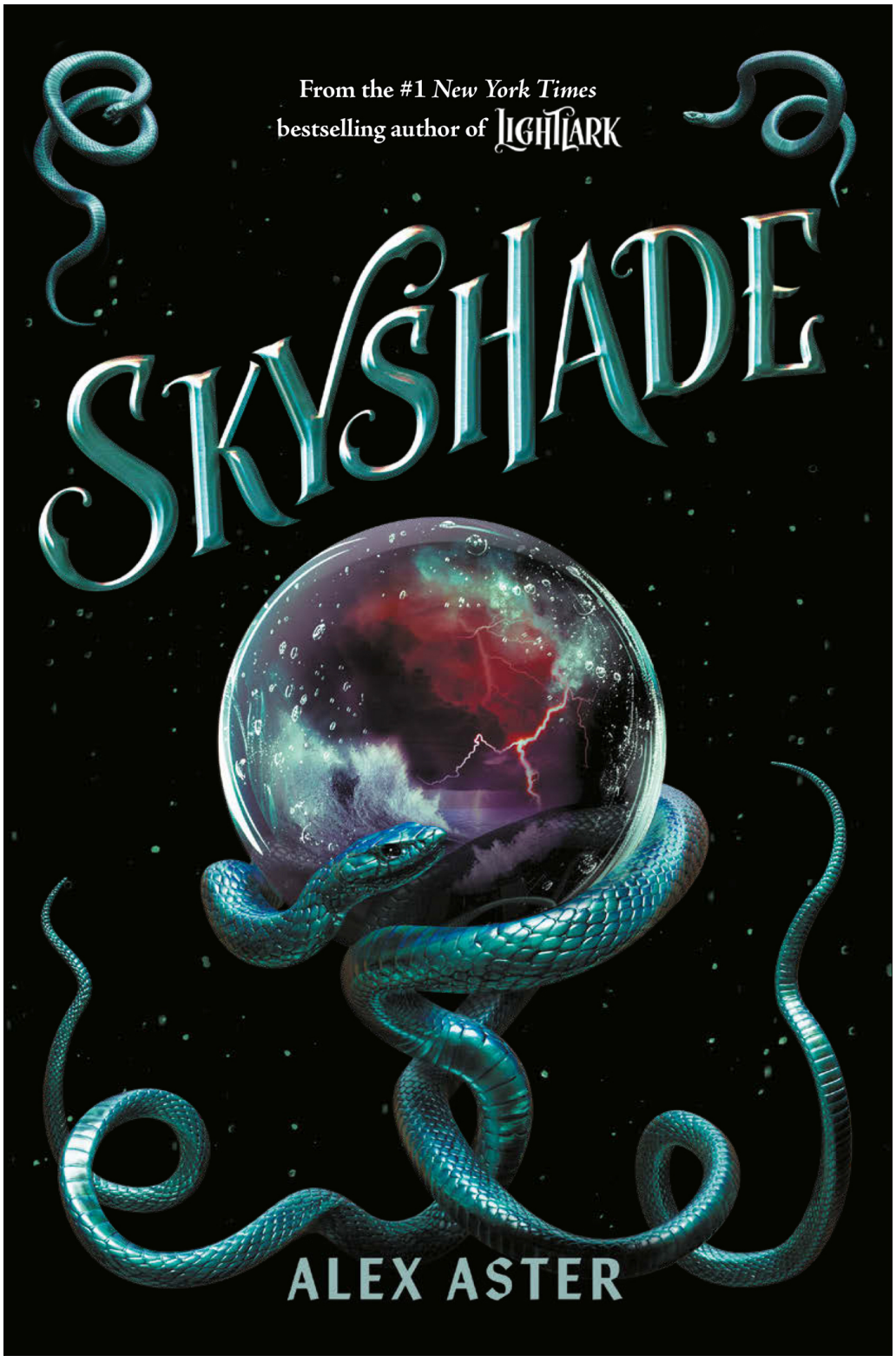
From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of LIGHTLARK

SKYSHADE



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THE LIGHTLARK SAGA
BOOK 3



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HOME

Isla Crown watched the man she loved disappear as the world fell away.

The other man she loved gripped her arm with the desperate hope of holding onto a dream before waking. Her stomach dropped; her ears rang—

Clashing swords and howling dreks turned to silence.

“You’re home,” Grim said, his voice breaking in relief; and then she was ensnared in the familiar place against his chest, her cheek below his heart. It was instinct to breathe him in, to hold him close.

Home. Something in her marrow unfurled.

Another part recoiled.

She tore herself away. Looked down. Her armor and hands were covered in blood. Her lips tasted of salt—sweat and tears from the battle.

She considered everything she had done . . . everything she was . . .

She wanted to run. She wanted to tear down these hallways the same way she had the first day they met, she wanted to portal back to Lightlark, back into Oro’s arms—

But she was here for a reason. Isla would kill either Oro or Grim, according to the oracle. It was fated. Now, knowing what she had done in the past, all the people she had killed . . . she didn’t trust herself not to hurt the Sunling king.

Grim approached her slowly, tentatively. His voice was gentle. “Heart.” He offered his hand again, his knuckles raw and caked in what had to be both his and Oro’s blood.

Heart. Hers was split in half. One part wanted him more than anything —remembered. Another wanted to stab him through the chest again.

She took his hand.

Grim’s wide shoulders melted in relief until she said, “Take methere.”

He knew what she meant. As much as she wanted to hate him, as much as she wished her hatred of him would stick, take root in her bones and overgrow like a neglected garden, he knew her. He really knew her. “Isla —”

“Take. Me. There.” Her voice was a guttural rasp. She could have portaled herself with her device or with his power, but the idea of using any scrap of ability after seeing what she had done with it made her want to retch. Grim studied her for a moment longer before curling his fingers around hers, and then the room disappeared. Her stomach flipped again.

Ash stuck to every surface of the landscape, a layer of poisoned snow. Houses lay in charred piles like pyre wood. Nothing stood tall anymore. The village had been brought to its knees.

Her cry cut through the silence like a scythe. Bodies big and small curled against the ground and hardened into rubble. Some were indefinable shapes against the stone.

You did this, a voice in her mind said. Monster.

No. She hadn’t meant to, she—

Memories flitted beneath her eyelashes. She saw herself visiting this site, mourning the same action in the past. It hurt. It hurt so much; she was a wound that refused to scab. She wanted to bleed. She deserved to bleed. Still, her pain meant nothing—these people were dead because of her.

Because of her power.

She turned to Grim, eyes burning. “You should imprison me. I—I’m a criminal. I’m worse than any thief or murderer, I—” Grim caught her as she began to collapse.

“This was not intentional,” he said, steadying her shoulders.

She choked on her breath. “Does intention matter when hundreds of people are dead?”

His eyes were sad. “It does.”

She tore herself away from him. “You would say that. Of course, you would say that.”

Tears caught in the back of her throat as she thought back to the battle on Lightlark, blood everywhere, dreks shredding the sky with their talons. Ciel dying, Avel cradling her twin’s body. “They didn’t have to die.” A sob scraped against her ribs. “Why, Grim? Why did you have to attack?”

“You know why.” His words were quiet. He stepped closer, but she walked back, refusing to bridge the gap between them.

She did know. She could almost see it now, the action that had caused all of this death—the uncontrollable power she had unleashed to save Grim, killing her in the process.

He had brought her back, by binding his life to hers, but it was just a temporary solution. Only Lightlark’s portal to another world with infinite power offered a permanent one.

“You could have told me. We could have talked about it. We could have told Oro—”

“Oro will die if we use the portal. He wouldn’t have agreed to it.” He was quiet for a moment. Then, “You wouldn’t have agreed to it.”

Of course, she wouldn’t have. Lightlark’s portal was built into the island’s foundation. Using it would mean the death of Lightlark and Oro, who was bound to it as king.

She shook her head, wincing at the death around her. “You really would have let Lightlark fall? You would have doomed the rest of the realms while leading yours into a world we know nothing about? For one woman?” It didn’t make sense.

Grim frowned. “Not for one woman,” he spat, like the words insulted him. He stepped toward her. “For my wife.”

Wife. The word unlocked a thousand memories of them, a year before the Centennial. Fighting. Falling in love. Marrying. All moments she hadn’t remembered, up until recently. She squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. “You know what I mean. One life to risk thousands. That is criminal. Selfish. Monstrous.”

Isla could feel Grim getting closer. When she opened her eyes, he was right in front of her. “Heart,” he said steadily. The spikes on his shoulders made him look like a demon. His blood-slicked armor glimmered in the moonlight. “If waging a war for one woman is a crime, then please do consider me a criminal.” Closer. “If killing thousands to keep you alive is wrong, then consider me a villain.” She now had to tilt her head to see him clearly. He leaned down. His breath was hot against her mouth. “If loving you this much is my downfall . . . then consider me already on my knees.”

Her voice shook. “That’s disgusting. You—you’re a monster.” She said the words and knew it made her a hypocrite. The ground they stood on now,

the hundreds of deaths around them . . . she had done it for him. To save him.

We are monsters, Hearteater, Grim had said to her, back during the Centennial. He had been right.

But that didn't mean she couldn't change.

Grim had promised to end the battle, if she returned with him. Too many lives had already been lost. Lightlark had been losing. "Call back all your warriors and dreks. Immediately."

"It's already done." In his hand, the sword that controlled the winged beasts appeared. "It's over."

It was the same sword they had searched for, in the past. The one she herself had unlocked for him to use.

This was all her fault.

The dreks had killed so many. She had led her friends into bloodshed. Her own husband's forces had cut them down.

The survivors must think her a traitor. They must think she had been lying to them this entire time. That fact killed her, but her feelings didn't matter if going with Grim guaranteed their safety. "Command all the dreks to remain underground and put the sword back in the thief's lair. Swear you will never use it again."

She expected Grim to put up more of a fight, but the words fell easily from his mouth: "I swear it."

She pushed her luck. "Swear you won't try to use the portal again."

This time, he said nothing.

"Swear it."

"If I do, you will die here," Grim said. "We all will."

Grim's life was tied to all of his subjects'. Now, all their fates were tied to hers. She looked around, at the bodies. The lives she had already taken. "You shouldn't have bound yourself to me." She closed her eyes again and tears swept down her face.

Grim's thumb traced her jawline, smearing the tears away. "I would do it again," he said, his voice a deep rasp against her ear. "I would do it a thousand times over, heart; you should know that. I will choose you over the world every single time."

Which meant it was up to her to save it.

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THRONE

Isla could have locked herself in her room for months, she could have drowned in regret and grief. She had in the past, the first time she discovered what she had done.

But her tears wouldn't keep Grim from using the portal on Lightlark. They wouldn't help her understand the oracle's deadly prophecy. They wouldn't ensure her death didn't doom thousands. Only action would.

So she buried her feelings down as deep as they would go and decided the only way to ensure Grim didn't plan behind her back again was to be part of every meeting. Every event. Play the part of his wife, because it would gain her access.

Starting with the burial ceremony, the next morning. Grim had given her his room—their room—and she woke at dawn. Lynx had nearly torn apart Grim's stables in the moments they had been parted, and now he watched her from the corner of the room—his green eyes simmering with worry—as she braided her hair into a crown, in the Nightshade style.

She chose her dress carefully. Here, surrounded by enemies, her image would matter.

That was why, when she was ready, she reached for her golden rose necklace with shaking fingers. It was the only thing she had left of Oro, other than her memories. Tears slipping down her face, she unclipped it and slid it into her pocket.

In the mirror, she hardly recognized herself. The Wildling green and red were almost gone—replaced by a black dress with the faintest of roses beaded into the bodice. She looked like a Nightshade's devoted wife.

It was a lie, she thought, as she portaled into Grim's store of weaponry. That was where she found their stock of the healing elixir, the one that the

Wildlings had been making for battle. Much of it had already been used, but she took the majority of what was left, drew her puddle of stars, and sent them through to Lightlark's infirmary.

It was a risk, but hundreds of injured warriors would die without the healing properties. It was the least she could do to help, after bringing them into battle. Nightshade had endless fields of nightbane, the flower the elixir was made from. They wouldn't miss it.

She closed the portal and was back in her room just before Grim knocked.

"You don't have to go," he said, studying her swollen eyes. He lifted a hand as if to wipe a tear from her jaw; but then, seeing the expression on her face, seemed to think better of it.

Her voice was cold. "I know. I'm going anyway."

On Nightshade, bodies were buried. Warriors were put to rest on a sacred stretch of land overlooking the coast, beneath mounds of ash.

The air smelled of flesh and salt. It blew her hair back, revealing the black pins she'd added. They were tipped in black diamonds to complement her cape. The necklace Grim had given her, with the large glimmering black diamond, was now purposefully visible against her throat.

Some gasped at it. She heard whispers about the stone around her neck. It was a symbol of their marriage. Perhaps they hadn't believed their union was real until they saw the necklace.

It didn't seem to make a difference to the Nightshade families who eyed her with hatred as she walked through the rows of the graveyard, toward the newest mounds. She couldn't blame them.

"Traitor. You don't belong here," she heard someone mutter. They were right. She belonged on Lightlark, mourning the deaths of the people who fought alongside her. Now, she pretended to honor the same warriors that had cut them down. She felt disgust, and hatred, and anger alongside families that cried out in grief.

Also, guilt.

Flashes of ash and bone had filled her dreams. Lynx had woken her that morning with a nudge of his head. The sheets had been on the floor. There were scratches down her arms, as if she had clawed herself. Her ribs still hurt from her racking sobs.

Now she buried those emotions. This was not the time to feel anything. Not when that same ruinous power prickled just beneath her skin, waiting to be unleashed.

As Grim spoke in remembrance of the dead, she clung to every word, searching for indication of a veiled plan or threat against Lightlark. All he offered were condolences. A line of warriors stood behind them, their heads bowed, and swords dug firmly into the dirt. When Grim's speech was over he waved his hand, and some of the ash that coated the graves rose toward the sky.

"My court will meet in the throne room tonight to discuss our plans," Grim told her, after meeting with every family.

She kept a vise around her emotions, lest he wonder why he'd piqued her interest. "Is there a place for me?" She studied his face, scanning for any irritation at her request.

She found none. "There is always a place for you," he said. "I made your throne myself."

He had: She remembered it now. Grim had crafted it with his own shadows.

Hours later, she walked toward that throne like a ghost. Memories blurred, past and present bleeding together until they were one.

She remembered the outrage when Grim had announced her as his wife to his court—as his equal—right before they left for the Centennial. Grim had made it clear that anyone who didn't respect her didn't have a home on Nightshade, and so the dissent was not erased, not pulled out by the root and banished, but permitted to grow like a weed in secret.

This room . . . these thrones . . . She recognized these faces that stared her down, the space filled to the brim with high-ranking soldiers and nobles.

They bowed for her because Grim would have gutted them if they didn't. Only he remained standing. He watched her walk toward him with an admiration typically reserved for the gods. But there were no gods here.

"Your ruler has returned."

No one dared protest.

A woman watched from the corner of the room, one palm resting at the intersection of the curved swords that formed an "X" on her chest. Isla felt a vestige of recognition from her past. It was Grim's general, Astria. Her long

black hair was tied back into a single braid. Her high, pale cheekbones made her face seem even more severe.

Her dark eyes slid back to Isla's, after sweeping across the room for any threats against Grim; and they narrowed, as if spotting the greatest threat of all. From the first moment they had been acquainted, Isla had known that Grim's general didn't dislike her . . . she just didn't trust her.

Astria would be a problem. Being here, in her enemy's land, would mean lying to Grim. Isla would need to hide her true purpose as she sought to identify her options. Grim's sense of reason was clouded by his feelings for her, but his general would see things clearly.

Isla reached the end of the aisle, and Grim took her hand. He helped her onto her throne.

Shadows moved curiously beneath her skin like extensions of Grim himself, but she didn't dare flinch as the crowd rose to their feet.

Isla had the sudden urge to unleash her power. She was surrounded by enemies. Some of these faces she recognized not from the past, but from the battlefield.

For Oro, she would sit among them. She would learn their plans. And, if they put him and Lightlark at risk, she would stop them.

"What now?" A voice dared break the silence. Isla knew of only one soldier foolish enough to speak so boldly. She found the source immediately, a hulking man who was difficult to miss. He wore armor shaped for his great stature. His hair was a single long patch down the center of his head. No one dared stand too close to him, even with his hands covered. It seemed no one wanted to be caught touching him. He was a powerful Nightshade who could control a person by touching them, an ability in their realm that had become rare over the centuries. Grim didn't acknowledge the man, who continued talking as though he had a death wish.

"We were winning. Don't think we don't know why we retreated." He stared pointedly at her, gaze fixating on the stone resting between her collarbones. "That necklace. It is an abomination for—"

"Tynan." Grim's voice was as cold and cutting as the shadows that stilled beneath her. No one dared move a muscle. "My father was known for taking the tongues of his soldiers, you'll remember. Following orders

doesn’t require speaking, isn’t that what he used to say?” He frowned. “It’s a wonder he let you keep yours. Perhaps that needs to be rectified.”

To his credit, Tynan stood tall, though his metal-encased fingers clashed together in anger. He was dangerous. But not to Grim. Grim’s power was as undeniable as the tide. The force of him was felt in the room. He could kill every one of them without leaving his throne, and they all knew it.

“Hundreds were lost,” Tynan continued, his voice shaking in fury. “Over a woman, over—”

Grim raised his hand, and Tynan froze. The Nightshade made a gurgling sound. “That woman is my wife,” Grim said clearly. “And your ruler. You serve her.” He released his hold, and Tynan staggered forward. “Now bow.”

“Ruler, I—”

“I said bow.”

Isla watched the man, his eyes flashing with hatred, as he sank to his knees.

“Lower.”

The man placed his hands on the floor, gauntlet clashing against the stone.

“Lower.”

Tynan’s shoulders shook with undeniable rage as he pressed his forehead to the floor.

“Now,” Grim said, leaning back in his chair. His voice turned almost casual. “We might have retreated . . . but we did not lose Lightlark.”

Isla stilled.

She turned her head very slowly to face Grim. He didn’t even look at her. Panic spilled like poison through her chest. “Quite the contrary,” he continued. “We have reclaimed our greatest chance at overtaking the island. Three rulers founded Lightlark, including my ancestor.” Only then did he turn to her. “And hers.”

Isla wasn’t breathing.

“The king of Lightlark is in love with her,” Grim said, as if it were a joke. As if she had been a spy sent in to make Oro, King of Lightlark, fall in love with her to gain access to his power. The court laughed. The soldiers began to murmur. Her rage turned into a wildfire. Isla’s hands gripped the side of the throne, the shadows’ sharp edges digging into her palms, nearly drawing blood. She wanted to silence them all. She wanted to drown them

with the power that surged like a rogue wave within her. She wanted to strangle Grim. Especially as he said, smirking, “Now we have everything we need to take Lightlark.”

Isla watched every soldier and member of Grim’s court file out of the room, her blood boiling to such a degree, it was a wonder she didn’t catch fire. Finally, the doors closed behind the last of them.

Her blade was at his throat in an instant. She pinned him to his throne. Her words shook with anger and betrayal. “You manipulative, villainous—”

“As much as I would love to hear the end of that sentence,” Grim said, seeming unconcerned by the blade beneath his chin, “do save your barbs for a different time, when you actually have reason to hate me.”

She bared her teeth. Everything he had just said—

“I’m not planning on invading Lightlark, heart.”

She blinked, incredulous. “You just said—”

“I know what I said. I told them what they wanted to hear, to buy some time.” He searched her eyes. “The portal would have saved you . . . and it would have also saved my people.”

She lowered her blade the slightest bit. That, she hadn’t expected. “Saved them from what?” The dreks were their biggest threat in the past, but they were gone. Grim had banished them below, and hidden the sword again, just as she had asked.

“Storms,” he said simply. “The deadliest you can imagine.”

It was the first she was hearing of this. And she had explored Nightshade for a year before the Centennial.

He must have sensed her confusion, because he said, “They used to happen every few centuries, on and off, then decades, then every few years. They are unpredictable, and every one has gotten worse. Hundreds die during the storm season.”

Hundreds? She frowned, and he nodded.

“It’s not just the weather. They bring sickness. Creatures. Entire villages have been razed by beasts in the night. The tempests are deadlier than the curses, even. The dreks appeared during one of them, and never left.”

“How do you know there will be a storm season?”

“There are signs,” he said. “The tides change. Certain animals burrow themselves. It lasts about three months. The whole winter this time, if I had

to guess.”

Isla swallowed. Hundreds of Nightshades were in danger, then.

Perhaps they were already doomed. Her own lifespan was uncertain . . . if she killed Grim to fulfill the prophecy, all of them would perish . . .

No. She refused to accept that fate. The oracle had made it seem like her future was etched in stone, but if there was a way around it, she would find it.

“I’ll help you. I’ll help you stop the storms.”

He raised a brow at her. “You don’t think I’ve tried?”

“You’ve never tried with me.” They had worked together before. The memories of it blinded her for a moment. Her breath became unsteady. “Work with me. Buy us more time, enough for us to find another solution that isn’t the portal.”

Buy her enough time to change her fate.

He hesitated. Then, nodded.

She sighed, leaning back, only to realize she was still pinning him with her legs.

Grim’s gaze slowly slid down her body, catching on the hem of her dress, riding high up her thigh. Her skin prickled with cold.

For a moment, she imagined his hand curling around her hip, dragging her forward against every inch of him. She imagined arching her back, pulling her dress over her head and—

It wasn’t her imagination, she realized. It was a memory of something they had done, and her cheeks burned. Grim watched her with darkened eyes, his hands firmly glued to the sides of his throne.

He was her enemy. She was disgusted by her thoughts.

Forget burying her feelings. She needed to smother them. Burn them.

She stood, straightening her dress. “Tomorrow, then.” She gave her sweetest smile. “If I find out your threat of Lightlark is real, I’ll find a use for all those pretty blades you left for me in my room.” There were rows of them, all perfectly angled to fit the many slim pockets in the pants that hung in her wardrobe. “Just because we’re married, don’t think I won’t gut you.”

Only when she reached the door did she hear him say, “I would expect nothing less, wife.”

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FORGE

Before she worked with Grim to stop the storms, she needed to do something for herself.

Burying her feelings hadn’t worked, not really. She couldn’t trust herself to keep them in check, and she now knew the ruin they could cause when mixed with her abilities.

She needed to ensure she would never kill another innocent again. She needed to keep her powers contained.

Only one person knew how to create such an enchantment, and the last time she’d seen him, she’d stabbed a knife through his eye.

“Here to take the other one?” the blacksmith said. He was sitting in his forge, back turned to her as he polished something on his worktable. Even seated, he was more than a head taller than her.

She remembered how that towering man had hunted her through his forest like prey, sensing her blood. He had craved its ability, to hammer into his weapons. Back then, she had thought herself powerless. She hadn’t understood why he had been so desperate for her blood, but she did now.

It was risky traveling here without telling Grim. The blacksmith had more than a few reasons to want to hurt her.

“If you’re wondering if I’m going to drain you of your enchanting blood, do allow me to put that fear to rest,” he said, without turning. “You happen to be the last person in this world that I would kill.”

She frowned, partially insulted. “Why?”

“You’re better use to me alive.”

That made her pause. “And just what do you plan to use me for?”

He didn’t answer. He just continued his polishing.

She ran her tongue across her teeth. Best to jump right into it.

“I need a way to restrain my power. Keep it under control. Can you make something like that?”

Once, she had dreamed of having ability. Now that she had access to more power than anyone in all the realms, she would do anything to have it taken away. It had made her into a weapon that no one—including herself—could control.

Her mind flashed the images. Ash. Shadows of bodies. Death—

His chair creaked wildly beneath his weight. “I could with the proper metal. It is rare, however. Coveted. I’ll have to melt other creations down to make it.” He studied her for a moment. Two. His gaze slipped to her necklace, and his eyes gleamed with interest. She wondered if it was his own making. “My help comes at a cost.”

She was happy to pay. Anything to smother the power like fire in her veins, anything to ease the fear that any turn of emotion would lead to more death. “Fine. How much?”

“Not coin. I want something only you can give me.”

Isla remembered what he had said, about how she was only valuable to him alive. Was it because he needed fresh blood? Her hand inched toward the dagger sheathed against her leg. He was the tallest man she had ever seen. She had the thought that he could crush her skull in his hands without much effort. She wondered if now was a good time to run. “What do you want?”

The blacksmith stared her down, single eye filled with fire. “I want you to kill me.”

Isla blinked at him. “I—I’m not sure I understand.”

“You understand perfectly.”

His request didn’t make sense. “Why me?” He could have found death numerous ways over the centuries, if that was what he wanted.

That was when she remembered what the blacksmith had told her right after she had put her dagger through his eye. “You weren’t supposed to be able to do that.”

“A ruler far before Grimshaw cursed me to never be able to die, so that they would never be rid of my abilities.” He motioned at his forge. “No one else in this world can create what I can. They knew that.”

“My flair circumvents that.”

“Your father’s flair,” he corrected. It was rare for non-rulers to be born with flairs, but her father had been powerful, and immune to curses.

He would have known her father. She had a sharp need to drain him for details, to ask for any crumbs of her father he might give her, but the blacksmith didn’t seem intent on indulging her for long, and she had more pressing matters. Like the blacksmith asking her to end his life.

Isla didn’t want anyone else to die by her hand. That was the entire point of using the metal in the first place.

He seemed to sense her indecision. “Allow me the mercy of rest,” he said. Isla wondered at the idea of living forever. Never having the peace of death.

“You’re sure?”

He nodded.

“Fine. I’ll give you until the end of winter to change your mind. If you still want this . . . I’ll do it.”

The blacksmith’s mountainous form seemed to shrink a bit in relief. Then, he turned toward his forge.

She watched him take down two daggers from his wall of creations. They looked ancient, their hilts covered in symbols she didn’t understand. And their blades . . . they shined brightly, more than they should have in their condition. Next to the fire, in the bright light . . . the metal almost glimmered. He didn’t waste a moment before melting them down. Flames erupted from a device, filling the forge with heat.

Watching the blacksmith cast was mesmerizing. He worked expertly, diligently. Under his process, the strange metal changed color, before melting completely. It glittered brightly in its new form, like a bowl of stars. He didn’t use a mold. Somehow, he was able to pour the liquid metal into his hands, without burning them. Somehow, he was able to shape it himself. This was his power.

She suddenly regretted making a deal to kill him in a few months.

The metal began to harden beneath his fingers. Before it was set, he motioned for her to outstretch her hands. She did, wondering if she would be burned by the blistering material, but under his control, they did not touch her skin as he closed them around her wrists. With a sweeping of his fingers, the metal cooled completely.

Then, it was done.

“What is this metal?” she asked. It glimmered brightly under the light, like a thousand diamonds were trapped within.

“It’s shademade,” he said. “Made from ancient power.”

“They won’t break?”

He shook his head. “It is designed so that only the person who puts them on can release them. And me. My enchantments always have safeguards.”

Good. She wouldn’t be asking him to release them anytime soon, however. The moment the bracelets had closed around her wrists, her shoulders sagged with relief. Her eyes stung with unshed tears.

It was so . . . quiet. She had almost forgotten what her mind had been like, without having to constantly block out the endless connections waiting to be formed around her. It had worked.

Her power was gone.

Grim insisted on having dinner with her before they began working together. She rushed into the room several minutes late, only to find him sitting perfectly still at the end of the table, looking content to wait forever, if needed.

As soon as she entered, he stood, his eyes widening slightly, as if she was something to marvel at. He took in her dress—long and embedded with thousands of black beads. It had been waiting in her wardrobe. It seemed he had made good on his promise to hire a tailor for her, after he had ripped so many of her dresses apart. She wore it because it was expected. The last thing she needed was Grim’s court questioning her motives even more than they already did.

Grim didn’t look suspicious at all. He smiled.

Then his eyes caught on her bracelets.

“Hearteater,” he said carefully, his deep voice making her chest feel tight. “If you remember, there’s a closet of jewelry for you just off your quarters.” There was. It was filled with centuries’ worth of ancient gems, mostly featuring black diamonds. Not that any of those stones rivaled the one against her throat.

She ignored him and the ridiculous sparks spreading through her at something as simple as his voice as she walked to her seat opposite his own at the long table. They were both seated at the heads. It made for an

impractical dinner. Now, as he continued to study her bracelets, she was grateful for the space between them.

Until Grim appeared at her side and gently took her wrist in his palm. He hissed, touching the metal. “What did you do, heart?”

“What I had to,” she said, turning her attention to the goblet of wine in front of her. It smelled slightly floral. She took a sip.

“You don’t have to hide yourself,” Grim said. “Not with me. Not here. Not ever.”

She wanted to tell him that she needed to hide most here, because despite hating him, she loved him, and that love had made her do horrible things.

She wanted to tell him that she remembered everything in vivid detail. Like the time they had forgone dinner entirely, and Grim had wrapped the room in shadows and laid her on this very table and—

Grim must have felt the shift in her emotions, because his eyes darkened. As though he too was remembering.

He eyed the side of the table, as if he could see the memory. As if he could taste it.

Isla swallowed, and his gaze shifted to her throat. Her necklace suddenly felt very heavy against it, though it had rarely bothered her before. Her skin prickled on instinct, and—

“You visited the blacksmith.” His words interrupted her thoughts.

She didn’t deny it. Grim only frowned, then returned to his seat across the table.

They ate in silence. The meal was perfect; he had purposefully ensured her favorite foods were made—charred vegetables, spiced grains, buttered potatoes. Still, she didn’t say a word, and it was up to Grim to break the tension.

“Your leopard bit the gardener,” he said. At night, Lynx slept with Isla; but that day, she had let him roam free.

Isla frowned. “What did the gardener do? Lynx doesn’t bite unprovoked.”

Grim narrowed his eyes. “That beast tried to bite me. And I haven’t done anything but house and feed him.”

“You provoke him with your very presence.” She took another sip of wine.

Grim sat back. He picked up his own wine. Casually turned it in its glass. “So, is this it, then? You’re going to pretend to hate me?”

She was out of her chair and on her feet in a moment. “I’m not pretending,” she spat, glaring.

He stood too. “Really? I can feel your emotions, heart. If you’re going to lie, you should get better at it.”

Her hands shook at her sides with anger. “I’m not lying,” she said, raising her voice. “You’re only lying to yourself if you thought waging a war would get me back here to be your loving, naïve, idiotic wife!”

Any amusement left Grim’s expression. “I didn’t wage a war to get you back here. I did it to try to save you.”

“And how did that work out?” she demanded, her voice echoing through the room.

Grim was silent. His eyes weren’t gleaming anymore. Any light in them had shuttered away. She had hurt him. Good.

They stared at each other from each end of the table, chests heaving, her heart hammering.

She wanted to hurt him more.

She wanted to rush into his arms.

She was two people—Isla from before the Centennial, who married the Nightshade ruler; and Isla from afterward, who had battled against him.

“I—I can’t do this,” she said, meaning it. She couldn’t sit here having dinner, pretending Grim hadn’t been her enemy just days before. She couldn’t pretend he wasn’t still her enemy.

She couldn’t pretend there wasn’t a prophecy that said she was just as likely to kill Oro as she was him.

She darted for the door. Grim appeared in front of it right as she reached for the handle.

“Please,” he said, his eyes wide. Desperate. “Please don’t go. I’m sorry. Hate me,” he pleaded. “Hate me all you want. Hate me forever. Just—just don’t leave.” He took a step toward her. “I love you, Isla. I need you.”

She didn’t need Grim’s ability to read emotions in order to understand the depths of devastation in his eyes. To know she really was his heart, the center of his life, and she had been ripped away from him. She had left him. She had chosen Oro, and it had clearly left its mark.

But he had done it to himself.

Her voice was shaking as she said, “You had me. And you lost me all on your own.”

She didn’t think his devastation could deepen, but it did. And this time, when she shoved past him, he didn’t stop her.

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WRAITH

Isla stared at the necklace against her pulse and wished she could rip it away.

She really couldn’t do this. Sitting across from Grim, sleeping in the room they once shared—it was too easy to slip into the past. Too easy to forget that half of her heart belonged to someone else—someone she had fought the urge to run back to every moment since they’d parted.

Oro. Her eyes burned as she thought of him. As she remembered the look of pure devastation on his face when she took Grim’s hand. Even when they were nearly gone, he had reached for her.

He had reached for her.

It had been only two days, but it felt like a lifetime away from him. Her hands curled in fists, her marred palms biting in pain. This wasn’t how the battle was supposed to go.

By now, she was supposed to be on a stretch of golden sand, just him and her, Oro’s favorite everything in his favorite place. She closed her eyes and could almost see and feel it—her cheek pressed against his warm chest, his hand making lazy strokes down her bare back, the unrelenting sun blazing against every inch of her skin.

She opened her eyes.

Instead, she was in this cold castle. Staring at herself in a mirror. Wishing she had never agreed to put on this damn necklace.

Nothing would break it, she had tried. Only in her death would it be released.

Soon, then.

Her jaw tightened; her teeth ground together. Enough. She was done speculating about how much time she had left, or the prophecy’s meaning,

or whether her fate could be changed at all. She needed answers.

Unfortunately for her, the only person who could give them to her—the oracle who had given the prophecy in the first place—was dead.

She sighed, moving toward the wardrobe, then stilled.

The oracle was dead . . . but she'd had sisters. Other oracles who hadn't awoken in thousands of years. Cleo had captured them.

Something dangerous—something like hope—began to bloom in her chest.

If she found Cleo's fleet, if she found the oracles . . . they could tell her more about the prophecy. About the time she had left. Maybe even how to change her fate.

It was a risk. Cleo was her enemy now more than ever. Isla didn't have powers; she would be easy to kill, if she could even locate the Moonling's fleet. Cleo's ships could be anywhere. They would likely be on their way back to the Moonling newland by now.

No, she realized. Not the Cleo she had come to know. Cleo wanted to go through the portal more than anything; it was the only way to be reunited with her child. She wouldn't simply retreat to her isle—she would have a plan. Grim's portaling power was essential to getting to the otherworld. Cleo would attempt to convince Grim to reconsider his decision.

The Moonling would be heading to Nightshade.

Isla's steps were quiet as she paced the room. Even if she was right, the sea was vast. The journey from Lightlark to Nightshade was long.

If only she could fly. If only she hadn't given up her powers.

She could portal back to the blacksmith right now. He could take the bracelets off. It would be so easy. She could even have him put them back afterward . . .

Isla pulled that thought out by the root. That was how it would start. Excuse after excuse, reason after reason, until the bracelets were off more than they were on.

Until something terrible happened again.

The ash. The ruin. The bodies—

No. She didn't need power. She hadn't needed it for most of her life.

She would find Cleo's fleet without it.

A bouquet of flowers lay outside her door. Dark red roses. She wanted to burn them.

A note was attached. It was scrawled in his sharp script, the same handwriting as the invitation to his demonstration during the Centennial.

I'm sorry, it said. Please have dinner with me. Again.

She wasn't going to go. She had left the flowers untouched. But as she took a ride on Lynx's back, mentally considering ways to find Cleo's fleet, she remembered another creature.

A tiny bundle of scales.

She had spent the rest of the day looking for him in the castle, without any luck. He wasn't in the stables either. By late afternoon, her chest twisted with worry.

Where was he?

Grim looked entirely too pleased to see her that evening. He stood immediately when she entered, then portaled to her chair to pull it out for her.

For the first few minutes, they ate their food in silence: him looking up every few moments, studying her, as if cataloging what she did and didn't enjoy; her trying her best not to care that he had meticulously planned each course to coincide with things she liked. Again. Strips of seasoned meat cooked all the way through, fluffy grains, root vegetables spiraled into ribbons. There was a chocolate dessert course. Of course there was.

Being this close to him made memories expand, like they were a sea trying to drown her. Some, featuring the tiny creature.

"Where—where is he?" she demanded, heart sinking behind her ribs. What if the little dragon was dead? She hadn't spoken his name in ages. "Wraith." Her voice broke on the word.

Grim's grin put her at ease. He hadn't necessarily liked the creature, but even he wasn't sinister enough to smile at its demise.

"I was wondering when you would ask."

"I looked for him, in the castle."

Grim made an amused sound. "He doesn't sleep inside anymore."

She remembered Grim glowering whenever the tiny dragon would take his spot in the bed. She glared at him. "Why not?"

"I'll show you." Isla followed him out the doors of the dining room, onto a wide, curling balcony. Salt burned her nostrils, her hair whipped

back wildly. She squinted. All she could see was endless ocean. “Wait here,” Grim said before she could ask questions, and then he was gone.

Isla tapped her fingers against the stone impatiently as she waited. She hoped Grim had treated Wraith well in her absence. He was just a tiny creature in need of help.

She remembered the day she found him struggling to walk, his little leg injured. She had slowly healed it with the Wildling elixir. He would cry when she rubbed the nightbane in, and she would hold him tightly until he slept. He was small enough to fit directly over her chest, and that was where he preferred to be, despite Grim’s grumbling that the dragon had stolen his wife.

That moment, that life, had felt like home once. Now, she remembered and felt hollow.

She was leaning over the balcony, wondering why Grim had told her to wait here and why he was taking so long, when a gust of air sent her flying backward.

Stone dug sharply into her back as she landed.

Midnight-carved wings wholly blocked the moon, casting clawed shadows across the balcony. Her hair whipped behind her as they flapped. With a horrible scraping, talons almost as large as her body gripped the ledge, causing pieces of stone to crumble into the ocean. The talons were familiar. One was slightly crooked.

Wraith.

The tiny bundle of scales was now a full-grown dragon. And Grim was riding him.

Still sprawled on the floor, not daring move an inch, she watched as the dragon dipped his head down to study her. Her hand trembled as she slowly moved to touch his face. His scales were cold. He sniffed her.

Then the dragon leaned back and cried into the sky. She was off her feet in a moment as Wraith threw her into the air with his nose. He caught her using his neck, and she slid down his rough scales, narrowly avoiding falling when Grim caught her by the back of her dress, sending beads flying. He hauled her in front of him while Wraith screeched happily toward the stars.

Grim’s eyes seemed to glimmer under the night sky. “I’ve never seen him so excited.”

Isla gaped at him. “How—it’s only been a few months. He—”

“Grew.”

It was an understatement.

“Do you want to ride him?” he asked.

Before she could respond—and the answer was no, for this was just another form of flying, which she decidedly hated—Wraith took to the air, and Grim caught her around the waist to keep her from being cut to ribbons against the cliff.

Her scream was swallowed by the wind as Wraith shot into the clouds. “Hold on,” Grim whispered into her ear, and that meant holding onto him.

She sat facing him, pressed firmly against his torso, her head tucked into his chest. Her legs wrapped around his waist. Straddling him.

It was an unfortunate position, but she didn’t dare loosen her grip around his neck, not when the alternative meant hurtling to the ground below. Her ankles locked behind him, and she felt Grim go still beneath her.

This was familiar. Even as fear dropped through her stomach, so did an ember of heat. He overtook all her senses. He smelled of soap and storms and something distinctively him, and she fought the impulse to run her lips across his neck, his jaw. He seemed to be dealing with a similar level of restraint.

No. He was her enemy. She despised him.

“Wraith,” Grim finally said, his voice a dark whisper against her ear, skittering down her spine as he instructed the dragon to land. When he did—and not gently—Isla ground against Grim with the impact, and she made a sound like a whimper. Grim made a sound like a growl.

Then, Wraith turned over, and Isla slid into an undignified heap on the ground. She couldn’t be too upset at the creature; he was still young. Wraith grinned at her with his massive teeth, in what would have been a horrifying smile if she didn’t see within it a glimmer of the little dragon he had once been. He bent down to rub his head against hers, which knocked her back onto her backside.

Grim tried and failed to hide his laugh as he watched her from across the clearing. “He’s still getting used to his size.”

Wraith huffed, as if he could understand Grim’s words. Then the dragon proceeded to do the last thing Isla expected, which was lazily roll onto his back.

Grim sighed in a long-suffering way. “Insolent creature,” he said. Then, Grim did the last thing she expected and began rubbing the dragon’s stomach.

Wraith’s foot moved wildly in delight, and Isla watched with her mouth dropped open.

Grim shrugged a shoulder. “It was easier when he was the size of a shield.”

“And how exactly did he become the size of a hill?”

Grim continued while he turned to face her. “It was difficult returning without you,” he said quietly. His voice told her difficult was a mild way to put it. “We missed you.” He looked at Wraith.

“You bonded,” she said, in awe, thinking of her own connection with Lynx.

He nodded. “It was what he needed to grow. It happened rapidly.”

A spike of happiness shot through her at the thought of them both finding such a bond. Leaning on each other.

It quickly withered when she remembered why, exactly, he had returned without her. He had taken away her memories. He had left her out of his plans. He had made decision after decision without her.

He seemed to sense her shift in emotions, because his tone turned serious. He walked over to her and did yet another unexpected thing. Slowly, gaze never leaving hers, he went on his knees and bowed his head before her. He was so tall, his eyes were level with her chest. “I’m sorry,” he said. “When I returned, I regretted taking your memories away every day. It was my fault this all happened. I—all I ever tried to do was protect you.”

“By lying to me?” she said, her voice sharp as the blade on her thigh. “By turning me into some pawn? Some clueless puppet?”

“I didn’t—”

“You did,” she said. “You did over and over again, and I trusted you, like an idiot.” He lurched back, as if her words had burned him.

Isla closed her eyes. She wanted to leave him here, on his knees. She wanted to tell him she hated him.

But his regret, she realized, she could use to her advantage.

“If you’re truly sorry, then swear you will never work behind my back again. Swear you will never enact a plan without telling me. Swear it on our

marriage.” She gripped the stone around her neck.

Grim rose to his full height. He pressed his hand over hers, on the black diamond that now always remained visible. “I swear it, heart.”

Words meant little, she knew that, but she could see the regret on Grim’s face. She knew how much their marriage meant to him.

She hoped it would be enough to keep him from razing the world, simply to keep her.

They were supposed to be working together. “You said the storms brought deadly creatures. Like what? Where?”

“I can take you to a place that was hit particularly badly tomorrow, if you wish.”

She nodded. She wanted to see it. She wanted to understand the storms and the devastation that was coming for them.

She wanted him to be distracted from her own plans. For, as they flew back to the castle, Isla watched Grim’s movements carefully. The placement of his hands. The scales he touched, in a wordless communication with Wraith. How he bent low against the wind.

She watched, because she had just discovered her way of finding Cleo.

Grim could have portaled them to the village in half a second. Instead, she asked if they could take Wraith.

“Do you—do you think you could teach me to ride him?” Her tone was casual. Curious, even.

Isla expected him to see through her, to realize she must have an ulterior motive if she actually wanted to learn to fly the creature that had made her nearly retch just the day before. Instead, he only smiled. Something about that made it feel like a blade was scraping against her insides.

“Of course, heart,” he said.

There it was, that blade again.

Wraith slept in a specially made stable, on the other side of the castle, away from the rest of the animals. Apparently, there had been some sort of incident that had required his relocation. Something about trying to play with the other creatures with his teeth . . .

The dragon’s wings lifted happily when he saw her. He leaned his head down, so it was level with hers. Smiled.

He breathed out, and the force from his nostrils nearly swept her off her feet.

Grim caught her with a firm hand against her spine. She tried not to focus on the way he lightly ran his fingers down her back before he dropped it.

Wraith's head lowered to the ground as Grim approached, not in deference, but in clear command. He wanted his head rubbed, and Grim complied, stroking the spot between his eyes. Wraith made a deep sound of satisfaction.

He looked over his shoulder at her. "You can portal onto his back—with your device, of course. Or mount him like this." She watched Grim effortlessly climb up Wraith's scales.

It looked easy enough. She approached Wraith. Rubbed her hand exactly where Grim had, which made the dragon smile. His teeth were nearly as big as her entire body.

Wincing, she gripped one of his scales. It was rough beneath her palm, and firm. When he was smaller, his scales had been smooth, almost soft, but now they were strong as armor. With a little maneuvering, she gained purchase, climbing first to his shoulder, then onto his back. She sat in front of Grim, leaving some distance between their bodies.

"May I?" he asked.

She looked down to see his hands hovering just inches from her waist. She nodded; then his fingers were curling around her hips, and he was effortlessly sliding her toward him, until she reached a place where her legs were almost perfectly molded to Wraith's spine.

"Better?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice to sound even remotely casual, not when he was still touching her.

"Finding places to hold on is obviously important," he said, his voice right in her ear. One of his hands lightly covered her own. "Here." He guided her hand to a ridge. "And here." He gripped his fingers around hers, showing her the right spot. "His hearing is impeccable. He can hear instruction even in the sharpest winds."

She hoped neither him nor Grim could hear the ridiculous beating of her heart as she leaned back, finding herself settled right between his legs.

"Do you have to sit so close?" she said sharply, her voice far too hoarse.

Grim said nothing as he shifted away from her. Good. She tilted back and forth, testing her position. She dried her sweaty hands on her pants, then gripped the places Grim had indicated.

"Go on, Wraith," she said, chin high, when she was sure she was ready.

Isla was expecting a slow ascent. A few more moments to mentally prepare.

Instead, Wraith took just one step before shooting into the clouds.

Her stomach lurched; she lost her grip completely. She flew back, soaring breathlessly for half a second until she crashed into Grim's chest, and he curled one arm around her, pinning her against him. Somehow he kept his grip, even though he was only holding on with one hand. A curl of darkness had her realizing he was using his shadows to keep himself steady.

"That's cheating," she told him, voice breathless with panic. Those same shadows inched toward her. They twined around her hips gently, reverently, extensions of Grim's own arms.

Grim made an amused sound. "What an interesting way to say thank you." He leaned down to say right against her temple, "You're the one who decided to part with your powers, Hearteater. You can't blame me for using mine."

Wind stung her cheeks. Wraith dipped, and she used the momentum to lurch forward, away from Grim and back to her hand placements. She wouldn't have his shadows keeping her secure when she rode Wraith alone. She would need to learn how to do it the hard way.

Her fingers were slick with sweat. Her thighs burned with effort as she fought to stay still. Her eyes watered from Wraith's speed. Wraith tilted slightly, and she gritted her teeth against a rush of nausea as she peered at the ground far below.

She wondered, for a moment, about the first time Grim rode Wraith. He wasn't particularly known for his patience. Part of her wished she could see it, the way they had bonded.

When she was relatively sure she wasn't about to slide off, she risked a look at Wraith's wings.

They were glorious—slightly translucent and massive, light filtering through like a shade. He soared through the sky in a smooth arc.

Most of the time, anyway. When they caught a trail of wind, Wraith turned sharply, riding the current. He was clearly still a child playing with a

newfound ability, tilting side to side, then up and down. Her arms shook with the effort of holding on. Her stomach lurched.

“Wraith,” Grim said smoothly. “Isla is going to vomit, it’s going to land on me, and I’m going to be far less inclined to rub your stomach.”

Wraith straightened immediately. The ride was smooth for several minutes, until he began lowering.

“You’ll remember, his landing needs some work,” Grim whispered behind her, shadows circling her waist once more.

“What—”

Her voice was swallowed by the wind as they suddenly dropped what felt like a mile in one fell swoop. Her body lifted from Wraith’s back, hovering, until the shadows tightened, pulling her back in place. Her breath caught in her chest as the ground came into view. Closer. Closer.

Wraith’s wings spread for just a moment before they landed, and then they were sliding through the dirt, his talons ripping up a slice of farmland, dirt exploding everywhere, before finally stopping at the edge of a village.

The dragon looked over his shoulder at them, grinning.

Grim sighed in a long-suffering way, then portaled them off his back.

The village was comprised of quaint houses constructed from either river stone or wood. She could see the edge of a modest square, with wagons selling produce. There were the beginnings of a fence built around it all, stopping just shy of complete, as if someone had given up just before finishing. A few people were visible beyond it, but they weren’t moving. No, they were stopped. Staring.

The man closest to them dropped the harvest he was carrying, his mouth falling open as Wraith flipped onto his back, shaking the ground itself, hoping to have his stomach scratched. Grim ignored him.

Silence, then screaming. Mostly coming from children, who yelled excitedly as they flooded through holes in the not-completed wall, followed by mothers who screamed with far less excitement.

When they saw Grim, even the children paused. Bowed. There were whispers—ruler.

Then, their attention turned to Isla. More whispers. They bowed again. Some eyed her with suspicion. Some mothers looked at her with more fear than the dragon behind her.

She was used to it.

Whereas the others seemed frozen in shock, an old woman stepped freely beyond the small crowd that had formed. She used what looked like a fire poker to support her gait. Her hair was silver, her eyes were sharp, and her smile was kind.

“What brings you to our village?” she asked, her booming voice completely at odds with her age.

Grim turned to look at Isla. He was going to follow her lead, apparently.

She straightened. There was so much blood on her hands, but stopping the storms could mean saving hundreds of people. She needed to know what she was up against. “We—we had some questions regarding the storms a few years ago, and the beast it brought. Do you remember it?” Grim had filled her in before they left the castle. This village had been attacked by a creature no one had ever seen before, or since.

“Remember?” the old woman said. “I’m still finding blood stains in my floorboards.”

Isla swallowed.

“Follow me.” Isla and Grim exchanged a glance; then Isla nodded. The woman led them down the long dusty road, the villagers’ eyes following them all the while, until they arrived in front of her house. She pointed at places on the floor of her modest kitchen that were undeniably stained crimson.

“Snuck through the window. Attacked my husband. He survived, somehow, though not with all his limbs. He’s gone now.”

“I’m sorry about that.” Isla hesitated. “What did it look like? The creature?”

The woman pursed her lips. Wrinkles sprouted from them like roots across her pale face. “Teeth. That’s what I remember. Lots of teeth. Oddly shaped too . . . crowding the mouth. It looked like a shadow, almost, slithering across the floor.”

The creature was eventually killed, Grim explained. Its teeth had been sold over time. There was nothing left now for them to look at.

The old woman shook her head. She sank into her seat with a groan. “I always said those damn storms were getting worse. They’re harbingers of the end, I tell you.”

The other villagers told them similar stories. Some died by running out of their homes into the night, thanks to the curse. Others were mauled by

the great teeth that were described slightly differently, depending on who was speaking.

Most were far less welcoming than the old woman, at least, to Isla. She didn't miss the way they studied her when they thought she wasn't looking, like she was yet another creature, come to ruin them.

She also noticed how they looked at Grim—not with fear, which she expected, but with reverence. Some used the opportunity to air grievances, and Grim took notes. He promised solutions. He made plans to have people in his court follow up on every concern. She didn't know why this shocked her, but it did.

All of the villagers seemed terrified of the start of another storm season. Some got to work packing their most valuable belongings and leaving them by their doors. There were tunnels built below Nightshade during the curses, to allow for nighttime travel. They had been used as shelters before, but the tempests were unpredictable, coming down without warning. Killing before anyone had a chance to run.

As they left, Isla turned the old woman's words in her head. She had called the storms harbingers of the end. She couldn't stop thinking about it.

Especially, when, just days later, the storm season started early.

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STORM

Wind rattled the windows. Rain hit the glass with the force of throwing stars. Some of it had been frozen solid.

She stood, watching. Listening. Even through the thick stone exterior, she could hear it now, howling. The sky had gone a strange shade. Whorls of green and purple peaked between clouds, illuminated by flashes of light. The stone rumbled with thunder.

The old woman's words might usually have been enough warning to keep her inside . . . but the storm was the perfect cover for her own plans.

Before she could think better of it, she was in her training clothing and portaling to Wraith's specially made stable. His head had been down in boredom, but he rose as she stepped toward him. He flashed his great teeth at her.

Guards typically patrolled outside. Tonight, they protected the castle's exterior, the sides that weren't facing the cliff, against any creatures. She had watched them from the windows, forming a perimeter, decked in thick armor. Grim had told her to stay inside—the palace was built well. It was secure.

She needed to hurry. Wraith's dark scales shimmered as he stepped out beneath the moonlight. Rain slipped down them.

The weather might be good for staying hidden, but it would make it far harder to stay on.

Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe it wasn't worth the risk . . .

A memory of Oro flashed in her mind. Sitting among the wildflowers. Her golden rose necklace still around her neck.

According to the prophecy, she might put a blade straight through his heart.

She thought of the village. The ash. The ruin.

As it stood, her death would be the end of everyone on this island. Including Grim.

If anyone knew how to change her fate or extend her life, it was the oracles.

She took a step forward. Wraith did too, as if to meet her. “Would you let me ride you? Alone? In the storm?”

In response, Wraith bent down, offering his neck for her to climb. She only made it three scales up, before slipping, barely catching herself. Her heart was in her throat. She didn’t dare breathe until she hauled herself onto his back. Her grip was tentative, at best. She swallowed. She didn’t even have to say a word. The moment her seat was secure, Wraith stepped one foot forward. Another. And then shot up into the clouds.

The sky raged like a battlefield. Thunder and lightning dueled, one striking and the other responding. Night seemed to shatter all around her, and the rain was thicker than it should be, striking like throwing stars. Isla ducked low, holding on to Wraith for dear life, fear settling in her stomach.

It wasn’t just the height. Something about this storm was wrong. She shouldn’t be up here. Not alone. Not when her life was now tied to all of Nightshade’s.

“Watch out!” she shouted, as a full-sized tree was launched toward them. Wraith moved at the last minute, careening left, and she fought to stay on, her teeth sliding painfully together as she smothered a scream. An entire forest had been ripped away by the storm, and it circled them, flying past, riding endless winds.

Wraith moved to dodge each tree, and her stomach dropped as he turned sharply upward, to fly farther into the clouds.

Up here, the sky changed shade. It was what she had seen shards of, from the castle window. The purple-tinged clouds, the greenish tint. She tasted power on her tongue, smelled it, like copper, like blood. Power from what? They climbed higher and higher, until they were drenched in it. The air felt heavier, alight, full.

Lightning struck, not far. It gleamed like a branch on fire.

Wraith’s wings flapped faster, shooting like an arrow through the sky, dodging projectiles. She held on tightly as he swerved. It was a wonder she

hadn’t slipped off. Only fear had kept her steady. Her head was bent low. Rocks of ice pounded against her arms, sure to leave bruises. Still, she held on.

The purple deepened the farther they went. The green seemed to glitter.

Out of nowhere, her chest began to ache.

Her heart. It began to burn, as if the seams of her scar were breaking. She risked a look down, half expecting to see her shirt soaked in blood, but there was nothing but rain.

Her hands wrapped tightly against Wraith’s ridges, she folded over as the pain became stabbing, like a blade was carving her heart out little by little, trying to wrench it through her ribs. She screamed.

Wraith turned to face her. She could barely see the land below; it was a blur beneath them. Her grip tightened.

Then, a flash of light. A monstrous strike of lightning flared through the sky.

It blinded them. Wraith didn’t see the tree until it was too late. It crashed against them with such a force, Isla was knocked clean off his back.

And then, she was falling.

She screamed until her voice went hoarse, and her limbs flailed helplessly. The force of the air was too strong; she couldn’t move her arm, couldn’t pull the necklace. Couldn’t reach for the starstick she had tucked down her spine. Couldn’t do anything as the wind howled around her, and she fell alongside the rain.

Her body broke through the storm, hurtling toward the ground. It rushed up to meet her.

With a breath-stealing thud, she was knocked back against a set of scales. Wraith had caught her on his spine, just feet before the dirt. He reared up, and her body flew off again with the force, but her hands held on. He lowered again, and she molded herself to him.

Go back. Go back. It was the voice of survival in her head, knowing she wouldn’t get lucky the next time she fell. This was reckless. Foolish.

But she needed to find the oracles tonight. Grim couldn’t know she was seeking them out; he couldn’t know about the prophecy. Especially since she might very well kill him to fulfill it.

Unless she could change fate. The oracles’ information could save them all. That was what kept her going.

Below, the ocean raged, peppered in whitecaps, like the sea had grown teeth. The waters between Lightlark and Nightshade were vast. Part of her knew the impossibility of finding anything out here, especially in the darkness, but Cleo had an entire armada. They would be together, like a legion.

She hoped she would get lucky. She hoped she was right.

The storm weakened away from Nightshade, but it did not disappear completely. Would Cleo's fleet be sailing away from it? Or would they be harnessing the power of the upturned waves to get to Nightshade even faster?

For hours, she watched the endless dark beneath her, waiting for any sign of the Moonling, her grip never loosening.

Nothing but waves.

She nearly gave up. Almost told Wraith to head back.

Then she saw it. White sails like ribbons in the storm, whipping wildly. Hundreds of them. It was a wonder the tempest didn't swallow them completely.

There.

Cleo's ship was the largest. It had extra sails that rippled like silk. "Keep circling, but higher," she told Wraith.

Then she slipped off his side, holding her starstick.

For a moment, she was falling again, hurtling through the storm.

Then, she was on a deck.

Her knees buckled under her; her legs weakened from fighting to stay on Wraith's back. She slumped against a pillar, hiding behind it, rain plastering her hair over her face. The wood below was white oak, crafted from the pale forest she had seen on Moon Isle.

Yells swirled around her, Moonlings struggling to tame the sea and keep the ship steady. She needed to move. Quickly, she looked around, squinting through the storm. A light. There was a light on, in what looked to be the captain's quarters. Cleo.

The oracles would likely be below. Another touch of her starstick, and that was where she went.

It was quieter down here. She took a shaking breath, shivering, not realizing how cold the rain had been until she was out of it.

Her legs shook as she got to her feet, leaning against a barrel. She slid the lid off with a grunt. Food. Almost every barrel was filled with it. Still . . . the Moonlings wouldn't last forever on water and fish without resupplying.

What was their plan? Would Grim allow them to get food from Nightshade?

It didn't matter now. All she cared about was finding the oracles.

The last time she had seen them, they had been frozen in ice. She wondered if Cleo thawed them or kept them entrapped.

Only one way to find out. She opened every single barrel, every crate, until her arms were sore.

No sign of them.

She searched every inch of the hull. She considered that they might be on another ship, but no . . . Cleo wouldn't let anyone as important as the oracles out of her vicinity.

They were above, then. If they were freed from their ice, they might be locked in a room. She touched her starstick. Winced, wondering if she was about to be surrounded by Moonlings.

The room she had appeared into was, mercifully, empty. Waves pelted the windows. The wooden ship groaned.

The space was large. Luxurious, even. She looked around, searching for any sign that the oracles might be staying here.

The more she looked, the more she realized every part of the cabin had been meticulously crafted. Moonstone floor. Expertly carved paneling.

It was a room fit for a ruler.

A floorboard groaned behind her.

Before she could take a single step, the sea crashed through the window, knocked her off her feet, and slammed her against the wall.

Isla's body shook as she tore against the icy restraints. She was trapped, splayed, just like she had been during the Centennial.

Cleo tilted her head at her, watching with pursed lips. "You must enjoy getting captured. You're so very good at it."

Isla spat at Cleo's feet, and the ice hardened further, nearly choking her.

Then, all at once, the ice turned to water, and she fell on the floor, gasping for air. She gripped her dagger immediately. Held it in front of her as she got to her feet, ready to strike.

Cleo looked bored. “What do you want, little Wildling?”

There was no use in hiding it. Cleo could have killed her, and she hadn’t. There must be a reason.

Her teeth were chattering. “The oracles. Where are they?”

Cleo’s answer was immediate. Emotionless. “Dead.”

Something within Isla wilted. “You’re lying.”

“You aren’t worth lying to,” Cleo said flatly.

Isla had her dagger to Cleo’s heart in a flash.

The Moonling barely spared it a glance.

“Why?” Isla demanded. Her hand was shaking.

Cleo only blinked. “Isn’t it obvious? I took their prophecies and killed them so that I would be the only one to know the future.”

Fury battled within Isla. She wished for her powers, so she could tear the ship to pieces, so she could shatter the sky and sea like a storm. It was this dangerous anger, this serpent within her always ready to strike, that was why she needed to keep the bracelets on. She knew that, yet still yearned for that power so she could paint the sky the shade of her endless rage.

“What did they say?” Isla roared, knowing she was foolish for even asking. But she had to try.

Cleo’s smile was serpentine. “So much about you. None of which I will share, of course.” In a flash, the Moonling hit her square in the chest, sending her back with a whip of water. Her dagger hit the ground. A half dozen ice blades were positioned at Isla’s throat, like a death necklace. Cleo stood above her, still amused. “Fear not. Your end will come in time, but not from my hands.”

In time.

Isla would have given anything to know when. To know how. To know how to stop it. To know any sort of explanation, or guidance, or hope that the oracle was wrong, and her fate could indeed be changed.

She felt so alone. The only two people she wanted to confide in were the ones she was in danger of killing.

“I’ll give you anything,” Isla said, meaning it. The anger had been put out and replaced by pure desperation. She was trembling, back against the corner of the room. She had never felt more powerless, and it had nothing to do with her lack of abilities. What was the point in having any power at all, when she couldn’t even control her own destiny?

