?

When the doors swung open, she realized they were not alone.

A long table sat in the center of the room, at the exact same spot where she had writhed in pain on the floor countless times. Six new men filled the seats, but only one she recognized—that man in the strange green clothing with the serpentine smile. The rest were dressed differently from each other, with various hair colors and styles and shades of skin. They glanced at her with a mixture of fascination, clear desire, and indifference.

Grim was seated at the end of the table. When his eyes found her, he immediately frowned.

The seat next to him, at the head of the table, was empty.

Cronan rose from the opposite head. He was wearing the same dark clothes and cape he usually did. His smile was unsettling, because it didn't reach any other part of his face. "Our guest of honor has arrived," he said, raising a massive goblet. The other men at the table, besides Grim, followed suit. "Behold . . . my worldkey."

"And what a striking key she is," the man to her left said. His beard was shaped as carefully as a maze. His skin was bronze, his hair gold. He hadn't taken his eyes off the bare skin below her collarbone.

"Sit," Cronan said, the word a clear order.

Isla strode over to the empty chair as confidently as she could, her dress fluttering behind her. This was no different than the Centennial, she told herself. She had dined with plenty of people who wanted her dead before.

Cronan remained standing, his goblet raised. “The gods are dead,” he said. “We feast on their bones and corpses.”

When Isla went to take her seat, she realized the chairs at the table were upholstered in furs. Beautiful, vibrant furs in various colors, like great beasts had been skinned to make them. That wasn’t all—their silverware was made of bone. Just like the god-bone from Horus that had helped Isla get to this world, that Cronan had taken away from her.

Cronan met her eye across the table and lifted his goblet toward her—he was drinking out of a skull.

Isla looked around at the richly appointed table and nearly vomited.

Especially as the other men raised their goblets once more, for yet another toast, and she noticed all of them were missing one of their fingers. She remembered Cronan’s words. He required a bone, from each of his supporters.

As if watching her put the pieces together, Cronan just grinned—and his crown flickered again to one of the many it held inside. The crown of bones. The god-bone was now amongst them, shining more brightly than the rest.

It settled back to metal, and the meal began.

Conversation erupted as the men toasted loudly and drank from the skulls. Only she and Grim remained silent. She glanced over at her husband and found his face expressionless. She wished she could access his powers again, use his abilities to feel his emotions. But the bond between them was well and truly gone.

“Your destruction of the planet Finestra was a wonder to behold,” a man two seats down said. His dark skin was covered in colorful tattoos, and she thought she saw one of them shifting. “Tell us about the next one. Will you keep it . . . or consume it?”

Cronan took another long sip from the skull. “Some worlds are better left conquered, as you know,” Cronan drawled, his eyes on Isla. “Some house the greatest beasts in the universe, who thrive in their natural habitats. Some contain deposits of ore that amplify power. Some produce energy that can be mined when needed.”

The men nodded, hanging on Cronan’s every word. Isla wondered if they were each the leaders of their planets and what resource they had that was

of value to Cronan. Clearly it was enough to keep them alive, let alone earn a seat at this table.

They must have all been offered the same deal as Isla. Had any of them hesitated?

“Other worlds, though,” Cronan continued, “are more useful feeding my own power. They’re better off not existing.” Cronan lazily swept a hand in front of his crown, and it changed, yet again. This time, it became a circle of sparks. The light and energy from the room were leeched away, pulled into that circle like it was a void. Isla gritted her teeth against it. And from those sparks, a galaxy formed. Dozens of planets, swirling in a spiral. Her throat went dry.

These were all the planets Cronan had destroyed. They lived in his crown.

But they didn’t live in *him*.

He hadn’t truly consumed them, then. He wasn’t like her. He was simply *moving* power, collecting it, not absorbing it.

Isla didn’t want to compare herself to a monster like him. But she couldn’t help but feel like her power was stronger. She was sure Cronan would prefer not to have to keep all his conquests outside of him, in a crown that Isla had proven could be taken.

Cronan’s voice knocked her from her train of thought. “Take for example, a foolish world where *all* people, not just the elites, can access power.” Cronan’s eyes remained firmly on Isla’s. She ground her teeth. “A world where power is drawn from all major forces. The sun. The moon. The stars. The sky. Darkness. *Nature*.” Isla heard a roaring in her ears. “I gather you all here in celebration, for we have finally found our way to our next frontier. A new galaxy to pillage. In just three weeks, we will break through this foolish world I speak of in order to get there. It will be our feeding ground before we make the journey onward. It will be the door to our destiny . . .”

He smiled at Isla. This time, it did reach his eyes. Cheers and cries of excitement sounded all around them.

“I will kill every single person there. Until the world is nothing but dust and ashes in our wake.”

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GRIM

Don’t do it.

Grim knew exactly what the witch was going to do. He had a chance to stop it—but he didn’t. He just sat back and watched her grip the bone-carved fork.

And fling it through the air, right at Cronan’s heart.

Fuck. Her aim was perfect. It would have worked, if Cronan hadn’t turned at the last moment—and stopped the fork an inch from his chest.

The room full of cheers went silent.

Isla made a choking sound as she was thrust into the air, her head pulled back, her arms stiff and wide by her sides. She was floating above the table. Giving everyone in the room a good look at her. Including those metallic markings she wore, like the one on his arm that was starting to burn.

This close, Grim could see her fingers moving, as if, somehow, she was breaking Cronan’s hold. Even if it was just in this small way.

She had courage, he would give her that.

She was also an idiot.

Cronan chuckled, and the rest of the table took it as an invitation to join him. Isla choked, her face draining of color. Cronan said, “Look at her. Fighting in vain for her pathetic planet.”

Isla gasped as Cronan’s shadows lurched through her forehead. And just like that, it was as if her mind had been emptied out as her memories spilled into the room for them to see.

They saw Lightlark. The market. The harbor. They watched a clear assassination attempt on the Wildling by Moonlings. Had it happened during the Centennial? He couldn’t remember. The images shifted, and they watched as Tynan, one of Grim’s former council members, tried to slay her in her sleep. Was that—was that his castle? Was that . . . *his bed*? The room

changed, and they watched as Isla was tied down by her own people and carved open like the food on the dinner table.

Grim frowned as the men around him laughed, spittle flying from their mouths. “You see,” Cronan said. “Only a fool would have any loyalty to a world that treated her like this.”

Isla shook with fury. Her fingers were twitching even more now as she struggled against Cronan’s hold. Her face was pale, even under all the layers of paint they put on her. Just when Grim was sure she would lose consciousness, Cronan released her. The last memory dissolved in the air above them as Isla roughly fell into her seat. She gasped for air, bent over, her nails clawing at the table.

He noticed something then that made his eyes narrow. He had to give it to the Wildling—she certainly had gall. He shook his head and almost smiled, choosing to keep it to himself. He’d rather see how this played out.

“For your own sake,” Cronan said to Isla, “I hope you learn. I hope you join us.” He gazed at the rest of his dinner guests. “For she would make an excellent queen of ashes, would she not?”

The men at the table nodded eagerly.

“And if she doesn’t come to her senses, will you kill her?” one of the men asked, lazily, as he sipped his goblet. He snapped his fingers, and one of the attendants, a woman with glassy eyes, refilled it immediately.

“Expeditiously,” Cronan said.

“A shame,” the man across from Grim said, his eyes glued to Isla’s chest, which was almost spilling out of this ridiculous dress she was wearing.

He didn’t know why the man’s leering made him want to turn him to dust. The man smiled at him good-naturedly—until he noticed Grim’s withering glare.

Cronan missed nothing. “Is there a problem, Grimshaw?” he asked.

He scowled at the name. He had always hated it. It reminded him of his father, who had never called him anything else. Slowly, he turned toward his ancestor. “No. I just think feasts are a waste of time.”

The room went silent. The other men gaped at him for speaking to Cronan this way. Especially after what he had just done.

But Grim knew his ancestor cared most about the continuation of his line. Especially now, at the precipice of his conquering a new galaxy. And Grim was the only progeny he had left.

Cronan pondered Grim's words for a few moments. "I agree," he finally said, far too casually. His eyes sharpened then, the switch in tone sudden and chilling. "It's a good thing this isn't a feast. It's a sentencing."

One of the chairs toppled over as the man sitting on it was flung back against the wall. He writhed, unable to move, eyes bulging. Cronan walked over to him slowly. "My dear, dear friend," he said. "How many centuries have we known each other?" His voice was a quiet hiss. "And this . . . this is how you repay me?"

He lifted a vial, and the dinner guests gasped. "My attendants found this in your room. They might be emotionless, but they aren't brainless. Poison? How small-minded." He smirked. "The sad part is you thought a drop of this would work . . ."

At that, Cronan uncorked the bottle with his teeth, spit out the cap—and threw his head back as he drank it all. He swallowed. Pressed his lips together. The room seemed to hold its breath.

Nothing happened.

He called the attendant holding the wine over, and Grim could guess what would happen next. "I saved you a drop," he said, handing her the vial. Wordlessly, and without hesitation, she drank it. The glass had barely left her lips before the woman seized. The wine bottle slipped out of her grip and shattered on the stone floor. Crimson liquid spilled everywhere, red as blood. She collapsed a moment later.

Cronan turned back toward the man, who clutched at the wall, his eyes wide and terrified, saying, "I'm hard to kill. You should have known that." He pursed his lips. "But I am not merciless . . . I'll give you a chance to live. I *always* give second chances . . ."

Cronan held out his palm, and from his skin, the Threads of Time Grim had handed over surfaced. With a brush of his finger, dozens of circular portals appeared, stacked vertically, close together, forming a tunnel of doors that rippled like water. They spanned from an inch in front of the man, all the way to the other side of the room, going right through the middle of the dinner table.

"Fifty worlds. I've conquered each of them, so you will find my knights there. You will only be able to go to the next world once you've killed one of them. If you reach the other side of this room, then I'll let you live. I'll pretend this unfortunate event never happened."

Grim watched this display of power in horror and fascination. Cronan had used the Threads of Time to summon different time periods with portals. He was combining his power with the threads . . .

Cronan released his hold, and the man fell through the first portal. He surfaced a second later—looking ragged and wounded. But not dead. Grim didn't know how long it took the man to slaughter one of Cronan's knights, but to their eyes, he was gone for only an instant. The man fell into the next portal. When he emerged again, he was wearing different clothes that were covered in blood. Still alive, though.

The next time he appeared—twenty blades pierced his back. The rest of the portals collapsed together, then vanished.

The man fell forward onto the floor, a puddle of blood forming beneath him.

Cronan sighed. "Not even three lifetimes . . . A pity. For your world, too."

The man's aura was lifted off his skin and turned into the shape of his planet, with various rings of energy around it—

And it swept across the room, melding to his crown. His eyes closed. Cronan inhaled deeply, as if invigorated with the power of the planet. Above, one of the worlds in the crown formation vanished.

When Cronan's eyes opened again, they were hard. "Anyone else planning an assassination?" he asked. He looked over each man, saving Isla for last.

Unlike the men . . . she held his gaze. She did not flinch beneath his study.

He was the one to glance away. Toward Grim. "Take her back to the cells," he said, before sitting back down.

Grim took her arm and hauled her to her feet. But before they exited the room, she looked back at Cronan one last time—her gaze still defiant.

As Grim marched the Wildling through the ornate castle halls in silence, he wondered if giving Cronan the Threads of Time was a mistake. His ancestor was more powerful than he had ever thought. But had he truly had a choice? There were no secrets here, with Cronan's mind abilities being what they were and his control over everyone in this castle. The discovery of the poison only proved that.

This Wildling, on the other hand, still seemed intent on deceit. The fool.

As soon as they reached the dark lower levels of the dungeon, Grim turned and pinned her to the wall.

His fingers slid down her sides, and her lips parted in a gasp. He frowned. Her skin beneath his hands was warm and prickled in awareness. When he felt around for her aura, he did not sense fear from her at all. No. Only waves of desire.

“If you wanted to see if I was wearing underwear, you could have just asked,” she said, her voice a husky rasp.

He glared at her, and she held his gaze, those green eyes challenging him. He bared his teeth at her, just as he found what he had been looking for.

A reminder of exactly what she was. His murderer.

He slipped the knife from the band of her undergarments. He had noticed it was gone the moment she collapsed back into her seat at the table. The stunt with the fork had been a distraction. To get this.

The knife was made of powerful bone. But it wasn’t going to break her out of the cell. So why did she go through all of that to steal it?

“What’s this?” His grip tightened on its hilt. “Ready to stab me through the heart?”

“Why don’t you let me keep it and find out?” she said, her voice still that breathless whisper that had him leaning toward her mouth. This close, her feelings were overwhelming, spilling into his, and he gritted his teeth against them.

No. He wasn’t a weak fool who would fall for a temptress’s tricks.

He slipped the knife into his own pocket in response. That seemed to fascinate her. She must have expected he would run back to Cronan and report the prisoner’s infraction.

That would have relied on the assumption that he wanted anything to do with his ancestor’s plans to destroy their world. He was still ironing out his own, but he was starting to think she didn’t fit into them at all.

She was transparent. Emotional. Not half as clever as she thought she was. It was almost an insult to believe she could, in any future, be the death of him.

He reached toward her to drag her back to her cell. Before he could, she slipped from his grip, turning so quickly that she blurred. In a moment, his

spine hit the wall. The breath was knocked from his lungs. And the Wildling was on her toes in front of him, still nowhere near close to his height, her green eyes fierce and bright.

The knife he had slid into his pocket was now trained against his throat.

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ISLA

“Aren’t you supposed to stab me in the heart, Wildling?” he said, his voice a mixture of mocking and irritation. “I would think that would be easier for you to reach, anyway.”

She blinked, her mind caught on that word—*heart*. But she kept the blade tip firm against his throat. “He’s going to destroy our world and everyone in it. And you’re just okay with that?”

He just stared at her, expressionless. He seemed bored, even.

She bared her teeth as she said, “You might not care about me anymore, but can you say the same for your people?”

Slowly, he tilted his head at her, his skin grazing the blade’s edge. Finally, she had the upper hand. She was just about to demand that he hand over Lark’s feather when, in a flash, their positions were reversed. She was pressed against the wall, her hands empty.

Her pulse thudded against the knife at her throat.

“Don’t pretend to know what I do and don’t care about,” Grim said, his voice cutting. His eyes burned with intensity, practically sparkling in the dim light. The blade scraped against her skin, as if he was testing it out. As if he might just kill her in this hallway without waiting three weeks to see if she would join them.

But for the first time . . . she felt hope. Because she knew him, and she could see how he would never abandon his people. He was playing a game, too, and not just blindly following Cronan.

“If you’re against him . . . I can help you,” she gasped. “We want the same thing.”

“You don’t know what I want,” he said, firmly. He pressed the knife harder, and she felt her skin split. A small drop of blood slid right against the diamond at her throat.

“Maybe not. But I did . . . once,” she said. “You don’t have to be on his side, just because he’s your ancestor. You have already changed your line by breaking tradition. You stopped the practice of having heirs fight to the death as children. You made Nightshade training less barbaric. You protected your people throughout the curses and the storms. Your people . . . they trust you. They believe in you.”

The blade dug in sharper, and she said, “I . . . I believe in you. I know you’ll come back to yourself. I know you’ll . . . come back to me.”

He was shaking. From rage, maybe . . . but she could also almost *feel* his self-control unraveling. Because up until now, he had avoided looking at her, as a rule. But now, his gaze dropped, as if he couldn’t help himself.

His eyes raked over her, gaze catching on her leg, bare up to the thigh in its slit. Isla watched his throat bob.

“I wore a dress just like this once,” she said, testing to see his reaction. He easily could have dragged her back to the cell or moved away from her, but he didn’t, so she continued. “That night . . . I danced in front of you. We were trying to find a sword . . .”

She didn’t mention that sword was currently sitting in his ancestor’s galaxy room.

“You pressed me against a wall, just like this,” she said, and she heard him swallow again. She reached for the hand not clutching the knife. Carefully, as if this moment was made of glass, she moved it to her thigh, uncurling each and every finger. And he let her. He even had to bend the slightest bit to reach.

His breath caught as his hand flexed against the thin fabric. Her eyes never leaving his, she slowly moved his palm up the length of the slit, toward her hip. She gasped involuntarily as his callused fingers brushed against bare skin.

“You did this,” she said. “And I . . . I could feel . . .”

She could feel him now. Right against her stomach. She pressed closer, just the slightest bit, and his gaze intensified.

Her lips parted. That’s where his eyes went next. And for a moment, she wondered if he would really kiss her, with this knife still against her throat. If he would remember her and show her just how much he missed her, against this wall.

His hand curled around her hip, pinning her to him. His eyes flashed with something she had seen in them before. Want. *Need*.

But then, he ripped away from her.

“Don’t put a blade to my throat unless you intend to use it,” he snarled before pocketing the knife and marching her back down the halls of the dungeon.

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GRIM

Grim scowled at his own foolishness. He and Cronan were sitting at the dining table before the rest of the lords joined them. Before *she* joined them.

Grim had touched her yesterday. And it had been like touching flames. Yet he didn't want to pull his hand away. This woman was going to *kill him*. He was not a fool to be lured off the side of a cliff by a temptress.

He was ruler of Nightshade. Cronan's heir. A warrior through and through—*feeling* had been trained right out of him.

But more than just the heat of her skin . . . he couldn't forget her words.

You might not care about me anymore, but can you say the same for your people?

For centuries, everything he had endured had been for his realm's survival. So his pain could somehow have a purpose.

Cronan had made it clear that he would destroy it all, for the simple reason that he could—and that it would make him more powerful. Grim didn't want more power. He hadn't wanted his own to begin with.

The only hope for his realm was to convince Cronan that his people, at least, were worth saving. And if he couldn't, he'd have to kill his ancestor.

"You seem distracted," Cronan said, peering at him as he sipped wine from his goblet. He could have easily pierced his mind with his shadows again, but he didn't.

His ancestor feared him. Grim could tell. But why, when Cronan had such endless power?

Why had he taken the memories to begin with? It didn't make any sense.

Unless he believed . . . that together . . . he and the Wildling could defeat him.

Grim blinked and saw Cronan awaiting a response. Right. “Apologies,” Grim said, the word scraped out of him. He bowed his head and schooled his features. Cronan couldn’t know he was planning against him. He offered a truth. “It’s been unsettling . . . having so many of my memories gone. There are gaps I’ve been trying to fill in.”

Cronan leaned back in his chair. “Don’t bother,” he said. “Your memories with the Wildling only made you weak. You’re much better without them.”

Grim nodded, but inside, he wondered if that was true.

Cronan continued to sip his wine, looking deep in thought. “In fact,” he continued, “if there’s anything else you’d like to forget, anything else that’s holding you back . . . I’d be happy to release you from any burdens.”

Grim’s hand turned into a fist below the table. As if he would ever willingly let his ancestor into his head again. Even if he was better off without his memories with the Wildling, it had been an invasion. The gap was unsettling.

Though . . . when he thought of moments he might want to be rid of . . . he immediately thought of Laila, of his shadows slashing through her and her blood spilling onto the floor. He had been haunted by that memory for practically his entire life. What would it be like if it simply . . . disappeared? Would he be stronger for it?

No. He wouldn’t erase Laila from his mind. That was the only place she still existed.

Besides. He knew how to erase memories too. Perhaps not as well as Cronan—he never did master mind abilities—but he was sufficient enough. And the thought had never crossed his mind before.

Especially when all this pain just made him stronger. It was useful.

But he didn’t say that to Cronan. No, he said, “Thank you. I’ll consider it.”

Like fuck he would.

Cronan hummed, pleased, watching as the attendants began bringing in plate after plate of dinner. There were meats and vegetables and fruits Grim didn’t recognize. He didn’t really care about the food, but he pretended to study them, if only to keep from speaking to his ancestor. Still, Cronan didn’t stop. “And how’s it going with our prisoner? Have you made any progress in trying to sway her to our side?”

Our side. Grim almost laughed at that. But he'd have to continue this charade until he could guarantee the safety of his people.

In truth, Grim hadn't spent a second of his time with the woman trying to convince her of anything. He was still trying to make sense of her, to understand what he had lost.

He ground his teeth, remembering the feel of her body pressed to his as she held a knife to his throat. He never thought the position would inspire any feeling other than rage.

But he'd had *several* other feelings. "She's stubborn," Grim muttered. Vague but not dishonest.

Cronan raised a brow. "Don't tell me she's bested even you."

"Of course not," Grim snapped. His blood heated with anger just thinking about her. "She's emotional, and her love for me makes her vulnerable. She likes to put up a fight, but in the end, she'll do whatever I say. She'll be on our side any day now."

Cronan laughed. And he could still hear the pleased sound of it when the lords filtered into the room and *she* sat next to him. He disagreed with his ancestor—she was the problem, not the solution. She definitely had to die.

But first, Grim still needed more information. She remembered everything he didn't. Everything Cronan had taken from him. It was why he insisted on escorting her back to her cell after dinner.

It didn't take her long to start speaking. "What about Wraith?" she asked.

Grim almost stumbled, hearing that name. He frowned at his own incompetence, at how she could so easily get through to him. She was the one he was leading to a cell, though sometimes he felt like he himself had been shackled. "What about him?" he demanded.

"So you remember him," she said, almost to herself. She sounded relieved.

"Of course, I do," he growled.

"Do you remember how you got him?" Her aura was dripping with curiosity. And hope.

What a ridiculous question. He—

Grim frowned. His mind was simply blank. As if his memory was a library that had partially been looted. Some books turned to ash. Missing. He wasn't lying when he told Cronan how unsettling it was.

She filled in the gaps. Her voice was gentle. “I found him. We raised him. Together.”

Together. The word grated at him. There was no *together* with anyone. And certainly not with a Wildling. He was a ruler, above everything else, in a realm that had long split from the rest. The only being that had brought him any comfort at all was the one she dared speak about.

“My dragon will survive,” he said, pushing her forward.

“Will he?” Isla asked, looking back at him. She was wearing another ridiculous dress, this one with burgundy sleeves that draped off her shoulders. “What if Cronan decides he wants the dragon for himself?”

The thought of Cronan getting anywhere close to Wraith had his shadows sharpening into points. Isla noticed. She kept prodding, like any good warrior who had found a weak point. “Will you just stand aside while Cronan takes him?”

No. He wouldn’t. He knew that, but he didn’t say a word. It didn’t stop her from continuing.

“What if he decides he doesn’t need an heir at all? What if he uses you to help conquer our world and then kills you?”

“*You* are the one who kills me,” he spat. He shook his head, incredulous. “Are you that shameless? Trying to get me to work with you when we both have seen the future?”

“*A* future,” she breathed. “It’s not guaranteed.”

Grim huffed a cruel laugh. “So you’re half as likely to kill me. You think that makes me anything other than your enemy?”

Isla swallowed. There. She was silent for a few moments before saying, in a small voice, “When we first met, you planned to kill me.”

Grim didn’t react. It didn’t surprise him. He was planning on killing her *now*.

“But we fell in love. You . . . you changed your mind. You chose me, over the world. Over yourself.”

“And look where that got us,” he said, his voice cutting, as he turned the corner toward her cell.

Without a word, he pushed her inside. Slammed the door closed.

He should go back to the dinner. Back to Cronan. But he couldn’t get himself to move. He still had so many questions. It was *not* fascination with her, he told himself. It was frustration at how little he remembered. At how

untethered he felt at the missing pieces in his mind, like something had been stolen from him.

Cronan told him that by taking his memories, he had set him free. Grim wondered if he had done the opposite.

Had Cronan taken more than just his memories with her? Or did those memories contain something vital?

He was tired of not knowing. Isla just stood there on the other side of the bars, staring at him, her emotions so strong he could practically taste them. Grim's gazed dipped to the necklace she wore.

She was Wildling. It didn't *belong* on her.

Before he knew what he was doing, he reached through the bars of the cell, grabbed the diamond around her neck, and pulled it toward him, bringing her face to his. "How did you get this?" he demanded, yanking, like he could rip it off her.

Eyes never leaving his, she said, "You gave it to me."

Impossible. But . . . her emotions. They were steady.

He dropped the diamond in shock. It had to be a trick.

He took a step away from the bars, as if distance would give him clarity. Around her . . . around her, he couldn't fucking think straight. If the curses weren't long broken, he would have blamed it on her Wildling charms. And she didn't have any powers here. So, what was it? What was she doing to him?

Wait—now that he thought about it . . . he couldn't remember how the curses were broken.

Had *she* broken them?

She laughed softly. "Did you ever wonder why this necklace can't come off unless I die? Why he hasn't just taken it, like everything else?"

Grim stood very still. He wasn't breathing. He still couldn't imagine why *she* wore it.

"How about the one around your neck? Have you tried to take it off?" she asked.

Grim frowned. He reached up . . . and found that a thin chain rested at the base of his neck. He had bathed several times here, but he hadn't looked at himself in a mirror. He hadn't even *been* himself.

No matter. His shadows engulfed the necklace to turn it to ash.

Nothing happened.

The realization crashed upon him like a tidal wave.

Isla took a step toward him, her gaze unrelenting. She leaned in close. She was far shorter than he was, yet she found a way to look down at him. “Hello, husband,” she whispered. She held out her hand, right through the bars, as if to shake his. “I’m your wife.”

No. *No*. He didn’t dare touch her.

“A Nightshade ruler has never taken a wife,” he yelled. She was foolish for thinking she could make him believe such a ridiculous idea. There had to be another explanation . . . another way . . .

“You did,” she said. She was gripping the bars now. Leaning as close to him as she could. “You chose me. From a line I was never meant to be in. You took me back to your room . . . and you kissed me.”

“I don’t kiss anyone,” he said, fiercely.

“You kissed *me*,” she said. And for some reason, he leaned toward her, as if pulled by an invisible tide. She reached a hand through the bars to press against his chest. He was too shocked by all of this to stop her. His skin prickled with awareness. “I stabbed you for it. Right here.” She gently tapped a spot just an inch short of his heart, and it sent a chill down his spine.

“I kissed you, and you *stabbed me*?” he growled, perplexed. She wasn’t making any sense. And why was he listening to her anyway? Why was he letting her *touch* him?

She only nodded. “Look.”

Warily, he pulled down his shirt, if only to call her a liar. But there, right where she had pressed, was a scar. One that he should have erased by now, like he had erased all others.

Why would he have kept this one? It made no sense.

She must have seen the confusion on his face, because she said, “You told me later it was a reminder of me.”

He shook his head. *Enough*. Cronan was right. These memories were shameful. “I am not a weak fool you can trick again.”

“Love does not make you weak,” she said. “It made us stronger.”

“Yeah?” He sneered, gesturing at the cell behind her. “How do you explain this, then? You’re a prisoner.”

Her mouth turned up into a smile that leveled him like a scythe. “No. *You’re* the prisoner,” she said, leaning close, her breath hot against his

mouth. “And I’m going to break you out.”

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ISLA

The next day, it was Grim who came to lead Isla out of her cell instead of a knight. He glanced coldly at Lark in the corner—she had been growing weaker by the hour and didn't speak much anymore, which Isla might have been grateful for, if she still didn't need the location of the starstick.

But first, she needed the feather. And only Grim could give it to her.

Wordlessly, he brought Isla to the room with the bath and the attendants with the blank stares. They bathed her and dressed her as usual. But before they had finished painting her face, she looked in the mirror, only to see Grim standing behind her. Studying her with narrowed eyes.

"What—"

"Out," he said to the attendants, the word a brutal command.

When they didn't immediately scatter, he bellowed, "OUT!"

They moved toward the door, but apparently not fast enough. Grim portaled them away in a flash of smoke.

They were alone.

She turned in her chair to face him as he stalked right toward her.

"Why would I marry you?" he demanded, like the thought had been grating on him. His eyes were wide and creased. He hadn't slept at all, it looked like.

His voice was so full of rage, so full of irritation, that she didn't know what to say. She couldn't help feeling insulted.

Grim rolled his eyes impatiently. "Nightshades don't marry. And you're . . . you're a *Wildling*." The way he said that word, spat out like an insult, didn't make her feel any better.

He sighed, his fingers flexing, as if he knew he was failing at actually trying to get her to answer. "Look," he said, flatly. "You're obviously attractive." She raised a brow at him. He gestured toward her in a harried

movement. “That’s not what I mean. I just—I need to know. Why would *I* marry . . . *you*?”

She had never seen him so worked up. He looked almost crazed. “You . . . loved me,” she said finally.

He shook his head, as if that was completely out of the question. “Did you have something I needed? Did you find me injured? Did you . . . poison me?”

Her mouth parted in indignation.

But his eyes filled with hope. “That’s it, isn’t it? You . . . you *poisoned me*.” Once the words sunk in, his expression clouded with rage.

“No. No, I—”

Her words were cut off when his shadows pinned her to the wall. Her breath was knocked out of her, but she couldn’t help but notice that her head didn’t hit the stone on impact. It was like his shadows cushioned her ever so slightly. Was it subconscious? Was there a part of him buried deep down that still remembered her?

Her hope died when she took in his expression—unmovable, fixed in its fury. He was just like Cronan when he had latched onto a thought in her mind, digging in, cutting deeper, fixated on getting an answer. “Then what was it? Did you threaten me?”

What? What could she possibly have held over him? He seemed to agree, because he moved onto his next theory.

“Did you use an elixir?” She glared at him, shaking her head.

“Then what was it?” he demanded.

“I didn’t do *anything*.”

His shadows suddenly released her, and she collapsed into a heap on the ground. He loomed over her, and she worried this whole thing was pointless. He would never trust her, never believe her.

“I just—I just need to understand,” he said, his tone still sharp, but like he was trying his best to sound gentle. Which resulted in not sounding gentle at all.

Isla remembered what it was like to have gaps in her mind. She knew it must have been driving him mad. She had felt similarly when he was the one telling her they had an entire love story between them.

One he had made her forget.

At least, she remembered slowly, over time. Grim never would. But if she had any hope of him falling in love with her again, he had to believe that he had once. And he had to learn more about *her*.

"You—you know what it's like to be trapped and alone," she said, slowly, without moving from the ground.

"I know loneliness as much as you do," she said. "My childhood was not so much an upbringing as it was a sharpening, of turning me into a weapon. I had spent my whole upbringing thinking I was powerless, weak. That I would disappoint my people."

He nodded once, seeming to understand her. She knew he could understand, because it was so similar to his own story.

"I found a key out of my cage under my floorboards," she said. "A stick imbued with your own portaling power that you had given to your general. My . . . my father." She watched as his eyes darted back and forth as if scanning his memory, processing this information. "*You* . . . indirectly . . . gave me freedom. And that's what led me to you." She swallowed. "I told you already how we met."

"When you stabbed me," he said, flatly.

She rolled her eyes but pushed on. "After that, you were using me. In order to get something *you* needed."

Grim huffed. "Finally, a part of this story that sounds believable."

She glared at him. "But then . . . you changed your mind. You chose me, and . . . and I suppose we kept choosing each other. Every day. Through every obstacle. Neither of us had pure intentions. It didn't happen smoothly, or on purpose. By the time we realized it . . ." She took a shaking breath. She didn't know if she was saying too much too soon. She didn't know if this was something he needed to uncover in pieces, the same way she had slowly regained her memories.

For a long while, Grim just stared at the floor, deep in thought. Then his eyes reached hers again. There was no recognition there. But there was a faint whisper of understanding.

"So it was the loneliness," he finally said, straightening, as if the answer was that simple. "I was lonely, and you were there."

She bristled. She had survived knife wounds that hurt less. "You should give yourself more credit," she bit out, wanting to wipe the satisfaction

from his face. He thought he'd figured it all out, but he was wrong. "Love is a choice, and you made it."

His eyes flashed with anger. With a challenge. "And what choice will you make, Wildling?" he said.

She refused to look away, and neither did he. They were locked in a duel once more.

He was the first to drop her gaze, but there was no victory in it. It was like he had grown tired of her. "It doesn't matter now. I have the answers I need." He leaned down so that he could say the words right in her face. "You might have meant something to me once . . . but you won't again. I would never care for someone as weak and foolish as you. If you think there's a chance at getting me on your side . . . don't waste your breath."

Then he rose to his full height, turned on his heel, and left.

The knights began escorting her to and from dinners after that. At the meals themselves, Grim didn't even spare her a glance. And his indifference was worse than his hatred.

She missed him more than she could put into words, but even though they sat at the same table, he had never seemed farther from her. She was starting to realize that she wouldn't be able to convince him to hand over the feather. Oro didn't have that kind of time, and the thought of him defending their world alone . . . The thought of failing him, again, when he had asked her for the starstick, for just one thing . . .

No. She wouldn't fail him. She would take matters into her own hands and steal the damned feather herself.

It was easy to stay silent during the dinners. To eat, and listen to the conversation, in case anything would help her situation. Nothing did. Cronan, she learned, only liked to talk about the planets he had conquered, the worlds he had brought to ashes, and his plans for all the power he would gain from his upcoming invasion of their world . . . and the galaxy beyond it.

The new people in the castle were a sign of celebration. After the dinners, there were parties, though she was never invited. Still, sometimes she could hear them, up above.

Celebrating every day her planet inched toward ruin.

The knights kept her under close watch. There wasn’t ever an opportunity to slip away. Isla studied their movements, noticing that there was no key for her to steal. It seemed like the cell door locked by their touch alone—and Grim’s.

Was it enchanted to respond to their blood? That would certainly make escaping harder.

Cronan always ordered the knights to take her back to the dungeons before the meal was finished. That would be the perfect window of opportunity to slip away. Grim wouldn’t be in his room. All the other heads of planets would be confined to one place.

But to overpower one of the knights, she would need a weapon, and she had none. Not even that knife she’d tried to take from the dinner table—thanks to Grim. She still had her armor, but now, it was miniature, each plate far too small to cut deeply. Without her powers, she couldn’t transform the metal. She went through countless options in her head, even looking in the room where she was bathed and dressed every day. But there was nothing sharp. Nothing at all.

That evening, when she was thrown into the cell, she looked over at Lark, and an idea formed in her head. One her ancestor was certainly not going to like.

“How badly do you want that feather?”

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ISLA

Isla reached her hands through Lark’s gaping chest and snapped one of her broken ribs. Lark hissed, her eyes gleaming. But she did not scream.

The witch was strong, Isla would give her that. Anyone else would have passed out from the pain.

Isla walked over to the cell gate. She hid one of her hands behind her back and used the other to rattle the metal. Hard. She kept going until she heard footsteps. One of the knights stood before her.

She was very familiar with these knights by now. They all wore armor that covered every inch . . . except a small gap between their helmets and breastplates. It was only visible when they turned their heads.

They were also incredibly dimwitted.

“The ceiling,” she said, gesturing upward.

That was all it took for the idiot guard to look up. And before he could call for help, she shoved the rib through the bars and right into his throat. He sputtered blood. He tried to scream, but Isla had torn through his vocal cords.

She reached both arms through the grate and caught him before he collapsed to keep him from making a sound. Her knees nearly buckled from the weight. Slowly, teeth gritted, she managed to move his arm to the lock. She pressed his palm against it—

The door unlocked and she pushed it forward, still holding on to the knight. By the time she gently set him on the floor, she was panting, her sweaty palms slipping on her knees.

She looked over her shoulder at Lark. All she saw was glowing green eyes. She expected her ancestor to make a break for it, but she remained very still.

“My feather,” she snapped.

Right.

She looked down at the guard. A puddle of blood was spreading around him. She didn't have much time. There usually weren't other guards on this floor, especially during the parties, when they were needed up above. She only hoped none of them would come down and check in the next few minutes.

She tore down the hall, the path seared into her skull after weeks in this castle. When she finally reached the main floor, she slowed. She inched the door open.

The hall was clear. Everyone was in the galaxy room. She could hear the faint sound of music and laughter. It seemed tonight, the party had started early.

Her heart hammered as she strode in the opposite direction, toward where she had seen the heads of planets congregate. She hoped their rooms were nearby . . . and that Grim's was too.

As she turned a corner, the castle seemed to change. Each wing looked different, as if it was made up of several different palaces that had been cut up and crudely combined. Just like Cronan's galaxy he had pieced together. Just like his crown. Taking the best of each planet to shape his own universe to his liking, with no regard for what he left broken.

She didn't know how much time she had. She couldn't be sure how long it had taken to break out of the cell after dinner. The party could be just beginning or be close to ending. A knight could stumble upon her, or the body in the dungeon. Her heart thundered as she opened door after door, searching, until finally—she found his room.

There was nothing special about it, really. Only an unrumpled bed, with the pillows beneath the sheets. A chair, slid out from its desk at an angle. But she instantly knew it was his. She just did. Because she knew him. She knew the marks he left upon a space. The way he liked his things laid out.

She slipped through the door, whispering it shut—

And froze as she heard running water.

He was here. He was *bathing*. She should leave . . . but when else would she have this opportunity? Especially after the knight's body was discovered?

Nerves swirling through her stomach, she lurched forward, eyes roaming the room. She rummaged through his things as quickly as possible. She

checked every drawer. Looked in every closet. Nothing.

The water turned off.

She couldn't go back without the feather, but she also couldn't be discovered here. Footsteps sounded. She had no other choice. Frustrated and hopeless, she strode toward the door. She pulled it open.

The handle was ripped out of her grasp as it was forced closed. Her lips parted in a gasp.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Slowly, heart thundering in her chest, she turned. Grim stood there, bare-chested with a towel tied low on his hips.

It was so easy to imagine that this was just a normal day together. That this moment would lead to them upturning that neatly kept bed.

But everything had changed. That was made clear by the fact that the shadows that had once caressed her skin now shackled her to the door. They pinned her hands above her head.

"I asked . . . what are you doing here?" he repeated. He stalked toward her until he was right above her. A droplet of water from his hair landed against her cheek and slid down her throat. He tracked its movement before his eyes snapped back to hers.

"Maybe you'll answer Cronan," he said, reaching for the doorknob.

"No, wait!" she said, the words spilling out of her.

He watched her expectantly.

"Just take me back to the cell. I promise—I promise I won't leave again."

That wasn't good enough. His eyes narrowed. The shadows on her wrists tightened to the point of pain. "Why. Are. You. Here?" he demanded.

She couldn't tell him. He might destroy the feather—or worse, give it to Cronan. And then she would lose all bargaining power with Lark. Oro needed the starstick. She had put him in this mess, and she would do everything in her power to help him.

Her lips remained closed, and he leaned down, so their eyes were level. His cheeks were flushed from hot water. His dark hair was already starting to curl around his ears. "No?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Very well then." In a flash, the towel was replaced by black clothes and armor. He pushed her through the door, making them both matterless for a

moment.

They didn’t emerge in the star-drenched hall, though. They were in the dungeons. Right in front of her cell. As if he wanted to see how, exactly, she had broken out.

He frowned down at the dead knight. “Is that—is that a *rib*?” She didn’t know if he sounded horrified or impressed.

His gaze locked onto hers again. His voice was lethal. “One more chance,” he said.

She remained silent.

“Very well.” Instead of shoving her back into her cell, like she expected, he took her hand—and dragged her out of the hall, where another knight was already waiting.

“No,” she said, turning toward him, eyes widened. His lacked any warmth at all.

“Tell Cronan his prisoner just broke loose.” The knight nodded before running off.

Isla slowly shook her head. “Wow,” she breathed. “I forgot what a bastard you can be.”

He whirled to face her again. “What?” he demanded.

“I said,” she enunciated clearly, “You’re. A. *Bastard*.” They stared each other down. She could hear the clattering of more knights coming down to the dungeons. Their steps echoed above, loosening dust and rocks that rained around them.

She swallowed, her pride falling away. She knew how easy it was for Cronan to reach into her mind and pluck out the answer. Worse than him taking the feather, he might just kill her. Especially since she hadn’t given him any indication that she was going to change her mind about working with him.

“*Please*.” Isla searched his eyes for any sign of her husband. But he just smirked.

“I told you. You are nothing. I hope he kills you for this,” he said. “That way I never have to see you again.”

She couldn’t help but believe he meant it.

The dinner table had vanished from the galaxy room. So had all the guests and any trace of a celebration. Only Cronan and the faint smell of wine

remained. He was staring up at his galaxy. His crown glistened in the starlight.

“Why did you escape?” he asked. His words were clipped. Brief. Just as Grim’s had been.

And just as she hadn’t said a word to her husband, Isla remained silent. She kept her chin high.

In a flash, he turned around, eyes blazing in anger, and Isla was thrust forward by an invisible force until she was hovering right in front of him. Grim just watched, feet away. His face remained expressionless.

He flung her back to the floor and from his crown, those familiar shadows soared toward her. The galaxies disappeared, melting beneath blinding, unrelenting pain. She screamed, convulsing, bile crawling up her throat. This was worse than before. Cronan had given up any pretense of trying to preserve her for his benefit. Now, he sank his shadows into her head as if he was truly trying to break it. It was enough to nearly make her pass out. But she would fight this. She would fight *him*.

Instead of folding beneath the commands of the shadows that wove through her brain, searching for a reason for her escape from her cell, she forced her thoughts into a different direction.

Oro was the reason behind looking for the feather. So she sealed him out of her brain. She blocked the sun with shadows. She smothered his light. She distanced herself from her feelings about him, as if she could cleave herself in half—the part that loved him, and the part that loved Grim.

She made a feeble wall so he could break through it, believing that her will had simply given way. Then, and only then, did she fully let Cronan in.

And she thought of Grim. Of their story. Of how curiosity had become hatred and then friendship. And then love. Sacrifice.

Cronan would never understand. He would never know that true love was more powerful than anything because it created worlds within planets. And she had lived in her own world with Grim.

Cronan made a frustrated, disgusted sound, as the claws in her brain sunk deeper.

Here, she said, dropping in a reason, hiding it beneath other memories, like a treasure to be discovered. A plausible explanation for why she would have snuck into Grim’s room this late at night.

And as Cronan found that reason, she built her strength against him.

She gathered all the love for Grim, all that she had once lost, then found, then recommitted. She remembered, she remembered, and it didn’t matter if Cronan made her forget, too, because her soul never would.

Slowly, she began to feel her fingers. They brushed the cold stone floor. She gritted her teeth, and her wrist escaped next.

She dug deep inside herself until she could move her arm, and this time, she did not reach out to strike Cronan, knowing that it would be a fruitless endeavor.

Instead, she flung her arm out and wrapped her hand around Grim’s ankle.

He gasped as if he had been burned.

Cronan’s shadows rushed out of her head, his expression looking disgusted . . . but not furious. He didn’t seem to have noticed that she had broken his hold. That she had moved.

Grim didn’t say a word.

And she knew she had succeeded in blocking the truth—about Oro and the starstick—from Cronan. She had fed him a lie.

Doing so had taken up almost all her energy. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, darkness caving in.

The last thing she saw was Grim’s horrified expression, as if one of those memories had made it to him.

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GRIM

The witch made him see something.

And as much as Grim fought to forget that memory, bury it down with every other useless part of his soul, he just couldn’t.

He saw the memory like he was swimming in it, like the witch had somehow plunged him inside that moment. He could feel his own emotions in it too. It was as if his feelings had merged with hers somehow. As if they had been intertwined. He had never sensed that with anyone before in his centuries of life. Never until her.

He lay in bed and replayed it over and over, like a drug he couldn’t quit.

A white dress discarded on the floor. His own clothes next to it, a pile of black. And she . . .

The witch was laying on the bed, fully naked, as if she existed only for him.

With clothes, without clothes, covered in grime, or cleaned and painted, she was beautiful. He knew it from the moment he saw her, a stranger on the floor. She was striking. It was simply a fact.

There was nothing simple about how mind-meltingly perfect she looked on the sheets in his room. Gazing at him with eyes that promised to fulfill everything he wanted.

He did not typically bow before gods. He did not pray. But he bowed before her and worshipped her like a zealot.

Her sounds, her taste, the way she bucked against him, needy and greedy, was enough to nearly do him in. He groaned against her, and it only made her arch her back, fighting to get even closer.

He lifted her hips and pinned her to him, and he could have broken without her even touching him, just feeling her own pleasure crest and

shatter. He almost joined her. She collapsed, tired and spent, and he would've been happy to rest now if that's what she wanted.

But before he could get a word out, she was dragging him over her. She was wrapping her legs around him and grinding herself on his length. The movement made him see stars.

"Please," she panted against his mouth. *Anything*, he thought. *I would give you anything, especially if you begged for it*.

So he pinned her hands above her head and leaned down to whisper, "Tonight, scream as loud as you want."

Then, he slowly sank into her, arms shaking as he fought the urge to break. She took all of him, clawing her nails into his knuckles, digging her heels into his back. She whimpered as he began to move, and he had to force himself to breathe. Her ankles locked behind him as he gave her everything she wanted.

And in this moment, he believed in everything, absolutely everything—because only some higher force could create something this perfect.

Grim's body jerked, knocking him out of the moment. Out of the memory.

He was panting. He was flushed. He . . .

He was losing his fucking mind.

This was exactly what she wanted, he knew. She wanted to make him doubt. Make him *feel*.

He wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

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ISLA

Grim began visibly recoiling from her whenever she was near. He would position his chair at dinner as far from her as possible, as if it was a physical pain to be near her.

And that was how she knew for certain he had seen one of the memories. Her plan was working.

She only hoped that his behavior meant that he was fighting his desire for her . . . and not that he was disgusted by it.

While he pretended she didn't exist, she noticed everything about him. So when he reached for his goblet of wine with his right hand, Isla sat up straighter. She knew even the smallest detail about her husband—like the fact that he always kept his dominant hand ready to grab his sword or wield his shadows, even in the middle of a meal.

She might have thought that the environment, with his own ancestor at the head of the table, would have put him at ease. But his posture was too rigid. His eyes, fixed on everyone in the room but her, remained alert.

"Is something wrong with your arm?" she asked quietly, while everyone else was locked in conversation about the preparations for the upcoming invasion of her planet.

Grim stiffened but otherwise did not acknowledge her question.

"I can—I can help you."

He huffed cruelly. As if he thought she would help him right off a cliff. She couldn't really blame him for that, after what he had seen.

The next night, the pain only seemed to have gotten worse. He nearly winced when his arm jostled and wasn't using it at all. She wondered how long it would be until Cronan noticed.

When Cronan banished Isla from the galaxy room for the evening, it was Grim who escorted her to her cell.

When they were in the privacy of the dungeons, she turned and said, “Decided to take me up on my offer then?”

His glare was piercing. “What do I use?” he demanded.

As a Wildling, she had basic healing knowledge. But this was not her world—and there was little nature left. She wasn’t sure if she could actually help him, but she would try her best.

“What kind of injury is it?”

“A cut,” he said simply.

That was odd. “Doesn’t Cronan have healing supplies?” A cut was hardly something that had ever brought Grim pain before. Unless it was laced with poison, like with the dreks.

“Didn’t work.”

She should have guessed she would be the last resort. She was grateful he was even speaking to her. “Can’t you ask Cronan?”

Grim’s jaw locked. He didn’t answer.

“You don’t want him to know.” She tilted her head. “You’re . . . hiding something from him.”

He must have sensed her hope, because his eyes turned scathing. “Just because I’m not completely aligned with him, doesn’t mean I’m aligned with *you*.” He spat the word, like the idea of them working together was disgusting. He looked at her and only saw his killer.

But she could see that he was becoming unmoored. By the memory? Was it making him hate her more . . . or less?

“Can I see it?”

Grim didn’t move. Right. He didn’t trust her either. How was she supposed to heal something she couldn’t examine?

Why would that even matter anyway? Unless . . . the injury itself was something important . . .

Wait. Had Grim given himself a skyre?

She frowned. He must have looked through her research when he was trying to get her back. He must have retraced her steps . . .

What if the skyre was slowly killing him? They were dangerous. It was easy to mess them up. If he was already in so much pain . . .

“Whatever it is you don’t want me to see, mask it.” She knew he could create illusions.

Begrudgingly, he held his arm out and slowly lifted the sleeve.

A circle was carved roughly into his skin. The lines weren't healing—as she watched, the skin was splitting and reforming, as if something was trying to undo the marking, reverse the skyre . . . and Grim's power was fighting back.

This must have been how Grim was able to use his power in this world. It wasn't his blood connection to Cronan after all. Somehow, he had discovered Cronan's unique skyre.

Cronan would have immediately known that Grim had found a way around his shield. Isla imagined he wouldn't have been happy about that, wanting instead for his heir to be as pliant and subservient as the rest of his subjects. But even if he could, he wouldn't forcibly remove the skyre if he wanted Grim to be loyal—just like he was trying to make Isla loyal. So, he was using his powers to fight it.

Did this mean Cronan was afraid of Grim attacking him? Of Grim actually joining with Isla and finding a way to destroy him, together?

Isla bit her lip. She didn't have her healing elixir here, and even if she did, she wasn't positive it would work. Not for an injury like this.

But she knew someone who could help.

Grim accompanied her to her cell. Lark was curled up on her side, glaring at both of them.

"Has the happy couple reunited?" she asked.

Isla sighed. "I need your blood," she said, flatly. "What do you want?"

Lark's power was regeneration. If Isla's theory was right, her blood would be the most potent cure.

Her ancestor's lip curled back. "You know what I want," she said. "He has it."

Isla's pulse quickened. The feather was the way she was going to get Oro the information he needed to find the starstick. She couldn't lose her only bargaining chip now.

"No, I—"

Lark turned her mocking gaze to Isla, her question clear: Who did Isla want to help more, Oro or Grim?

Isla swallowed.

When she didn’t immediately answer, her ancestor turned to Grim and outstretched her palm. “I want my feather.”

Grim just blinked at her. At first, Isla wondered if he didn’t remember. After all, Isla had been the one to discover it.

But then he reached into his pocket. Of course. That was why she hadn’t found it in his room—he had carried it on his person. It must have been in the bathroom while he had bathed, in the clothes he had discarded.

“Why do you want it?” he asked, revealing the feather. It was half charred, but still, Lark’s eyes gleamed.

“It’s a part of me,” she said. “I want to be made whole.” She sneered at the gaps in her body, at all the places that had been ripped apart and crudely put back together. “As whole as I can be.”

Grim seemed to be weighing his options. Her ancestor had nearly leveled his lands. She had killed hundreds of his people.

“Do you want to be healed or not?” she said.

His eyes roamed over her wounds like he could just take her blood without giving away the feather.

Lark seemed to sense that, because she smiled knowingly. “My blood isn’t so easily taken. And if you try, I’m sure Cronan would love to hear about this visit.” She tilted her head at Grim. “So, what will it be?”

Grim’s injury must have been impacting him more than Isla thought, because she watched him hand the feather over. The moment it touched Lark’s hand, there was a burst of light. Isla watched as her body began piecing together—she wasn’t completely healed, but it was much better than before. She took a deep, shuddering breath, grinning.

Grim opened his palm in return. He clearly didn’t want to show her the marking, even disguised.

Lark gave him a scathing look, not trusting him either. She sliced her skin open with a sharpened nail, and only a single drop of blood was revealed. She dripped it into Isla’s hand instead.