She had never imagined willingly being at the Moonling's mercy, but for this, she would beg. "Please. You must want something. Tell me what the oracles said, and I'll help you get it."

"All I want is my child back."

The only way to do that was to go to the otherworld, where souls could rise again. Getting there would require the death of all Lightlark. Thousands, including Oro. It wasn't an option.

Cleo seemed to see it on her face, because her expression completely hardened. "Leave now. Don't make me tempt fate."

Isla gripped her portaling device and obeyed.

It had taken hours to get Wraith home. Portaling them both while flying with her starstick hadn't worked. She'd had to wait until they reached land, where she could draw her puddle. By the time they went through and reached the stable, the storm had nearly crested. Wraith rolled onto his side and fell asleep immediately. Isla shivered as she portaled back into her room, barely meeting Lynx's gaze as he snarled at her, displeased. She closed the doors to her bathroom and winced as she lowered herself into the steaming tub, the one she had once shared with Grim.

Now it was just her, knees against her chest, tears slowly falling down her cheeks.

The oracles were all dead. There was no one left to ask about her fate. No one left to help navigate the prophecy.

There was no easy option. Each would break her in different ways.

Oro was the obvious choice. Her life wasn't bound to his.

She refused. She loved him—and, even if she didn't, she couldn't doom all his people and the island.

Grim's death would also kill thousands, including her.

Then, of course, there was the fact that she might not have long to live at all anyway. How much time did binding Grim's life to hers give her? The oracles might have known.

As she tightly gripped the edges of the tub, pinching her lips against a frustrated scream that would wake half the castle, part of her wished for her life before the Centennial. A fool locked in a glass room, thinking the only thing she would ever want was freedom. She remained in the tub until the water went cold.

First thing in the morning, a knock sounded on her door. She expected to find Grim there, to visit the other villages affected by the storms.

Instead, she found an attendant. He stood on the opposite side of the corridor, as if afraid to get close to her.

"Yes?"

"You have visitors," he said. "They're waiting in the throne room."

She frowned. "I do? Who?"

"Your guardians."

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NIGHTBANE

“The last time I saw you, you tried to kill me,” Isla said.

Terra only huffed in twisted amusement as she regarded her. “The last time I saw you, you were bleeding yourself out for power.” She cocked her head. “How did that work for you?”

Isla might have lunged at her before. Now, after last night, she didn’t bother summoning the anger. She was drained.

And Terra was right. Bleeding herself out to amplify her abilities had been reckless.

Still, the longer she stared at her old teacher, just standing there as if she hadn’t lied to her for her entire life, the more a fury built in her bones. Hating her was easy. Terra had held her limbs to flames, had abandoned her in the middle of a storm, had knocked her unconscious with the hilt of her sword countless times during training.

Poppy, on the other hand . . . Isla watched her guardian nervously raking her nails against her thick skirts and wanted to sink to the floor. Poppy had held her hand while she received treatment for the injuries she received while training. Poppy had hummed while making tea filled with honeycomb. If Terra had been the blade, Poppy had been the balm. “Little bird—”

“Don’t call me that,” Isla snapped.

“Isla,” Poppy corrected, her eyes darting to Terra nervously. “We can return another time, if—”

“I banished you,” Isla said, her voice raising. “You killed my parents. You killed the last ruler of Wildling. You—”

Terra sighed impatiently, and the anger Isla had tried to bury came creeping back up. “I did hope surviving the Centennial would make you

less of a fool.”

The air around her changed, sharpened. The color drained from Poppy’s face as she stared somewhere behind Isla.

“You’ll watch how you speak to my wife in our home.” Grim’s voice was as piercing as the blade at his side. It would have made her blood go cold, if she weren’t the wife in question.

Terra didn’t seem concerned that Grim could turn her to ash without so much as a glare, as she barked a laugh. “And a coward too? Needing your demon husband to defend you?”

She stepped forward, drawing her blade from its sheath. In half a moment, it was aimed at Terra’s throat.

“Speak to either of us that way again, and you’ll find you won’t be able to speak at all,” she said steadily. Poppy paled even further. “I might have saved your life during the Centennial, but I am not beyond ripping your tongue out of your skull.” The violence of her words shocked her, but she did not backtrack. She did not shrink into herself.

If Terra didn’t like it, then she could only blame herself. This was who her guardian had trained her to be.

Terra almost looked impressed for a moment. Then, she frowned. She looked tired. Her voice barely contained any acid as she said, “Hate us for a thousand different reasons, but I’m putting an end to one of them once and for all. We did not kill your parents.”

Isla didn’t know what she had expected Terra to say, but it wasn’t this. She bared her teeth. How dare she lie to her so blatantly? Did she think she wouldn’t do as she promised and kill her on the spot?

“You admitted it,” she said.

Terra did not deny that. She said nothing at all.

Why accept the blame? It didn’t make any sense. “Liar.”

“Yes. A thousand times,” Terra said. “But not now. Not about this.”

She could know for certain. She could reach for Oro’s flair. She had used Grim’s before, she could—

With the bracelets, she couldn’t. And she wasn’t going to take them off. Not for anything.

She forced her face back to indifference. It didn’t matter now. She had far bigger issues. “I assume you didn’t come here just to clear your names.”

“No,” Terra confirmed. “We came to tell you about the nightbane.”

She frowned. “What about it?”

“It’s dead.”

Dead? “How much?”

There was a pause. Then, “All of it.”

Once, the dark violet flowers had made up fields of star-shaped petals. Isla had stood here with Grim, marveling at their existence. They were miracles, every single one, capable of both life and death—healing and killing.

Now, they had all shriveled up and died. Isla picked one from the ground and watched it turn to ash between her fingers.

“We salvaged what we could,” Wren said beside her. It had been a relief to see the Wildling leader safe.

Isla knew she needed to address her people. It had been days since she had returned.

Wren’s leadership in her absence was a gift. The Wildling told her about the castle Grim had relocated them to, an abandoned estate with fields fit for farming and more than enough room for all of them.

Grim appeared minutes later, and Isla did not miss how Wren watched him warily. She turned her attention back to the wilted flowers.

“Secure any of our remaining elixirs,” she told Wren. “We have seeds from the newland, right?” The plant was notoriously slow to grow. For the time being, the healing elixirs would be limited.

Wren nodded, bowed her head, and turned to give orders.

Isla studied the ground. The storm. She remembered how Grim said it had ruined lands before.

Grim was silent by her side. She could feel his tension. His worry. It echoed her own.

The destruction of nightbane was a massive blow. The scarcity of the drug it was used to create would only intensify unrest. Many people of Nightshade relied on it daily.

And, without the healing elixir it made, people would die from injuries that could previously be mended. They had just lost one of their greatest assets.

This had just been one storm of a season. It was just the beginning.

“We need to know about the origin of the storms, if we’re going to stop them.” They needed more information.

She needed more information.

The question was asked from desperation. She tried to keep the urgency out of her tone as she said, “You don’t have oracles here, right?”

She didn’t dare hope. She didn’t dare breathe.

“No,” he said, and she closed her eyes. Fought against the rush of sadness. Then, “The closest thing we ever had was a prophet, but he died a long time ago.” A prophet? “His order survived, but they only speak to those who make the climb.”

“The climb?”

“Up to their base. It’s at the top of a mountain.”

She blinked at him. “You never tried?”

“Of course I did. When I reached the top, they refused to let me in.”

She frowned. Grim was their ruler, and he seemed well-liked by his people. “Why?”

“My father killed the prophet.” Oh. Perhaps sensing she was going to ask why in the realms Grim’s father would do that, he added, “He refused to share his prophecies with him.”

Her desperation was so sharp, she knew he could feel it. “Maybe they’ll speak to me. I’ll make the climb.” She said the words casually, but her heartbeat was anything but.

Grim just looked at her. “It isn’t a simple mountain. There are tunnels within, and they shift unnaturally. There are beasts inside. The climb is a test, created when the prophet still lived. Only those who survived it were deemed worthy of his knowledge.”

She gave him a withering look. “And you think me incapable?”

He glared back at her. “Of course not. But all power is nullified in the mountain, it’s a sacred place of unusual ability, and—”

It didn’t matter. The bracelets did that anyway. “You think just because I can’t use my powers, I’m powerless?”

Grim blinked at her. “No,” he said, looking as though he was trying to choose his words carefully. “But without them you are vulnerable.” Vulnerable. She hated that word, even though he was right. “I’ll go with you.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Perhaps not. I’m coming anyway.”

“I—”

“Every single person who has tried to make the climb in the last century, other than me, has died. Your death means the death of my people. Any information they can provide about the storms is critical to us all.”

That, she could not argue with.

She shifted on her feet, considering, and Grim just watched her, leaning against Wraith. She had so many secrets. She wished he would just leave her alone.

But if the prophet-followers wouldn’t allow him in . . . he wouldn’t hear her questions. If he could help her make it to the top, so be it.

“Fine. Where is this mountain?”

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THE CLIMB

According to Grim, the ascent would take a full day. Two, possibly, depending on what they encountered.

She wanted to back out. Not just because of the danger, but because she wasn't thrilled about having to be trapped with him for hours on end, in close quarters.

As much as she denied it, Grim was right. Her feelings told a different story than her mind. Logically, she knew she should hate him. She knew he was the enemy.

Her emotions were still tied to memories.

She pushed the feelings down. Buried them as far as they would go. They didn't matter. They were only a distraction from her purpose.

They each carried supplies. The packs were small, to allow for easy movement. Water, food, and thin blankets were strapped to their backs. Swords and daggers were at their fronts. She wore her training clothes.

"Any warnings?" she asked, as they lingered at the entrance. It was a simple arch, leading into a single tunnel.

Grim looked at the dark passageway warily. He shook his head. "None that would do any good."

And then they were plunged into darkness.

"We should have brought an orb," she said, feeling around. They were less than ten steps up the path, and she couldn't see in front of her anymore.

"I did during my climb," Grim said. "It burnt out immediately. It was considered power, I suppose." Great.

She felt around in the dark, looking for a ledge, only to drag her hand completely down Grim's stomach. It was hard as marble, rippling with

muscle. She snatched her hand back before she went any lower. “Sorry,” she said quietly.

Grim’s voice was deep and rattling, and too close for comfort. “Don’t apologize,” he said. “You can touch me wherever you like, wife.”

She rolled her eyes even though he couldn’t see it and blindly took a step forward, desperate to be as far away from him as possible. “Good to know, but irrelevant, as I don’t plan on it.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so,” she hissed. She took another step that wasn’t actually there and lurched forward. Only Grim’s hands on her waist kept her from knocking her teeth in.

She stood very still, his breath right against her ear. “Careful. There are over a thousand steps to go. I can carry you, if you’d like.” His tone was almost mocking.

With one of her senses muted, she focused on the others. Grim’s voice, echoing through the tunnel, deep and scraping against some aching part of her. His cold, muscled body behind her back. His large hands still on her waist, fingers gripping her hips.

Isla placed her hands on Grim’s and felt him stiffen.

Then, she shoved away from him.

She took it slow. The steps were uneven, so she felt each one with the tip of her foot before advancing. It was a long process. By the time a pocket of light appeared in front of them, they had been climbing for hours.

In the ceiling, bits of crystal glowed, creating a trail through the tunnels. Still, her eyes strained with effort in the limited light. Her calves began to burn.

Isla put down her pack and sank to the floor. “How far are we?”

“Not even a fifth of the way up.”

She groaned. The prophet-order better be worth it. He handed her water, and she took a long sip. The tunnels were full of dust that dried her lips and tongue.

“We’re lucky we haven’t come across any creatures. I’d had at least two encounters by this point when I last was here.”

A clicking noise echoed somewhere far away. It could have been anything. Vermin. Shifting rocks.

Then, it got louder.

Grim began to pack his bag once more. “Spoke too soon.” He looked up at her. “Have enough water?”

She nodded. He took the pouch from her. “Good. Now run.”

Clicking filled the tunnels. Their steps scraped against the stone floor as they ran, side by side, dust kicking up around them. They hurtled around each corner, her hand dragging along the rough wall as she turned. At the last one, she dared look over her shoulder.

That was when she saw them.

Curved-over creatures with talons that clicked as they crawled through the caves, their horns like crowns of daggers. They were almost as wide as the tunnels themselves. If the beasts caught up to them, Isla and Grim would be torn to shreds.

Faster. They needed to go faster.

Her legs ached as she pushed forward, but it wasn’t quickly enough. The creatures were advancing. She had to slow down for fear of crashing into another wall.

The tunnels diverged again, and instead of choosing the one with the path of lights overhead, she dragged Grim in the other direction.

He followed her lead without slowing. “Is there a strategy I should be aware of?”

She motioned at the tunnel. A light smattering of crystals barely lit their path. The clicking was getting louder. They were right behind them. “Look. The walls are getting smaller.”

Ever so slightly. It was a gamble, to see if it would continue to narrow. They ran and ran, and Isla wondered if perhaps she had led them down the wrong path. If there was only one right one, and they had lost it. Doubt nearly choked her.

Then there was a terrible high-pitched noise as the creatures’ horns began to scrape against the walls.

Hope made her run faster. Just a little farther. They just needed to get a little—

She fell, skidding on her knees. One of the horns had torn a gash down her leg. Her scream echoed through the tunnel, and she turned around, arms in front of her, ready to be shredded—

But the creature was stuck. It snapped its wild teeth at her, just inches away, but did not reach her. Its horns were caught.

Before she could sigh in relief, the other creatures slammed behind it, sending the beast lurching forward. A moment before its jaw locked around her leg, Grim pulled her to her feet. He examined her wound. “The cut isn’t deep. Can you walk?”

She nodded, but at the first step, her knee nearly buckled with the pain. It didn’t matter. They had to keep going, lest the creatures break their horns and fit through.

They raced down the tunnel, slower than before, around a different corner, before she collapsed to the ground. Grim began to diligently wrap her leg with supplies from his pack. He was right: It wasn’t deep, but it stung.

It would be difficult climbing the rest of the way with an injured leg, but they didn’t even have the option of turning around. Not with the horned creatures completely blocking their path. The only way through was up.

“Ready?”

She wasn’t. The pain burned. The tunnel was growing darker again. She didn’t know how much she would crave light and greenery until she was completely without it. Still, she stood and took the hand Grim offered.

He hadn’t taken this path on his previous journey—neither knew what they would face. For an hour, they walked in silence. The tunnel kept getting smaller, and smaller, until Grim’s head nearly brushed the ceiling. The floor slightly tilted downward, instead of up. They could be going the wrong direction. It didn’t matter now. They didn’t have another choice anyway.

The silence bred endless thoughts, especially this close to Grim. All the questions she had wanted to ask him, the ones she had kept buried for months after the Centennial.

“You thought working with Aurora would save my life, didn’t you?” she asked.

She shouldn’t care. It was in the past.

But she did. She cared a lot.

His eyes hardened. She could tell he didn’t like thinking about it.

“Her plan promised us all Lightlark’s power. I thought it might be enough to sustain your life for centuries, until we found another solution. I

was going to move my people from Nightshade, away from the storms."

Aurora had tricked Grim into believing the prophecy to break the curses involved a Sunling king having to fall in love with a Wildling ruler—the history that had to be repeated.

She had used him, just like she had used Isla.

"You didn't think to tell me? You didn't think to include me?"

He stopped dead in his tracks. She did too. They faced each other. "All I thought about was your survival. I regret it. I told you that."

Regret wasn't enough.

"I fell in love, Grim," she said, her voice rising, echoing through the tunnels. "I fell in love with someone else, while I was married. And I had no idea." He winced. Her words hurt him. Good, she thought. She wanted him to hurt. She wanted him to understand.

"Do you have any idea what it feels like to betray someone you love? Without even trying to?"

"Yes," he said through his teeth. He meant her.

She stepped forward. "You don't know what love is."

"I don't?" he said, bridging the space between them. "I waged a war for you. I bound my life to you."

"I didn't ask you to!" she screamed. She shook her head. It ached. Her eyes stung.

So much death. So much loss. She knew she should be grateful that he had brought her back to life, but part of her wished he had just let her die. The world would have been better for it. So many people wouldn't be in such imminent danger. When she said it aloud, Grim growled with anger.

"Don't ever say that. Don't ever think that. You have saved far more people than you have killed. You have power that threatens the gods." He frowned down at her bracelets. "Even if you insist on keeping it contained, you have it. I might have saved you because I love you, but you are meant to live. You are meant to use this power."

She didn't know how he could speak so reverently about power that had caused so much destruction. She wished she'd never had it at all. She wished she hadn't ever explored the world with her portaling device.

"I wish you'd never loved me." It was true. It would have made everything so much easier. It would have saved so many lives. She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes in frustration. Anger built behind her ribs.

She dropped her hands and looked him right in the eye. Her voice was sharp. Barely recognizable. “I wish I hadn’t given myself to you, like a fool. I wish I hadn’t let you betray me, and lie to me, and manipulate me, and I hate you.” Her chest was heaving. “I hate you, I hate you, and I would throw this damned necklace into the sea if I could!”

Grim reared back, as if she had slapped him. His eyes glistened with hurt. She had never seen him look so wounded, even when he’d had a dozen arrows through his chest.

She instantly regretted her words. But why? She had meant them, hadn’t she?

He took a step away from her. She took a step away from him, in turn—and nearly slipped.

Water. Just a puddle of it, spreading slowly. Eating away the rock beneath it, creating a mirror. She blinked at her own reflection, hazy in the faint crystal light.

Then, it came rushing like a river.

She looked up at him. Their gazes locked.

“Run,” she said, and they did. The water was gushing now. Rising to her ankles, then her calves. It kept growing until it knocked her off her feet, and then she was paddling, gasping for air. Soon it would fill the tunnel. They would drown.

Her limbs ached as she swam as fast as she could, fighting to stay above the water. She managed a gulp of air before being pulled under by the force of the current. When she surfaced again, there were only a few inches remaining between the top of her head and the rocks above.

The tunnel was endless. It was no use fighting it.

She stopped swimming. Grim did too. She lifted her head as high as it would go, greedily swallowing air.

Grim faced her.

In his eyes, she saw unfiltered fear. The same fear she had seen moments before she had died.

They found each other’s hands through the water.

“I—I’m sorry, I—”

“I know, Hearteater,” he said. He pulled her close, and their foreheads touched. This couldn’t be it. This wasn’t her fate.

She thought of all the people who would die because she was reckless enough to insist on going on the climb. The children. The innocents. The same as before, when—

The floor. It had curved downward. It had confused her, but now she realized it might be their salvation.

The tunnel had split throughout their journey, left and right. What if it also split top to bottom? They had been fighting against the current, trying to remain above the water, when perhaps they should have been letting it take them. With the last gulp of air, she said, “The tunnel is going down, the water pressure is increasing. Sink to the bottom. Follow the floor. Stop fighting it.”

Grim met her eyes; his were filled with trust she didn’t deserve. He nodded.

It was a risk, but the water was at the ceiling now anyway. Isla stopped swimming. Stopped struggling. So did Grim. She blew out the air in her lungs in one long stream and sank to the bottom. The current was even stronger down there.

In a rush, it raked her across the bottom of the tunnel, her shirt the only thing keeping her skin from being ripped apart. Faster. Faster. The water took them down, then farther, and she felt stone above her, as she moved through a different tunnel, a tighter one. Hope engulfed her. Maybe she had been right.

Just as quickly, panic closed in as closely as the rock that surrounded her. The space had become as narrow as a tomb. What if it narrowed further and she got stuck? She would drown in seconds. She was drowning now.

The pressure in her chest built. Roaring filled her ears. Spots clouded her vision. She came to a stop.

Then one great surge pushed against her feet, and she was careening forward, downward, faster than before. She was thrown in every direction, rock scraping her bare skin, her throat constricting, her head throbbing, lungs burning. Just when she thought she couldn’t take it any longer, she flew forward out of the tunnel, where she landed in a pool of water. She let out a choking sob as oxygen flooded her lungs.

Grim.

He broke through the water next to her a second later. His eyes were wild, and their intensity didn’t dim as he found hers. She was coughing,

gasping, feeling like she was going to retch but seeing him safe, knowing they had survived the tunnel—

Their arms were around each other in an instant. She didn't realize she was shaking or crying until he smoothed his large hands down her spine. "You're okay," he said, as if he was saying it to himself as well. "Because of you . . . we're okay."

They had nearly drowned. Her lungs still burned. She buried her face in his neck as he carried them through the pool, toward its edge. He whispered soothing sounds against the top of her head. His hands continued their gentle strokes up and down her back as she trembled against him. She was freezing. He was naturally cold; but compared to the water he was warm, so she clung to his chest. Safe. She felt safe in his arms. She knew it was wrong; but when he hauled her out of the water, she found herself grieving the loss of his skin against hers. She braced for more chill, but the rock was surprisingly warm beneath her hands.

After retrieving her pack that had gotten lost in the spring, he hauled himself out of the pool and straightened to his full height, towering over her. His clothes were molded to his body and dripping, their runoff forming a puddle at his feet. She swallowed, heart still hammering.

Then he began removing his clothing.

Logically, she knew it was because they were wet. They needed to dry off before they advanced. They would freeze in their drenched clothing, especially in the cold tunnels.

But there was nothing logical about the way she watched him. About the way she couldn't bring herself to look away from his chest, muscled to perfection and marred by a single unhealed scar. Or his legs. He was built like a statue. Like a warrior. She swallowed.

"You're leering at me."

She immediately found somewhere else to look. "I am not."

"Leer away, wife. I don't mind."

Isla scowled and pulled herself to her feet with a groan. Her leg still ached. Her breaths remained labored. Meeting his gaze, she began to take her clothing off too, slowly, piece by piece. She watched his throat work. For all his smugness, he turned away a moment later, seeming very preoccupied with laying his clothing perfectly across the rock, alongside their soaked blankets.

Just like him, she kept her undergarments on. She laid her clothes out flat. Then, she rested against the rock. It was warm—comfortable, even—a balm against the spiking chill of the pool. The groan that escaped her as the stone pressed against her skin was mortifying. She pressed her lips together as her skin flushed.

Any hope that he hadn't heard her died when she turned to find him staring. No. He was leering. Just as she had.

She wasn't sure he was breathing.

They wouldn't survive the rest of the journey if they both died of hypothermia. She tried to appear unaffected as she motioned toward the space next to her. "Are you going to warm yourself, or just stand there with your mouth hanging open?"

Grim didn't even try for a retort. His eyes didn't leave hers as he slowly lowered himself to the ground next to her, careful not to touch her skin.

Sleep. They needed to sleep. Their bodies were spent from the journey. Now, the inside of the mountain was quiet, but who knew what they would soon face?

She turned away from him, pressing her eyes shut.

Cold air hissed through the tunnels of the cave, making her skin prickle everywhere. She shivered. Sleeping on her side wouldn't work. Not like this, anyway. Any part not touching the warm rock was numb. She shifted slightly closer to Grim and found that it helped.

"You're freezing, aren't you?"

She didn't deign to respond. She wasn't used to the cold. The Wildling newland was always warm. Terra had tried to train her in as many different environments as she could, but even the worst of trials hadn't been close to this.

"You hate the cold."

She did. He knew her. Bastard.

He shifted slightly closer to her. She stiffened. "Who likes the cold?" she asked, tone biting.

"I do." She knew that too.

Still, she laughed without humor. "You must be thrilled about our current circumstances, then."

"No, not particularly. I'm watching my injured wife shiver like a leaf in a storm in front of me."

She glared at him over her shoulder. “Stop calling me that.”

“A leaf in a storm?”

Her eyes narrowed further.

“Wife?”

“Yes,” she hissed.

“No.”

She flipped to completely face him. “What do you mean, no?”

“No,” he repeated. “You are my wife.” His gaze dropped to her necklace. She didn’t so much as move as he dragged a finger down her throat, then across her collarbones, tracing a slow circle around the massive stone. He leaned in. His breath was hot against her pulse as he said, “I’m your husband. I’m yours.” His voice was nearly a growl as he said, “And you . . . wife . . . are mine.”

A warmth dropped through her. She tried to ignore it. “I don’t see you wearing anything around your neck.”

He didn’t so much as falter. “That can be arranged.”

She gave him a withering look that didn’t hold any real bite. Not when his finger was slowly tracing the path from her collarbone to her chest, stopping just short of the thin fabric she wore.

“Cold, Hearteater?”

“No,” she said, with all the conviction in the world, only to follow his gaze and see that her chest was very clearly peaked and visible through her undergarments.

She stiffened, and Grim dropped his hand. She shivered involuntarily at the loss of contact, the loss of the tiny bit of heat.

All she wanted was to be closer, but she forced herself to turn around again. She wrapped her arms around herself, covering her chest, and tried to forget who was behind her.

Minutes later, she was still freezing. She couldn’t take it any longer. The prophet-followers were her only hope of obtaining more information about the prophecy. If she didn’t at least rest a few hours, she wouldn’t have the strength to press forward.

That was what she told herself, anyway, as she scooted back and said, “Do you—do you mind?”

“No. Come here.” His arm circled her waist. He gently dragged her back, cradling her against his chest.

And then, she was enveloped by him.

She was finding it hard to breathe normally. The fabric of her underthings didn't create any kind of barrier. It was just skin and muscle, and his hard edges against the softest parts of her, and heat flowing through her as soon as the cold was banished.

Being this close to him was like being in a storm, wrapped in everything him.

This was wrong. How did they end up here, on the ground, in nothing but bits of fabric, folded around each other?

He was her enemy. She was in love with someone else.

She knew she should get up, but she didn't want to. She was tired, hurt, and cold, and all she wanted was to lay here, for just a little while, and be relieved that they had survived.

Comfort—that was what she needed, and what he offered her as he wrapped his body fully around hers, shielding her from the cold. She leaned into his touch just a little too much. She felt herself sigh when his nose ran down the length of her neck. She shifted back, pressing against him, some part of her finally relaxing, as if it had waited a long time to be back in his arms.

Only for a little while, she reminded herself.

She thought it even as her eyelids drooped, and she was smothered by sleep.

She awoke wrapped in Grim's arms. At first, for a few strange moments, she didn't know where she was—only that it felt familiar to be surrounded by the smell of storms and spice and something distinctly masculine. To be held in these arms. She let out a peaceful sound and wriggled back, against him. Against something hard.

She stilled. Her eyes flew open.

The cave greeted her. She didn't dare breathe. Want flared within her like a wildfire, but she buried it down, instead forcing herself to scuttle forward, away from him. He was awake. Of course he was. He probably hadn't slept a moment, lest they be caught unawares by some creature in the cave.

She turned, and they stared at each other. For just one second, the air between them felt taut, like a single move could break the illusion between

them. Like one movement forward, one word, or one rasped breath could lead to them tangled together on the floor.

She rose to her feet. Grim did the same, and she didn't dare stare at him, not again. She turned and began dressing. Her clothes were dry now. Not just dry, but warm.

Without glancing at him, she made her way to the tunnels. There were a few paths to choose from. Each had different colored crystals embedded in the ceiling.

She had led them through the last tunnel, and it had nearly gotten them killed. It was his turn. "Choose," she said. He moved ahead of her, and they walked through the mouth of his chosen tunnel in silence.

At first, it seemed as though Grim had picked a good path. For miles and miles, the worst thing about it was the climb. They had gone down, and now they were forced back up, to a degree that seemed impossibly high. Her calves burned, and she feared falling backward, rolling all the way back down. Likely breaking her neck in the process. She leaned forward, angled over her knees, steadying herself. Her breathing became labored.

Her leg had bled through its bandages again. She could feel the blood dripping down her ankle. Filling her shoe. Crusting between her toes. It was impossible to stop here, in the narrow space, the floor curved and treacherous.

Times like these made her grateful for her training. It was hours until the path became level. She nearly sank to her knees in relief but worried she wouldn't be able to stand again if she did. The muscles in her legs were all stiff. The nerves were either numb or burning with exertion.

They had to be close. She didn't think she could last much longer.

The crystals in the ceiling became more plentiful, until they led to a wide cave. A clearing. Beyond it, another tunnel entrance awaited.

But it was blocked.

"What," she asked, not daring speak beyond a whisper. "Is that?"

A dark shadow concealed the entrance—a monstrous figure with long, thin limbs. It reminded her of a grasshopper, if grasshoppers grew to be twenty feet tall.

Its skin was iridescent. Every time it breathed, every inch of it rippled.

It turned sharply toward her. It had no face.

Isla backed away, placing her hand on the blade at her hip. She waited for it to advance. But it did not. It simply stood at its post in front of the tunnel, facing them.

“We’re going to have to get past it,” she said.

Grim sighed. “Any ideas?”

Without a face, did the creature have all its senses? As a test, she reached down, grabbed a rock, and threw it to the other side of the clearing.

It hammered wildly against a wall. The sound echoed.

The creature didn’t move an inch. Interesting.

It had sensed her, somehow, though . . . if not from her speaking, then from what? She took a step forward and nearly slipped in a dark, wet streak by her heel. That was when she realized it.

“Blood. It senses blood.”

Grim looked from her leg to the creature. “I think you’re right.”

Isla knelt to the ground.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“What do you think?”

She began to undo her wrapping. He stopped her, with a hand over hers. “Keep it on. I’ll cut my arm.”

She shook his touch away. “You said it yourself. This is a test to see if they’ll let me in at all. It has to be me.” Grim didn’t seem happy about it, but she didn’t really care. She hadn’t been nearly shredded, or drowned, or trapped in this dusty tunnel system only to stop short of speaking to the order of prophet-followers.

No. They were getting past this creature. She was going to get answers about her fate.

“Get ready to run.” She stepped into the clearing.

Before she could throw the wrapping to the other side as she’d planned to, the creature lunged. It knocked her off her feet in a flash.

One of its thin legs pinned her down, pushing into the center of her chest with surprising strength. It was a wonder it didn’t crack through her ribs. Her head spun. She could smell more blood—likely from her head this time—and the creature began chittering.

It lifted its foot. Only then did she see that there was a mouth at its bottom, rimmed in teeth. It inched toward her head, as if to swallow it. As if to rip her face off and eat everything beneath it.

Before it could get any closer, she cut its leg off with her sword.

The creature seized above her, emitting a high-pitched sound. She rolled out of the way just as another mouth-tipped foot shot down, right where her head had been.

“Go,” she screamed, rubbing a hand along the back of her head, and finding it wet. Yes. Blood. She rubbed it on the walls, then stumbled at the force of the creature slamming against it. It was right behind her. Right behind—

She ran through the tunnel.

It was still right behind her.

It was a split-second decision. She gripped her sword tightly, then dragged it down her calf, tearing her wound open again, coating it in blood. Then, she stopped running. She turned and planted herself in the center of the tunnel. Outstretched her arm just in time—

And watched the creature skewer itself on her blade.

She was panting. Her leg was a fire of pain.

Grim cursed, moving quickly to wrap her opened wound as she twisted her sword, until she was sure the creature was dead. “Climbing is going to be difficult,” he said.

“Good thing we won’t be.” She could see the end of the tunnel from over her shoulder. The crystals above their heads flashed, as if in welcome.

Below them sat a door.

The moment Grim was done wrapping her leg again, she began limping toward it. The pain had faded away. All she felt was the cold rush of relief. She had made it.

The door had no handle. That was fine.

She stepped forward and knocked, slamming her fist against the stone. Her skin broke. Blood coated it.

For moments, nothing happened, and she banged harder. Harder.

It finally opened just a sliver, rattling the cave. Enough room for a single robed individual to step through.

A hood hid their face. The figure turned to her, then Grim, then back. A bony finger peeked from the robe and pointed right at her.

It was clear. Only she would be allowed through. They had expected this. She turned to look at Grim, and he nodded. She could almost sense the words in his intense gaze—he was right outside. He might not have powers

here, but he would rip the doors off their hinges and get to her if she needed him.

A few days ago, she would have glared at him, but now . . . after what they had faced . . . she nodded back.

The doors closed behind her with a thud she felt in her bones. Inside, hooded figures faced her, in perfect lines. They bowed, their white robes gleaming through the darkness. It was almost as if they had known she would be coming.

It was almost like they had been waiting for her.

Every wall was shimmering black rock. A scattering of the same crystals from before were embedded in the ceiling above.

The hooded figure led her down corridor after corridor, until they turned into a small door, cut into the rock-face room. It promptly closed behind her.

She turned and startled.

A woman appeared from the darkness itself, seated on a slab of rock that hadn't been there before. Another seat appeared before her. Then, a table between them.

There was power, at least, here in their base, it seemed.

The woman before her lowered her hood. A large scar cut across her face, slicing through her lips, her brow, and one eye. Her smile was wide and warm, completely at odds with her height and muscular figure. This woman used to be a warrior. She could see it in the small scars along her fingers. She'd had the same ones, once, before Poppy had healed them away with their elixir, thinking them ugly.

She took the seat she offered.

"I'm Eta. Welcome to our peak, Isla, ruler of Wildling." A book appeared on the table. Its pages were thick and yellowed. Eta trailed a leathered, scar-crossed hand along its spine. "Our dear prophet," she said reverently. "The book is bound in his skin. The words are written in his blood."

She fought the urge to vomit. She had clawed her way to this very seat. Part of her wanted to come out and ask about her prophecy, but no. She had to start off small. Judge whether she could give her any useful information at all.

“I’m here to find out how to stop the storms on Nightshade. Did your . . .” she motioned toward the book with a wave of malaise, “prophet have anything to say about them?”

Eta gently traced the edges of the book, though she didn’t look down at it. No, her gaze was fixed on her. She was studying her closely. She looked almost amused.

Isla shifted uncomfortably under her gaze but was relieved when she nodded.

“To stop them, you must close their source.”

“Which is?”

“The portal. The door left open.”

She blinked. No, she couldn’t have heard her right. “The one on Lightlark?”

Eta shook her head. “No, no, that is a bridge. The one here is simply a door, left ajar.”

She leaned forward. She wasn’t sure she was breathing. “You’re saying there’s a portal on Nightshade?”

“Of a sort.”

Grim couldn’t have known about it. If he had, he would have used it. He wouldn’t have attacked Lightlark.

“How do you know?”

“It’s how our prophet got here. He came from another world entirely. It’s how he knew everything that would occur. It had been written.”

The prophet had come from the otherworld?

She didn’t mask her interest. No, she couldn’t do anything but demand, “Where is it?”

“No one knows. The prophet’s records of it were stolen.” Eta reverently flipped through the book’s wellworn pages; and upon closer study, Isla saw a large portion of its beginning was missing. Pages had been ripped away.

“If someone found the portal . . . could it be used?” It could be the solution to all her problems.

Eta shook her head. “It is simply a rip between worlds, a torn seam. Anyone from this world would die making the journey—the power required doesn’t exist here. Portaling between worlds has a price, just like power has a price.”

Power has a price. She knew that better than anyone.

“The portal on Lightlark. If it had been used, it would have killed us too?”

She shook her head again. “Not necessarily. That portal is a bridge, built to fuse two specific worlds, so the connection is stronger. It does most of the job itself, you might say.” She pursed her lips. “Still, many would have died. Only the strongest would have made it through. Many did die, in the creation of Lightlark. Their bodies were used as the foundation of the island. It gave it power. Did you know?”

She didn’t. Her voice was a frustrated growl. “Why is there a portal on Nightshade at all, if it can’t be used?”

“That, I do not know. What I do know is that it is like a hole in a dam. And it is growing. Things are being let in. Storms and creatures that don’t belong here.”

“Can it be closed?”

Eta nodded. “The prophet knew how. He simply wasn’t able to, before he died.”

To stop the storms, they needed to find the portal and close it. She had gotten the answers they needed.

Now was the time to ask about her own fate.

“Did the prophet speak about my prophecy?” Part of her wanted to rip the book from her hands.

Eta seemed to sense that, because it suddenly vanished. “Yes, it’s all been written. You’ve been told all you need to know. Goodbye, Isla World-maker.”

No. She had so many more questions. Her hand flung out, forming an iron-clad vise around her wrist before she could leave. She looked up at her, eyes wide. In fear? No. In curiosity. “How long do I have to live?”

She shook her head. “That, I do not know. Only the augur might be able to tell you that.”

“The augur?”

Eta nodded. “He was one of us, once. Now, he lives deep in the woods, behind a curtain of water. He studies blood. He might be able to read yours and tell you how much time you have left.”

Studies blood. That made her more than a little uneasy, but she was desperate for information.

“What is his price?” She knew well enough now that just like power and portaling, information also came at a cost.

“Blood, naturally. I believe hearts are preferable.” She watched her, amused, but didn’t say anything about her people’s former curse.

Isla’s teeth dragged together. Her entire goal was to not kill another innocent, but she would find a way around that.

Eta’s wrist still in her unrelenting grip, she said, “My prophecy. Does it—does the book have anything about who I kill?”

The oracle had said that the choice was still in flux. She was just as likely to kill either ruler.

“No. Only that you will plunge a blade into another powerful heart, and it will mark the start of a new age.”

“Can it be changed? Is it possible that the prophecy is . . . wrong?”

Eta looked almost sad for a moment. She smiled weakly. “Every single thing that has been written in this book has come to pass.”

Her eyes burned. Her throat tightened. She released the prophet-follower’s wrist.

No. There—there had to be a way . . . she had to be wrong—

Her look was nearly pitiful. “A warning for you, Isla Harbinger. There is a traitor in your midst that would like to see you dead. One of your own.”

It was the last thing she was expecting to hear. “A Wildling?”

She nodded. “It is written. One of your own betrays you. One of your own has already struck against you.”

Betrayed her how? “What do you mean?”

“The nightbane, of course.”

The fields of dead flowers. Poisoned by a blight. “That was the storm.”

She shook her head. “The storm was used as a cover. A Wildling poisoned the flowers.”

A Wildling. That didn’t make sense. The nightbane benefitted everyone. Her people spent months cultivating it. Why would one of them destroy it?

“Find the traitor. Stop them, or they will be your ruin.”

“How do I find them?” she demanded.

“Follow the snakes.”

The snakes? “What—”

Before the word left her mouth, Eta was gone.

Grim straightened as she stepped back outside the doors. He looked relieved, until his gaze dropped to her leg. It had bled through again. She hadn't even felt it. No, she had been too busy turning Eta's words in her head.

Every single thing that has been written in this book has come to pass.

The book had to be wrong.

Grim ducked to replace her bandages. From the floor, he looked up at her, and it made her heart stutter. "Well?"

She considered not telling Grim about the portal. She knew he would hope, just as she had, that it was a solution to their problems.

But she had to tell him something—and she would need his help finding it.

She told him everything about the portal. She sensed his excitement at the idea of another way to the otherworld, then watched it wither when she told him it couldn't be used, not without killing them in the process.

"Do you have any idea where a portal might be?"

He shook his head with certainty. "No. With my flair, I would have sensed it."

She had figured as much. So, where was it? Where could it be hidden, where the ruler of the land wouldn't have encountered it?

The storms were connected to it. Perhaps they could be the key to finding its location. There was one person who knew more about tempests than any of them. "I'm going to visit Azul."

Grim looked surprised, but he didn't try to change her mind. She was trying to help his realm, after all.

But that was not the only reason she wanted to seek out the Skyling.

The walk down nearly broke her. Grim offered to carry her several times, and she was close to letting him, but somehow, they left the darkness of the mountain. Before she saw even a shard of sunlight, Grim was portaling them back to the palace.

Her leg was soaked in blood—the wound was worse, deeper now from the strain of her movements. Her head was spinning. They had run out of bandages. Grim was gone in an instant.

When he returned, he held a coveted vial of healing elixir. Before she could say a single word, he was pouring the liquid directly onto her wound.

She gritted her teeth as her skin slowly sewed back together.

Only minutes later, when the pain had dimmed, did Grim say, “Hearteater. Why is there only one vial of healing elixir left in our weaponry store?”

There was no use in hiding it. “I sent the rest to Lightlark.”

She watched his shoulders stiffen.

Isla knew what it looked like. Nightbane was one of Nightshade’s greatest resources, and now it was gone. Every remaining vial mattered.

She had sent almost all their store to the enemy.

It was a betrayal, treasonous.

But she wasn’t even sure who the enemy was anymore. All she knew was that the elixir belonged to her people, and she chose what she was going to do with it.

Grim was silent. She readied herself to see anger or frustration in his expression . . . but all she saw was pain.

He stood. Handed the near-empty vial back to her.

He didn’t say anything, which was almost worse.

“You can’t expect me not to care,” she said, out of nowhere. “I was preparing it for them, that was my home, I was—I was—”

She couldn’t get the words out. Her eyes stung, thinking of Oro. Of everything they had built together, over months. Trust. Love.

And she had shattered all of it.

“I understand,” he said, and he looked like he did. Or, at least, like he was trying to. Most of all, he looked full of regret. He closed his eyes for a moment. Opened them. “Can you ever forgive me?”

She knew what he was asking. From the moment she had arrived, she had made it clear she resented him for everything. He was asking if they could ever go back to how things were before. If she could ever truly love him.

No, she wanted to say.

Instead, she said, “I’m not sure.” It was the truth.

He nodded. She was surprised when he said, “You’re right. I don’t know what love is. I don’t know how to love. If you ever gave me another chance to love you, I would learn. I would learn the right way to love you.”

Then, he left.

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STORMSTONE

“I hear congratulations are in order.” Azul’s booming voice overtook the room. She hadn’t seen him since before the fight between Lightlark and Nightshade, when the Skylings had voted for their ruler not to participate.

So, he had heard about her marriage. “Who told you?”

“Who do you think?”

“Zed.” The Skyling was fast as lightning. He hadn’t ever truly trusted her. Now, she knew he never would.

Azul nodded. “I heard the king is . . . inconsolable.” He studied her, as if waiting for her reaction. She showed none. If she thought too hard about Oro, and their life together, and the betrayal he must feel right now, she would start crying, and she didn’t know if she would ever stop.

Instead, she raised her head. Azul stared pointedly at her necklace. “What would you have had me do?”

“Well, to start, you could have not married him.”

Isla ground her teeth. “When I met him, I was a naïve puppet that had only ever known the confines of her room. Then . . . after the battle . . . it was the only thing to stop the killing. To stop the death. To stop everything.”

He shook his head. “No, you knew what he was when you married him. You knew how many people he had killed. You know now. Why stay? To stop a war? You are not a fool, Isla, so stop playing one. Do not think for a moment that Grim won’t invade again. Nothing in the world can come between him and his sights set, not even you.”

She hoped he was wrong.

“I stay because I’m a monster too, Azul.”

He gave her a look. “You are many things, Isla Crown, but you are not a monster.”

“You’re wrong. That is why I came here.”

“To tell me I’m wrong?”

“No. To tell you the prophecy.”

Isla hadn’t told anyone. But someone needed to know. Someone needed to keep her accountable.

She needed to be careful with who she trusted; she knew that. But Azul was the most trustworthy person she had ever met. And, perhaps more than anyone, she trusted herself the least.

She told him every single word. Azul listened, frowning. “It is certain?”

“According to the oracle, yes. One or the other.”

For a moment, it looked like he pitied her. Then, “So which one is it?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I really don’t. But either way, as it stands . . . either death would mean the end of thousands.”

Nexus bound all people to their rulers. It was a curse.

“Why are you telling me this?”

She looked at the ground. Part of her felt shame. “I don’t trust myself. I’ve made every decision with my heart . . . and it has ended in ruin. I wanted you to know the prophecy, in case I ever lost myself. In case you saw me about to make the wrong choice.”

He nodded.

“How are the Starlings?” She thought of Maren, who had told her about nexus in the first place. Cinder, her cousin, who was the most gifted Starling she had ever seen.

“Taken care of. Our newland has more than enough space for them.” She supposed it helped that the realm was small, unfortunately, due to their previous curse. “They’re conducting a vote soon, I hear.”

Right. Isla had promised to make Starling a democracy and to yield her rule should they vote for another leader. It seemed obvious they would choose one of their own.

She’d thought of Nightshade’s storms as a localized problem, but she now realized the portal could affect all the realms. Especially if the torn seam between worlds was growing.

“What do you know about storms?” she asked him.

Azul looked slightly amused. He studied her carefully. “What do you know about flowers?”

Fair. “How do you stop them?”

He seemed to consider this. “Storms are filled with energy. Powerful Skylings can shape them, manipulate parts of them. Stopping them is more difficult. It would mean cutting them off at their source.”

There was no time for secrecy, not with Azul. “What if their source was a portal?”

Azul frowned. It was an unfamiliar expression on his face. “I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“There’s a portal on Nightshade.” His eyes widened ever so slightly. “Not one that can be used. It’s a torn seam between worlds. Creatures are being let in. Storms. I need to find it and close it.”

There was a fold between Azul’s brows. His thumb was thrumming down the side of his chair. Silence.

“What is it?”

He hesitated for just a moment. Then, he said, “We read omens in the clouds.”

“And?”

His head lowered. His voice was nearly a whisper. “They warn of a storm to end all storms. A reckoning.”

She thought of the woman in the village, calling them a harbinger of the end. “When?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure . . . But a storm is coming, Isla, I can feel it.” He dipped his chin as he said. “One unlike any we’ve ever seen before.”

Chills swept up her arms.

“Wait here,” Azul said. He flew out of the room in a flash. When he returned, minutes later, he was holding a cage, with a bird inside. It was sky blue with a grey beak. Small enough to fit in her palm.

“This is a stormfinch. It can sense a storm before even Skylings can.” She had never heard of such a creature. “Before the next storm . . . It will start singing the most beautiful song you have ever heard.”

This would save countless lives, she thought. It would give Nightshades time to get underground before the tempests struck.

She gingerly took the cage. It was ornate, with swirling designs across its side.

“When she sings, I want you to get as high as you can. Then, I want you to hold this.” He slipped one of his largest rings off his fingers and handed it to her. It had a large light blue stone, like a bird’s egg.

At her questioning look, he said, “It has a shred of storm trapped inside.” A shred of storm? She squinted, holding the stone up to her eye. Faintly, she could see something spinning within its depths. She gasped and stared at him.

He cracked a smile. “You didn’t think I wore all of these just for decorative purposes, did you?” She studied all the stones he wore, on his fingers, around his neck, on the buttons of his cape. “They are all imbued with storms. They amplify my powers significantly. Precious stones can trap power.” He nodded at the ring in her hand. “Trap part of the storm in it, and the stone should lead you to its source.” To the portal.

“How?”

“Break the stone with power. The storm will be released and called to its origin. Follow it.”

Her grip on the bird’s cage tightened. “Thank you,” she told Azul.

Isla went to turn on her heel, but he called her name, and she just barely caught something he had thrown her.

Another ring. Her diamond ring. The one she had given to Azul before the battle for safekeeping. She looked inside. Something flurried.

“I added something to it. A shred of power for you to shape how you wish.” It seemed to hum against her hand, just like the other stone. She swallowed. She didn’t deserve this. If he had seen what she had done with power—

“Everyone can be redeemed. You are not a monster, Isla.”

She wished she believed him.

“You are not,” he repeated. “I know one when I see one. I knew something was wrong with Aurora from the very beginning.”

Aurora.

Some empty corner of her mind ached. She had been her best friend. She had been a stranger.

As she portaled away, she remembered the one thing she had left of her friend turned enemy. The only thing she had kept.

She had meant to go to Grim, to show him the stormstone, to hang the bird's cage in the castle, but instead, she went to the Wildling newland. She went to the room she had been locked in, almost like the stormfinch.

A charred mark marred the center of her former room. The door had been ripped off its hinges. She had done that, in a fit of anger, proof that her bracelets were necessary. Now, even as she called for her power, it didn't even whisper back.

Her wall of swords reflected her face in garish angles as she searched for the one object she had kept from the Starling newland.

Aurora's feather.

She found it in a drawer. Upon closer inspection, it was just a simple white feather. Its weight didn't signal any importance. A single flame would kill it, a single gust of wind would spirit it into the forest. She had found feathers just like it during her training.

So why had Aurora kept it in an orb?

Why had she kept it a secret?

Isla strummed a finger down its spine, and the barbs shivered in waves, like a pond disturbed by a stone, a breeze humming through treetops.

Strange.

She thought of Azul's words, how stones could be imbued with power. Could feathers?

Her finger continued its path until its point, and she flinched, nearly dropping the feather in surprise. Its tip was as sharp as her dagger's. A drop of blood dripped down her finger like a tear. The feather's white point now gleamed red.

If it was this sharp . . . perhaps it was meant for writing, she thought, before finding a pot of ink and a ream of parchment in another drawer.

She wrote a single word. Isla.

Nothing happened.

What did she expect would happen? She nearly snapped the feather in annoyance. She should burn it. She should throw it into the forest. It was useless, just like her former friendship.

Aurora had betrayed her, but she was dead.

If the prophet-follower was to be believed, she had another traitor to deal with.

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TRAITOR

A Wildling had destroyed the nightbane. One of her own was working against her. It still didn’t make sense. Why would a Wildling kill one of their greatest assets? According to Wren, her people were thriving on Nightshade.

It was time for her to see it for herself.

Lynx snarled as Wraith landed behind them, so closely, she was nearly knocked off his back. Grim had insisted on accompanying her here, though he didn’t know about the traitor. When it came to anyone harming her, he seemed to operate by a kill first, ask questions later philosophy. No, she would find the Wildling traitor herself. She ran her hand down Lynx’s neck as she dismounted, and he took off, immediately followed by an eager Wraith, as if they were in some sort of race.

A castle sat on the edge of a cove, surrounded by farmland. Its bricks were shining black, almost silver, and its towers were spiked, as if covered in crowns. A ring of water around it glimmered beneath the sun. Its door was a bridge, laying across the moat, perfectly aligned with a pathway of cobblestone and patches of grass. A small village sat nearby, abandoned for decades.

That was where Grim had taken the Wildlings. “They chose this place,” he said, from just behind her.

A castle with a town next to it. Something about it tugged at her bones.

“It was your father’s. It’s yours.”

Her father.

He had been Grim’s general, a powerful Nightshade, from a prominent family. That was all she really knew about him, besides his flair.

A question snagged in her mind. She couldn't believe she had never asked it before. Perhaps she had been too afraid of knowing the answer. "Do I—do I have any surviving family?" The castle had been abandoned, but it was possible they lived somewhere else.

Grim nodded, and she nearly drowned in hope.

Her eyes burned. "I do?"

Her entire life, she had been taught her family was dead. The idea of that not being true, of her having someone out there . . .

He could sense her excitement, she knew that, but still, he had a strange expression on his face. A tentative one. "A cousin."

A cousin.

Family.

She wanted to meet them. How could Grim have hidden them from her? She scoured her memories but came up short. She had never met a relative, not even in the past.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

He looked suddenly nervous. "Roles in my court go blood deep. Certain lines have served the same positions for centuries. Millenia, even."

Isla's smile dropped. She knew what he was saying. Who her mysterious cousin was.

Grim's current general, Astria. The woman that looked at her as if she was a snake curled around Grim's neck, slowly tightening.

Astria must have known they were related. She must have known and still didn't trust her at all.

"Oh," Isla said.

Grim portaled her to the castle's entrance and was gone.

The inside of the palace was surprisingly welcoming, coated in a layer of black marble. Her people looked happy to see her. She might have suggested they convene all together, but no. If she was going to find the Wildling traitor working against her, she was going to have to speak to each one of them separately.

One woman approached her immediately. Her name was Calla. She had short hair and freckles across the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were wide as she told Isla about what had happened a few days prior, during the storm.

"I was out in the field, when the ground began to shift. I could feel it . . . pulsing, almost. Then snakes crawled from the dirt. Dozens of them.

As if called by the winds. I've never seen anything like it."

Follow the snakes. That was what Eta had said.

Perhaps it had been Calla. Maybe she was trying to blame the storm for the nightbane loss. How else would she know about the serpents?

Isla's suspicions withered after a few hours, when she spoke to the rest of the Wildlings. A few had been with Calla the entire time. Several had seen the snakes. They were described as being half green, half black.

According to them, all Wildlings had been around the keep during the storm. The nightbane fields were across Nightshade. Without portaling, getting there would take several hours.

Unless they were all lying—unless they were all working against her—she couldn't put the blame on anyone yet.

For hours, she sought each of her people out. The result was twofold—getting to hear their grievances and experiences thus far on Nightshade while also considering if they might have destroyed the nightbane.

Most seemed happy here. It should have pleased her, but, as time went on, it unnerved her. The prophet-follower had been clear. There was an enemy among her people.

Was her judgment so faulty, that she couldn't spot them? Were they truly that good at hiding from her?

She had been betrayed, time and again, by people she had trusted. Perhaps she was the problem. Perhaps she should trust no one.

Everyone was a suspect. Everyone could be lying to her.

Again, she briefly considered going to the blacksmith and having him take off her bracelets. She could use Oro's flair to see who was telling the truth . . .

No. It wasn't worth the risk or useful, unless she planned to ask each of her people point-blank if they were the ones that destroyed the nightbane. Perhaps it would come to that, but not yet. She didn't want her people to panic.

By the end of the day, she wasn't any closer to identifying the traitor. It was dusk when she found Wren in the castle stables. She was tending to a tree with strange branches that curved and moved wildly.

No, not branches. When Isla got closer, she realized they were snakes.

Snakes. Isla stilled, remembering Eta's words.

Wren simply smiled. She brushed the tree, and a serpent slid right down her knuckles, wrapping itself around her arm. It was light green, with shining black eyes. Its scales were hard and reflective, like armor. She recognized the faint patterns on its scales. It was poisonous.

Wren smoothed a finger down the snake on her arm. “I brought them here from the newland. Their venom cures sickness, when mixed with the right flowers.” She glanced at Isla and smiled. “Don’t be afraid. I trained them myself. They don’t bite Wildlings.”

Was Wren the traitor Eta warned about?

Isla shook the thought away. Besides these snakes not looking like the ones that had been spotted, Wren had never given her a reason not to trust her. If there was anyone close to her that she didn’t trust, it was her guardians. They had lied to her time and time again.

They had been her first suspects, until she learned Terra and Poppy had taken charge of maintaining the fields of nightbane. They had been healing Wildlings with it, and even Nightshades who came to them for help.

Why would they then kill the creation they had painstakingly worked on for months? It didn’t make sense. Unless there was something she was missing. A bigger purpose.

Isla lived in Grim’s castle. She needed to stay focused on finding the portal and changing her fate. Any chance at finding the traitor hinged on trusting someone who lived here, alongside her people. Someone who could keep an eye on things, in case there was another event like the nightbane.

The snakes seemed to watch her, wrapped around their branches, as she took a step forward. “I believe a Wildling destroyed the nightbane. Not the storm.”

Wren frowned. “Why would any of us do that?” Her shock seemed genuine.

“I’m not sure yet. But if anything else happens . . . if you see anything suspicious . . . tell me,” Isla said.

Wren nodded.

Isla slowly extended her arm toward the tree. A single snake slithered from the pack, down a branch toward her. She tensed, waiting for it to sink its fangs into her skin, but all it did was trail down her wrist. It coiled itself around and around like a bracelet.

“Take her for a while,” Wren said.

She did.

By the time she returned to the castle, Wraith was in his stable. Her starstick was in her room, so Lynx followed her through the halls, eyes narrowed at the snake slithering up and down her arm. She thought about the traitor. She wondered if they were operating right in front of her nose.

That was when she felt it—Grim's power, radiating off him. It made the air feel thicker, heavier. She told Lynx to wait for her and followed the power toward the throne room. The door was open just a sliver. Hushed voices sounded just beyond it.

She stood there, listening. At first, she heard just words. Risk. Attack. Future.

Was Grim having a meeting without her? She thought about Azul's warning, that nothing and no one, including her, would stop him from invading Lightlark.

Was he already doing it against her back, despite his promises not to?

She neared the opening, bowed her head, and listened.

A scraping voice. She vaguely recognized it as belonging to a bald officer who had sneered at her more than once.

"We are your council. If we cannot speak plainly, who can?"

There were some murmurs of approval. A few voices she couldn't make out.

Then, the officer's again: "There is a snake in our midst, ruler, and you are blind to it."

Grim's voice was as cold as the stone she was leaning against. With predatorial calm, he said, "A snake? Speak plainly, then. Tell me exactly what you mean."

There was a frustrated sound. "The temptress in your bed is a serpent waiting for the right moment to strike. She is a traitor. Can't you see—"

He was cut off by a gurgling choking sound, followed by the thud she knew as a person dropping to the floor.

Quiet.

Then, "Does anyone else have any doubts about my wife?"

Not one word.

She took a step back. Another. A small council had intervened to warn Grim about her. A snake, they called her. A traitor.

Isla couldn't even be mad.

Because, depending on how the prophecy was fulfilled, it could very much be true.

Grim didn’t believe them. He trusted in her. It made her chest twist uncomfortably. They were right. She was working behind his back, lying to him about her true intentions. She had come here, knowing the prophecy, knowing there was a good chance she would kill him. As suspicion rose, her questions seemed more pressing than ever. How long did she have to make the decision? How long did she have to live?

According to the prophet-follower, there was only one way to find out.

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THE AUGUR

If the augur wanted blood, she would gladly give it to him.

Lynx glowered at her as she crept past him to the wardrobe in the middle of the night.

Clad in her dagger-filled pants; boots; a long-sleeved, thick fabric wrapped around her hands and forearms; a hood over her head; and a scarf draped over the bottom of her face, she portaled away with her starstick.

It took a few tries to find a larger town, complete with a market, roads that twisted and converged in no decipherable pattern, and plenty of shadowy rooftops from which she could watch.

She could likely kill anyone, but she wouldn't harm innocents. No; if she was going to kill someone, they would deserve it.

Though the curses were gone and Nightshades could go out after dusk, it seemed centuries of habit weren't broken in mere months. Or perhaps they were worried about being caught in a storm. The streets were quiet. She leapt across rooftop after rooftop, listening. Studying.

It took a few hours before she discovered its underbelly—a shard of city that had thinner alleys, establishments with basement levels carved into the ground, and bars that didn't ever seem to close. This would be the spot. She watched, fascinated, for a few nights, discovering people's routines. A large, bowlegged man went to the same brothel every other night, like clockwork. Just beforehand, he would visit the bar next door for courage. Every morning, just before dawn, he emptied the contents of this stomach in the streets before wobbling home.

Another man—slender and tall with spikes on the back of his boots—lingered by the door of the brothel for hours without ever stepping foot

inside. At first, Isla figured he was shy, but when a woman stormed out to demand he leave, she learned he had been banned.

The man didn't leave after that night. He just got better at lurking in the shadows. Isla had her sights on him, but—though making the women of the brothel uncomfortable was certainly deplorable—he hadn't yet done anything worth his life. He would, though. She was sure of it. She just needed to wait.

It happened two days later. Isla was sprawled across a rooftop that had a view all the way to the harbor, when a scream split through the night.

The sound made her think of the hundreds of innocents—of the ruin she'd inflicted. How they must have screamed, hoping someone would save them. How she had been responsible . . .

She was on her feet in moments, leaping across rooftops, bolting toward the sound. It was coming from an alley that ended in a point: three buildings that had sagged together over time, fighting each other for foundation.

There was the slender man—choking a woman who looked no older than she was.

She landed behind him in a crouch. She took her thinnest knife from its place against her thigh and slid it right into his back.

The man cursed and dropped the woman immediately. She fell to the floor, gasping, clutching her throat with shaking fingers. The man made to turn around—presumably to hit her—but his efforts simply pushed him more firmly onto her blade.

Isla had never stabbed someone through the ribs . . . through their back. There wasn't anything honorable in it. But, then again, a man choking a woman in an alleyway didn't deserve an honorable death.

He whirled and grabbed her other wrist, perhaps meaning to break it, but the snake she wore there as a bracelet over her metal ones struck out, piercing his vein with its jaws. Without power, she needed to take precautions.

Isla sighed. "Now that's going to be painful," she told him. "Right into the bloodstream." She shook her head ruefully. "Stabbing your heart would be merciful."

She drew her blade sharply from his back and kicked him to the ground, far from the woman he had nearly killed. He vomited as he flipped over.

His face was turning a peculiar shade of blue. He began spasming. The poison was already working.

She hardly recognized her own voice. “I’ve grown tired of being merciful.”

The woman flinched when Isla reached out to her.

“It’s okay,” Isla said, her voice gentler now. “I’ve been where you are.” She met the woman’s eyes, thinking back to all the times she had faced near certain death.

“Thank you.” The woman accepted her hand, allowing Isla to help her to her feet and escort her back to the town’s main street, leaving the man to choke on his own bile.

By the time she returned, he was dead. The alley was quiet. There was no one to witness how she carved his heart right out of his chest. It was bloody work, cutting through the ribcage; his organs were still warm.

The augur wanted a fresh heart? He was going to get it.