“I’ll know if you use it for anything else,” she said to Isla. “And I’m in much better shape to hurt you in here.”

Isla’s jaw worked, realizing Lark could now pose far more danger to her.

“Fine,” Grim said, looking angry about everything. He roughly took Isla’s arm—

And they were in his room.

The last time she had been in here, Grim had been shirtless. And he had betrayed her, bringing her to Cronan. She could still feel the tears in her head from his shadows.

Grim wasted no time, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling up his sleeve to reveal the circle. She gingerly perched next to him, waiting to see if he would object. He didn't.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked before her blood-soaked fingers could touch him.

She looked up at him. He was peering at her with narrowed eyes. She imagined he was combing through her emotions. He glanced at the symbol on her own arm but didn't ask about it.

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked. Then she pressed her fingers against the mark. He was concealing its true shape from her touch too. She covered the entire swath of skin to be safe.

Grim's entire body went stiff, shifting away from her slightly. "I don't like to be touched," he said through his teeth.

"I know," she whispered.

She kept her hand on his skin, his body both fighting it and welcoming it. She could tell he was in pain by the way his hands were clenched, his knuckles white. His fingers curled around his bed frame, and the wood splintered.

Her hold didn't loosen. She needed time to fully heal the skyre so that it was completely seared into his skin, impenetrable by even Cronan's power.

She was turned toward him. Their knees were nearly touching. Grim's jaw tensed. His voice was thick as his gaze bored into hers. "I don't understand you," he said. "I called you weak. I called you a fool. I told you . . . I would *kill you* . . ."

Isla just shrugged a shoulder. "You're a bastard in each lifetime, I guess," she said. "In every version of our love story."

"There is no love story," he said, his hand in a fist, the veins of his arm quivering. His voice was so full of malice, she was positive he was considering throwing her out of his room, despite needing her help.

"Not yet," she breathed.

After a long pause, he spoke like it was hard to get the words out, around the pain. "This. . . . this isn't going to soften me. If that was your hope, it's not going to work. I'm just using you."

“That’s not why I’m doing it,” she said, shaking her head. She applied more pressure and he hissed.

“Then why?” he demanded. “Why waste your efforts healing me only to kill me later on? *It doesn’t make sense*.”

He had done the same. She hadn’t known it at the time, but he had planned to kill her by using her to unlock Cronan’s sword. Still, he had healed her on multiple occasions. But she knew the Grim in front of her didn’t care about that. And all she could tell him was the truth.

“Because I love you.”

That word was a mistake. His entire face shifted, transformed into a mask of rage. “You don’t love *me*. You love a weak, foolish version of me that is dead.” His lip curled in disgust. And as the skyre fully healed, he portaled Isla back to her cell, where she landed roughly on her side while Lark’s smug laugh echoed around her.

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ISLA

Isla shoved herself into a seated position with a groan and glared at her ancestor, who was still cackling. “You got your feather,” she said. “Now, where is the portaling device?”

Lark only sneered at her. “You made your choice. The feather was in exchange for the blood your husband needed.”

Isla slammed her hand down against the damp cell floor, exhausted and furious. “I don’t have time for your games. Cronan destroys my world in less than two weeks.”

“This isn’t a game,” Lark said. “We had an agreement, and you changed it. I held up my end of the bargain.”

She seemed to relish in Isla’s anger. Isla closed her eyes tightly. “What else do you want?” she said. She didn’t have time for this. Oro was in trouble. She opened her eyes at the silence.

Lark made a show of thinking. “Let’s see . . . I want you dead,” she said. “No?” She sighed. “Well, then. I guess you’re never going to find the portaling device. I hid it very well, you see. You won’t find it without me.”

Isla wanted to scream. She would kill Lark with her bare hands right now if she knew how. But all she could do was curl up on the cold stone floor. She didn’t even have the energy to cry.

Isla found it hard to hope at all. Like any muscle, it had tired. She was running out of time before Cronan killed her and everyone she loved—since she would never join him. She didn’t have much time to convince Grim to align with her. She was starting to suspect that even with all the time in the world, he wouldn’t be swayed. She knew how stubborn he was, how adamant he had been to never fall in love before he met her.

She sat in silence as the attendants fussed over her, dressing her up for yet another dinner. She barely noticed when the men tried to speak with her. She didn't cringe against their leering glances. She couldn't find it within her to care. Not even as Grim sat beside her as if she wasn't even there.

Hurt had a limit. And she had reached it.

Isla didn't think things could get worse, until the meal was interrupted by the doors slamming open and the knights dragging someone into the room.

No.

The woman from the oasis. *Jessel*. Her eyes found Isla's immediately and narrowed. She must think Isla was part of this.

Isla stood—and was roughly slammed back into her chair by an invisible force.

Cronan smiled at her as more people of all ages were led inside. The tattered fabrics they wore were a stark contrast to Cronan's gleaming armor.

Cronan stood. "When I conquered this world," he said, "I promised the survivors that I would let them live. All those who did not oppose me were able to keep their homes. Their *lives*. And look at how they repay me . . ."

His shadows filled the room and formed images before them. Isla saw groups meeting in secret, plotting attacks, taking down knights. Being captured and dragged away. Isla recognized many of them as the people in the room now.

The illusion shifted to one of Jessel—helping Isla. It was a memory Cronan had stolen from Isla's mind after Grim brought her back to the castle.

Jessel didn't even look at her. Isla's heart was in her throat. She wanted to do something, but she knew Cronan would just stop her. This was almost worse than being held completely still—even though she could move, it was pointless. Next to her, Grim's face didn't betray a single emotion.

Cronan tutted his tongue and addressed the room. "Learn from this. Learn that those who you save, those who you let live, will betray you eventually. You must slaughter them first, or become the slaughtered."

Isla's stomach sank.

"But I always offer a second chance . . . an opportunity to show strength."

One of the knights brought the first person forward. He was hardly more than a boy, and his clothes hung off his gaunt form. *Starving*. He was starving, while Cronan sat here with a table covered in a half-eaten feast and silverware made from the bones of the gods.

The boy didn't glance at the food, instead looking squarely at Cronan, bravely staring down his fate.

Cronan took one of his dinner knives and handed it to him. "Here," he said, his voice magnanimous. "Wound me, and I'll let you live."

The boy's hand trembled as he took the blade. But then his eyes sharpened. He was quick, quicker than he should be, given his starved state, as he lunged toward Cronan—

He didn't even make it close before the knife was plucked from his grasp and stabbed into his hand. But instead of emerging from the other side, the blade sank fully into his flesh, traveling up his arm, beneath his skin, through tissue and bone, as he shrieked in agony. He was so thin that Isla could see the shape of it clearly, and her mouth parted in horror. The knife moved from his shoulder into his chest, where it finally pierced his heart, the other end sticking out from his ribs in a spurt of blood. The boy collapsed. The room erupted with screams.

"Next," Cronan said calmly.

Another person was brought forward. Younger. Just a kid—

The men at the dinner table chuckled in amusement. Isla barely heard it over the roaring in her ears. She had to do *something*, even if it was useless. She glanced frantically at the objects in front of her to decide on the best weapon. A plate? Another knife?

Only a hand on her knee stopped her. She looked down at it, then up at Grim's face, but his expression revealed nothing. He still appeared bored, watching the events across the room with disinterest.

But those fingers, they curled around her leg and *squeezed*. Keeping her from doing something reckless.

Isla's eyes burned. She couldn't just—just sit here and let Cronan kill them all. They were children. And Jessel had helped her.

In the next moment, the child was bleeding on the floor, dead, and Isla had never felt so powerless.

"Next."

A man. Older. Cronan offered the knife, and the man just spat at his feet. He didn’t even take it.

She could only sit and watch as Cronan sliced his blade right across the man’s throat, nearly all the way through to the bone. He crumpled to the ground in a lifeless heap. The knights dragged his body out of the room, blood pouring from his wound, his head hanging off just strips of skin. Isla nearly retched.

The next was forced forward. An elderly woman. Cronan laughed as she threw herself to his feet and begged, but he showed her no mercy.

Again and again, person after person. Grim’s fingers curled around Isla’s leg as an anchor against the rage. Against the sadness. Against the pain. She knew that this display bothered him too.

But still, he didn’t stop it.

When Jessel was dragged to the front, a thick layer of blood already coated the floor.

Cronan was the most powerful person in the universe. That was clear. They were no match for him. No one was.

Still, Isla stood. She couldn’t just keep fucking *sitting* and *watching*.

The entire room turned to face her, including Jessel. She could feel Grim’s eyes on her, but she didn’t even glance at him.

The world seemed distant and roaring, like a faraway wave, as she moved steadily around the table. She didn’t have powers. Cronan ruled over both her body and mind. As she approached, he examined her curiously, as if awaiting her next move.

Cronan wanted her willing. He was still hoping she would join him.

When she reached Cronan, she just extended her palm, and said, “Let me.”

Cronan had no reason to fear her. She didn’t have access to her abilities here. There was no trace of a storm. And even if she did, he had overpowered her so easily before.

So he handed over the blade.

She offered it to Jessel. “Wound me,” Isla said, “and live.” She gave her the same chance Cronan had given the rest.

Hesitantly, she took it. Her eyes were sharp, full of anger and suspicion, but a sliver of hope shined. Her fingers curled around the knife. She lunged.

It was too easy. Isla darted out of the way, twisted Jessel around, plucked the knife from her grasp.

And slit the woman’s throat.

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GRIM

The room was silent. The Wildling carefully handed the knife back to Cronan. She stepped over the body and quietly returned to her seat.

Cronan looked pleased.

“It seems she might be turned yet,” one of the heads of planets said. “You were right, my liege.”

“Of course, I was,” Cronan said. “I told you she would see the benefits of joining me.” He returned to his place at the head of the table and raised his glass. She returned the gesture.

They drank, and Grim watched the crimson wine stain her lips.

Even when the conversation at the table resumed, Grim couldn’t stop his mind from wandering to her. What game was she playing? With her bleeding heart, she didn’t seem the type to kill an innocent woman like that.

You don’t know her, he reminded himself. All this proved was that she was unpredictable, a stone-cold killer if she needed to be. Capable of killing even someone she swore she loved.

But from where she leaned back in her chair, he noticed her smile did not reach her eyes. For the first time, he wished he had mind abilities, like Cronan. He wished he could sense more than just her emotions. Her aura was paler than before, as if drained of its essence. Where she had once been fiery and fierce, she was now gray and hollow.

Had Cronan . . . broken her? Had Grim’s behavior made her realize that she stood no chance at getting him to side with her against his ancestor?

Had she truly chosen to join them?

The image of her slitting the woman’s throat, her eyes hard and cruel, remained seared in Grim’s mind, even hours later. He told himself he only cared because she would be the one to kill him if he wasn’t careful . . .

So he needed to know if she was working on a plan against him.

It was late at night before he portaled down into the prisons. He wasn't even sure what he was going to do. Interrogate her right then and there? Try to get her to admit why she did it?

He was rounding the corner, when he heard it. *Her*.

She was crying. Her sorrow swept over him, thick as fog.

He knew for certain then that the entire display at dinner had been a façade. But even Cronan had believed it . . . which meant that she had kept part of her mind hidden from him.

Without powers.

But why kill the woman, then? In order to make Cronan believe she was on his side?

He suddenly remembered something Cronan had said. That the Wildling's flair was absorption. Had she killed the woman to keep her alive, somehow?

Was she hoping there was a way to bring her back?

It was the only explanation for her current suffering. Grim knew he should relay this to Cronan the way he had before, to show her again that her blind belief in him was useless.

But as he listened to her sobs, Grim couldn't stomach betraying her again. Not after she had healed his arm. Not after she had done *something* about the innocent deaths, when he had sat back like a coward.

It was something about her defiance and her quiet strength, about her foolish faith and unwavering loyalty to him that had him striding back toward his chambers instead of the galaxy room. And creating a temporary shadow barrier around her cell so the knights wouldn't hear her.

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ORO

He was alone on his balcony, staring worriedly out at the horizon instead of resting like his friends thought he was, when he saw Isla materialize in front of him.

Isla. Her appearance alone was like a balm—but also a pain. She was the fever and the medicine.

She was cleaner now than before. Made up, even. It was better than the injuries, of course, but Oro worried that her circumstances were maybe more dangerous than they were previously.

Especially when he noticed the tears on her face . . . and the blood stain on her sleeve.

She spoke quickly, like she wasn't sure how much time they had.

"I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. "I haven't been able to get Lark to tell me where my portaling device is."

Oro tried to keep the despair he felt from showing. There wasn't any point in upsetting her more.

These last few days had been just endless disappointment. Wall after wall to break down, he himself *becoming* a wall between these beasts and his island.

A person could only take so much. Even Cinder was weakening. She was exerting too much of her energy, so Oro had sent her and Maren to Star Isle two days prior, where they were safer, so she could rest. His friends were injured in the last attack.

Now it was just him, standing between worlds. Trying to keep the door open, while not letting anything else in.

It was a certainty that he would fall. He couldn't do it alone. He needed more help.

“Do you think it’s on Nightshade?” he said. Lark had gotten there from Lightlark, after all.

“Most likely.”

He frowned. Well, then he would have to go find it himself. “I’m going to fly there,” he said. “I’ll look for it.” The journey would take days, but he had no choice—they needed that portaling device.

He stood. He would get Cinder and have her and his friends stand watch. They’d had days to recover.

“Wait!” Isla’s voice stopped him. “Lark said you’ll never be able to find it without her.”

Oro’s eyes closed. Of course the witch would have hidden it deep underground, or somewhere else he couldn’t even imagine.

They didn’t have time. Every hour mattered.

Cronan’s attack was just days away. If he flew to Nightshade and still couldn’t find it . . . he might not even have enough time to return to Lightlark before Cronan invaded.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Isla, curled against the ground, body coiled. He knew her—he knew that she was lost in her mind. Likely hating herself for all the mistakes she always put solely on her own shoulders. She was slipping away. Losing strength.

But he needed her to keep fighting—for all of them on Lightlark. And for herself.

“Then I guess you’ll have to convince her some other way,” he said. It was a challenge. He waited, hoping it was enough to reignite the fire within her that had always been like that forever flame on Sun Isle. It never went out. Ever. Even when all chances and circumstances seemed stacked against her.

If it went out now . . . their world was well and truly doomed.

Isla parted her lips as if to make another excuse. But slowly, she lifted her chin. Her spine straightened. “I will,” she said, her voice steady.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll be waiting.”

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ISLA

Isla was summoned to Cronan’s galaxy room by his knights in the morning, just as she always had been before Grim arrived.

She assumed Cronan wanted to resume their torture sessions and that maybe he was suspicious of her motives for killing Jessel, but when she walked inside, she was surprised to find a small table set up in the middle. It was a fraction of the size of the one the council used for dinner and made of ancient, intricately designed wood.

If only she could access her abilities, she could sense its properties.

And twist it into a pike that could skewer Cronan through the heart.

Cronan stood and motioned toward the open seat across from him. One of his guards unceremoniously shoved her into it before the knights left and doors closed.

In the silence that followed, Isla waited for Cronan to speak, to explain why he’d brought her here. But then a flurry of attendants swept in, heralding tea. She watched it be poured and couldn’t help but think of Oro and his demonstration during the Centennial. And all the tea they’d had together in the months afterward.

She couldn’t fail him—she’d get the answers she needed out of Lark by any means necessary.

The tea was poured and they were finally alone. “Are you ready to join me?” he asked. Straight to the point. “Your display last night was quite surprising. Has my descendant been able to convince you to hand yourself over?”

“No.” Isla’s eyes never left his. She needed more time. She only had ten days left before the invasion.

Irritation flashed in his expression—but he didn’t look completely surprised. “I suspected enough. Grimshaw is powerful, but he lacks vision.”

He eyed her. “You, on the other hand . . . play the long game. You didn’t respond well to our previous sessions . . .”—*Where you tortured me*, Isla thought, hand clenched around the curve of the table—“I thought we could have a conversation in a more . . . civilized manner,” he said, good-naturedly, as if he was not the one who had forced her to the floor and cracked her mind open like it was a stubborn walnut.

She was silent. He motioned toward the tea, and she just stared at it.

“It’s just tea,” he said. “Not drugged, I assure you. Why would I bother? I could force you to do anything I wish, already . . . including, telling me the truth.”

She swallowed at his threat. She would much rather drink potentially poisoned tea than have his shadows digging around in her mind.

She took a sip and was met with a pleasant, calming flavor of an unrecognizable flower. It reminded her that even though this world was a shadow of its former glory, some beauty had survived. It had endured.

The glass clinked against its plate as she set the cup back down.

“Now, then,” Cronan said. “I’m going to ask you questions. And I’m going to hope I don’t have to force myself into your head to get answers.” She sat back in her chair, waiting for the first question. “Why did you kill that woman after she helped you?”

She took a sip of her tea. She told him exactly what she thought he wanted to hear. And the truth. “To absorb her power.”

She was going to die anyway. What Isla didn’t tell him was that she still hoped she could kill Lark and bring everyone back. Including Jessel.

At least, by dying by her hand, there was hope.

Cronan tented his fingers in front of his chin, pondering her. “You see . . . we aren’t so different, you and I. We both take power. It makes us stronger.”

His head tilted at her. “But you are halved. Wildling . . . and Nightshade. Life . . . and death. Killer . . . and creator.” He pursed his lips. “I see the war within you. You’ve felt divided for a while now, haven’t you? Between who you really are, and the person everyone else wants you to be?”

“Yes,” she answered honestly. And with that, there was a slight bite in her brain, a pinprick, and she watched as a memory poured from her mind into the room. Cronan had plucked it out of her head with a razor-thin shadow. So much for not using his methods.

The memory danced around them. Isla saw herself, covered in snakes. Her eyes gleamed as she strutted through Grim's throne room, the severed head of the Nightshade who had tried to assassinate her held in her fist by the hair.

Cronan hummed, and it reverberated through the room. "Queen of darkness," he said. "That's who you are. Anything else is just a mask. An ill-fitting veil over the truth."

When Isla didn't respond, Cronan chuckled. "No?" She didn't feel him scrummage through her mind, so she guessed he could read the defiance in her face.

"Tell me honestly," he continued. "Would you prefer to be locked up and powerless, back in that room of yours . . ." Isla thought he was talking about her cell in his dungeons, but a new memory bloomed around them—one he had long ago plundered. The galaxy room disappeared and she was back on the Wildling newland, trapped and alone. She knew it wasn't real, it was an illusion, but her heart hammered on instinct. "Or would you kill innocent people, just to free yourself?"

Isla frowned. She had her answer at the ready, but he waved her away before she could utter a single word. "A useless question," he said, "considering you already made your choice. If you had just stayed in that room, a lot of people on your world would still be alive . . ."

True. But now Isla knew that many more would have died. But she didn't dare think about how she knew, lest he break through her mind again.

"Why are you so loyal to a world that already thinks you're a villain?" He seemed genuinely curious.

"Because it's my duty," she said. "It has been since the moment I was born."

"No. It's your duty to *rule*."

"I don't think ruling means killing and controlling. I think it means helping your people. Sacrificing for them."

His lips curved into a crooked smile like a shard of glass. "And is that what you've done, Isla? Helped your people?"

She didn't drop his gaze, and he just hummed, taking another sip of his tea.

She took the opportunity to ask her own question. "Did you create nexus?" Remlar had told her as much, but she needed to hear it from

Cronan.

He seemed mildly surprised by that. “Not as a concept. But I’m the one who tied rulers to their subjects.”

“Why?”

“I did the same to the heads of my planets. It’s easier to rule one person whose life impacts thousands, or millions . . . and easier to kill them, too.”

Isla swallowed. For some reason, when Cronan had outlined killing everyone in her world, she had imagined an invasion. A war. But Cronan didn’t have to kill thousands. He didn’t have to slaughter entire realms. He just had to kill their leaders.

“What does Horus have to do with it?” she asked. The rebels on Lightlark had been convinced Oro’s death would end nexus. Remlar had all but confirmed it too.

“His line was afflicted with the original nexus curse,” he said. “I simply borrowed from it. His family was not always so noble . . .”

Curses were a Nightshade power, though. Was Oro’s family cursed by another Nightshade? By another power altogether?

She was knocked from her thoughts by Cronan’s next question. “Have you ever seen a silver pool?”

Her teacup paused on its way to her mouth. It was just a momentary stutter before her lips pressed against the warmed porcelain. She kept her expression flat and calm as she took a sip and went to put the cup down. She had just convinced herself that he hadn’t noticed when his shadows burst forth, striking her straight in the center of her mind. She dropped the cup and heard it shatter, but she couldn’t see anything. Her vision had turned black, like a light suddenly extinguished.

In the deepest corner of her brain, a part he hadn’t breached yet, she could almost see it. Silver, glimmering like a star. The water seemed to slither away from his shadows, deeper into her head, as if hiding.

Cronan pushed harder, carving more of her mind, his shadows like an arrow intent on going right through the back of her skull.

She scrambled to build up her wall. To make him believe he had reached the back of her head, when in actuality, he hadn’t. She knew he didn’t suspect she could do that.

So, when he reached it, she felt his disappointment sear through her.

“No. I’ve never seen a silver pool,” she replied.

It was like he didn’t hear her, or he didn’t care. She could feel him clawing through her mind, shredding as he went, and she had never seen him so hurried. So desperate. She felt his anger grow, flaming through her skull, his power pressing against bone. The pressure had her screaming. She thought her eyes would burst.

But it was useless. He found nothing.

He ripped out of her mind, and she fell forward onto the table, hands landing onto the teacup shards. Her palms bled, crimson mixing with the hot tea. She panted, gasping for air, her pulse so fast, her heart rattled her ribs.

Cronan frowned down at her, lip curled back, every air of civility gone from his demeanor. She knew he had a reason to keep her alive, to convince her to align with him. His obsession with the silver pool had overshadowed everything.

“Take her away,” Cronan said, and two knights swept into the room. They grabbed her beneath each shoulder. Her body felt boneless as they dragged her through the halls. Her head lulled. Her vision blurred.

Fuck him.

Fuck this castle.

Fuck these guards, who did his bidding.

Her voice hoarse from all the screaming, she said to one of the knights, “Are you even a person under there? Or a mindless beast, following orders?”

There was no response. Of course there wasn’t.

Isla laughed ruefully, suddenly delirious with pain and exhaustion. “I would love to know what about his cause drew you in. Was it the destroying worlds? Killing millions of people? Or—”

Before she could get another word out, she was slammed against the wall face-first. Her teeth sang from the impact. She could feel blood rushing down her nose. For some reason, that made her smile.

“Was it something I said?” She sighed. “If hearing your own beliefs spoken aloud causes this reaction, then—”

Her scalp burned as the knights pulled her back by the hair and smacked her skull against the stone once more, her forehead taking the brunt of the impact. It hurt less than Cronan’s shadows had. As her vision dimmed, she still couldn’t muster a shred of regret for opening her mouth.

They gathered her hair in a fist, to send her head back toward the wall, but before they could, a voice spun from darkness itself echoed down the hall.

“Release her.”

The knights paused, but their grip on her hair didn’t lessen. She turned, cheek pressed to the bloody stone, and watched as Grim stalked toward them.

“We don’t take orders from you,” one of the knights spat. So, he was a person. His voice was strange—deep and resonant, like he was ancient, perhaps older than the world she came from.

That didn’t seem to matter as Grim turned them both to heaps of ash.

The *metal*. Grim had turned the shademade *metal* to cinders . . .

Isla slid down the wall, released from their hold. Her boots slipped in the mess.

She knew her husband was powerful. She had *shared* that power. But on this world, it had seemed that he had gotten stronger.

“I—”

“Don’t speak,” he growled, before taking her by the arm. His touch was steadying, not nearly as firm as it was during those first days after he lost his memories. He pulled her to her feet, but her knees immediately buckled. Her head . . . it pulsed with pain. Even standing seemed like a momentous task. He sighed heavily before kneeling—and taking her into his arms.

It was like an echo of the past. Of so many memories that this moment had conjured.

And he had no idea.

In a daze, she leaned against his shoulder and said, “You once killed everyone in a room because one touched me.”

She looked up at him. Her vision was going in and out, but she noticed him frown. His eyes dipped to hers before focusing on the hall again. “Sounds dramatic,” he said, flatly.

Her lips twitched. Her whole body was spent, her energy nearly gone, but she fought to stay conscious. “It was,” she said. “Then you carried me . . . just like this . . .” A half-crazed laugh spilled from her lips. It almost sounded like a sob. She lifted one of her hands, glass still sticking out of her palm. “You’re not going to believe it . . . but my hands were injured then

too.” He stopped, then. It was as if he hadn’t noticed her bleeding palms. “You healed them . . . with me on your lap.”

That made his eyebrows come together. “Why were you on my lap?”

She shrugged. “You said it was to keep me still . . . but I have other theories.”

He blinked, long and hard. It seemed like he was struggling to remain focused on her injuries. “Your powers are suppressed. Your hands will scar.”

She sighed. “Does it matter, when I’m going to be dead in ten days?”

His eyes narrowed. “You have another choice. Another path.”

She looked up at him. “Do you think I don’t know you plan to kill me if he doesn’t?”

Grim didn’t even deny his plans to kill her. He was peering at her like she had lost her mind.

“You forget, husband, that I’ve lived through this before with you. Every step. Clearly, some things stick every time.” Him, plotting against her. Him, saving her anyway. She tilted her head at him and his incredulous expression. “I have to believe this ending will be the same too.”

“Death, you mean?”

She shook her head, but that made her dizzy and she groaned. “No. Death wasn’t the end. It was just the start, really.”

She knew she wasn’t making sense. She couldn’t keep her thoughts in order. They kept slipping out in all directions, as if the connections in her brain had been severed.

His gaze broke from her face as if he was snapping out of a trance of some kind. He started walking again, tearing down the hall in long strides. He must have gotten impatient because then they were portaling . . .

She was in his room.

He set her down immediately, as if her touch burned him. She sank to the ground, her dress pooling on the floor. She held her stinging hands out in front of her. They really were a bloody mess.

“Here,” Grim said, throwing vials and bandages at her. He even tossed her a needle and thread. Supplies he must have found for himself, when he was trying to heal his arm.

She stared down at the tools, her mind still numb. Getting the pieces out of both of her hands would be complicated . . . and she would almost

certainly need to be stitched.

She looked up at him from the ground. He leaned against his bedpost, his arms crossed over his chest. He wouldn't help her until she asked.

Bastard.

She didn't want to have to plead, not like this, but she was worried she would do more harm than good if she healed herself in this state. Finally, she whispered, "Will you please help me?"

He tilted his head at her. "Eager to be back on my lap, Wildling?"

Isla ignored the flash of feeling at his words. Even in this state, even in this situation, she had pride. "Never mind," she said. "I can do it myself." And she could. She'd healed herself plenty of times before she had ever met him. She would find a way to do it, even now, while her head was spinning.

He just stood and watched.

She winced as she removed the first piece of glass, and it clinked against the floor. This was harder and more painful on her own, but she refused to beg him for help again. She really had forgotten how damned infuriating he could be.

Finally, all the glass was out, so she poured the alcohol on both her hands. Her body tensed at the burn. She cursed loudly.

Grim raised a brow at her. "You have a dirty mouth," he murmured.

"You have no idea," she breathed. She watched his eyes widen in surprise for a fraction of a moment. She held his gaze, as if in challenge. "But you did . . . once."

He swallowed.

She looked away, grabbing the needle to weave it through her skin. She cursed again and ignored Grim's deep chuckle. When she was finished with one hand, she cut the thread with her teeth. She heard Grim swallow again, and found his eyes glued to her mouth. He dragged his gaze back up to hers. "How do you know how to heal so well?" he asked.

She resumed her work. "Same way as you," she countered.

She stole glances at him as her statement washed over him. As he considered that they might have had a brutal childhood in common. She had told him before, about both being locked in rooms and trained, but it seemed he hadn't considered the implications. His eyes hardened in understanding, but he didn't say a word. She kept stitching, but her vision

was starting to go in and out. It hurt to focus. She winced as the needle pierced the wrong spot. As her grip faltered.

Apparently, her work wasn't clean or fast enough for his liking.

"Here," he said, the word full of impatience, as he pushed off the bedpost. He kneeled before her roughly, but his touch was featherlight as he gently put her hand in his. Her palm looked so much smaller than his. He took the needle and began stitching her himself.

She took the opportunity to pore over his face while he worked. His eyes were narrowed in concentration.

"What?" he demanded.

His features started to blur. She blinked them back into focus. Her mind felt loose, unraveled. "We always start off as enemies," she said. "Trained to hate each other. We lie and steal and fight. Until we learn we aren't so different. That we're . . . we're on the same side." She swallowed. "You hurt me with your words. Then . . . you heal me." Her laugh was half-crazed. "It's always like this."

He frowned. "You say that as if this isn't just the *second* time."

She lifted a shoulder. "Even if it was the hundredth, I still think it would be the same. Us . . . always being both the curse and the cure for each other's souls. The wound . . . and the stitches. Just because we're always on opposite sides of fate."

She didn't know if she was making sense. Her mind was slipping, but she had to say this.

"But we used to wish for a world where we didn't have crowns. Where we weren't ever enemies. Where fate didn't care if we loved each other. Where we weren't each other's downfall or ruin. Where . . . there were no prophecies. No stakes. Where we could just be the balm. Not the blade."

Her eyes closed tightly as she remembered the illusion Cronan had shown. One of her futures. She didn't want to hurt him.

She never wanted to hurt him.

"Our world has always viewed us as weapons. Only seeing the ways we can wound. But we can heal too . . . and we did. And we *do*. Every time."

She opened her eyes. Hand still grasped in his, he looked down at her. He was finished; her cuts were all closed. Yet he didn't drop her hand or her gaze. She sat up on her knees to get closer to his level.

The damage to her head, from both Cronan and the knights, made her mind throb, made it difficult to find the words. Still, she managed. “You want to know why we fell in love? Not because we were lonely. But because we were hurt. And in each other . . . we found a cure.”

Isla didn’t breathe. Her whole world narrowed to the cool gray of Grim’s eyes as he held her gaze. They drifted closer. Closer. As if brought inevitably together by the gravity between them. Until their mouths were just inches apart. His fingers curled over hers.

Then, she was gone. Back in her cell.

Healed and still covered in blood.

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ORO

Oro was so confident that Isla would find out the location of the portaling device that he set out for Nightshade. To get there from Lightlark, he would be flying for days. He knew, because he had made this exact same flight months prior. In order to see *her*.

During that journey, the days had passed devastatingly slowly. He had been consumed with worry about Isla. How strange to think about that after everything that had happened recently. At least she had been on *this world*. Now, Oro couldn't even get to her, no matter how far he flew.

And she was trapped with the most powerful person who had ever lived.

Oro could almost feel her pain through their bond now, as if Cronan was hurting her. He tightened his hold on the threads between them.

And he saw a pool.

A shining, glittering, silver pool, right in his mind. Was Isla projecting this to him?

In the next instant, he saw the endless sea below him again. Nothing but rolling waves that stretched to the horizon. He flew through wispy clouds as the sun warmed his neck and back.

Just when Oro had started to believe he had imagined the pool, the ocean flattened, the waves stilling so much that it looked like a mirror. The water glistened silver and bright.

The pool.

He saw himself reflected in its surface, flying. He wasn't alone . . . There was a woman with silver hair and eyes right next to him. Matching his pace as they soared through the sky.

He turned abruptly, but the air to his side was clear. Nothing for hundreds of miles.

A voice echoed in his mind, saying, “Oro Rey, king of Lightlark, you have been chosen by the pool.”

Oro blinked. The pool?

As if the woman heard his thoughts, she said, “The Pool of Possibilities.”

He looked down at the water again. A spot below him rippled, as if something had fallen into its center. And as the surface wobbled, the image it reflected transformed.

“You will have a choice to make,” the voice said. He couldn’t see the woman anymore, but he could feel her, could sense her power in the air around him.

“What choice?” he asked.

The woman didn’t answer, but the surface of the pool had settled into an image. A memory.

Oro saw himself with his brother. Violet, the Wildling ruler, was right next to him. This was the moment Egan told him he wanted to abdicate.

“Ask the pool a question. See how events might have unfolded differently.”

Oro didn’t know who this woman was, or what this pool was, or if perhaps he was hallucinating due to lack of sleep, but he couldn’t help but ask the question that had haunted him his entire reign. Through every difficult decision. Through seasons of war and hopelessness.

What if Egan had never decided to abdicate as king?

In the pool, he saw a new future that very strongly resembled his past. Aurora inevitably found out about Egan and Violet’s affair. She cast the curses out of heartbreak and betrayal. Thousands of people died, including Oro’s brother. Oro became king.

Another question, then—

What if Egan had never fallen in love with Violet?

The pool did not shift.

“In every possibility, they fall in love,” the woman said. “There was never any stopping it.”

Oro gritted his teeth and tried again.

What if Grim hadn’t found the heart of Lightlark for Aurora?

It was how she had cast the curses, using the Nightshade power trapped within the heart.

Finally, with that question, Oro saw a new series of events unfold. He watched as a furious Aurora swept through the castle, filling it with Starling energy. She killed Violet first—then Egan.

Then Oro, because he was with them.

At the death of its king, and Oro, the entire island crumbled and fractured, until it was nothing but ruin that sank into the depths of the sea. Until there was nothing left at all.

Oro tensed, blinking as the image in the pool cleared. His heart was racing.

"You see," the woman said. "It would have led to even more bloodshed."

It couldn't be real. But he could feel the truth of it, in the pool. For so long, Oro had hated Grim for his role in the curses . . .

When his actions had actually saved the island. Saved *him*.

No. There had to have been something that could have changed, to stop all of it. To have avoided the curses.

What would have happened if I never fell in love with Isla Crown?

The pool was still, Oro's frown reflected in its waters.

"In every possibility, you fall in love with her," the woman said. "As long as you meet her, you love her."

Love. He closed his eyes against the memories.

Fine. He needed to ask a better question.

What would have happened if I never met her?

The pool shifted.

He saw himself exactly how he looked at the start of the Centennial. Hollow, cold. Closed off. Dying. And it only got worse through all the trials. Through the end of the Centennial. He never learned to thaw his heart.

The curses were never broken. They finally took their toll on him, and he died. The island died with him.

He ground his teeth, trying to find the right question to get the most ideal future. To finally see where they had all messed up, to bring themselves to their current circumstances.

He tried to find a path where it didn't feel like his heart and soul were breaking.

What if Cleo had not attended the last Centennial? What if the curses never happened? What if Grim's father had never declared war? What if I had never lost my parents?

He flew toward Nightshade and lived dozens of versions of his life. Alternate endings to a story he already knew.

And even in possibilities where his family was still here with him, even in possibilities where the curses never occurred, even in possibilities where all his problems had seemed to have been solved . . .

He never ended up as happy as when he had been with her.

The realization stung. He didn't need the pool to tell him this, but even after the heartbreak of the last few weeks, that hadn't changed. Even when he didn't end up with her, even when she chose Grim, just having known her for a little while was enough to have made him happier than in any other life.

"Why are you showing me this?" Oro asked, his voice tight, his head pounding. He had been flying for hours, but his mind was more exhausted than his body. All of this was in the past. It had already happened. Even if he knew now what he might have done differently, it didn't matter.

"I told you. Because soon, you will make a choice. You have seen so much of the past already . . . But until now, you haven't explored your own."

Oro didn't know how the woman could sense he had used the Threads of Time, but she was right. He had been lost in the past, had traced his ancestors' footsteps over thousands of years. He had seen how predictably history repeated itself, over and over.

"You can break the cycle," the woman said.

"*How*?" he asked desperately.

But when Oro looked below him, the pool had vanished. Only dark, undulating waves remained. The moon was bright in the sky, glistening off of the sea. He had been lost in his mind for an entire day.

He swallowed, the silver woman's words haunting him. He had plenty of time left to contemplate them as he raced toward Nightshade.

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ISLA

Lark was sleeping.

The feather was clutched in her hands, as if she didn’t want to be parted from it for even a moment. She hadn’t seen her ancestor sleep soundly before. Perhaps the pain had been too great, the way Cronan had left her. Now, it seemed she had healed enough to rest.

She had told Oro to wait for her, but she knew he wouldn’t. His faith in her was unwavering, even now. He was probably already halfway to Nightshade. He would have had to abandon his island in the midst of the creature invasions. He had to leave his friends to fight without him . . .

All for the belief that she would do her part by discovering the starstick’s location.

She had tried, but she had nothing left to offer Lark. Nothing left to bargain with.

Isla laid on the filthy cell floor and looked up at the only window in this cell, perched high up the wall. From this angle, she could see a shred of the moon, staring down at her. Almost smeared away completely by the strange shade of sky—peculiar even in darkness.

But then it was covered completely.

By a dark cloud.

Ever so slowly, Isla started to feel that seed of power within her bloom to life.

Her eyes flicked over to Lark’s sleeping form. Now that she was mostly healed, she posed a risk. But the incoming storm didn’t rouse Lark. It was as if her body was catching up with all the sleep she had missed when she had just been pieces that hardly fit together.

Isla eyed the bars of the cell next. Even if she wanted to escape, she couldn’t. The metal was not only shademade but also tied to Cronan. He

controlled it.

It was why he didn't even bother shackling his prisoners. Storms might give them access to their powers, but the shademade bars couldn't be destroyed with their abilities.

Still . . . she would be able to use her powers *within* the cell . . .

Her gaze landed on Lark again.

The storm was moving on quickly. She could feel her abilities going with it. But how would she use her powers to get this information out of Lark? The last thing she wanted was to duel with her ancestor in such close quarters. If only she could read her mind . . .

Why couldn't she? Her father was Nightshade. She had that power within her.

And during those long, painful torture sessions . . . Cronan had taught her everything she needed to know.

Isla closed her eyes, concentrating, and within moments, shadows crept from her essence. They shot toward Lark, so fast they were invisible.

She was careful, delicate, like a dream washing into Lark's mind, like the tide rolling in. Her ancestor shifted slightly—but she did not awaken.

Isla didn't have much time. She felt the shreds of her abilities shrinking.

She knew how to search for what she needed. Cronan had shown her, again and again. She rifled through Lark's mind until she stumbled upon memories from a few weeks prior. Back on Nightshade.

There. The last memories of Lark with Isla's portaling device. A slow smile crept along Isla's face.

You and me . . . we aren't so different . . . Cronan had said.

She didn't know if this made her just as bad as him, but she didn't care. She reached into Lark's mind for the location of the starstick—and took it.

Oro didn't look surprised that she had gotten the information. When she said so, he lifted a shoulder.

"I always believe in you."

She flushed. It was foolish, really, because anyone else would see her entire life as one long string of mistakes. Bad decisions. But Oro looked at her and saw the good first.

"You're on Nightshade," she said, recognizing the castle around him. It had been her home once. Somehow, she'd had several homes, but none that

had ever felt fully safe and complete. Distant dangers and future obstacles always kept her from ever being able to root herself anywhere.

Oro nodded. “Astria let me into the castle. Set up a room for me. The council, as you can imagine, isn’t thrilled.”

She almost smiled, imagining their reactions. “You—you must be exhausted.” What she almost said was that he *looked* exhausted. He must have flown at full speed. There were purple splotches beneath his eyes. The last time she saw him this tired had been during the Centennial.

When he had been dying.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. He met her eyes meaningfully, and she knew he had picked up on her concern for him. He was an expert in her. “How are you?”

“I’ll be fine,” she repeated.

A long stretch of silence followed. They understood that they were both keeping secrets. It wasn’t malicious. She didn’t want him to worry. She suspected he felt the same.

“How is it going?” he finally asked. “With . . . him?”

She gave a brittle laugh. “Do you want me to outline how I’m trying to seduce my husband?”

Her words were light, but Oro turned away. His hand clenched. Isla’s face flushed with shame. She hadn’t meant to hurt him.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“It’s fine, Isla. How is it going?” he asked again.

“Not well.”

He looked surprised at that. “His devotion to you . . .”

“I know.” She knew better than anyone. She lifted a shoulder. “But he was like this before too. When we first met. Worse, even . . . But now, we don’t have the time . . .” She pressed her head to her knees.

“What is it?” he said. “What’s worrying you?”

Isla took a breath and let out a fear from deep within her heart. “What if it was nothing more than circumstance that brought us together?”

Before, Grim was alone, and desperate. Here, on Skyshade, he had Cronan.

Maybe Grim was right. Maybe he had just been lonely, and she had been there, just as desperate for connection.

“Isla,” Oro said, so gently she looked up at him. “You are not someone to be loved by circumstance.”

She let out a raking sigh. He leaned closer.

“You are loved on purpose. I promise.”

Her eyes stung with tears. “I don’t—I don’t know what to do. I don’t know if I’ll even be able to reach him before—” She cut off her words to keep from crying.

Oro filled the silence, just as he had filled the darkness. “I know you’ll be able to,” he said. “The same way I knew you’d find the location of the portaling device.”

“You have too much faith in me,” she said.

Oro just smiled. “No,” he said. “You just have too little.” He reached out, and she grabbed his hand like it was a lifeline. An anchor. His hands were warm like fire, and they called to the flame in her heart. “Don’t stop now, Isla. He loved you. Remind him. Find the strength to keep going.”

“Find your fire,” she breathed.

He blinked, seeming taken aback. “What?”

“Find your fire,” she repeated. “It’s what—it’s what you told me.” He frowned, like he didn’t remember. “I heard it in my mind . . . when

I was at a low point. You—you were saying it.”

He looked pensive. “It’s something my mother used to tell me, when I was very young. I’ve kept it with me.”

Isla just looked at him. “Did you find your fire?” she asked.

His eyes didn’t leave her face as he said, “I did.”

Her heart felt heavy. She knew what he meant. “It burned you, didn’t it?”

His expression didn’t change. He just nodded. “It did.” He reached out, as if to tuck her hair behind her ear, before he said, “But it was worth it.”

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ORO

Lynx was waiting for him outside the Nightshade castle, pacing restlessly.

“I just spoke with her,” Oro said. “She’s doing okay. She told me where the portaling device is.”

The great panther bowed his head, and Oro reached forward. The moment his fingers brushed against Lynx’s fur, his senses were overcome.

Marrow-deep pain flooded through his head, as if it was being split open. That turned into an image of hands covered in shards of glass. Then flashes of blood on a wall. Isla’s point of view, as her skull was slammed against it.

Finally, Oro saw his face. *Grim*. Oro was almost relieved to see that he was alright, until the scene changed. And then—

Oro stumbled back, fire flaring in his fists.

Grim had been just inches away, about to kiss her.

Oro felt a strange mixture of anger and sadness—but also hope that it was working, that Grim would help Isla. She needed him to get back to this world. He looked up at Lynx, who only seemed concerned.

“We’re going to get her back,” Oro said, stepping closer to the creature. Lynx bowed his head, this time in mourning, and Oro pressed his cheek against his in comfort. “I promise you, we are going to get her back. No matter what it takes.”

“He likes you a lot more than he likes Grim,” a voice said from behind him.

Oro turned to see Astria, Grim’s general—and Isla’s cousin—carrying a large barrel with both hands toward the stables, stumbling with the weight. The crossed swords she always wore on her chest glistened in the morning light.

She noticed his gaze on the contents of the barrel and sighed. “You have no idea how much it takes to keep him and Wraith fed. This one, at least,

feeds himself most times," she said, motioning her chin toward Lynx. She looked over at Wraith with affection. "That one is spoiled."

Wraith grinned like it was a compliment. Then he proceeded to eat everything in that barrel in no more than two bites before looking up at Astria expectantly.

The Nightshade sighed. "The cook says you've taken his entire supply of meat! Everyone else has been eating vegetables. We're on rations!"

Wraith simply blinked.

Astria shook her head. She turned to face Oro. "Please tell me they're coming back soon." The look on Oro's face made her casual expression shift into seriousness. "It's bad, isn't it?"

Oro guessed Lynx hadn't been giving her the same updates. "Whatever you're thinking, it's worse."

She cursed. "What do you need?"

Moments later, Lynx and Wraith were taking them to where Isla had indicated the portaling device had been hidden. Oro simply had to touch Lynx's brow to transfer the information. The panther did the rest.

When Oro slid from the creature's back, he was met with a simple field. Lark had hidden the portaling device deep below Nightshade, in tunnels she had carved with her Wildling power.

He stood right over where the device was supposed to be. Only miles of rock separated them.

"I can try to find the entrance to the tunnels, see if it's easier that way," Astria said. She and Enya had been tracking Lark's movements before.

Oro shook his head. "Isla said that Lark was making the tunnels and closing them as she walked."

Astria cursed again. Oro nodded in agreement.

They had no choice but to break through rock. Astria, Lynx, and Wraith moved to the other side of the field. Oro took a deep breath, then sent a wave of energy down beneath him. The ground trembled and fractured. He flew into the air, waiting for the cloud of dust and rock to settle.

He had only managed to break through a few yards. Isla's information said the device was *miles* below the surface.

He was still looking down when Astria appeared and said, "My shadows aren't much help here. I could get the rest of our forces to dig, but—"

They didn’t have enough time. A Wildling could do this easily. But all of them had been moved to other lands, during the battle. His love bond with Isla was useless, since her powers were blocked.

Oro closed his eyes tightly. He needed Isla and Grim here. Their world needed them. It had never been clearer than it was now.

He didn’t know how he was possibly going to make it, but he began to dig.

Hours later, Oro was tired and drained. Still, he kept shooting wall after wall of energy into the rock.

The ground was thick with ore and hard to break through. Sweat dripped down his dirt-covered face as he kept going, even as his energy was depleting.

This deep underground, light barely reached him. The cold, dark isolation only fed the worry churning in his chest. What if beasts were ravaging Lightlark right now? What if his friends needed him?

He waited to feel the familiar pangs of pain that would mean the island was in trouble, but he didn’t. He held on to hope that it meant everything was still okay.

What about Isla? Was she okay right now? His energy surged hotter as he remembered the flashes of images Lynx had shown him. The blood. He didn’t know who had done that to her, but he wanted to kill them. Slowly. He imagined breaking each of the fingers that dared hurt her, then lighting their skin on fire. Freezing them. Then igniting them. Again and again until their bones were ash and their blood was a smear beneath his boots.

His only consolation was that he knew the woman he loved would kill them herself as soon as she got the chance.

“Loving you makes me murderous,” he whispered to the endless darkness as his energy surged forward once more. The ground howled as it broke around him, sending pieces flying that were only blocked by a wall of glimmering energy. Another burst of silver light. “Loving you makes me reckless,” he said, as he felt himself reach the bottom of that deep crater of power within him. Until his energy sputtered out.

His knees buckled, hitting the jagged ground. His palms pressed against the dirt. He looked up—and he couldn’t see the sky. The darkness had blocked it out.

He reached for his abilities and realized he didn’t even have enough to fly out. He turned onto his back, so tired he could sleep here, deep in the ground.

It was just like being miles below the sea with Grim. Both powerless. But at least then, they’d had each other. Even through hatred, they had fed each other’s strength. He couldn’t have gotten out of there without him.

So what would happen now, when he was alone?

Oro fought to keep his eyes open—but he couldn’t. And as his body stilled against the dirt, he couldn’t help but think that all he had managed to do was dig himself his own grave.

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ISLA

Isla was still thinking about Oro’s words during dinner when she heard her name spoken.

Her head was yanked upward by an invisible force. Cronan was looking at her expectedly. So was Grim.

“Yes?” she asked, playing her part.

“I said . . . I think it’s time you show the other lords why you’ll be so valuable when you join us.”

Isla forcefully swallowed her last bite of food. A charred purple vegetable with a honey-like glaze that she admittedly looked forward to every evening.

One of the other lords—a particularly pompous man who always chewed with his mouth open—said, “A duel? Finally?”

Cronan smiled. “Patience, Alaric. She’ll get her duel . . . if she decides not to join me,” he said. Panic slid down her spine.

And his hold on her powers was released.

Isla lurched forward, as her blood rushed through her. The clouds in her mind cleared. It was easier to move. The poison was gone. She could finally take a full breath.

This was a test. The last time she had access to her powers in his presence, she had escaped. This time . . .

She sat still. Even as she felt Grim’s eyes boring into the side of her face.

She wouldn’t leave without her husband.

“Well, then,” Cronan drawled encouragingly. “Why don’t you show them?”

She didn’t budge.

His head tilted. “No? Maybe you just need some encouragement.” He looked around the table. “If anyone can take her down, I’ll gift you the planet of your choice in the new galaxy we conquer. Second pick, right after me.”

At once, every lord ignited with otherworldly power. They turned toward her, eyes hungry, like they had waited several days for the moment to finally hurt her. They lunged.

Isla curled her hands into fists.

And every single one of them was slammed against the wall. One was pinned by a wall of flames. Another by shadow. Another by streams of energy. Another by whorls of wind. Another by all the wine at the table. Another by a jagged piece of the table itself.

The only ones left in their chairs were Grim, Cronan, and Isla.

Her husband was gazing intently at her sides. That was when she realized her shadow had peeled off the floor and multiplied, each one holding shadowblades and standing in echoes behind her. Stolen powers. Sairsha’s. Multiplication from one of the other prophet-followers, likely.

Cronan clapped. His vise gripped her bones once more, and all of her powers fell away. She felt empty without them.

The men were released from Isla’s abilities, relatively unscathed—except for their pride. They looked at each other, eyes sharpened, but they brushed themselves off and followed their liege’s lead, giving Isla a round of applause. She just glared at them in return.

“Now you see,” Cronan said, “what a powerful addition she’ll make.”

When Grim escorted her to the cell, they hadn’t even reached the dungeons before he said, “Why didn’t you flee?”

She snorted. “He would have sent you after me again.”

“A storm was summoned by your power. You could have used it.”

He was right. She could have. She glanced at him. “I’m not leaving without you.”

He scowled. “Then I guess you’re not leaving.”

“Maybe not,” she said, her words just a whisper. The door to the dungeon screamed as it opened.

“Why don’t you just give up?” he asked, stopping in that darkened hall. There was barely any light, but she could sense the confusion and anger

written into each of his features. “*Why didn’t you leave*?” he demanded again.

He said it with outrage, like she was an idiot, but she kept her chin high.

“Because you wouldn’t have left me,” she said.

A moment of silence stood between them. And for that second, they just stared each other down. Finally, he shook his head. “That person—that person you loved doesn’t exist.”

“You’re wrong,” she said.

He glared at her. “I would think I would know myself better than *you do*.”

She shook her head. “Not when so much is missing.” She stepped toward him. “You made me forget my memories. Our entire story. A year’s worth of love . . . gone. You thought it would save me.” He frowned, taking the information in. She took another step. “I hated you. I was at *war* with you. Then I remembered. I know what it’s like to forget.” Another step. “You can keep telling me that I don’t know you, or that you could never love someone like me, but the proof of your love is right against my pulse.”