Just like Eta had said, the augur lived deep in the forest behind a thin waterfall, guarding the mouth of a cave like a door. It didn’t take long to find it, on Lynx’s back. Without so much as a word, she threw the sack with the heart in it through the curtain of water and waited.

Minutes later, her own sack was thrown back through—empty—nearly hitting her face. If the action wasn’t already clear, the voice from behind the curtain certainly was. It said—

“More.”

Greedy creature.

Isla returned three times—with three different wicked hearts—and was told the same thing.

More.

How much blood could one being need? What was it even being used for?

There hadn’t been another storm in days, but she could feel the energy in the air, as if the sky was holding its breath. It had slowly shifted into an ominous, darker blue. Grim was busy preparing the tunnels and developing

a system of bells that would warn each town of an incoming tempest as soon as the stormfinch began singing.

Now that they knew there was a portal, he had searched for it himself, on Wraith's back, unsuccessfully. She knew, because he gave her updates in his scrawled writing on letters he left outside her door, along with flowers, every morning.

She had let them pile up. She didn't roam the halls anymore, in fear of running into him.

He had defended her. He had believed in her. She told herself she avoided him because he was a distraction from her work to get answers from the augur, but the truth was, she couldn't face him.

At night, she portaled to the different villages, much to Lynx's irritation. She heard things, from the rooftops. Whispers. Loud jeers. It wasn't long before she heard about herself.

The snake queen, they called her. The Wildling snake. Just like the council that had tried to warn Grim.

A traitor in our midst. A lover of the king of Lightlark, come here to spy. To destroy. The words filled her with rage—and also with hurt, because what if they were right?

She didn't want to be a traitor. She didn't want to pretend. She didn't want to be all the things they thought she was.

The next time she showed up at the augur's door, she speared her sword into the soft dirt just in front of the waterfall. He wanted more?

Eight dripping hearts were skewered on her blade. It had taken days of searching for her victims, and only one night to end them all.

Her voice was a low growl. "If you want these, you'll have to come out and get them."

Silence. There were only her ragged breath and heartbeat and the waterfall beating against the pool to mark seconds in the night.

Then the curtain of water parted, and the augur stepped through.

Isla stilled. The augur had smooth skin, as pale as the curve of the moon, covered in dark markings as thin and delicate as the weaves of a spiderweb. They glimmered mysteriously, like the ink had been melted straight from a starless night. His eyes were dark crimson voids. He didn't have a nose—just a hole where it should be, a skull clear of its cartilage. He

was tall and wore the same robes as the prophet-followers, without the hood.

“What do you do with the blood?” It wasn’t her most important question, but the words spilled out of her as she watched him pluck her sword from the ground. He eyed the hearts appraisingly. Hungrily.

“I’ll show you.” He motioned with his chin toward the waterfall.

She had worked days to get to this point, but now she looked at the entrance to the cave and wondered if she was making a grave mistake—if Eta had tricked her. She had no powers; only daggers and her snake. She had never encountered a being with bloodred eyes before.

As if sensing her hesitance, the augur said, “You’re scared. Good. You should be afraid, Isla Snake-queen. You should be terrified of everything that makes up this wretched land.”

He stepped over the pool separating her from the cave and passed through the waterfall.

She followed him.

Water hit her for a moment, soaking the crown of her head, and then—darkness. The cave was carved from smooth black rock. She walked blindly forward, following the white flash of the augur’s robes and the high-pitched scrape of her heart-laced sword he dragged behind him.

Soon, there was a light, the faint twinkling of sparkling rocks embedded in the ceiling like a cluster of stars. Beneath it sat a shimmering pool.

A pool of blood.

Isla stopped short. Her hand crept toward her throat. One pull of her necklace and Grim would be there; she knew that. But then he would know she had sought the augur. He might start to listen to those rumors about his traitorous bride.

The augur looked amused. “I do not fear the ruler,” he said, as if knowing the significance of the necklace. “He should fear me, as I know the properties of blood. Blood tells such secrets, doesn’t it?”

His gaze never leaving hers, he slowly removed the first heart from her blade, held it in his hand above the pool—and squeezed.

There was a ring on his thumb adorned with a blade curved like a talon on its underside, and he used it to cut through the tissue. He pressed harder. Harder.

She watched him drain the heart of every drop of blood, the red liquid sputtering from between his fingers until he threw the spent organ behind him, to a corner of the cave. Creatures chittered there, fighting over the pieces. She swallowed the bile building in her throat.

The augur looked over at her as he did the same thing to the second heart. Then the third. He looked amused.

“Your people have done far worse to hearts,” he said, his fist tightening for the fourth time.

“They did it because of a curse,” she responded, forcing herself to watch. “They did not relish it.” She wouldn’t shy from her actions anymore. If this was the price required for the information she needed, so be it. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Right. What I do with the blood.” He threw the last of the hearts to the corner, where a mound of insects with a tangle of legs had gathered.

He handed back her bloody sword. She took its hilt with tentative fingers. Then he made his way toward what looked like stone steps leading into the pool. At the top of the first one, he turned toward her. Extended his hand.

The augur raised a brow when she didn’t immediately take it. “You want answers . . . yes?”

Yes.

But she needed to know he could give her the answer she needed. “Can you tell me how long I have to live?”

He nodded.

She swallowed down her disgust and bent to release the snake onto the rock. It slithered and curled, head raised, as if pleading with Isla to reconsider. Still, she stepped forward. Took the augur’s hand. It was spindly; his bones protruded through his skin. His grasp was cold as the cave itself. Together, they walked down the steps.

Blood. She had seen it before, had felt it on her skin, but not like this. It was thicker than water, noticeably so, and rippled only slightly as she moved through it. First, it was at her knees, then her hips, and then her ribs, and she fought the urge to retch. The scent of metal prickled her nose; there was something else in the air.

“You feel it, don’t you?” The augur said, watching her far too closely. “Power . . . it’s in the blood, you see.”

Blood is power. The past whispered the words, and the memory of her and Oro sank its teeth into her before she could shake it away.

She ripped her hand from the augur's in the middle of the pool. "How does this help me get answers?"

Quick as a serpent, he struck. Metal glinted in front of her, then disappeared. Her cheek burned in pain. He had cut it with the talon on his thumb. She gasped, nearly tripping back in the pool. Her hand rose to her face, her fingers slick against a small trail of blood.

The augur brought the talon to his lips and slowly licked the blood off it. His eyes seemed to grow even redder as he said, "Interesting." He began to laugh. "You are the greatest thing that has ever stepped foot into my cave, Isla Thorn-tide."

Then she was dragged down through the blood.

An invisible grip clutched her ankle, forcing her to the bottom of the pool. She kicked, but her foot didn't hit anything solid. Her mouth opened with a silent scream, filling with blood.

I shouldn't have come. She reached toward her necklace—but before she could touch the stone, spectral ties seized both of her wrists too.

She was drowning not just in blood but also in power. It was everywhere, flaying her skin, calling to something deep inside her chest, an incessant knock on a locked door.

Flashes of something, obscuring her vision, intruding on her mind. Memories. But they weren't hers. Voices filled her head, so many voices. There were laughs and sighs, but then there was screaming. Everyone was screaming, all she felt was pain, and anguish and—

One moment she was fighting for her life at the bottom of the pool of blood. The next, she was gasping for air, her fingers clawing at her throat. The snake crawled across her chest, as if trying to wake her. She opened her eyes to find herself on the smooth stone beside the pool. Blood muddled her vision. It filled her ears, cloaked her lips. She turned to the side and retched once. Twice.

When she looked up, blinking away the blood, she saw the augur pacing just a few feet away.

A moment later, she was on her feet. Her blade pressed against the tattooed skin of his neck. "You tried to kill me."

He looked amused. “I would love to kill you. But, sadly, I cannot.”

“Why?”

“I know what was written, and I am but a servant of the book. Your fate is on one of the very last pages. I’m curious to see where your future goes from there.” He smiled, revealing teeth that had been shaved into spikes. They were still tipped in her blood. “You felt it, didn’t you? The power of your blood, calling to the rest? The strength of it all?”

He spoke of it with such relish, it nearly made her sick. His robe, previously white, was now stained crimson.

“Your blood spoke to me in many tongues. You wear your fate like a crown of blades. Doesn’t it hurt?”

Her snake hissed, slithering farther up her forearm. Isla frowned. Part of her screamed to slit the auger’s throat, to be done with it. All he was doing was speaking riddles and nonsense. “What?”

“Your blood . . . all that power, stirring beneath your skin. Doesn’t it burn?”

It had. But not anymore. “My bracelets keep it contained.”

At that, he laughed. It pealed through the cave. He shook his head, skin slicing slightly against her dagger. He didn’t seem to care. “You can defang a snake, but the poison remains.”

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps she was lying to herself if she thought the bracelets changed who she was. What she had done. Or her fate.

Enough. She had come for answers and, so far, had gotten nothing. “How long do I have?” she demanded, digging the blade, made sticky with blood, into the top layer of his pale flesh. More blood joined it.

He sighed. “Yes, your lifespan. You died. Life was given to you, leeched from another.”

She nodded. She knew that. “And?”

The augur frowned. “In your current state . . . you won’t last past the storm season.”

She stumbled back. Her hand trembled as she sheathed her dagger. Grim said it would likely last the entire winter. They were already weeks into it. “You’re certain?”

He nodded.

Thousands dead. All because of her.

No. “I need more time. How do I get it?”

A slow smile formed across the augur's face. It stretched his pale skin too taut. His pointed teeth glimmered. "You asked several times what I do with all the blood. It helps me with readings. Amplifies my power . . . but also gives me time." He motioned toward himself. "You can see the price paid. Every method to extend life has one."

She glanced at the pool of blood. Shuddered. "What are the other methods?"

He pointed toward the markings on his head and neck. "Skyres. The ancient markings." She hadn't ever heard of skyres, though she had seen something like the augur's markings once before on someone. But that person was dead.

"Teach me."

He shook his head. "I cannot. I do not know myself. The prophet made these skyres, you see . . . he did so in secret. He never allowed anyone to witness the art."

She studied them carefully. They looked complicated.

The augur sighed. "Find the portal, Isla Stormheart. It has power. Take it. Use it to live. Its fate is tied to yours. Find the portal . . . find your fate."

"Do you know where it is?" She didn't want to wait for another storm to find it.

He shook his marking-covered head. "No. The prophet knew its location. He wrote it in pages bound by his blood . . . but they've been lost." She remembered the torn-out parchment from the book. "Centuries before the curses, a follower of the prophet's word stole them and set off toward Lightlark."

Lightlark? The mention of the island made her pause with both curiosity and longing. It was an effort to shift back to the reason she was here.

"Do you know how to close the portal when I find it?"

He shook his head again. "Only the pages know." That wasn't useful, if they were as good as lost.

She needed to wait for the next storm, trap it in the ring, and follow it to the portal. If the augur was to be believed, its power could give her life, time. She would take it, then find a way to close it.

The augur licked his thin lips with relish. His tongue dragged along his pointed teeth. "Such blood . . . Use it wisely, Isla Cursecure. Your parents

gave you such gifts.” Her parents. He eyed her bracelets. “Such blood . . . such blood, wasted.”

“How can I make sure it isn’t wasted?” she asked. Her life . . . she wanted it to be worth something. She wanted to have done more good than bad.

“Use it.” The augur smiled. His sharpened teeth glimmered in the limited light. “Learn the truth of who you are . . . and your path will become clear.”

He motioned toward the wall. There, carved into the rock, she saw a drawing. It was a woman with snakes wrapped around and around her arms, her neck, her chest. She looked—

She looked like her.

“What is that?” Isla breathed, reaching out to trace the lines in the stone that looked ancient. Weathered.

“The future,” he said, reverently.

“Is it—is it supposed to be me?” The woman looked fearsome. Wicked.

The augur looked at her curiously, crimson eyes swirling. “Do you want it to be?”

She backed out of the cave, throat tightening.

“Not to worry. You will be back, Isla Heartblade,” he said, his voice echoing through the cave as she tore out of it. “It has been written.”

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SNAKE

She and all of Nightshade wouldn’t survive the storm season, unless she could find the portal. Unless she could extend her life long enough to change her fate.

Part of her felt rage. Her life had barely been her own. Since she was a child, she had trained for the Centennial. Then, she found herself the ruler of two realms. Now, she was practically a walking corpse, her life tied to another, on borrowed time.

Freedom was what she had craved since she was a little girl, but fate was the ultimate restraint. It was the glass in her room, caging her; it was the bracelets, keeping the worst of her at bay.

The stormfinch sat watching her from inside its cage. She watched it back, willing it to sing. Willing a storm to break, so she could find the portal. Its beak remained closed.

It always stood in the same place. No matter how many days she left the door open, the bird never tried to fly out.

“You’re smarter than I am,” she said. For years, all she had wanted was to leave her room in the Wildling realm. She dreamed of adventure, of freedom.

Look where that had gotten her.

She was lonelier than ever, out of necessity. It wasn’t like Grim hadn’t tried to seek her out. Along with her favorite flowers, her favorite foods had been brought by attendants. He knew them all, and she didn’t think too hard about that fact.

The plates were all empty now, and she craved a bit of comfort. Something warm and sweet that would make her forget, for just a few moments, that there were only a couple of months left of winter.

It was long past midnight. She left her room, stepping carefully over the built-up pile of flowers, intending to find the kitchens. The halls were empty.

She walked through them, taking the long way to avoid the room Grim had been staying in, since he had given her his quarters. Part of her wanted to go there, to seek comfort in him, but no . . . her heart was too confused already. What she longed for was a friend.

What she longed for was a home.

There was an emptiness in her that had always existed. A place where perhaps a mother or father or friend would have gone. Celeste had filled it for a time, but she hadn't been real.

So much hadn't been real.

She remembered the carving on the augur's wall. Her, looking the part of the vengeful snake-queen the people here believed her to be. She could almost see the serpents now, slithering around her arms. Hissing. She could almost feel them, cold scales slipping against her skin, even though she had returned the serpent she often wore to Wren an hour ago. It felt almost familiar. Almost right.

She turned the corner and hit something solid. Before she knew it, she was pressed against a cold wall. Her hand reached toward her blade on instinct but was pinned by her side before her fingers could curl around the hilt.

Grim rippled into visibility before her. His grip on her wrist was loose. She could easily escape it, but she didn't. She remained very still, even as his thumb gently brushed across her pulse. It was getting faster. He could feel it. He tilted his head, looking down at her with a preternatural focus.

She was grateful she had scrubbed the blood from her skin, from her hair, from her clothes; but under his unrelenting gaze, she wondered if he knew where she had been. If he knew that while it seemed she worked for his realm's benefit, she was also making plans without him.

She lifted her chin. "Following me?"

A slow smile spread across his face. "Always."

He leaned down, and she didn't move a muscle, even as his lips inched closer. Closer. She swore her traitorous pulse must be hammering beneath his thumb, because his mouth curled in wicked amusement. Part of her wanted him to bridge the gap between them. Part of her wanted any comfort

he could offer her, especially now, especially with everything falling apart. Instead, his lips swept past hers, dragging across her cheek all the way to her ear to say, his voice like a finger down her spine, “You’ve been avoiding me.”

She swallowed. He traced the movement of her throat with his gaze. “I’ve been trying to get information. About . . . about the portal.” It wasn’t completely a lie. She kept her emotions steady.

His lips were still inches from her ear. He leaned in, as if he could smell her feelings, as if he could taste them. Lower. His mouth pressed ever so gently against her pulse. She didn’t think she was breathing.

Then, he abruptly pulled back. Stared down at her, with eyes filled with something like fury. Something like worry.

“What happened?”

Of course he could sense her sadness.

She said nothing. She wondered what he would read into that—if it would make him suspicious of her comings and goings—but, if anything, he only looked more concerned.

He couldn’t have known she had been looking for the kitchens, but that was where he brought her, before she could blink.

Without saying a word, he began preparing something, moving around the room in a familiar, practiced way.

The words stumbled out of her. “You cook?”

He pretended to look offended by her surprise. “Is that really so hard to believe?”

“Yes,” she said, leaning against a counter. The dark stone was cold against her spine.

His gaze slipped down her body for just a moment, and she became aware that she had left her room in one of the nighttime outfits from her wardrobe, two small pieces of silk that left swaths of skin uncovered. His eyes darkened.

Then, he turned back to what he was doing. She watched as his hands worked quickly. Diligently. He was chopping something up and putting it in a pot. She couldn’t see exactly what it was. What she could see were his broad shoulders. His muscled back.

He faced her again, and she quickly shifted her gaze. “I learned during training. I often found myself alone. If I wanted to eat . . . I needed to

cook.”

She knew little about his upbringing, other than a few mentions of it in the past. She knew he had undergone extreme training to be a warrior. It was difficult to imagine him without the comforts of his castle.

Now, though, as she watched him stir something in a pot, she could picture it. Grim, hair curled around his ears the way it was now, messy from a clear lack of sleep. His wide shoulders draped not in a ruler’s cape but in a black fabric that didn’t look soft at all, not soft enough to sleep in. She wondered if he had any comfortable clothes. All she remembered was him in his training clothes, or armor, or formal attire, or out of it.

The thought made her cheeks burn. She heard a scrape of movement—Grim, finding a mug. Pouring something into it.

That was when she smelled it.

She met his eyes. She must have looked far too excited, because he smiled again, like he treasured her excitement, like he would do anything to make her make that exact expression again.

He carried it over to her; and in her happiness, in her anticipation, she slipped her fingers over his around the mug. Together, they held it. Together, they brought it to her lips.

She groaned, tasting the chocolate. It was velvety, rich. Hot compared to the cold of the stone still against her back. Her eyes fell closed, savoring it.

When she opened them again, she found him studying her. He looked transfixed. Before she could make another move, he gently took the mug from her hands, set it on the counter beside her hip, and brought a thumb to her lips, which she imagined were covered in chocolate. He brushed against them, and she shivered.

She didn’t know what came over her—perhaps the reminder that her life was fleeting—but when he moved to drop his hand, her own came down over it.

Grim went still. His eyes bore into hers, waiting. Waiting for her to tear away from him the way she had so many times before. She didn’t; and slowly, so slowly, his calloused fingers curled around her jaw. Threaded through her hair. Her fingers molded over his.

They just stared at each other, until his gaze dropped to her lips. The corner of his mouth lifted. “Missed some chocolate.” His voice sounded strained.

Her own was breathless. “Then get it.”

He made to move his thumb again, but she kept her hand firmly over his. He frowned. Then, his eyes seemed to go wholly black as he understood her meaning.

With a gentleness that had her heart racing, he slowly, so slowly, dipped his head.

He was the ruler of darkness. He was a brutal warrior who had killed a member of his court in cold blood simply for speaking ill of her. Now, he was almost trembling as his lips hovered inches from hers.

Slowly, reverently, his tongue traced her mouth, licking away the chocolate, and she was burning, she was aching. She wasn’t sure she was breathing when he took her entire bottom lip into his mouth—and slowly dragged it through his teeth, tasting her completely.

That was it. In this moment, she didn’t care what had happened or about the prophecy; she wanted him. She wanted him so badly, her skin felt raw, needy, ready. Her lips were swollen as he stared down at her, his chest heaving just as much as hers.

She wanted him to lift her onto the counter behind them by the backs of her thighs. Wanted him to settle between her legs, drag his tongue over the rest of her heated skin, taste her everywhere.

He could feel that want. Feel that aching need. She could feel his own, against her stomach. It nearly made her ask for everything she wanted.

Instead, she said, “Thank you for the chocolate.”

And went back to bed alone.

The scrape of a boot against the floor awoke her.

Before she could move a muscle, every single one in her body tensed as if turned to stone.

A hand was curled around her wrist.

A gravelly voice said, “The whispers are true. You don’t sleep with the ruler.”

Tynan. She fought against his iron grasp on her bones, but she couldn’t even summon a groan in response.

“No, no . . . you can’t move at all, can you?” She heard him tap his foot. Her eyes were wide and glued to the ceiling. Tears streamed down her face after just seconds of not being able to close them. “The ruler seems to

believe you are special in some way.” He spat at her. “But you are just a distraction. An enemy.”

She knew the sound of a sword scraping its scabbard. He forced her head back with his power, controlling her every muscle, stretching the skin of her neck taut. Her body trembled with the strain of trying to overpower him.

“The ruler has gone weak. You, Snake, have made him so. With you gone, we’re going to invade Lightlark. We’re going to finish what we started.” He leaned down until his putrid breath was right against her mouth. “You don’t even know how priceless this necklace is, do you? Only in death is it released . . . so I’ll just have to kill you.”

No. He didn’t know her and Grim’s lives were tied together. He didn’t know killing her would secure his own demise.

Tynan gripped her wrist so tightly it was a wonder the bone didn’t break. She would have cried out if she could.

The sword came into her view as he lifted it high over his head. She watched the flickering of her hearth’s flames reflect upon it.

A low growl sounded in front of her.

Tynan might have been right about Grim not sleeping in her chambers . . . but whoever had told him that information clearly didn’t know about the leopard that did. The one who was barely visible when he slept in the corner of her room, sinking into the shadows.

A roar, and then her wrist was released. Her limbs were freed of the invisible vise.

She doubled over and gasped for air. Sweat streamed down her back and the middle of her chest.

Tynan was thrashing on the floor, holding a hand against the gash Lynx had made in his neck.

Lynx’s teeth gleamed with his blood as he awaited her instruction.

Grim landed in the room with a crack. His wide eyes went straight to her, quickly assessing her state, then to the bleeding man on the floor.

His hands were shaking. His voice was not the predatory calm she had come to expect.

No, his words were laced in pure fury as he bent down, grabbed Tynan by his bloody neck, and said, “My wife? You dare threaten my wife?”

Tynan made what must have been a gurgled plea that didn’t translate into words.

Grim bared his teeth at him, his mouth turning into a twisted smile. “You have no idea how much I’m going to enjoy killing you.”

Shadows spilled across the floor, poisonous and ruinous, nothing in the world could stop them—except for the hand Isla placed on Grim’s shoulder.

At her touch, he stilled immediately. He looked up at her.

“Let me,” she said, in a voice she didn’t completely recognize. His shadows instantly retreated. Tynan’s eyes wildly searched the room, as if looking for a final chance at escape. But there would be no escape. He was injured, unable to wield his ability. She wasn’t frozen in her bedsheets any longer.

She took the dagger at her thigh and plunged it through his heart. Blood spurted through his ribs, down her hand, but she only twisted the blade deeper. Deeper, until the tip dug into the floor.

Something within her seemed to sing.

As she watched the life leech from his eyes, Isla realized with horror and fascination that taking it felt good.

Tynan wouldn’t have been the only one in the Nightshade court who wanted her gone. She needed to send a message.

Grim’s people didn’t need another reason to hate her. But she would gladly give it to them.

Air was stolen in sharp gasps throughout the room as Isla strutted through it. They had all gathered before Grim, who watched her from his throne. His posture might have been casual, but there was nothing mild about the lingering fury in his expression.

Snake queen? She would be the villain they already believed her to be.

Her black dress had thin straps and a plunging neckline. The fabric clung to her skin like a sheet of water, its loosely curled ribbons streaming gently onto the floor. Thin, poisonous snakes curled around her waist, sliding up and across her chest, keeping her decent, slithering. Two more wrapped around each of her arms. They hissed at the closest nobles as she passed them by, making one stumble onto the floor. The thinnest snake of all curled around her neck like another necklace.

Their looks of horror weren't about the snakes, however—though each was poisonous. No; they stared at what she gripped loosely in her hand, emitting a line of dripping blood next to her.

Tynan's head, held by the hair.

She reached Grim's throne and threw it at his feet.

"Eat," she said, and the snakes slithered down her body and raced to the floor, sending the closest people screaming. Their poison worked instantly, melting flesh from bone. The creatures devoured his eyes and tongue in front of the crowd. They swallowed the remaining flesh, and his eyes, all in front of the crowd. Wren had trained them well.

Someone loudly vomited. Another fainted.

Grim forced them to watch. Isla stayed until Tynan's head was no more than a skull.

"Well," she said, her voice echoing in the silence. "If anyone else wants me dead, you know where to find me." Then, she turned on her heel and left the throne room, her snakes not far behind.

"That was quite the display."

Isla stopped brushing Lynx's fur to find Astria standing behind her, posture straight as ever, donning those curved crossed swords on her chest.

"Thank you," Isla said. "I was sick afterward, but it's the show that counts, right?"

Astria made a huffing sound that almost resembled a laugh. Then she frowned. "Tynan had it coming. For someone ordered to wear gauntlets all the time, he found plenty of excuses to go without them." Isla felt a rush of joy at having been the one to end them. It didn't seem like the first time he had ventured into a room at midnight and made a person a prisoner in their own skin.

Grim's general reached a hand toward Lynx, and Isla opened her mouth, ready to warn Astria that Lynx had developed a reputation for biting Nightshades.

But, to her surprise, her bonded allowed Astria to touch him. He only started to growl when she got too close to his ears.

"So," Isla said, looking the woman up and down, trying to find some similarity. "How long have you known?"

Astria's hands absentmindedly drummed her swords' hilts. "That you're my blood? Grim told me right before you were married." She frowned. "Right after I suggested you might be a spy and he should consider putting your head on a pike."

"Nice," Isla said, knowing how lucky Astria was to have escaped that conversation with her life. She began brushing Lynx's fur again. "And the fact that we're related changed your mind?"

"No," she said, considering her. "It isn't ever too late for Grim to take my advice."

Isla looked over her shoulder at her. "And it isn't too late for Grim to get a new general. I hear the position runs in the family."

Astria smiled. Then laughed a little.

Isla smiled too.

She bent down to clean between Lynx's pads. He made a peeved sound and tugged his foot back. She glared up at him. "Do you really want another rock incident?" she asked him. There had been a stone lodged in there for a week, and it had gotten infected. For as tough and ancient as Lynx was, he had been awfully dramatic during the days of resting his foot.

He begrudgingly lifted his leg, and Isla spotted a pine needle lodged right between two of his pads. She shook her head, and tried to pull it out, but it was stuck. Lynx growled.

"Here," Astria said, bending down low. She pulled it out quickly, and the leopard roared. Then he glared at Astria, who took a few steps back. She watched Isla work until she was done, and then said, "I looked for him, you know."

Him. By the intensity of her tone, Isla knew exactly who she was talking about. Isla slowly rose to face her cousin.

She remembered what the augur had said: When you learn the truth of who you are . . . your path will become clear.

She was desperate for any detail about her parents. She wanted to know them, even through the eyes of others.

"I searched the newlands with the ruler, just in case there was a chance he was alive. Then . . . when too much time had passed . . . I grieved him." Her nostrils flared. "He was like a brother to me, and I don't understand his choice. I don't know why he chose her."

Her mother.

Lynx growled low.

“He wasn’t . . . an emotional person,” she continued, eyes studying her bonded. “I can count on a hand the number of times I ever even saw him smile. He wasn’t cruel, no . . . but serious. About his duty. About serving his realm.” She frowned. “Now that I know he didn’t die, that he left . . . I can’t respect his decision. I can’t respect what he did.”

Isla understood. Even though she was talking about her father, and not in the greatest light, Isla appreciated that Astria was even talking to her at all, let alone telling her something so personal.

Isla knew what it was like to choose her heart over duty. If that was what her father had done, she couldn’t judge him. But things were more complicated than that.

Her father and Grim had searched for the sword that controlled the dreks together. Her father had found it.

“He stole the sword, to keep it away from Grim. He must have believed Nightshade was better off without it.”

He must have believed Grim would use it to overtake Lightlark. He must have been trying to save the island, the same way she was now.

Astria shook her head. “Even if that’s true, that wasn’t his call to make. We serve our rulers. Their word is law. We are their sword. He knew that.”

Isla didn’t know what to think. She just wished that she had known her parents. How different her life would have been, if they had survived . . .

It made her think about what Terra and Poppy had said. If they really didn’t kill her parents—which she wasn’t quick to believe—then who did?

It also made her think about the Wildling traitor. They hadn’t struck again, to her knowledge, but dissent was dangerous. What was their end goal? What did they want?

“You have his frown,” Astria said, knocking her out of her thoughts.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s exactly the same. Almost uncanny. Everything else, I suppose you got from . . . her.” Astria studied her closely, as if trying to imagine what her mother would have looked like.

Part of her wanted to forget their connection at all. Why develop a relationship with someone now, when they all didn’t have much time left? Another part, the little girl who had sat in her room and dreamt of having a place to belong, refused to let this opportunity slip by. “I don’t have any

other family," Isla admitted, and immediately felt exposed, like she had shown far too much of herself.

Astria studied her. She raised her head. "I don't either."

Isla didn't know why that was a comfort, when she should have been sad that they had both lost everyone related to them. "I suppose we have each other," Isla offered.

Astria's suspicious gaze did not falter in the slightest. But, after awkward moments passed, she said, "Yes, well. I suppose having you is better than having nothing."

Isla's smile spread across her face. "And here, I was thinking you incapable of giving me a compliment."

Another day passed without a storm. She was restless, impatient, knowing it was what she needed to find the portal. With her starstick, she brought Lynx to the Wildling newland, if only to feel a whisper of home. They tore through the familiar woods, his legs stretching happily as he leapt into trees. He had missed it, she realized. Both of them had.

Part of her wished she could feel the forest, its heartbeat, but the bracelets made everything quiet. Dead.

By the time they approached her old room, it was dark out. She left Lynx outside and portaled her way in, with the goal of retrieving some of her old knives. The ones Grim had provided were nicer than any she had ever had, but she missed their familiar feel in her fingers. Their simplicity.

She walked toward her vanity and began opening drawers. There were a few simple blades inside that she hadn't used in years. She grabbed one of them, a simple dagger, without any markings.

And dropped it.

Its tip nearly went through her foot. She didn't even look to see where it had landed.

Her eyes were caught on the piece of parchment before her, and the white feather atop it. It had been weeks since she had written her name on the page.

Now, there was a new line below it.

Hello Isla, it read.

The words themselves weren't what made her stomach drop—it was the handwriting, which she knew almost as well as her own.

Aurora’s.

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FEATHER

She had seen Aurora’s writing hundreds of times before. She still had scraps of it, from when they used to share books and write notes to each other in the margins, back when Aurora was disguised as Celeste.

She rushed to her secret hiding spot, and there it was, one of the last volumes they had ever read together. She flipped through the pages, looking for the curls of ink and finding them. Her spine turned to ice. It was undeniable as she compared the letters.

Her hand trembled as she took the feather, half expecting it to twist out of her grip. She wrote beneath it.

How is this possible?

She dropped the feather and waited. Silence. She could hear her own heart beating as the seconds ticked by. Just when she was about to begin wondering if she was losing her mind, the feather stood upright by itself. She watched it slide across the paper and carefully write a sentence that made her blood run cold.

All that is buried eventually rises.

The feather dropped dead on her parchment.

Isla nearly tripped as she stumbled backward. This was impossible. She had killed Aurora. She had plunged her dagger into her heart, had watched her fall into a chasm.

It had to be a trick. A faulty enchantment.

Only one person would know for certain.

“Have you ever created something that allows one to speak from the dead?”

The blacksmith was busy hammering away at some creation. He had been working with the same material since the last time she saw him, the

shademade metal. It glimmered beneath the flames of the forge. He carefully put his tools down.

Instead of answering her question, the blacksmith only outstretched his hand. He grumbled with impatience. “I’m assuming you’ve brought the object. Best to just let me see it.” She hesitated, wondering if she could trust him not to share this discovery with Grim.

But no. The blacksmith only cared about his death, and she was the only one who could give it to him.

She produced the feather from her pocket and placed it in his awaiting palm. He held it with remarkable care, eye gleaming as he studied it. “It writes words from the dead? You’re sure?”

“One dead.”

“On its own?”

She nodded. “I watched it write a sentence as if a specter’s hand held it.”

The blacksmith hummed. “Interesting.” He squinted and studied its every inch, seeming to find traits she couldn’t see. “I smell your blood on it,” he said. “Your power woke it.”

She frowned. “Even with the bracelets on?”

He glanced at her. “Your blood is power, Isla. The bracelets don’t change that.” She thought about the augur tasting it and shuddered. He turned his attention back to the feather. “Not my creation, but I recognize its charms. A shred of a soul has been stored within it.”

A shred of a soul. So, it wasn’t Aurora’s words from the dead . . . but a small piece of her she had left behind.

He tilted the feather at her. “Look at its tip.”

She squinted. There, she noticed a tiny layer of metal. It glimmered like a thousand diamonds trapped inside.

Shademade.

“This is very old enchantment. It predates this land itself.”

“What does that mean?”

“It is not of this world.”

Not of this world.

Isla frowned. “You—you don’t mean . . .”

“It’s from the otherworld.”

How did the blacksmith even know about the otherworld? Isla was under the impression very few people did. “How do you know?”

“Because that’s where I’m from too.”

Isla blinked. She had only ever met one other person who seemed to be from the otherworld, the ancient being that had taught her to wield her Nightshade abilities. Remlar. “That—that would mean you’re—”

Thousands of years old.

He just looked at her.

“Tell me about it. What is it like?” The words slipped out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

He lifted a shoulder. “Even if I wanted to, I can’t. The more time spent here, the more the otherworld is forgotten. It was by design, you see. To keep us from wanting to return. I don’t even remember its name.”

How did Aurora get her hands on an object from the otherworld in the first place? “Are objects from the otherworld common here?”

“No. Most were destroyed over the millennia, or stripped of their enchantment by me, following orders.” He took the blade from his belt, then positioned it beneath an orb of light. She watched as the metal glimmered, as if a thousand stars were trapped within it. “Here. This is how you can always tell what is shademade. What is otherworldly.”

She took the feather back. She knew she should have put it back in the drawer. Forgotten about it. Burn it, maybe.

She didn’t.

Isla stared at the writing for days. She kept the scrap of it in her pocket, alongside the golden rose necklace.

Hello Isla.

Words, from her former best friend. The one she had killed.

Part of her wanted to reply, and longed to speak to her friend the way she had for years, confiding in her every time she had felt alone.

“Celeste doesn’t exist,” she told herself, as she rode across Nightshade on Lynx’s back. “You need to remember that.”

Lynx made a sound beneath her, as if he could sense her inner turmoil. She stroked the top of his head. In flashes, she was seeing his perspective,

the land rippling before him. Then, there were pieces of something else. His own lost friend.

Her mother.

She saw her in his memories. Laughing, in a forest. Turning around in a circle, making flowers bloom in a torrent around her. As Lynx tore across the island beneath her, she watched, and she couldn't get enough.

Isla saw her own room. It looked slightly different than it did now. There were no swords against the wall. There was no paint across the glass of the greenhouse. No, her mother hadn't had a reason to hide. She had been born powerful. From what she could see, she was a skilled wielder.

Did she have a flair? She watched, waiting to see something out of the ordinary, but all she saw was nature.

Then, she caught a glimpse of her father. Dark hair. Pale skin. She watched him look at Lynx, but from his view, it was almost like he was looking at her. She felt a tear slide down her cheek.

He showed her something else. A flash of golden hair. Amber eyes.

Her grip on his furs tightened.

Lynx had always liked Oro. She had worked to bury any memory of him down; but just as Aurora had written, all that is buried eventually rises.

Isla should have moved her hand—should have told Lynx to stop—but she didn't. She watched greedily, remembering Oro's smile, the way it made tiny crinkles form next to his eyes. The way those eyes would glimmer when he was happy, like sun sparkling atop water.

She watched their first kiss, when he had pinned her against the tree. She heard Lynx's low growl, stopping them as Oro's hands ran up her sides. She heard them both laugh. For a single moment she felt that happiness, as if she was there. As if she had been portaled into the past.

The images stopped as quickly as they had started.

They had reached the stables, and Lynx made a huff of annoyance.

Wraith. He was outside his stable with Grim, who looked to be at the end of washing his scales.

Face still flushed from the memories, she cleared her throat. Worked to bury her feelings again. "I'm surprised you don't give someone else the pleasure of bathing a full-grown dragon."

Grim sighed as he put the giant sponge he had been using back in a bucket. Wraith was covered in soap and bubbles. Isla didn't think the tubs

of water used for the other animals would be even remotely helpful.

“He only allows me to do it. Temperamental creature,” he muttered. Wraith only grinned down at Isla and Lynx.

Isla watched her bonded consider the dragon, unimpressed. He didn’t care for him, not really. She smoothed the space between his ears with her hand, sending images to him. Wraith as the tiny bundle of scales she had discovered limping near the cave. Wraith in her arms, his wings tucked tightly against his body.

Lynx’s muscles relaxed a bit beneath her. Isla slid off his back and watched Lynx and Wraith regard each other for a few moments longer, Wraith far more excited. Then, Lynx turned away with a huff, in the direction of the dried meats the stableman had begun offering him, to try to curry his favor.

Isla watched as the soap on Wraith began to fizzle. “How do you plan on washing him off?”

Grim glanced over at her. “Care to see for yourself?”

No. She still had nightmares about slipping off his back in the storm. Nearly hitting the ground. But Wraith looked so heartbreakingly excited that she sighed and allowed Grim to portal them both onto his spine. It was slippery with all the soap, but Grim pinned her in place with his shadows, called Wraith’s name, and they were off.

The flight was short, and the dragon began to tilt toward the ground as soon as the fields turned to forest. She knew what to expect by now and steadied herself for their landing. He curved, then plunged in the direction of a spring. Wind blew her hair back, roared in her ears, made her eyes water. Her muscles tightened as she braced herself.

Wraith’s wings flared out before they crashed right through a pond.

Isla gasped, and her lungs would have filled with water, if Grim’s translucent shadows weren’t still enveloping her. Only when he met her eyes, when he was sure she wasn’t still in shock, did he let them drop, and she was encased in water.

Wraith fell slowly, like a rock sinking down to the bottom. He rested there for just a moment, before kicking off, and surfacing.

Isla desperately sucked in air as they crashed through, water sputtering, and she turned to Grim, glare already in place.

His dark hair was stuck to his forehead. He didn't seem to mind that he was soaked through, his cape a wet shadow across his shoulders.

Isla shoved him off Wraith's back and had the pleasure of watching him crash into the water. Wraith turned his head to face Isla, and she could have sworn he was smiling.

She was smiling too, until a rope of shadows pulled her right in after him.

She would have sunk to the bottom, weighed down by all her daggers and sword, if it wasn't for the arm that curled around her waist. Slowly, like he had all the time in the world, she felt Grim reach into the slits of her pants, long fingers expertly pulling out dagger after dagger, throwing star after throwing star, and tossing them all to the edge of the bank.

"How many blades does one person need?" he asked, incredulous, as his rough hands gently traced down her legs, fingers curling around her thighs, looking for more. Isla felt like she might be close to drowning again, for very different reasons.

"Several, when she's married to a demon."

He only grinned. She threw her sword to the bank herself, then shoved away from Grim, able to swim on her own.

"What is this place?" she asked. There was a thick waterfall falling into the deep body of water, reminding her, with a chill, of the augur's home. Wraith was currently beneath it, clearly happy as the water hit his back, scrubbing off the soap.

"A pocket of beauty on Nightshade. A rare one."

It had been a while since she had swum for leisure—and not when she thought she was dying. She liked it, the feeling of the water through the roots of her hair, the way it seemed to soothe her aching muscles as she pushed through it. The water was cold, but she didn't really mind. By the time she pulled herself out of it, and onto the bank, she felt like she could roll over and fall asleep.

The grass was soft beneath her. The sun wasn't strong, but it gradually warmed her skin. She was so relaxed she didn't even try to move when Grim lay right beside her.

Her eyes were closed as he carefully and slowly slid every one of her knives back in place, fitting them against the curves of her body, in the pockets that were specially made for her, by him. She shivered, feeling his

fingers brush up her thighs as he pushed them each in. He left her sword in her open palm. “In case you need to use it,” he said, dark voice skittering down her bones. She would have rolled her eyes if they were open.

She had just managed to drift to sleep, when a thousand droplets of water pelted her every inch.

“Wraith,” Grim growled, and she opened her eyes to find the dragon staring happily down at them, after having flapped his wet wings.

Wraith didn’t do anything but sink down into the grass. He rolled over, but Grim glared at him, refusing to rub his stomach.

The dragon turned to her.

“Traitorous creature,” Grim muttered.

Isla had to fight to hide her grin as she stood, and obliged Wraith, running her fingers down his scales as his talons happily scratched at the sky.

Wraith made joyful sounds, and she found herself smiling. Laughing. She hadn’t really realized it, until she turned, only to find Grim staring at her.

Her smile withered away, replaced by guilt. She didn’t deserve to be happy. She didn’t deserve to have this time to enjoy when so many lives were at risk.

“The storm is taking too long. There hasn’t been another storm in days,” she said. “There has to be another way to find the portal.”

Grim’s expression turned serious. “I’ve tried. I’ve visited any surviving elders. I’ve gone through all the ancient records; none speak of a portal. I’ve flown across nearly every mile of Nightshade and haven’t felt even a whisper of my portaling power.”

She had tried too. The augur had been helpful in other ways, but their best bet was still Azul’s ring.

Isla sighed. Grim continued to watch her. There was a fold between his brows. He opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked . . . almost nervous.

“What is it?” she demanded.

“Would you marry me?”

Her look was withering. With the hand that wasn’t still scratching Wraith’s stomach, she lifted the stone at her neck, and let it thud between her collarbones. “Didn’t we already do that?”

“My people believe you’re a traitor. Your display with Tynan didn’t exactly disprove that point.”

Her eyes flashed with anger. Her stomach swirled with panic, remembering everything she had overheard. “He tried to assassinate me.”

His gaze mirrored hers in intensity. “I know,” he said, standing. His height was surprising, even now. “And he deserved to be eaten by those snakes while he was still drawing breath. But discontent and suspicion continue to spread to the people. It grows and grows, like a weed. An uprising would only hurt us all.” He sighed.

Grim, she had to admit, was right. “Fine. What do you propose?”

“A wedding.”

She remembered their first. It had been small—only Astria there as a witness. Isla had worn an embroidered dress that told their story—nature meeting shadow. Life melting into darkness. She’d had flowers in her hair.

“How in the world would that help? Your court hates me.”

“They doubt your commitment to me. To us. Some are convinced you’re a spy from Lightlark.” She watched him, wondering if he ever had that fear. If he ever doubted her motivations. “A ceremony would show a unified front. The people of Nightshade are removed from the ongoings of the palace. They only hear rumor, and they are suffering. Everyone still feels the effects of the storm. A distraction—even for a few hours—would benefit everyone.”

“Fine,” she said, even as her stomach twisted. Marrying him once was one thing. Twice? If news of another wedding reached Oro, what would he think? He would hate her.

Good, she thought, with a bite of sadness. She didn’t deserve him. Loving him would ruin him, if she let it. He needed to forget her.

“We’ll have a wedding.”

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HEARTRIPPER

Isla dreamed of snakes slithering across her skin. She dreamed of drowning in them. She dreamed of them wrapping around her throat—

She awoke panting. Lynx's green eyes glowed through the darkness, watching her warily. Her head was pulsing, feverish.

Follow the snakes . . .

It was still dark outside. She hadn't planned on visiting the town, but she grabbed her daggers and slipped on her clothes.

Waiting for the storm had made her restless. The augur had said she would be back to his cave—that it had been written.

She didn't yet know the right questions to ask, but she figured it wouldn't hurt to pay in advance for his services. That was what she told herself, anyway, as she prowled the streets night after night. It was easier than admitting that she got a twisted sort of satisfaction in seeing the life leave the eyes of those she had seen hurt others. That with every kill . . . something inside of her was growing. And there was never a shortage of people to hunt down. Even as she killed the worst in society, over and over, more seemed to take their place, like relentless weeds.

She had a favorite perch, a rooftop where she could get a wide view of the city. That night, she found something waiting for her. A piece of fruit, and a pastry. It was warm in her hands. Buttery in her fingers. Still, she didn't eat it. It could be poisoned.

The next night was the same. Another offering.

The following evening, she arrived early, and waited on a different rooftop. She watched a woman climb up the stairs inside the building and leave the gifts. She recognized her clothes. She was the woman Isla had saved.

Tonight, the gift was some sort of pie. It smelled of potatoes and meat and herbs, and even as her stomach growled in hunger, she didn't eat it. The woman had seemed kind . . . but she couldn't trust anyone.

She watched the streets for hours. It was quiet, so she made her way down to walk, sticking to the shadows. She made five right turns in a row, in a useless circle.

That was how she knew someone was following her. She could hear their footsteps splashing the puddles between misaligned stones in the road, just a few yards behind. Whoever it was, they weren't skilled at stalking. They were clumsy, and careless.

Satisfaction rooted deep within her. She figured one of these days a friend of one of those men she had killed would come after her. Her skin buzzed with excitement as she climbed up the gutter of a building and waited. Once they turned into the alley, she pounced, jumping from the rooftop.

She nearly had her blade against her stalker's throat, when she realized she knew them.

The woman who had been leaving her gifts. She had pale skin, freckles, and curly dark red hair that she wore up in pins.

She grinned, not looking too upset that a dagger had just been pointed at her. "This close, you look far less menacing than I thought you would," she said, seeming stunned as she looked Isla up and down. Even though half her face was covered with her scarf, Isla didn't like how closely she studied her.

"Stop following me," Isla said, trying to make her voice as firm as possible. "Stop leaving me things."

The woman just tilted her head. "I meant no offense. Just gratitude. I don't know how to repay you."

"You don't need to," Isla said. "Just please keep yourself safe."

With one final nod, she turned on her heel.

"Help me, then."

Isla turned around again. "What?"

The woman raised a shoulder. "Teach me."

Isla just stared at her.

"It's not the first time something like that has happened. Teach me to defend myself, in case you're not there to save me next time." Isla almost

laughed. She shouldn't be teaching anyone anything. But the woman just looked at her. She blinked.

Isla sighed. "If I teach you this, will you leave me alone?"

The woman nodded, grin widening.

"Fine."

Isla looked behind her. Paused. When she was confident she wasn't about to be ambushed, she took out one of her daggers—one with its own sheath—and handed it to the woman.

She beamed. "My name's Sairsha, by the way."

Isla ignored her. "The blade is sharp. Make sure not to stab yourself while trying to wield it." She took another dagger between her fingers, and demonstrated the right way to hold it. "Like this."

Sairsha tried a few times before getting it right.

She nodded. "Keep it sheathed. If you're being attacked, the best thing to do in your case is run. If that's impossible, then first try to go for their nose. Or their groin. If none of that works, use the dagger. Get in a strong stance." Isla demonstrated a simple one. "And go for anywhere you can. The stomach is a good option. The ribs are hard to get through. The neck . . . is messy." She closed her mouth, wondering if she was doing more harm than good. "If you aren't skilled, the dagger is more likely to be used against you. It's a last resort."

Sairsha nodded. She carefully sheathed the weapon, pocketing it like a treasure. Her voice was reverent. "Thank you."

Isla didn't say anything in response before she turned and left.

Sairsha didn't keep her promise. The next time Isla visited the town, the woman was waiting on her favorite rooftop with a basket of pastries in her lap.

She smiled and waved, and Isla turned on her heel and left. The next night was the same. She was close to visiting another town entirely, when she finally found her spot empty.

Good. The woman had given up.

Not an hour into her watching, Sairsha noisily opened the door opening to the roof. "Oh you're here already! I had—"

Isla had her hand over her mouth in less than a moment. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

“Helping you,” she whispered from behind Isla’s fingers. She held up something in her hand, as if to show her.

It was the dagger Isla had gifted her.

She dropped her hand. “If I tell you to leave, will you listen?”

The woman shook her head. Isla sighed.

They ended up on the rooftop, side by side. Sairsha chewed the pastries loudly, crumbs falling all over her lap.

At least she was being quiet, Isla thought, until Sairsha was done with her food and said, “You’ve saved many of my friends, you know.”

Isla didn’t look at her. She just stared ahead and wondered when this woman would leave her alone.

“We feel safer nowadays. Fewer incidents happening. It seems people are afraid of the consequences. You’ve earned a reputation.”

That wasn’t great. She would need to start going to other villages.

A door opened below. Laughter spilled onto the streets. It closed, muting them. “Have you been there before?”

It was a bar. She had watched its entrance plenty of times but had never been inside. She shook her head, grateful the scarf over most of her face had kept still.

“I could use a drink. Let’s go.”

Isla ignored her.

“The beer’s terrible, but the food is good.”

Isla offered her a noncommittal nod.

“The company’s not bad either, except—”

Isla turned to face her. “If I go, will you actually leave me alone?”

Sairsha nodded. Isla sighed, then found herself scaling down the building, while Sairsha took the stairs. This was foolish. She should just go into an alley and use her device to portal away. She should find a completely different town. She should wait at her window until another storm finally broke.

But, she realized, she had come to crave the routine of this town. It had given her some semblance of control over her life. She liked this rooftop and the bars around it, the alley that was especially convenient for killing.

So she stepped inside the bar.

Someone near her turned lazily in her direction, then froze. He whispered something to the person next to them—a short woman—and she startled. It continued, person after person whispering, then staring, until the room went quiet.

Isla went still. Her hand inched toward her dagger and starstick, as she wondered which one she would use first.

She shouldn't have come. It was a risk, even with a scarf disguising most of her face. The people of Nightshade hated her. If they knew she was Grim's wife—the snake-queen—she might not be able to portal before they attacked.

Sairsha just laughed. "Don't mind them. They're just in awe of your presence." They knew. She took a step backward.

"It really is you," a voice said, as Isla turned to run. "The heartripper."

Her hand paused just inches from the door handle.

Heartripper? She needed to start adding more variety to her killings. Clearly, she had made it her signature.

She breathed again.

"Told you I knew her." The woman linked arms with Isla's, and she had to physically stop herself from wrenching away.

A man with a weathered face and bald head nodded at her as she passed. "Thank you for all you've done," he told her, before continuing his conversation.

Slowly the attention shifted away from her.

"Get you anything to drink?" Sairsha said, as she led Isla to a pair of empty stools that looked very close to collapsing and were covered in a film of substance, likely dried drink.

"No," Isla said, keeping her voice as hushed as possible. They didn't seem to know who she was beyond heartripper—yet—but she didn't need to make it easy for them to figure out her identity.

Every time someone in front looked over their shoulder at her with curiosity, she tensed. She reminded herself that it would take hardly any time to portal away. Or to touch her necklace, summoning Grim in an instant. But then, he would probably end up killing every single person in this room. And wondering why his wife was in this bar to begin with.

Sairsha returned a few moments later, slamming a large mug in front of her. "In case you change your mind," she said. "Our little saint must be

parched.”

Saint. It was laughable how ridiculous that word was, when applied to her.

Isla nodded in thanks, not planning to take a sip.

The woman seemed to sense the reason for her hesitation. She raised an eyebrow, found an empty mug on a table, poured half of the offered drink in it, raised it in cheers, and took a hearty sip.

“Decidedly not poison,” she said with a wink. Then, she turned around again and joined the others.

Curiosity got the better of Isla a few minutes later. When no one was facing her, she quickly pulled down her scarf, took a tentative sip, and fought to keep herself from gagging. Yes. Decidedly not poison.

Still, decidedly disgusting.

Again, Sairsha did not keep her word.

They formed a routine. After Isla was done roaming the streets, she would visit the bar for a few minutes. It was filled with the same people every time.

“Why do you come here every night?” Isla asked her one day.

Sairsha shrugged. “I was looking for a sort of family.” She smiled as she looked over at the others. “We all know each other. We have meetings, sometimes, to try to make our town better. Our future better. We’re joined by purpose. And that, I’ve found, can be stronger than blood.”

Purpose.

Each night, they would share a drink; and every time, Isla would pretend to like the warm beer that tasted like it had long gone sour. But Sairsha seemed to love it and would throw her head back and laugh as she told Isla stories about her family and growing up in a small mountain village. It was nice.

“What do you think of the ruler?” Isla asked one day, curious.

Sairsha thought long and hard. “He’s fair. Much fairer than his father, or any before, I’ve heard. Whenever there is some sort of problem, he is always the first one there. He doesn’t just send others. During the curses, he himself built the tunnels with his great power. He spent years creating them. Making sure we were all safe and had enough provisions. He would hand-deliver them.”

She didn’t know why this shocked her, but it did.

Isla remembered him struggling against the dreks. Taking the brunt of the attack himself. Appearing in her room, ravaged by wounds and shadows.

He didn’t just hide behind a palace. He was there, in the thick of it, every time. He put the needs of his people above his own.

Except when it came to her.

She had just crept into bed that night when Lynx nudged her.

“Let me sleep,” she said, turning toward the other side. She barely got a handful of hours of rest a day, thanks to her insistence on playing vigilante every night.

Lynx made a growling sound and pushed her off onto the floor.

She landed in a heap of blankets and glared at him through the darkness. “What is it?”

His green eyes glowed just inches in front of her. He motioned toward the glass. The window.

There was a faint knocking sound, clearly not the wind. The stormfinch was asleep in its cage.

Knocking?

Lynx looked insistent.

She reached toward her necklace, and Lynx growled.

Isla dropped her hand. “Fine. If I die, it’s your fault,” she said to her leopard, and grabbed her blade instead.

She ripped the curtain back.

Her dagger dropped to the floor.

There was a figure, right outside her window, filling it like a god. Oro.

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STORMFINCH

Panic gripped her chest. This had to be a dream—an illusion.

But Oro's amber eyes were clear, he was right there. Even without her powers, she could feel the link between them, fainter than before, thanks to the bracelets.

For a moment, she felt joy, warmth, relief, like being plunged into the sunlight after weeks in darkness.

Fear replaced it.

If Grim found him here, if anyone did, he—

She opened the window and pulled him through it.

Oro nearly collapsed onto the floor. He was cold, shivering. He had dark crescents beneath his eyes.

He had flown here, across the world. It must have taken days.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, searching wildly for his pulse. It was still strong. It was a wonder he wasn't nearly dead.

Oro only looked at her. He seemed lost for words for a moment. Lynx brought over a blanket with his teeth and draped it over him.

Treacherous creature.

Oro reached back and pet Lynx on the leg. He curled up behind him and purred.

"What are you doing here?" she repeated. Her voice was hushed. Any sign of panic, and Grim would be here in an instant. It was his room, after all. Their room.

This was bad. Very bad.

"Our bond weakened. I was worried something had happened to you."

She lifted her wrists, to show her bracelets. "They block my power."

Oro frowned. His gaze trailed up her arms, to her chest, to her face. He searched her quickly, as if looking for any sign that she had been hurt. Then, his gaze roamed across the room, as if half expecting to see that she had been locked in a prison.

"You flew across the world to make sure I was okay?"

"Of course I did," he said sharply. His breathing was labored.

"You could have sent someone else. The risk, it—"

"I didn't trust anyone else." He looked at her, and she understood his meaning. He didn't trust anyone else not to kill her on sight. She was the traitor.

Yet—he was here.

Tears gathered in her eyes. She couldn't believe it. So many nights, she had clutched the golden rose necklace to her chest and thought of him before burying the emotions down.

Isla knew she should send him away. She knew she was a risk to him. But she couldn't stop herself from slowly reaching a hand to touch his face. His eyes closed as her palm pressed against his cheek. As her fingers grazed his lips. She made to move, and his hand curled around her wrist, keeping her there.

"Oro," she said, her voice a rasp.

"Isla." And the way he said her name . . . it was nearly her undoing. She nearly threw her arms around him, nearly kissed him, nearly did a thousand stupid things that would only end in more confusion and heartbreak.

But then a sound cut through the darkness. A pitch like a talon scraping the night itself, nearly painful, wholly beautiful.

Her hand still against his face, they both slowly turned toward the intricate cage in her room, and the small blue bird sitting within it. Dread and hope dropped through Isla's stomach.

The stormfinch was singing.

She turned to look at Oro, eyes so wide they watered. They had just seconds. Grim would hear the bird. He would portal here, so they could go into the storm.

She had to get to Grim first. Keep him away from her room. If he found Oro here . . .

Flashes of their battle echoed in her mind. Blood, everywhere. Her, screaming at the sky, watching them nearly kill each other.

Her voice tumbled out of her. “I have to go.” She stood, immediately missing the faint heat that had started radiating out of him. “Stay here. Stay hidden.”

The stormfinch continued its singing. It was getting louder. Grim would be on his way.

Oro’s brows came together. He looked half ready to demand to come with her, but before he could say a word, she grabbed her clothes in a fist, then the starstick, and portaled into Grim’s room.

He was standing in its center, looking half a moment from going to her.

“Hearteater,” he said, mouth barely moving, as if on instinct. His eyes filled with surprise and happiness for less than a second, before they narrowed in confusion. He was staring at her night clothes. Likely wondering why she hadn’t changed in her own room.

Her heart was hammering so loudly, she wondered if he could hear it. Her emotions were unbridled. Grim was feeling a canvas of relief and devastation and fear—

“I—I need help,” she said quickly.

The stormfinch was still singing. She could hear it faintly, even from down the hall. Would Grim want to go to it?

She turned around in a flash, offering her back to him. “The buttons. I can’t reach them.”

It was a lie. She was grateful he wasn’t Oro, because he would have seen through her in a moment, with his flair. There were only five buttons. She could easily twist and get them, but she made a frustrated sound and pulled her hair over her shoulder, to allow him access.

For a moment, he didn’t move an inch. He must have already alerted a guard, because somewhere far away a bell started ringing, warning the nearby villages of an incoming storm. The warning would spread across Nightshade.

They didn’t have much time. They needed to get up into the skies quickly and follow Azul’s instructions.

Yet time seemed to stand still as Grim’s cold fingers brushed against her spine. Her shoulders hiked.

“Sorry,” he said, somewhere close to her ear. “You’re . . . very warm.”

She swallowed, pulse racing, thinking about the Sunling skin she had just touched. The warmth that had filled her like a gulp of summer air.

Panic spiked, knowing he was still in her room. Just a few walls away.

She turned to look at Grim right in the eyes, attempting to distract him from wondering about anything. “It’s fine. Don’t stop.”

His gaze didn’t leave hers as he undid the next button. Then the next. Then the next. Until all of them were done, and her straps were hanging off her shoulders, back completely exposed. Body turned away from him, but eyes on his, she let the night dress drop to the floor. Watched his throat work.

Then, she turned toward the wall. She shrugged on her long-sleeved shirt and pants. She didn’t know if he was watching, but by the time she had everything in place, he was facing the wall.

“Ready?” she said.

He nodded.

And he portaled them both to Wraith.

The night was starless. The darkness seemed to simmer, full of something she couldn’t see but they both could feel.

Wraith moved silently through the sky, farther and farther up until Nightshade was lost below.

“Worried, Hearteater?” Grim said, leaning in so she could hear him through the wind.

She swallowed. Of course she was worried. Oro was in her room—in Grim’s room—at the very center of the land of his enemies. He had flown across the world. He could be discovered in an instant. How long would he wait?

“The storm,” she said with all the confidence she could muster. “It’s our best chance at finding the portal.”

It was true. They had waited weeks for this moment. Her thumb fidgeted with Azul’s ring. An energy coursed through it, the storm inside gently swirling.

Grim was silent long enough for her to peer over her shoulder at him. He was staring at her.

She knew him, so she could see the slight disappointment in his expression, the hint of sadness. “What?”

He tilted his head at her, ever so slightly. “I’m just wishing you didn’t feel the need to keep so many secrets from me.”

Her limbs went boneless. Feelings spilled through her, unchecked—surprise, and guilt, and fear. She knew he could feel them. Knew it was useless to say, in a voice like it was dragged out of her, “What secrets?”

Did Grim somehow know about the king in her room? Or the prophecy?

She felt the sudden need to run, though she didn’t know how. She had forgotten her starstick back in Grim’s room.

Just when she nearly lost her grip on Wraith’s ridges, palms slick with sweat, he said, “You went to see the augur.”

Relief filled her—and was almost immediately replaced with wariness. “How do you know that?”

His eyes narrowed at her. “You’re dying. You don’t think I’ve been trying to find every way possible to save you?”

Right.

She should have known—should have expected that the same man who had waged a war to save her wouldn’t simply accept her fate.

She should have been relieved that he was pursuing an avenue to save her and Nightshade that didn’t end in Lightlark’s destruction. Instead, all she felt was worry. How much had the augur told him?

“And?”

Grim dropped her gaze, then. He was looking below at the dark clouds that had begun to gather. His jaw tightened. “As I suspected, the only chance at permanently saving you is the otherworld.”

She knew her death was imminent . . . but it didn’t make it burn less to hear it said. Only a few months of winter remained. Every day was colder. Would she ever feel the heat of summer again?

“Reconsider,” Grim said, meeting her eyes again. His voice was firm. Desperate, even.

“What?”