Gaze never leaving his, she slowly ran her hand up her stomach. Up her chest. Grim traced her movements with unrelenting focus. She wasn’t sure if he was breathing. Her fingers slowly made their way up her collarbones to her throat. They settled around the diamond. She touched the smooth stone, and Grim shivered, like he could feel it. Maybe he could.

“This is proof that I’m yours.” He went very still at her words. She took a final step toward him. “And you’re mine.”

“I belong to no one,” he spat.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Cronan seems to think you belong to him.”

Grim gave her a withering look, but she knew the comment had gotten under his skin when he reached over, fast as lightning, and pulled her toward him by the diamond. She gasped as she stumbled forward, stopping herself just short of his chest.

“Maybe I just want this stone for myself,” he hissed, right in her face. “Maybe I’ll kill you right now.”

Isla did not retreat. “You can try, but our lives are bound,” she said. She smirked at the look of disbelief that passed across his face. “I’m not lying. You gave your life for me. To save me. If I die, you die.”

He looked her up and down with disgust. “Of all the things you’ve tried to convince me of, I think this one is the most laughable.” He scoffed. “I would never tie my existence to someone else’s. Least of all someone as insignificant as you.”

He released the diamond, and her, and turned to keep walking through the dungeons.

Enough. She knew her husband could be a bastard, but he was really making it hard to love him.

When she didn’t immediately follow, he stopped. His shoulders were rigid. He whirled around.

“I can see myself to my cell,” she said.

His hands twitched before settling into fists. “Forgive me if I don’t actually trust you to do that.”

She just shrugged. “The knights will get me then.” She waved him off. “Go back to dinner. I’m sure your ancestor misses you.”

A vein in his neck became visible. She leaned against the wall and stared at him, like she had all the time in the world to watch his anger build.

“You are an idiotic, irritating pain in my *ass*,” he spat.

She wasn’t affected by his insults. “I’ve heard it all before. From you, in fact.”

His lip curled into a snarl. “Do you ever learn? Do you ever stop?”

“I guess not. Do you?”

His hands were shaking by his sides, in utter fury. It looked like he was trying very hard not to rip the hallway apart with his shadows. “I’m going to portal you. Is that what you prefer?”

She pushed off the wall and strode past him. “Using your powers to solve problems? How very *you*.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

She just kept walking ahead of him. “You always say people are defined by who they are without their powers. But you love to use them, don’t you?”

She could feel him glaring at her back. The next thing she knew, she was against the wall again. But this time, her head was noticeably cushioned by his shadows. They caressed her skin like *they remembered her*.

His hands were pressed into the stone on either side of her head, as if he was trying not to touch her. He leaned over, so he could look her eye to eye.

His hair was curled and disheveled, like he had been running his hands through it. He did that when he was frustrated. With his arms up like this, the bottom of his shirt rode up. She saw a flash of familiar muscle, and heat flared in her core at the sight.

"*Stop*," he commanded.

Her brows came together. "Stop what?" She wasn't even moving. Or speaking.

"Your emotions," he barked. Oh. He could sense her desire. Of course, he could.

She had actually been feeling a host of emotions, but now that she mentioned it . . . a memory flashed in her mind. Of them. Against a wall. Doing something other than arguing.

His breathing became heavier. "*Stop*," he said, a ragged plea.

She wasn't trying to. She knew he was being awful, and that they were in a dungeon. But he was her husband. She loved him. She *missed* him. It had been a long time since they had been together. She couldn't look at his face and not want him, not when he was gazing at *her* just as thoroughly as she was at him. She guessed that if she could access his abilities, she would be sensing desire from him too.

And maybe that's why he was so pissed off. It wasn't *her* emotions. It was what they inspired in him.

"I'm not doing anything," she said, pulse thundering.

"You're doing . . . *everything*," he said, his voice full of barely leashed restraint. His hands flexed against the wall. He grimaced like there was a war within him. He shut his eyes tightly.

After a moment, with what looked like pure and complete control, he straightened. Without a word, he strode off down the hall.

She remained where she was—pressed against the wall, heart racing.

She had just dropped her gaze to the floor in disappointment when she heard his steps slow. He turned.

"Fuck it," he said, and then his mouth was on hers.

She gasped in surprise, and then her blood ignited as he parted her lips. Kissing Grim felt like the first time and every time since all rolled together.

His tongue brushed hers and flames blazed through her, and she groaned as his hands curled beneath her to lift her to his height, so he could kiss her properly.

Her legs locked behind him, and she didn’t miss the strangled sound he made in the back of his throat. He almost seemed like he might pull away, but instead he pushed closer, so she was pressed firmly against the wall as he devoured her.

He wouldn’t have remembered how he had kissed her thousands of times before. In his mind, this was the first time he was doing this, and she noticed the similarities from that original time in his room. How he was a little clumsy, a little forceful, how he didn’t even stop to breathe, like he couldn’t stop himself from tasting her.

Her hands curled around his neck, to pull him closer, and she could feel his pulse racing against her fingers. When he finally pulled away, he was gasping. His eyes latched onto hers, bright and shining, and then he dove back for more. He growled as she bit his bottom lip, as she wove her fingers through his hair and pulled.

Then, his lips dragged down her throat, and she made a sound he seemed to like because he hummed against her throat, and then she felt his teeth, lightly skimming her sensitive skin, and it was the echo of when he had bitten her there during Creetan’s Crag. She bucked her hips as he trailed lower, desperate for friction, desperate to feel the heat of him against her.

She only moved slightly, rolling against the hard length of him—and his mouth stopped its path along her collarbones. He pulled back.

This is it, she thought. The moment he finally ended this.

But instead, he said, with a voice dark and jagged as the stone behind them, “Do that again.”

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GRIM

She slowly ground herself against him, and he whimpered.

He *whimpered*. He was losing his fucking mind.

“Tell me what you want,” she said.

He was powerless against the intensity of his feelings as he sputtered out, “You.” *You*.

“You already have me,” she whispered in his ear, and she did it again, bucking her hips, and he had ruled for centuries, he had folded away his emotions for most of those years, he had been an efficient and merciless warrior on the battlefield . . .

But in that moment, he lost control completely.

Because he was practically drowning in her desire. With every move she made, it bloomed, heady and sweet, and it only made his own grow exponentially.

What do you want? she had asked, and he wished he was strong enough to ask her the same question. He wished that he wasn’t so eager to give her *everything she wanted*.

But he was. He wanted her in a bone-deep, insidious way that seemed like a curse in and of itself. A curse he never wanted to break.

No. He wanted to enjoy it. He wanted to enjoy her.

He looked at her chest, spilling out of this ridiculous dress . . . and through the thin fabric, he saw the proof of her arousal. Of her sensitivity. She peered up at him and must have seen the direction of his gaze because she said, “*Please*.”

And hearing that word from her . . . hearing her beg for him to touch her . . .

His shadows sliced the straps of this dress, and the top fell to her waist, revealing her chest, and—

Fuck. She was just as perfect as that memory he had replayed a million times. But having her here in front of him, feeling her flushed and writhing against him, body taut with arousal . . .

It made him realize he had never truly known desire. Not before now. Not before *her*.

He couldn’t wait a moment longer. He ducked, took her into his mouth, and her gasp went straight to the center of him.

She liked it. He did it again. He sucked and lightly bit, and those sounds she was making . . .

He wanted them to echo through his bedroom. He wanted to portal her there right now, and do things he had never done before, just to hear her sigh his name. He moved to her other hardened peak, learning exactly what she liked, and then doing it. His shadows strummed down her skin, like extensions of himself, touching more of her, and she cursed.

That mouth. The things he had imagined it doing to him . . .

Her body jerked against him again, and he suddenly had no other purpose in life but to make this infuriatingly beautiful woman unravel.

Hands curled beneath her hips, he dragged her against him, steadily getting faster. He pressed his forehead to hers firmly so that she would look at him. He didn’t want to miss a single moment of this. It was the most attractive thing he had ever seen in his life, helping her use him to find her pleasure. It was bringing him an inordinate amount of satisfaction.

He had done far more than this countless times before. Their clothes were still mostly on. But for some reason, this simple tryst in this hall was making his heart race so quickly, he could hear it. It was making his body feel like every nerve had finally, after centuries, turned on.

By the sounds of her quickening breathing, the moans falling from her parted lips, and her flushed cheeks, he was expecting her to break.

What he didn’t expect was to break with her.

Just as she gasped, convulsing against him—he did too. His shadows flared, clawing against the wall. The stone splintered and cracked against his power. *Fuck*.

They were left panting, staring at each other. Her green eyes had never looked brighter.

And . . . this was bad. He had thought, perhaps, that having her once would rid him of this irritating obsession. But it hadn’t worked. Not at all.

Because now, he wanted her more than ever. He could smell her desire, and his, and the mess they had both made, and he wanted to make more. He wanted to turn her around, against this wall, hike up this dress, and feel her convulse around him.

He slowly lowered her to the ground so that he could take a step away from her.

"Grim, I—"

No. Her voice. Her face. Her *everything*.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't be near her. If he stayed for a moment longer, he would portal her somewhere they could do this again and again without consequence. He would run full speed into the fate that awaited him.

What was he thinking? She was leading him to his ruin. And he was letting her.

He forced himself to smirk, to say, "Did you think that would work? Did you think that would make me remember?" He sneered. "All it did was make me realize I must have been using you the entire time."

Isla bristled like she had been slapped. She looked like she might slap *him*. Before she could, she raised her chin, turned on her heel, and walked herself to her cell. He heard it close behind her.

Only then did he allow himself to slump against the wall and curse.

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GRIM

Grim lay in his bed and was full of anger and regret. How could he have let himself be so overcome? He was stronger than that. She was *nothing*. He had lived centuries, had survived countless battles. He had been merciless, his mind an unyielding fortress.

But the moment she had writhed upon him, he had lost control completely.

"*Fuck*," he cursed as he shifted uncomfortably, already overcome just by the memory of it. He had never felt like that in his long life. Not even close. The encounters he'd had were fine, and unmemorable, and served a purpose. He had never even wanted to kiss anybody before now.

But this . . . this had been like a wave sweeping him off his feet. Like he had discovered some other form of gravity. Like he had just discovered a new sensation entirely.

He growled as he got out of bed. He needed to get out of this room. Out of his filthy head. He nearly dented the door as he shoved it open, making the attendants waiting outside jolt.

He didn't spare them a glance. And as he stormed down the halls, all he could think about was her. How he had pressed her against the stone of the dungeon walls. He only now realized she might have been cold. But under his lips, her skin had been warm.

No. He wasn't going to think about her skin. She was a prisoner for a reason. She was the biggest threat to him and his realm. There was no denying it.

Then why did the thought of her dying make him frown, beyond the possibility of it leading to his own demise? Why had he nearly leveled this fortress when he saw those knights put their hands on her?

Grim swept into the galaxy room. Cronan was there, like he always was, staring up at all that he had conquered.

“Show me again,” Grim said.

Cronan glanced over at him. “What?”

“The future. I want to see it.”

Cronan didn’t ask any more questions. In a billow of smoke that emitted from the charm on his crown, there she was. Looking almost the same as she did now. Staring up at him. Telling him she loved him.

Then stabbing him in the heart.

“Again.”

He repeated it.

“*Again*.”

Cronan showed him again and again. Then, when he tired of his descendent, he kept the vision going as he left the room.

Grim didn’t know how long he stood there watching. It must have been hours. By then, he had memorized every lilt in her voice. Every expression in her face. Every line of the intricate blade.

The sound it made as it entered his chest.

Until he could finally breathe steadily again.

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ORO

Oro awoke to a stirring in his chest. It was just a whisper that turned into a scream.

And suddenly, a gaping piece of himself was whole again. *Isla*.

He opened his eyes and only saw darkness, but he could feel her energy. Feel the connection. Feel her abilities.

He did not hesitate. Whatever fleeting opportunity this was, he would not waste it. Even with his strength in tatters, he heard those words in his mind.

Find your fire.

This time, hers had found his.

With her Wildling powers flowing through the bond that still existed, even after everything, Oro turned on this cold, jagged ground. Then he shot through the compact rock that he had been mining for half a day like it was no more than butter. Until finally, he reached that glimmering portaling device. The moment it was in his hands, the Wildling ability disappeared. That bridge was broken once more.

But just those few moments of strength were enough to fortify his own.

He grasped the stick with blood and dirt-crusted fingers, looked up to the surface—and flew right to it, with the wind at his back and every shred of energy he had left at his heels. Until sunlight finally rained down on his skin, and he was able to take a clean breath of air. He landed, stumbling—but Lynx caught him.

He had been waiting there. So had Wraith. And so had Astria.

“You got it,” she breathed, looking at the object in his hands.

“With help,” he said, his voice just a dry rasp.

“More help is coming,” Astria said. And it was nearly enough to bring him to his knees with relief. She was right. With the portaling device now in

his possession, more help could finally reach them.

Astria insisted he eat and drink before doing anything else, but Oro refused. He was covered in dirt when Isla reached out again.

She was in yet another dress that was pooling around her from where she sat on the floor. He guessed she was still in a cell, but right now it looked like she was in the room that Astria had graciously set up for him.

He studied her quickly, like he always did, for any injuries. This time, though, what he noticed weren't marks. He saw the wrinkles and tears in the fabric. The straps looked like they had been cut and then retied hastily around her neck.

He swallowed. She gazed down at the state she was in and blushed, pressing her knees against her chest.

"I take it . . . things are getting better with Grim?" he asked, trying to push down all his emotions for both of their sakes.

She gave just a single nod.

He took a long breath and closed his eyes. He could put reason first, before his feelings. He had done it for centuries. He could do it again.

Hand still trembling both from strain and emotions he didn't want to name, he lifted the portaling device. "How do I use this thing?" he asked. At least this was a safe subject.

Isla's smile was pure relief, seeing it in his possession. She also must have been happy to see it at all. Oro knew how much she loved this relic. How it had freed her from her Wildling room, how she had used it to explore the world before the Centennial.

How she had used it to meet Celeste. And Grim.

Maybe there were no safe subjects between them anymore . . .

"It takes a little practice," Isla said, shaking Oro from his thoughts.

She explained how to picture his destination in his mind's eye, how to channel his energy into that image, into the device, how to draw a puddle of stars with it and step through.

"It's much harder to go to places you've never seen before," she explained. "And make sure to practice before going anywhere too far, in case you get stuck and can't return."

Oro nodded and closed his eyes, picturing the throne room in his castle on Lightlark. It was a place that was more familiar than anywhere else.

His blood hummed as he channeled his energy into the object in his hand. Slowly, he used it to draw a circle on the floor between them. With every inch made, he kept his focus steady on the throne room. He imagined the sun gleaming against its walls, and the smell of freshly steeped tea, and Isla walking through the doors for the first night of the Centennial, dripping wet—

A flash of gold flared in front of him, so bright, it reached past his eyelids. He opened his eyes to see sunlight streaming through the portal he created. His throne was right in the center of it.

"Show off," Isla scoffed, but when he looked at her, she was smiling.

"You're a good teacher," he replied, and she broke his gaze in a way that made him wonder what she was thinking about.

A flash of activity within the portal pulled him from that thought. His friends were there, locked in conversation. It seemed tense. "I should head back. I just—I wanted to see you first."

And the way she looked at him, with the same worry and focus, made him wonder if she had been desperate to see him too.

"Go," she finally said, with an air of disappointment. As he moved to stand, she said, "I'm glad it worked out . . . and that betting on me wasn't in vain." Her words were light, but he knew her.

"I will never regret betting on you, Isla," he said, standing to his full height. "Bet on yourself. You'll never lose." He was about to walk through the portal when he hesitated. There was something else on his mind. His friends would tell him to keep this to himself, but he couldn't. He was still betting on her, he would *always* bet on her choosing light and helping them all through this.

"I . . . I saw something on my way here."

She frowned at the seriousness in his tone. "What was it?"

"A silver pool."

Her eyes widened, and Oro instantly knew that the pool had appeared to her as well. "What did it show you?"

He slowly sat back down. Secrets wouldn't help them both save this world. He knew that. So he told her everything, all the questions he asked, and all the possibilities the water had shown him.

She just listened, a small fold between her brows.

“I didn’t realize how much hatred I had been holding on to,” he admitted after he was done. “How angry I still was toward my brother, for being so reckless. For causing the curses then—then leaving me to deal with the aftermath on my own.”

“But now you see that things would have always ended up the same,” she said. He nodded. “Lightlark is lucky to have you as king.”

His eyes slipped to the ground. His throat felt thick.

She reached toward him, her cold fingers wrapping around his own. “I’m glad you see what I always have. That you are more than we deserve. Even at your worst, you are better than all of us.” His gaze locked onto hers. Even though these were unusual circumstances, he knew she was one of the only people who could understand. He knew he was not alone.

That was clear when she said, “I saw something similar. About . . . the Nightshade village. About what I did.” A tear swept down her cheek. “It feels impossible to forgive myself. It’s so much easier to call myself a villain.”

“But you aren’t a villain,” Oro said, reaching out with his other hand to brush that tear away. “If you were, you would have joined Cronan a long time ago. You wouldn’t still be sitting in a cell. You would have chosen the easy way. And you’ve done many things, Isla . . . but you’ve never chosen the easiest path.”

“That’s not true.” Her voice was just a whisper. He could tell something was bothering her. He waited, hoping she would feel comfortable enough to share it, but not wanting to pry. Finally, she said, “I had the chance to see the future. To see the consequences of my choices. And I didn’t.”

Oro furrowed his brow. “Do you regret it?”

“Not looking?”

He nodded.

“Yes.” She took a trembling breath. “I regret ever making a choice out of fear. That’s—that’s not who I want to be. That’s not who our world deserves. It deserves someone like you. Someone strong enough to save it.”

Oro curled his hand over her shoulder, and squeezed. She was so cold. He sent some of his heat to her, hoping it would reach her. “My mother used to tell stories about phoenixes. She said they were like sunsets, dying on the horizon, only to be reborn every morning. She said a phoenix’s strength was not found in its flames but in its ashes.”

He thought about his journey to the portaling device. He thought about every pain and challenge he had faced in the last few weeks. “Falling is hard. Rising is worse.” He frowned. “You say I’m strong. You say I’m better than this world deserves. But I am also flawed and broken and weak. I have regrets. I have shame. I have moments that have marked me.” He looked up at her. “The strongest aren’t the unscarred, Isla—they’re the ones still standing.”

He reached up and touched the center of her forehead, where that dark mark was still visible. “And scars are not proof of failing—but surviving.”

Her eyes glistened with tears . . . but also with fire. She was the blade that refused to be broken. She was the flame that refused to be extinguished.

He said these words for her but also for himself. For he had felt unmoored lately. For centuries, he’d thought he needed to pretend that he was unbreakable. He thought breaking was a failing. Now, looking at her, he knew that true strength was in never staying broken.

Because Isla always got up, even in impossible circumstances. She always *tried*. And she had never pretended with him to be perfect. No, Isla was open with her feelings and fears, and it made him want to open up, too. He realized that in wanting to be strong for her, he hadn’t allowed the broken pieces of himself to show. And he wondered if it made her feel like she was supposed to be shatterproof.

He lifted his palms, which were still covered in dirt and blood. “None of us are invincible. We are not gods. Duty does not come easily. There are days I want to give up and give this crown to anyone else. It takes work to fight, and endure, and rise. And it’s hard to remember. It’s hard to get up every day when staying down is so much easier.”

“What do you do?” she asked. “To remember?”

His eyes met hers. “I remember you.”

She swallowed. He thought she might look to the ground, or say she had to go, but instead, she said, “When I think of peace . . . I think of our beach, Oro. I think of that sea. And . . . and I think of you.” She took a shaking breath. “But peace feels like a fantasy.”

Oro wished he could tell her that it *was* possible. That peace and love and that beach could ever be a future for either of them. But if finding the pool had taught him anything, it was that some fates were inevitable. No matter how much they all hoped things could be different.

“I have to believe that there’s always a chance for peace,” Oro said.

Isla smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. She took a shaking breath. “That’s worth fighting for, then. For the possibility of peace,” she said, as her form blurred away.

“For a chance at golden beaches and evergreen seas.”

When she was gone, Oro stood, feeling more determined than he had in days. He would fight for her and for the possibility of an *after*.

The window into the throne room glimmered beneath him. There were only days left before Cronan would come to destroy their world. He needed to ensure there was even a world left to save. He squared his shoulders and did as he always had—he moved forward. Right into the portal.

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GRIM

Isla was wearing a gown made of purple silk that looked almost liquid. It cascaded over every curve, leaving nothing to the imagination. Cronan must have sourced the strange fabric from another world completely.

The front of her hair was tied back by two glimmering insects that fluttered like butterflies but were not. The attendants had painted her eyelids a lavender sunset.

Really, what the fuck was wrong with him? He had never even *noticed* what a woman wore, and he certainly didn't take inventory like he was a damned painter studying a subject. But that's how it felt, sometimes. Knowing Cronan would kill her soon, Grim studied her every chance he got, just in case that one glance was his last.

Because she was beautiful. Stupidly, infuriatingly beautiful. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Even if she was his enemy.

She was frustratingly silent as Grim walked her to the galaxy room, though her mouth was turned in a smile. His hands made fists as he realized he had spent so many days telling her to be quiet . . . and now, he wished she would speak to him. He was desperate to know what she was thinking.

He felt around her emotions, carefully, parsing out each thread. She was amused . . .

He frowned. Did she find him amusing? Was she . . . laughing at him?

"What?" he barked. She was the one held captive, though she didn't act like it. He remembered what she had said—

You're the prisoner.

Isla's lips twitched, and his shadows flared in annoyance as he wondered what she found so comical.

Finally, she put him out of his misery. "It's funny," she said.

“What is?” he demanded.

She turned to face him, and he was struck with the totality of her brilliance. “That you keep pretending this isn’t inevitable.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. She was wrong. It was almost pitiful how wrong she was.

The doors flung open to reveal another opulent and ridiculous dinner. Or, more accurately, a chance for Cronan to showcase his all-encompassing power.

Grim didn’t miss how every eye always went to her whenever she entered the room. Tonight was nothing new.

And neither was the fact that Grim had the brief thought he should kill everyone in this room for looking at her the same way he did.

They went to take their seats, Isla moving toward the head, as Cronan had always directed. But today, he lifted his hand. He pulled out the chair Grim normally sat in for Isla, using his powers. There was an extra one next to it, he realized.

“We have another guest of honor joining us today,” Cronan said, his eyes gleaming like liquid metal.

Isla sat, confusion crumpling her brow. Grim resisted the urge to squeeze her hand from the seat next to her.

He was pathetic.

The rest of the rulers of planets were speaking but kept glancing at the door, as if awaiting a grand entrance. Their curiosity spilled around him. Curiosity . . . and fear.

A few minutes later, it finally happened.

Lark Crown strode into the room. The feather she had asked of him was tied into her hair. While she had been little more than a pile of bones and tissue the last time he saw her, now she looked completely healed. She wore a layered dress in heavy fabrics that glistened with gemstones.

Grim could feel her power. It spilled through the room, radiating off her.

Cronan had allowed her to have it back. But why?

“Behold,” Cronan said, motioning toward Lark. “An old. . . . friend. The key to my regenerative power.”

As Lark moved to the head of the table, the lords watched her with hungry gazes. Their intrigue was as pointed as daggers. “Which was possible because, you see . . . she loves me.”

Grim was surprised to hear that, considering the only feeling he sensed from Lark as she glared at Cronan was pure and utter rage.

But he concentrated harder, searched deeper, and Cronan was right. There was something at the center of her emotions. An unyielding love.

That made no sense. Grim had seen what Cronan had done to her . . .

"She is my prisoner now. But I am merciful. I always give a second chance . . ."

With that, all the chairs were flung to the sides of the room. Grim's back hit the wall, his shadows protecting his head from the impact.

He turned, expecting to see blood spilling down the back of Isla's . . . but his shadows had moved without his permission.

Protecting her too.

Her green eyes found his, and he abruptly faced the middle of the room. Their dinner hadn't even begun.

It seemed it never would—with a flash of power, all the food and silverware vanished, and Cronan stepped onto the table, his crown glimmering below his galaxy. "You always thought you were better than me," he said to Lark below him. "Prove it. Win this duel, and I'll portal you to any world you wish."

Next to him, Isla's panic flared with concern for their world.

Lark's eyes narrowed at the challenge. One of the braids in her hair turned into a root that slithered down her spine and below her feet, growing into the floor and lifting her to the table.

"I hate you," she said, her voice full of conviction.

Cronan only smiled. "Prove it."

Lark lifted her arms—

And a thousand vines broke through the glass of the ceiling, then wrapped around Cronan quicker than he could become shadow. Cronan squirmed as the vines squeezed, as the thorns tore through fabric and skin.

With a jolt of energy, the vines flew away, scattering across the room, shriveling as if he had drained the life right out of them.

Before he could strike, Lark opened her hand—revealing a palm full of seeds that she threw toward Cronan—

And they exploded into massive trees midair, as if she had sped up time, nature blooming in an instant.

One of those seeds struck Cronan’s middle. A moment of silence, of stillness, stretched as he slowly looked up at Lark.

And then the tree burst through him, tearing him into pieces that scattered across the room. Some hit the ceiling, beneath a galaxy that shuddered.

Silence.

Relief tore through the room. And hope. But before Grim dared feel any himself, the pieces of Cronan’s body were pulled back together by a bone-rattling force. Perfectly.

Cronan’s mouth was turned into a good-natured smile, but Grim could feel the fury beneath the surface, his pale aura stained with it. He was clearly done with this duel.