“Using the portal on Lightlark.” He leaned toward her. He let go of Wraith with one hand and reached toward her cheek. His fingers were trembling and cold against her skin, so at odds with Oro’s heat. “Reconsider. Let us go through it. Let—let me save you.” His voice broke on the words. It seemed supremely difficult for him to hold back on simply taking her to Lightlark right now and carrying her through the portal himself.

But he was listening to her. He was respecting her wishes. He was trying.

Her eyes stung as she shook her head. No matter how much she wanted to live—truly live, with freedom her position would never allow—she wouldn't doom thousands to death, just to save herself. "I can't. I—"

Her skin prickled. The wind shifted into a different pitch, a sharp sound that made her wince. Something in her body seemed to sing, pulled toward a force she couldn't see. Her scalp felt sensitive, the metal of her bracelets trembled against her pulse. Grim lurched forward, as if to shield her, just before the skies around them shattered.

Her breath was knocked out of her lungs as she was thrown against Grim's chest. He caught her with a hand around her waist as Wraith was flung back by a gust of wind that seemed intent on shooting them down.

The sky had gone that strange shade again—green and purple whorls formed around them. Her ears rang. She fought to breathe.

Something hit her in the arm. Her blood was hot against her frozen skin.

"Something's wrong. We're leaving," Grim said.

Her words came out raw. "No! It's our only—" She cut off sharply as her leg was sliced, down to her ankle, right through her clothes. Impossible. Her pants were made of fabric that was supposed to be nearly impenetrable.

"Enough of this." Grim extended his hand, to portal them away.

Nothing happened.

He froze behind her. Tried again. She could hear his frustration like a growl. Then, he was lunging forward, to block another object soaring through the air, right at her face. He caught it in his fist.

He flinched like it had burned him, before dropping it. It looked like a piece of metal, but charred, aflame.

It looked like her bracelets.

"My power isn't working," he said over the roaring of the wind. This storm . . . it was so much worse than the previous one. There hadn't been metal in that one, not that she had seen. Wraith was moving quicker than ever. In seconds, she could barely keep her eyes open against the force of the tempest. The dragon whipped sideways suddenly, nearly sending her off his back.

The shademade metal fell like hail. The pieces were getting larger. She ducked, barely dodging a clump the size of her fist.

“We should turn back,” Grim said, his grip on her tightening. Wraith dropped to avoid something she couldn’t see, and her stomach lurched.

“Not yet. Tell him to go higher.”

“Heart—”

“Tell him,” she said, looking down at the ring upon her longest finger. Nothing was happening, not yet. They must not be in the heart of the storm.

He cursed, then shouted orders to Wraith. At first, she feared he had ignored her wishes and told the dragon to turn back to the castle. Instead, they began to rise through the skies.

It was worse up here.

The energy was almost speaking to her, a whisper, a thinly forged dagger flaying her skin. The metal pieces were smaller but more abundant, thick as rain, nicking her every inch.

“We’re not going any higher,” Grim said.

“But—”

The sky chose that moment to rumble and shatter around them. Lightning struck, thunder answered.

“Fine,” she said through her teeth. She made sure her grip was tight. Grim didn’t have his shadows to keep her in place. If she fell, it would be to her death.

With a steadying exhale, she lifted one arm into the air, offering the ring on her finger to the tempest.

One second. Two. Three.

Something scratched against her finger. It was the metal, shifting, turning slowly around her skin, by itself. It was almost as if the shred of storm inside the ring was trying to escape. It was pulsing, like a heartbeat. She looked up to see it faintly glowing. It seemed the power inside was calling out.

With a flash that nearly blinded her, the storm answered.

Lightning. Barreling right toward her. Stopping just short of the ring, blinding her completely for seconds.

She tasted power on her tongue, like metal in her mouth, like blood. The stone felt hot against her finger, absorbing a piece of it.

Another strike, this one far too close, and Wraith was propelled away by the force of it, wings flapping wildly to regain balance. Grim gripped her hip with one of his hands to keep her steady.

She lowered her arm and stared down at the ring. Inside, green and purple wove together with the shred, in thin, braid-like strands. They formed a new, sparkling color.

This was the key to finding the portal. The key to saving Nightshade.

According to the augur, the key to giving herself more time to live.

A searing pain erupted in the back of her head, from something that had cut across it. The metal. It was getting bigger now, even up here.

"Duck!" Grim yelled through the roar, and she did, but it hardly helped. The storm had thickened. She was pelted by metal in all directions, like an army of throwing stars, until Grim covered her entire body with his.

She remembered him shielding her from the arrows in the cave. Remembered him taking every single one. He did the same thing now, getting stabbed a thousand times by increasingly large pieces.

His powers still weren't working. If they were, he would have wrapped them in shadows. He would have portaled them away.

They were stuck in this storm.

Grim shouted orders for Wraith to descend. They lost air quickly as Wraith dropped—so quickly, that Isla's hand slipped.

And with it, her grip on the ring.

She watched in agonizing slowness as the ring fell through the air, down toward Nightshade, disappearing through a thick layer of clouds.

Her only chance at finding the portal. Gone.

On instinct, she went after it. She had no plan, no powers, no starstick—before she jumped over the edge, Grim was hauling her back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded as he pinned her in place, shielding her with his body as they continued their descent. Blood dripped from every exposed inch of him, he had been cut in a thousand places, but he didn't seem to be focused on anything but her as his eyes filled with rage.

"We need to land!" she screamed. "That was our only chance!" She didn't recognize her own voice, her own insistence, her own recklessness.

Her life was tied to thousands, but in that moment all that mattered was that shred of storm.

She didn't have any other rings on. Could she use another stone to trap the storm? Her necklace. She reached for the stone around her neck.

But before she could wrap her fingers around it, a roar cut through the storm like a blade carving it in half.

“What in the realms is that?” she whispered, Grim’s breath hot against the top of her head, Wraith’s scales wet and cold beneath her cheek. She slowly turned her neck, to look up.

The sky had gone red.

And from those blood-brushed clouds emerged a creature emitting spirals of flame.

No. Not flames.

Lightning.

She turned to Grim. “Can Wraith—”

“No,” Grim said and he—he sounded afraid. Afraid like when she was dying in his arms. In a desperate push, he pressed them both down against Wraith’s cold, rain-slicked scales. He shouted against the roar of the storm, and Wraith began to tilt down, to retreat.

It was too late.

Streaks of lightning darted toward them, illuminating everything, splitting into shards. Roots on fire.

One hit Wraith right in his neck, and he seized. His wings went still. He tilted to the side.

And then, they were falling.

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BROKEN

Her chest burned.

It was like her scarred skin, right where the heart of Lightlark had marked her, was aflame. That sensation was what woke her as she fell through the sky, wind whipping her wildly through the air.

Grim. Wraith.

She tried to look around, but she couldn’t see anything past the blinding mist.

Wind whipped wildly, tossing her through the air as she plummeted, her skin raw and bleeding. This was it. Her powers were gone. The metal would have muted them anyway. Her limbs flailed as she fought against the inevitable.

A sob scraped against her throat as the clouds cleared, and she managed a look at the ground that was rushing up to meet her.

It was replaced by a wing.

She crashed against the leathery skin, and then against someone—Grim. Wraith had caught them both, and folded into himself, shielding them from the metal that had already marked them everywhere. Cocooning them in his wings that didn’t work any longer, as they fell. Fell.

They crashed like a shooting star, and then, there was only darkness.

She gasped, coughing up water. Her throat burned with salt. Her eyes stung as she fought to open them, as she gripped anything she could—

Only to find herself on land.

Grim was in front of her, holding her hair back as she retched seawater. “What—”

“My power returned just before we hit the ground. I portaled us to the sea for the impact, and then back here.” She turned to see they were on an unfamiliar cliffside. It was freezing, a cold she felt in her bones. A layer of snow frosted everything.

Her chest was still burning.

Wraith.

Her knees nearly buckled as she tried to stand, stumbling away from Grim’s help, looking around frantically, only to find Wraith on his side, a few feet away. She rushed toward him, dragging herself forward, everything sore.

She pressed a palm against him, tears already blurring her vision.

“He’s injured, but alive,” Grim murmured. His voice was pained.

His wings. They were torn up and bloody, shredded from the scraps of metal flying through the sky, some still imbedded into his leathery skin. There was a starlike mark on his neck, where the lightning had struck.

It must have hurt immensely. Still, he had shielded them. Wrapped his wings around them, even as he was falling toward the ground. He had sacrificed himself to save them, without any hesitation.

Tears swept down her cheeks. This was her fault. It was her fault they were even in the storm in the first place. She should have listened to Grim —should have let him turn them around.

It was all for nothing. The ring was lost. They could search for it, but they’d been so high up . . . it could be anywhere.

She looked to the sky. The storm had moved on. She could barely see it now, though she narrowed her eyes, searching for another pair of wings. “The creature—”

“Is gone. The storm cleared . . . and with it . . . everything.”

Isla’s knees finally buckled, and the snow was cold against her legs as she buried down into it.

She blinked, and they were back in the stables. Wraith was groaning, breathing in a way that sounded like it hurt.

“Where’s the remaining healing elixir?” she demanded. The vials in the castle were gone, but there had to be more.

“If there’s anything left, it’s with the Wildlings.”

“Get it. Heal him,” she said, knowing he would. They had bonded. She could see the worry clear on his face.

She wanted to stay with the dragon, take each piece of metal out of Wraith's wings herself—but there was something she needed to do first.

Grim eyed the dozens of tears in her previously impenetrable clothing. The blood that stained it. "Let me help you first," he said, stepping toward her.

He was going to portal her to her room. Help wrap her injuries. Help her into new clothes.

The room that Oro was currently standing in.

"No," she said, so loudly, he stilled. "Please—please go with Wraith. I—I feel so guilty." It was true. He would be able to feel that guilt now, mixed with undeniable panic. "Portal me to your room, please. I'll get the starstick, fix myself up and meet you at the Wildling keep."

She wasn't breathing as she watched him watch her—studying her closer than she cared for at that moment.

He could ignore her wishes and help her anyway, portal them both right now. It wasn't like he hadn't done that before.

Slowly, he reached his hand toward her.

His fingers curled around hers.

The stables faded, replaced by his room. She grabbed her starstick, and portaled to her own.

She was immediately engulfed in warmth. She seized, whipping around to see if Grim was there too, if he had changed his mind—but there was only Oro, arms wrapped around her, his heat almost biting against the cold of her skin.

"You're freezing," he said into her temple.

Past him, she saw the stormfinch sitting quietly in her cage. Lynx towered behind Oro, eyes wide in worry. Teeth barred in fury.

"What happened?" Oro asked, looking just as concerned as Grim had a few minutes prior. She was covered in cuts and blood; her hair and clothes were still wet.

There wasn't time to explain. She had to get Oro out of here. She needed to get back to Grim quickly, lest he come and check on her.

"Come back with me. For good."

Oro's words were firm. Pleading.

She closed her eyes. They still burned from tears and salt water. "I can't. You know I can't."

His warm hand pressed gently against her cheek, and her shoulders hiked. She opened her eyes to find his staring her down, lit like they held flames.

“I know you think you being here is the only way to save Lightlark, I know you did it for us, but you cannot be the cost of this. I won’t let you be. There has to be another way, another—”

“There isn’t .” He didn’t understand. “If you kill Grim, I’ll die, and so will all of Nightshade.”

“Killing him isn’t the only way to stop him. You could help us. We could imprison him. No one would have to die.”

“I’m going to die,” she said. “Soon.” And before that, according to the prophecy, she would plunge a blade into either Grim’s or Oro’s heart.

“We’ll find another way.” He didn’t look defeated . . . he looked determined.

Oro wasn’t going to stop fighting for her; she knew that, even though he should. She remembered Enya’s words. Him loving her was dangerous. It made him weak.

Even without the prophecy, she was bad for him. She made him forget his duty. Made him do reckless things like risk his and all his peoples’ lives by traveling across the world to the land of his enemies. The king she had met at the Centennial would never have done that.

She was poisoning him.

She didn’t deserve him, and she was ruining him.

Break him, a voice in her mind said. Make sure he never looks for you again. Make him hate you.

Her heart was burning again, breaking, but for entirely different reasons. Tears fell down her face. She missed him so much. She missed his touch, but also so much more. She missed their conversations before bed. The way he would warm her socks because she always had cold feet. The way she would catch him studying her, as if he always knew this was temporary, that it would end, and he wanted to commit her to memory.

She didn’t breathe as his thumb slowly swept down her jaw, to her lips. As his calloused skin scraped across her mouth. It continued down her neck, until he reached her necklace.

He dropped his hand as if he had been burned.

His eyes darted to a corner of her room. It seemed in her absence he had noticed the pile of daggers she had taken from her pants. They were still bloodied. She hadn't cleaned them yet.

For him to be safe, he needed to forget her.

For him to stop looking for her, he needed to hate her.

"I use those to kill people," she said steadily. He met her eyes. They narrowed, because he knew she was telling the truth. She didn't drop his gaze. "I put the knife through their hearts . . . and I enjoy it. I roam the streets at night, looking for people to kill. I smile as the life leaves their eyes."

He shook his head. Even as his own power was telling him she wasn't lying, it seemed like he didn't believe it. "No. You don't."

"I do," she said, stepping into him, getting as close to his face as she dared. "There is so much blood on my hands, they'll never be clean. I'm the enemy, Oro. Stop looking for me. You won't like what you find."

He took a shaking breath. "I don't recognize you, love."

"You're not supposed to."

She grabbed her starstick, then him, and it was done.

They were back in his room.

Their room. They had shared it for months. Part of her ached, truly ached, to just crawl back into that bed. Let Oro help her get warm again, let that warmth be a bonfire that lived permanently in her bones, making her feel safe and loved. Go to the beach with him, the one he had promised to take her to.

She wanted it so badly, it nearly brought her to her knees.

Oro must have seen it on her face. He lit the great hearth in his room, to warm her, then caught her wrist in his hand.

"You don't have to go back." He was looking at her neck. At the necklace that marked her as Grim's wife. "We can find a way around it. You have a choice."

She had two necklaces. One, permanently on her neck. Another, she kept in the pocket of the pants she most often wore. The one with the golden rose he had made her.

It nearly killed her, but she reached her hand inside. Gripped the gold.

It pained her to say the next few words. "I know," she said. "And I made it."

Isla handed the golden rose necklace back.

In his eyes, she saw unfiltered pain. Gone was the cold, heartless king of Lightlark. No, this one had a heart.

And she had broken it.

She was about to portal away, when the balcony door to his room burst open. Zed walked through. “You’re back, you—”

He spotted her immediately, and he didn’t hesitate. He was fast, faster than them both. In half a second, he had his bow ready, and before her hand reached her starstick, he had three arrows careening toward her.

One pointed at the center of her head. One at the center of her heart. Another at the center of her stomach.

Oro threw his power out, a Starling shield that blocked the arrows.

But not all of them. Not in time.

She looked down and saw one sticking through her stomach.

Oro’s heat filled the room. He roared. “What did you do?” he demanded, and Zed was suddenly chained to the floor by glittering sheets of Starling sparks.

There was no regret in Zed’s face as she fell to her knees. As pain flooded her chest like a wildfire.

“What you wouldn’t,” Zed said.

Oro reached toward her, calling water from the balcony to heal her. He took the arrow out, and she screamed. He worked to close the wound. She couldn’t stay here. She had to go. As soon as it was mostly stitched, she reached for her starstick and said, her words just a gurgled rasp, “I’m marrying him again.” Oro didn’t know the circumstances, but he didn’t need to. All he needed was to hear that she was telling the truth. “I made my choice. It isn’t changing. Don’t seek me out again.”

And then she was gone.

Zed had nearly killed her.

She portaled to the Wildling keep, took one step, then collapsed to the ground. Grim was there in an instant, cradling her in his arms. Yelling orders.

Grim’s shadows were everywhere. “Who did this to you?” he demanded, but she didn’t say a word.

His power raged around them, growing more ruinous as he began to understand her silence. His voice was raw as he said, “Don’t tell me. If it’s anyone you care about, Isla, don’t say a word. Because nothing will stop me from wiping every ember of their existence from this world.”

She knew it was a promise. He had done it before.

Oro would certainly hate her if Grim killed all his closest friends . . . but she couldn’t do that to him. They were the only people he had, especially now that she had left for good. So she remained silent.

She heard Wren’s voice, but her eyes wouldn’t open. The world felt too heavy, like she was being dragged underwater.

“This is the only full vial left,” she heard Wren say.

Grim didn’t hesitate. “Use it.”

“Wraith—” she gasped. The elixir was meant for the dragon. “Please.”

Grim hesitated for a moment before he said, “I’ll restitch her wound myself. Use the vial for my dragon.”

Good. Good.

Commotion. Then, something cold against her skin. Pricking it. Breaking it. Redoing the stitches that were already there, the ones that had broken because she had left before he could finish. Grim had to know who had made them.

He had to know, and it had to be killing him.

She thrashed in Grim’s arms as he sewed her skin back together. She gasped for air. His snow-cold hands ran down her back. “I know, heart,” he said gently. “I know.”

Zed had wounded her.

She shouldn’t be shocked. She was a traitor. Everyone knew securing Lightlark’s safety meant ending Nightshade.

It was still a surprise, though. The betrayal felt raw, more painful than the wound itself.

She had been too careless. Of course it was a danger going to Lightlark at all, especially without her powers.

She grieved Oro. They could never be together. Not when she saw what she had turned him into. Not when his friends hated her enough to try to kill her. There was no going back from that. She hoped he forgot her. She hoped she never saw him again.

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AFTERMATH

The storm cleared, and with it, her chance at finding the portal.

Entire villages had been torn apart by winds that were described as hands dropping from the sky, scraping away everything in their path. Wicked, twisted creatures had been spotted again, attacking villagers in the most rural areas of Nightshade, too far from the tunnels to use them for shelter. Their bodies were never found. The only remnants of them were the puddles of blood staining their floorboards.

Without the healing elixir, the injured died.

This was just the beginning; she could feel it. Azul was right. A storm was coming, unlike any this world had ever seen. They needed to find the portal, and close it, before the next one.

If only she hadn't lost the ring.

Wraith was still recovering. She visited him once she could leave her bed. He purred weakly. Lynx sat with him in the stables, watching over him.

If the dragon wasn't injured, she could retrace their flight path, try to find the stone . . . but she knew it was little use trying. It could be anywhere.

Grim was busy helping the people of the villages that had been destroyed, though she couldn't help feeling like he was avoiding her.

He had to suspect she had been with Oro. Would he think she had been going back and forth this entire time?

Would he think her a traitor, just as his court had warned?

At night, she didn't sleep. Stress made her toss and turn in her bed. She needed an outlet for it.

She portaled back to the rooftop.

Sairsha was already there, waiting. She looked up at her. “Wondered if you were coming tonight,” she said. She had an entire bottle of wine with her.

Isla sat beside it. She didn’t say a word for several minutes, lost in her own thoughts, until Sairsha tipped her head back, taking a long swing of the drink.

“Something wrong?” Isla asked, her eyes trained on the street. At first the woman’s presence had been annoying. Now, it was a comfort.

Sairsha drank deeply. “The storm destroyed my house.”

Isla whipped to face her. “Really?” She shouldn’t have been shocked. Dozens of homes had been decimated.

She nodded. “Not the one I live in currently. The one I grew up in.” She shrugged. “Haven’t been there in a while, just strange to see it all gone.” There was a faint clinking as she put the bottle down. “Family’s all dead. Some were taken by the curses. Others by the storms, over the years. Others just by time. The house is all that was left, and now that’s gone too.” She shrugged. “The place I live now is fine. The bar is fine. It just makes me wonder if the only home I’ll ever have is lost.”

Isla knew what it was like to feel like home had been ripped away. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I hope you find another home. A better one.”

At that, Sairsha smiled. “I hope so too.” Soon after, she left her alone.

The next night, she returned. She met Sairsha at the bar. A group of women were chatting excitedly about the upcoming wedding. They were talking about the dresses they had sewn specially for the occasion.

“I heard the marriage is fake,” someone said. “I heard they can’t even tolerate each other.”

Another person grunted. “I suppose we’ll see soon.”

Isla was grateful for the scarf as she grimaced, trying not to think about the fact that Grim hadn’t so much as spoken to her in the last few days.

She had assumed the ceremony would be cancelled due to the storm, but now it seemed more important than ever. Morale was low, but talk of the tempest had been replaced by excitement for the wedding.

Days passed without storms, and Isla spent the mornings looking for the ring and the evenings on her rooftop.

That night, she was tracking a man who had killed his wife and was now on the run. She had been watching him for days, waiting for the perfect

moment, for he was rumored to be a powerful wielder. She couldn't use her abilities, so she would need to surprise him.

She was waiting in the alley he had stashed his belongings in, when he entered it. Before he could summon his shadows, she was there, taking advantage of his surprise. The Nightshade was against the wall before he could blink, her blade was through his windpipe before he could summon a scream. Blood ran hot down her hand, seeping into the black fabrics she would throw away by the end of the night.

With his last remaining energy, his hand produced a shadow sharp as a sword, and she sighed. He was still too strong, even with a knife sticking out of his throat. She had been changing up her killing techniques, not wanting her reputation as heartripper to spread, but now she didn't have much choice. Heart it was.

She forced her blade out of his neck and through his chest.

The man lurched against the wall, and she frowned. Still not dead. She pushed the blade deeper. He was stronger than she was used to.

"A little harder, heart," a voice said close to her ear. "Need to get through the ribs."

Isla startled, and the man she had pinned beneath her blade lunged, but a strong hand curled over hers, keeping her steady. With his added strength, she went right through his heart. The man slumped down the wall.

Isla turned slowly to face Grim, who was looming over her. She swallowed. Excuses filled her mind. She opened her mouth to voice one of them, but Grim tilted his head at her, daring her to try to explain her way out of it.

He seemed amused by the shock on her face. "You didn't really think I didn't know what you were up to, did you?" She froze. How much did he know? He raised a brow. "Beautiful woman wearing snakes and killing wretched men with blades through their hearts? The heartripper." He stepped toward her. "That could only be my wife."

She just blinked at him. "You—you don't . . . care?" He wasn't upset. He wasn't disgusted. There was something about him seeing the worst of her—and not flinching.

He shrugged a shoulder. "Kill anyone you want, heart, especially these bastards. Kill me, if it will make you feel better."

A stone sunk in her stomach, knowing the prophecy.

A moment later, she had him against the wall, dagger to his throat.

Grim didn't so much as look at the blade. He only looked at her. Eyes never leaving hers, he reached up and slowly dragged her dagger down his chest, cutting through fabric and skin, until it reached his heart. Then, he patted her hand and said, "Go ahead. It's yours anyway."

Her chest was heaving. Her every nerve was aflame. For one gleaming moment, it was just them, the way it had been before. They were just inches apart, only her blade between them, but she wanted—needed—to be closer. She went on her toes just as he leaned forward. Their lips just nearly touched, and she gasped.

The dagger slipped from her fingers, made slick from all the blood, but he caught it on its way down, and gently—ever so gently—slid it back into the pocket against her thigh, the metal curving slightly around it. He didn't drop his hand. His bloody fingertips slowly trailed up her leg, and she was suddenly burning. He gripped her hips, and she ached for him.

Then, in a flash, he swung her around, so she was the one with her back pressed against the wall. He raked his fingers up the sides of her stomach, pulling her shirt up in the process, until his thumbs curled around the bottom of her chest.

They were both covered in blood, but she didn't care. She couldn't think straight.

His lips slipped down her jaw, her neck. He dragged his teeth across her pulse and made a deep sound of approval. His voice rumbled against her throat as he said, "I love it when I make your heart race."

Her sensitive chest tightened. She was desperate for more.

This was wrong, it was so wrong, but she also didn't want him to stop.

"Hearteater. As far as I'm concerned, you killed me the day you met me. I've never been the same." His lips trailed back up, across the corner of her mouth, all the way to her ear before he whispered, "I'll see you at the alter tomorrow."

Then he disappeared, leaving her pressed against the wall.

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CLASP

Isla had hoped for storms. Not only for another chance at finding the portal, but also because they might have wiped away the tents that had been built outside the castle, for the wedding festivities.

None had arrived. Excitement for a distraction had only grown among the people.

A Nightshade ruler had never taken a wife before.

That morning, there was a knock on her door, and a group of women filed inside. They painted her nails and her features, and brushed her hair, and put jewels on her wrists, all without saying a word to her. She wasn't sure if they were ordered not to speak to her, or if they simply didn't want to, but she sat in silence, waiting—hoping—for the stormfinch to sing. It just stared at her.

When they were done, she had red smeared on her lips, just like the first time she had ever seen Grim. She had kohl on her eyes. She had pink on her cheeks. It all accentuated her natural features, but Isla hadn't worn so much makeup in a long while. Her hair was left down, but the front pieces were pinned back by clips coated in black diamonds.

The dress left on her bed wasn't the one she had been married in. No, that one was in the wardrobe. She had seen it and blocked it with her other dresses, because every time she saw the fabric, all she could think about was how Grim had removed it, and there was no room for any of those thoughts, especially after what had happened the night prior.

A mistake.

Agreeing to this wedding was a mistake. It was getting far too easy to forget, and that had always been her problem, hadn't it?

The dress was black, the requisite color for a Nightshade bride. It was strapless, perfect for putting her necklace on full display. The bodice was tight, and then there was tulle beneath her skirts, making it wider. There were long black gloves that slipped easily over her bracelets. They reached far past her elbows. They reminded her of Celeste's gloves. They reminded her of the gloves she had worn at the Centennial, the one she had wrapped around her eyes, when she had struck the crown—

Off Oro's head.

No. She needed to forget him. She was marrying his enemy.

Again.

There was a knock. It was time.

She opened the door and was relieved to see a familiar face. Astria. She threw her arms around her, before she could think better of it. They barely knew each other. Still . . . she was the closest person she had.

Astria let out a shocked laugh. "You'll cut your dress," she said, but Isla was careful with the swords. She sighed and stepped back.

"How do I look?" she asked her cousin.

Astria lifted a shoulder. "Painfully beautiful."

Isla raised a brow. "No insult?"

She shrugged. "I'm sure I'll think of something before the night is over." She took Isla's arm in hers and walked her down the corridor.

"He sent you, didn't he?"

Astria nodded. "He thought you might want . . . family."

"Are there a lot of people there?"

"Anyone who could make the trip, did," she said. "The ones who can't see the ceremony will be at the festivities afterward. They'll go on for more than a day."

"What are Nightshade weddings usually like?" Astria had been at her original one, but it had been quick and nontraditional. They hadn't had an audience. Grim had made it special.

"There's a ceremony," she said. "Some sort of hand ritual. Then, necklaces are presented, as is custom." She nodded toward Isla. "You already have yours, of course."

Isla froze. Was she supposed to have one for Grim?

Astria dragged her along, not missing a beat. "This is where I become useful," she said, pulling a simple chain from her pocket. It reminded her of

the one Grim had worn during the curses, with the charm that made him impervious to them. She handed it to Isla. “A family heirloom.”

Isla took it. It was cold and smooth against her fingers. She gripped it like an anchor through her confusing emotions as Astria continued to lead her through the castle. She wasn’t sure where they were going, until they reached the end of the wing.

Then, she remembered.

The Nightshade castle had always made her feel like she was drowning in ink. Every surface was black. Most windows had been built over during the curses, and the floors were gleaming sheets of dark marble. It felt like being underground, trapped, without any sunlight or nature.

But, on its edge sat an orb of life.

Grim had built it for her.

It was a greenhouse. The walls were glass, and every shade and shape of flower bloomed before her. A fountain sat at its center, with a statue of a smiling woman holding her tiny dragon, flowers in her hair and between her fingers.

Standing in front of it was Grim.

There were hundreds of people in the room. Watching. Judging. Even more were outside, observing from beyond the glass.

But it might as well just have been them.

He was wearing armor without spikes and his shining black cape. Her own dress had a sheer cape with roses knitted into the fabric, a nod to her Wildling realm.

Grim had chosen this place. He must have known it would feel like home. He must have known it would mean a lot to her that he had included the Wildlings, who had their own section right behind him.

She remembered Grim presenting the greenhouse to her. It was her wedding present. She had always bemoaned the lack of color and life here, so he had built her this. A spot of life in Nightshade, just for her, his Wildling wife.

She stepped forward.

The crowd watched her. Some looked curious. Others regarded her like an abomination.

Grim looked at her the same way he had at their first ceremony. Like she was the beginning and end of his world. Like he would be content to

live in this very moment forever.

He broke into a smile. People whispered. They seemed unnerved by it. She wondered if his people had ever seen him smile.

He reached out his hand.

She took it.

When she turned, she finally noticed the woman behind Grim, the one who would be handling the ceremony.

Eta. The leader of the prophet-followers. She frowned. Why was she here? She hadn't even considered that she left the mountain.

Had Grim made the climb again to ask? Had they let him in this time?

She didn't seem to be the only one surprised by Eta's presence. Members of Grim's court—and many of the guests—whispered, watching.

"Today, it is my honor to join the ruler of Nightshade with the ruler of Wildling. A powerful union that has not existed in millennia." She paused and looked around meaningfully at the guests. "A union that was fated. A partnership that was written."

Silence, then whispers. She guessed many on Nightshade held the prophet's opinion in high regard, because many in the crowd gasped at this revelation.

Grim's idea to have the wedding to gain support for their union was working.

She was told to face Grim. To raise her hand. He was told to meet it. His hand was huge, engulfing hers. His fingers gently slid against her own, callouses scraping. Sparks whispered down her arm at his touch.

"The clasp," Eta said, and Isla assumed she meant the necklace, the one she had for Grim. She dropped it in the prophet-follower's grip with her other hand.

Eta tied the necklace between their fingers, joining them, the chain wrapping around and around. She supposed if it wasn't already around her neck, her own would be part of the ceremony too.

"And now, they are bound, until their last breath," Eta said. She nodded at her, and Isla undid the necklace's clasp.

Grim bowed before her. There were a few whispers, murmurs, indignation that the great ruler would bow to her, but she ignored them.

He lowered his head. For a moment, she hesitated.

Once the necklace was clasped, it wouldn’t ever be released, not until his death. She remembered the prophecy.

Would it be at her hand?

Part of her wanted to drop the necklace. Run out of the room.

But she was Grim’s bride. It was a decision she had made, in the past, and now, again, in the present. As much as she hated it, as much as she wished things were different . . . she cared about him. She really did.

Isla clasped the necklace.

It was done.

Grim stood, towering over her. His eyes were glistening. He took her hand. Music began to play. People began to form around them, circling them. “Now, we dance. It marks the start of the festivities.”

She nodded. She could do this. She could stand here and pretend like emotions weren’t thrashing within her, battling. Like she wasn’t both radiantly happy and horribly disappointed in herself. Like her heart wasn’t currently breaking and mending at the same time. Like it wasn’t split to begin with.

His other hand went to her waist.

“I didn’t know you were capable of dancing,” she told him, as he moved through the steps with surprising precision. It was easy, he was leading her in a circle, but he did it perfectly.

Grim tilted his head at her. “I’m capable of anything, with the right motivation.”

“And the motivation right now?”

“Not stepping on my wife’s toes.”

She swallowed. Looking at him was too painful. No, not painful. Too familiar. Too pleasurable. She wanted to hate this. Her gaze returned to the glass, to all the flowers around them.

“Did I make the right choice?”

She nodded. That, she could admit. “It’s my favorite part of the castle.” She smiled. “I was so touched that I cried when I saw it,” she said, the memory fresh in her mind. She turned to face him again. “You thought I didn’t like it and were prepared to fire all of your gardeners.”

The ghost of a grin played on his lips. “I was prepared to kill all of the gardeners, heart,” he gently corrected, and she wasn’t even sure if he was joking.

Afterward, she had demonstrated to him just how much she had liked it, right here, against the greenhouse glass. She blushed. That time right after their marriage had been a frenzy, a race to who could know each other most intimately.

Grim's hand flexed against her lower back, as he felt her shift in emotions.

Isla was quick to change the subject. She didn't remember ever giving him a marriage gift. She hadn't known it was custom. She frowned. "Did—did I ever give you anything?"

Grim looked at her, and this time he did smile. "Heart," he said, eyes glistening again. "You gave me everything."

She looked at him. Really looked at him. For a moment, she allowed the iciness to thaw. She allowed herself to feel the emotions guilt had buried away.

She loved him.

It wasn't something she could change.

Grim's leg pressed slightly against hers as he twirled her, and she watched him frown. Slowly, one of his hands dipped, knuckles trailing down her thigh—and the dagger she had strapped to it.

"Is this for me?" he asked, voice faintly amused.

Their faces were just inches apart as she said, "Maybe."

He held her closer, lips brushing down her temple, and said, "Wait until the end of the song, at least."

For a moment, she allowed herself to melt into him. To pretend that this wedding was done purely out of love and celebration, and not as an elaborate distraction. She let herself fall fully into his gaze, their eyes locked like a vow, speaking to each other without words, the way only people who knew each other could. The way only people who had fought distant dangers and sacrificed their lives for each other could.

Grim made an amused sound as he brushed against her waist, and the hidden pockets there. She had tucked throwing stars inside.

He clicked his tongue, then leaned down to say into her ear, "Only my wife would come to her own wedding armed to the teeth."

Isla's hands slowly dropped down his chest, smoothing across the rough material he always wore. "Only my husband would know the places I keep my blades in the first place."

The corner of his lip twitched upward. “You forget I know you, wife.” He leaned in closer, so his words were pressed right against her ear. “I know you have a blade here.” He touched the curve of her arm. “And here.” He gently stroked the pins in her hair that yes, she had sharpened into weapons, should she need them. “And here.” His fingers ran up her thigh past the other blade—dangerously high, almost to her hip—to where she kept yet another dagger. He brushed against it, leaving blooming heat behind, and she swallowed. He straightened again.

“That’s all you know about me? Where I keep my weapons?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Tell me.”

His face turned serious. He leaned in, so only she could hear him. “I know you prefer the other wedding dress but didn’t wear it, because you want it to stay ours. I know you hate that we’re dancing in front of a crowd right now. I know you’re hoping a storm will interrupt the ceremony, so it can all be over.” He leaned in even farther. “I know you have nightmares every night, and it kills me—kills me—that I’m not there to hold you through them, the way I was before. So, instead I send whatever I can. Your favorite foods. Your favorite flowers. I know you’ve killed dozens of people who should have rotted in our prisons long ago, and I know why you do it. To keep the beast within at bay. To funnel your anger and skills into something that maybe looks sort of like good.”

Her breath hiked. How could he know that? He must have felt her jolt of surprise, because he pressed his forehead to hers.

“I know that, because you and me, we are the same shade, Hearteater. I knew it the day you stabbed me through the chest while our lips were still locked. I knew it when you looked at me with such hatred, such fury, but never fear . . . not even knowing who I was, and what I had done.” His lips brushed across her cheek. She wasn’t sure she was breathing. “I knew it when you gave up your life for mine, because for you . . . only for you . . . I would do the same.”

Grim gently pulled away. His eyes burned into hers, as he gently tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear. “You are the only person who has ever seen any good past all the blood on my hands, Hearteater.”

And he was the only one who hadn’t made her feel shame for who and what she was.

“You see, I used to have nightmares too, heart.” He did? She must have looked surprised, because he said, “You wouldn’t know. They all stopped when I met you.”

The nightmares stopped.

Something sank through her chest, something she had buried deep inside, bottled for fear of what it would to do to her.

Something like trust.

They were still dancing. For the last few minutes, she had almost forgotten she was in the center of her own wedding, but when Grim spun her around, she spotted a smirking solider. Someone she recognized. She had faced him on the battlefield.

That trust wilted.

These people . . . they had been killing her friends just weeks before. They had been attacking her. Now they just stood to the side, drinking from black goblets and murmuring.

If anyone on Lightlark saw her, right now, twirling around with the ruler of Nightshade, as his bride, they would be disgusted.

She was a traitor. She was a villain. She was everything they said she was.

Grim was right. They were the same. No one could understand her mistakes the way he could.

She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing.

He tenderly moved her head so their gazes met again. “I know you’re still angry. I know you don’t yet forgive me. Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. Tell me how to fix this.”

Her eyes burned. For all of their good memories, there were bad ones, things she didn’t know if she could ever forgive. “I—I don’t know.”

Grim nodded. For several moments they danced in silence, looking away from each other. In the absence of words, she thought about the betrayals. The heartbreak. He seemed to sense her anger and sadness, because he said, “Don’t worry. It’ll be over soon.”

She laughed without humor. “And then what? They’ll all watch as you take me to bed?” The way they were watching them now, as if expecting their every movement, looking for lies, it wouldn’t shock her.

His eyes darkened for just a moment at the mention of it. Then, he frowned. “Of course not.”

The music was slowing. The song was nearly over. “Good,” she said, getting close to him. To the crowd, it must have looked like she was leaning close to her husband, to whisper something loving into his ear. “Don’t even think about visiting my chambers tonight.”

Then, the song was over. And he should feel lucky, she thought, that she didn’t reach for her blade.

Drink was served by the barrel. She sipped from a glass and frowned. It would take a while to get used to the thick, strong Nightshade wine. The ones Grim chose for dinner were lighter, more floral.

He did know her. Every single thing she touched or consumed in this castle had been carefully hand-selected by him.

Her people, at least, seemed to be enjoying themselves. She counted all of them. Every single one of her people was invited, but two. Terra and Poppy.

Some small part of her felt guilty not having them there. They, out of anyone, had been with her the most in her life. They had raised her.

She buried the feeling down. Just like Grim, they had betrayed her. They had betrayed her mother. And, more than that, it wasn’t as if this wedding meant anything. The true one had happened many months prior. This was just a show.

Everyone was dancing. The party had moved outside, beyond the greenhouse. Music was played in wild plucks, people swayed in the grass, there was laughter, and smiles, and celebration. Grim had been right. The ceremony would raise spirits. It would foster hope.

He was on the other side of the lawn, speaking to members of his court. She took a long sip of her drink and wondered if she was supposed to be staying by his side. If everyone would believe it was odd that she wasn’t. Somehow, he seemed to sense her gaze, because his eyes met hers. He raised his drink toward her, in a silent cheer. She gave her best attempt at a smile, still angry from the end of their previous conversation.

It must have looked more like a grimace, because a moment later, a voice behind her said, “Very convincing. You look more inclined to murder me in my bed than to lie with me in it.”

She turned to the side, where Grim had portaled, and gave him her sweetest smile. “Really? And I was trying so hard to mask my true

feelings.”

He barked a laugh, and the people around looked genuinely concerned. She wondered if they had ever seen their ruler even chuckle. “You’re scaring the guests,” she murmured against the rim of her glass.

Grim looked faintly amused. He opened his mouth to say something, but, just then, a guard frantically rushed over. He whispered something to Grim. He only nodded, not letting a hint of trouble show on his face.

She knew better. “What is it?”

He motioned for her to follow.

She wasn’t the only one who had seen the guard, who had sensed his panic. The celebration seemed to wane. People were watching them, stopping their conversations. Some began to whisper. She didn’t know what the guard had told Grim, but it couldn’t be good. And this was meant to be a distraction.

So, she grabbed Grim by the shoulders, pressed him against the nearest tree, and kissed him.

At first, he looked alarmed, eyes opened wide.

Then, he seemed to forget all his people were watching, or he just didn’t care, because he threaded his fingers through her hair, cradled the back of her neck, and kissed her ravenously.

His tongue swept into her mouth and his taste—she had almost forgotten. Had almost forgotten how one brush of his tongue inside her mouth melted down all of her emotions and forged them into a single gleaming, unrelenting want. She groaned before stifling the sound, but it only made the act more convincing. His thumbs grazed her throat as he held her, calluses scraping, making her shiver, until he reached her necklace. With a sharp movement, he pulled the diamond and growled into her ear, as if the word had escaped, “Mine.”

In response, she pulled the chain around his neck, forcing his lips back to hers, and said against them, in a voice she hardly recognized, “Mine.”

That seemed to be his undoing. He turned her around in a flash, her spine hitting the bark, and dragged his lips down her neck, toward her chest. Her breathing hitched, ending in a high-pitched sound only he could hear. He rumbled his approval against her collarbone.

There were cheers, somewhere. The music became louder.

This was likely enough of a distraction, but the drink made her bold enough to chase exactly what she wanted, so she moved his hands down her body, slowly, exactly where she had imagined them for weeks, and he made a low sound of pure need. One hand gripped her hip bone, thumb making broad strokes across the thin fabric, inching toward the center of her need. His other swept down her spine, her nerves raw and full of want, before stopping just short of her backside, as if he had finally realized that everyone was watching. No. She didn't want him to stop. She rose on her toes, so that his hand slid, and he laughed darkly against her lips.

Her own fingers trailed down his chest, exploring, remembering, pressing against muscle like stone. She didn't want any fabric between them, she wanted to feel him, feel the heat that was currently pressing against her stomach dragging through every aching part of her. She broke the kiss to whisper, "Carry me," into his ear, and then she was off her feet. He turned—

And they weren't at their wedding anymore.

No. They were on a cliffside. He was still carrying her. They were both breathing far too quickly.

"That was convincing," he said. His voice was casual, but his eyes were like two pools of ink, darkened with want. He looked like he was on the edge of his sanity. Like one word from her could snap his control completely.

Part of her was relieved he had known it was an act. The other part wondered what would have happened if Grim had portaled them into their room instead.

"What did the guard tell you?" she asked.

At that, his gaze returned to normal. He set her down. "He told me that."

She turned, and any heat she had felt before withered away. They were at the burial site they had visited just weeks before.

And the graves had been destroyed. Dirt was everywhere. Ash had been scattered.

Anger flashed in Grim's eyes. It was enormously disrespectful to the dead. She knew that, but it wasn't what made dread sink through her chest.

This wasn't a simple job. Hundreds of graves had been desecrated. It had been done quickly, for guards typically monitored these sites. It was

only empty because of their wedding.

There was something else. A single serpent, waiting in the center of one of the dug-up mounds. It rattled its tail, then sank back into the dirt. Follow the snakes.

This was the work of a Wildling.

She reached behind her, down the back of her wedding dress. Her starstick was warm in her palm.

"Where are you going?" Grim asked.

She didn't answer. She left her husband on the cliff. In her dress, the bottom now muddied, she swept into her family's stronghold.

Isla found them in the dining room of the castle. Poppy was sniffling, eyes red and bloodshot like she had been crying. Terra sat next to her, eating dinner in silence.

Poppy jumped up when she saw her. "Litt—Isla," she said. "You came to see us." She saw the expression on her face and frowned.

Isla couldn't find it in her heart to feel badly. No, not when she felt such anger. Such conviction. Her smile was pure hostility as she walked toward them. She hardly recognized her own voice as she said, "Everyone was at my wedding . . . everyone except the two of you."

Terra looked up at her, bored. "We're aware. Poppy's been crying about it for hours."

"That's how I know."

Poppy frowned. "What do you mean?"

"How I know it was you. You killed the nightbane. You destroyed the gravesite. You are the traitors I was warned about, you want me dead!" Her head pulsed. Something stirred painfully in her veins, like her power was rising, fighting against the bracelets' hold. "My parents weren't enough for you, were they? You needed to kill me too?"

Poppy looked at Terra. She looked . . . almost afraid. "Isla . . . are you all right?"

Terra got to her feet. "Enough, you sputtering fool," she said. This was it, wasn't it? Isla reached for the blade on her thigh.

Poppy gasped at the sight of it.

Terra's frown only deepened. "We didn't kill the nightbane. We didn't destroy any gravesite. And, for the last time, we did not kill your parents."

Lies. Liars.

“Stop lying to me!” she said, and she felt her power flare in her chest, felt it be stopped by the metal. Her heart was hammering. Her eyes burned.

They had never loved her. They had never cared for her. All they had done was lie to her, and betray her, and use her.

She clutched her necklace, before she could stop herself. Grim was there in half a moment.

“I want them imprisoned.”

Poppy cried out.

Grim looked unsure. “Heart, are you—”

“I said I want them imprisoned,” she said. She could feel something in her chest unfurling. Rage and vengeance spreading. “Or does my word mean nothing here? Am I ruler simply by name? Is my throne a prop? Does this marriage mean anything to you?”

He swallowed. “If this is what you wish.”

It was what she wished.

She strode out of the castle, away from Poppy’s cries and Terra’s curses.

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WRITTEN

Her guardians were the traitors. She shouldn’t be surprised. They had betrayed her before. So why did it hurt so badly? Why did it make her question everything?

“You’re making a mistake,” Wren told her.

No. She was finally finding the strength to rid her realm of those who would rise against her.

Did they not understand that the future of all their realms hung in the balance? Did they not see that a storm worse than any before was coming?

Did they think she wanted to imprison some of the only people she had ever loved? Did they think it made her feel good?

Of course not. They didn’t know she was on borrowed time, that she had just weeks left to make these hard decisions, to change her fate and save them all, even if it broke her heart. Even if it broke her.

There had to be another way to find the ring—at whatever cost.

The blacksmith didn’t look particularly happy to see her. He didn’t even turn to face her; instead he continued to work diligently as he said, “It isn’t time.”

“I’m aware.” She had been counting down the time he had left almost as closely as she tracked her own. The end of winter—the end of the storm season—marked both of their deaths, even if he didn’t know it. “Do you have a device that can track something?”

“Be more specific.”

Her voice had an edge. “I lost a ring. I need to find it.”

He paused his work. Gently put down one of the large metal tools he had been holding. “No. I used to, many millennia ago, made from the blood of a ruler with a tracking flair. But it was lost, and his ability with it.”

Lost.

“And that’s it? There isn’t any other way?”

He shook his head.

That might have been the end of it . . . but he had paused slightly.

For a fraction of a second.

“There is, isn’t there?”

He sighed and turned to face her, looking tired. “Not one that is practical.”

“But possible?”

The blacksmith shook his head. “I suppose. But—”

“Tell me.”

He studied her. “The person I’m speaking of . . . the ruler with the tracking flair. He bound his power to a marking.”

She frowned. She didn’t know that could be done. “What does that mean?”

He leaned his massive arm against the side of his worktable. “It is part of an ancient, dangerous art. When crafted correctly, markings have power. They can call upon ability long lost.”

Isla took a step forward. “You’re talking about skyres, aren’t you?”

The blacksmith stilled. His forge seemed to still with him. “What did you just say?”

“Skyres.”

He blinked, as though clearing cobwebs from his mind. “How do you know about that?”

She wasn’t about to tell him about her visit to the augur, though the blacksmith almost certainly knew he existed. They were both obsessed with powerful blood, for very different reasons. She held his gaze, unblinking. Shrugged a shoulder.

“You will get yourself killed.”

“I’m dying anyway,” she spat back.

He frowned. Shook his head. “It’s unnatural. I’ve seen even the most honorable people transformed into demons over time. Like all power, using skyres has a cost. Often, it’s your soul.”

Chills rippled down her arms, as if his very words contained power. As if he was giving her an omen.

She had been warned against power before. From Oro. From Grim, even.

But there was only a month and a half of winter left. Now she was getting desperate. If extending her life, if saving all those bound to it, had a cost . . . it only made sense that it would be her.

“Tell me.”

He shook his head. “I cannot. I don’t know much about them; it was a lost art even in the otherworld. Even if I had the completed skyre from the tracker, I wouldn’t know how to help you use it. Doing it wrong has disastrous results. It’s best you don’t even try.”

She stared at him for one second. Two. “What do you mean, the completed skyre?”

The blacksmith heaved a heavy sigh and turned to face his wall of weapons. He looked through rows of daggers before he found the one he was looking for.

“This is half of the marking: his personal flair. All I know is the rest should be made up of one of the original skyres.”

She asked for a piece of parchment and a quill. Slowly, she traced over the marking, until the lines were perfectly imprinted on her page.

“It won’t work for your purpose,” he warned. “A tracking skyre needs to be bound with—or onto—a portion of what you’re looking for. The marking helps each piece call to the others. It forms a connection.”

And she didn’t have a piece of the ring. Or the storm within it . . .

Azul hadn’t enchanted it; it didn’t contain his blood. There wasn’t an easy way to find it, even if she could figure out the skyre.

She was back at the beginning of her search, but something about the markings made her curious. Perhaps there were others that could help her now.

“Thank you,” she said to the blacksmith. He might not know the art of skyres. The augur might not either.

But she knew someone who had.

They were dead now.

Though . . . perhaps that didn’t mean the information was lost.

Back in her room, the feather’s tip glimmered slightly in the light. She picked it up carefully, ready to drop it at any second.

Isla had to know whether the small markings she had seen on the Starling's pale skin—during a rare time she had allowed her long gloves to slip down her arms—were the symbols she was searching for.

Do you know how to draw skyres? Isla wrote.

She watched the feather rise with bated breath, as the feather wrote:

Yes.

Isla couldn't trust Aurora. She knew that better than anyone. She herself had plunged a blade through her former best friend's heart.

Aurora would betray her just like she had before. It would be foolish to follow anything the dead Starling said.

Still, before she had shoved the feather back in the drawer, she had asked,

Would you teach me?

The answer was immediate. Yes.

Why would you help me?

There was a minute of nothing. Two. Then, the feather rose and wrote, Redemption.

It was a word Isla identified with, though she still didn't trust her. There had to be another way to find the portal. Something she was missing.

That night, she funneled her rage and pain into visiting three different towns. Hunting down those who had wronged others.

By the time she reached her rooftop, she was starving. Thirsty. Sairsha and her usual basket of goods awaited her. They hadn't seen each other in days.

"The little savior is tired," Sairsha said, stretching her legs long across the roofing. There was the aftermath of a pastry in her lap, crumbs everywhere.

"Don't call me that," Isla said weakly, sinking to the place next to her.

Sairsha only smirked. "Is heartripper preferable?"

Isla winced at the name. It wasn't the worst she had been called. The truth was carved out of her. "No. I don't like names, or titles. They come with expectations. And I so often fall short of them."

A ruler of Wildling who didn't live among her people. A ruler of Starling, who had given her position up, since she wasn't the best choice. A

wife of a Nightshade she would likely betray, because it made sense to kill Grim to fulfill the prophecy, if they were all going to die anyway. It was a thought she had kept suppressed, but the weeks of winter were dwindling down without progress.

They were all going to die. Because Grim gave her life.

She shut her eyes against the images. The ash. The bodies. She was responsible for so much death, and there was so much more to come.

Isla felt something smooth against her hand. Sairsha had placed a bottle of wine in it. She was shaking her head at her. “Don’t do that. Don’t underestimate yourself, when you’re trying. So many people never bother. They decide they can’t make a difference, so they don’t even try. And trying . . . that’s the hardest part. Not succeeding, but all the trying it takes to get there.”

Isla raised a brow at Sairsha. “You sound like an expert.”

Sairsha laughed. “No. But I had a sister once, and she told me the same thing. I’m just repeating her words. She—now she was truly a savior. Half our village was in the path of a landslide. Every storm, it would get worse. She was determined to stop it, even though everyone told her it was impossible. Inevitable.”

“Did she stop it?”

Sairsha’s smile was sad. “No. She was buried under the rubble while trying.”

Isla’s throat worked. She wondered if the prophecy, and her fate, was her own form of a landslide.

Inevitable.

After a few moments of silence, Sairsha turned to her and said, “Why do you do this? Why do you care about us?”

Isla fiddled with the cap at the top of the wine bottle Sairsha had handed her. How much to say? Lies were easier to tell when wrapped with truth. “I want to make amends. Get redemption . . . for the things I’ve done.” She noticed how easily she echoed the feather. Echoed Aurora.

Sairsha nodded sagely. Her eyes went to the knives and sword on Isla’s waist, and she wondered if the woman was thinking about how much blood had crusted on those blades. Isla drank some of the wine and winced at its sour bite.

“I joined a group out of a need for redemption too,” Sairsha admitted. “I was a thief on the streets when I happened upon them. They gave me hope that my skills could be used for something good. Something important.”

Isla wondered what group Sairsha was talking about; but when she opened her mouth to ask, she found she couldn’t form words. Her face had gone still. Her vision began to swim in front of her. Sairsha’s concerned face became a blur.

She needed to go. Something was wrong. Isla’s hands gripped the rooftop to lift off of it; but her limbs were useless, buckling beneath her. She fell over onto the roof with a thud.

Sairsha’s distorted face peered at her from overhead.

Isla had consumed dozens of gifts during her conversations with Sairsha.

Only one had been poisoned.

Isla awoke coated in sweat. Her hair clung to the side of her face, and there was a rushing sound, a roaring. Still, even over it, she could hear her heart. It was pounding desperately, as if in warning, saying get up. Get up. Get up!

Her eyes flew open, and that was when she saw the roaring sound was a river. There was a tiny island in the middle of it, a massive stone that the water churned around. She had awoken in its center.

Around her stood a group of people she recognized from the bar.

They had changed. Instead of their worn clothes, they now wore flowing robes, with hoods that cast shadows across their faces. Each was belted with a scabbard and sword.

“What—what are you doing?”

The bald man she knew as Ragan stared at her, eyes gleaming with something like excitement. Something like hope.

Two men stood next to him; she’d exchanged polite nods with them once or twice before.

Then, standing the farthest away, was Sairsha. She had the nerve to smile at her.

Isla wasn’t bound. They hadn’t even taken her weapons. Fools. “So. You know who I am.”

Sairsha’s smile widened. “Yes,” she said, far too enthusiastically. “We know exactly who you are.” What were they going to do, sell her for

ransom? Imprison her?

Had Sairsha planned this trap the entire time?

Isla slowly rose and realized with a shot of horror that while they hadn't taken her weapons, they had taken her starstick. "What do you want?" She motioned at her daggers. "If you wanted to kill me, you really should have taken these." They wouldn't know their lives were bound to hers. She wondered how much she should say.

Sairsha laughed. It was a pleasant sound, completely contrary to the circumstances. "Kill you? Quite the opposite." She stepped forward. All the others did too, pulsing like a living body. With them surrounding her, there was no backing away, only backing toward one of them. Sairsha's smile brightened, her eyes wide and reverent. "Isla Crown, we have waited hundreds of years for you."

She couldn't have heard her correctly. This . . . this had to be a dream. Her head was still pulsing with pain, from the poison. "What are you—"

"This is your destiny. It is written."

"No." Her voice barely made a sound.

They were prophet-followers.

"What's going on?" Isla's eyes were wild. She turned in all directions. She was surrounded.

Metal sliced through the night as they each pulled swords from their scabbards in one fluid motion. They dug the blades into the rock and did something Isla never expected. They went to a knee before her.

"Please," Sairsha said, her voice thick with emotion. "Accept our gifts."

They rose at once.

Gifts? Did they think she was raising an army? Isla didn't understand.

"You . . . you're confused," Isla said, turning quickly, afraid to give any of them her back.

"No," Ragan said, his voice booming. "The prophet never made mistakes. Everything that was written has come to pass."

Sairsha's eyes gleamed with fervor. She was buzzing with energy, and so were the others. As if something big was about to happen. Isla felt the same dread, the same prickling on the back of her neck, that had come just before the breaking of the storm. "I wish you could read his teachings. His book is full of wonders. And you . . . he spoke so much about you."

"What did he say?" she demanded. Eta had hinted at her destiny.

Sairsha smiled. “He said that at the end of the world, a girl will be born from life and death. The girl will either destroy the world . . . or save it. She would be either a curse . . . or remedy.” Sairsha’s grin grew even wider. She was shaking with excitement as she said, “Don’t you see? You are the girl. The one that was promised.”

Isla shook her head. Tried to back away. These were fanatics.

Sairsha still smiled as tears streamed down her face. She was so, so happy. And Isla didn’t understand at all. Her smile never faltered as she said, “We were chosen to help you. We have waited so long for you to be revealed to us.”

Chosen? By who? For what?

“We offer ourselves to you,” Ragan said, volunteering his sword for her to take. “And hope we are worthy.”

She tentatively took the sword by the hilt, not knowing what was going on, but certain that she would rather it be in her grip than his.

Ragan smiled wide. He closed his eyes.

And ran himself through with the blade.

Isla screamed, the sound filling the world. Her ears began ringing. She dropped the sword, and his body along with it. Blood pooled at her feet. She hadn’t wanted to kill him . . . but he was dead.

What had he done?

What had she done?

Something in her chest flickered, almost in satisfaction. That didn’t make sense. She didn’t want to kill. She didn’t want to feel as though she had gained something from it.

Grim’s words from their wedding were in her head: I know you’ve killed dozens of people who should have rotted in our prisons long ago, and I know why you do it. To keep the beast within at bay.

There was a beast inside of her, she had known that for a while. It enjoyed taking life.

But that wasn’t who she was.

Isla slowly looked up from the body, only to see the rest of them smiling at her, offering her their own swords. She backed away as much as she could. “What are you doing? What is wrong with you?”

Sairsha shook her head. “Don’t be concerned, Promised,” she said, smile still bright on her face. “You will take us somewhere else. Somewhere

better.”

What was she talking about? She couldn’t promise them anything.

“Please,” Isla said steadily. “Just give me my portaling device. Let me go. I don’t want any part of this.”

“But it’s the part you must play,” Sairsha said. “It has been written.”

They pushed forward in unison, and Isla was forced to put her own blade up.

“I won’t kill you,” she said, backing away, shooting a look at the wild waters behind her. If she could make it in the river, the current would help her get away.

But she needed her starstick. In the wrong hands, it could be ruinous.

She could clutch her necklace. Summon Grim. But that would likely lead to everyone here dead, and that was exactly what she was trying to avoid.

“Oh, but you must,” Sairsha said. She put her arms to the side, baring herself for a blow.

No. She refused. This was madness.

Sairsha’s face fell. “We hoped you would understand. But you still have much to discover.” She looked to the others. “We insist.”

“I said no,” Isla repeated. “Leave me alone. I’m not the person you’re looking for. I am not the girl. I have not been promised.”

Sairsha smiled again. “You are everything he said you would be.”

Then, she struck.

Isla folded over with the blow. She hadn’t been expecting the hilt to the face. Blood ran down her temple. The act of having killed Ragan swirled in her chest, burning, unleashing feelings she didn’t want to harbor.

Hunger. Part of her wanted this fight.

When Sairsha went back for another hit, Isla kicked her square in the chest. Sairsha flew across the rock, landing on her back. Good. She didn’t have to kill them. She just needed to subdue them, get her starstick, and leave.

It seemed they were intent on forcing her hand, though.

The men she had never spoken to shot forward, and, suddenly, she found herself fighting against two swords. Their blades sliced the night sky to pieces, and she grunted as she worked, still tired from whatever poison they had given her. She managed to hit one man in the face with her hilt,

but he was relentless, returning just moments later, blood spurting from his nose.

Sairsha was on her feet again. “It doesn’t have to be difficult. This death is not permanent.”

Isla twisted away from a blow and just barely managed to avoid what would have been a nasty scar on her arm. “How many times do I have to tell you?” she yelled. She slipped her fingers into the pockets woven into her pants and pulled out two throwing stars. They gleamed as they flew, hitting one of the men right in the shins. He collapsed to the ground, and she hoped he stayed there. She whirled to meet the other’s blade. “I am not going to kill you.”

The other man came to her from behind, and she shoved him back with a hilt to the forehead. He fell back, and there was a horrible crack as his head hit the rock.

He stared back at her with empty eyes, dead.

No.

The other swung at her, and she fought back to meet his blade. This time, though, he let his sword drop. He didn’t deflect her blow.

Instead of meeting metal, her blade went straight through his heart.

Ringing sounded in her ears. She backed away. No. No.

She looked up, and the woman’s red hair had fallen from its braided crown. She was staring at her, tears glistening on her cheeks. And still, despite the blood at her feet, smiling.

“Go, Sairsha,” Isla said, her voice barely a whisper. “Please. I won’t fight you.”

“But you will.” Sairsha closed her eyes. She took a breath—

And her shadow began to move on its own. It peeled from the ground and rose, in Sairsha’s exact shape. The shadow had a sword.

It leapt forward, wicked, baring its teeth and tearing into Isla’s flesh with a bloodthirsty ruthlessness. She screamed out as the shadow’s teeth sank into her shoulder, as solid as the ground beneath her feet. It was an impossible ability, a fine-tuning of Nightshade power. She hadn’t even seen Grim do anything remotely like it.

Groaning, she managed to shove the shadow away, but it did not tire. If anything, it was invigorated. It leapt at her; sword raised high—and Isla ran

hers right through its center. The shadow instantly dropped to the ground and melted right off the stone, ink swirling into the river.

“Thank you.” Isla looked up to see Sairsha’s robe soaked in blood, right in the middle. Right in the same spot she had stabbed the shadow. She collapsed.

Isla’s knees buckled.

She knelt next to Sairsha, pressed her hands against the wound, ripped off part of the robe to try to stop the bleeding. It was no use. Blood puddled in her hands, and Sairsha just smiled. “Thank you for this honor.”

And then she went still.

Her starstick was in Sairsha’s scabbard. Isla took it in a shaking hand and stood, stepping over the bodies around her. Blood coated their robes and streamed down the rock in rivulets, before being swallowed by the river.

Isla lifted her head to the sky and screamed.

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SECRETS

She arrived in her room covered in blood. Lynx growled, and Grim was there in a moment. She didn’t even look at him as she passed him by. She didn’t even tell him to leave as she stripped off her clothing in a pile and turned on the bath.

“Who?” he finally asked, the word as sharp as a shard of ice.

Her head rested against the side of the tub. She stared at the opposite wall and felt nothing. “Doesn’t matter. They’re all dead now.” Her words were emotionless. He didn’t have to know about their supposed prophecy, or the promised, or the other words that had driven them to madness. A madness they had been willing to die for.

Grim portaled the crimson-soaked clothes away. She didn’t protest when he took the soap and gently helped her wash the blood from her temple, and back, and shoulders. She didn’t bristle when he began slowly washing it out of her hair.

She closed her eyes and wondered why death always seemed to follow her.

“Change your mind yet?” Isla asked. Her voice was hard. Unfeeling.

The blacksmith didn’t falter. “Not for a moment.” He turned. “But I see that you did.”

Isla didn’t say a word as she held her wrists out in front of her. “I’m done pretending to be powerless,” she said. If she’d had her abilities, she would have been able to get away from the sect. She could have saved them.

“My dear,” he said, his gravelly voice like scraping rocks. “You’ve never been powerless a day in your life.”

With his touch, the bracelets fell onto the table.

"I'll see you in a month," he said. Then, he got back to work.

Isla thought to herself that he seemed remarkably busy for someone who was readying himself to die.

"Light reading?" She was thumbing through a tome that was as thick as her head and could be used as a solid shield, should she ever need it.

A tracking skyre wouldn't help her find the ring, but perhaps another type would. She had hoped to find some trace of them in the library, so she wouldn't have to trust Aurora. She had gotten nowhere. The blacksmith and augur were right. It was a lost art.

Astria was standing in front of her, wearing her typical armor. She never took it off, and Isla wondered aloud if she slept in it too.

The general asked in an even tone, "What do you mean, sleep?"

Isla blinked, immediately taking herself out of the imaginary consideration for applying to be Grim's general, when Astria leaned back, and said, "A joke." She pulled what looked like a handful of nuts from her pocket and began eating them. "And the answer is: Yes, sometimes, when I'm too tired to change out of it." Her eyes slid from the nuts in her palm to Isla's book, curious.

Isla slammed it closed, emitting a formidable cloud of dust that immediately provoked the biggest sneeze of her life.

To her horror, when she opened her eyes she found a small pile of peonies in front of her, as if her hold on her abilities had momentarily slipped.

Astria stopped mid-chew, staring, her mouth agape. "Did you just . . . did you just sneeze flowers?"

Isla felt a flush of red creeping across her cheeks. "No."

"I saw you."

The petals hadn't come from her nose; that was ridiculous. Still, she knew what it looked like. Isla ran her tongue along the front of her teeth. "If you tell anyone, I'll kill you," she informed the general. "I'll go right for the gaps in your armor."

Astria folded at the waist, laughing. She laughed and laughed, voice echoing up the tower, until a small man marched out from the stacks, hand in the air—already halfway to chastising—before seeing who he would be

speaking to. Then he abruptly turned on his heel and left. Astria continued to laugh until she reached up and dabbed at her eyes with a piece of cloth she kept in a pant pocket.

“Are you . . . crying?” Isla asked, incredulous.

Astria turned to her, and, with the same steady tone said, “If you tell anyone, I’ll kill you.”

Isla made a gesture signaling a truce.

Her cousin finally composed herself enough for Isla to break in. “So. Did he send you here to find me?” She hadn’t seen Grim in a couple of days. The skies were swirling with color again, and he was preparing his people for another potential storm.

Astria gave her a sharp look. “I’m his general, not his clerk. Your wedding was a special circumstance.”

“Then why are you here?” The rest of the library was relatively empty.

Astria narrowed her eyes at her. “I’m sorry, do I look like I don’t read?”

Isla raised a shoulder. “Do you?”

“I do, thank you.”

Isla stared at her expectantly. When Astria continued loudly chewing on her nuts, Isla asked, “What do you read?”

A nut cracked between her teeth, and she picked away a curl of skin. “A little of everything, I suppose. Some history, here and there, though those are usually horribly overwritten. Some mysteries. Romances too.”

“Romance?” Isla asked, her interest piqued. She and Aurora used to trade books, but their selection had been limited. “There’s romance in this library?”

“Oh, yeah,” Astria said. “There’s a Starling writer from the last century whose works were smuggled in a few decades ago. Guess by who?” She smiled mischievously. “There are a few books by Nightshade writers as well, but many of them . . . well, many . . .” She made a face like she was vomiting.

“Many what?”

She snorted. “Many are about the ruler. Not by name, of course. But you can tell. The main characters are all tall, dark-haired, broody, powerful. It’s ridiculous how many women are in love with him.” She laughed, then stopped short, seeming to remember she was speaking to Grim’s wife. She cleared her throat. “Sorry.”

Isla didn’t care, though she would love to see the look on Grim’s face when he found out his library housed fantasies about him. She would likely wake up the next morning to the library aflame. She smiled at the thought of it.

Then her joy wilted. Lately, happiness seemed like flowers that withered before she could pluck them for herself.

She wished the book in front of her were a mystery or romance. Instead, she had been flipping through a multi-century look at how the curses had impacted society on Nightshade, hoping to find any mention of skyres. In summary: negatively.

Isla looked up at Astria, who had gone back to eating her nuts, and realized one of her greatest resources might have been right in front of her all along.

She wouldn’t ask her about the skyres; no, she couldn’t, not when her cousin was loyal to Grim. He couldn’t find out she was looking for something that would eat at her soul . . . but the augur had mentioned figuring out her history. When you learn the truth of who you are, your path will become clear.

Perhaps the answers she was looking for were somehow related to her parents.

“My father.”

Astria slowed her chewing. “What about him?”

What about him? She started with the little she knew. He was one of the few non-rulers in history born with a flair. “How did he discover he was immune to curses?”

Astria rolled the shell of a nut between her fingers. A smile tugged at the side of her mouth, before melting back into a frown. “It was an accident. He fell asleep outside or something, and woke up to the stars. Realized the night didn’t kill him.”

“Was he interested in curses? Given he was immune to them?”

Astria nodded. “He would talk about the other realms’ curses for hours. He pitied the Starlings. And, of course, the Wildlings.” She looked pensive. “He envied Grim’s flair, though. Always wanted to travel. Always wondered what was beyond our borders.”

“Do you have a flair?”

She shook her head. “No. Just good at killing.” She grinned, then continued to chew her snack. “You know . . .” she said after a while, then trailed off, her voice cautious, as if she hadn’t yet decided whether to finish her sentence. Whatever interest she found in Isla’s face seemed to convince her, because she continued, “Your father. He liked maps.”

“Maps?”

She nodded. “You won’t find many here, in this library. Exploration was nearly impossible during the curses. Couldn’t really keep an entire crew below deck in the middle of the sea all night, right? But your father . . . he searched them out. From before the curses. Collected them. Started making his own.”

“Why?”

Astria lifted a shoulder. “Who knows why he did anything he did? He always wanted to leave. He was great in his role, but he hated it. Even I saw it, and I was far younger.” She was looking beyond Isla now, as if ensnared by a memory. “When your father was eight, he built a boat out of driftwood and tried to set sail at the castle cove.” She huffed. “The idiot didn’t realize how big the waves were; he really thought that he could make it. No one could come rescue him, because he did it in the middle of the night, thinking it was best chance of getting away. My poor aunt sobbed at the window, watching him holding on to the boat for dear life, nearly drowning. The waves eventually washed him ashore. He was sent to training not long after.”

Isla swallowed, finding her throat dry. Her father had been desperate to see outside the world he had been born into. Just like her.

“Do you have any of them?” she asked quietly, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice.

“The maps?”

Isla nodded.

“They should all still be in his room. It’s untouched. He lived in the castle once he became Grim’s general, but he only ever kept his most personal items in his own home.”

Isla nodded, lazily paging through the useless tome in front of her, waiting for Astria to leave. After a few more minutes of conversation, she did, and Isla wasted no time falling through her puddle of stars, into her family’s castle.

According to the Wildlings at the entrance, the main bedroom was on the top floor of the keep. Isla made her way up the stairs, speaking to a few of her people. They seemed more somber than usual; Terra and Poppy's imprisonment hadn't gone over well.

A few more women passed her on her way, and then she was alone, facing the last door in the hall, the only room on this side of the floor. Isla quickly realized why it had been left untouched.

The door didn't have a handle.

It didn't even have a keyhole. Isla frowned. How was she meant to get in? From the outside? She supposed she could break a window. Or simply break down this door with a weapon. Or portal in with her starstick.

She placed a hand against it to test its strength—and with the slightest touch of her fingers to the wood, the door creaked open.

Isla jumped back, almost expecting to find someone there.

But the room was empty. She hesitated on the threshold and the door opened wider, like a hand beckoning her inside.

Isla didn't know if the room was enchanted or if it recognized her as her father's blood, but it didn't matter.

At first glance, the room was nothing special. It was empty save for a mirror, bed, and wardrobe. But as she stepped forward, shadows fell from the walls like brushed away cobwebs, revealing stacks of books. Letters. And, most of all, rows and rows of maps.

Astria had been right. Her father had been born with the heart of an explorer. An entire wall was made up of layers of parchment overlapping at the edges like a quilt and painted over with meticulously drawn coastlines. She recognized Nightshade, Lightlark, and the newlands.

There were a few other shapes she hadn't seen on any other map. Unexplored areas, by the look of it.

The largest of these was far beyond Nightshade, to the west. It was a large piece of land, separated from the rest of the map by a row of tiny islands, sitting like guards. Strange. How could something that large not have been developed in all the years since the curses? It seemed special. In fact, it was the only uncharted body of land with a name, etched in with precision. Her breath caught as she read it.

No. That couldn't be right.

Its name was Isla.

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MIRROR

Her heart thundered in her chest. This didn’t make any sense. Why did her father have an island with her name on it, when he had lived here before he had ever even met her mother?

Isla.

It had to be a coincidence. Her name meant island. Perhaps it didn’t mean anything at all.

But what if it did?

Isla removed that sheet of map from the wall, rolled it up, and placed it in the pocket of her cape. She moved around the room, to see if there was anything that could help her now, anything that might indicate the portal, but all she saw were letters between him and family members, detailed maps of Nightshade, and books upon books about the other realms. She flipped through one about Wildlings, read the first sentence of the middle chapter, and nearly snorted.

Wildling women have fangs that curve out of their mouths like pythons, they have claws like panthers—they drink blood in buckets.

Is that what her father had thought of the Wildlings before meeting her mother? She wondered for a moment about their story. How they met, and where, and how they had fallen in love.

Part of it she could guess, given the details she already knew. Her father had escaped with the sword, using the portaling device he had stolen from Grim. Somehow, he must have ended up on the Wildling newland. Her mother must have happened upon him, and, for some reason, they had chosen not to kill each other.

Isla swallowed, realizing how closely it matched her own story. She had somehow ended up on Nightshade, using the starstick. Grim had happened

upon her. And—though she had stabbed a blade through his chest during that first meeting—they had decided not to kill each other.

Yet.

Life and darkness. Opposites in so many ways. One power created, the other destroyed. It seemed like a pairing that could never work, not really. Perhaps they were too different. Perhaps her own parents' joining had been wrong.

She remembered what the prophet-followers had said, before their death. A girl will be born. She will either destroy the world . . . or save it.

She wouldn't be the cause of more destruction. She would find a way to close the portal and buy herself more time. She would use that time to change her fate.

This map . . . it had to mean something.

There was only one way to find out.

Map in one hand and starstick in the other, she imagined the island in her mind's eye, felt around for it, tried to visualize it, tried to pin down its place in the world. She fell through her puddle of stars.

Then she was drowning, pulled down by a relentless current. Only her last-second instinct to reach her arm high over her head kept the map from disintegrating in the water. She had landed in the middle of the sea—a wave crested, about to pull her under again. She closed her eyes tightly and used her starstick to whisk her away. Anywhere. Anywhere.

She landed roughly. Her cheek was scratched from the shell-laden beach, her landing had dragged her across it. The sand was dark, volcanic ash. She peeled herself up from the ground, coughing up water, folding over, her mouth and eyes full of salt. Her fingers felt around for her map and found it damp—but whole. She carefully opened it up, tying the corners down with rocks so it could dry. She didn't have fresh water, but once her tears cleared her vision enough to see properly, she carefully folded the map into her pocket.

Four tries later, she found herself on a wider coastline.

The rest of the islands had been barren, lifeless, but this—

This might as well have been the Wildling newland. She could see the forests from the beach, rising high. She could hear squawks and growls and the chitter of insects. She could feel endless gleaming threads, reaching

toward her like fingers. This place . . . was alive. She half-expected a group of people to approach, but no one came.

She needed a better vantage point.

In the days since she'd had the bracelets removed, she had been hesitant to use her power. It had been buried so long, she feared it would rush up in an uncontrollable wave.

That was part of why she was here. According to this map, the island was far from any other inhabited land she knew of. If it was empty; it could be the perfect place for her to explore her abilities again, without fearing ruin.

She just needed to ensure it was the right location.

Breathe. It was almost as if she could hear Oro in her head. She slowly filled her lungs, wincing, her airways still dry with salt. She carefully focused her mind, like an arrow. Then, without daring open her eyes, she shot into the sky.

It was a risk. She could fall, she could propel herself too high; but for a moment, she let go of her fear, and of gravity, and her stomach dropped—

Then, there was just peace. Silence. Weightlessness.

She opened her eyes and nearly vomited. The land was so far from her feet. She gasped and fell, screaming, hands pinwheeling, before stopping herself.

Breathe, she commanded.

Hurriedly, she studied the coast, the islands nearby. She had memorized the map by now. This was it.

This was Isla.

With the rush of relief, she lost her grip on the sky, and fell—the ground rushed up to meet her.

She shot her arm out, and a burst of energy helped cushion her fall. Still, she landed roughly against the sand.

Every bone and muscle ached, but she forced herself up, because she had found it—the island only her father seemed to know about.

From the sky, she had seen just how large the island was, but tonight, she would start with this forest. As soon as she took a step inside, it seemed to quiet.

Isla went still. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Fruit, everywhere. Hanging plump from trees, the forest was heavy with it. The ground smelled sweet from the fruit that had fallen and broken open. She reached up and grabbed one, smelling it, recognizing it. This was a variety Poppy had fed her as a child once, and never again. Isla had asked, and Terra had said the tree had died.

Because of her.

Because of her powerlessness.

Now, she knew that had been a lie. So many lies.

Isla bit into the fruit and groaned. Its yellow juice dripped down her face as she ate ravenously. It was the sweetest variety she had ever eaten, and there were dozens of them—hundreds—hanging right there.

It was impossible. Nightshade didn't have many varieties of fresh fruit. In the aftermath of the storms, it was barely getting by, yet there was this land with endless food. Endless resources.

How did Grim not know about it?

She quickly used her abilities to weave a basket with vines. She filled it to the brim with fruit, portaled into a Nightshade village, left it on a doorstep, and did it again. Again. Again. Until her arms were sore, and that tiny patch of island was bare.

A small difference, but a difference all the same. Trying, she thought, with a bite of bitterness in her chest.

She spent the rest of the night eating her way through the woods, trying everything. Eventually, the native creatures seemed to get used to her presence, because the snakes began to slither. The birds began to call to each other. A boar with wild, twisted horns darted in front of her and was gone.

By the time Isla found a pool where she could scrub the salt and sand from her skin, she wondered if her father's biggest secret wasn't his own death, his wife, his child—

—But the island.

She hadn't traveled here only to see a piece of her parent. No, this island would serve a purpose.

Still in the center of the water, Isla reached into the deepest crevices of her power. Into all the places she had buried her ability, and emotions, and sanity.

And let it all come rushing out.

The water around her exploded upward before turning into steam.

Waves of petals and trees broke through the land around her. The air itself seemed to shatter, wind howling. Shadows coated her arms, wrapped in sparks.

The beast within her—the one that made her powers deadly—uncurled. She gave into it, only here. Only in a land where she couldn't hurt anyone.

As her power unleashed across the island, the monster within felt relief.

Isla awoke in the middle of the night, shivering from another nightmare, only to find a serpent curled at the foot of her bed.

She hadn't gotten another from Wren in a while. Where had it come from? Cautiously, she reached out to grab it, but the serpent slithered onto the floor.

Lynx was still asleep, curled in the corner. Isla stepped out of the bed, and lunged toward the snake to catch it—

But it was too fast. It slithered beneath the door frame. She crept into the hall, following it around the corner, only to watch it be joined by more snakes. They were all the same dark green color with black specks, moving as one, as if each were pieces of the same whole.

Follow the snakes.

She did, even though the traitors had been captured. The serpents were relentless; it was as if they were trying to lead her somewhere, tell her something. She followed them until she turned a corner and nearly crashed into a wall adorned with an intricate mirror.

Her reflection stared back at her.

She was covered in snakes. They were wrapped around her arms, her stomach, her throat, squeezing—

She gasped, and they were gone. They weren't on the floor either. They had vanished, as if they had never been there to start with.

Slowly, she inched back down the hall, her heart hammering, only to crash into something solid. She seized, then whipped around, and Grim gently grabbed her wrists before she could reach for her hidden dagger.

"Hearteater," he breathed. "What are you doing?" His voice sounded faraway.

She blinked, and it was as if she was plunged back into this moment, into the hall. She heard a faint screeching.

“Did—did you see them?” she asked, squinting against the darkness, searching for any sign of them.

Grim frowned. “See what?”

“All the snakes,” she said, as if it was obvious.

“Heart,” he said, knuckles running across her forehead. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she told him, stepping away from his touch. She drew her brows together, studying him. “You look like a demon.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“That wasn’t a compliment.” She shook her head. “Why are you in armor?”

“The stormfinch,” he said. “It’s singing.”

That was the screeching.

Hope flared within her. Finally, another chance. She still had the other ring Azul had returned to her . . . he had trapped a shred of storm inside. Perhaps it would work.

Quickly, she got dressed and slipped the second ring on her finger. Without Wraith they couldn’t fly, so Grim portaled them to a location just outside one of the rural villages. Some of his people lived far from the tunnel system, so he would bring them to safety himself.

Rain had just started to fall; it was cold on the crown of her head. A flash of lightning soon joined it.

The clouds above began circling ominously.

Villagers rushed out of their houses at the sight of their ruler. He portaled them all to the castle. Isla took more, using her starstick. After everyone was evacuated, they went to another town.

Bells were still ringing faintly from other villages. Warnings of what was about to come. Villagers began pouring out of their houses again, possessions pressed to their chests. But, before Isla and Grim were past the wall surrounding the cluster of houses, the first tornado touched down.

Then another.

Another.

Grim’s power shot out. He portaled a few screaming people away, as the tornado barreled right toward them. Then his own abilities faltered.

Just like the last one, this tempest was full of tiny pieces of shade-made metal, swirling everywhere, stabbing into surrounding trees and grazing her

skin, nullifying power.

“Hearteater, get down,” Grim said, before pulling her behind the stone wall. The storm roared behind them, sending trees and bricks flying. She reached for her power, but it had dimmed. Gone, as though she were wearing her bracelets.

There were screams.

There was nothing she could do.

This—this was why they needed to close the portal. She held the ring tightly, waiting for it to tremble in her hand, to heat—but nothing. She was too far away.

Isla made to stand, and Grim pulled her back down. “You’ll get yourself killed,” he said over the roaring; but he meant all of them.

He was right. She closed her eyes tightly, wind bellowing around them, the ground peeling away in coils, dirt smattering against her every inch, metal cutting through her clothes, and knew that getting close enough again would be almost impossible.

It seemed like hours before everything went still again. Grim stood first, then helped her up.

She choked back a sob.

Destruction. Death. Bodies . . .

It was just the beginning.

For a week, there was a new storm every day. The season had started in earnest. Each time, Isla attempted to capture part of it; but she never got close to a tornado again. Most of the tempests raged far above—and with Wraith still injured, she couldn’t go that high. Her Skyling ability wouldn’t work, thanks to the metal.

Every death—every quiet morning after, watching the aftermath, seeing the ruin—made her remember.

Ashes. Bodies. Destruction.

There was less than a month left of winter when she finally took the feather between her fingers again.

And wrote, Teach me.

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SKYRES

Skyres draw power from blood.

That was what Aurora said.

They can only be formed with shademade metal.

She had been practicing the symbol for days, on parchment. Aurora knew one, she said. One to funnel power. To control it.

It was exactly what she needed. A replacement for the bracelets. A safeguard in case her visits to the island to unleash her power weren't enough.

Now, she was ready to try it on her skin.

Shademade. She could have gone to the blacksmith and asked for another dagger, but its tip would have been too broad for her purposes. No, the feather was perfect.

She followed Aurora's instructions. Skyres were most effective when bonded with objects of great power, to use as ink. She unearthed a ruby that had been passed down through generations of her line. One that was said to have been made by the power of her ancestor. Slowly, she pressed against it with the feather's tip. Not expecting much to happen.

She watched, transfixed, as the glimmering metal went right through the gem. The stone's center became almost liquid, coating the end of the quill in sparkling crimson ink.

If the feather did that to a stone, she wondered what it would do to her skin.

Act immediately, while the source is fresh, Aurora had said, so she didn't wonder for long. Pinching her lips in anticipation of a scream, she dug the tip of the feather against her arm.

Fire erupted through her veins, as if her blood had been set aflame. She screamed, grateful she had portaled to the Wildling newland, where no one would hear her. Sweat poured down her forehead, mixing with tears. She had never experienced such pain in her life, not when she had purposefully lit her arm on fire for the Centennial, not when she had been struck in the heart by an arrow.

It was almost enough for her to stop. Still, her fingers trembled as she mimicked the symbol she had practiced hundreds of times already. The delicate curve, the swirling lines, the tiny details.

Every single line has to be right, or your skin will flay from your bones. The skyre becomes a curse that will consume you.

She gritted her teeth, trying to keep her hand steady. When she finished the final sweep of ink, she dropped the feather and collapsed onto the floor.

Her arm was bloodied, the skin broken. It looked wrong. It looked like she had been bitten by a strangely fanged beast.

But slowly, the ink began to glisten. Shine. Until the skin around it tightened, painfully, melting into the marking.

It was done.

Her blood was roaring in her ears, searing through her body like lightning. She lifted her trembling hand, testing the skyre.

It was supposed to funnel her powers. Control them.

Energy spiraled out of her palm in a green-tinged crest. She jolted in surprise, watching as it hit the wall with precision, searing through one of the swords against the stone.

Slowly, she approached the singed metal. Studied the hole that had gone right through the wall.

Perfectly circular. Perfectly controlled.

She stared down at the gleaming ink upon her skin, thin as the weaving of a web. With it . . . her abilities felt like they had been forged into a weapon in her hand—a sword, or dagger, or throwing star, that she could throw with precision.

It was a shortcut. It came at a cost. She heard the warnings in her mind, but they didn’t matter . . . not when so many other lives were on the line.

Aurora was still her enemy . . . but she had helped her. The skyre had worked.

Do you know any other markings? She scribbled desperately.

The response came quickly. It made Isla's heart sink. No.

Isla nearly grabbed the pen, before it started moving again. But I know where you can find out.

She found Grim in the greenhouse. In his black outfit, he looked like a demon at the center of an oasis, shadows staining the ground around his feet. They puddled as he turned around to face her.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, joining him at his side. There was a balcony up a spiral staircase, overlooking all the nature. He was leaned against its ledge.

He blinked as if he had been lost in his mind. "I come here, sometimes. To think." His gaze shifted to her. "To remember."

Remember.

"Things . . . things were different back then," she said, eyes glued on the fountain in the center. The one with a statue of her, smiling, holding a baby Wraith in her arms.

She could see him nod in her peripheral vision.

"We were different."

He had fallen in love with a person who had barely left her room. Who had never known an intimate touch. Who had never known power.

She had fallen in love with a ruthless warrior who had planned to kill her, at one point.

"Sometimes I think our love was cursed from the beginning. That it started with so much hatred . . . so much blood . . . it could never lead to anything good."

He was silent. She turned to face him, only to find him frowning. "From the first moment I saw you, I didn't stop thinking about you, and I hated it. I thought you were a curse. Hatred was a lot easier to admit to myself than love. It was a lot more familiar." He shook his head. "I . . . I'm sorry for ever hating you."

"I'm sorry too." She had stabbed him in the chest during their first meeting. She had kept countless secrets from him. She had chosen someone else over him. Right at this very moment, she kept a prophecy from him that could lead to his death, by her own hand.

"I've never loved anyone," Grim said, and she turned sharply to face him. "Not until you."

His face was clear. His eyes were earnest. It made her sad. “That can’t be true.”

“It is. I started to believe I was incapable of it . . . of any of the feelings I sensed from others . . . of loving someone so much, I would die for them, without question.” He leaned against the ledge again. “I would watch, sometimes, in the villages, a family walking down the streets, smiling. A husband and wife with their arms linked. I thought it impossible to be that happy. I thought love was the greatest lie. The most outrageous fantasy.” His eyes narrowed. “I hadn’t . . . I hadn’t ever imagined myself happy. I didn’t think I would ever deserve it. Not after everything I had done.” His body tensed, as if he had been snagged by a memory. “When I was young, we were trained to be ruthless, to have heart trained out of us.”

Isla’s voice was barely a whisper as she settled beside him, staring out at the greenery. “How do you have the heart trained out of you?” She wondered if she should even ask.

Grim raised a shoulder. “You ensure a child is never loved.” His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “There was one guardian I grew attached to. Against orders, she would tell me stories from her village before bed. She brought me one of her own child’s balls to play with. She . . . cared for me, and I cried saying goodbye to her. My father found out and had her executed. He made me watch.” Tears burned her eyes, fury at his father for being a monster, anger for the childhood that had been ripped away from Grim.

He glanced at her. “‘Love is a disease,’ my father used to say. ‘Love kills kingdoms.’ So, he tried to rid me of it.”

In their world, love did kill kingdoms. When power could be shared, it could be taken. As Isla thought about the oracle’s prophecy, and the sacrifice he had already made for her, she couldn’t help but think—

His father had been right.

“I come from a long line of heartless men, modeled after Cronan.” Her jaw set at the mention of Grim’s ancestor, who had founded Lightlark with Horus Rey and Lark Crown. “His cruelty was seen as strength. According to my father, he was the model we all fought to emulate. Even the most barbaric of practices.”

“Like what?” Again, she wondered if she should even ask, but she wanted to know him, know the childhood that had made him into someone

he considered a monster.

His eyes blazed with fury. “Cronan had children. Many, many children, as much as he could.” He swallowed. “He buried them beneath the land, their power fed it.”

She stilled against the ledge. “He killed his children?”

“All except the strongest. And that was how the line continued.”

Isla gaped at him. No. She couldn’t be hearing him right. Her eyes stung. “You—you can’t mean . . .”

Grim nodded. “Every Nightshade ruler before me has had dozens and dozens of children. Has raised them until they were of age. And has forced them to compete to the death.”

No.

She had heard of Grim’s brutal training. Never once had she considered that there were others. His siblings, who he must have been raised to think of as his rivals.

“So, you—you . . .” she couldn’t say the words.

Grim, mercifully, shook his head. “I was spared by my flair. The moment my father found out about it, he slaughtered the rest of his children himself.”

Isla was crying. Grim had always been alone . . . but he hadn’t needed to be. He’d had family. And they were all dead. No wonder he hated his father. No wonder he had fought against love and connection.

“But you . . . you don’t have children,” she said, confirming. He had told her as much in the past, when she had inquired about the line of women she had once joined.

“No. From the moment my father died, I knew I couldn’t do it. I knew I would never be able to . . .”

Isla grabbed his hand. She felt sorry for all the innocent children, brought into this world to die. She felt rage for the rulers who had killed them, all for power.

“I’m sorry,” she said, meaning it. She knew what it was like to grow up alone.

Isla understood now, more than ever, why Grim had been ready to go through the portal for her.

She was all he had.

Slowly, her fingers settled between his, and a chill swept up her arm at the contact. He looked at her like he had so much to say, but not enough words and not enough time. His thumb brushed across her knuckles, scraping them just slightly, and she shivered. He reached her wrist and swept the inside, across her pulse. Frowned. His gaze slid down to her bare wrists. He raised his brow slightly in question.

She hadn't seen him since she had gone to the blacksmith. "I decided to stop hiding."

"Good," he said. "I married all of you, Isla. Not just the good parts. Not just the good days. Don't hide from me."

It was in that moment that she realized she had been hiding from herself. She wanted so much, and it shamed her.

Half of her loved Oro—always would.

The other half loved Grim. Unconditionally. The same way he loved her. Theirs was not a gentle love, it was a bleeding love. And she was done pretending she didn't want it.

If she was going to save Nightshade, and change her fate, she needed to work with Grim—not against him.

Tears swept down her face again.

His eyes widened. He looked like he wished he could kill anything that had made her upset. "What is it, heart?"

She shook her head. "I trusted them. The people I killed the other day, when I was covered in blood. I—I thought they had become my friends." It sounded so stupid, saying it aloud. She sounded so pathetic. But Grim only listened. He did not judge her. "And . . . my guardians. They—they—"

He held her as she cried. This was what she deserved, she knew. She had betrayed countless people as well.

"I want to go somewhere," she said, her chest rattling with sobs. "Just with you. Like before."

They didn't have much time. They were well into winter now. The augur had been clear—her fate and lifespan were somehow tied to the portal. They needed to find it. All of their lives depended on it.

She watched Grim hesitate.

"There's another palace," he said, his large hand sweeping down her spine, gathering her closer to her chest. "We can go there, for a few days. I think—I think you'll like it."

She nodded against him. Perfect.

It was exactly what she had been hoping he would say. Exactly the place Aurora had described. The skyre on her arm, made invisible by Nightshade shadows, seemed to pulse.

It was an excuse, but it was also the truth. With so short a time left, she wanted to enjoy part of it for just a few days. Give in to the desires she could no longer ignore.

She and Grim . . . as much as she had tried to fight it, as much as part of her hated herself for it, they were more alike than they were different. They understood each other.

She was done pretending she didn't love him. She was done burying her feelings down, hoping they would die.

It might have made her a villain. It might have been wrong.

But she wanted him.

Isla found her original wedding dress in the wardrobe. It was pristine. Perfect. Hung in a way that made it look like art on a wall, a piece Grim might have often looked at.

Her fingers swept down the silk, across the ties of the bodice, and she remembered standing while the dress was created around her. She remembered the look on Grim's face when he first saw her. She remembered when he went to his knees and pressed his forehead against her legs and whispered something into the fabric like a prayer.

She slowly took it off its hanger.

The buttons down the back were difficult to hook herself, but she bent her arms, and with every latch there was another memory, another moment. He had imprinted himself upon her life, and she wasn't sure if there was any way around it.

Before she could think better of it, she was in front of his door. She didn't need to knock.

The door swung open, and Grim's eyes widened, just slightly. She hadn't often surprised him, but when she did, she cherished it.

The dress had long sheer sleeves made up of intricate embroidery. The design told their story, whirling shadows meeting blooming flowers. The bodice was low and covered in petals, the design of vines and stems curling

out of them, against her skin. The fabric was tight against her waist and stomach, and the silk below was smooth, all the way to the floor.

“Heart,” he said, blinking more than usual, as if trying to discern a dream from reality. “What—”

“I’m ready,” she said. She took a step forward. “I’m ready to try again. To be your wife. Truly.”

The look he gave her was so earnest, so disbelieving, she couldn’t imagine she had ever thought him heartless.

Slowly, his gaze never leaving hers, Grim went to his knees before her. He took her hands as gently as if they were made of glass and bowed his head. Tears swept down the sharp panes of his face. She had only seen him cry once before, and it was when her heart had stopped. It made her own eyes burn. “I won’t pretend I’ll ever be a good man,” he said. “But I’ll be good to you.” His words were a promise she could feel in the center of her chest, the bridge between them dark and gleaming. He smoothed his lips across her knuckles. “I will make us happy, heart. I swear it.”

She wanted that. With every part of her, she wanted this to be real. She wanted to pretend she could change her fate: that she could save them all, have a happy ending.

Grim rose to his full height, eyes still never leaving hers. She carefully wiped his tears with her thumb, and he shivered. “Our wedding night,” she said, slightly breathless. “You remember it?”

His eyes darkened, then. “Only every night.”

“Good,” she said. She stepped into him. His body was hard and cold against her. “Do it all again.”

Grim didn’t hesitate. One moment she was firmly on the ground, and the next, he had reached down and swept her off her feet.

He turned around and portaled them so smoothly that she didn’t even realize they were in their room until they were facing the bed.

She had anticipated he would want to do this here. Lynx was gone. Isla had already brought him to the stables. She’d had to leave him several pieces of dried meat and blankets to make up for it.

Ever so carefully, Grim set her down in front of the bed. She slowly slipped out of her shoes, shrinking slightly before him.

“May I?” he asked, motioning toward her dress, the words so soft she barely heard them.

She nodded and turned around. He gently moved her hair over her shoulder, and his featherlight touch made her shiver. Just like their wedding night, every sense seemed to be heightened, her skin as sensitive as if she had never been touched before. Her toes curled at his breath on her neck and his rough fingertips against her spine as he began to slowly undo the buttons. Every scrape of him against her skin had her burning. Restless.

There were too many damn buttons.

He laughed darkly. “Patience, Hearteater,” he said, and a thrill went through her as he used her old name. “We have all night.” She felt his breath against the shell of her ear, and it made her shoulders hike. “And I plan to enjoy every moment of it.”

She twisted to face him. “If I recall correctly, we didn’t leave this bed for days.”

Grim laughed again. “Greedy for more, when we haven’t even started, Hearteater?”

“Always,” she said, and felt the last button open. Her entire back was bare to him. Just as she got used to the cold air upon her skin, he swept his rough knuckles down her spine, and she arched, aching. The fabric fell off her shoulder, and he pressed his lips against it, making his way up her neck, across her jaw. She shivered at his touch, her want surprising her, rising just as forcefully as she had tried to bury it down.

The dress fell to the floor, and Grim made a noise that almost sounded pained. She had found the pieces of lace in her dresser too, the ones that barely covered anything.

“My memory is useless, when it comes to you,” he murmured. “You’re always so much more beautiful than I remember.”

“And you’re still fully dressed.” She was impatient, needy. She pressed her hands against his shirt and watched it turn to ash, revealing a chest so broad and muscled, he would have looked like a flawless statue, save for the scar next to his heart. The one she had given him. He had kept it, a vestige of her.

“Getting back at me for all the dresses?” he said, his voice dark and amused. The ones he had ruined, by ripping them off her.

“Exactly.”

His pants were next. Now, they were on equal footing. Before she could touch him again, he bent down and picked her up by the back of her thighs,

lifting her onto the bed. Then, eyes never leaving hers, he knelt before her again.

She gasped as he hooked his fingers beneath her knees and dragged her to the edge of the sheets, right below him. His breath was hot against the center of her, and she groaned.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve imagined this,” he said. Her lace was gone with a single movement, and he didn’t waste a moment with teasing or games. No, he seemed to be as starved as she was. Her head fell back with the first press of him against her, toes curling, eyes squeezing closed.

Then, she arched off the bed. His hands gently pinned her hips down against the sheets, thumbs stroking her sensitive skin. He was slow, and gentle—until he wasn’t. She dug her heels against his back until she was moaning into her own shoulder and fisting the sheets. Then she was being dragged beneath an endless sea of pleasure, until her muscles tensed and she was shattering against him.

She sat up, dazed, limp, her skin feeling raw and covered in sparks.

He slowly rose from the floor, and she watched him with wide eyes, beyond words. She watched as he slowly climbed up the bed, leaning over her. Then he tucked his arm beneath her and dragged them both to the head of the bed.

He slowly kissed his way up her body—her stomach, then her sensitive chest, peaked with need. He took his time there, and she gasped as he scraped his teeth, then his tongue across her. She was molten, squirming below him, desperate for more.

“Please,” she said. She locked her legs behind his back, reaching for him. In response, he slowly, very slowly, took one of her arms and placed it above her head, her knuckles pressed against the silk sheets. Then he did the same with her other arm.

He reached between them, and she gasped as she finally felt him push against her. He slowly inched forward. His thumb swept across her palm, and he moved carefully, gently, his body shaking with restraint. He went in and in and in, until she couldn’t think around the pressure, couldn’t breathe around it; and then he sighed against the crown of her head, and she groaned as he reached a place that made her spine feel like a bolt of lightning.

Then he started to move, and nothing in the world had ever felt so good, so right, so saturated. She was breathless, breaking, mending, and it was better than she remembered, this feeling, this fullness.

He held her by the wrists as he drove into her, and she moaned into his mouth, panting, lost for words, lost for sanity. She knew he could feel her emotions, every crest of pleasure, every inch of need and want.

He growled as he hauled her up against him, as if he couldn't feel enough of her; and she groaned at the contact, her sensitive chest scraping against his cold skin with his every movement. She hooked her arms around his neck and bit down against his shoulder to keep from making even more noise.

In a flash he sat back on his feet, lifting her upper body to face him. At this angle, she could feel everything, every inch of contact between them. He moved, and her head fell back as she took everything he gave her, his body finding every aching spot in hers and filling it.

Grim grabbed her by the side of her face and kissed her deeply, his tongue stroking the roof of her mouth as she shuddered against him, all of her going taut, then loose. He pulled her back onto his chest, and kept going, faster, and she kept kissing him, as if she could show him with her lips and tongue how good this all felt, because words would never be sufficient.

She bit his bottom lip as he found a spot that felt like the place between stars, and he kept going, never tiring, muscles hard as stone beneath her. She met him stroke for stroke, grinding her hips, chasing her pleasure; and when she found it and cried out against his mouth, he flipped them over and drove into her again, pulling her close. He gasped as he pushed into her one final time, his shadows flaring around him, shuddering through the room.

On their wedding night, he had broken all the windows. Tonight, it seemed he had remembered and taken precautions against it.

"Again," she said, panting, not a moment later. "Do that again."

He laughed darkly in the space between her neck and shoulder. He kissed the length of her neck. "So impatient," he said against her skin. But then he flipped her over, and he did.

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WINTER

The winter palace was made of harsh arches that mimicked the mountains around it. A thin layer of snow clung against the stone and glass exterior as if it was wearing a sheer blanket, and the windows were as dark as lifeless eyes, like the entire castle was sleeping.

Howls of wind blew her hair back and clawed at her cheeks. The cold was voracious, striking in a thousand swift bites. Grim didn't seem to mind it as he took a few steps forward. "It wasn't always empty," he said. "I remember it full."

"What happened to everyone?" she dared ask.

"They died. Every single one."

She felt a bite of pain, remembering what he had told her. Everyone Grim had ever truly known was gone. Everyone except for her.

"Did you spend a lot of time here as a child?"

He nodded. "From the time I was born, until I started my training. This area is called the Algid, the northernmost part of Nightshade. Here, it snows all the time."

The forever winter here was a reminder of her fate. Of the limited time she had left to change it.

"Has it been abandoned for long?"

"Not completely. The grounds are maintained, and the main chambers are attended to, in case of a visit."

She turned to him. "I don't remember coming here. Why didn't you take me?"

He frowned. "It's cold. You hate the cold."

The moment Grim stepped foot inside the castle, flecks of silver lit up within the stone of the interior, a million lights around them, like stars

buried in the night sky. Isla gaped at them.

"It's a special stone," Grim said, glancing at her. "Lights up when it senses Nightshade power."

It reminded her of Starling. She told Grim, and he nodded. "The realms aren't as different as we make them out to be."

Grim showed her down hall after hall, room after room. She saw a few attendants who bowed, then went on their way.

By the end of his tour, Grim seemed lighter. He ran his hand along the back of a chair carved in an intricate style she had never seen before.

"You look . . . happy," Isla said, watching Grim take all of it in.

He nodded. "As a child, I was happiest here."

"Why?"

"Because my father lived in the other castle," was what he said.

"We can be happy here," she said, putting her hand on his. Remembering the words he had told her before he had taken her to bed.

And, even as she hid her true purpose for being here, she meant it.

Grim had portaled in a wardrobe full of soft fabrics. Sweaters, pants casual enough to sleep in, thick tights to wear beneath her dresses. There were capes with hoods lined in furs, and gloves that would reach her elbows. It wasn't all black, either.

"I thought you would appreciate color," he said. The color in question was a mix of white, greys, and the occasional Starling silver, but she was grateful.

"This was thoughtful," she said.

He looked almost sheepish. "All I ever think of is you."

Isla stepped close to him. She went on her toes and didn't even come near his height. "Remember when we first met?"

"Of course, I remember." He pulled his shirt up, revealing the silver slash on his chest. "You made it difficult to forget."

She rolled her eyes at him as he smoothed the fabric back down. "The Grim I first met would have been disgusted by the words that just came out of your mouth."

Grim scowled. "Does this end in a point?"

She flicked his nose, and it seemed like he was trying very hard to glare at her. He ended up pulling her close to him. “My point is . . . people can change.”

His face softened. “If they have a reason to,” he said, reaching down to run his rough fingertips across the side of her face. Even that simple touch felt like sparks trailing down her skin.

“I want to see you relaxed,” she said.

“I am relaxed.”

He was wearing three different types of swords, a cape, and wraps around both of his arms. His spine was soldier-straight.

“Right.” She frowned. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in anything . . . casual.” She walked over to his own wardrobe and tore it open. Cape. Cape. Cape. Cape.

She turned around, exasperated. “You wear it when you’re alone too?”

He just looked at her.

“No.” She shook her head and grabbed his hand.

“Where are we going?”

“Take us to the closest village,” she said. Her plans could wait. If they had a couple of days together to celebrate their union, she wanted to enjoy them. “This time, disguise us as something fun.”

In the valley of mountains that resembled carnivorous teeth sat a village draped in snow. The houses were quaint, roofs like folded pieces of parchment, glistening with frost. Smoke rose from stout chimneys like steam from tea. She had never seen a place so beautiful. Isla gaped at Grim. “I can’t believe you weren’t ever going to take me here.”

Grim gave her a look. “Who said I wasn’t?”

She stared at him. “We were married for months, and I can’t seem to find this particular place in my memories.”

He grabbed her hand. “We’re still married,” he said. “And you hate the cold. I thought we established that.”

She nodded down at her cape, which was lined in fur and the softest fabric she had ever known. Her dress was made of thick wool. Beneath it she wore soft tights and boots that went up to her knees. “Not so much when I’m dressed for it.”

No one paid them much attention as they walked through the village, and Isla knew Grim had disguised them with his power. Children played in the snow, their cheeks pink, their words coming out in clouds. Shops featured pastries and licorice in their windows.

“I used to steal those, when I was a child,” Grim said, nodding at the candy.

She glanced at him. “Villainous from your first breath.”

“Precisely.” He looked thoughtfully at the shop. “My father didn’t allow candy, or games, or anything he thought would make me weak. My guardians were good at enforcing his wishes.” He shrugged. “But I discovered my flair at a young age. When they thought I was sleeping, I was here, stealing candy, and watching the other kids play.”

She tried to imagine a child Grim. Messy black hair, pale face. Alone.

It was exactly what she had done with her starstick, once she had discovered its ability. Grim’s power—even though he hadn’t known it at the time—had provided them both with an escape.

“When I was old enough to be trusted with money, I walked into the store, dropped a pile of coin on the counter, and walked out.”

“Enough to pay for all the licorice?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Enough to pay for the shop, if I wanted.”

She pulled his hand. “Let’s go, then.” He started to refuse, but then he gave up, and let her lead him inside.

“One of each,” Isla said at the counter, and Grim chuckled behind her, remembering when he had said the exact same words at the Centennial. When they were brought a pile of different flavored strands, he sighed and stared at her over the table.

“This was much more charming with chocolate,” he said.

“Yes,” she agreed, nodding her head solemnly. “It wasn’t at all alarming that the villainous Nightshade was feeding me chocolates.”

A smile played on his lips. “You liked it.”

“Of course, I liked it,” she said, grabbing one of the licorice strings. “It’s chocolate.” She motioned at him. “Now, should we get started?”

Isla watched Grim take a bite, and his eyes closed as he slowly chewed. A smile almost crept across his face. “It tastes exactly the same,” he said, disbelieving. “Centuries later, and it hasn’t changed.”

She chewed on a piece, and it was fine—it wasn't chocolate. But seeing the joy it brought Grim made her love it.

They took the rest wrapped in paper for later. Then the real fun started. She found a shop that sold clothes and pushed Grim into a changing room. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I'll get options," she said. "You can try them on."

He looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "I'm not changing in a store," he said, as if the idea was ridiculous.

"Fine," Isla said, throwing her hands up. "You'll just have to buy options without knowing how they look. You might not end up getting anything you like."

Grim looked exasperated. He turned to the shop-owner, handed her a mountainous stack of coin, and said, "One of each."

"You're leering at me again," Grim said.

She really was.

He was wearing a soft, long-sleeved black shirt and casual pants. No cape. No boots. No spiked armor.

Just him.

Something about that was doing strange things to her composition.

For her part, she felt like she had made an outfit from a cloud. She wore one of Grim's new sweaters, like butter against her skin and deliciously oversized, and a thicker version of the tights he had brought her.

Most of her life, she had either worn dresses with bodices that cut off her air supply, or armor that weighed her down like an extra layer of gravity. Only recently had she known the comfort of thick, smooth fabrics against a cold night.

She walked over to him as he cautiously eyed her. "Isn't this comfortable?"

He frowned down at his outfit. "It's fine."

She made a sound of indignation. Her hands smoothed down his chest, the fabric softer than silk beneath her fingers. She groaned. "Tell me you can feel this," she said, looking up at him. His eyes had darkened.

"Suddenly," he said, "I'm liking it more."

She beamed at him.

There was a small fireplace in their room, and they sat in front of it, watching the snow and trading stories from their childhoods. Isla told him about how she would sneak sticks and leaves in her pockets during training to build dolls out of them. One was named Stick-man.

“Creative from your first breath,” Grim said, and she flicked his nose again.

Grim told her how he had first discovered his flair. He was seven years old, in this very castle, and had just been locked inside of his room, as a punishment for allowing himself to be struck during training. He had banged on the cold glass windows and had wanted to be somewhere warmer. Somewhere different.

When he opened his eyes, he was on the beach below the Nightshade castle to the south. He had almost driven himself mad trying to get back to his room, in time for his guardians to check on him. He had managed to portal back just before dinner.

No one had noticed the sand in his shoes.

He had kept it a secret for as long as he could, knowing that once he shared the news with his father, his movements would be more closely monitored. It wasn’t until the portaling became a strategic fighting advantage that he shared his flair. By then he had mastered it, having traveled across Nightshade and beyond.

It was the same flair Cronan had been born with thousands of years before. She knew now how the comparison must have weighed on him. How it would have put even more pressure on him to become as monstrous as his ancestor.

“Are flairs usually passed down through family lines?”

Grim shook his head. “Besides rulers, only very few familial lines have flairs. It isn’t guaranteed and is rare.” Grim must have seen her confusion, because he added, “It is strange you have the same flair as your father. But anomalies happen.”

Speaking of family. “I talked to Astria.”

“Did you?” he sounded wary. Perhaps a bit amused.

“Yes. She told me she strongly advised you to stick my head on a pike.”

Grim’s shadows surged, but his smile was playful. “She’s very loyal to her family,” he deadpanned.

“Yes, I gathered that.”

“So. What did you say in response?”

The edges of her mouth twitched. “I told her that I heard the position of general runs in our family, and that I would be happy to replace her.”

Grim’s chest shook as he laughed. “You want to be my general, Hearteater?”

She shook her head. “No. That would require listening to you. And I think far too highly of my own ideas to be able to do that.”

He laughed again. Fighting a smile, she thought it was the perfect time to tell him what Astria had told her about the romance books in the library. The ones about him.

His amusement withered away. He scowled. “Astria’s idea of a joke.”

Isla grinned. “No. Not a joke.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “And you know that how?”

Her smile brightened. “Because I read one.”

Grim shook his head at her. “That library’s days are numbered.” “I thought you would say that. So, I wanted to let you know I really like the library. And I would be very sad to see it reduced to a pile of ash.”

“Too bad,” he said, without any bite.

It seemed like a perfectly normal time to ask, “Does . . . this castle have a library?”

He nodded. “It does.” Hope gleamed within her. He sensed that hope and frowned down at her. “If you’re looking for any more of those books, I can assure you this collection isn’t the romance variety.” She swallowed. She had almost forgotten how careful she had to be with her emotions around him, especially when she was hiding something.

She raised a brow at him. “Why not?”

“It’s our most ancient texts. Every piece was curated by my ancestors.”

Good.

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MAZE

Gardens stretched behind the palace, overgrown but still beautiful, coated in a layer of ice and snow. Isla watched them from the wall of windows as she sipped from the mug of hot chocolate that Grim had handed her when she had awoken.

He shamelessly stole the mug and took a sip from it. She narrowed her eyes at him, and he lazily smiled before pressing his warmed lips against hers and handing the drink back.

“What’s that?” she asked, spotting the border of a tall hedge. It seemed to turn a sharp corner.

“The maze.”

She frowned. “Maze?”

He nodded. “It’s ancient, older than the castle itself. Do you want to see it?”

Of course, she wanted to see it.

They got dressed in their winter clothes, Isla putting on layer upon layer, like some sort of ornate pastry. Grim led them outside, past the sprawling gardens, around the castle.

They walked until they reached the mouth of the labyrinth. It was enormous, with frost-caked hedges reaching more than triple her height. The tunnel was like a hallway that split ominously.

There was an energy to it like a shield. Power, pulsing, in a mysterious way she had and hadn’t encountered before.

They stepped inside.

“This was my favorite place, as a child,” Grim said. He made a turn, and she followed him. “My guardians were replaced every year, to keep me from forming an attachment to them. They never stayed long enough to

learn the maze.” He trailed his hand along the thick shrubs. “I used to hide here. I used to hope they would never find me.” He frowned. “My father learned, and I awoke one day to see the maze on fire. I thought it was gone forever, but the maze is stubborn. It took centuries to grow back, but it did. And its power never wavered.”

Another turn.

“Power?”

He nodded. “The maze is dangerous. No power can be used within it, not even Nightshade. Which is why my father had to use a match to try and destroy it.” She thought about her bracelets. Was there a deposit of the same ancient metal beneath? It reminded her of the Place of Mirrors, but even Wildling ability could be used there.

“So, a ruler could die here,” she said. She had assumed if they got lost, she could use her abilities to cut through the hedges or fly out herself. But now, when she reached for her power, she found only its embers. Grim nodded. “The maze has killed countless of my extended family members, if lore is to be believed.”

Isla swallowed. She wondered at how casually he walked through it, brushing its hedges like an old friend.

“You aren’t . . . afraid?”

He shook his head. “No. Because I know the way.”

Isla studied his every turn, memorizing it, just in case. Starving to death in a maze was not how she wanted to spend the last moments of her life.

The maze was enormous. Her feet seemed frozen solid when they finally reached the middle of it.

At the center sat a coffin.

“Cronan,” he said, before she could ask.

The Nightshade ruler was buried there. The maze had been built around his grave.

She studied the coffin, knowing now why power was drained here. It was completely made of sparkling black metal. Shademade.

She didn’t know where Lark Crown was buried, and Oro had never mentioned anything about Horus Rey’s body. Perhaps the knowledge had been lost with time.

Since they couldn’t portal out of the maze, they had to walk out of it. The ground was damp, and their footprints had been frozen solid by the

time they exited. It became a trail out of the labyrinth, leading their way out. By the time they were in the gardens again, Isla was shaking.

“The library has a fireplace,” he said, and she nodded, anticipation building in her chest.

In moments, the fire was raging. The hearth was so large, even Grim would be able to walk into it. The flames were unnaturally high, nearly brushing against its ceiling.

Frost melted down her skirts immediately, forming a small puddle around her shoes. Without thinking about it, she slipped out of them and undid her cape. It fell to the floor. She looked up to see Grim watching her.

Now that she had given up on burying her feelings for him, they surged forward at every opportunity. She didn’t fight them as her eyes traced his body, his damp shirt pressed firmly against every muscle in his chest and stomach. She didn’t look away from a gaze so hungry, so intense, that her skin prickled beneath it. His chest was rising and falling just as he looked at her, like it was an effort to keep still in her presence, to battle against the growing want that she could see right in front of her.

It was a frenzy.

Her lips crashed into his, and then her freezing fingers were weaving through his hair, still damp from the cold. His tongue was hot against hers and she moaned. “I need you,” she said against his lips.

He seemed to need her too. With a burst of power, the texts and papers on the table behind them were swept to the floor, and then he was bending her over it. He pulled her stockings down, and then she was filled with pulsing heat. She clawed at the table, sending cracks forming along the thick wood.

They were ravenous, starved; nothing was enough. Soon she was kicking her tights off completely, and he was hauling her against the wall.

No—not a wall. She discovered it was a bookshelf when books began crashing down around them, falling from their shelves.

“Don’t stop,” she said, her ankles locking behind him. She formed a Starling shield around them, the books flying wildly.

“I never intended on it,” he said, as the wood groaned behind her.

She woke up draped in a half dozen blankets. Grim must have portaled them here to make her comfortable. The fire crackled just a few feet away.

Somehow, they had ended up on the floor, right beside it. She remembered now, how Grim had groaned as she had climbed atop him, how he had pulled her down against his chest afterward. Their clothing was strewn across the floor, along with dozens of books. There were gaps in the shelves he had pressed her against.

"We made a mess," she said. Grim waved the thought away.

"I'll put them back," he said. His power began to work, but she shook her head.

"I—I want to look through them," she said. "I've never had a library to myself—not like this. Not without restrictions."

"Now you have several."

She told the truth. "Maybe there will be something to help find the portal."

He brought her some fresh clothes, and she slipped them on, before moving to the table. She began stacking books with her power. Grim watched her.

She turned to face him. "You're distracting."

"Am I?"

Isla looked from the cracks in the table, to him, laying in the fabrics with nothing on, shadows from the flames playing across his pale skin. He was already ready again, and part of her wanted to go back to him, but—

Grim laughed. He walked over to her, kissed the top of her head, and said, "Enjoy your library."

Then, he was gone.

The room suddenly felt too empty. But she had a job to do. She found her discarded dress and pulled something from the interior pocket.

The feather.

She struck its point against her palm, watched the blood burble, and wrote on a fresh piece of parchment.

What am I looking for?

A book cursed closed, the feather wrote. Isla wasn't sure she understood. How could a book be cursed?

She didn't suppose it would simply be sitting on a shelf, and she hoped it wasn't one of the ones that had fallen to the floor.

Most of the books didn’t even have titles, or covers; they were simply leather-bound. She had to flip them open and read a few paragraphs before moving on. After doing so for hours, she realized it would be weeks before she got through the entire collection. And she had only a few hours before Grim would summon her for dinner.

If the book was important, it would be hidden. She studied the walls, looking for levers or special panels. She remembered searching the libraries on Lightlark, and looked in the hearth too.

Nothing.

It was only when she was stacking the books she and Grim had knocked down that she realized one book had remained in the middle of the center row, when all others around it had fallen.

Strange.

She shook the shelf, waiting for it to fall loose. But it didn’t move an inch. As if it was stuck.

Or enchanted.

Isla grabbed one of the sliding ladders and climbed to the shelf.

She studied the book carefully without touching it, not wanting to force it out with her abilities and potentially harm it.

It looked just like the others. Thick black leather cover, creased by time. Spine engraved in a swirling pattern. There was just one thing that set it apart. Strange stains against its pages.

Isla expected it would take all her might to pull the book free. But the moment her hand curled around it, the book released its hold, and slid against her fingers.

Strange. She climbed down and set it on the table. It had a force around it, power she could feel clicking against her bones.

It was only when she went to turn the page that she realized the stains upon it were blood.

Isla stumbled back just as the book flew open. Cursed. It was supposed to be cursed closed, according to Aurora. She expected an attack, a storm to rise from its pages, blades to careen through the air . . . but there was nothing.

Only parchment and faded ink.

Her flair had saved her.

Her father was the only person she knew of who'd had her flair. If the book was cursed, then perhaps it hadn't been read in millennia. Even though, judging by the blood, many had tried.

She sank into a chair and rushed to flip through the pages, reading as quickly as she could.

If she had been expecting page after page of skyres . . . she was wrong. Every page was blank.

She grew more frustrated as she flipped through them. "Help me find the portal," she begged in a whisper. She needed to close it, stop the storms, stop the death. She needed to use it to extend the time she had. She needed to hope it would be enough to change her fate.

The pages remained empty until the very end.

Undeterred and without any other options, she flipped from the beginning and tried again, to see if she had missed something.

This time, ink began to form. It was as if the book changed every time it was read. A few sentences were revealed, far away from each other. Most didn't make sense out of context.

Then, on the last page, there was a skyre. An ornate marking that looked almost like a rose, encased in an orb.

It had no description. Part of her itched to simply paint it upon her skin, to test it out . . . but it would be a risk. It could do anything. She remembered the blacksmith's warning.

She flipped back to the first page and started again.

Grim surprised her by taking her to the village for dinner. He must have noticed how much she had loved it.

The restaurant was full, and Grim frowned at all the noise and chaos, but Isla couldn't hear enough, couldn't see enough. It was lively, the villagers dragging chairs to other tables, having conversations over groups of people, laughing, and smiling, as if they weren't in the middle of the storm season. As if they lived each day to the fullest, anyway.

When she looked at Grim, he was already staring at her.

"What?"

"You . . . would be happy here," he said slowly, studying her face for her reaction.

She hadn’t really thought about it. But . . . even as much as she hated the cold, this village was alive in a way she hadn’t seen before. The community had survived centuries of curses. It was clear that the same families had known each other through generations. It was beautiful.

Grim ordered charred meat with whipped potatoes and got something completely different delivered by the boisterous owner. Isla smiled behind her hand at the look on his face. Still, he ate it, and she ate off his plate when she decided his was far better than hers.

“Just take it,” he said gruffly, pushing his plate to her, and reaching over to take hers.

“It’s so much worse,” she said, watching his face as he took a bite. “It was a horrible trade.”

“It is,” Grim confirmed. Isla smiled, pushing his food back, but he stopped the plate with his hand. “I told you I would give you anything, remember? That includes my clearly superior mystery dish.”

He dutifully ate everything on his plate, and then the rest of hers when she was done. Afterward, he dragged her into an alley, and she moved first, pinning him against the wall and kissing him until he sighed into her mouth.

“As much as I enjoyed that, I had more innocent motives for bringing you here,” he said, sucking his bottom lip, as if to savor the taste of her. He motioned toward light peeking around the corner. “Chocolate,” he said. “It’s a chocolate shop that—”

She pulled him to her. “That is so incredibly thoughtful,” she said. “And I love chocolate in a way that is probably concerning. But I want something else right now.” She looked at him. “Do you understand?”

By the way he portaled them back to the castle—and what he did afterward—she knew he’d understood perfectly.

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UNLEASHED

The winter palace seemed oddly removed from the rest of the world. Outside, nothing was heard but the faint calling of birds; and at night, nothing was seen but an endless sheet of stars.

As she stared out the wall of glass windows, she wondered how this place had survived centuries of storm seasons. She had seen the force of the tempests—and all they had destroyed—in just the last few months. She kept waiting for another one, but the sky here was still blue.

Grim said he wanted to show her something outside, and he motioned toward a set of clothes he had pulled from her wardrobe. She squinted at the pants that would disintegrate in the snow, socks that were meant for inside, and undergarments that weren't at all suited for any type of exercise.

"What?" he asked as a smile played on her mouth.

"Nothing," she said, pulling pants made of thick leather, a tight band and shirt to keep her chest warm and in place, and a long-sleeved shirt. "You know remarkably little about how women dress, for someone who's been alive for half a millennium," she said. He had likely asked an attendant to help him create her wardrobe.

Grim gave her a look. "Might I remind you, I was never meant to marry. I was never meant to have a woman in my quarters for more than a few hours."

She smiled at him. It was true. She remembered the challenges of having the original ceremony. The surprise and outrage of the court.

Isla realized this room—the one that must have been his father's centuries before—would never have had a woman living in it. Now her things were everywhere.

When she was dressed, Grim studied her, as if committing the pieces to memory, annoyed at having gotten it wrong before. She smiled as he led her out into the gardens.