As Lark lunged forward once more, he simply lifted his hand. And she was shredded apart at the seams, collapsing in a pile of flesh and bones. Cronan just stood and watched as her fragments came back together, slower than he had. And with less precision. When she reformed, she was still broken. Even so, she clawed across the table, lifting her hand to unleash another form of nature upon Cronan.

That hand dissolved into granules smaller than dust. Her arm soon followed, then the other, and within seconds, her entire body was just ashes that drifted in the middle of the room. They settled into a pile on the floor. Cronan barely glanced at it.

Fuck.

Grim felt a wall of panic beside him. Isla. He didn’t think she cared for her ancestor. Or did she? He realized Lark might be her last remaining family member, but she had nearly leveled their world . . .

The rest of the lords applauded, startling Grim from his thoughts. They leapt to their feet, bowing before their liege. Cronan ignored them and knelt to scoop a pile of Lark’s dust into his hand. “My, you are truly indestructible, aren’t you? The ultimate example of survival.” He ground it between his fingers before letting it go, watching it fall like snow.

He sighed before standing and turning toward them all. “She’s not dead. She truly is invincible. Can only die from her own will . . .”

Suddenly, Cronan created a shadow like a scythe—and used it to cut his own arm off.

Gasps sounded through the room as it thudded to the floor and blood gushed from the wound. But they watched as the limb regenerated within moments.

"You see, even now . . . *she still loves me*." He laughed cruelly. The rest of the lords laughed with him. Cronan walked right through what remained of Lark, kicking the ashes.

"Even now. Even after everything. She loves me. And it shows what I have always believed . . ." Cronan's eyes bore into Grim's at his next words. "Love is the most foolish decision imaginable. It can only ever lead to ruin. It is a curse."

With that, he brushed the dust off his shoes and opened his arms wide.

"Who's ready for dinner?"

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ORO

Azul didn’t seem surprised by Oro’s arrival.

Now that Oro finally had the portaling device—and knew how to use it, thanks to Isla—he could transport across the world in moments.

“Have creature attacks happened here too?” Oro demanded as soon as he set foot in the Skyling castle. He looked around, and the walls seemed stable enough. The beasts had mostly come through the tide pool, but some had ripped right through the air itself in storms that dissipated just as fast as they appeared.

“No,” Azul said, his light blue cape whispering against the polished stone floor as he turned. “But we are sensitive to the skies, and some of us have sensed its disturbances.”

He gazed up at the clouds in the open ceiling for a moment and frowned. “So, he went, then?” Oro knew he meant Grim. Oro nodded, and Azul sighed. “Keeping that portal open has left a gaping hole in the veil between worlds. Worse than what ever existed on Nightshade.”

Yes, but what other choice did they have? Getting Isla back wasn’t just for Oro and Grim . . . it was for the entire world.

“Trust me, I know,” Oro said. Azul looked him over, eyes snagging on the tells of his tiredness. Azul had them too. Oro didn’t doubt he was going through his own challenges, what with most of the realms still on his land. “I know you’ve got your hands full here, but we need help, Azul. I’m—” He swallowed. He was king of Lightlark. He was supposed to be the most powerful person in this world. But strength, he knew now, sometimes meant admitting weakness. “I’m not going to be able to hold them off much longer.”

Azul had known him a long time. Long enough to know he didn’t ask for anything he didn’t desperately need. He nodded. “I’ll call for volunteers.”

Then he paused. And it was because of those centuries of knowing each other that Oro could sense the Skyling had more to say. Unlike the other rulers, he was thoughtful with his words. He always considered them before he spoke.

But they didn't have time. "What is it?" Oro asked impatiently.

Azul studied Oro and said, "My husband told me something else. I didn't share earlier because I didn't think Grimshaw would understand. But you . . . you might."

"What was it?" Oro asked more harshly than he intended. Now wasn't the time to hold anything back, not when so much was at stake.

"He said that in some interpretations . . . Crowntide is not an event. It is a person."

Oro stilled. "What does that mean?"

"It means that there's a person whose entire existence changes fate," he said. "In her case . . . a person destined to end this world."

"Or save it," Oro added vehemently.

Azul didn't seem convinced. He looked . . . torn. Haunted.

"What are you saying?" Oro asked. He didn't like where this was going.

Azul gazed at him with sad eyes. "If she dies, her fate dies with her."

The room went deathly quiet, as if the wind itself had paused. Oro felt fire smoldering through him as his irritation turned to fury. "Are you trying to get me to kill the woman I love?"

He took a step away from Oro. "I'm just pointing out a way that this could end without involving your death." He paused, looking out at the sky again. "Isla told me the prophecy. That she is bound to kill one of you. With her life tied to his . . . who do you think her choice will be?"

He knew everything Azul was saying was true. He knew every prophecy promised that Isla was just as likely to destroy this world as she was to save it. But that didn't stop his anger from growing until fire blazed in his palms.

Azul just sighed again. "You gave her a choice. She made it." He looked at Oro warily. "You may have a choice to make too . . . between her and this world. Will you be strong enough to kill her if it comes to that?"

Oro couldn't suppress the treacherous thoughts that bloomed in the back of his mind.

She chose him, over you. Would you choose her over the rest of the world, if she was fated to end it? Even if she wasn't yours?

Oro banished the insidious voice. He would never do anything to hurt Isla because of the choice she made. He remembered what he saw in the pool—he was never happier than when he had been with her, even if it was only ever temporary. He would not hold her decision against her, no matter what.

But then he thought about Azul's question again and just how many people were at risk. Not only his friends, but all of his people. The children. Could he really let them die? Could he put an end to everything that he and his line had sworn to protect?

Was he being selfish by even considering it?

He dropped Azul's gaze. He couldn't think about this. Not right now . . . and perhaps not ever. But what if Azul was right, and this was a choice he would have to face? Who was he, if he had an entire world's blood on his hands?

If he chose one woman over thousands?

"One more thing," Azul added, as if he hadn't already said enough. "My husband said there were often slightly different interpretations of prophecies, since fate is fluid. Multiple outcomes. Only one of the three frozen oracle sisters ever thawed with Isla. She only heard one version . . . but I think it's possible her prophecy could be about someone else."

Oro frowned. "The oracle told both Isla and Cleo that Isla would determine the fate of the world. That she would plunge a blade through either my or Grim's heart. That she would either save this world . . . or end it. She is the heart divided. She was specifically told so."

"Yes." Azul looked at Oro meaningfully. "But *your* heart is also torn in two—between her and your duty. *You* are also a ruler divided. She went to another world. Her actions could have altered fate. Maybe the prophecy does come true . . . but maybe now it's about you."

Oro's mind was reeling. He was positive the prophecy was still about Isla. But he couldn't help but remember what the silver woman said—that he would make a choice, soon.

"This all ends with a blade through a heart," Azul said. "As far as I'm concerned, it could be yours, Grim's . . . or hers."

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ISLA

Isla didn’t say a word during the rest of the meal. She didn’t even look up from her plate. Before the first course, attendants came through to sweep away the pile of dust that used to be Lark, and a thin layer of ash remained on the floor. Beneath Cronan’s boots.

Isla wasn’t worried about her wicked ancestor—she knew she’d be back in their cell in no time—but she couldn’t stop turning Cronan’s words over. He had imprisoned Lark for millennia. He had tortured her. *Destroyed* her. And still . . . she loved him.

Isla wondered if she was as foolish as her ancestor, destined to repeat that cycle.

Grim’s gaze kept drifting over to her, but she didn’t meet it. She was lost in her mind. Lost in what she had just witnessed.

After the meal, Grim escorted her back to the cell in silence. When they reached the dungeons, she heard a faint ripping sound. “Here,” he said, shoving a small piece of fabric at her.

She blinked, not knowing what she was supposed to do with it. He glanced meaningfully at her shoulder, and she looked down. A streak of blood was splattered there. Some of Lark’s must have gotten on her. She wiped it away with the cloth.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, turning to him, and that was when she realized he had sliced a piece of his *shirt* with his shadows to give to her. The side of his stomach was now visible, a line of muscle she knew very well.

He huffed with faint amusement. “Finally, some manners.”

“Don’t get used to it,” she said, as she continued down the hall toward her cell.

The next afternoon, Isla was doing her best to ignore the sinewy, crackling sounds of Lark's body reforming when someone appeared at her cell door.

It was Grim.

Her brows came together. There were still hours left before dinner. "What—"

"Cronan is invading our world early," Grim said, cutting her off. His voice was hurried. His shadows filled the hall, cloaking them.

She stood and approached the bars. "What?"

She could hardly see his face through the growing darkness, just the gleaming of his eyes. "I heard him planning with the other lords." He looked at her. "He knows you're not going to join him. He knows you've been speaking to someone in your cell."

Oro. Cronan knew about her conversations with him.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

His eyes didn't meet hers. It was like he was afraid to. He touched the shademade door and it gave.

"I'm going to leave this open," he said roughly. "This is your one chance to leave, but Isla—I never want to see you again."

His eyes finally met hers. And she could see the conflict in them clear as day—how torn he was to be helping the woman who might put a blade through his heart.

Still, he was opening this door.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked.

His eyes fell to her lips, to her neck, down and up again, as if he knew this was goodbye. As if he was trying to memorize her.

"Because I don't remember you." Those words were like a blade to the gut. "But I remember a world worth saving."

There was good in him yet. He was not Cronan, intent on turning entire worlds to ash out of greed.

"If he finds out, he'll imprison you," Isla said, perplexed.

Grim only lifted a shoulder. "I said I remembered a world worth saving. Not that I remembered a life worth living."

Isla's throat felt tight. The fact that Grim did not think his life was worth saving . . .

Her eyes burned. She shoved the gate back into place and stood on her toes to grip his shirt in her fists and say right in his face, "*I* remember, even if you forgot. You don't just have a life worth living—you have so much more than that. You have love worth rediscovering. And our love was worth living a thousand times over." She shook her head. "I can't do this without you," she said. "But together . . . he's afraid of us. He knows that joined, we can defeat him."

He looked between the closed door and her. And in his eyes, she saw only rage. "You are a fool for rejecting my help. This was your only chance at survival."

"You don't understand," she said. And she desperately wished he did. "I made a vow. Not just for this life. But the next. And the one after that. And all those that might follow."

She took a step toward him.

"And when I do finally leave this cell . . . I'm going to break out of it," she said, holding his gaze. For a few moments, they just glared at each other.

"You are a fool," he snarled.

"So you've told me."

"You both are," a voice said, and it broke through the obsidian like a blade. Before Isla knew it, a new wave of shadows had formed.

And Cronan was walking out of them.

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ORO

For hundreds of years, Oro’s heart had felt frozen in his chest. The curses had taken so much. In one disastrous day, everyone’s life changed. His, perhaps, most of all, as he became king.

Until a woman with eyes like a forest blazed through his life, igniting his heart. Igniting hope in a world worth not only saving . . . but making better. For all this time, he had simply been focused on surviving . . . not truly *living*.

Isla, on the other hand, was full of feeling. She led with her heart in everything she did, which might not have always ended well, but at least she *cared*. In a world full of immortals, jaded and bored and angry, she was spring—a breath of fresh air.

They had been enemies, then reluctant allies, then friends, then more. He had never thought it was possible to selflessly love another ruler without politics involved, until he met her.

Oro had grown used to the weight of the world on his shoulders. He always made every decision with his people at the forefront. Now he was questioning everything. He had always tried to do what was just, but nothing about this potential choice felt right.

He sat on the beach, gazing out at the sea that was the color of her eyes.

That is where Enya found him.

He didn’t want to tell her about what Azul had said. Though he knew his friend only wanted him to be happy, she had not made it a secret that she didn’t think he and Isla were a good match.

He couldn’t blame her. Enya was fiercely protective of him. Since he had met Isla, Enya had witnessed him at his lowest. But she also couldn’t deny that with Isla, he had also been at his very best.

After a few minutes of sitting together in silence, Oro asked, “If someone gave you the choice to save me but doom the rest of the world, what would you do?” He heard nothing in response but the roar of the waves, so he turned to look at her next to him.

Enya’s red hair was whipping back fiercely in the wind, glimmering in the sunlight. “I would choose you,” she said at last.

Oro frowned. “You would kill everyone else in this world . . . just to save me?”

Enya nodded. “I would.” She stretched her legs out. A wave broke yards away, its foam reaching them. “But that’s easy for me to say, since it’s a choice I know I’ll never have to make.” She looked over at him. “And I’m not king.”

He hung his head. “This crown is a curse,” he said. It always had been. Part of him wished he could just fling it into the water, but that wouldn’t rid him of his responsibility to his people, or his blood-deep connection to them.

“They all are,” Enya said.

She was right. All crowns were covered in blood. Whether through conquest or through heritage, people had to die for a crown to transfer to a new head.

He felt the weight of his entire lineage on his. Now that he had seen all the histories, he knew what it had taken for his line to survive. For this crown to finally reach him.

Oro couldn’t kill Isla. But he also couldn’t be the one to doom his people and bring all his ancestors’ work to an end.

“I wish the choice was between her or me,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I would give my life for hers in an instant.”

“Even now?” Enya asked. “After she chose him?”

“Even now,” he repeated.

He could tell Enya had a thousand thoughts about that. He guessed that she wanted to yell at him, to tell him his life had value, to plead with him not to do anything reckless. It was the same thing Oro would have told her, if their positions were reversed.

But in the end, they just sat in silence, side by side, watching the tide rush in.

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ISLA

Cronan looked both of them over with an air of disappointment.

He had heard everything. He knew now, for certain, that Isla wasn't going to join him. Grim stood very still, his shadows not lowering.

His ancestor turned to him, sneering. "I expected better from you. Perhaps that was my first mistake."

In a rush, the darkness closed in. Cronan's portaling power was like a whip, cracking as they landed in the galaxy room. The force nearly made her knees buckle. Knights stood against the curved walls of the circular room, spines rod-straight. Awaiting orders. Cronan sighed, gazing between them. "You could have given birth to an entire new age." His eyes narrowed on Isla. "But you . . . I underestimated you. You've been hiding part of your mind from me."

He circled them slowly, and Isla felt hunted. "I am merciful," he continued. "You've seen yourself that I always give second chances to those who prove their greatness."

Each of the knights took a step forward, and Isla swallowed, counting them. A dozen. All plated in enchanted shademade metal. They didn't have any weapons, but Isla knew from fighting them that they didn't need them.

Cronan's head tilted as he examined her. "I won't be foolish enough to give you your powers again, but I won't leave you empty-handed." A sword fell through the air, and she caught it before it hit the ground. "If you can kill each and every one of my knights in this room, I'll let you leave."

She wasn't going to leave without Grim. She just stood in place, refusing to move.

But then a knight to her left lunged at her.

She ducked at the last minute, whirling and kicking him in the back. He slid across the floor. Cronan watched on, looking amused.

She didn’t give the knight time to get up or gather his shadows. She swung her sword and cut his head clean off.

She heard a sharp inhale, like Grim was surprised by her brutality.

Did he not understand? They were both brutal in the lengths they would go for each other.

She heard the sound of shadows sharpening and stabbed behind her without looking, hearing metal strike metal.

Cronan hadn’t given her a sword sharp enough to go through their armor. Of course not. She turned—and was flying through the air, hit with a wave of shadow. She landed, her breath ripped from her lungs—

And eleven knights were right over her.

It was just like being on her back, in the middle of the forest, years before. Helpless against the forest Terra was raining down upon her.

She didn’t have powers again. But that did not mean she was powerless.

Remembering how she had weakened a knight before, she flung her sword into the sliver of vulnerable skin between helmet and breastplate, and the closest knight fell. One moment, shadow was rushing toward her, and the next, she was catching the fallen body, pulling it onto her—

And using it to reflect all their ruinous power back at them.

Their armor clashed against the marble as they fell, stunned by their own darkness, and she did not waste a moment. From the floor, she wrenched her weapon from the knight’s neck, and on her knees, she turned, stabbing and stabbing and stabbing until all of their throats were in tatters and she was covered in blood.

Ten more bodies, strewn around her. *Ten*. She frowned—

And was slammed forward from behind. Her teeth sung in her skull from the impact, and she turned, but he was faster, kicking her blade from her grip. His hands curled around her throat.

One knight would not stand between her and Grim. Not when she had gotten this far already. She gasped for air. She had no weapon. No powers. But she had her hands.

She reached up and managed to rip the helmet off the knight’s head, throwing it across the room. She thrust her thumbs toward his eyes—

But then she saw his face and froze.

It was—it was *his* face. Cronan’s.

Her shock cost her.

The hilt of a sword slammed into her temple, and she saw stars. Then cold metal slid against her throat.

“Enough,” a voice said, and her blood-soaked body lurched as she was wrenched into the air. She looked frantically between the knight, who was in the process of getting his helmet, and Cronan. They were identical.

“Yes,” he said. “They’re all like this. All versions of me. Weaker versions.”

He looked over to the knight, who had just fitted his helmet back onto his head—

And Cronan sliced it clean off with his shadows. The knight’s body collapsed in a loud heap of metal as the head rolled across the floor.

Isla took a shaking breath. Cronan didn’t tolerate any weakness—even in himself. She tried to meet Grim’s eyes, but he was watching his ancestor closely, his face not betraying a single emotion.

Cronan strode over to Isla and ran a finger across her cheek. “Your death must be public, of course,” he said. “After all, I’ve done so much to build you up . . . Another duel, of course. We can make a spectacle of it.” He smirked, seeming pleased with himself. “But first—let’s breach that wall in your mind you’ve been keeping, shall we?”

Her bones locked under his hold. Then his shadows pierced into her skull, and she screamed. She couldn’t help it, despite the many times he had hacked through her mind, searching for what she had kept hidden.

Through her yell, she heard something. It started as a faint echo but grew louder as Cronan dug through her thoughts. She didn’t recognize the voice . . .

Which meant it had to have come from him.

That was when Isla realized that while he plundered her mind, he was still leaving the door to his wide open.

While they were connected like this, she could use her powers. He may have been able to hold her body still, with a firmer grip than ever before after what she had done to him, but her mind? It could wander. It could fight back.

As his shadows axed through her brain, she pierced his. He was so fixated on desperately breaking through her thoughts that he didn’t even notice. He was exposed, vulnerable. He didn’t think she was capable of doing what he did. He didn’t realize that the entire time he had held her

down and invaded her mind, he had been teaching her everything she needed to know to break into his.

Just like with Lark, she imagined herself like the tide, rushing in. Her awareness eroded the coastline of his mind again and again, until she saw flashes—of strange people and creatures and worlds she never could have imagined.

He didn't just have walls within his head . . . he had labyrinths. They were shaped just like the maze in the winter palace garden.

More. She needed to see more.

She flooded his mind, her waters plunging deeper, until she found a crevice in the hedges.

In her own head, she let wall after wall break. And while Cronan's shadows took what she wanted him to, she saw everything. *Everything*.

He was right. Everyone had a weakness.

She had just discovered his.

But it might have been too late. Because when Cronan finally crawled out of her mind, leaving her numb and gasping, he said, "All that planning with the king . . . for nothing. What a shame. You could have been great."

He turned toward Grim. "And you," he said. "You were going to let her out."

Grim's face remained expressionless. Cronan's hands twitched, and Isla wondered if he would finally strike Grim down. *Let him try*.

Instead, he took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders. "But I always give second chances." He looked between them. "I'll be conquering your world the day after next. I've been convinced that perhaps not everyone needs to die. I could use willing servitude. Whichever one of you wins will get to save their realm."

Isla's mind was still spinning from the shadows in her head and the fight with the guards. Cronan could see the moment that her scattered head finally put the pieces together.

His smile was sharp as a blade. "That's right," he said, taking pleasure in her panic. "You won't be dueling *me* to the death . . . You'll be dueling your husband."

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GRIM

His eyes flashed toward Cronan, and his ancestor simply turned to him. He spoke right into his mind, and said, *You've betrayed me. You didn't think I could let you live, did you?*

Grim swallowed. He didn't know what he was thinking when he went to her cell. He had heard Cronan's plans, and he had just acted. It had been instinct.

Even now, he couldn't find it within himself to regret it.

I've seen your mind, his ancestor said. *I know you want to save your realm. If you win the duel, I will let Nightshade survive. I swear it, on my crown*.

The jagged metal atop Cronan's head glistened, as if in reflection of the oath. Then, his shadows retreated.

She was going to die. *He* was going to kill her.

It was a certainty he had known from the beginning. Either Cronan was going to end her . . . or Grim was. It was the only way to prevent the possibility of the destiny he had seen. Only recently did he learn that because of their bound lives, her death would trigger his own.

Though his emotions had been running wild in these last few days, he felt nothing now. Only flat acceptance.

He was going to die. But at least his realm would live. He had meant the words he had told her, just moments before.

I said I remembered a world worth saving. Not that I remembered a life worth living.

Her rush of passion in response, her insistence that he had once been happy, had lit a strange flame within him, a desire to believe her. An unfamiliar yearning to not only survive but *live*.

For a moment, he had envisioned a future that was just like she had spoken about, without duties or fate binding them. Now he realized all it had been was a dream. A ridiculous fantasy.

Isla seemed to realize it too. Her emotions were flat as a lake as he led her from the galaxy room to the women who would prepare her for the duel tomorrow. He only sensed the slightest hints of regret and worry, but the rest . . . was peace.

He wondered what that meant. Had she finally realized he would never remember her? That Cronan was unstoppable, which had been clear even before Isla revealed that his knights were all versions of himself?

Cronan had scattered himself throughout the universe, throughout time, throughout this world. He couldn't be killed. If one version of him was eliminated, another would be waiting.

Isla had been wrong. Together, they still wouldn't have had a chance against ending Cronan.

Grim had to save his realm. He had to defeat her in the duel.

He wished the thought of having to kill her didn't make him frown. This duel was a good thing. A *gift*, just as Cronan removing his memories had been.

But Grim couldn't deny now that it felt more like a curse. More like a *taking*. An absence that he missed.

In his last night of life, he would have wanted more moments to remember.

Cronan allowed him to attend dinner with the rest of the lords of planets. Isla's seat was noticeably empty. He tried to shove his emotions down, to not feel her absence just as sharply as he had felt her presence, but it was impossible.

He wanted to kill his ancestor. Desperately. But that was also impossible. So, he would do whatever he needed to ensure his realm's survival.

After dinner, he portaled into his room . . . and stilled. Her aura was everywhere. *Her*.

Slowly, he turned, only to find Isla sitting on the edge of his bed as if ripped from one of his daydreams.

She was wearing an otherworldly fabric that glistened like a dusting of stars. It was thin as spider silk and just as transparent. She might as well be wearing nothing at all.

“This is what they gave me to wear to the duel,” she said, noticing his study. The dress would tear the moment she moved. Cronan clearly meant to humiliate her. Her head tilted. “I think it’s a little too modest.”

He blinked a few times to try and clear his mind. He kept his hand on his bedpost, knuckles whitening as he clung to it like it was an anchor in this sea of intensity that threatened to sweep him off his feet.

“What are you doing here?” His voice was breathless. Almost pained.

She lifted a shoulder. “You kill me tomorrow,” she said. She didn’t even try to pretend she would win. “I want to spend my last few hours of life with you.”

“Why?” he asked. He needed to know. Needed to understand the emotions that turned people into fools so that he wouldn’t become one of them.

“Because you’re my husband, and I love you,” she said. “Even if you end up stabbing me through the heart tomorrow.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Grim asked. His chest was rising and falling too quickly. “Don’t you know how ridiculous that sounds?”

She smiled. “Love usually is.”

She stood before him, and he could see her—all of her—clearly now. The fabric hid little, and she did not shrink beneath his study. No, she closed the space between them like she had done it a thousand times before.

“I can leave, or I can stay. It’s your choice.” She peered at him, waiting for his decision. When he said nothing, she nodded. She swept past him, out the door.

Good. A night together would only complicate things tomorrow. He watched her go.

Before she stepped foot out of his room, he snatched her wrist, pulling her back. He had portaled so quickly, the world had blurred. She paused, looking over her shoulder at him.

Perfection was a person. And she was standing right in front of him.

She raised a brow at him in challenge. They stared each other down. He had promised himself that he would be better, that he wouldn’t fold beneath temptation. He had watched her stab him in the heart in a loop. He had reminded himself of his countless centuries of self-control.

But fuck him, this was one battle he was willing to lose.

He tugged her inside, slamming the door shut behind her. It was against that door that he pressed into her, unleashed, his eyes sweeping down her body, studying her hungrily.

The starlit dress was so delicate, it would tear beneath his touch, rip beneath his teeth. He knew that it needed to be intact for her execution, but he was tempted to shred it to ribbons.

Instead, hand trembling with restraint, he gently trailed his fingers up her thigh, knuckles brushing against the dangerously thin fabric, until he found that slit. And then he was smoothing across warm, soft skin. His heart was racing. The world could end right now and he wouldn't even notice, his entire focus was on the path up the inside of her leg. Higher. *Higher*. She shivered beneath his touch, her breathing slow and heavy. She gazed up at him expectantly. In her eyes, he could see all of his wants reflected. In her aura, he could taste the depths of her desire.

And when his fingers finally reached her center, he could *feel* that she wanted this just as much as he did.

He cursed, his fingers sliding over the silk. She groaned, moving against his fingers. He leaned low to get a good look at her.

She craned her head up, so their faces were just inches apart.

"*Please*," she begged, right against his mouth.

"So polite," he murmured, his blood roaring with need. "Tell me, do you only say please and thank you when I'm giving you something?"