They could have portaled anywhere, but they walked for miles, talking about everything from what was going on at the castle to how Lynx and Wraith were getting along.

“Your leopard is oddly protective of a creature that is several times his size,” he said.

“His name is Lynx,” she corrected, for the dozenth time.

“But he isn’t one,” Grim said, for also the dozenth time, exasperated. “You’re calling him by a different type of animal.”

“He likes it,” she said, glaring at him.

“Fine,” he said. “Lynx,” he frowned at the word as if it had insulted him, “is oddly protective of the aptly named Wraith.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Wraith might be huge, but he’s still a child. Lynx is older.” She sighed. “I’m just relieved Lynx hasn’t held Wraith’s bonded against him.”

Isla didn’t see the ball of snow until it was crashing into the side of her face.

She whirled around, fingers pressed to her temple. Grim was already holding another one.

“Don’t,” she said.

He threw it, and she only barely ducked in time.

“You said you’re ready to stop hiding.” He motioned at the fields around him, and the mountains at their back. “There’s no one for miles. Except for me.” She looked at him pointedly. “You can’t hurt me,” Grim said.

“Overconfident?”

“Try,” he said.

“No.”

“Try.”

“No.”

The ball of snow hit her right in the center of her chest. She gave him a look. “Fine. Remind yourself you begged me to put you flat on your ass when it hurts.”

If they were going to duel, she wasn't going to use balls of snow.

He didn't know about her skyre. He had kissed every inch of her skin last night, but it had remained hidden by Nightshade power. His own power, that she had used.

Which meant he didn't know about her newfound control.

She flexed her hand toward the ground, and a sword of ice formed down her arm, the sharp point sliding against the snow. It didn't feel like she was using Oro's powers. No . . . this felt like her. If Grim was surprised by seeing her using Moonling ability, he didn't show it. He just summoned a sword made of shadows that twisted and calcified.

Then, he struck.

Isla turned away at the last moment, then hooked her leg around his. With all the force she could muster, she knocked his legs from beneath him, but he was ready for her. Before he hit the ground, he was on the other side of the clearing. "Portaling isn't fair," she grumbled.

Grim chuckled. "Might I remind you, wife, that you have access to the same power."

She did.

She portaled into the mountains, and he was right behind her. Their swords clashed, and then she was gone. Higher. They portaled their way up the cliffside, swords battling.

When he appeared right behind her, she swept her arms wide, and sent a wave of snow over him. She grinned, watching it glide down the mountain, but then she turned, and there he was. He sent her back with the force of his shadows, but she was already propelling herself into the air with a burst of Starling energy.

She landed with a crouch on the mountain top and waited for him. Waited.

A snowball hit her right in the ear.

She bared her teeth and turned around, finding Grim standing there, looking very pleased with himself.

Isla slowly stood and, eyes never leaving his, summoned her Starling shield, feeling it form from her toes, up her legs, her stomach, her chest, down her arms, over her neck. It was a glimmering second-skin, a fighting suit of stars.

Grim’s eyes trailed her body. “Impressive. What a striking star you make.”

Isla launched forward and, with the force of a meteor, crashed into him. Grim fell back with a whoosh, and she was pleased to have knocked the breath from him. They rolled across the clearing, just nearly falling off the side.

He landed above her, caging her in with his arms on either side of her face. His body was pressed against every angle of her.

Grim’s eyes swept down her form again. “I’ve never taken a woman on a mountain before.”

Just when he made to kiss her, she disappeared, leaving him in the snow.

Behind him, she said, “And you never will.”

Grim laughed darkly. He was behind her in an instant. “Will you be mad at me when I launch you off this peak?” he whispered in her ear.

Cocky demon. His shadows swarmed her, but she was too fast, she froze his shadows solid, and they fell into the snow. She shot herself back with a burst of energy, then began throwing ice dagger after ice dagger, aimed at his heart, his head, his neck. Each turned to ash just an inch before landing true. In response, he sent an army of snowballs in her direction, which bounced off her Starling shield. They didn’t touch her, but the force against her shield hurt.

It was too thin. She needed thicker. And she needed to wipe that self-satisfied grin off his face.

Isla shielded herself completely in energy, arms crossed in front of her. She called every inch of her force around her. Then, when Grim was close enough, she exploded.

Grim was launched off the mountain so quickly, he was just a streak of shadow.

And Isla was left smiling.

He was waiting for her at the bottom of the mountain, leaning against it, looking awfully whole for someone who had just been hurled off a peak. “Unleashed suits you, Hearteater,” he said.

She couldn’t agree more.

Grim woke her up early, with his lips against her head. “Wraith is getting restless. I’m going to take him flying. I’ll be back soon.”

She should take Lynx for a run too. But she needed to spend more time going through the book. So far, she had only collected a handful of skyres, without knowing how to use them. He couldn’t know about her research.

He left, and she returned to the library. The pages flipped over and over, revealing just a little bit more each time.

Most were pieces of skyres. A select few were whole. None had descriptions; not yet.

She was slouched in the chair, her cheek resting against her palm, as she flipped through and a sentence caught her eye. She’d hardly finished reading it before it settled, disappearing.

Slowly, she sat up.

It wasn’t a skyre . . . but it was something important. Something she would need, once she discovered the right marking.

It read, Bones hold more power than blood. The most powerful skyres must be formed with them.

If she was going to close the portal—if she was going to extend her life—she would need infinitely powerful bones.

She knew where to get them.

Snow fell weightlessly around her as she stopped at the mouth of the maze, still clutching the book in her hands, in case she needed a different skyre.

Uncertain, she took a breath. She had memorized the turns Grim had taken, as a precaution. Still, Isla wondered if she was making a grave mistake as she stepped inside the labyrinth.

Power hummed somewhere inside the hedges, smothering her own. She could feel it biting against her cheeks, her fingertips.

It was quiet. Too quiet, almost, as if all life had been stolen within its walls. She imagined what it would be like to be trapped forever, to go crazed inside, searching for the way out.

The book seemed to hum in her hands. She opened it as she walked, flipping through the pages, seeing what might be revealed to her.

Nothing.

Just blank parchment. Not even a single marking. She frowned. Closed the book again.

By the time she heard the growl, it was too late.

The creature was on her, its teeth sinking into her calf as she screamed. The smell of her blood filled the air, and she kicked as hard as she could, foot finding hard skin. It was enough to get the beast off her and give her a chance to run.

That was when she saw what it was—a snarling four-legged creature with a squished, angry face, and tusks coming out of its front. Something about it was twisted. Wrong.

A creature from the storm. From the otherworld.

But there hadn't been a storm in weeks . . . unless there had been one far away. Unless the beast had been hiding all this time.

Its skin was plated in patches of scales like armor, and it roared, head to the sky, as if communicating with something. It sniffed wildly in the air, and Isla realized with a start that it didn't have eyes.

Smell. It went off smell, and hearing, similar to the creature in the mountain.

Her ankle was bleeding badly. She would need to return to the coffin later. She took off toward the maze's entrance, limping as fast as she could, shaking hand keeping a firm grip on the book, and froze.

Three more beasts awaited her.

They smelled her immediately, the one she had kicked in the face catching up. And all Isla could do was run. Into the maze she went, ankle screaming in pain as she ran as fast as she could, weighed down by her heavy fabrics. She tucked the book into the front of her dress to keep from losing it and soaked her cloak in her own blood. When a turn came up, she threw it in the other direction, over a hedge, and watched all four creatures lunge the opposite way.

She tore back down the path, but she had turned too many times in their pursuit. The directions she had memorized were now useless.

She was lost.

Ripping sounds reached her as the cloak was turned to shreds. Then, roaring. They were hungry. They had gotten a taste of her blood and wanted more.

Isla pressed against one of the hedge walls, panting, trying to keep quiet. They would smell her here. It was little use.

The growling was right behind her now.

If she was lost, she needed to get up, atop the hedges. She felt around her person. She had two daggers. Nearly useless against the scaled beasts . . . but she could use them to climb.

She stuck her blade into the thick hedge and heard the creatures erupt in growls. They had sensed her.

Her other blade reached high above, and she cried out as she hauled herself up, her ankle bleeding down the plants. Just three more stabs of the hedge should do it, she told herself. Then, she would be safe. The hedge was tall; she didn't think they could climb it.

She reached back to strike again—

And was dragged off the wall by a set of teeth.

Isla's breath left her as her back hit the ground. All she could do was watch as four sets of teeth hovered, snarling, ready to pounce.

The book against her chest was the only thing shielding her body from being ripped open, and it didn't stand a chance against those teeth.

The book.

Just as they leapt to finish their meal, Isla pulled the book out of her dress, hoped Aurora was right about it being cursed, and flung it open.

At first, nothing happened.

Then, an otherworldly scream cleaved through the air like a clap of thunder. Isla watched as nothing short of a demon crawled through the pages. It was winged, and sinewy, and didn't have a face, other than a mouth with more teeth than she had ever seen in any type of beast, rows of them, sharp as stacked blades. It hit the ground in front of her, resting on the talons of its wings and even the four-legged creatures backed away.

They didn't stand a chance. The demon lunged forward and ripped them to ribbons. Blood spattered as the creatures fought, covering Isla in it, but she wasn't safe. Not yet. When the demon was done with the beasts, it could turn for her . . . and she was still lost in the maze.

She tucked the book back against her chest and began to climb.

At any moment she could be torn to shreds. She could be pulled back off the wall. She knew that, and she kept climbing and climbing, dragging her bloody ankle behind her, until she reached the top and hauled herself over it.

The castle gleamed in front of her, just beyond the gardens.

She was right. The hedges were compacted, strong. Covered in a layer of ice.

Solid enough for her to run atop them.

She should go back to the palace, before she bled out . . . but she turned toward the coffin, glimmering in the center of the maze.

This could be her only chance to visit it without Grim. As soon as he saw her injury, he would be suspicious. She might never get this opportunity again. “You’re going to regret this,” she said to herself, before taking off toward the glittering metal.

She ran down row after row, until there was a gap. She needed to jump. She did, over and over, using skills honed from prowling the towns, jumping from rooftop to rooftop. On her last leap, her ankle twisted below her, and she hit the side of the opposite hedge with a thud that stole her breath, before sliding to the ground. Her head spun. Her body was sore everywhere. But she was close. She had seen it. Ignoring the pain, she got to her feet, turned the corner, and was nearly blinded by sparkling metal.

Her breathing labored, she inched toward the coffin. Curled her hands around the side. Pushed.

Nothing happened.

She tried again. Heaved against it with all her might. But it didn’t budge. Almost like it was enchanted.

Or cursed.

She remembered what the blacksmith said. Her blood was power.

She didn’t spare a moment before smearing the blood from her ankle across its opening.

Immediately, the blood began to spread, melting across the coffin. This time, she pushed—and it opened.

She looked inside, expecting to see a corpse. Waiting to steal a bone to use for her skyres.

But the coffin was empty.

Impossible. Had the body been moved? Stolen?

A screech like a talon across the sky shattered the silence, and the maze seemed to tremble around her, in anticipation.

The creature. It had finished with the others, and now, it would find her. She tucked the book to her side, scrambled to the closest hedge, and climbed for her life.

She ran, dragging her ankle behind her, along with a trail of blood. She had lost so much already.

After the next jump, she collapsed against the top of the hedge, her vision blurring. Her head spinning. She dragged herself back up,letting the pain pulsing through her ankle anchor her consciousness, but she stumbled, dropping the book. She didn't even see where it landed.

Already, she could barely feel her hands and fingers. This was bad.

Then it got worse.

There was rustling behind her, and she turned to find the demon from the book crawling up to the top of the hedges.

She whipped around and ran faster. Faster. So fast, she barely saw in front of her; all she knew is she needed to move. The castle was right there. So close. But her head was spinning now.

And there was one more jump left to the outer ring. She didn't think she could make it, not when her entire leg now had gone numb from the loss of blood. It was freezing. She sunk to her hands and knees and felt the ice, slippery beneath her palms. The cold seemed to stick to her, crawling into her lungs, stinging against her wound, slowing her breathing. Her eyes fluttered closed.

Somewhere behind her, the demon from the book screamed again, and she folded over, covering her ears.

There was an answering roar.

She recognized it immediately.

Grim.

With renewed hope, she flung herself through the air, just barely making it across the way. She hung off the side of the hedge and groaned as she pulled herself atop again with her last remaining effort. Just a little farther.

Stars spotted her vision. She saw the mouth of the labyrinth and forced herself forward. There. Just there.

She crawled to the edge, and her fingers were cut to ribbons as she reached within the thorned hedge for purchase. She tried to climb down the wall without her daggers, but she had lost too much blood. Her vision went black, and her hands went wholly numb. She fell halfway down—

Into Grim's arms.

Snow melted against the window; the glass heated by the roaring fire beside it. It was the first thing she saw when she awoke.

She was still in the winter palace, then. Flashes of the maze came in spurts. The four-legged creatures. Her ankle, torn open by their teeth. The demon from the book. Her running atop the maze.

She looked down at her ankle and found it wrapped around and around, in bandages already soaked with blood—but not as much as there should be. Grim was in the process of changing them.

When he saw her awake, he knelt beside her in an instant.

She strained to get up from the chaise he had dragged next to the fire.

"Creatures—"

"I saw them," he said. "Or what was left of them." He looked at her in question. She was good with her daggers, but even she could not shred a creature of that size the way that demon had.

"Something saved me," she admitted.

That was when Grim held up the book. He must have found it within the maze. Isla's reflexes made to fling it across the room, to warn Grim not to touch it.

Then, he held up the head of the faceless demon that had crept out of it.

Oh.

"It saved me," she said, a little sad to see it dead, even though it had hunted her.

He raised a brow at her. "It tried to tear me to pieces."

Fair.

Isla had seen the demon at work. Sometimes she forgot how powerful Grim was.

Then came questions she wasn't prepared for. "What were you doing in the maze, Isla? What is this book?" The pages had remained blank for him, then.

She stilled, wondering how much to say. She remembered how his advisors had warned him . . . had called her a traitor. A snake. Even now, though, Grim didn't look upset . . . no. If anything, he looked confused. Hurt.

She told part of the truth. "I thought it might help me find the portal."

He blinked. "Did it?"

She nodded. “It did.”

It had all come together on her way out of the maze.

He looked at her expectantly.

“The portal is the coffin.”

Grim’s eyes narrowed, considering.

“It’s empty. His flair was portaling.” Bones hold more power than blood. “I think . . . I think his bones created it, became the portal.”

Grim bit the inside of his cheek in concentration. “The maze . . . it hid its power.”

She nodded.

Isla expected to feel melting relief—they had found the portal. But it didn’t even look open. She had no idea how to permanently close it, or if that was even possible, when she couldn’t use power around it.

She sighed, leaning back, and caught a glimpse of glimmering ink. The swirl on her arm that she had previously kept hidden. Her sleeves had been torn by the beasts and thorned maze. It was fully visible between the tatters.

The shadows she had kept over them would have been released in the labyrinth. She had passed out before being able to put them back.

Grim had clearly seen it, while he had healed her. Slowly, she looked up at him. He didn’t drop her gaze as he said, “What, Hearteater, is that?”

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BONES

Isla told Grim everything about the skyres. About the augur's words. About her dwindling timeline. About the feather she spoke through. At first, the words came out slowly, but then, in a relieved rush. She was grateful to be burning at least some of the secrets between them.

The entire time, Grim just sat there, almost unnaturally still, as if forcing himself to be silent to let her finish.

Then, he said, simply, "No."

"No?"

He shook his head. "No. Your soul will not be the price to pay."

"Then what will?" she demanded. "Who will?"

He was silent.

"I'm going to keep using them," she said firmly. "This—this guilt. This blood on my hands. It will never be erased. But any sacrifice I have to make to do more good than bad . . . to make sure everyone doesn't die with me . . . I'm going to do it. It's my choice."

His eyes blazed into hers. They stared each other down.

Grim didn't agree with her . . . but she knew he wouldn't dare take away her choice. Not again. Begrudgingly, he nodded.

Grim looked away. For a few moments, there was silence, as he leaned over his knees, his hands pressed against them. He looked pensive, deep in thought. Then, he said, "I said I would choose you over the world, every single time." He glanced over at her again, and she nodded. "It's true. I would burn the world for you, in a moment. Without question." His throat worked. "But that doesn't mean I want us to live in its ashes." He sighed, and it seemed to move through his entire body. "I don't want the world to

die, heart. I've been trying to search for solutions. I thought . . . I thought maybe we could have a child."

She stilled. An heir would resolve his life being tied to his realm.

"The augur's read of your lifespan clearly makes that impossible," he said. He was right.

But the idea of having a child with him . . .

"It made me happy," he said, quietly. "It made me wish for another life. Another universe, where it was just us, just our family. One where we were free from all the responsibilities that bind us."

"I want that too," she said, the words a whisper. Her eyes burned, thinking about it. "A life with nothing binding me. It's what I've always wanted."

He almost smiled. He brushed away a tear that had slipped down her cheek. "We aren't supposed to want anything," he said gently. It was true. She had learned that from the time she could learn at all. Rulers were born simply to serve their people. Her life was not her own.

She leaned into him, and he gathered her to his chest. She buried her face in his shirt, her ear pressed against his heart. She relished in its beating. "Somewhere, out there, nearby, or in another world completely, there someone who got everything they wanted. It will never be us." She looked up at him. "But for them . . . for them, I'm happy. I hope they know how lucky they are."

"I'm not happy for them," he said. "I envy them."

She smiled. "I envy them too."

His arms tightened around her. He whispered, right against the crown of her head, "I'm holding everything I've ever wanted."

Isla turned and looked up at him, only to find him studying her.

His eyes were almost glimmering with intensity. "You said before, I don't know what love is . . . but I do. I know it means us being infinite. It means our fates being tied together regardless of where we are, or whether we live or die." He trailed his knuckles down her cheek. "I'm not sure of much in this world, Isla, but I am sure of this. My love for you doesn't know reason. It doesn't know limit. It doesn't know death. In every universe, every timeline, I am yours . . . and you are mine."

She kissed him as snow began to fall outside the glass window. She held him and thought to herself that this moment was perfect.

It was almost easy to pretend that there weren't a million problems waiting beyond, like distant arrows aimed at this glass house, ready to shatter it.

The augur eyed her as she stalked toward him, having stepped through his waterfall without an invitation. He was standing at the ready, as if he had been expecting her.

"I wondered when you would show up," he said. "Where are my hearts?"

Her grin was poisonous. "I'll feed you the one in your chest, if you'd like."

Slowly, he smiled, stretching his sickly skin taut, his pointed teeth glittering. "Oh, the prophet would have liked you . . ."

"Speaking of him," she said. "I'm assuming you have his blood."

He didn't make a single move that signaled surprise.

"You have more than that . . . don't you?"

The augur lifted a bony shoulder. "I have his skull. And, of course, blood."

She imagined stealing their dear prophet's body might have been what had gotten the augur ousted from the mountain.

They knew where the portal was—but not what to do next. There was a path to find out she hadn't yet explored, mostly because she had believed it impossible. Now, she was desperate. "The lost pages of the prophet's book. They speak about how to open and close portals. Right?"

He nodded. "They detail exactly how the prophet got here."

"They were written in his blood?" She needed to confirm.

He nodded again.

"If I put a tracking skyre on his bone . . . would it lead me to it?"

He seemed surprised. "You learned how to form it?"

No. She hadn't. But the book from the winter castle had given her several original markings. It was dangerous—and painful—but she would try each one, until she got it right. "Not yet. But I will."

The augur regarded her curiously. For a moment, it looked like he was going to say something. Then, he seemed to think better of it and scurried deeper into the cave.

He returned holding an object far smaller than a skull. It gleamed in the limited light. He motioned for her to outstretch her hand, and she did, watching as he dropped it in the center of her palm.

A tooth.

“Write the skyre on this, with your blood. Follow it closely.”

She nodded.

“Oh, and Isla?”

“Yes?”

He reached out, just as something dripped from her face. Crimson stained his finger, and he licked it away.

Her own hand rushed to her lips . . . only to find them coated in blood. She was bleeding from her nose. From the corner of her mouth.

The augur tutted. “The price of the skyres,” he said. “I can already taste them in your blood . . . souring it.” He frowned. “It will get worse, the more you make.” He eyed the tooth in her palm. She curled her fingers around it.

“Such guilt you wear,” he said, licking his lips. “I taste it so sharply. You want so badly to be the hero in this destiny.”

She remembered what the prophet-followers had said. That she was destined to either save the world . . . or destroy it.

The augur seemed to know it too.

“You are made from both light and dark, and so much more. You don’t even know it. But you will. Soon.” He sighed. “The traitor. She’s been uncovered. She’s rising.”

“Traitors,” Isla said, confused by his words. “My guardians.”

He looked surprised. His crusted lips nearly cracked and bled from how wide he smiled. “No . . . you don’t know. The traitor . . . she’s closer than you realize.”

“What do you mean?” she demanded, her fist tightening around the tooth.

But the auger only laughed. He turned and walked deeper into the cave, the blood in his pool rippling as he passed it by. His laugh echoed, until it, like him, disappeared.

Grim found her on Lynx’s back, halfway to the castle. Wraith had recovered enough to fly. He landed, his wings shuddering slightly with the impact, but

when he saw Isla, he smiled.

She rushed to him, and he bent his head low to brush it against hers, sending her flying back, against Lynx, who grumbled.

He too, however, looked pleased to see Wraith flying again.

She turned to Grim, and her smile slowly shrank. “What is it?”

“Another gravesite has been ransacked. Worse than before.”

The augur’s words were fresh on her mind as she said, “Take us there.”

He did. They landed in front of a gravesite.

Isla’s mouth went dry. She didn’t dare say a word.

The graves hadn’t just been desecrated . . . they had been raided.

“The bones are gone,” Astria said. She had been waiting in the clearing.

The holes were empty. Barren.

She could almost hear the augur’s pealing laughter echoing through her skull. “Terra and Poppy. Are they still imprisoned?” she asked Grim.

He nodded.

“Take me to them.”

The prison was on an island off the coast of Nightshade. Large waves crashed against its exterior. One side had windows, the other did not. Guilt stabbed her through the stomach, knowing this is where she had sent her guardians.

They were led in front of her, still restrained. The prison itself had been built thousands of years before, from glimmering shademade metal. No power could be used inside, so they had been brought outside, to her.

Poppy looked afraid. Terra looked murderous.

Isla had sworn to herself she wouldn’t use Oro’s power, but she had to know. She had to be sure. She closed her eyes. Reached for the connection.

Part of her wondered if it wouldn’t be there. Part of her hoped it wouldn’t.

But, clear as a beam of sunlight, she felt it in her bones.

She grabbed onto it.

“Tell me again,” she said slowly. “Tell me again all that you did not do.”

Terra looked ready to gut her, but she said, “We did not destroy the nightbane. We did not desecrate any graves. And,” her voice was clear as day, “we did not kill your parents.”

Poppy repeated the words.

Isla waited to feel the bitter taste of a lie on her tongue. She readied to feel it like poison in her veins.

It did not come.

They were telling the truth.

Isla didn’t know what to believe—what to feel. Her sanity was unwinding within her. Everything she had believed to be true was a lie. She had locked up her guardians, and they had been innocent. She no longer trusted her own judgment.

It was the middle of the night when she turned slowly in the sheets, next to Grim. His wide chest was bare, illuminated by a sliver of moonlight peeking through the curtain they had rushed to close when Grim had grabbed her on her way out of the bath.

She carefully moved his arm from her waist and left the bed. Her steps were quiet, careful, but Grim awoke anyway. “Hearteater?” he asked quietly, his voice thick with sleep.

“I’ll be right back,” she told him, and headed into the bathroom. She waited until his breaths slowed again.

Then, she portaled to her island.

Grim knew she was using skyres . . . but he didn’t need to see the pain it took to create them.

The tooth glimmered in the moonlight.

She spread out the pages before her—four full skyres she had managed to get from the book, and the half of the tracking skyre. They were supposed to fit together somehow.

Her tests would be run on another object—a piece of bark she had peeled from a nearby tree.

Her eyes closed. She breathed deeply. Then, she dipped the feather’s tip into her vein, until it gathered her blood like ink. She winced against the slight burn, but that wasn’t the hard part, no.

The moment she began to create the shape upon the bark, the edges of the skyre forming, her veins began to heat.

Please be right, she thought, remembering what the blacksmith had said about making markings incorrectly. There was a price.

As her shape closed, she paid it.

Her body seized. She began thrashing on the ground, she barely missed biting her tongue. Instead of feeling fire through her veins, she felt as if each one was being plucked out of her body, torn through her skin. Her scream scraped roughly against her throat; it seemed to swallow the world.

The pain—it was too much.

Her powers rose up to the surface, that beast within her lashing out.

Plumes of black smoke barreled through the woods and down the beach, ending in flames that hissed into ice when they met the sea. The forest floor lifted like a carpet and became a field of thorns.

She screamed and screamed, the pain and power it called blinding her, eating all her senses, until it all became too much, and the world fell into darkness.

The noon sun peeked right through the treetops. She squinted against it, then rose, only to find herself covered in dirt.

Pain surged through her, a reminder of last night.

She had messed up the skyre, and it had nearly killed her. The peel of bark sat buried beneath a layer of soot, glimmering with her blood.

She didn't know if she could do this again, until she got it right. She didn't know if she would survive it.

Her body was sore. Her power was spent, scraped clean. She nearly fell over as she made to stand. Her head throbbed. She had dreamed of the village again—the screaming, the darkness, the chaos.

How long had she been asleep?

Isla portaled back to her room and found it empty. She cursed. It was already past noon. Grim would be well into his day already and wondering where she had disappeared to. He would be getting worried. As she changed out of her clothes, she noticed the commotion outside. Soldier boots. Orders. Panic.

Grim portaled in a moment later, his hardened expression shifting to relief when he saw her.

Then, his gaze dropped to her bare feet, which were covered in dirt. "Where were you?"

"The Wildling newland," she said, the lie escaping her with surprising ease. Isla wanted to tell him about the island. But there was something

about it belonging to her father—something about him having kept it a secret—that made her hold back. She turned toward the bathroom. “I was experimenting with the skyres. What’s the panic?”

“There’s been an attack. Many people are dead.”

Isla stopped in her tracks. She whipped around. “Another storm?”

He shook his head. “No. An attack.”

“What? Where?”

“A town to the northwest,” he said, studying her. “It’s one of our military bases. But civilians died too.”

That didn’t make any sense. Who would attack now? Oro certainly wouldn’t. He didn’t want war and wouldn’t kill Nightshade innocents. The rest of the realms didn’t have the motive or resources.

Poppy and Terra might have done something out of vengeance, she thought. But no—she had already wrongly accused them of murder before.

“Why would anyone attack Nightshade? How would they even get access?” Almost the entire island was surrounded by reefs, making it nearly impossible to reach by boat. Cleo’s fleet could only anchor to the north. She supposed the perpetrators could have flown, but it was a long journey, and the Skylings were peaceful people. There was no need to start a war between realms, not now.

“We’re not sure. We just have initial reports, we’re working to get more witness accounts.”

Isla nodded. Good. “Are we going to the town?”

He looked at her. “Do you want to?”

“Of course I want to.”

She turned to the dresser and began putting on a new set of pants, boots, and a long-sleeved shirt. A bath would have to wait.

As she made to put her hair up, however, Grim said, “You should stay. Get cleaned up; I will take care of it.”

Isla froze, fingers still against her roots. “You want me to stay?”

“You didn’t sleep last night.” He brushed his lips against her forehead. “Rest, heart. I’ll be back soon.”

Then, before she could protest again, he was gone.

Isla’s eyes narrowed at the door. There was something he wasn’t telling her.

She slipped into the hall. Keeping to the shadows, she followed him all the way to the throne room, where his legion waited. Just before he entered, Astria stopped him at the doors.

Isla pressed against a wall around the corner, far enough not to be sensed but close enough to listen.

“Yes?” Grim said, even more gruff than usual.

“More witnesses,” her cousin said. “They’re all saying the same thing, ruler.”

“They’re confused. They don’t know what they saw.”

Astria was silent for a few moments before she spoke again. Her voice was resolute. “Is that what you’re going to tell them to say?”

Grim made a sound like a growl.

“They’re reliable witnesses. Previous soldiers. They are certain in their accounts.”

“And what, exactly, are they claiming they saw?” Grim demanded.

“A Wildling, coming up from the ground. Leveling the town with power they have never seen before. Pulling bodies straight into the dirt. Suffocating them.”

Isla wasn’t breathing. A Wildling attacked a town on Nightshade. A Wildling with power they had never seen before. None of her people had power like that, at least that she knew of. She supposed they could be hiding it, but to what end? They were happy here.

It was the traitor. She was still out there.

“They saw her, ruler,” Astria continued. “Their description matches her exactly. One of the witnesses has seen her in person, at the court. He confirmed it.”

Her.

She meant Isla.

Her blood went cold, then boiled. How could Astria accuse her of such a thing? Did the fact that they were family mean nothing to her?

Grim’s voice was a growl as he said, right in Astria’s face, “Are you accusing my wife of destroying a town?”

Astria did not back down as she said, “She’s done it before.”

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BLOODLESS

Isla didn’t stick around to see Grim’s rage, but she felt it, the castle trembling around her. She raced to their room.

A town was destroyed. And they thought she was responsible.

That was why Grim hadn’t wanted her to come, why his eyes had lingered at the dirt on her body.

Did he think she did it too?

Did he suspect that if she showed up at the town, they would point to her and scream? Like she was a villain who had returned to finish them off?

No. It wasn’t her.

Just as she denied it, a sliver of doubt spiraled through the back of her mind like a blade. She had dreamed of destroying the village. She had woken up later than usual, covered in more dirt than expected. The skyre had been made incorrectly. She thought of the auger and blacksmith’s warnings, the price of using the markings.

Had she attacked the village unknowingly?

Had the monster that had been growing within her taken over while she slept?

No. Tears swept down her face.

No.

She shouldn’t have taken the bracelets off. She shouldn’t have trusted herself, even with the skyre. Especially with the skyre.

Isla needed to see the ruins. Maybe she would remember. Maybe it would be clear that she’d had nothing to do with it.

She knew the general direction of the village, but it took one of her father’s maps and five tries to get it right with her starstick. By the time she

landed, encased in shadows, Grim was already there with his soldiers, searching through the rubble.

Her knees nearly buckled. It looked so much like the village she had destroyed.

A baby wailed. A woman cried out for a daughter she still couldn't find. Her hands were bloody from desperately digging through rubble.

Instead of ash, there was dirt. Everywhere. It was as if the ground had swallowed the town, had dragged the bodies beneath. A few lifeless hands were sticking up through the ground, in a final call for help.

Someone grabbed her hand and she gasped, realizing she had lost hold on her shadows. "Hearteater," a voice said. Grim.

He wrapped them in his own shadows, shielding them from the world.

"I didn't do this," Isla said. She couldn't have. That was what she told herself. She shook her head. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I swear it."

"I believe you," he said instantly, before pulling her into his arms. Her cheek against his chest, his hand cupped the back of her head.

Grim trusted her. Immediately.

As he held her, hand smoothing down her spine, she couldn't help thinking that he shouldn't.

She's done it before.

Astria's words had gutted her with more efficiency than any blade could. She couldn't even be mad at her cousin, because she was right. Isla had unintentionally killed hundreds in the past.

Who was to say this wasn't her either?

She knew the facts. Nightshades had seen her. Who was she to question their testimony?

She barely slept, afraid that if she did, her body might act on its own, relive its nightmares again and again. Grim's arm around her now felt more like a precaution.

"If I leave in the middle of the night . . . follow me," she told him before bed one night, and he just nodded. That was the furthest she could go in acknowledging that the attack might have been her. Grim's eyes were clear of any judgment.

Kill anyone you want, heart, he had said before. I will never judge you.

His words had once been a balm, a sigh of relief that someone could see the worst in her without flinching.

Now, she wondered if it had been permission for the worst part of her to roam free.

Follow the snakes. The words echoed through her head as she attempted to draw the skyres, paying the price with every try until she finally got it. She didn't feel any rush of triumph when the skyre gleamed upon the tooth.

Follow the snakes.

She remembered the augur's laugh when he realized she hadn't figured it out, she didn't know who the traitor was.

When you learn the truth of yourself, your path will be clear, he had said. She thought of the sculpture on his wall. Her, wrapped in serpents.

She thought of her dreams, of drowning in scales.

She thought of seeing the snakes in her mind, crawling through the halls, leading her to a mirror. To her reflection.

Skyred tooth in pocket, she visited Wren and watched as every snake on the tree turned toward her. She stilled as they inched up her legs to wrap around her chest and arms, as if summoned.

Follow the snakes. She had.

And they had all led to her.

Grim was sitting on his throne when she entered the room. He looked exhausted. Still, the shadows at his feet puddled when he saw her.

He was in front of her in an instant. "What is it, Hearteater?"

He studied the snakes still curled around her body, hissing.

"What if it was me?"

"It wasn't." He seemed certain.

She shook her head. "What if I'm what everyone says I am? What if I'm a traitor? What if I'm a monster? What if I end up being your downfall?"

Grim's look was fierce and fearsome as he caught her chin in his palm. He tilted her face toward his. "Then I will defend you until my last breath."

Her voice trembled. "You can't mean that."

"I do."

"You shouldn't," she said. "It's madness. It's . . ." The floor began to tremble.

She frowned. “What—”

Isla was flung back as the castle’s foundation lurched. Only Grim’s shadows kept her from crashing against the wall.

There was a moment of stillness, of silence.

Then the castle began to shake in earnest, as if it was being slowly pushed off its cliff. Another storm—a big one.

The doors slammed open as Astria rushed inside, her two blades in her hands. It was the first time Isla had seen her since she had accused her of destroying the village.

“There’s an army at our steps,” she said, out of breath, her eyes narrowing at Isla. “They—they look like ours.”

“What do you mean they look like ours?” Grim bellowed.

“They are ours,” she said.

That didn’t make sense. Was this a coup? But Grim’s entire army wouldn’t dare rise against him. His death would mean death to the mall.

No. This was something else.

Windows began shattering from above, in the highest corners of the chamber, one by one, glass raining down, fracturing against the marble.

Branches and rocks like blades skewered from every direction. Guards up on the balcony were sucked out of the room.

Grim reached for Isla, seeming to anticipate something she couldn’t; but just before his fingers met hers, the ground below her feet split open like a broken stitch.

And she was swallowed up.

Isla was dragged through the ground, a tunnel forming below her feet. If it wasn’t for the Starling shield that she made around herself and her snakes, they would have all been shredded along the rock. She fought against the invisible hold, clawed at the walls with her power, but whatever this was, it was stronger.

Just when she managed to overpower it, she was deposited into a room. She was deep underground. It was dark save for fireflies, stuck against the cavernous ceiling.

In front of her stood a woman. She had long dark hair, large eyes, and tan skin. There were vines wrapped around her arms and legs. Her clothes

were nothing more than a tapestry of woven branches, flowers, grass, and leaves.

“You’re Wildling,” Isla said, thinking back to the vines and branches that had crashed through the castle. “You’re the Wildling that attacked the village.” Her resemblance to Isla was uncanny. She now understood why, from a distance, the witnesses had believed it to be her.

But Astria had spoken about a Nightshade army. That was impossible. Were the Wildling people planning a coup behind her back, with this woman at the helm?

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” the woman asked. She was speaking softly, but her voice seemed to echo, resonant in a way Isla had never heard.

She didn’t. And though Isla had barely been a ruler to her people, she knew them all. “No. Should I?”

The woman looked sad. “No. I suppose you shouldn’t.”

Isla felt around for her powers. They were right there, just like her blades, waiting for her to take them.

But this woman had attacked a village. She had ambushed Grim’s castle. She apparently had an army. She had captured Isla for a reason. Before she escaped, Isla needed answers.

“What do you want?” Isla demanded.

The woman smiled. “To make this world anew.”

Whatever she’d been expecting to come out of the woman’s mouth wasn’t this. “What do you mean? What do you want with the Nightshades?”

“Simple,” she replied. “I want to kill every last one of them.”

Isla’s vision narrowed to a tunnel. Whoever this was, she was done listening to her. Fast as lightning, Isla’s fingers curled around a blade at her thigh, and she threw it right into the woman’s chest before she could blink. Isla watched the metal pierce her heart.

The Wildling looked down. She didn’t collapse, didn’t bleed, didn’t die. All she did was frown, and Isla watched in terror as her knife slowly inched out of the woman’s chest and dropped to the floor, clean.

Impossible. Isla gathered all her power—energy, fire, ice, vines, shadows—and unleashed it onto the woman. The Wildling was punctured in a hundred different places at once. One arm was sliced clean off.

Isla was panting, waiting for the woman to drop dead. Waiting to feel the curl in her bones at yet another kill.

But it never came.

Isla watched in horror as all the gaps in her body filled again, without a single drop of blood. As her arm was remade, before her eyes, the arteries and skin growing like bark and vines.

“You didn’t let me finish,” the Wildling said, sounding annoyed, as she stood again to her full height. She took a step forward, and Isla backed away, until her spine hit the wall. “I want to kill every last one of them . . . and use them to build something better. A new world.”

“What makes you think you can create a world?” she asked.

She smiled. “Because I’ve done it before.”

The snakes around her began to hiss. They started to uncurl. Isla watched as every serpent slowly slithered down her body, one by one . . .

And went to her.

They wrapped around the woman’s arms and chest, just like the etching in the cave. The future the augur had promised.

That was when Isla realized the woman looked like her, more than just from a distance. They shared features. They had the same lips. The same cheekbones. The same exact shade of green eyes.

The Wildling’s smile was wicked. “Now you’re getting it. It’s nice to meet you, Isla. I’m Lark Crown.”

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LARK

Lark Crown. Her ancestor. One of the three founders of Lightlark.

“But you’re—”

“Dead?” She motioned down at herself. The snakes continued to wrap around and around, tightening. “As you’ve seen, I’m hard to kill.”

Icy fear spread through her chest . . . but part of Isla was relieved. All those times she had felt so alone—she wasn’t. She had Wildling family. She had someone who knew what it was like, having these uncontrollable powers. “Where were you?”

“Buried. By someone I trusted.”

Isla didn’t understand. Lark must have known that, because her gaze softened. She looked so much like her. So much like her mother—at least the glimpses Lynx had given her.

“Worlds are built on bones, you see. So many needed to die to feed the lands when we made Lightlark. So much power had to be given. Including our own.”

“For the heart of Lightlark,” she said, her voice just a whisper.

Lark nodded. “The heart had more than that. It was stolen from the world from which we came. A seed of endless ability.” She could feel a whisper of that power in her heart, where it had marked her. “Nightshade didn’t have that. Cronan used his children for power, burying them, but one line could give only so much.” She curled her lip in disgust. “He was supposed to die, to give the ground what it wanted: some of the original power born of the otherworld. Instead, he used me to anchor it.” Vines exploded out of Lark’s hands, coating the ground, brambles with thorns everywhere. “He buried me in metal that leeched my power, so I could not

use it to escape. My strength fed the land for millennia until I was set free." By who?

Then, Lark's words sank in. "Cronan . . . is alive?"

His coffin was empty, but no . . . it was impossible.

Though Lark standing here, in front of her—that was impossible too.

Lark nodded, and a chill crested along her arms, remembering everything Grim had said about him.

"Where is he?"

"Back in the world from which we came."

"He used the portal here," Isla breathed.

"He created the portal," Lark said. "He drained me of as much power as he could, over and over, until he had enough to use his flair and rip a hole in this world, to the next."

"But it should have killed him . . . the journey." She remembered what the prophet-follower had said about the portal.

"He is more powerful than you can imagine," she said. "He could have made it himself, but the power he stole from me ensured he would stay alive." That fact seemed to haunt her.

"How do you know he wasn't killed?"

Lark tilted her head at her. "His curses have survived. They were each bound to his blood. They would have died with him."

His curses.

She had so many questions, but few of them mattered now, when Lark was here before her, threatening to destroy their world. "Why do you want to create a new world? Why do you want to kill everyone?"

"It's what I should have done in the first place. I should have killed Cronan and Horus and built a world from their bones. I won't make that mistake again."

Lark meant to kill Oro and Grim and build a new world with their power.

Anger formed a flame in her heart as her power surged forward. But her ancestor was impossible to kill. The best thing she could do now is get as much information as possible, anything she could possibly use to defeat her.

"And me?" Isla dared ask.

She understood the prophet-followers' warning now. Lark was the Wildling traitor that wanted her dead. Not Terra. Not Poppy. Not Wren. Not any of her subjects.

Lark was the one who killed the nightbane. She was the one who turned up the graves. She was the one who killed those people.

She was the true snake-queen.

Her voice was emotionless. "I planned to kill you too, but you might be more useful to me alive. You have access to all the realms' power." She looked at her as if she could see through her. "The heart of Lightlark has marked you. I can feel its energy. I need its power to create a new world. You will help me find it."

How could she believe Isla would give up on her world so easily? "I'll never help you. I don't care if you're my blood."

Lark tilted her head. "Is that true? You're so lonely. I can see it all over your face. You're alone in this world, Isla. No one understands you. You're a traitor everywhere."

How could she know that?

"I know you better than you think," Lark said, smiling. "You are so much like me. You have no idea."

Isla bared her teeth. "I would never kill innocents for power."

"Oh? But haven't you?"

She felt like she couldn't breathe. Suddenly, the darkness, the muskiness of the rock, the narrowness of the underground . . . it felt like the world was closing around her.

"I can give you life, Isla," Lark said, and time seemed to still.

The word was barely a whisper. "What?"

"I can save you. You have seen what I can do."

She had seen.

She wanted to live, she wanted to save Nightshade. But not at the cost of this world.

Isla needed to warn Grim. Oro. They had no idea what had been awoken. They had no idea what was coming.

"Think about it," Lark said, seeming to know what was going to happen next.

Isla reached above and formed a tunnel in the ground, her skyre directing her Wildling abilities, sharpening them. She crashed through the

rock until she surfaced, sunlight spilling all around her. She was panting, her heartbeat like a merciless drum in her chest. She coughed up dirt.

This couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening.

Isla turned. The Nightshade castle glimmered in the distance.

It was surrounded by an army. Grim's army, just as Astria had said. They wore the black shining armor.

She took a deep breath, then shot into the air toward the keep, using her Skyling power. She landed roughly on the steps in front of the door, guarding it from the coup. Searching for Astria or Grim.

She barely got her arms up before a weapon was upon her. She felt the force of the blow through the crown of her head as her blade rushed up to meet a sword longer than her leg. She wasn't prepared—she wasn't in armor.

The warrior went to skewer her through the stomach, but she whirled to the side and cut off his hand with a blade-like slice of Starling energy. It fell to the floor, and she stole his sword.

She expected blood. Screaming. Cursing.

Instead, the warrior's hand fell, and he didn't even look like he noticed. He kept advancing.

This was not Grim's army.

This was something worse. Something buried that had risen.

She thought about all the graves that had been ransacked. She thought about how Lark had been able to regenerate herself.

Before she had time to even consider the possibility, the warrior pulled another blade from his belt and attempted to stab her in the throat. She ducked and struck her stolen sword through the gaps in his armor, right in the stomach. It stuck all the way through him, but he didn't so much as falter.

Dozens of soldiers were closing in. She was surrounded. Grim's true army was approaching now, portaled in spurts by their ruler, but it was impossible to see who was who, when they wore the same metal.

Confusion, clashing swords, chaos, as the warriors discovered what they were up against. Then, death. Soon, she could tell which were Grim's soldiers by all the blood. By the bellows of pain, as they fought an enemy that felt none.

They were losing.

She shot into the sky, flying high above. She could wipe the army clean with a burst of her ability, especially with her skyre. But the soldiers were all interspersed, battling one another. What if she injured Grim's army as well?

Did she care? She remembered their brutality as she had fought against them on the other side . . .

Yes. She did care. To have any chance against Lark, they would need Grim's forces.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the seed of power in her chest. The world dimmed. Her panic quieted. Her abilities were a horizonless sea and her skyre was a gleaming sieve, filtering it through, shaping it into a scythe. Her marking burned as she summoned its control, trading it for a shred of her essence. She breathed in. Out.

And unleashed.

Her arms flung out, and from her fingers, silver sparks exploded, smothering the world, rippling, targeting only the bloodless soldiers. They fell into shards, breaking until they were nothing but indistinguishable pieces.

Grim's army stopped. Looked up at her.

And they started to run, fleeing as if she was the enemy about to strike them down. She found herself smiling. That was what they expected. They hated her. She found herself wondering if she should do it. Wondering if she should give into that rage, that revenge. Especially the cowards who ran, when there was a battle right in front of them.

In the end, she let them flee. Let them fear her.

Some remained. They stood firm in their places. She nodded down to them.

Then she threw her arm out, and shadows formed a tidal wave, washing over the entire army, swallowing only the ones who didn't bleed.

When the darkness cleared and Grim's remaining forces found themselves whole, they advanced toward the next wave of bloodless soldiers.

Again and again she struck, clearing the way for the Nightshade warriors. Still, Lark's soldiers were relentless, attacking from all sides; and some of Grim's army were cut down, no match for an enemy that felt no pain. That didn't bleed. That kept going, even while missing limbs.

She raged until all the bloodless army was vanquished. She breathed heavily, nearly spent—and that was when she heard them. Distant screams coming from the direction of the closest village.

They needed her.

As she raced through the sky, she saw mile after mile of warriors marching as one.

Thousands of them.

Bigger than Grim's current army. Millennia worth of dead, risen.

Her throat went dry. There were too many. And they were headed toward all the villages, as if to recruit new soldiers.

One had already been infiltrated, the wall around the town turned to rubble. The bloodless warriors were clogging the streets, advancing, marching over dead bodies that were being pulled into the soil. Dead innocents.

Villagers screamed as they ran away, only going quiet as the soldiers cut down everyone in their path.

Ash. Bodies. Shapes—

She wouldn't let these people die.

With the force of a meteor, Isla landed in the streets, right between the bloodless soldiers and the villagers in their path.

She gathered the remaining power in the center of her chest—and set it free.

Oro's flames—fire tinged in blue—exploded out of her, filling the tunnel of the town. It raged, eating the bloodless soldiers, burning them, until their bodies came apart before her. When it all ran out, she could barely breathe, and only singed armor remained. She folded over, chest heaving.

A crash sounded behind her, and she whirled around, hands up, ready to strike—only to find Wraith standing in the middle of the town.

Grim was on his back.

She was in his arms in a moment.

He looked her over frantically. "We searched everywhere. Lynx was tracking your scent—"

She didn't realize she was crying until Grim frowned and wiped her ears away, cupping her face. "Heart," he said steadily. "Who took you?"

She told him everything. Who the traitor was. What she looked like. What happened when Isla delivered what should have been a dozen deaths upon her.

Grim had been right. The recent deaths . . . it hadn't been her.

It had been something far worse. "This army . . . it falls only to rise again. Even with limbs missing. Even with their heads missing."

"I know. Hundreds of people are dead."

"Then her army will only grow."

She looked around at the injured villagers. The blood painting the streets. The screams and cries surrounding them.

Her power was spent; she felt ready to collapse, but they couldn't leave the other villages defenseless. "We need to go," she said. Grim nodded.

They raced to get on Wraith's back, and then they were off.

Nightshade had been overtaken. Every single village was being swarmed by soldiers. They were everywhere, like an endless plague, worse than the storms.

"Call back your forces," she told Grim. "Portal any of your people in our path away. So we don't end up killing them all."

Grim did.

She watched them retreat, building up her strength. Calling upon her skyre, using it to leech her of more power, to fill her with all that was left.

Then, from Wraith's back, they both raged. Fire met shadow and killed everything in its path.

She knew Grim was one of the most powerful rulers. She had seen him fight. Still, she hadn't been prepared to watch his shadows swallow the world. They rippled across the entirety of his land, devouring everything for miles. Even the trees were cut down, the ground wiped clean.

He could skin the world clean of life. She could see that. It might have scared her before, but now she almost smiled, watching the soldiers become nothing. Watching everything become nothing.

Her shadows joined his, filling in every gap, until they formed a united wall, an endless surge that made the ground itself tremble in fear. She threw all of herself into it, every bit of pain and fury and pulse of the skyre. Isla screamed as the power was scraped out of her, as every bit seemed to be eaten up.

“You’re going to hurt yourself,” Grim said, but she kept going. Children were dying. Innocents. She heard their screams, and they mixed with the ones she’d heard in her head constantly for months.

They landed in another village, and she started to fight with a shimmering starblade, formed from energy. Everything in her path died. Over and over and over she fought, blinded by purpose and rage. She used every ability in her arsenal, and when one was snuffed out—sapped to the dregs—she reached for another. And another. She fought, and depleted her power, until it was just a whisper, and then she used her swords.

She didn’t stop until Wraith was behind her again and Grim’s hand was on her hip. She whipped around to find him covered in dirt and blood.

She realized with horror it was his; the soldiers couldn’t bleed. She raced to find a major wound, but it was mainly cuts.

“They’re gone, heart,” he said.

“What?”

“They just . . . left. Like they had been called off. Their bodies went straight through the ground.”

Lark must be replenishing her forces.

She remembered what Lark had said . . . what she had offered. Life.

But this wasn’t life. Not truly. Her forces had been drained of their souls. They were just bodies.

Grim looked spent. More exhausted than she had ever seen him. “She has an endless army. One that can never die. Never be stopped.”

There would be no winning against a force like this.

Screams still rang around them. The cries of the injured and dying. Grim portaled them all to the Wildling keep. They didn’t have any healing elixirs left, but they had basic remedies. It wouldn’t be enough. People would die . . .

This was what Lark had wanted, she knew, rage boiling through her veins. She had killed the nightbane so more people would die when she attacked. So that more people would join her army.

This entire time, Lark had been planning against them.

Grim portaled her to her room so she could get her starstick. She needed to help get more people to the Wildling keep. But just as she went to grab it, it glowed. Then pulsed, as if trying to tell her something. Tentatively, she grabbed it.

When she fell through her puddle of stars, it wasn't to her family's home.

The blacksmith was pacing his forge. For once, he looked happy to see her. It was hot inside, as if he had just finished making something.

He handed her a dagger by the blade.

She frowned down at it. "It's not time yet. Not for a couple of weeks."

"I've called in my favor early." He looked restless, a single eye glued to the entrance, as if he was waiting for something. "I trust you've seen her?"

Lark. Of course. Isla nodded. Understanding washed over her. "Has she visited you?"

"Not yet," he said. "But she will." His tone was ominous.

Isla realized then that the blacksmith must have been the one to put Lark in containment. She asked him, and he confirmed.

"If she's this powerful, how did he do it?" Isla asked. "How did Cronan trap her? How did he wound her?"

He smiled ruefully. "He didn't. Lark loved him. She cannot be incapacitated, but she sleeps, just like the rest of us."

"He took her while she was sleeping?"

He nodded.

For a moment, she almost felt bad for the Wildling. She couldn't imagine such a betrayal. Cronan was truly ruthless.

"We don't have much time," the blacksmith said. "That's why I summoned you."

She frowned. "How did you do that, with my portaling device?"

He tilted his head at her, single eye narrowing. "Who, Wildling, do you think made it?"

Of course. She owed him so much, for creating the one thing that had made her childhood tolerable.

"And I've made you something else." He unveiled what he had been working on for months—a suit of armor. A breastplate fitted exactly to her measurements, by the look of it, and crafted from the thinnest metal imaginable. Sleeves of tightly woven chainmail and boots of leather and metal. Pants of the same material. The metal was a sparkling silver with roses painted onto the wrist plates. It glimmered beneath the light. Shademade.

This was what had been keeping him busy.

“Why?” she asked, in awe at the beauty of his craft.

“You will need it.”

“To fight Lark?”

He nodded. “For that . . . and so much more.”

But he had begun working on this before Lark had attacked. “How—”

“I’m sure by now the prophet’s followers have found you.”

Pain lanced through her as she remembered Sairsha and the others, dead by her hand. She nodded.

“I never believed in their prophecies . . . not until I met you. And then I understood. Who your parents were . . . your flair . . . it all began making sense.”

“What did?”

“That you were born to either destroy the world or save it.”

She paled at his words, the ones she had heard before. Isla shook her head. “I don’t want this armor. I don’t want this role.”

“Yet they’re yours anyway.” He presented her with a set of knives, which fit into thin pockets in her armor. Every little piece had been considered, crafted for her. Her eyes burned, looking at it. “Remember, Isla. Weapons are nothing without those who wield them.”

He looked past her, as if seeing something she couldn’t. He frowned.

“She’s coming.”

Isla imagined he’d made enchanted devices to warn if anyone was nearby. Or maybe he could sense the Wildling’s blood. He was suddenly rushing, looking around his forge as if making sure he didn’t miss anything.

“I can’t be killed, but I can be compelled,” he said. “My skills have been twisted by people like her for millennia. She will use me to destroy this world, just as she did to make it. She needs me. Do not allow her to have me.”

Isla shook her head. “But I might need you,” she said, tears sweeping down her cheeks. “I—I might need you to help me save it.”

The blacksmith paused then. Smiled. “You have always had everything you needed.” He handed her one of the daggers from her armor. It was sharp and efficient. Perfect for just this task. “Now, make it quick, Wildling.” She gripped the hilt. Hesitated.

“Your name,” she said. “What is your name?” She had never asked before.

He squinted. His eyes glazed over, as if seeing past her, to another life. Another world. “I—I don’t remember,” he said softly. His gaze focused again, as he looked to the door. “She’s almost here. Now, Wildling.”

Isla struck.

Just before the metal touched his skin, his hand curled around the blade. “I remember now,” he said quickly. “Ferrar. My name is Ferrar.” He let her go.

Ferrar gasped as the blade went through his heart. Tears traced Isla’s cheeks, one after the other, as he slumped over. She fought with all her strength to keep him upright, but he was too heavy, so she sank to the ground alongside him.

Brambles began filling the forge. She could feel Lark’s power overtaking it.

She wiped her cheek against her shoulder and tried to grab the suit of armor, but it fell apart into several pieces, too many for her to carry. The ground shook with Lark’s power, and Isla refused to leave without Ferrar’s gift, not when it was the last thing he had ever made. She didn’t have time to put it on. With her Starling power, she forced her armor into the air, its pieces hovering around her. She quickly shaped them like a puzzle, into something like a shield she could carry on her back. She pulled her new blade free from the blacksmith’s body.

By the time Lark stepped into the forge, she was gone.

When Isla finally appeared in front of the Wildling stronghold, she felt knee-wobbling relief to see that it had been left alone, for now. She wondered if Lark would spare her own people.

She sank to the ground as Lynx came running toward her, green eyes bright with worry. He buried his head against hers. She gripped his fur and cried. He showed her images—flashes of waves of warriors, cutting everything down in their path. Him, looking for her on the ground, while Wraith and Grim searched from the skies.

“I’m okay,” she told him, feeling his panic as if it was her own.

She couldn’t say the same for hundreds of Nightshades.

When the last of the injured were carried inside, she went to Wren. Terra and Poppy were nearby, helping the wounded. She explained everything to them.

Lark was their ruler . . . not Isla. Lark was infinitely more powerful. She was the original creator of their world.

And Isla? Beyond breaking the curses, she hadn't given her people much reason to be loyal to her. She just hoped they wouldn't stand against her.

There was one thing she could offer: an escape. Though something in her grieved, she carefully handed her starstick over to Wren. "Use this to portal our people away, should you need to. Go back to the Wildling newland. Bring Lynx, if he's not with me."

Wren nodded. Isla taught her to use it.

Grim portaled them back to the castle steps. There, Astria was waiting. She was covered in dirt. Her arm had been badly cut and was now wrapped.

"Burn the dead," Grim ordered. "Dig up any other grave sites and burn the bones."

Astria looked wary. Isla understood. The outcry when the graves had been desecrated had been sharp. Warrior cemeteries were places of honor.

Still, she didn't question Grim.

The general took off to follow his orders.

Isla watched him carefully. As the rush of the battle slowly faded away, realization settled in her bones.

When she had told him who had taken her . . . he hadn't looked as surprised as she should have. Lark Crown was one of the three founders of Lightlark, and she was alive, here, on Nightshade.

It was at that moment that she remembered something Oro had said, back at the Centennial. He had said that Grim was the only thing standing between them and a greater darkness.

"You knew," she said. Her chest felt hollow. "You knew Lark was alive. You knew she was buried below."

He stood, expressionless. He didn't deny it.

She took a step. "You both knew. You and Oro."

They hated each other. Why would Grim share information like that with his enemy, and not her?

Grim nodded, confirming her fears.

"You . . . you both kept it from me. Why?" Something deep within her cracked. It was another betrayal. Grim looked almost afraid, as if seeing the

shift inside her. It had taken so long for any trust to be rebuilt between them.

She wanted to be angry, she wanted to feel betrayed, but she also knew it would make her a hypocrite. She had kept so much from him, even now, even after letting him in.

"I told Oro at the Centennial, before the trials started, so he wouldn't try to kill you. He knew your death wouldn't fulfill the Centennial prophecy; it wouldn't end your familial line. It was also a way to prevent him from trying to kill me. My line's power trapped her. Only my power can release her. Upon my death, she would have been freed."

Grim tried to take her hands, but she wrested them away.

He frowned. "Many of our histories have been buried, but Oro knew that Lark had been just as ruthless as Cronan. She killed thousands to form the land; she made it from their bones. Freeing her would mean the end of the world, and we both knew it." He studied her. "That is why you couldn't know. She's your family. She's part of your realm. We thought you might one day be compelled to visit her. Free her. She can only be released with my line's power, and—"

She had access to it.

Lark had been freed anyway, somehow. If not by either of them, then by who?

Everything he said made sense. But she still burned with betrayal. Not just from Grim . . . but Oro.

He knew she'd had family. He knew her ancestor had been imprisoned deep below Nightshade, forced to power the land. Lark might be a monster, but her imprisonment was torturous. Twisted.

Power in bloodlines were shared. It meant Isla's ability, as vast as it was now, was limited by Lark's existence.

She wasn't the only one.

"Cronan is alive," she said. Lark had told her as much.

Grim stilled. "That's impossible."

"All of this is impossible."

They stared at each other. Their ancient ancestors still lived. The fact that they were both this strong meant their lines were infinitely powerful.

It also meant her death wouldn't be the end of all Nightshades. Grim's wouldn't be either.

She could kill him to fulfill the prophecy . . . and his people wouldn't die. Not if Cronan still truly lived.

But she would.

The choice remained impossible. She loved both Oro and Grim. And though the prophecy had taken over her life since the oracle had made it, Lark was now their greatest threat.

They didn't have a chance against her. They both knew it. "Lark can't be killed. Her army is endless."

"So what do we do?" Grim asked. The great Nightshade warrior was asking her for her plan. And she had one.

"Nothing in this world can stop her," Isla said. "So we need to send her to another one."

Grim's eyes narrowed as the meaning of her words became clear. "The portal."

She nodded. "We need to open the portal on Nightshade and send her through. Then close it behind her."

Grim shook his head. "We don't know how to do that."

He was right. But she knew where she could find that information. "The prophet's book had pages missing, containing information on how to open and close portals. If it still exists . . . it's on Lightlark."

Grim stiffened at the mention of the island.

"I'm going to go find it." She took the tooth from her pocket, skyre gleaming in the sun.

"I'll go with you."

"No. Lark could be back any moment. You need to protect your people. You need to ensure there are people left to save."

In the past, he would have stopped her. He would have insisted on coming anyway. He would have made the decision for her.

Now, he only gathered her in his arms, pressed his lips to the crown of her head, and said, "Come back to me, wife." His voice broke on the word. "Please."

She looked up at him. Nodded. She didn't have her starstick anymore . . . but she had access to Grim's powers. She had used his flair before, when she had saved his life. It had taken every ounce of emotion and ability she hadn't known she possessed.

Even now it was difficult, reaching for that bridge between them, finding that elusive portaling power. Gripping it. She gritted her teeth against the effort to hold it firmly. A bead of sweat trickled down her forehead. Her skyre glowed.

Finally, she clasped the power.

And portaled to Lightlark.

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GATES

If Isla had been expecting the tooth would lead her straight to the prophet's missing pages, she was wrong.

She landed at the edge of a forest. The trees had golden leaves and plump fruit like miniature suns.

She was on Sun Isle.

Focus, she thought to herself, feeling the rush of emotion swelling within her. Nightshade was in danger. Thousands of innocents were in danger. Grim was in danger.

The world was in danger.

She had only been on the isle once. It felt like forever ago now. She had never been past the palace.

The tooth stirred in her pocket, warm against her thigh, pulsing with power.

The missing pages had to be nearby, even if she couldn't see them. She walked through the forest until she saw a flash of something tall and glimmering through the treetops. The tooth heated, leading her toward it.