His fingers slipped beneath the fabric, and they both cursed. She squeezed her eyes shut for just a moment. When she opened them, they were fierce, blazing green. It was clear who held the power here. And she knew it. "Give me everything and find out."

In that moment, he knew he would.

She was his ruin. She wasn't even touching him, and he was already close to losing himself completely.

She was the blade destined to cut through his heart. It felt like she was already there, testing him, testing his ability not to break.

Especially when his fingers trailed lower, and she made a sound that went right to the throbbing core of him. There. She wanted him *there*. His gaze slipped down her body, tracing it with his eyes like he wanted to do with his mouth, and he had never been more turned on in his entire life, watching her writhe against his hand, cheeks heated, her chest nearly

spilling out of her dress. Her head had turned to the side, lips parted in another gasp, but, as if she could feel his study, she faced him again. Their eyes caught, like a key clicking into a lock.

“You have two hands,” she said. “Use them.”

No one had ever spoken to him like that. He was ruler of his realm, the leader of an army, but for her, he was willing to serve. He would do anything she asked.

He used the other hand to palm her chest, fingers featherlight against the delicate fabric, thumb brushing against her hardened peak, and she bucked against him, her body going taut with pleasure. He suddenly wished he had more than just two hands, so that he could touch her *everywhere*, but then he remembered his shadows. He used them to sweep across her chest while he reached to grip her hip, cupping her firmly in place before he finally leaned down, whispered in her ear, “I hope you have all night, because this is just the start of what I have to offer,” and then he slipped a finger inside her.

One turned into two and she took it all, grinding against his hand, nails clawing into his wrist as she told him how to make her feel good. He followed every order, every command, hanging on her every word until her body went taught then loose around him.

That was when he lifted one of his hands to cup the back of her neck, and pulled her lips to his. Her *taste*. She was a drug that would kill him before he quit.

He didn’t want to leave a single inch of skin untouched. His shadows stroked her as he swallowed her moans with his mouth, guiding her through every tremor, until she stopped moving against him. She panted against the wall, chest heaving, eyes bright. She looked at him like she needed more. *Everything*.

It was the hardest thing he had ever done, slowly slipping the straps of her delicate dress off her shoulders. Slowly, unbuttoning every tiny button down the back. Slowly, lifting her out of it. And as soon as the dress hit the floor, she was in his arms.

He set her on the edge of the bed, and took a step back, just to admire her like a work of art. Because her beauty deserved to be worshipped. He planned to—thoroughly.

And wholly naked . . . he took a moment just to breathe before he stalked toward her. His own clothes dropped away, and he didn’t miss how her tongue darted out to lick her lips. And even just the thought of that mouth on him . . .

“We’ve done this before?” he asked, his voice full of barely leashed desire. He had seen it in his head—but he needed to know for certain.

“On every surface you can think of.”

“Good.” She gasped as he swept her back into his arms. Fuck the bed. “We’re going to add a few more places to the list.”

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ISLA

Somehow, until now, they had never done this in a tub.

They had been on the floor. Then, he had put her on the counter. Now, they were inside the porcelain bath. He draped her over the side and took her like this. She gripped the edge, knuckles white as she fought off another wave of pleasure. She didn't want this to end. *Ever*.

Grim had meant it when he said they were going to put this room to the test, and they had. The bed's sheets were ripped apart. The headboard was in splinters. There were feathers scattered all over the floor. The floor itself was pocketed with gashes from Grim's shadows, which had clawed up the ground with his release.

He hadn't been deterred. He had simply carried her out of the mess, pressed her against the wall, and started again.

And again.

She felt so full of him, she could barely breathe. "This is the best night," she gasped, as he took her in long strokes, "out of all of them."

His breath was hot against her neck, sending a chill down her spine as he said, "It's not over yet."

Suddenly, she was off her knees and against a wall, her sensitive chest flush against it. He was still behind her, a shadow far taller than hers. Slowly, he lifted one of her hands up high above her head, uncurled every finger with aching slowness, brushed his thumb across her palm, then pressed it against the wall, placing his own over it. He did the same with his other hand.

Then he was moving again, and she cursed against the smooth rock, because this was the best she had felt in weeks. His shadows swept down her heated skin, and she gasped as they moved with purpose, sliding everywhere Grim had already explored with his tongue.

“Do we do this often?” he asked, his voice a ragged rasp in her ear.

“All the time,” she said.

“Well, at least I did one thing right,” he said, and then he went faster. She met him stroke for stroke, back arched so he could take her deeper, and he hummed his approval against her neck. Her nerves were all so sensitive, so attended to. He didn’t leave one part of her wanting.

Grim reached down now, sensing she was close. He learned her completely from just one night, and she cried out as he found exactly what she needed. His body curled over her, skimming his teeth across her shoulder, shadows stroking her chest, then took her even harder. His long fingers flexed over hers, one hand still pinned over her head, and he held her firm against the wall as he went faster, knowing she needed this, needed her entire world to be narrowed to the feel of him. His other hand worked her center until the toes she was standing on started to curl, and she gripped the stone like it could keep her from falling over the side of this infinite bliss. She wanted to live in this moment. She wished it was endless. Her head dropped back as her lips parted, her spine a bolt of lightning, her pleasure cresting. His teeth grazed her throat. She gasped her release, pulsing around him, before he groaned, and followed her over the edge.

His body was warm and heavy as he slumped around her, spent. For now.

She was still against the wall, pulse racing, when she heard the tub being filled. She turned, but he left the room before they could get started on another round, which was likely for the best. She washed herself, relishing in the fact that he had touched every inch of her skin. She had missed this. This insatiable need.

He came back with a towel and clothing.

“Here,” he said. His voice was a little gruff, and he didn’t meet her gaze. She didn’t mind. His eyes had been locked onto hers for hours, telling her how good this felt, how perfect she was, how well they fit.

Now, it seemed hard for him to look at her.

“Thank you,” she said, her cheeks heating as she remembered what he had said again about her *politeness*. Maybe he was right.

“Don’t—this doesn’t change anything,” he ground out. “I won’t go easy on you in the arena. I won’t let you win.”

“I know,” she said. Finally, he allowed their eyes to meet, but only for a moment. And she saw all the feelings he had tried to bury come flaring to the surface.

She searched, almost desperately, to see if a shred of that bond was there on his side. After everything they had done, she dared herself to hope.

But it wasn’t.

He walked her to the door. Before she could say a word, he slammed it shut.

In the cell, she felt a bite of unease. Maybe she had gotten this all wrong.

They had spent *the entire night* together. And she had sworn it had been more than physical. He had touched her like he cared about her pleasure. He had looked at her like she was a goddess to be worshipped.

She knew him. She clung to that belief that she still did, as she turned toward Lark’s ragged shadow. She had barely reformed after being turned to a pile of ash. The feather, which was gripped in her hands, had most certainly helped speed up the process. Isla plucked that feather from her ancestor.

And she got to work.

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GRIM

If Grim’s fork wasn’t made of god-bone, it would have snapped beneath his grip.

He ground his teeth as he fought off yet another memory from last night. At the way she—

No. He had meant what he had said. Last night was purely physical. Meaningless.

Regardless, in just an hour, they would both be dead. The heads of planets were already at the crumbling arena. Thousands of people from this world and others had gathered too, excited for the spectacle. It was the entertainment before the invasion.

Commotion sounded outside the galaxy room. Grim ignored it, piercing the piece of meat in front of him. The plate shattered.

Cronan peered at him with narrowed eyes. Before he could say a word, a group of knights burst through the doors.

“What?” Cronan barked.

“The prisoner.”

Grim looked up then.

“What about her?” Cronan demanded.

The knight hesitated for a moment, before saying, “She’s gone.”

Cronan frowned. Grim echoed the movement. Gone? She didn’t have any powers. She had refused his chance to leave. Those bars were made of *impenetrable steel*.

And when I do finally leave this cell . . . I’m going to break out of it, she had said.

Impossible. Unless—

Lark’s feather. Grim had obscured the marking Isla had healed . . . but had she sensed it, somehow? Had he let the disguising illusion drop during their night together?

Had she used him for that? Is that why she had been waiting in his room?

The witch. She had told him herself how she had stabbed him in the chest during their first kiss. He should have known. This entire time, he had convinced himself that he was using her . . . only to see she had been using *him*.

He might have been impressed if he wasn’t so fucking angry. At himself, mostly.

What would Cronan do if they weren’t able to duel? Would he simply decide not to let one of their realms live? Her escape could cost him his chance to save Nightshade.

“Find her,” Cronan said, his anger like poison.

He would. Not for Cronan, but for himself.

He began striding from the room—but a thought stopped him.

The smart thing for her to do would be to leave this place. But Isla did not make smart decisions. She made them out of emotion.

She still believed there was hope he could remember her. He knew exactly what she was doing.

She had waited until this moment to make her move. She must have known he had lost his control. Of course, she did, after the way he had behaved last night.

But she was wrong.

Last night meant nothing. Especially when the lives of everyone in his realm were on the line.

As if to prove the fact, he turned to his ancestor and said, “Let me prove my loyalty to you.”

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ORO

Thanks to the portaling device, there were now legions of Skyling, Starling, and even Moonling forces keeping the creatures at bay on Lightlark. Cleo had helped without question. She had wanted to be nearby, in the hope that Isla would soon return.

Their help had lessened the weight on Oro's shoulders. But as if in defiance of his hope, the creatures were now attacking in greater forces. He had been battling them for hours all through the night and morning.

It was a good distraction from what he had been trying hard not to think about. When he finally went to bed well into the morning, though, he realized he couldn't escape it.

The silver pool was waiting for him in his mind, as if called by his noblest and most treacherous thoughts.

"Hiding from the truth," the woman said, her voice echoing. "That doesn't sound like you."

He ground his teeth together. "You don't know me."

"No. But you know yourself."

"Is the prophecy about me?" he asked.

"It's hard to know, until it's done," she said. "The future is split, just as you are."

He swallowed the urge to roll his eyes. Her answer was as vague and unhelpful as he expected.

"But there is a constant in every path. Every possibility. Even now."

The silver pool began to ripple. And in its metallic waters, something rose up until it breached the surface.

A blade longer than a dagger but not quite a sword. It had an intricate handle in the shape of a heart.

“What is this?” he asked, reaching for the hilt. Before he could lock his fingers around it, the blade disappeared back into the waters.

“A famed weapon that can kill anyone and anything. It’s been hidden for millennia. Kept from those who would use it for ill will.” Her silver eyes pierced him, wide and unwavering. “This,” she said, “is the key to peace or ruin. You must find it to even have a chance at defeating Cronan.”

“Where is it?” Oro asked.

“It’s not just in another world,” she said. “It was hidden in a pocket of time.”

The Threads of Time must have been used. He frowned. “I don’t have the time threads anymore. There’s no way I can find it.”

“You, perhaps, are the only one who can,” she said.

With that, she disappeared.

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ISLA

Grim was chasing her. She could feel his power spilling through this world like a river of impending night.

The labyrinth of Cronan's mind was in the shape of a skyre. *His* skyre. After she had carved it into her palm with Lark's feather, her power rushed back into her, as she became immune to his poison.

She had broken right through her cell's shademade bars, then through the entire castle, punching hole after hole until she was free. And as she rose higher into the sky and looked behind her, she saw that Cronan had not been leveling indiscriminate parts of this land.

The scars of this world formed the same symbol.

She wrapped herself in energy until she was a star, shooting toward the heavens. She became a beacon. And it didn't take long to attract a storm.

She had known for a while now that the storms were portals. But she hadn't truly thought about them as an extension of Cronan's power—just like her starstick was an extension of Grim's.

Lightning barreled toward her from the center of the tempest, and when it reached her, she closed her eyes—and focused. Just as she had learned so many years before, when she had first discovered the relic beneath her floorboards, she thought of exactly where she wanted to go . . .

Just like Grim had taught her. And she had taught Oro.

The lightning's energy met hers, and her body jolted. Together, they produced a loud peal of thunder. But her concentration did not break, and she was sucked through the portal, crashing to the ground a moment later, tearing it up in spurts of dirt and roots.

When she finally came to a stop, she opened her eyes—and saw that it had worked.

She was back in the Forgotten Forest. She remembered what the silver-haired woman had said. This was a place that you had to be invited into to find. It was the perfect place to hide from Cronan.

Grim was already coming after her. Last time, it had taken over a day to find her. Now, she would make it easy for him.

She reached up to the necklace around her throat. And pulled.

Not a moment later, she heard a step sound behind her.

She swallowed. This had to work. If it didn't . . . then he would truly be lost to her forever. And she couldn't bear that possibility.

Their world was dying. Oro was barely keeping it safe. Eventually, he would fall. He needed help. He needed them both. Cronan was going to invade. They needed to find a way to stop him.

"Stood me up for our duel?" Grim said. His words were light, but his tone was anything but. He was angry. Of course he was.

"No. I just chose a different arena." Slowly, she turned to him.

Grim was wrapped in shadows that were sharpened into claws. Against *her*.

Still, she took a step forward. This was her husband. Just because he didn't remember making that vow didn't make it less true.

Now that she had her powers back, she could feel the energy of this forest, buried deep in its roots and bark and leaves.

She could *control* it.

His shadows lurched, turning into chains to tie her down. Before they could, she shot toward him, breaking right through those shadows with her own. He frowned, like her shadows were a reminder that she was also Nightshade, and they were not so different. Before he could rally his power once more, she pressed her hand to his heart—

And the forest fell away.

They watched as Grim's castle on Nightshade bloomed around them. There was a line of women in identical clothing. Isla recognized herself as one of them. The scene before them was edged in shadows, blurred. The women's whispers were slightly muted, as if they were underwater.

Grim from the past walked inside a moment later, and all the sounds quieted.

His eyes went straight to her. There was no hesitation. No break in their gaze. It was as if he had known from the moment he had walked in exactly

what she was—*his*. Some distant part of her head had known that he was hers.

Isla turned to the Grim next to her, and his gaze was glued to the scene. His eyes were narrowed, his hands in fists. Isla wondered how much time she had before he was wielding his shadows against her once again. Still, he watched. It was all she needed. Just a few moments.

The scene shifted as the Grim from the memory took Isla into his room. She was against the wall, her legs around his hips, not so different from how they had been just a few hours prior. Beside her, Grim swallowed.

He flinched as they both watched Isla stab a dagger into his chest.

The memory fell away, breaking into scattering leaves that swirled to make a new scene—

A slice of darkness cut through it, and Isla was thrown back, right through their memories. She landed on the floor of her Wildling room. She watched as past Grim forced the Isla of the memory up the wall with his powers, invisible shadows choking her.

The Grim before her did the same thing now.

Two Grims, of the past and present, stood side by side, and both Islas clawed at their throats, inches apart. Their gasps for air synchronized across time.

No. Grim was fighting this, fighting remembering. But that only meant that it was *working*.

And Isla was not the same woman she had been back then.

She growled and burst forth in a shot of energy, crashing into Grim. They rolled through the memory, the powers emanating off their clashing skin, until she managed to pull herself away and get to her feet. Grim was right behind her. He wasn’t going to stop and listen. He was resisting this. He wanted a fight.

Isla bared her teeth. One arm rippled in flames, crackling through the forest. The other wrapped in water from the dew of the woods, which she hardened into ice. “Fine. You want to duel? Let’s duel,” she said, as the scene around them shifted to the market.

And they both lurched forward.

Grim’s shadows became blades that shot toward her, and she blocked them with a wall of fire. She pushed the flames toward him, and he just managed to make himself matterless before he was burned. The fire kept

going, roaring through the market memory, as they battled through it, surrounded by Nightshade guards as Grim of the past ordered them to take Isla to the prisons.

A wave of obsidian rushed toward her, choking her senses, but Isla raised her hand at the last moment—and those shadows froze. They fell to the ground and shattered in a thousand black pieces.

The scene transformed to the dark and dank prison on Nightshade, and Grim smirked, looking over at past Isla who hung from the ceiling by her wrists. “It seems you make a habit of being imprisoned.”

“And you make a habit of leering at me,” she shot back as they both watched him very noticeably study past Isla’s body in her plum dress.

Her Grim glared at her—then shot forward. But instead of his body crashing into hers, shadows emerged from his skin in the shape of him. One. Two. Then half a dozen, all surrounding her, blocking out the scene. He was using her own powers against her.

His voice echoed through the forest as he said, “This isn’t personal. I need to save my realm.”

Then, he attacked, the six forms closing in.

“And I need to save my husband.” Isla lifted her arms, and the full force of the forest was upon them, cutting those shadows into pieces with vines and thorns and jagged bark until they were no more than ribbons. The moment his shadows were destroyed, Grim was upon her again, a sword made of shadows rippling from his palm. She watched it calcify before her eyes. She flexed her hand and used her Starling energy to create a blade of sparks and stars.

She took her stance. He took his. For a moment, Isla’s heart broke with how familiar this felt—like they were back at the Centennial, during his first demonstration. But these were very different circumstances.

He charged forward, and she blocked his attack, sparks surging from her starsword. They dueled through the blacksmith’s woods, then through Creetan’s Crag. And as they battled through their memories, through their love story, Isla could see subtle changes in Grim’s expression as he watched past Isla dance, on that stage. As his former self pinned her against that wall. As he killed everyone in that room after one of them had hurt her, as he picked the glass out of her hands. Echoes of their past had bled into the

present. He must have seen it. He must know that no matter how hard either of them fought it, they were inevitable.

It was working.

But it was only making him angrier. She grunted as he delivered a particularly brutal blow that sent her tumbling through the forest. She landed right next to his own body from the past, on the floorboards of her room. His pale skin was ravaged by dark markings. Injuries from dreks.

“I healed you. And you healed me,” she said as his shadows crashed against the starshield she summoned, propelling her farther across the floor. When she came to a stop, she turned and saw that Grim was studying the scene before him—watching past Isla tend to his past self’s wounds with care.

“We healed together,” she said, rising to her feet, darting toward him, blocking yet another swing from his shadowblade. The colorful leaves of this forest flurried around them, before the scene settled into that cave with dragon fire roaring toward Isla, and the shadows Grim sent to stop it, saving her instead of claiming the sword.

Present Grim stared at the blade, clearly recognizing it as Cronan’s. But after a moment, he was streaking toward her again, weapon raised.

Their swords continued to meet, over and over and over, emitting high pitches of power and sparks every time they touched. Isla remembered what the silver-haired woman said about fated pairs. About souls that were meant to fall in love again and again.

“It never made sense,” she said, as they dueled through Isla’s bedroom, the first time they became one. “This love . . . it went against both our interests . . .” She slashed at his chest before ducking to swipe his legs, but he dodged her. “Yet . . . in the end . . . we chose each other. Over everything else. Every time.”

Her room was replaced by scorched dirt. In the distance sat a village. Grim of the past was just yards away, battling a sea of dreks. His shadows were faltering. He wouldn’t make it much longer.

Grim stopped in his tracks, almost forgetting his opponent next to him. He watched as Isla appeared there, next to the scar. As past Grim realized there was only one way she could have gotten there without her starstick.

Love. She had access to his abilities. Past Grim seemed at peace then, ready to accept his own death. He was about to portal Isla away, to save her.

But then—claws pierced right through his chest.

Past Isla bellowed in pain. And without a moment's hesitation, she plunged Cronan's sword into the ground and gave herself over completely, her power spilling out of her like a tidal wave. Uncontrollable and infinite, just like their love.

She collapsed to the ground. Past Grim rushed to catch her.

Current Grim watched, stoic and unmoving, as she died in his arms. As his past self made that same sacrifice for her.

As the scene faded into the next one, Grim did not move. He just stood, his hands trembling at his sides, like he wasn't sure if he wanted to strike Isla again or drop his blade.

Isla stepped toward him. His back was tense as the memories shifted from nights in his room, to finding Wraith, to him proposing to her in the glimmering violet field of nightbane.

To their wedding.

Her fingers reached for his. She reached for *him*. The same way she had reached for him countless times before. The same way she always would.

But inches from his skin, he turned in a flash, and she barely blocked a blow as their blades clashed once more. She gritted her teeth, pushing against him, but he didn't budge. In the sparks that their swords were producing, she could see his face clearly, through the darkness. His expression was twisted in strain, but something told her it wasn't just from holding back her sword. He was fighting this. He was fighting *himself*.

"You loved me," she said, groaning as she put all her strength behind her blade. They were equally matched. Unmoving. Both unyielding. "Look. *Look*."

But he refused. He didn't take his eyes off his opponent as he bared his teeth and the forest flashed in memory after memory. The scenes were forming quicker now, flickering through all the moments since their marriage, all the times their love was tested and proven. Grim roared as he spun to the side, Isla's sword shooting forward into the space where he had been. She whirled to block his next advance before his blade could strike her neck.

And as their swords met once more, as they continued to duel in the center of their love story, Isla noticed that their blades, with every crackling clash, were slowly starting to bleed into each other. The shadows of his

weapon melted into hers, and her stars merged with his darkness, forming constellations. The space between them was blurring, uniting. *Melding*.

It was working. No matter what he said. No matter how fiercely he fought her right now.

The memories swirled around them even faster, feeding off Isla's desperation as she used everything Cronan had taught her, turning the pain into the power to show Grim everything he had forgotten. She gave him every single moment, just as she remembered it—until their past shattered, a thousand leaves spinning around them, blocking the rest of the forest from view. The world fell away. The entire universe vanished. It was just them. The way they had always dreamed.

"We gave our lives for each other," she said, yelling over the roaring of the wind, her hair whipping wildly around her. "I love you. In the past, and in the present, and in the future, I love you. In this world, and the last, and every one in between, I love you."

Instead of advancing once more, instead of wielding her blade against him—

She let it flicker out into nothing. Until she was defenseless.

This could be the last mistake she ever made.

Grim still held his sword tightly. But he did not strike. His eyes met hers, and they were blazing with intensity. He was breathing hard.

He could cut her down where she stood, but still, she walked toward him. One step. Another. Until she reached for the hand that still clutched his blade.

"I love you," she said again, the words so soft, they got lost in the wind, but she knew he heard her. Her fingers gently brushed along his wrist, and he shut his eyes, tightly, as if her touch both burned and healed him. She shifted even closer. "I love you, even if you don't remember. Even if you never will. Even if you strike me down right now, I love you. This is not the end. There is no end. Our love is infinite, just like you said."

Infinite. The word was like a key. His eyes snapped open.

And the shadow sword fell away.

Slowly, the hand that just moments ago wielded a weapon against her now reached toward her face.

Isla didn't dare hope. Didn't dare breathe. But as his fingers gently slid against her cheek, she finally let herself cry.

"*Grim,*" she said, her voice breaking.

His thumb brushed away her tears. She wanted to fall to her knees in relief at the tenderness of that touch. "You remember," she said. "You . . . see."

"I do," he said, and she thought her heart might burst from happiness. He tilted his head, taking her in, and then there was no doubt. He was gazing at her like he had a thousand times before, like he couldn't get enough, like he never wanted to look at anything else again. She smiled.

But then—his entire face changed. His grip on her face tightened. "I just don't care."

The raging leaves around them fell to the ground, turned to dust.

And Isla's entire body went cold as she felt that force behind her—that of picked-apart galaxies and upturned worlds and endless death. His approaching footsteps rang through the woods he had already partially destroyed. He carved a path of ruin, and every remaining tree and flower and leaf withered until they were standing in ashes.

Cronan's laugh echoed through the emptiness.

"You were right, Grimshaw. She took us right to the forest."

No.

She stumbled out of Grim's hold, calling to her powers, energy and fire encircling her—but then Cronan said, "Try anything, and he dies."

That's when Isla saw the shadow-dagger floating in the air, its blade pressed right against Grim's heart.

Her husband's abilities were extraordinary. But he did not wear a crown of broken worlds. If Cronan wanted to plunge that blade into Grim's heart, both he and Isla would be powerless to stop it.

She stopped fighting. The fire and energy around her died.

"Who knew it was so easy to get you to do my bidding?" Cronan drawled. "Who knew you would be so foolish as to still harbor feelings over a husband who doesn't want you at all?" He shook his head, stepping over what was left of their memories. "To be broken so easily . . . that love must have never been very strong to begin with."

Isla's eyes burned as she watched her husband back away from her—to Cronan's side. The dagger moved with him, its tip trained at his chest.

With a simple flick of Cronan's hand, Isla's body lurched forward, toes of her boots dragging through the dirt, until he held her throat in his fist.

Her entire body was under his control as he forced her to raise her arm . . . and reach toward that dagger. Her fingers curled around its hilt.

She swallowed. No. *No*. This was not how their story ended. Her hand shook, fighting against Cronan's hold. But even with her powers, she couldn't stop him from forcing her wrist forward—

And blood began to puddle.

Her blood roared in her ears. Grim wasn't moving out of the way—was it because he couldn't? Was Cronan controlling his body too? Or had Grim meant what he said when he told her he couldn't remember a life worth living?

But before the blade could go any deeper, Cronan made her pause. One move . . . one second . . . and the prophecy would be fulfilled.

Isla trembled with rage as Cronan said, "Now. Take me to the Pool of Possibilities, or you kill your husband."

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GRIM

She meant nothing to him. So why were his hands in fists as he watched his ancestor drag her through the forest?

Ever since Cronan had trained that dagger against his heart, she had given up. The fight had left her completely.

For *him*. Though he had racked his brain for any other motivations, he couldn't find any. She could have escaped from Cronan several times over the last few days. She could have gone home and left Grim here.

But she hadn't. She had brought him to this forest. She was still trying to get him to remember things he never would. She was a stubborn fool.

So why did part of him feel raw and strange, knowing someone cared enough about him to doom themselves too?