She stepped out of the woods and swallowed.

Massive gates stood before her, wrought in twisted ornate gold. They had to be over a hundred feet tall.

She took a step forward, and the tooth in her pocket nearly seared into her flesh, through the fabric. Its message was clear—the prophet's blood-inked pages were on the other side.

Her hand reached to touch the burning metal. She pushed.

Nothing happened.

She pushed harder. It didn't so much as tremble beneath her hands.

Her power was nearly spent from the battle. Her body was aching. Neither mattered when Lark threatened the world. With a steadying breath, she bent her knees, then took off into the air, the delicate weaving of the metal right in front of her face, until she was above it. She moved to fly over it—

And was met with resistance, like an invisible shield rippled out in all directions, where the gates couldn't reach. It was as solid as the metal itself.

Lark's forces could be rising at that very moment. She didn't have time. She reached for Grim's power, straining with effort, meaning to portal to the other side.

It didn't work.

Her landing rattled her bones. She frowned as she lifted her hand, energy spiraling out of it, enough to turn the gates into a mangled mess.

Nothing happened. The gates were impenetrable. Shielded.

Not for long. She fell back into the forest. Closed her eyes. Breathed in and out, felt the woods whispering around her.

Threads, reaching out.

She pulled all of them.

Trees were ripped from their roots, scraped until they were sharp, until they were tied together to form a massive battering ram. Her hand shook as she kept it levitating, moving the ram toward the entrance. She sent her shoulder back, intending to slam it through the gates.

And was knocked off her feet.

Her back collided with a tree behind her. She lost her grip on the ram, and the forest shook as it fell to the ground.

There was a blade at her throat.

And amber eyes pinning her in place.

Oro wasn't breathing. Isla was breathing far too much, panting in his face. His golden hair was disheveled, his clothes were darker than usual, and he was staring her down like she couldn't possibly be real.

His eyes slipped down her body, slowly, and she felt his gaze like rough knuckles dragging down her neck, her chest, her ribs, her hips, her legs. Then, his eyes were meeting hers again, and it was undeniable, this force between them, an energy quivering like a strike of lightning.

It was almost enough to forget his dagger against her pulse.

He looked down at it, as if remembering. Still, he did not lower it. No, if anything, his grip tightened. The metal dug sharper against her skin. He leaned forward, and she didn't know if he meant for his hips to pin hers against the tree; but that was the result, and she swallowed against the blade.

"I should kill you," he murmured, his lips so close to hers. "I should really kill you." She couldn't help but think this was the same position they'd been in when he had first kissed her. She could almost taste him, the summer and heat and fire—part of her wanted him to do it now.

No. She shook away that thought. She loved Grim. She had just been with him—

But her heart was split in half. And one piece belonged to the king in front of her, holding his blade against her pulse.

Until he straightened, leaving her sprawled against the tree, heart thundering for conflicting reasons.

"What are you doing here, Isla?" he asked. There was no friendliness in his tone. No love, though she could feel it, a shining bridge between them. "Are you here to kill me too?"

Her blood went cold, remembering the prophecy. But he didn't know about that . . . not unless Azul told him, which she didn't believe.

His words sunk in. "What do you mean kill you too?"

His gaze was sharp as his knife. "Do you really think I don't know?"

"Know what?"

His voice shook with anger. "You murdered the entire coastal guard. Twenty warriors."

She frowned. "No, I didn't."

Isla knew how unbelievable that was. She had killed innocents before. He had watched her lose control. She had told him about how many people she had killed, to get him to hate her.

But she didn't need to convince him.

Oro blinked as he realized she was telling the truth. "They . . . they saw you. Witnesses saw you."

Dread curled in her stomach. No. Lark couldn't be here that quickly. It was impossible. She had seen her, just hours before, across the world.

She told him about Lark and her attack.

His expression turned to stone, melting into his familiar seriousness, but he was not wholly shocked. Of course he wasn't.

Her voice trembled. "You always said you didn't lie to me, but omitting the truth, what is that? Isn't that a lie?" She could feel power radiating out of her, Starling energy gathering in her fists, along with her anger. "You knew about Lark. You knew I had family. You knew, and you didn't tell me."

Oro's gaze softened, just barely, a flame dimming. "Isla—"

"You were afraid I would seek her out, weren't you? Wake her?" Maybe she would have. She didn't know. The promise of family might have made her foolish. Still, he had kept it from her, and it hurt. She shook her head. It didn't matter now. She was awake, and somehow had already gotten to Lightlark.

She had less time than she thought.

"There's a deadly portal on Nightshade. I'm going to banish her through it; but to do that, I need to get past those gates."

Oro studied her for moments, in silence. Weighing her words. Sensing the truth in them. Finally, he eyed her discarded battering ram. "That wouldn't have worked."

"Why?"

He walked toward the gates. "Because only my bloodline can open the gates."

She wondered if that extended to her because he loved her. The augur would know. Seeming to sense her thoughts, he looked away and nodded. "Yes. Should you have done it correctly, they would have opened."

"What is the right way?"

He ignored her question. Instead, he said, "If I let you through, I'm going with you." She had figured as much. She didn't pretend he trusted her for a second. His throat worked. "Lark is all our problem now. Especially if she's here."

She didn't want him to go with her. Any time near him was torture. Any feelings she had tried to bury were now rising in full force.

But they were on his isle. Perhaps he could help her get the pages she needed.

"Fine."

“You should know, there’s a reason only my bloodline is allowed inside.”

“Why?”

“Apart from holding our greatest enchantments . . . it has some of our harshest temperatures. Even Sunlings could die in the heat.”

“And . . . power can’t be used on the other side?”

He looked over at her as he approached the gates. “It can. But the elements can be stronger than our abilities. They can weaken us. Drain us.”

“So why have it at all?”

“Heat brings us strength, if you know how to use it. My ancestors used to come here to gorge on power. When I came of age, and mastered my Sunling abilities, I was locked here for a week, to prove that I was worthy of our line.”

“Has anyone . . . has anyone in your line not survived it?”

He nodded.

He and Grim had more in common than they ever would have admitted.

She swallowed, considering the gates. The place beyond seemed deadly—an endless expanse of twisted rocks and sand. Though, if that was where the tooth was leading her, she didn’t have a choice.

“Open it,” she said.

He ran his hand down the metal. There was a gold thorn there that she hadn’t noticed. It sliced down his hand, drawing blood. It dripped.

Then, with a magnificent groan, the gates creaked open.

For nearly an hour they walked in silence through a canyon of twisted rock, painted in hypnotic, orange, wave-like stripes. The path through was narrow and strangely formed, but at least it offered shade.

She had dreamed about this, about being able to talk to him again, but now . . . now she couldn’t find the words. She didn’t know if she should apologize or let him continue hating her.

Oro still loved her. She could feel the bond between them, as strong as ever. Killing him wouldn’t destroy Lightlark, not while she still lived.

He was walking slightly ahead, bending beneath the twisted stone. She could do it. She could take the dagger in her pocket and plunge it through his heart before he even sensed her movement.

It would fulfill the prophecy. Grim would be safe.

She knew it; and still, her hands remained firmly by her sides. As it stood, her life was almost over, unless she could find the portal and take some of its power before closing it. Being bound to Lightlark would only put more innocents in danger.

They continued walking as the ground turned to orange dirt. The air became heavier. She considered discarding layers of clothing; but the sun was beating so heavily, she was afraid her skin would burn. She conjured a starshield above her for a few hours, before her focus began to wane. Oro was right. The heat was like a current, dragging her energy away.

“Conserve your strength as much as possible,” Oro said gruffly beside her. “It’s only going to get hotter.”

It did.

The heat intensified, thickening until it felt like she was treading through water. She lifted her shirt to wipe her brow. Sand stuck to her sweat-covered skin as they traveled through it. Her legs began to strain against the friction, her feet sliding. Even Oro began to look tired.

“Isn’t the heat supposed to energize you?” she asked pointedly, her voice dry and raspy.

His look was piercing. “It feeds my Sunling abilities, which I have no intention of using.” Good. She didn’t know if she could take even another degree of heat.

Hours later, it felt like she was steaming in her clothes. She started peeling layers off, starting with her shirt. Oro didn’t look at her as she took it off, tying it around her shoulders to protect them from the burn. Next was her tank top, which had stuck to her body like a second skin. Soon, she was only in her pants and the fabric she wore around her chest. Her daggers were heavy against her legs, weighing her down.

She treasured each of them. But one by one, she began discarding them, until only one dagger remained.

The tooth pulsed against her leg, leading her forward. Her pace became slower, until her feet were barely moving. It was then that she realized she might not make it to the missing pages at all. She had never felt this shade of heat before, a warmth that seemed capable of drowning her.

She swallowed and found her throat raw and aching. Water. She needed water, but there was none around. Just endless sand.

Her steps began to slow to a glacial pace. Her head developed an aching pulse. Eventually she stopped, hands on her knees. Breathing unsteadily.

Oro stopped with her. “There’s an oasis. It isn’t close, but it exists.”

An oasis.

The promise of water was enough for her to start walking again. A faint breeze brushed against her cheeks. She closed her eyes tightly against the sand and spread her arms wide to get as much of the cool air as possible.

Oro cursed beside her.

She opened her eyes the slightest bit, and it looked like . . . it looked like the desert was rippling.

She squinted, wondering if the heat was making her see things, but no. She couldn’t just see it; she could feel it. The ground trembling, as something like a rogue wave rushed toward them.

It overtook everything in its path, smearing away the sun itself. Distant mountains disappeared. It was swallowing the horizon whole. It kept going. Right toward them.

“What—”

“Sandstorm. We need to get inside now.”

Her voice was crazed. “Inside where?”

Oro didn’t answer, he just took her arm and started running. He had been here before; he had survived this. Her knees nearly buckled as she tried to match his pace.

She was slow, slower than she ever had been, and certainly slower than the storm. Oro didn’t look over his shoulder. He didn’t falter. He dragged her to the right, parallel to the sand whisking around them.

They should be heading away, she thought; but she followed him regardless, not sure if she would be able to move without him helping her. If he let go, she would just sink into the sand. She would die.

She thought of Grim. Nightshade. They were counting on her to survive this.

But the storm had reached them.

The sand hit her like a battering ram, and she would have fallen to the ground if Oro hadn’t kept her steady.

“Keep going,” he yelled over the roar of the wind; and, through sand that nearly blinded her, she saw it. A cluster of dark orange rocks. A hole in one side. Shelter.

Sand grated her skin raw. It was already burned from the sun, and now it stung as if she was being flayed. She gritted her teeth and kept going.

She had survived many storms before. She would survive this one too.

That was when she remembered the stormstone, the second one Azul had given her, the one she wore now.

She didn't need to track a storm anymore, but Azul had said gales were engorged with power. Ability that could be captured. It could be useful against Lark.

She began to slip the ring off her finger.

"Faster," Oro said right in front of her, but she couldn't see him. No, all she could see was golden sand, scraping like teeth against her skin. She could barely breath. It was getting in her throat. "We're here." Oro had reached the opening.

She dropped his hand before entering.

He lunged for her, but she planted herself against the wall of sand and faced the storm. It roared like a beast, increasing in power, winds raging, nearly knocking her back, but she stayed firm. She did not fall. She did not falter. She closed her eyes and raised the stone above her head, the same way she had before.

The diamond trembled in her palm. It shook as she captured the storm in her fist, feeling its strength in her bones.

Warm fingers curled around her arm and dragged her into the cave.

She collapsed on the ground, gasping for air, coughing up sand. It had torn up her throat. It had filled her mouth. When she could breathe again, she tried to open her eyes, but they stung too much. Sand was caked on her eyelashes and on every inch of her skin.

"What the hell was that?" Oro demanded.

She said nothing as she slipped the ring back onto her finger, as she scrubbed against her eyelids again. After several minutes, tears washed them clean, and she wondered how she had any liquid left in her body.

The space was small. Sand blasted outside, in a torrent, stronger than before. Without shelter, they would have suffocated in it. She leaned against the stone at her back and flinched. It was hot as coals.

The entire cave was hot, without so much as a breeze from the outside. Heat had been trapped within. They might have been spared the storm, but she could die of dehydration in here.

“How long will the storm last?” she asked, eyes darting to the entry, at the flashing wall of gold.

“Hours, sometimes.”

Hours?

She wouldn’t survive hours in here. Not with all the heat. Not when she was already boiling.

No use in waiting. Wincing against the feeling of the fabric shifting against her raw skin, she slowly peeled the rest of her clothing off, until she was naked. She crossed her legs and pulled them to her chest, in an attempt to cover anything she could.

Isla wasn’t sure Oro was breathing. He was just watching her, looking like he might be close to losing his mind. Sweat slipped down her neck, between her breasts, and he traced its path with his eyes. Swallowed.

For several minutes, Oro sat very still. He didn’t move a muscle. Then, as the heat intensified, made warmer by their body heat, he took off his shirt. His pants were next.

She knew she shouldn’t, but she watched his own sweat slide down his chest, down muscle as hard as the rock behind her. For a moment, she imagined tracing it with her finger. Feeling his golden skin against—

Isla turned away.

It was too hot. It was messing with her head. She couldn’t think straight.

She reached for the link between them, to use Moonling ability to freeze the water dripping down her chest, hoping to offer some sort of relief, but her energy was nearly depleted. Only a single bead of sweat turned to ice, before her power flickered away.

“Here,” Oro said. He reached a hand toward her. “May I?”

At first, she tensed, and he dropped his hand. She was naked. But then, she understood his meaning. She understood what he was offering.

Cold. Relief. She should say no. He was her enemy. He’d had his blade against her throat just hours ago. She was married to someone else.

Still . . . she found herself saying yes.

Oro gently, very gently, ran his hand down her arm, and her every nerve awakened. She was coated in sweat, but he didn’t seem to mind. Under his touch, the water cooled, and she groaned as his icy hand smoothed across her heated skin.

She pressed her lips together against the sound, for it was far more sensual than she had meant it to be. Oro's throat worked as he moved to the other arm. Everywhere he touched was soothed, calmed. She was greedy for it. Desperate. She took his hand in hers, making him tense, and placed it on her forehead. She closed her eyes and sighed. It dulled the ache. He dulled the ache.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes to find him staring down at her. Amber eyes. She had missed that color. The heat was doing wild things to her head. She remembered a time just like this, during the Centennial, when he'd had his hands on her, to heal her. She had only been in her underthings. She remembered, and it made her forget herself. Forget the other half of her heart. She couldn't help but move his fingers down her face, her jaw, her throat.

"Isla," he said, his voice dark and rasped, and it made her remember even more. She dragged his hand down her chest, to her heart. His fingers were long against her bare aching skin, and she sighed again.

"It feels so good," she said, barely knowing what was coming out of her mouth. "It feels so good when you touch me."

His eyes darkened. His other hand was splayed next to her head, stiff with restraint, veins taut. He didn't dare move, not unless she guided him.

And she did. She slipped their hands down her chest. Down her stomach.

An ache began to build. An ache for him, an ache from the past. A memory. She started to remember the day before the battle, and everything they had done.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She stilled their hands.

Sorry? Why would he be sorry?

His thumb gently swept across her stomach, over a scar that hadn't yet completely healed. The place Zed had put an arrow through her.

"He's imprisoned. It doesn't erase what he did—he, he shouldn't have __"

"You put him in a cell?" she asked, part of her sanity returning. He nodded. Zed was one of his oldest friends. But he had tried to kill her.

Her thoughts seemed to slither free from the grip of her mind. Everything was slippery. Everything was magnified, especially this ache

within her.

She guided his hand lower again. Lower, until his knuckles traced a path between her hip bones, leaving her skin prickling.

“Isla, I think you inhaled too much sand in the storm.” Oro was saying, somewhere far away. “It has power. It can . . . heighten senses. Emotions.”

Yes, that was what she felt. Heightened. Every nerve was on fire.

He began to move his hand away, but she said, “Please. Please don’t stop touching me. Never stop touching me.”

But he did. He looked pained, but he gently removed his hand. “Sleep, Isla, if you can.”

Sleep. She didn’t want to. She was suddenly burning, more than she ever had in the desert. But, as she rested against the warm floor, sleep reached her quickly.

And she dreamed of the night before the battle.

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GOLDEN

Isla had surprised Oro in his chambers. The following day, everything could change.

She wanted a piece of happiness, a slice of summer, something to hold on to during the bloodshed. So she had put on a red dress that molded against her every inch. And now, she waited.

Isla felt his heat before she saw him, a radiance that nearly brought her to her knees, and then he was filling the door, and staring at her, and she wasn't sure he was breathing. He had gone still, fingers still curled around the door's handle.

She smiled, pleased. "I take it you like it." Her voice was a rasp she almost didn't recognize.

His own was strained. "If by like, you mean I want to tear it to shreds with my teeth, then yes. I like it very much."

His words were like embers catching fire, a heat dropping right through her. She wanted him now. She wanted everything.

He closed the door behind him and stalked toward her, eyes intently studying her dress the way she had watched him study maps and battle plans. He looked at her like he was trying to navigate the easiest way under it.

A moment later, he had her against the wall, and she inhaled sharply. He ducked toward her mouth, but she stopped him with a hand against his chest.

"Can we pretend?" she asked.

"Pretend?"

"Pretend for just a moment that you're not the king, and I'm not your enemy." If only. If only.

He frowned. She didn’t like to upset him, but she secretly loved it when he frowned; it reminded her of the Centennial, back before she had admitted to herself that she could tolerate the Sunling king. “Isla,” he said against her forehead. “You could never be my enemy.”

Her voice trembled. “I’m Nightshade. I opened the portal without realizing. I helped him find the sword. I made it possible for Grim to destroy everything.”

Anger flared in his expression. “You didn’t know. Most of this happened in the past.”

“Can we pretend there’s no past, then? That it’s been you and me from the beginning?” She wanted that so badly. More than anything.

For a moment, she wondered if he would send her away.

But then he said, right against her lips. “Tonight . . . we can pretend anything you want, love.”

Need prickled her skin. They had all night. All night to pretend like they might not all die the next day. “I want you to do something for me. I want you to make my dress gold.”

He seemed confused. “I’ll call for Leto after all this is over.”

A smile tugged at her mouth. “No.” She looked down at her dress and was met with the sight of her chest, straining against the low, tight bodice. She heard him swallow, also watching her. “The one I’m wearing. Turn it gold.”

She knew what gilding meant to him, the trauma behind it. She wanted to take that trauma and turn it into trust.

He hesitated, so she went on her toes, and said against his mouth, “I trust you. You won’t hurt me.” It was true. He was the only person in the world who had earned all her trust. Then she whispered, “Turn it gold. Please.”

The hand he had pressed against the wall next to her head flexed.

Slowly, slowly, his fingers lightly gripped the side of her waist, thumb rubbing down, and they both watched as the red fabric of her dress gave way to the thinnest gold foil, down her stomach, to the floor. It was an impractical choice. The gold foil was so thin, even the slightest movement would rip it.

He made a primal sound, watching, seeing her in his realm’s color. Just when he was about to reach for her lips again, she said, “Now melt it off

me.”

His brows came together. “I’ll hurt you.”

“You won’t.”

Before he could protest again, a Starling shield raced across her skin.

His eyes widened in surprise, then intensified, taking in the gold and glittering silver. She felt powerful. In control.

“Now,” she repeated. “Melt it off me.”

It didn’t seem like she would have to ask him again. He ran his knuckles down the center of her chest, to her stomach, and watched the dress melt down her body like a candle, revealing every inch of her little by little. The gold slipped into a puddle that hardened in a circle around her feet, and she was completely bare in front of him. Her Starling shield fell away.

The way he was looking at her . . . it made her remember when he said, I wish you could see yourself the way I do. You would never doubt yourself again. “You’re looking at me like I’m something to worship,” she said, nerves swirling in her stomach.

He made a low sound of need as he stepped forward, leaning into her. His voice was just a rasp as he said, “Do you want me on my knees for you, love?”

Her answer was immediate. “Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, ready. She felt raw, needy, desperate to feel him. “I think I might die if you don’t touch me.”

Slowly, eyes never leaving hers, he sank to his knees before her . . . and that heat turned to a pulsing, relentless ache. “We wouldn’t want that,” he said.

Then, he gripped behind her knee and hooked her leg over his shoulder.

She gasped. At the first press of his mouth, she bucked against him, making a sound that mixed with a whimper, and he pinned her against the wall with a hand against her lower stomach. She writhed below him, pleading, making the types of promises that made him growl against her.

Her pleasure was a wildfire, razing the world, setting it aflame, flaring with every stroke, every nip. Their eyes were locked when it all crested. She gasped. Her hand hit the wall, and energy spiraled out of it, cracking the stone in several directions. For a moment, they just stared at each other, eyes ablaze. Chests heaving. No one had ever made her feel this way:

cherished, like the full force of the sun was upon her, shining, melting all her troubles away. She trusted him fully, and that trust deepened every moment they shared. Every connection.

Oro gently set her on the ground again, and she shook her head, spent and still aching for more. “How are we ever going to leave this room?” she asked. She meant it.

“If it was up to me, we never would.” Then, he reached down, swept her into his arms, and carried her to the bed.

As soon as her body pressed against the silken sheets, she reached for him. Her hand pressed against his chest, and they watched as his shirt burned away, the flames licking his skin. She was using his power.

He looked at her like he was seeing her for the first time, like she was something wondrous and rare, and she couldn’t take it anymore. She wanted everything with him. She wanted it while they still could. Who knew what the next day would bring?

With a burst of energy, she pulled him under her and climbed atop him, straddling him. Slowly, she ground her hips against his, and they both groaned at the contact. Her head fell back, and she balanced her hands behind her as she moved against him, pace quickening.

“I want you,” she said, panting. “I want all of you.”

He sat up, gripped her backside, and shifted them both until his back hit the headboard. Her hands fell to his shoulders, and he reached his own hand between them.

She gave him a look that said that wasn’t exactly what she meant—that she wanted all of him—but when he touched her, she groaned, and her eyes fell closed again. “More,” she said, reaching down to direct him where she wanted him, deeper. When he did, she gasped and leaned down to press her forehead against his. They were both breathing too quickly, sharing breath, and she looked him right in the eyes as she said, “I love you. I could never not love you.”

I love you.

He pressed his thumb where she liked it, and she curled her nails into his shoulders.

She moved on him with abandon, arching her back, wanting it to last, wishing this fire she felt when he touched her would rage forever. He stared

up at her, transfixed, his other hand curved around her hip, tightening when she cried out.

“Oro,” she said, eyes blazing into his as her body tightened and he sat up quickly, as if he couldn’t help himself. His hand at her hip curled around the back of her neck, and he pulled her lips to his, tongue stroking her through her pleasure. It was a savage kiss, hard and desperate, like they might not see another night, like he could memorize the taste of her.

“I love you too,” he finally said when she stilled, melting against him. “No world exists in which I do not love you.”

At that, she pressed her lips against his neck, and went lower. Lower. Suddenly, she was off him and removing the rest of his clothing.

“Isla—” he said.

“Oro,” she responded near his hips, looking up at him, before continuing her exploring.

The first press of her lips against him, he fisted the sheets in his hands, and they burned away beneath his fingertips.

The rumble of her laugh against him seemed to undo him, because he groaned.

She groaned too, the sound melting into a gasp. Her body twisted.

Only to scrape against hard rock. A dream. It had been a dream of a memory, and—

At once, she remembered herself. Where she was.

Who she was with.

Oro sat on the other side of the cave, watching her. His eyes had darkened to a shade she had just seen, in her mind. He looked like he hadn’t slept at all.

She opened her mouth. Closed it. “I—did I say anything. . . . in my sleep?”

“My name. Constantly.”

Right. Her cheeks burned. “I—”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before,” Oro said, before standing.

Her eyes slid to the entrance, and she saw that the storm had cleared. “Why didn’t you wake me?” she demanded.

“You looked like you were enjoying yourself.”

Anger replaced any remaining shred of want. Then, shame. Enjoying herself.

The longer it took her to figure out how to close the portal, the more people would suffer. How could she be this guided by feeling?

What would Grim think, with her gone so long? Would he panic? Was he okay?

If something happened to him because she was taking too long, she would never forgive herself. She shook the sand from her clothes quickly, dressed, and met Oro outside.

The sun was gone, and part of the heat had lifted. The tooth in her pocket trembled. Still, even though it was supposed to lead their path, Oro stepped in front of her.

She frowned. “How—”

“There’s only one structure out here, past the gates. Unless your pages are buried in the sand, I know where we’re going.”

Oh.

In the relative coolness of night and after a bit of rest, she moved across the desert quicker than ever.

It was hours before her head began to throb again from dehydration. Her tongue felt heavy and rough in her mouth. It hurt to swallow.

Her eyes stung with every blink. Her sunburnt skin was painful to the touch. Everything felt dry, and she was desperate for the oasis Oro had promised.

By the time dawn broke, the tooth was practically shaking out of her pocket. They were getting close. Still, as the heat of the day intensified, her eyes began to close. She muscles went slack. She would have fallen right into the sand if it hadn’t been for a strong arm curled around her waist.

“Hey,” he said, somewhere above her. “The oasis is up ahead. You can make it.”

It was easy for him to say. He was Sunling. He was used to this unrelenting heat. It invigorated him, in some ways. She tried to reach for his power, seeing if it might give her a surge of energy, but she was too weak now. None of it held. It felt like she was falling again, and he jerked forward to catch her.

Then, she was off her feet and in his arms.

Her eyes opened the slightest bit, crusted in sand that they had kicked up on their journey, only to see Oro above her, looking forward.

He didn't slow in the slightest, even though he was now carrying her. If anything, his pace quickened.

She should insist he put her down. Instead, she almost melted into his touch. Being Grim's wife made him her enemy, yet she trusted him more than almost anyone.

That trust made her body stop fighting. She went in and out of consciousness. Her senses were snuffed out, one by one. Sun seared her skin, burning it, until suddenly, she was plunged into water.

Isla gasped and gripped Oro in shock. Her arms curled around his neck; her chest went flush against his.

The oasis. The water was hot, but with Oro's ability it cooled, and she almost whimpered in relief, clinging to him, afraid she would lose consciousness again and drown.

"May I?" Oro asked, a hand outstretched.

She nodded, and his fingers carefully slipped across her skin. She flinched, raw, burned red; but under his touch, her pain eased. Carefully, he healed her burns, using his limited strength on her.

Her eyes closed, and she tried to focus on anything else but the careful, practiced way he touched her, like he had done it a hundred times before, because he had. He knew her body . . . and she knew his.

He was just healing her, she told herself. Helping her. It was innocent.

But there was nothing innocent about her pulse quickening. Or the heat that dripped down her spine.

"Thank you," she whispered, far too close to his face, when he finished.

Then she fell backward, and he released her into the water.

Isla let herself sink. She relished the smoothness, the cold, the way the roots of her hair were massaged, how the sand separated from her body and clothes. She pooled water in her hands and drank greedily, quickly.

"Slowly," Oro said. "You'll make yourself sick."

She wanted to drink the entire damn oasis, but she listened.

When she was satiated, she swam to the edge of the pool and turned away from Oro, then began stripping off her clothing. She rinsed each item and set them out on a cluster of smooth rocks to dry. It was only when she

had sunk back into the water that she realized they were both naked inside of it.

Before—in the cave—that had been different. She hadn't been herself. She had been fighting to survive in the heat. She'd been asleep.

Now she had most of her sanity back. She looked down. Her chest was nearly exposed, and she sank deeper. Covered herself with her arms.

Oro's brows rose. She could practically read his mind. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen before, hadn't touched before, hadn't tasted before. But things were different now.

At least, they were supposed to be.

Traitor. The word echoed through her mind. In this very moment, she wasn't quite sure who she was betraying. Maybe everyone, including herself.

His fiery eyes pierced right through her. "Are you happy?" he asked, out of nowhere.

Her answer came too quickly. "Yes."

He looked unconvinced, and Isla almost asked him if it had been a lie. She was happy. She loved Grim.

But she loved Oro too.

The pool was shallow. She watched as he slowly approached her, water rippling around him, as if rushing to move out of his way.

Under the sun, in this place, he looked like a god. Golden hair turned darker by the water, wild strands clinging to his forehead. Sunkissed skin over rippling muscle.

He got closer, and closer, until he was towering over her.

"Why did you get married again?" he asked.

She remembered why she had told him about it in the first place. To make him hate her. To make him forget her.

She still hoped he would.

Oro had warned her before about using blood for power, and that was what she was doing now, to an even greater degree. Her skyre was still hidden by the thinnest snip of shadow, but if he learned about it, he would be upset. He wouldn't understand.

She was dangerous. Reckless. Even without the prophecy, he deserved better. One day, she could hurt him without even meaning to.

“I married him again because I wanted to,” she said, hoping the statement held enough truth. Oro looked unconvinced.

He leaned closer, until his breath was against her forehead. “So that’s it? You’re my enemy now?”

She swallowed at his proximity and nodded.

He tilted his head at her. “That’s what you want?”

Yes. “I do. I—I hate you.”

He only dropped his gaze to her lips, then her collarbones, then her chest, still almost completely visible in the clear water. Then, he leaned down, breath skittering across her bare skin, so he could say, right against the shell of her ear, “Say that to me when you aren’t moaning my name in your sleep, and I might believe you.”

Then, he lifted himself out of the pool and got dressed.

After that, they walked in silence. She tried her best to stay as far away from him as possible, to bury this building attraction, and he seemed content to do the same.

They kept going, walking all through the night until the horizon shaped into a mountain range, and she spotted a structure in the distance.

Relief nearly made her knees buckle.

A palace had been carved into the entire side of a golden cliff. It looked like a castle trapped in stone. Its façade was made up of thousands of sunlike symbols and countless doors. There were statues, stairs, and endless columns.

“What is this place?”

“A tomb,” Oro said, stepping past her. He stopped at the front. She made to walk through the door, but he caught her wrist. “We can’t enter yet.”

“Why?” They didn’t have time. Nightshade could be overrun by warriors by now. Grim could be in trouble. Oro wouldn’t care about that; so she instead she said, “Lark has made it to this island. She’s likely killing your soldiers right now, adding to her army.”

His jaw tensed. “Just trust me, Isla,” he said, and she would be a liar if she said hearing her name from his lips again didn’t make her chest constrict. “We need to wait.”

They did. And as they lingered at the front of the palace, she studied it more closely. The columns were made up of statues, a row of previous rulers. The pediments were filled with sculptural scenes showing a hunt. A wedding. A burial. All delicately crafted from the golden cliff face. Up above, at the very top—almost at the peak of the mountain—something flashed.

A flame.

Oro followed her line of sight. “That’s the forever flame,” he said. “It hasn’t gone out in thousands of years. Kings have risen and fallen, curses have been woven and broken, and through it all, the flame has endured.”

She watched it flicker. It wasn’t huge . . . but it was mighty. Strong.

The darkness began to shift, and Oro stood straighter. He motioned for her to step inside the palace. Finally. She did and was plunged into darkness. Her energy was spent, but she reached for Oro’s power, lighting the smallest of embers. His fingers curled over hers, snuffing it out.

“Unnecessary,” he said. He turned back toward the door. Waited a second. Two.

Then light poured into the hall in a glittering line, like melted gold. As dawn rose, the slice of sun streamed across the floor, illuminating an intricate design beneath their feet.

It was beautiful. She turned to Oro, only to find him already studying her.

They stared at each other for a moment before following the sunspun path down the long corridor and into a room that began flooding with light.

It was a tomb.

Oro moved carefully around the coffin. “Fire doesn’t work in here. Any flame is immediately extinguished, which means this room is visible only in the winter, at dawn, for just a few minutes.” It was aligned with the sun.

“We don’t have much time, then.” She took the tooth from her pocket. The moment it was freed from the fabric, it flew across the room, as if summoned, digging into the wall.

No, not a wall. A single page stretched upon it. The crimson red ink was faded, nearly illegible.

Carefully, she peeled it off the stone. Read over it quickly. Relief flooded her like an oasis in her bones.

“Does it have what you need?” Oro said.

She whipped around and nodded. “It’s exactly what I was looking for.”

The sunlight was already fading, its rays sweeping across the tomb. Beneath them, the metal glistened. Shademade.

Oro’s eyes locked with hers. It seemed they were having the same thought. He didn’t even know about Cronan, but he knew about Lark. “It can’t be opened. Many have tried.” Sensing her confusion, he added, “It’s rumored Horus had a relic. A bone from the finger of a god. Many have searched for it.”

The light was almost gone now. Isla didn’t waste a moment before cutting a line down her arm and smothering her own blood across her palms. She barely felt the pain, barely heard Oro’s yells in protest.

She pressed both of her hands against the tomb’s wall and pushed it open.

Oro stood still as a statue.

A body sat inside. Not bones, a body. The man was whole, his skin intact. He looked to simply be sleeping.

Horus Rey, one of the three founders of Lightlark. He had Oro’s golden hair. Sunlit skin. Straight nose. Sharp angles in his face.

“Is he . . . alive?” Isla asked. Was it possible all three founders hadn’t perished at all?

The man’s arms were folded across his chest, his hands stacked over his heart. Below them, gripped in his fingers, something was faintly glowing.

A bone.

Sunlight began melting from the room, as if drained. They didn’t have any time; but still, Oro hesitated.

“Take it,” Isla said. “It could help us against Lark.”

It could help her.

A moment. Two. Then Oro slowly reached toward the bone. Gently lifted it.

The moment it was out of Horus’s grip, his body became bones. The flesh turned to ash. He became a corpse.

He was dead, that was certain. Somehow, the power of the bone had preserved his body.

Quickly, before the light all but faded, they pushed the tomb’s top back on. The room was quickly drenched in darkness, dust, and decay. Oro

grabbed her hand, and together they found its exit. They slowly inched down the hall.

Just before they stepped back into the desert, the sand began to tremble. Rise.

Oro cursed. “Another storm.”

They didn’t have time. She had to go, now. Her voice was a frustrated growl. “They happen this often?”

He nodded. “It’s why few have reached this place.”

“What do we do?”

He looked around at the entrance of the castle and sighed. “We wait.”

For an hour, they sat in near silence, staring at the raging storm. Slowly, Oro’s eyes began to close. He must be exhausted. They had spent days walking. He hadn’t slept the night before, and he had drained himself considerably to heal her.

His head leaned against the wall. His breathing evened.

She watched him, remembering what it was like to curl up next to him. He looked almost at peace now, across from her, one hand reaching in her direction, as if he was drawn to her even in his dreams.

Slowly inching forward, she ran her hand gently down his arm the way she used to, when they slept side by side. He groaned in his sleep, leaning toward her. He didn’t even feel her grab the bone.

He was so content—so happy, so deep in sleep—that he didn’t even hear her leave.

The storm bellowed around her. She had tied her shirt around her nose and mouth, remembering what Oro had said about inhaling the sand. She couldn’t afford to lose herself to her emotions, not now.

Oro was right. Lark was all of their problem. But he might not agree with her solution. That was why she needed to leave him, even though it killed her inside.

The bone glimmered through the fabric of her pocket. She had read the missing page. It highlighted every instruction to open a portal—and close it. It required multiple skyres, as well as powerful objects to draw from, and this bone would be central to her plan.

All she needed now was to get back to Nightshade.

When she couldn’t see the palace any longer, she slipped her ring off her finger. A miniature storm swirled inside the orb, in sparkling gold.

She had to get back to Grim. She had to make sure Oro couldn’t catch her before she got beyond the gates and their hold on her portaling.

She remembered what Azul had said about trapping storms. Shaping them.

With all the strength she could muster, she broke the stone between her fingers—

And the storm came tumbling out of it. Her storm. She kept her grip on it, as if it was still in an orb in her palm. Her teeth slid together as it fought against her hold.

Slowly, she gained control of its winds with Skyling power and hollowed it out into a vortex, piercing the other storm to form a tunnel for her to safely travel through.

Then she ran through it as fast as she could, knowing that soon, Oro would wake up and realize she was gone. Soon he would notice the bone was missing. He would suspect she had her own hidden plans.

And then he would chase her.

She pushed down the guilt, the lingering feelings, anything that would slow her down, because she couldn’t afford to do anything but move.

Isla hoped he hated her. She hoped he forgot her. It would make things so much easier for all of them.

The miles were endless. Her limbs felt heavier and heavier. The roaring of the golden wind tunnel sounded like an ocean, one she would drown in if her control on the storm faltered for even a moment.

It wasn’t long before the heat slowed her down again. Her eyes began closing. This time, there was no one to catch her when her step slipped. She barely maintained the tunnel while she shot back up, breathing hard.

You have to keep going, she told herself. Trying . . . that’s the hardest part.

Isla remembered the bloodless soldiers, how they had cut down innocents and Grim’s warriors with the same efficiency. Lark was nearly unstoppable. She would burn this world to its embers, stripping away everything that made it good. It wasn’t perfect, but it deserved a chance to be better.

They had a chance. With this bone, and the skyres, and the instructions on the page folded in her pocket, they could send Lark away forever. But not if Isla died in this desert.

The heat and sand that had made it past the fabric messed with her mind. She saw the past like she was walking through memories.

She thought about her best ones. Running through the forest after training, smiling up at the treetops, singing with the birds. Finding her starstick below the floorboards. Portaling into her former friend's Starling castle for the first time. Seeing the world from far above, in the hot-air balloon with Grim. Walking through the fields of nightbane, their dark purple color like night being reflected up to the sky.

Azul, showing her the singing mountains here on Lightlark. Rebuilding Wild Isle with Oro, watching nature revive a dead place.

There were her worst memories too. So much loss, betrayal, and danger. But there was beauty here, in this world—more good than bad. And she was willing to fight for it.

With a groan scraped from the depths of herself, she gripped the storm harder—and felt it sweep below her feet, lifting her into its center, sand orbiting her body. Higher. Her arm trembled with effort, with control, her skyre setting her skin aflame, and the sandstorm became a wave she rode across the desert. It rippled below, tearing across miles and miles. She knelt, her fingers running through it, feeling its power surging.

Oro won't catch up, she told herself.

She might reach the gates before he even knew she was gone.

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ENEMY

The gates loomed far ahead. The shred of storm she had stolen had long dissipated, melting down until she was back on her feet. She had been walking for hours in the open desert, shoes sinking into the sand. Now at least, she had reached the twisting canyons.

She was walking through one of the strangely shaped tunnels, hand dragging against the smooth rock, when she heard it. Something cutting through the air. Her breath hitched. She turned just in time to see a dagger pierce the stone wall inches from her face.

Her dagger.

One she had discarded on the journey. One that must have been picked up, by someone who would have known how much the blades meant to her.

Someone she had betrayed.

She ran.

Her legs felt boneless beneath her as she stumbled through the canyon, ducking, turning, barely missing the sides of the twisted rock that curved wildly under shards of sunlight.

Oro was the king of Lightlark. The ruler of Sunling. Even with the storm, she could not outrun him—not here in his own lands.

Another dagger. This time, just inches from her hip. She cursed. It seemed he had collected them all on his journey back. He had been right on her heels.

She tore around another curve of undulating stone, then stopped, breathing far too quickly. He was faster. Stronger here, in this heat.

Just before Oro turned the corner, she summoned any remaining energy she had—and used Grim’s Nightshade ability to disappear.

It wasn’t a power she had mastered. Her shadows were slippery in the heat, especially with her strength waning.

Still, she willed herself to keep a hold on them as Oro inched into her line of vision, another one of her daggers held loosely in his hand.

This wasn’t the Oro from before the battle, the one who had called her his favorite everything. No, this was the coldhearted king she had met on the first day of the Centennial, his eyes narrowed in anger—in betrayal. His tall, muscular frame tensed with the practice of a hunter. He took a few more steps. Stopped. Looked up.

Then, very slowly, he turned.

And looked right at her.

He squinted. Isla’s heart froze. She glanced down at herself. She was still invisible. She looked back up and found him in front of her.

She wasn’t breathing. She didn’t dare move an inch as he took a step. Then another. As he tentatively raised his arm. Reached for her.

It was a shame she hadn’t learned to walk through walls, because when his fingertips brushed her cheeks, they both felt it.

And then, she became visible.

Before he could say a single word, her Starling shield rippled onto her skin, and she launched a wave of energy at him.

Oro crashed into the rockface with enough force to crack it. She turned to run, but Oro’s hand shot forward. A sheet of stone from behind him ripped off the canyon, hit her hand, and pinned her against the wall. It curled around her wrist, trapping it above her head. With one more movement, her other wrist joined it.

His look was pure fire. Pure satisfaction.

He was using her own power against her.

They both knew what that meant.

He stalked over to her. A dagger of energy formed in his hand, and he raised it against her cheek. Isla glanced down at it. This was good, she tried to tell herself. This was what she wanted. For him to hate her. For him to resent her.

It was not all she wanted.

“You stole from me,” he said, as if he still couldn’t believe it. “You left me. You betrayed me.”

She just stared at him, chest heaving.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find you?” His face was just inches from hers, close enough to see the specks of gold in his amber eyes, simmering with fury. “Did you think I wouldn’t catch you?” He leaned closer. “You can’t hide from me,” he growled. “Even if I can’t see you, I can feel you. You are relentless. You are a gravity I’ve tried to escape, but I can’t. I can’t , Isla.” His voice shook. He was one of the most powerful rulers in history, but his arm shook with restraint as he brushed his thumb against the wrists he had pinned above her head.

He looked like he hated himself, truly hated himself for his words. He looked like he hated that she shivered beneath his touch. He shook his head. “You chose someone else, you left, and still, I wait here like a fool for the day you might return.”

He pointed just beyond the gates, close to the forest where he had found her.

“I go to that cliff, that beach, every single morning because the sea is the green of your eyes, and it’s the closest I get to waking up next to you.”

She shook her head. “Forget me,” she begged. “I’m not good for you, Oro.”

“You don’t think I’ve tried?” He said, eyes blazing. “My love for you is like that forever flame, Isla. Relentless. Stubborn. Endless. Burning brightly, even if you’re not around to see it.”

A tear slipped down her cheek.

His anger abated. It was replaced by pain. “Come back,” he said, his voice breaking, and she closed her eyes tightly. “Stay.”

“Oro, I can’t.” He didn’t understand. He didn’t get it.

“You can,” he said, and she opened her eyes to find his widened, desperate. “I’ve driven myself mad thinking about it. I understand why you left. You wanted to stop the battle. You wanted to stop the death. But I can’t understand why you stayed. I kept . . . I kept waiting for you to come back. So I came to you, thinking there must be something wrong, that he was somehow keeping you there, but then,” his voice broke as he cut off. He closed his eyes and took a breath, as if gathering strength. “Then you gave me this.” He pulled the golden rose necklace from his pocket.

He carried it with him. He hadn’t melted it down or thrown it into the sea, as she had imagined.

Oro must have sensed her surprise, because he said, “I wanted to destroy it. I wanted to burn it. But I couldn’t.” He shook his head. “Why, Isla? I would have thought the words you told me, the time we shared, had been a lie—but I could feel their truth. So why?”

He leaned closer, and she leaned away, her wrists still pinned above her. They were made of stone. She had energy left. She could remove them, but she didn’t. She didn’t, even as his lips lowered toward hers, as he said, just inches away from her skin, “Tell me you don’t miss me. Tell me you don’t think about me. Tell me you don’t go back in time and change your mind.” His lips grazed her cheek as he said, “Tell me that, and mean it, and I will leave you alone forever. I swear it.”

She lifted her chin high and forced herself to meet his gaze. “I don’t miss you,” she said steadily. “I never think of you. I don’t go back in time and change my mind.”

His lips were just over hers. She felt his breath against her mouth. He leaned closer, like he might kiss her, like she might let him, and said, “Liar.”

Then, he walked away, leaving her pinned against the stone.

He made it a few paces before he cursed. Isla wrenched herself from the wall and turned the corner.

The gates stood there, in view.

And an army stood beyond them.

Isla recognized the stillness of Lark’s bloodless soldiers.

They were blocking their path, making exiting impossible, unless they wanted to risk getting cut down by dozens of blades.

Worse—they weren’t just Nightshade. They were Skyling. Starling. Sunling. Some faces, Isla recognized from the battle, fighting on her side.

Now they stared blankly.

Oro’s eyes were pure fire and fury, understanding coming over him. “I’m going to kill her,” he said, his voice a dark promise.

Her words were barely a whisper. “She can’t be killed.”

He turned to her. “Then I will throw her into the forever flame and watch her burn until the end of time.”

The bloodless soldiers watched them, waiting. Isla suspected what would happen, but she sent a spiral of flames through the gaps in the gates

anyway.

They dissolved the moment they hit the gold. It was impenetrable, on both sides.

They were trapped. Only death awaited on the other side. The army could stand there forever if needed; they were already dead.

Without water, in this heat . . . Isla and Oro would soon join them.

They didn't have time for this. She needed to get back to Nightshade. She knew what she had to do. "I'm sorry," she told Oro.

Then, she pulled her necklace.

She could almost feel the air change around them, the sky going taut. His power cleaving through the world to get to her.

The ground itself shuddered as Grim landed just beyond the gates, in a scar of streaking shadow.

In an instant, the army of dead was ash. He walked over their sizzling remains, eyes never leaving hers.

Until they slid to Oro.

He looked between them.

Before she could blink, a shadow scythe was hurtling toward Oro, ready to cut him down. Only the gate stopped it.

Her look was crazed. "Don't hurt him," she said, stepping in front of Oro, even though she didn't need to.

Grim just looked at her. Slowly, the shadows that had gathered in his hands withered. She turned to Oro. "You too."

He glared at her as he cut his hand . . . and opened the gate.

She flinched, waiting for them to ignore her order, to fight each other until the death, like before. But they both stood very still. They both turned to her.

The army's ashes swirled at her feet. They were just the beginning.

"Lark is here." She looked at Oro, then at Grim. They were enemies. She could almost taste their hatred. But Lark would destroy them all if they remained on different sides. "We can't defeat her divided." She couldn't believe the words that were about to leave her mouth. "The only chance we have is to work together."

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REMLAR

Enya spat at her feet when she approached. She looked at Grim and did the same. He didn’t even acknowledge her.

Calder’s normally jovial expression was cold. Wary.

Zed was missing. She remembered what Oro had said. He had imprisoned his friend.

They sat in the war room—the same place where they had planned Grim’s death. Now, he leaned back in one of the chairs, glaring daggers at anyone that looked at him. Anyone but her.

“Lark means to kill both of you,” Isla said, looking from Grim to Oro. “And me, likely. She won’t stop until this world is leveled.”

“Why didn’t she just kill you when she had the chance?” Enya said, as if she would have really liked that outcome.

Shadows spilled across the table, ending in claws.

Isla ignored them. “She needs me to lead her to the heart of Lightlark. That’s why she’s here: to find it.”

It only bloomed once a century, disguised as a living thing. The last time Isla had seen it, the heart was falling after Celeste into the center of the island.

“So, what do we do?” Calder asked, running a massive hand down his face. “How do we stop someone more powerful than any of us, who created the very island we’re standing on?”

“We lure her out with the promise of the heart. Then, we attack.”

Calder looked confused. “From what you’re telling us, she’s invincible. She can’t be killed, or even injured.”

“Perhaps,” Isla said. “But if she can be stopped for even a few hours, one person on this island knows how.”

“What then?” Enya said, leaning forward, elbows on the table. “Even if we can injure her, she’s still unstoppable. We need a plan.”

“I have one,” Isla said.

Enya laughed without humor. “Why should we trust you?”

Isla let shadows engulf one of her arms. The other was wrapped in tendrils of ice, air, crackling energy, and fire.

“That proves nothing,” Enya said. “Only that they both still love you, which is obvious.” She glared at each of them, like loving her was a personal failing.

Isla looked at Grim. Begrudgingly, he made the tiniest of flowers bloom in his hand.

Then, Isla turned to Oro. It hurt to look at him. His eyes were not hollow, not lifeless, but full of pain. Fear. Determination. She remembered a time when they had only been filled with love.

Slowly, he uncurled his fingers. Petals dripped from them, onto the floor, roses tipped in thorns.

They both loved her . . . and she loved them. She wouldn’t do anything to put them in danger, not right now, regardless of what the prophecy predicted.

It wasn’t a guarantee . . . but it was something.

Enya looked unconvinced. “Why should we listen to you?”

“You don’t have to,” Isla said. “You can listen to his plan,” she said, motioning toward Grim. “It involves using the portal on Lightlark, destroying the island, and sending all of Nightshade to the otherworld.”

Grim nodded, looking as if that plan sounded perfectly fine to him. Enya glared at them both.

“My plan involves sending Lark away forever.”

Silence. Then, Oro said, “We’re listening.”

She told them about the storm season. About the portal on Nightshade—and her plan to send Lark through it. She told them about the missing page she and Oro had discovered, detailing exactly how to do so.

Then, very slowly, she dropped the bone onto the table. Oro’s jaw worked, watching it.

Enya turned slowly to face the king. “Tell me that’s not what I think it is.”

He remained silent.

She stood, fire flaring from her fists, scorching the floor. “That is our greatest relic. And you gave it to her? You—”

“He didn’t give it to me,” Isla clarified. “I stole it.”

Enya whirled around to face Oro, speechless. His jaw tensed.

“I need it to create the markings necessary to close the portal,” she said. “Its power is the best chance we have of defeating Lark.”

Enya looked incredulous.

Grim said, “If you sun fools have a better plan, we’re listening.”

Enya’s fire flared—before weakening. She slowly sat down. For a few moments, her anger heated the room. Then she sighed and said, “And what part do we each play?”

“You and Calder, gather up everyone left on Lightlark, all the remaining forces, then wait for me. We need to portal them to the newlands. Lark is here, and they’re just more warriors to add to her army.”

Enya begrudgingly nodded.

She turned to Grim. He waited, expectant. “Did you do what I asked with the sword?” Cronan’s sword, the one they had searched for in the past, that controlled the dreks. She had asked him to return it to the thief’s lair, but now she needed it.

He nodded.

“I need you to get it back.”

“I can do that.”

She turned to Oro. She opened her mouth, but he beat her to it. “No. Whatever you’re doing, I’m going with you.”

Grim’s shadows sharpened.

Oro only looked between them. “You can’t really expect us to trust you. Or that he won’t use this as a distraction to go through the portal in the vault.” The one in the Place of Mirrors, the one that would save her life forever.

The air seemed to shift as Grim began to stand. She gripped his wrist, and he stilled.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll figure out how to injure Lark . . . together.”

Enya left with Calder, without another word. Grim left too—and was back in just minutes.

“It’s gone,” he said simply.

Isla sat back against her chair. “What do you mean, it’s gone?”

“The sword. The pile of relics. Even the damn dragon, it’s gone.” The pile of stolen enchantments had belonged to an infamous thief. They hadn’t met her in all the time they spent trying to get past the dragon.

“She must have moved everything.” Her nails dug into her palm as she regretted ever telling him to put it back. She had been trying to protect the world . . . now, this could put them in risk of losing it. The dreks were crucial to her plan.

Oro leaned back in his own chair, at the head of the table, and said, “I have an idea.”

Zed was sitting against the back wall of his cell. He looked both bored and unsurprised to see both her and Oro.

He gave her a feline grin. “Brought me a cellmate?”

Oro glared at him. “Not quite. She’s your ticket out.”

Zed’s smile didn’t falter. “Oh, we both know I could have been out of this place weeks ago, if I wanted.” To demonstrate his point, he slipped out of his binds, and kicked behind him. The stone went soaring, taking half the wall with it, revealing a hole he could easily fly out of. “You seemed upset, though, so I felt it best to stay put.”

“He’s perfect,” Isla said.

Zed narrowed his eyes at her. “Shameless of you to try to add yet another paramour to your messy situation, but you’re not my type.”

Oro sighed. “Have you ever heard of a thief better than you?”

That wiped the grin off Zed’s face. “Only one. Why?”

“Do you think you can find her?”

“I can find anybody.”

“Good,” Isla said. “Make it quick. None of us have much time.”

“I don’t need much time.” He reached his hand out, as if waiting to be portaled.

“Oh, no. I’m not going with you,” she said.

Grim stepped from where he had been leaning against the wall, cloaked in shadows. He looked Zed up and down, unimpressed. “Why is he in prison in the first place?”

Isla’s own grin spread across her face. “I’m sure he’ll be happy to tell you all about it during your time together.”

Grim glared at Zed, then reached down to brush his lips over hers. Heat spread behind her—anger she recognized as Oro’s—but still, she went on her toes and said, “Come back to me,” to Grim. Lark was out there somewhere. They were all in danger.

His hands were cold along the bottom of her spine. “You too, Hearteater.”

Then they disappeared.

She was left with Oro next to her, radiating his undeniable tinge of fury.

“He’s going to kill him once they find her,” he said through his teeth.

She shrugged, trying her best to be casual. Trying to pretend Grim didn’t just kiss her in front of Oro. “Zed’s fast. He’ll be fine.”

Maybe.

Oro still hadn’t looked at her. Perhaps he couldn’t. He was likely disgusted by her, by the fact that she was married to the person they had once plotted to kill.

She turned to him. “Ready?”

Using Grim’s portaling power was too much strain. She needed to conserve her energy for when her abilities would be crucial.

Her flying wasn’t perfect. It would slow them both down. Reluctantly, Oro bent and took her into his arms.

She faced away from him, in a failed attempt to get her pulse to settle, as he shot into the clouds, toward Sky Isle.

The hive was empty.

They had portaled into the familiar lattice structure. The winged creatures were gone. Remlar was gone.

Oro frowned. “They were here.”

Remlar was ancient. Could he somehow feel Lark’s presence on the island? “They must have fled.” But where?

“Is there somewhere else on Sky Isle they’ve been known to live?”

He shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of.”

Great. She had been counting on the ancient being to help them. He had been born in the otherworld, and lived here, on Lightlark, since its

inception. If there was a way to incapacitate Lark, he would know.

Oro looked ready to return to his friends, but she stopped him.

“We keep looking for him,” she said.

He looked like he wanted to be as far away from her as possible, after seeing her with Grim, but he flew out of the hive, landing at its base.

She did the same, using his powers. His jaw worked as he watched her.

He could feel the bridge between them. He knew she still loved him. Yet, he had to watch her with him, his enemy . . .

“Oro—” she said.

He turned away.

For several minutes, they walked in silence. She wished she could fill it, tell him all her truths, the way she had before.

If only he could understand why she had left. Why she hadn’t returned.

“How is he?” he finally asked.

Isla blinked. “. . . Grim?”

Heat flared through the forest. “No,” he said sharply. “I don’t give a damn how he is. I meant Lynx.”

Oh.

Her leopard had always liked Oro. “He’s fine,” she said. “I think he misses it here. I don’t think he likes the cold.”

That was an understatement. Lynx slept exclusively next to the hearth in her room and had no shame in waking Grim up when the flames got too low.

“He could come back,” he said. “No matter what . . . there would be a place for him here.” She wasn’t sure he was only talking about Lynx.

They sank back into silence. Any warmth he’d had toward her in the desert, any affection, was gone.

It pained her to see him hurt. To know that she had been the one to hurt him, betray him, again and again. All he had ever done was love her. After the Centennial, he had been patient with her as she recovered from Aurora and Grim’s betrayal. He had helped her learn her powers. He had taken everything slow, which was what she’d needed in that moment.

She had ruined it. And he didn’t even know why.

Her eyes stung. She couldn’t take this. She continued forward, past him, desperate to be out of his orbit, his heat, his scent. She continued through

the trees, remembering herself. She breathed deeply, needing to focus, trying to bury her feelings for him down into the pit of her chest.

And then she was knocked to the ground with such a force, her breath left her.

Oro. He was atop her, shielding her. She looked up to see the spot she had just occupied was stabbed through with three lances, dug right into a tree.

She had stepped on a trap. It could mean Remlar and his Skyling sect were close.

Oro must have known it too, but they remained there, staring at each other.

Tears gathered in her eyes.

Oro blinked in confusion. “I don’t understand,” he said, sitting up, allowing her space to leave if she wanted. She didn’t move an inch. “I can feel you still love me. It hasn’t changed . . . not in the slightest. Tell me the truth. Please.” He searched her eyes. “Is it what you did in the village? Do you think I can’t forgive you? Nothing could make me stop loving you. Nothing. Let me in. I can help you, we can—”

“I’m going to kill you.” The words were out of her before she could catch them. “There’s—there’s a chance I kill you.”

Oro stilled above her.

Her mouth tasted of salt. Her voice was a rasp. “The morning of the battle, I went to the oracle. She gave her last prophecy.” She had never wanted to tell him. But if marrying his enemy, if telling him about all the worst things she had ever done wasn’t going to stop him from loving her, from putting himself in danger, maybe the truth would. “I will kill either you or Grim, with a dagger through the heart. It is certain. It is fated.”

A crease formed between his brows.

“That is why I stayed away. Even though I wanted to, trust me, I wanted to come back.”

He considered her. “You stayed because you believed it would keep me safe.”

She nodded. “At first, yes. And then things changed. I love him, Oro. I’m . . . like him.” Her tears dripped down her temples, into her hair. “Now you know the truth.” She wriggled her way out from beneath him. “Now

you know why you need to stay away from me. I'm dangerous. I'll be the death of you, if you let me."

"Isla," he said gently, standing.

"No." She shook her head. "It doesn't even have to be intentional. You've seen me lose control. I don't trust myself not to hurt you."

"Isla," he said again, stepping forward. She didn't know what he was going to say next, because before he could continue, there was a snap in the forest.

And a voice saying, "Look who it is. The traitor and the king who loves her."

Remlar stood before them, in the underground hideaway where he and his people had fled. Bright blue glow worms on the ceiling illuminated his skin of the same shade, his black hair glimmering beneath their light. It was part of the same cave system Isla and Oro had escaped to after the first time she had met the ancient, winged creature.

"I trust you've had your family reunion," her old teacher said, sneering.

He was aware of Lark's escape, then. "I have. You knew her, didn't you?"

Remlar grinned ruefully. "Unfortunately." His expression turned solemn. "I'm one of the few from the otherworld that wasn't killed to feed this land. I was useful to them, back then."

"I don't understand. Lark created Lightlark. I thought . . . I thought she wouldn't be . . ."

"Monstrous?"

She nodded.

He smiled sadly. "Those with godlike power usually turn out to be . . . There were gods in the otherworld. They ruled us all. They were worse than you can even imagine." He spoke of them with reverence . . . and fear. She didn't think she had ever seen him afraid.

She thought about the bone still tucked in her pocket.

"We're going to lure Lark out. I need a way to injure her, for at least a few hours. Do you know a way to do that?"

Mercifully, he nodded.

Hope must have bloomed in her expression, because his eyes narrowed. “She’s far older than you, girl,” he said. “She will be expecting you to do exactly what you’re doing. She is many steps ahead of you already.”

“I know.” She was counting on it.

“There is metal that would leech her powers. You could find a way to get it on her.”

“No. That’s how she was trapped in the first place. She won’t fall for that again.”

Remlar looked pensive. “Then you’ll need a curse. A strong one. Bound to something powerful.”

She turned to Oro. “I don’t know if Grim can spin curses.” It was a Nightshade ability, but a specialized one. She had never heard him talk about it.

“The ruler cannot curse,” Remlar said. “But I can.”

She faced him. Remlar was partially Nightshade—she knew that—but his powers were mysterious. “You can?”

He nodded and pulled a blade from his pocket. It shone brightly.

“Shademade,” she whispered, and he perked up.

“So, you have been learning,” he said, grinning to reveal his crowded teeth. “I will curse this blade and bind it to myself. It won’t take long.”

They flew to the castle, where Enya and Calder had gathered all the remaining soldiers they could find—the ones that had agreed to leave. She reached into the depths of Grim’s power, across the bridge between them, and with effort that left her panting, portaled them away.

“Some were missing,” Enya said when she was back. Some had been killed.

“Burn any remaining bodies from the battle,” Oro said. Enya nodded. Calder followed her.

When they were gone, she turned to Oro. “I have to—”

“I’m going with you,” he insisted. Fine. This time, she flew herself. They weren’t going far. When she touched down at the Place of Mirrors, Oro eyed her warily. This was the home of the portal, the one that would doom him and Lightlark, should she use it.

“I just need to see something.”

Walking into the glass castle felt like walking through a dream. She had spent some of her best and worst moments inside.

The vault sat in front of her, its door still open.

She stepped toward it. Oro was right behind her. She touched a palm to the metal. It glimmered in a way she hadn't truly noticed before.

Shademade. Of course. But Wildling power worked here. This metal had been infused with something that made their abilities slip through. She pressed her hand against it, feeling its power. Trying to sense the threads that it had been made with. Blood. Wildling blood must have been fused with it somehow.

"What are you doing?" Oro demanded. "Why did you need to come here?"