The memories she had shown him in the forest had felt like watching strangers. It was odd, seeing a version of himself he didn't recognize in the slightest. But he had to admit he could see slivers of reasons he might have developed feelings for her.

No, not feelings. *Weaknesses*. Cronan had been right. The witch had made him soft. He didn't want to become the Grim from the memories, who had put one woman over everyone in his realm.

But even if his death wasn't imminent, he wasn't sure if he wanted to become Cronan either, living alone in the ashes of a world he destroyed. Was that Grim's future, if he somehow survived Isla's death? All that he had to look forward to if he stayed on this path?

Was it a coincidence that Grim couldn't remember the last time he had been happy? Or was it because all the memories with her had been lost?

Is it because *she* had become his happiness?

They reached a glimmering silver pool in the charred remains of the forest. Only a crown of trees around this pond had been preserved, as if

they were made of stronger stuff than the rest. The water radiated a strange, powerful energy that Grim didn't recognize—simultaneously soothing and threatening, like the gentle scraping of a blade against skin. Cronan finally released Isla, and she fell onto her hands and knees in the dirt. She did not make a move to stand. Or fight. Nothing.

It was as if she was a flame that had been extinguished.

And why did that make him furious?

She had been an aggravating thorn in his side for weeks. He had been desperate for her to give up, or, at the very least, be quiet. It was not until he saw her feeble that he recognized that he missed her strength.

It didn't matter now, but a pit formed in his stomach at the thought of her just giving up. He loosened his hold on his feelings, the wall he'd had to build up when he had set off to hunt her down again, and Isla's aura crashed into him. He nearly stumbled as he was hit with her crushing sadness. Hope, ruined. Fury.

But not a single ounce of regret.

Cronan, on the other hand, was full of triumph. His normally cold and emotionless aura was blazing with pride. "The Pool of Possibilities," he said. "Elusive to me for centuries . . ." His eyes found Grim's. "Good work," he said.

Still, Cronan did not remove the dagger from his chest. Its point was still dug into his skin, a fraction away from his heart.

Normally, Grim would have rather fought to the death than allow someone to threaten him like this. But if he wanted his realm to be safe, he had to play by his ancestor's rules.

Cronan waved a hand over his crown. In its center, the golden Threads of Time gleamed. "The oldest place in the universe is an ancient tree, from which an entire forest grew. In those woods, you can find every portal to every world that has ever existed," he said, and Grim got the sense that he was talking more to himself than anyone in particular. "Once, long ago, I had a chance to do what needed to be done in order to reach that place. But I made the wrong decision."

Cronan had said the pool would show him every choice in his past that had needed to change in order for him to find that forest. And the threads would take him back in time, to do just that. To change *history*. Who knew what the consequences of that might be.

Cronan looked down at Isla. “And the diamond will amplify everything I am. It will allow me to conquer this universe once and for all. Starting with your pathetic little world. Not that you’ll be here to see it.”

He turned to Grim. “The diamond would never let me claim it, but *you* control it now. When she dies, before you fall, you will give it to me. And then, I will uphold my end of our bargain.”

With that, his ancestor walked into the pool. It glimmered, like liquid metal. The moment he stepped inside, the waters changed. They stilled.

Slowly, Cronan took his crown from his head. He placed it into the waters, and from its broken metal, shadow began to spill like ink, growing until the silver was reduced to only flecks of stars. The pool became a slice of night sky.

The waters stilled again, and Cronan’s eyes went blank.

This was Grim’s chance. He could kill his ancestor. Did he want to? With shreds of himself scattered throughout the galaxy, would it even make a difference? Before he could make a single move, Cronan was released from his trance. His crown flew back to his head as he stepped back onto land.

Cronan had everything he needed, so there was no reason to keep Isla alive anymore. Still . . . she didn’t try to leave. She didn’t run. She just looked at Grim from the ground, then faced Cronan, meeting her death head on.

His ancestor strode toward her, his face twisted into a smile of pure satisfaction. Grim should have been happy, knowing his realm would live. But all he felt was dread. It seemed so cruel, to end something that felt like it was only just beginning.

And even on the precipice of death, Isla’s emotions were full of peace that washed over him in a gentle wave. Peace and clarity and unyielding strength.

It was in that moment that Grim realized that there was strength in surrendering. Her aura was radiating. There was no doubt within her. No fear. Only fortitude.

Even as Cronan’s hands wrapped around her throat, she did not falter. She did not fight. She just held Grim’s gaze, as if she was not covered in dirt in the middle of these ash-crusted woods. As if she was not a moment

from death. She looked at him the same way she had in those memories, from across the aisle of their wedding.

"I love you," she said.

And then Cronan broke her neck.

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ISLA

HOURS BEFORE

Isla had a plan. It was reckless. It probably wouldn't work. But for them, for *him*, she had to try.

Even if it ended in her death.

"You hate me," she told Lark in their cell without preamble.

Lark could hardly even look over at her. "Of course, I do."

"But you hate Cronan more."

Lark did not deny it. Isla crawled over to her ancestor, ignoring the smell of rot. Lark's face was mottled with infection and decaying flesh. This time, she had barely been able to reform. A simple breeze would have her dispersing again. It was a wonder she could speak at all. "He is stifling your powers. You might never die, but this is a cruel existence."

Lark did not deny that either.

"I can kill him," Isla said. "I almost did."

Lark finally met her gaze, laughing. "You can't defeat him," she said.

"You're right. Not alone. But with help . . ."

"What do you want?" Lark snapped.

"Tell me how to kill you."

Lark bared her teeth at her. They were just jagged shards of rot.

Isla sighed. They didn't have time for this. "Let me kill you, and I will absorb your power and bring you back to life," she said.

Lark's eyes caught on the mark Isla had carved on her arm with the feather, before her ancestor woke up. Isla could see the realization setting. She looked as if she might just carve the skyre into herself. But her hands were just ribbons of flesh. There was hardly anything left to carve *into*.

“I need you,” Isla said, plainly. “I told you; I can’t do this alone. Together is the only way we end him. Both of us, impervious to death. He would be powerless against us.”

Lark peered at her for a long time, clearly weighing her options. They had trusted each other, once before, in the Forgotten Forest. All in the name of survival.

“I know you hate me,” Isla spat, her hands in frustrated fists. “But we’re family. That has to—it *has to* mean something.” She thought about her mother and all the generations of Wildling rulers before her. She could almost see them in this cell, standing between them, even the ones she couldn’t name. Her eyes burned. “Please,” she said, the word a desperate rasp. “Don’t let him end us all. Don’t let him kill everything you have created.”

It felt like years before Lark leaned forward.

And told her what she needed to know.

It took less than a moment for Isla to end her ancestor’s life—and her eyes widened as all that infinite, ancient power flowed into her veins. As she became the last living ruler of her bloodline. The world went silver as her body was filled to the brim with energy. It took a few moments to breathe around this endless wave of power. To be able to reach its surface, and force it back into her chest, in a blazing seed of strength. Finally, the cell came back into focus.

Isla looked over at Lark’s corpse. “Good riddance, you murderous bitch,” she said.

She stood, leaving Lark in a pile of her own rot, and bent the shademade cell bars with her bare hands before bursting through the walls.

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GRIM

Grim was not prepared for the wave of pain and heartbreak that hit him when Cronan killed Isla. He watched her limp body fall to the ground, and his very soul seemed to shatter upon impact.

At first, Grim thought it was because their lives were bound and he was dying.

But when Isla's body stirred . . . when that broken bone snapped back into place . . . Grim realized the answer was much more complicated.

This surge of anguish and rage and regret was all his own. All for *her*.

She was alive.

And though it seemed like centuries since he had grinned, he couldn't stop the slow smile from stretching across his face as he realized what she had done.

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ISLA

Isla’s head turned back into place, and the world snapped back into focus. She met Cronan’s ruinous gaze.

And smiled.

Then she unleashed a beam of silver energy from her forehead that sliced through all his shadows like a sparkling blade.

He was thrown across the clearing, his body cutting right through ancient trees with the force. The ground trembled as they fell.

Isla stood from the ground, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. *Endure*, her mother had said. She would do that and more. She would carve a new path, so no one would ever have to endure him again.

He thought he had killed her.

He was going to *wish he could kill her*.

Cronan didn’t stay down for long. His shadows erupted from his crown, through the gap in the woods, but she was fire and wind and stars and sky and shadow and the ground itself, and the world seemed to bend to her will as the rock in front of her feet rose, the sky fell, and energy ignited in between, shielding her with power forged from every element. It was so bright, she watched Grim turn and shield his eyes.

When the light cleared, Isla was wearing a full suit of sparkling armor. She was holding a sword forged of every shard of her power. And it all seemed to converge into something new. Something stronger.

“You can’t have my world. You can’t have my husband,” she said, taking a step forward. When Cronan’s shadows shot at her again, she blocked them with her sword, the sound producing an ear-splitting howl. “You can’t break me. Not because I’m unbreakable, but because I am not alone,” she said.

With that, the waters of the starlit pool behind her began to ripple. She could feel it as if it was in her own mind. Her consciousness was in two

places.

Isla formed a root-spun cage around Cronan, then poured the rest of herself into that pool—the flair she had taken from Lark, the abilities she had been born with, the power she had claimed for herself. Life, death, and everything in between swirled in its midnight waters.

The diamond around her neck began to burn, searing into her skin. The shard of the heart of Lightlark that had stitched her own heart together pulsed, awakening.

Both infinite forces merged, amplifying everything she was.

And she was glorious.

Not unscarred, but unyielding. A flame that refused to extinguish, a night sky that refused to gutter out. A mind and body that was fractured and bleeding but still standing.

Everything in her was focused on that pool. Her arms were stretched wide. Her head was thrown back. It was from this angle that she saw a flash of darkness spiral through the night—pure obsidian, concentrated into a pike. It pierced through every layer of the shield around her. Her fingers flexed, but all her power was focused in the other direction. Cronan had broken free of the cage, and now, he was going to split her mind in half, in so many pieces they might not ever reform the same again. She gasped, bracing for the impact.

In the instant before the pike reached her, a wave of silver energy like liquid metal bloomed in front of Isla, and Cronan's pike shattered. Isla turned her head to see a familiar face looking back at her, silver hair gleaming as brightly as the energy surrounding her.

"I've got your front. You, finish this," Aurora said, as she turned sharply toward Cronan, unleashing a torrent of power that halted all his incoming shadows midair, then burst them, one by one. "*Go*," Aurora said, when Isla didn't move.

It had worked.

Slowly, Isla turned, calling her power back into her body, and saw that the pool was filled with figures, still forming. Her relief was nearly enough to make her sob right here in this forest, but her work wasn't done yet.

She faced Grim. His posture was rigid as he looked from Cronan to her, as if he was still undecided. Still torn. She reached out her hand. "We need you." Grim didn't move. "We—" She took a step forward, just as Aurora

was flung through the forest, her energy withering away as she landed in the waters.

Cronan had broken free again. His shadows raced forward, and Isla lifted her arm to form a shield. She felt the impact in her bones as she was knocked off her feet, into the pool, and her vision went black as her head hit the bottom.

Quiet. Everything was so quiet here. She blinked away the darkness, and it only subsided a little as her vision returned. Her world became midnight waters, shifting as limbs moved around her.

The energy she had used to turn death into life, and to release herself of the souls within her, was starting to take its toll. She tried to move—

Then found she couldn't. The familiar feeling of Cronan's shadows locked around her wrists and feet, shackling her to the bottom. She tried to move, to fight, but they held firm. Her throat contracted. Her lungs burned. Her vision blurred.

Finally, she couldn't take it any longer, and water rushed into her mouth.

She drowned.

Again.

Again.

Cronan's voice spoke into her mind. *This is your fate. I will keep you here for all eternity . . . or I will allow you the mercy of death, if you bring me the Sunling king*.

Oro? Why would he need Oro? What had Cronan seen in these waters?

No. She refused.

She drowned again. At her sides, the people she had killed—the ones she desperately wished to see—were almost awake.

Do you really think I'm going to let them live? he said. *The moment they surface, I'm going to kill them all*.

Through the dark water, she saw his shadows forming, becoming daggers above the surface. If he killed them, she didn't know if she had the strength to bring them back again. Especially not if Cronan kept her in this cycle of death. She was trapped. He had won.

As water filled her lungs again, burning like flames, she turned to the side and saw someone else, at the bottom of the pool, right by her side. Herself, at eight years old. She was drowning too. Her eyes were wide. Her

arms were thrashing. No. That little girl had been through enough. Too much, to end up like this.

She hadn't fought so hard to get to this world, to undo what had been done, for one man to take it all away. He had tried to break her. He had *hurt* her. But all his attacks only sharpened the blade within her. He had only made her stronger.

Endure.

When the world pushes you down—you push back.

Find your fire.

We are strong, she told the little girl. *I remember*.

Isla's hands curled into fists. Her diamond began to glow like a star—fortifying what was left.

She began to build her strength, not through pain but through love. She remembered Oro pulling her out of the fractured pieces of the island. She remembered Grim bringing her back to life.

Love had always been the only thing powerful enough to conquer death. To conquer fate.

She filled herself with every moment between them, every memory, because it was the one thing she had that Cronan didn't.

Infinite glowed brighter, cutting through the pool, spearing through the darkness. She could see Cronan looking down at her. And in the reflection in his eyes, she saw her own—and saw they were glowing, just like her diamond.

One look from her made all of Cronan's shadows melt away to nothing.

The light within her grew, flooding through her blood, until her entire body seemed to gleam. One by one, the shackles shattered.

Thank you for showing me just how strong I could be, she said inside his mind. *And for teaching me this*. Then shadows burst from her mind right into his.

He bellowed. His mind melted beneath her shadowblades, his walls becoming nothing but dust. Why did he need Oro? What was he planning?

Hidden deep below, she found the thing he feared most. The only weapon that could truly kill him. A dagger with a strangely shaped hilt.

Heartblade.

It could kill anyone and anything. Even her, with Lark's flair. It was the greatest weapon ever forged in this universe.

Her shadows retreated as she stood, breaking through the waters Cronan had repeatedly drowned her in. And she was not alone. All around her, she was surrounded by herself at eight years old, at twelve, at sixteen, at twenty. He staggered back, but she wrapped her power around his limbs, forcing him to his knees. She tilted her head at him. Her voice came from every version of herself standing at her sides, echoing. “I have seen inside your mind, Cronan, and you are just as broken as the metal you wear on your head. Jagged, mismatched, and forged from hate. This crown is made of everything you have ever claimed. It is a crown of bones and ashes. And now . . . it will be your ruin.”

Cronan’s mouth parted into a roar, his endless power lashing out—

As she took it.

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ORO

You, perhaps, are the only one who can.

Oro kept willing to see the pool once more. He needed to understand why he was the person charged with finding this mysterious weapon that could slay any person or being. Was it because he was the king of Lightlark? Ruler of Sunling? He didn't know where to start.

It was then that Isla appeared in a rush, warning him that Cronan was invading early. She was gone in an instant.

He was striding into his castle after having alerted his friends and all the volunteer forces when his vision turned silver. The pool and the woman were waiting.

The waters looked different now, dark as ink.

"Future has been poured into this pool. You can now ask questions . . . and see how the consequences of every possibility will unfold."

Oro went very still, wondering how that was possible. Wondering if it meant things had gone terribly wrong . . . or right.

Isla had told him she regretted not seeing the future. Regretted giving into her fear of seeing what was to come.

The woman had accused Oro of hiding from the truth.

But Oro would be stronger now—for both himself and Isla. For their world. He would not look away from hard truths. He would not let fear guide his life.

He waded into the pool until he was floating on his back. He closed his eyes.

And he asked about every scenario he could think of. Every possibility. Until he knew every future.

He saw death. Life.

There was a clear distinction. A clear moment—a choice—that changed the fate of their world and everyone in it.

He gasped as he crashed through the surface, sputtering, his veins flooded with panic.

The prophecy was right. *It was right*. Someone had to die. Total and complete destruction could all be avoided, with this one choice.

Part of him wished he hadn't seen it. But the truth could not be unseen, just as it could not be unsaid.

Oro knew what he had to do.

He just didn't know if he was strong enough to do it.

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GRIM

Isla forced Cronan’s crown onto her head, and the very world rippled. She became the gravity, the tide, the force between them all. Grim was nearly knocked off his feet. He had to anchor himself with his shadows.

The world settled, and all he saw was her, a queen of darkness and ruin, standing in a dark pool. Cronan was bowed before her—forced onto his knees.

Over the course of the last few minutes, while Isla and Cronan battled, Grim had wanted to step in a thousand times, but he had stopped himself. His heart was torn. It was *racing*. He was confused and worried any move he made would jeopardize his realm.

Isla turned to look at Grim, her eyes glowing with power, and all his defenses folded. She reached out her hand once more. “Together, we can destroy him. I know how.” Below her, the waters changed, showing a blade powerful enough to kill not only Cronan but all parts of his soul that had been scattered throughout the universe. “It’s hidden here, but in another time. I saw it, in his head.” Isla had Cronan’s crown, with the Threads of Time within it. She only needed Grim’s portaling ability to travel through time.

Together, they could find the blade and end him. They could save their world and everyone in it.

Grim took a step toward her—toward his *wife*. He took a step toward a future that he could hardly hope for.

This was real. He didn’t need to keep fighting. He could just fall into her and everything she promised. He took another step, until he was at the water’s edge.

There, he saw the reflection of her outstretched hand. Reaching toward him like she was now . . . but holding a dagger. The same one she wanted

him to help her find, to end Cronan.

No. It was just one of many fates. He took another step toward her, and the moment his foot hit the pool, he saw it all. Every possibility. Every future. And he knew for certain that if he went with her right now, he would die.

The only chance he had to live was with Cronan.

Isla was still reaching for him. Her emotions were echoes of his own—hope and relief and wanting.

He remembered how her lips had felt against his, how her fingers had danced across his skin, how she had taught him that feeling didn't just mean hurting. He remembered her strength against all odds, her unwavering belief in him, and how she looked at him like he was more than just a villain. He remembered the awe of watching her bring herself back to life, and how she had always taken down everything that stood between them.

She was infinite. She was *his*. She was his wife, and she was everything his life had always been missing.

Their hands brushed, and his blood heated in bone-deep knowing. Like his soul knew her, even if he didn't.

She pulled him in, and he went with her, until their foreheads were pressed together. Until they were sighing against each other's lips. Until his fingers were slipping through her hair. And around the crown on her head.

She stilled.

"I'm sorry," Grim said, against her mouth. Then he broke through all her shields and defenses, because he was the only one who could.

He portaled the crown away. He hurled Cronan from the pool with a wave of shadows.

Finally, his abilities turned to her. His salvation.

His *ruin*.

But as his darkness rushed toward her, to imprison her, to keep her from finding this blade and sealing his fate, he felt something hook through his chest and pull.

His eyes met hers, and dread filled his veins. "No," he whispered. *Not again*.

The last thing he saw was the devastation on her face as she and the pool portaled away.

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ORO

Isla was coming. Oro could feel her careening through the universe, headed right toward him.

Relief and dread battled in equal measure, after everything he had just seen. His hand shook with both as he used the portaling device to go to the tide pool. The one he and Grim had turned into a portal. It was quiet now, for the first time in days. But its waters glimmered.

Cleo was already there, waiting. She hadn't left since the moment she had been summoned. Neither of them said a word, not daring to hope, not daring to breathe. A wave crashed toward them, whispering against the sand.

All at once, the sea seemed to shatter as energy dropped into the pool—flinging water to the cliffs and the horizon. The tide pool widened into a crater that nearly took up the entire coast, surging and dispersing, its sand dragged up. And the water that remained now was as dark as a midnight sky.

Oro stood steadfast in place, his power rooting him. Cleo was still by his side. She reached into the waters and pulled out a boy.

Her son. He was alive.

Cleo's cry of relief sent waves rising hundreds of feet, crashing over cliffs, flooding the island with her joy.

They were all alive. People were emerging from those waters, gasping for air. And Isla was in the center of them, rising like a god.

Her eyes were glowing unnaturally. Her hair was whipping behind her from an invisible wind. She wore armor and held a sword of metal he couldn't name.

Oro couldn't stop the panic that raced through his blood. He had seen the future. *He had seen the ruin*. But when he looked at her, she made him want

to forget it all. Forget his crown. Forget his duty.

Forget the future.

“Love,” he said, the word spilling from his lips, and in that instant, her hair settled. The glowing of her eyes dimmed. She blinked too many times, then looked around her, as if in a daze. Finally, her knees gave way. Oro caught her before she hit the sand.

Her eyes widened as she saw him. *Green*. That green was back, he thought.

“You’re home,” he said, his voice breaking with emotion. She nodded, tears streaming down her face. He didn’t want to speak the words, but in the end, he had to. Their fates were all interlaced. With the future on his mind, he asked, “Where is Grim?”

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ISLA

“He chose Cronan,” Isla said, Oro’s amber eyes the only anchor in her crushing sadness. The sun was bright behind her back, its warmth like a caress.

Her body was slowly coming back to her, both brimming with power, and spent. Both filled with happiness at seeing Oro again, and grief at having lost Grim again.

She could have killed Cronan. *They* could have . . . together.

“I’m sorry,” Oro said, and he sounded like he meant it, but she shook her head.

“He loves me. The fact that I’m even here is proof of that.” Isla had desperately reached for the bridge between them—and felt that thread. It had formed sometime in that forest. *He loved her*.

But the blade he had seen reflected in those waters had made him falter.

“Love—” Oro said, the word so soft, she almost didn’t hear it. She frowned. Why did he look so full of regret? So torn? So . . . devastated?

Her muscles tensed. “You saw the futures, didn’t you?” Isla asked. Oro hesitated. But he would not lie to her. She knew that. Finally, he nodded. Dread spilled through her bones. “What did you see?”

He opened his mouth . . . then closed it. Like he couldn’t get the words out.

She scrambled out of his arms and took a step back. He took a step toward her, and it felt almost like another duel. Isla wondered if she should be raising her blade.

But before she could see what he would do next, the world went still, as if it was holding its breath.

Then, everything broke.

The sky ripped open with a howl that shredded her senses. Portal after portal formed over them all.

Dozens of worlds. *Cronan's worlds*.

Coming here to conquer.

Cronan needed her dead to get the diamond. With Lark's power within, she couldn't be killed without her permission. Unless he found that dagger.

It was the only way to kill him too. War was upon them now. And it could only be finished by the Heartblade.

The pool had shown her that with the Threads of Time and travel across the galaxy, fate had been changed. Fractured. There were more possible futures than before. Now, the prophecy might not be about her at all.

Grim, Oro, and Isla's choices would define destiny.

Only these facts were certain. One of them would wield Heartblade. One of them would die by it, for good. One of them would either save the world or destroy it.

This all ended with a blade through the heart.

The only question was—

Whose?

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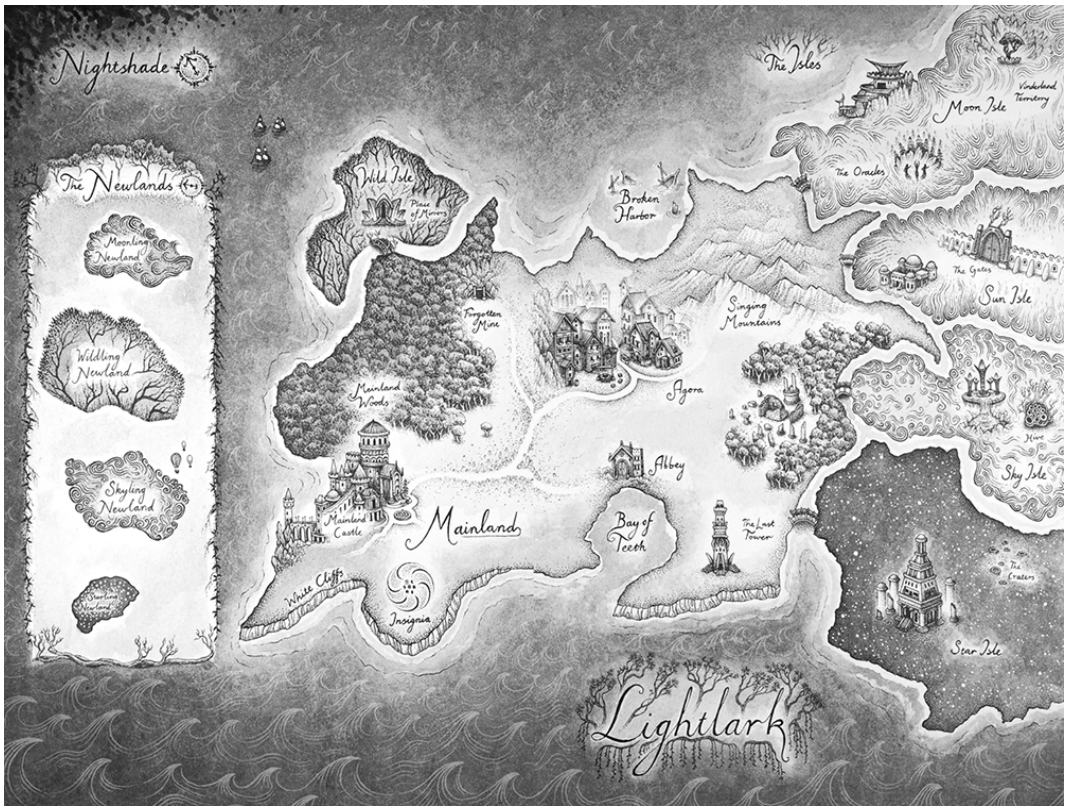
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