She ignored him.

"Isla," he said. "What do you want with the vault?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

He caught her wrist. She had kept her markings shadowed before, but in the Place of Mirrors, they were on full display.

Oro stilled. "What are those?"

"Nothing."

"Isla. You saw what happens when you use shortcuts for power. Your soul—"

She shook her arm away and stepped out of the palace, into the forest. "My soul is already gone, Oro," she said.

He was relentless. "It isn't. How can you say that?"

She whipped around to face him. "How can you say it's not?" she demanded. "You know what I've done."

"It was an accident."

"And there are more, Oro. More deaths on my hands. And there will be more. Either you, or Grim, and—" she nearly choked on the words.

"And what?"

She threw her arms up. "There's another prediction. They said I'm going to either save the world . . . or end it." She closed her eyes. The truth, the truth she had started to hide from herself, spilled out. "I feel this . . . calling within me. To kill. It's gotten worse and worse. I told you before, I like killing people who I feel deserve it. But . . . even the ones that don't . . . even the ones that happen by accident . . . It affects me in a way I don't understand."

It was a relief to share the terrible truth with someone. Someone who had seen the good in her too.

“You think you might do it,” he said softly. “You think you might actually end this world.”

Isla nodded. “The bracelets stole away my power. They worked well. For a little bit, I almost felt like myself again. But then, I started killing. Something inside me started awakening.” She felt tears like thorns in the corners of her eyes. “I’m afraid, Oro. I’m afraid of what I might do. I don’t trust myself. I—I haven’t had enough time with my powers, and they’ve been more of a curse than a blessing. I’ve been more of a curse than a blessing.”

“That isn’t true,” he said, his voice steady. His amber eyes seared into hers. “You broke the curses. Don’t forget that.”

She often did. She often thought of even that act as something wrong. It had cost her a friend. It had been the worst day of her life to that point.

“I’ll help you if you let me, Isla.”

She wanted that. It was why she had told him, right?

It was easy, falling back into her past self here. Surrounded by this nature they had created together.

She wanted to let him in completely. She wanted to stay.

“Could you ever truly forgive me?” she asked. It was a dangerous question. “For killing all those people? For marrying Grim? For leaving Lightlark?”

Oro didn’t even have to think about it. “Yes,” he said, the word sharp from his mouth. “I’ve already forgiven you.”

She and Grim . . . they understood the worst of each other. She was married to Grim—she loved him.

But she also loved Oro. Half of her belonged to him. Was that enough?

“I know you’ve made your choice,” Oro said. “Don’t change it for me. But you are my only choice. Forever.”

They stared at each other. She reached for him—

A snap of a leaf, somewhere close by. She whirled around to face it. A woman stood at the edge of the forest, staring at her. She squinted. It wasn’t just any woman.

It was Wren.

She stared at Isla . . . then she took off into the forest. Isla frowned.

What? Why was she here? She had given her the starstick. Was something wrong?

Without another thought, Isla took off after the Wildling, Oro following closely behind.

“Wren?” she called into the forest. How did she know how to get to Lightlark, when she had never been here before? How did she know to find her on Wild Isle?

Just when she almost reached her, Wren ran down the bridge connecting the isle to the mainland. Isla followed, just a few steps behind. “Wren!” she yelled at the Wildling. But she didn’t stop.

Isla crashed through the trees, clearing them with her power, but Wren remained just out of reach.

Enough. She burst forward with a shot of Starling energy and was nearly on her—but then she was gone. Isla stood in the clearing. Turned around.

“Where—”

And then there was a blade, stabbing toward her face. Wren. Isla barely got her own weapon up in time.

“What are you doing?” she screamed at the Wildling. She wasn’t wearing her snakes. What had happened? “Where are the rest of the Wildlings?”

“Isla,” a voice said. It was Oro’s. He was standing a few feet away, looking unsure of what he should do.

She blocked another blow, her blade grazing down Wren’s arm in the process. It was an accident. “I—”

Dread seized through her chest.

There wasn’t any blood.

She looked up at an expressionless face. Glassy eyes.

“No,” she said, or cried, she didn’t know, all she did was block yet another advance. Another. Oro stood there, inching toward her, as if seconds away from interfering.

Tears swept down her jaw. “I—Oro, I can’t,” she said. She was gasping for air.

He seemed to understand, because before Wren could take another step toward her, she was covered in flames.

Isla watched her burn. Wren just stood there, expressionless, as the fire consumed her. As her skin separated from bone. As she burned until she was nothing but ash.

She sank to her knees. Wren was here, on Lightlark. Isla knew what that meant.

That was how Lark had gotten to the island so quickly. “She—she has my starstick.”

Oro’s features turned to stone. With portaling power, she could be anywhere at any moment. They needed to stop her now. They needed that cursed dagger. He pulled her to her feet.

Isla reached for Grim’s portaling power to take them to Remlar.

But it was gone.

No. She reached again. Again. But it was like the bridge between them had been severed. It was like it had never existed at all.

Her heart was beating so fast, clawing up her throat. She couldn’t breathe.

She reached. And reached.

Her emotions broke out of her chest, exploding from her ribs. “I can’t feel it!” she screamed. She nearly sank to the floor. Only Oro kept her steady. “Oro—I can’t feel him!”

He couldn’t be dead. If he was, she would be too, right? Or was the heart of Lightlark keeping her alive for a few stolen moments?

Her scream was a guttural rasp; it didn’t sound natural. Pain nearly ripped apart her chest. Power exploded, and Oro just barely shielded against it.

“Isla,” he said carefully, “Grim is tough to kill. His power is likely blocked, like with your bracelets. You need to stay calm, or we won’t survive this.”

She couldn’t. The idea that he was in trouble—that he had been captured. That he could be dying—

Oro grabbed her wrist, as if feeling something she could not. He threw up his Starling shield around them.

Seconds later, trees snapped in half as easily as matchsticks, as the forest was flattened.

Something roared.

A massive serpent broke through the remaining treetops, rising like a tower before them. The serpent-woman. The ancient creature that had fought beside her and Lightlark in the battle against the Nightshades.

Her scales were muted. She was covered in dirt.

Dead. She was dead and risen.

She launched at them with her tree-sized fangs bared, breaking through the shield.

Oro sent them hurtling back with a blast of power, and they rolled through the forest together, before hitting a tree that had been reduced to splinters. There was another roar as the serpent-woman made to strike again.

They couldn't portal away. They needed to run. Oro grabbed her hand to help her up, and she did not drop it as they tore through the forest, taking cover beneath any remaining trees, hiding from the massive serpent.

She couldn't think straight. Her head pounded and her breathing was uneven, but Oro guided them through the forest, running until they reached the cliffside. They stopped just short of the edge, rocks hurtling below.

The snake broke through, hissing. Curling. In a flash, she shot forward toward them, with nothing to stop her from swallowing them whole.

At the last moment, Oro grabbed her hand, and they jumped.

The snake followed, sliding right off the side—and crashing into the jagged rocks below, stabbed through. Pinned in place.

With Oro's power, they landed safely on the beach.

And were immediately surrounded.

Skylings, everywhere, with arrows drawn. Part of the legion that had fought in battle. There were dozens of them. Expressionless. Dead.

Arrows shot through the sky, right at Oro. Right at her.

She reached for Grim's power, hoping to find a thread, but there was nothing. Nothing. Fury gathered in her bones. Pain lanced through her.

I can't feel him.

I can't feel him.

I CAN'T—

Her vision went black as power exploded out of her. She could taste it, feel it slide against her skin like a blade, ripping the air itself into tatters, shattering everything in its path.

Her skyre burned. Her heart burned.

Mist rained down. She had boiled the sea behind her. She had turned the cliffs into a thousand daggers. All the Skylings were in pieces along the beach. Her breaths were labored from the effort. Her knees nearly buckled.

She turned slowly to Oro, only to see him clutching his chest. When he dropped his hands, she saw all the blood.

And the blade buried beneath it.

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SACRIFICE

Oro was bleeding everywhere. His eyes were wide and unblinking.

Saltwater brushed against her legs as she kneeled beside him, hands shaking, rushing to apply pressure against his wound.

“I’m—I’m so sorry, it was—”

An accident. Just like before.

This couldn’t be his end. This couldn’t be the prophecy. She refused to let him die here, on this beach.

Water pooled in her hands, and she closed her eyes and forced herself to anchor through the panic, just like he had once taught her.

She didn’t know how to heal, but Oro had trained her well. He had said that all powers were similar in their execution.

She heard his voice in her head—Focus. She did. She cleared her mind, even as pain and regret and shame raged. For him, she pushed it all away, until her mind was quiet.

The water was warm beneath her skin, prickling against places she had been cut. Threads appeared, waiting to be pulled. She reached for all of them and formed a bond. The water began circling beneath her hand, faster, faster. She opened her eyes to see it gleaming.

Slowly, she reached toward Oro’s wound. She imagined it closing. She imagined the water soothing his pain, washing the blood away. Saving him.

It wasn’t working. He was dying.

His hand inched toward her. Pressed against her heart. She knew him, knew what he was telling her.

It’s all for you. All this time . . . I saved it for you.

She had access to his power. Lightlark wouldn’t fall.

But he would die.

No. She refused. She thought of the beach he had promised to take her to, the one with water the color of her eyes. The one he visited every morning. She thought of the golden rose necklace. She thought of flicking his crown. She thought of him pulling the thorns from her back. She thought of crying in his arms and how he had held her, and comforted her, without having to say a word.

That sort of love didn't just die. He was right. This bridge between them was like the forever flame, relentless and unyielding.

If this was her fate, then she would fight against it. She would break it, the same way she did the curses.

Fate should fear her, should fear this clawing in her chest, this love that burned and burned.

She pressed harder. She poured power she couldn't spare into her palm, into him, and watched the sea shimmer. Watched as it twisted into his wound.

Watched as it stitched it together.

She didn't dare move, didn't dare break her focus, until his own hand came down over hers. She looked up, to see him staring at her. Blinking.

She choked out a sob. "I'm sorry, I—"

He reached up to cup her cheek. His hand wasn't nearly as warm as it usually was. She shook her head and sobbed again. "I'm a monster, I—"

"I love you," he said, even with the blade still in his chest. The one she was afraid to remove, for fear of doing more harm than good.

Her own words died in her mouth.

She shook her head. "You—you should hate me. Don't you see? I'll kill you, if you let me."

He just stared at her. "I'll never hate you, Isla. I'll love you until my final breath—even if you're the reason I'm taking it."

She didn't want to be the reason. He was conscious now but still bleeding. They were on a beach, far from help. He needed healing elixir. If only she could portal, to get it. If only she hadn't given up her starstick.

Slowly, Oro dropped his chin to stare down at his chest. "I'm assuming if I die from this, it won't fulfill the prophecy."

She shook her head. Her voice was a feeble whisper. "It's supposed to be my blade through your heart."

Clearly, mercifully, it had just missed it.

“Ah,” he said. He winced. “Then this death won’t do. It’ll have been for nothing.” The color in his face was fading. The water was working too slowly.

A sob spilled from her lips. She didn’t know how to get help. She couldn’t leave him here—without the pressure against his wound, he would succumb to his injury. She tried to keep him distracted, calm, hoping the water would be enough. “No. You can’t die, because I don’t know if I would ever be happy again.”

“That’s not true,” he said. “You . . . you love him. I can see that.”

She did love Grim. He did make her happy. Yet . . .

“My heart is halved, Oro. I love him . . . but I could never forget you. I could never not love you.” She swallowed. “And even—”

“Even if you were with me . . . you would still love him.”

She nodded. “You deserve more than that, Oro. Before I remembered my time with him, I loved only you. That was the truth. But now . . .”

Now, things were far more complicated. She felt torn between past Isla and the woman she was now. It was almost as if they were two separate people.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks I deserve.” His breathing was labored. The pain of the injury seemed to be catching up with him. “I want you. I still want you, even though you’re a traitor. I still want you, even though you’re my enemy. I still want you, even though you might kill me. I want you, I want you, I want you, and it is the most selfish thing I have ever felt.”

His eyes fell closed.

She screamed. She pressed against his chest, tears falling against it. She begged the water to work faster. She pulled the bone from her pocket, but it was useless without the right skyre.

He couldn’t die. She loved him. She felt their bond, felt it dimming, and would do anything to stop it. Give anything to stop it.

She pulled her necklace, reached for the other bond, cried out for anyone, anyone to help—

“Heart.”

Isla whipped around to see Grim there, gasping. He was out of breath. Zed was there too. The Skyling rushed over to Oro’s side and brushed her away, taking over the pressure on his wound.

She was in Grim’s arms in an instant. “I—I couldn’t feel you!” she said into his chest.

“I know,” he said, holding up the sword he had retrieved. “We were imprisoned, we—”

He looked behind her. He saw Oro fading. She could see it, clear on his face. He wanted to let him die.

Isla forced him to meet her gaze. “Save him,” she said, her voice a brutal command.

So Grim portaled them all away.

In the castle, she found Wildling elixir, a few leftover vials she had sent to the island. First, though, they had to remove the blade.

Grim roughly pulled it out, clearly taking some pleasure in the way Oro seized in pain. She shot him a look and applied all the elixir onto Oro’s chest and waited. Waited.

When Enya entered the room, her fire-wings flared out of her back immediately. She rushed at Isla in a flash of crackling red, pinning her against the wall. Her hand was at her throat, and her eyes were brimmed in fury. “You did this.”

Grim’s voice was pure malice as he said, “Just checking, heart. You’d be upset if I kill her?”

“Yes,” Isla gasped below the Sunling’s grip, before Starling energy radiated off of her, sending Enya sliding back a few feet.

She couldn’t blame the Sunling for her anger. It was her fault. Enya had been right about her.

The Sunling gave her a look that told her she knew that, before rushing to Oro’s side. She grabbed his hand. Whispered a few words to him that she couldn’t hear. They had been friends for centuries. She could see how much she loved him.

They all waited in the same room, watching as the elixir worked diligently. Oro had lost a lot of blood on the beach. It was a slow, painful process.

Zed was leaned against the wall, staring at the sword in Grim’s hands.

“What happened?” Enya demanded.

Zed looked haunted. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Isla glanced at Grim, who stood a few feet away, glaring at Oro, as if he could personally will him not to recover. He shrugged. “Not me. The thief.

They had some sort of . . . quarrel.”

For several agonizing minutes, she watched Oro, panic like claws around her heart, until his pulse began to stabilize again. Her relief was like ice through her veins.

“This ends now,” she said, not wanting to wait a moment longer. Not when Lark had a chance at finding the heart.

“Stay here,” she told Grim. “Make sure he recovers.”

Begrudgingly, he nodded. Then, he portaled her to Remlar, to fetch the cursed blade.

The Skyling was still working on it. “Just a few more minutes,” he said, before turning to her. His eyes glistened. “Now . . . tell me what you really want to know.”

“I can wait,” she said. “Until you’re done with the curse.”

“Don’t insult me. I can do both at once.” He sat cross-legged on the forest floor above the tunnels his people had escaped to, blade between his fingers. She sat in front of him, just like she had during their training. “What is it?”

The prophecy still existed. Lark’s attack didn’t change that. Its importance was clearer than ever, now that she had nearly put a blade through Oro’s heart. “If one had to die—Grim or Oro—who would you choose? Whose death would do the most good?”

His answer seemed obvious, until he said, “Oro.”

Remlar smiled at her shock.

“Why?”

He settled back. “Let me tell you a story.”

Annoyance flared within her. “We don’t have time for a story. People are dying as we speak.”

He continued as if she hadn’t said anything. “There was once a world with three gods. One that ruled the skies. One that ruled the dirt. And one that ruled the great below. All three stuck to their dominions and lived in harmony, until the sky believed it was more important. I have stars, the sky said. I have clouds. I have the sun. I have lightning. It decided it needed to be more powerful, and so it grew, and grew, until it ruled over both the dirt and below. It had children, and those children decided they needed to rule. Other children were born, from the sky, but also the dirt, and the below.

“The sky’s original children decided they didn’t like sharing power. So, they kept all their power to themselves. Anyone not in their family that had power was put to death.

“It wasn’t until, one day, the children of the dirt and the below rose up and fought back for their power. It started a war.

“One of the princes of below and one of the princesses of the dirt dreamed of another world, where everyone would have power, not just the ruling line. They recruited a prince of the sky, and together, they lured their people to a new future.

“Oro, you see, is the last remaining part of this original ruling line. His bloodline has all power trapped within it. If he dies, that power is released. Given back. Nexus will exist no longer.”

Nexus was the curse that bound all rulers to their people. That made another form of rule nearly impossible.

“But nexus is a curse. Killing whoever spun it could end it too. Right? If it was bound to their life?”

“Perhaps . . . but Cronan is in the otherworld. And Oro is here.” Cronan. Remlar had just confirmed he was the ruler who had created nexus. She should have known, but she had assumed he had been dead for millennia . . . now, she knew the truth.

The implication was clear. The only real way for her to end nexus was to kill Oro. It was what Maren had told her, long ago, with the rebels.

“You knew Cronan was alive,” she breathed.

He nodded. “I know a great deal more than anyone wishes.”

His eyes were wicked. His smile was sad.

“You must understand something else, my dear. You are the only person living who is of the sky, the dirt, and the below. You, Isla Crown, bring the gods to their knees.”

Right now, trapped between two unwanted fates, she didn’t feel powerful at all.

“You have been marked,” he continued. “The heart of Lightlark chose to mend your own. Its power was stolen from the otherworld, now it lives in you. No one can be sure how that might manifest.”

She didn’t know what that meant. She didn’t want to be marked or special. She just wanted freedom to do whatever she wanted, without her choices deciding the fate of the world.

But this was her role to play. So, she pulled the piece of parchment from her pocket, along with the bone, and asked him her questions.

“You’ll need great power,” he told her.

“I know,” she said. She swallowed, understanding what she must do. “They’ll never forgive me.” It was a risk. Reckless.

“Then make sure,” Remlar said, “it’s worth it.”

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NO ONE

Lark wouldn’t find the heart of Lightlark. Isla would make sure of it. The slice of power was warm and bright in her palm as she surfaced on Sky Isle, Remlar’s instructions sharp in her mind.

She didn’t even see the vines until they were wrapped around her and she was on her knees. A row of thorns forced her fingers open, peeling her skin in coils. She had no choice but to drop the heart.

Right into Lark’s awaiting hand.

“Thank you so much for finding it for me,” Lark said, her smile serpentine.

Isla bellowed as she fought against the restraints. Her anger exploded off her in waves of energy, sending the vines flying in pieces. In a moment she was on her feet, wiping her bloody hands down her clothing.

Lark frowned as she curled her fingers around the shining orb. Its light faded until it went dull and only an acorn remained. A very helpful illusion Grim had helped her master. “What is this?” she demanded.

“It’s a trap,” Isla said, and then the world exploded.

The acorn hadn’t been an acorn at all, but something Zed had previously developed, an orb filled with their own concentrated power. It burst in Lark’s hand, throwing them both backward.

Isla was caught by Grim’s shadows, the cold darkness smoothing tenderly around her body and swimming across the skin torn by Lark’s vines.

The Wildling landed on the other side of the clearing. Her body had been brutalized by the burst of energy, but she was healing quickly.

“Now,” Isla yelled, and Oro was there, Remlar’s blade in hand. The cursed weapon glistened. He didn’t waste a moment.

Isla didn’t dare breathe as he pulled back and stabbed the knife straight through Lark’s heart.

Darkness seemed to swallow the world, blinding them for a moment before retreating. There was a gurgled scream.

The shard of ice came from nowhere. It struck Oro, and Isla roared. She broke free from the shadows and rushed forward but was thrown back by a sheet of water so concentrated, her spine hit the trees again.

Cleo stepped out of the woods. Isla should have known. Of course the Moonling was working with Lark.

Grim’s shadows rushed forward; he would end her in half a second. “Careful, Grim,” the Moonling said. “Hurt any of us, and your wife’s pretty little head will hit the ground.”

That was when Isla felt a cold sword against her throat. “Hello again,” a voice said. Soren.

The traitor.

Lark had mentioned someone had helped her surface . . . somehow, Cleo must have managed it. She wondered how that was possible, when only Grim’s ability could free her.

It didn’t matter now. Lark was cursed. Immobilized.

Even with the blade at her neck, Isla melted with relief.

Until Lark began to move again. To her horror, the Wildling stood, the dagger still sticking through her heart. No. Impossible. The curse was supposed to last at least a few hours, long enough to send her through the portal.

Slowly, Lark’s skin began stitching around the blade, until the dagger was expelled and fell to the floor, as if it was nothing more than steel.

It didn’t make sense; Remlar had bound the curse with his life.

The Wildling smiled again. “It seems we both planned traps today.

You don’t think I know where you went? Who you went to for help?”

She raised her hand, and the trees above shook. From its branches, a body dropped down, limp and dead. Eyes wide and pale blue throat slit.

Remlar.

“No!” she screamed, tears falling down her face and trickling onto the blade.

Lark only grinned wider. “What a curious being he was,” she said. “Always had been.” He was a curious being, Isla thought. And a loyal one.

He wouldn’t have told Lark anything useful, even while his life was at risk.

Oro was on the ground, surrounded by Zed and Calder, who were working furiously to close his new wound. Enya was in front of them, her wings of fire curling out of her back, balls of flames in her hands.

Grim was looking at Isla, eyes wide but focused, as if he was calculating the chances of being able to turn Soren to ash or portal her away, before her throat was slit. Soren’s pressure against her neck was firm—portaling away could kill her.

But she wouldn’t let anyone else she cared about die because of her failings.

Grim seemed to sense a shift in her emotions, because he stepped forward. “No—”

She was too quick. Using his power, using the strength of her anguish, she sent them all different places, far from each other.

Before she could think to portal herself, Soren pinned her against him, blade pointed right at her jugular. She didn’t dare breathe.

All her focus shifted to holding on to her and Grim’s bond, blocking his power, the same way Remlar had once taught her to, so he couldn’t portal back to her. She immediately felt him fight against it, the power pulsing, but she stood firm. Remlar would have been proud of her.

Lark looked surprised but not discouraged. “No matter. We will find the others later. And you will regret having ever wasted our time.”

The hilt of the sword hit the side of her head, and the world fell silent.

She woke up bound. The air was stale and dry. She had been plunged into near-total darkness. She blinked and could just barely make out the figure of a woman in front of her.

Lark sighed. “Strange how easily mistakes are repeated . . .” she said. “How strange another Wildling ruler fell in love with her Nightshade counterpart.”

Isla’s grin was cruel as she spat at her feet. “Mine gave me his life. Yours locked you in a prison. We are not the same.”

Lark just smiled back, but Isla could tell she hit a nerve. The Wildling still harbored deep resentment over Grim’s ancestor. She could feel it.

“Let me give you some advice, Isla,” she said. “Kill your heart before it kills you.” She stepped closer. “The heart is always our downfall. No matter

the poetry or the lessons about love conquering all, no—the opposite. Love conquers us. It is the true ruler. The true equalizer. The true weapon and scythe among men.”

That, at least, was true. Isla knew it. Love had made her do the worst things she had ever done in her life.

But it had also made her strong enough to do the best.

“We could have been allies, in another life,” Lark said. “You know what it’s like to be locked away. To be betrayed by those you love.” The side of her head ached where the sword had hit her. Her vision blurred, then returned. “Perhaps time will be what you need. Just like me.”

It was then that Isla turned to see her wrists bound behind her, and what was around them.

Her bracelets, made into cuffs chained to the floor. The ones Lark must have found in the blacksmith’s forge.

“No,” she screamed, trying to break herself away from them. She summoned all her power—but it was gone.

Gone.

Lark sighed. “It’s torturous, isn’t it? Even worse after the first century. You’ll see.” She stepped closer to her. Isla lunged forward, but the chains dragged her back. Lark only smiled. “I don’t need the heart of Lightlark when I have you. I’m going to find the Nightshade and Sunling rulers and send you pieces of them, until you comply. I’m going to kill every single person you’ve ever cared about.” Isla raged against the bracelets, and Lark only smiled. “Goodbye, for now, Isla,” she said, as the ceiling dropped to swallow her.

Isla’s raging scream was heard by no one.

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FED ON DEATH

Isla’s wrists were raw from tugging against the bracelets. Blood dripped down her fingers and onto the floor.

Please, she said to herself, please don’t let her find them.

If she did. If Grim and Oro were hurt—

She folded over and vomited.

She struggled against the restraints in vain.

Time passed differently underground, without the moon or sun to tell her how long it had been. She was slumped forward, having exhausted all her energy.

Damn her for having the bracelets made. She had done this to herself. She had sourced her own imprisonment, down to the metal.

Only Lark could remove them, which meant she would die with the bracelets still on her wrists.

No, that wasn’t true. The only other person who could free her was the blacksmith, Ferrar. And she had plunged a blade through his chest.

All his work had been for nothing. The suit of armor and sword she had left in her bedroom. None of it mattered anymore.

What if I need you? She had asked him.

You’ve always had everything you needed, he had said.

If only that were true.

A day passed, it seemed, before a mindless soldier appeared in the cavern. His skin was leathered and far too cold as he roughly pulled her hair back and forced her to drink water. He shoved food down her throat, and she bit

his hand as hard as she could, but he didn’t even flinch as his fingers came apart in her mouth.

Isla folded over and retched, spitting wildly. And he repeated the process again, with his mangled, bloodless hand.

Another day. Another meal. Another guard, this time. She had been right. Lark might have summoned them from the dead, but they weren’t whole. Lark was weaker here, in this world. Isla wondered, if, in the otherworld, she had been able to perform full resurrections.

What had she promised Cleo? Did the Moonling understand the limits of Lark’s power here?

Isla wondered about Grim and Oro. She hoped they were safe and far away from the Wildling.

She felt around for the bond between them, like she did every few hours, but with the bracelets on, and this far down, she felt nothing.

The thought occurred to her later than it should have. Her necklace. If she could find a way to pull it—perhaps to trick the guard into doing it—Grim could find her. He had found her before.

The next day, Isla tried. She fought with the guard.

She folded herself over, in any attempt to tug at the necklace.

The day after that, she attempted to speak to him, to convince him to help her, but it was like he couldn’t hear her.

Nothing worked.

Isla screamed again, as if her voice could cleave through the rock and alert Grim and Oro to where she was—

But no one came.

A week was a long time spent in silence. Her only company was her thoughts. There were only a few more days left of the storm season. A few more days before the augur said her body would perish. Perhaps Lark would find a way to keep her alive. Perhaps the Wildling planned to turn her into some sort of monster.

Ferrar’s words were like a chant in her mind, an echo through the cavern.

Everything she needed . . . She began going over his words. Going over her research. Going over the events of her life.

The prophet-followers had been convinced she had been the curse born of life and death. That she would either end the world . . . or save it.

Sairsha's group had forced her to end them. They had believed they were giving her a gift. It didn't make sense—unless they thought by killing them, she would be taking something.

She thought about the thrill of killing Tynan. The surge of every death afterward. The beast within that was being satiated.

As her powers had developed, something dark had formed. It had started with using her blood and pain as power, on Lightlark. Then, on Nightshade, it turned into killing for power. Eventually, the skyres.

It was as if something within her was always taking. And always getting stronger.

Almost like another power completely.

That was impossible. She already her flair. She had her father's flair. She couldn't possibly have another one. Unless—

Unless she hadn't been born with her father's flair.

Unless she had taken it.

Isla began to shake.

We did not kill your parents. Terra had said those words, and Isla had been quick to dismiss them, even though doubt had harbored in the back of her mind. Then, using Oro's flair, she had confirmed it. Her guardians had no reason to take the blame of killing her parents. They had no reason to look fearful when she had returned from the Centennial, accusing them of that death.

Unless . . . unless they had kept it a secret. Unless they had been protecting her from the pain of the truth. Unless they had been protecting themselves, in fear of what she might do.

Tears welled up in her eyes, blinding her.

No.

Isla screamed at the top of her lungs.

She had killed her parents.

She had killed Aurora.

She had killed so many others since.

And it had made her stronger.

She took—she had taken the power of every single person she had ever killed. Shame consumed her, and she shook with rage. She fed on death. Death.

She was a monster.

But then realization washed over her like rushing water.

Because she had also killed the blacksmith.

You have always had everything you needed.

A primal sound left her mouth. The ground trembled in response to the force of her, because now that she knew the power she had—she could use it.

The blacksmith had put the bracelets on her before. He had always built a failsafe into his designs.

She had his power now.

Her focus unwavering, she remembered watching him in his forge. She remembered seeing him hammer, cleave, create. She imagined him taking his work apart, demolishing it forever. The metal bracelets at her wrists began to crack. Rocks in the ceiling began to fall like rain, shattering against the floor. And Isla just smiled.

She took, just like a curse.

And, as hard as she had tried, Lark would find that she could not be broken.

Isla dug it all up—the pain, the shame, the love, the hatred, the loss, the doubt, the fear, the life, the death, and wrapped herself in it, soaked in it. She scraped every ability from where it had been buried, every bit of power that she had ever taken, every strength she had been afraid to use. She filtered it through the skyre.

And she unleashed.

The world broke open around her. The ground parted like a screaming mouth in a roar that swallowed her senses, tearing through endless layers of dirt and rock until light rained upon her again. She blinked furiously against it, panting. Isla stood a mile down, in the new crater’s center. The bracelets were just twisted scraps at her feet.

She had been buried deep below, where no one could hope to find her. She stared up at the distant sky, and the ground that had walled her in like a cage.

Lark would wish she had buried her deeper.

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COST

Isla was filthy, bloody, and still shivering from the cold of the underground, but she needed to know for certain.

Terra and Poppy were guarding the door of the Wildling newland castle when they saw her.

Poppy's eyes went wide—not in fear . . . but in concern. "What happened? Are you alright? Let me see those wrists, they'll get infected."

Isla was too tired, mentally and physically, to refuse. She allowed her guardians to lead her to her old room. It took three baths and endless scrubbing to wash the blood and dirt from crevices she wouldn't have even thought of. Poppy brought healing ointments and wraps.

"Did she come for you here? Is everyone okay?"

Terra shook her head. "Wren portaled us here with the device, but she stayed behind, on Nightshade. She never came."

Isla closed her eyes against the memory of the burning Wildling. "Wren is dead."

There was just silence.

As Poppy finished the final set of wraps around her wrists, Isla couldn't take it any longer. She had to know for certain. "I killed them, didn't I? My parents."

Poppy looked at Terra. Terra only looked at her. She nodded.

Isla felt a part of her shatter again, but she didn't have time to break. She swallowed. "How?"

Terra sighed. "Your first cry . . . you brought the castle down. They were killed instantly. Only you remained. Her bonded . . . he shielded you."

Lynx. It was why he had hated her at first. He knew; he had been there. She had killed his bonded right in front of him.

“You were born with too much power,” Terra said. “Your power threatened us all. Yourself, especially.”

Isla didn’t understand. It didn’t make any sense. “I never had power.”

Poppy’s smile was sad. “We ensured that. There was a metal, passed down for generations. Rumored to suppress power. We never had much use for it . . . until you.” The very metal that had just been tied around her wrists. But she’d never had bracelets like that.

“We ground it into your food. We laced it into your clothes and weapons,” Poppy said. “Between that . . . and convincing you that you were born powerless, you never tried to use it. We knew the dose of stone wasn’t strong enough. One day, you would overpower it. We trained you as best we could without it, hoping you would be able to control your abilities once they appeared.”

Villainous from the first breath. The words she had once spoken in humor to Grim were very real when it came to her.

She fought against the tears. There wasn’t any time for them now.

Poppy and Terra had brought her clothing. She slipped on her familiar brown training pants, long-sleeved shirt, and boots. Poppy silently braided her hair away from her face.

For the first time in months, she felt like a Wildling again.

“Things are going to get bad,” Isla told them at the castle door. “Grim will come for you, if I don’t.” Terra nodded.

Poppy threw her arms around Isla. She held her guardian for just a moment.

She opened her eyes and found Terra watching her. Then, her former teacher said, “We trained you well. Now kill that murderous witch.”

In her clean clothing, Isla used Grim’s flair to portal into the clearing on Sky Isle. Leaves rustled across the forest floor, carried by the wind. They had partially covered the body in the center of it, like a blanket.

She went to her knees and cried.

Remlar hadn’t deserved this death. He had been alive thousands of years. He had helped her, when most wouldn’t have dared.

He had become a friend.

She found his blade nearby. The one he had cursed. The one that held his power. It glistened beneath the light. Otherworldly. Shademade.

Isla remembered some of his last words for her.

You will bring the gods to their knees.

He had believed in her, when she didn't even believe in herself. She tucked his blade into her belt.

Then, she pressed a hand against his body, and portaled him to The Hive.

The winged creatures awaited. The woods shook with their sobs. He was carried on a scrap of wind, between his people. She watched in shock as they plucked feathers from their wings and put them upon his body, until he was coated in them.

She was the last in line. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm going to do it. I'm going to do everything you taught me."

It was the last secret shared between them.

Isla stood on the edge of the cliff next to her father's estate, overlooking the cove where he had once tried to flee his destiny.

She clutched the large black diamond around her neck and pulled.

Within moments, the ground thundered as Wraith landed, his talons digging deep into the dirt. Grim was on his back. He wordlessly leapt to the ground. Isla's knees nearly buckled as he walked toward her. For days, she had wondered if Lark had found him. If she'd . . . if she'd—

"I thought you were—"

His lips covered hers, and she was engulfed in him—in storms and rain and shadows. "Don't you ever do that again," he said. And then, he kissed her more.

She wanted to capture this moment forever. But Lark was still out there. She still wanted all of them dead.

He hugged her to his chest. He was grasping her so closely, she could feel his heart beating wildly, right against her ear.

She looked up to see him studying her body, gaze snagging on her raw wrists. The shadows that had puddled at his feet now flared, eating across the cliffside. "What did she do to you?"

"She put the bracelets on and chained me a mile below the ground. She said she was going to kill all of you."

Grim's voice shook with rage as he said, "I'm going to rip that witch limb from limb and have her heal herself so that I can do it again and again until the end of time."

"And I'm going to help you," she said. "Where is she?"

"Astria saw her go underground a few days ago, and she hasn't surfaced since. The Skyling's blade might not have cursed her, but it was strong enough to have weakened her."

Good. His death was not for nothing.

Lark was strong. Soon, she would surface. There were only days left of winter. Their time was nearly up.

"This ends now," Isla said. She had everything she needed. "Get them all—Oro, Enya, Calder, and Zed—and bring them here. I'm going to Azul."

Grim nodded.

She left him on that cliff.

Azul was seated on his castle steps. He stood as she approached.

"What's happened?" he said, as if he could read the pain and trials of the last few weeks in her features.

Energy simmered around her as she approached. Ever since she had discovered her true flair, it was as if part of her power had been unlocked, and now it surged around her. "The storm to end all storms? It's happening tomorrow," she said.

Azul tensed. "How do you know?"

"Because I'm making it."

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YOU

Tomorrow, she would face Lark. She would face her fate.

Her island was quiet. She could hear the waves wash ashore, could feel the forest breathe in and out.

She was on Lynx's back. She thought he might like to see it too. He had gone still beneath her, the moment they portaled here. His ears had sharpened.

"What do you think?" she asked him.

In response, he took off.

Isla was nearly thrown off his back. She had to press herself against his spine, fingers full of his fur, to hang on. "What are you doing?" she asked, as he crashed through the forest that she had come to know.

He didn't slow or waver. He traveled down paths she had never walked before, up hills, into valleys, with confidence.

As if he had been here before.

Isla slid farther up, to press her hand between his eyes. That was when she saw them. Flashes of memories Lynx gave her, melting into the present.

Her parents, here, on this island. Eating fruit from the trees. Riding Lynx. Building bonfires and—

The forest parted. Lynx came to a stop, right in front of a house that had been overtaken by the woods.

"No," she said, slipping off Lynx's back. She had come here dozens of times in the last few weeks and had never happened upon it.

He pressed his nose against her back, and she watched her parents build this place. Every bit of wood, every decoration, every rock. They portaled in some of their favorite things and made it a home. For the two of them. No . . . not just for the two of them.

In one of the memories, she watched her mom laugh, then turn toward Lynx. Her stomach was rounded, full. Her hands stroked down it.

Her. They had made it for her too.

Isla walked into the house.

In the last two decades, it had been overtaken. Vines crept inside, creatures scuttled in the corners. Cobwebs stuck against the ceiling. But parts of her parent's history had remained.

A lopsided table, with chairs that had clearly been made by hand.

Paintings of Lynx and her father . . . she recognized him from her bonded's memories. Her mother had been a painter.

On the center of the table, there was a piece of paper covered in a layer of dirt and yellowed by the air and time.

She froze as she read the familiar handwriting atop it.

Isla. Her father's writing. The same as his maps.

With trembling fingers, she unfolded the piece of paper.

My dearest Isla,

You will be born in just a few days, according to your mother. She has fallen asleep in the chair next to me, just minutes after she said she wasn't tired. I thought this would be as good a time as any to tell you just a little of our story . . . and yours.

Some of this, I'm told, you will know by now. Some might come as a surprise. Let me tell you all of it.

I was working with a man that hated the world, and himself. He sought to find a sword so he could overtake the land his predecessors had lost. I helped him. I visited a blacksmith and gave my blood to make him an amulet that would allow him to walk in the night, like I could. In exchange, he had the blacksmith make me a portaling device so that I could better help in his mission to find the sword.

I found it, but I was injured in my efforts. I portaled to the Wildling newland, by accident. Your mother found and saved me. She told me that if I gave my ruler the sword, the world would suffer and countless innocents would die in a neverending war. So, after much thought, I decided to make it seem as though I had been lost, the sword unfound, the portaling device destroyed with me. I left my old life behind, and it killed me. But your mother was a light in the darkness.

Her curse meant that the more time we spent together, the more my life was in danger. I decided to do something desperate. I used the portaling device to visit the blacksmith again, risking my entire plan. I begged him to make me another charm, for your mother, out of my blood. In exchange, he wanted death, but, because of his curse, I knew if I killed him, Grim would know I was alive. Instead, I gave him my armor, which had been passed down for generations. It had original power in it, and he accepted. He made me the necklace.

I wasn't sure if it was going to work, but it did. Your mother still needed blood to survive, but she could fall in love with me without feeling compelled to kill me.

I wish I could tell you every detail of our story, Isla, but it will have to be saved for a different time. I can tell you this, though. In the early days of meeting your mother, I could not stay on the Wildling newland. She was under near constant supervision, and my presence would have been noted. So, every night, I would return to a place I had discovered years before, when my ruler had first given me use of the portaling device. An uncharted island so lovely, I called it by the name I always wanted to give my future daughter—Isla.

Each day before I left your mother, I would take one of her favorite flowers or fruits from her garden. It would annoy her endlessly. She thought I was doing it to be cruel, but I was planting it here. On this island. So that it would be made up of all her favorite things.

Every fruit, every flower, every animal, every insect on this island was loved by your mother, Isla. And she was loved, let me tell you.

When she was with child, your mother began having strange dreams. She started to believe that our child would be born at the cusp of a new era. And that she would either save our world . . . or end it.

Did you ever wonder what your mother's flair was? She never told her guardians, so I'm guessing you don't know.

Your mother could see the future, Isla. And that is how we know that your life will be a difficult one.

It is how I know you will read this letter on the eve of a day that will change your life, and this world, forever.

It is how I know what your flair will be.

It is how I know your birth will kill us both.

If you feel guilt for what you did, let me put an end to it. We knew what would happen if we chose to have you, Isla. We knew all that would occur. We made a choice, and we have never once regretted it.

You will have my flair. You will not know the pain of the curses. But you will not have your mother's, not yet. We took another trip to the blacksmith, and your mother told him he would die within the next quarter of a century. He was so pleased, he did us the favor of creating a vessel for your mother's flair. She wanted it to be your choice, to know the future, or not. She knows you will make many hard choices.

Your mother's flair is here. It's been waiting for you. Take it, and you will know everything.

You might be wondering how I can be so cavalier about my own imminent death. The truth is, my regard for my own life is nothing compared to my regard for your mother's. From the moment I met her, I loved her. From the moment we were married, I swore to protect her from anything that would ever cause her danger. I have killed anything that ever sought to harm her. There has only ever been one person I have loved more than your mother, Isla. Only one person I could bear losing her for.

And that is you.

Tears swept down her face, falling onto the page. They knew. They knew she would kill them, and they had her regardless.

They knew everything that would happen to her. And still . . . they believed in her. They believed she would make the right choices.

Beside the letter was a bracelet. She recognized the blacksmith's work. It had a tiny charm. A vial.

Somehow, she knew, breaking the tiny vial would mean claiming her mother's power. Knowing the future.

Knowing whether she would be able to change her fate. Knowing which of the two men she loved would live.

Part of her wanted to break it, take it, know immediately to stop the doubt and pain. Another part didn't want to know. Just wanted to stick to her plan.

She fastened the bracelet onto her wrist.

Then, she got on Lynx’s back, pet him between the ears, and said, “Let’s go home.”

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ILLUSION

Her plans were in place. Her hair was still wet, her arm burned, and her muscles were sore from everything she had prepared.

Everyone knew their orders. Grim was making sure of it now.

Lynx was sleeping peacefully in the middle of the hall of the winter palace. She heard him release a low growl and knew exactly what that meant.

She turned, nearly crashing right into Grim.

Isla hadn't seen him so exhausted in a while. His shadows were pulled in tighter than usual. His posture was slightly bent.

Still, he picked her up by the backs of her legs and set her on the dining table she had been pacing beside. "You're disappointed," he said, his cold nose running up the side of her neck, making her shiver. "Why?"

"Hasn't anyone told you it's rude to read someone's emotions without their permission?"

"Yes," he said into her neck. "My wife. Constantly." He looked up at her. "Why disappointment, heart? Did I do something?"

She shook her head. "No. Of course not. Did—did everything go well?"

He sighed. "Took just about all my power, but yes. We evacuated everyone on this side of Nightshade, split between every isle. Every newland. I've never portaled so much in one day in my life, but they're all safe."

Good. That was good.

Tomorrow, Nightshade would not be a habitable place. The storms would be worse than any of them had experienced before.

"And Oro?"

"Alive. For now," he said.

She gave him a withering look.

“He’s ready.”

“Lark hasn’t surfaced?”

He shook his head. “No. Astria and Enya are taking turns on watch. I just saw them. Neither has spotted her.”

Good. She sighed against his chest.

He looked down at her, expectantly, still not over the fact that she, for a fleeting moment, had felt disappointment. She shook her head. “It’s nothing. With everything going on, it means nothing.” He only continued to wait. “It’s just—you look tired. And I had . . . I . . .” She made to move off the table, but he stopped her with a gentle hand against her hip.

“Ah,” he said. “A final night together in case we all die a gruesome death tomorrow?”

“Something like that,” was all she said.

His eyes darkened. “I’m never too tired to take my wife to bed,” he said. “Unless you had planned something with portaling involved, in which case, you’ll have to—”

She tried to pinch his stomach and found nothing but a little skin. Still, he feigned hurt. He smiled, and Isla died a little inside.

His grin withered. “What is it?”

“The storm . . . the portal . . . I worry it will destroy this castle.” The entire back of the house was made of glass. She looked around. “This is the only real home you’ve ever had, and it could be destroyed. You must be devastated.”

Grim nodded, understanding. “Of course I am,” he admitted. “But I haven’t lived here for centuries. I haven’t felt as much of an attachment as you think.” He dragged his fingers through her hair, his palm cupped her face. “And this isn’t my home,” he said. “Not anymore. My home is wherever you are.”

A tear slipped down her cheek, and before Grim could notice, she crushed her lips to his. At first, their kiss was gentle. Loving. Then it was desperate.

He parted her lips with his tongue, and she groaned as he tasted her thoroughly, stroking the top of her mouth, her tongue, her teeth. He nipped her bottom lip, then licked over the hurt, and a jolt of pleasure raced down her spine.

Her hips ground forward, desperate for any type of friction; and slowly, so slowly, his long fingers traced up the inside of her thigh, bringing her dress with them. His thumb made slow, teasing strokes, so close to where she needed him, before he pulled the hem of her dress up to her hip in one rough motion. Grim seemed to go preternaturally still as he realized she wasn't wearing anything beneath it.

"Hearteater," he said, his voice strained. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good. Now open your legs for me."

She did as he asked and arched as his knuckles brushed straight down the center of her, his touch featherlight, his skin cold against her heated skin. He growled at her want, at the way she clutched his shoulders like he was her anchor, at the way she tipped her head back as his fingers made long, languid strokes right where she needed him. At the way she cried out when he finally filled her.

"That noise," he said, his voice filled with such brutal want that she met his gaze again. His eyes had gone almost wholly black, darkened with desire, and he slowly leaned down, curled his hand around the back of her neck, and said right against her lips, "Make it again."

She did. Again and again as she shamelessly ground against his hand, chasing her pleasure with abandon. His thumb traced her pulse, then dragged down her neck to her sensitive chest. He caressed it, back and forth, pace quickening. She panted into his mouth as she matched his pace with her hips; as she tensed, then broke, pulsing around him.

He gently removed his fingers, and she was left wanting—but not for long.

She was in his arms in an instant. He kissed her, dragging her swollen bottom lip through his teeth. His lips didn't leave hers as he ripped her dress off her, seams splitting, buttons flying, until it was just shreds of fabric on the floor. She didn't even yell at him. All she did was fumble with his clothes, before giving up and turning them to ash as he pressed her to the window. The glass was cold against her spine, and she gasped. Her ankles locked behind him.

Grim didn't waste a moment. Hands curled beneath her backside, he went in and in and in, and she didn't know if she would ever get used to the size of him, the feel of him.

“Wife,” he breathed against her neck when he was fully in, his arms trembling with restraint as he waited for her to adjust to him.

“Husband,” she said, right into the shell of his ear.

That one word seemed to be his undoing. He dragged his teeth down her neck as he drove into her in one brutal stroke, slow and deep, reaching a place that was all pulsing nerves. She made a sound she had never made before, and he laughed darkly against her throat. “There?” he said, and she nodded furiously. There. He hit that place again, and she buried her face in his shoulder, digging her teeth into it to keep from screaming.

More—she needed more, and he seemed to sense that, because his strokes became wilder, until he was moving so hard and fast, she didn’t know how the windows didn’t shatter behind her.

He held her close, one arm around her back and the other holding her hip, her sensitive chest dragging against his cold skin.

“I love you,” she said in a quiet gasp in his ear.

“I love only you,” he said. Then, both of his hands gripped her hips, and he took her harder, like he could fuse their very souls together, like he could show her his love with every movement. She clung to him through it all, meeting him stroke for stroke, spine sliding against the glass, their foreheads pressed together and gazes locked, until she clenched, and he cursed. He buried into her in one long stroke, and they crested together, holding each other through the pulsing, blinding pleasure.

Only later, when they were washing off, did he say, “We’re infinite, heart. Never forget that.”

She hoped he was right.

The skies were clear above the winter castle. That would change soon, she thought, as she stared out the windows.

She turned around to find Grim already dressed for battle. He wore sheets of metal and armor, with a sword on his back, its hilt peeking over his shoulder.

He looked like death itself.

She was in lighter clothing, fitted for the role she would play. Grim would be on the ground, with Lynx . . . she would be in the skies with Wraith.

Her leopard didn’t seem too fond of the idea.

Grim had his instructions. “Look for my sign,” she said.

He nodded. “I’ll be there. So will Oro.”

“Good. She’s more powerful than all of us. We only have one chance at this.”

She went on her toes to press her lips to his. He held the back of her head, fingers weaving through her hair, and kissed her like it might be the last time he ever did. When she finally pulled away and fell back on her heels, she felt breathless and even less willing to leave. But she had to.

They went outside, where a layer of fresh snow coated everything, even Wraith. The dragon flapped his wings, sending frost flying.

Lynx gave him a long-suffering look, which only intensified when Grim walked toward him.

Grim slowly offered his hand to Lynx’s forehead—a truce.

The leopard huffed and turned away.

“Be careful,” Isla said, squeezing Grim’s hand, then looking at Lynx. “Both of you.”

Grim portaled onto the leopard’s back. He gave her one final nod that held all sorts of promises—that today wouldn’t be their last, that they would repeat everything they had done the night before again and again, that they were infinite, and death didn’t stand a chance—and then they left. Isla watched them go, fear and regret clutching her heart.

“It’s just you and me, now,” Isla said, rubbing the place between Wraith’s eyes. They sharpened, as if he could sense battle was coming. Hot breath steamed from his nostrils. Then he leaned down, so she could climb atop him.

She settled in the place Grim had taught her. Curved her hands around the right ridges, and said, “Let’s go.”

An hour before, she had gone to Cronan’s coffin. The portal was invisible, hidden, unreliable. Lark’s power, she guessed, had torn the seam wider, her abilities calling to the otherworld. It, answering. They had fed each other.

But Isla had a piece of the otherworld too. Two of them.

Bracing against the pain, she had made her first skyre with the god-bone, right over her heart, where the heart of Lightlark had marked her.

The pain had been like swallowing a river of fire—power searing through her veins, desperate for an outlet. Soon, it would find it.

But not yet.

Her new skyre pulsed against her skin, the ink swirling, alive. The missing page had been right—bone held more power than blood. She could feel the added strength in her bloodstream, heating it and adding yet another ability to her arsenal.

This was how she was going to open the portal. Closing it, according to the page, would require power from her, Grim, and Oro, along with enchantment.

First, they needed to send Lark away for good.

Wraith soared across the skies, and it wasn't long before she heard it—the marching of an army. Grim and Oro had been the bait, waiting for Lark to sense them. Bringing her out of hiding.

From high above the clouds, she and Wraith could barely see Grim and Oro—and the endless wave of bloodless soldiers that now surrounded them.

Isla swallowed, and a voice at her side said, "So. Which one's death would hurt you more?" The voice was angry. Mocking.

Enya. Her fire-wings spread long behind her, crackling.

Isla ignored the question. As easy as it would be to dislike the Sunling, she admired her loyalty to Oro. She was grateful he had someone like her in his life.

"Be careful," Isla said from Wraith's back, as the army below inched closer to the men she loved. Enya only raised a brow and said, "Worry about yourself, Isla. I do not die today." Then, with a wink, she plummeted, her fire-wings growing, expanding, blazing. Just before reaching the ground, she turned sharply to the side, and her wing dragged along the dirt, setting hundreds of bloodless soldiers aflame, scorching the world in a thick line as she shot forward.

She landed and turned sharply, wings curling, wrapping her in swirling flames. Isla watched from above, transfixed, as she tore through the army like a tornado, cutting them down with her fire.

"Impressive. You can say it's impressive," a voice purred right behind her. She jumped, nearly losing her balance, only to find Zed lounging behind her, hands resting behind his head, like there wasn't a battle beginning beneath them.

"Are they ready?" she asked. For her plan to work, everything had to be in place.

He nodded lazily. “Azul gave us everything we needed. And a few things we don’t.” He tapped his pocket, and she shook her head. He straightened and motioned toward the sea. “Calder gathered a few surprises too. You’ll see them.”

Then he fell right off the side of Wraith’s back, shooting across the clearing in a streak of blue. He landed in the center of a group of bloodless soldiers and cut them down with a curved blade crafted from a sharp wind. It was almost casual, the way he fought—never faltering, never looking like he was exerting too much effort.

Grim and Oro were the opposite. They stood back-to-back and raged. From above, all she saw was ruinous shadow meeting searing flame. Both extinguishing everything in their path.

She never imagined them working together, but Lark had made enemies into allies. She waited a moment, then two, for the signal.

It came in the form of a bell ringing. The same warning as the storm.

Astria had been watching Lark. She had emerged.

It was time.

Isla breathed in, and out. Wraith floated, barely moving his wings, keeping them very still, as she slowly rose to her feet.

Her power had been buried. It had been hidden. It had been forgotten. Now she reached into the deepest depths of herself, farther than she believed possible—

And called it all.

All that is buried eventually rises.

Her powers surged up with the force of a tidal wave, nearly knocking her off Wraith’s back, but she stood firm. Firm, as her power began to rise out of her, simmering, glittering green and red.

It formed a shield around her, a sparkling veil, and she could see all her powers swirling within it. Every person she had already killed. Every ability she had taken so far. It was all there, all within reach.

Her skyres burned, pleading to be used. The new ink, formed from bone and blood, swirled in anticipation, right over her heart.

It was time.

She called it forward and her chest glowed, the skyre’s starlike pattern shining through her clothes, through the sky, like a beam of light. She was

engulfed in power, brimming with it, like she had swallowed the sun and moon and stars and sky and all the universe between them.

Her back bent, her arms splayed out—and she launched it all toward the sky in a beam of unyielding, otherworldly strength.

She was the lightning.

The world thundered in response.

She could feel it across the island, the seam of the portal ripping open, called forward by its power, recognizing it.

From a distance, she saw clouds gathering, forming from nowhere, as if they had been portaled here.

They were dark, heavy, worse than any storm she had seen during the season.

And when they broke open, they did not rain water.

They rained creatures.

Scaled, clawed beasts fell from the sky in endless waves.

Grim saw them first. A stampeded of twisted creatures, with far too many limbs and necks and heads, barreling right toward them.

At first, his shadows killed them all. Oro's fire burned anything that hadn't become ash.

But then, the rain became droplets of metal. Shademade.

And all their powers—including Isla's—withered away.

The sky turned crimson. A wind toppled her over—she only escaped death by clinging to Wraith's ridges. She pulled herself up, flattened against his spine, and said, "Wait. Not yet."

The ground was overrun by snarling creatures, by boneless soldiers who worked as one, surrounding those she loved.

She watched, her skin itching to go there, to fight by their sides, to use her swords the way she had been trained.

But she stayed in the center of the storm as clouds began to circle her. It was quiet. Dark. She could barely see beyond the night-tipped clouds.

That was when a flash of lightning lit the skies for just a moment—revealing that they weren't clouds at all but shadow-shade beasts.

The light vanished. Isla trembled against Wraith's back.

And cries like a talon cutting across the night itself filled the sky. She gritted her teeth against the sound, and then Wraith was off—flying as fast

as he could, away from the beasts that trailed them through the storm. He went higher, and higher, past the clouds. For a moment, she thought they had lost them.

Then fangs were illuminated by another flash of lightning, nearly closing upon Wraith's wing.

"Move!" she screamed, and the dragon ducked, turning, diving headfirst back into the storm. She held on for dear life, sweat-slicked fingers fighting to keep purchase.

The creature did not slow. It chased them through the storm with spiked wings and massive fangs that curled out of its leathery lips, mouth open, ready to swallow them whole.

Until it was devoured by a creature larger than a mountain.

The dragon shot back, just before it suffered the same fate. Isla swallowed.

The storm itself seemed to still, as the beast straightened to its full height—and roared from half a dozen mouths. It had wings that wholly blocked the sky, and six heads, each bigger than Wraith.

Slowly, very slowly, each of those heads turned its sights on them.

That's when she saw Lark sitting on the creature's back, watching her.

There would be no out-flying them. The creature was too large. Her powers didn't work up here.

Wraith trembled below, but his wings flared out. He didn't run. He was ready to look certain death in the face, with her.

She pressed a hand against his spine, remembering him as a tiny bundle of scales. Remembering him crying because of his injury. Remembering him healing. Getting stronger.

She was so proud of him.

So proud that when the beast lurched forward, he did not falter.

He shot toward it without slowing down, his head bent low. Determined. Brave. Knowing he didn't have a chance but trying anyway.

There were only yards between them.

That was when Isla dragged her sword from her scabbard and grinned wickedly at the look on Lark's face as she recognized it.

Cronan's sword.

She lifted it over her head and roared.

And the world itself seemed to tremble. Cries cleaved through the air, through the ground, a scar of land parting somewhere close by. Then, the sun was blocked out by a thousand pairs of wings.

Dreks.

They shot through the air like throwing stars, burying themselves into the creature. It bellowed. Its many heads tried to catch each drek, but they were too large, and the winged beasts were too quick. Too small. Soon, they swarmed the creature and Lark. They ate through the beast's flesh, infusing it with their poison, the same darkened veins that she had once seen on Grim. The wounds festered before her very eyes, and the creature dropped a few feet, off-balance, blinded by the rush of wings.

Isla stood on Wraith's back again and shot forward.

Some of the dreks surrounded her, like a legion, illuminated through the storm by the rings they carried in their talons.

Azul's rings. Hundreds of them.

Hundreds of storms. Power, trapped inside, that she could unleash, even in the metal. That she could control.

She lifted the sword again, in command, and the orbs all shattered.

Energy filled the sky, freed from the stones. Each storm orbited around her like rings of ability, so fast they became streaks of color. With a roar, she shot them all forward at the mountainous beast.

One head was slayed by a blizzard concentrated into a blade. Another by the force of a tidal wave she had morphed into a scythe. A third by a hurricane that went right through one of its throats. Storm after storm attacked the beast at every angle, until there was only one head left.

Wraith flew between two headless necks, turned sharply, and from her place standing on his back, the storm winds she now controlled keeping her balance, she made a blade of monsoons and floods and twisters, and chopped the final head off herself.

The beast dropped from the sky, taking Lark with it.

Her storms raged, painting it her own shade of oceans and snow and hurricanes and sandstorms and ice all controlled by her, all melding together to create the storm to end all storms. Arms shaking with strength and effort, she shaped them all into a single orb that she shrank down before adding it to her belt.

She turned Wraith around in a circle three times, marking the signal. Grim would get Oro. They would meet her at Ferrar's forge.

First, they needed Lark.

Calder was instructed to find Lark's broken body below and trap its pieces in ice, so she couldn't heal.

She needed to meet Oro and Grim at the forge. Their plan was almost complete.

First, though, there was something she needed to do.

Isla took off into the sky, on Wraith's back. She traveled to the winter palace for one final preparation.

She was walking by the wide windows of the dining room when she noticed the snow. It was increasing. Falling faster than usual. Drops became a flurry, and then sheets, so white and thick she could barely see the gardens through them. It rushed downward faster and faster, and she took a step back, but it was too late.

The snow turned to water that broke through every pane of glass. The wave sent her across the floor, as she fought for purchase. She clung to the dining table, to chairs, to the window, but it was persistent.

It was no use fighting as it pulled her under.

She gasped as she crashed through the surface, desperate for air. She swallowed it in large gulps, her eyes blinking wildly, her body numb beneath her. When her vision cleared, she saw she was in the center of the long fountain behind the palace, in the middle of the garden.

Cleo and Lark stood before her.

The Wildling was supposed to be in pieces. She was supposed to be frozen solid.

Cleo. Isla bared her teeth at the Moonling. She hoped Calder hadn't been hurt.

Cleo responded by pulling Isla under again, and she thrashed against the water, fighting to summon some power—but she had been submerged for too long. Her body might as well have been ice. Her abilities had sunk to a place deep behind her ribs.

She broke the surface again, shaking wildly from the cold, coughing. Lynx roared from across the gardens. She heard him thrash, as if fighting against restraints, and her blood heated. Grim had left him here, tied, for

her. He and Oro were waiting in the blacksmith's forge. They would be wondering what was taking her so long.

"You were right," Lark said. "She is a slippery one. In fact," she said, eyes flashing with anger, "I thought you were still in the center of the ground, waiting for me . . . imagine my surprise when I saw you in the storm, on the back of a dragon." Lark looked at her curiously. "How did you manage to get out of the bracelets, little Wildling?"

Isla spit in her direction and was dragged beneath the water again. She tried to fight against the liquid, to control it by using Oro's power, but it slipped between her fingers, as if Cleo had full control over all of it. She was a stronger Moonling. All water and ice and snow encasing the Algid was loyal to her.

"Not yet," she heard Lark say, and then she was gasping for air again. "I need her alive . . . for now." She grinned at Isla. Her eyes trailed to her heart and the scar on it that was just nearly visible in her now-sheer, long-sleeved shirt. It was faintly glowing. "Did you think your life was safe, because you hold a shred of the heart of Lightlark?" Her smile grew. "I don't need it. I just need you. I will drown you in my soil, and then you and your power will belong to me. I will raise you up just like the rest, and you will destroy this world, with all that great ability you hold. And then, with your bones, I will start anew. The world will be built off you, Isla," she said. "Find peace in knowing your death will have meant something."

The ground beneath the fountain began trembling. The stone around it fragmented, cracking along its veins. Isla lurched to the side, trying to avoid it.

Lark never took her eyes off her, a smile on her lips, her hand in front of her. Roots broke through the bottom, curling around Isla, pulling her, suffocating her. Dragging her down toward the water.

She would drown, then she would be buried below. She would rise. Lark would use her for her destruction.

She would become a weapon. She would either save the world . . . or end it.

Lark's eyes flashed with satisfaction as she watched Isla struggle against the vines. As she watched her try to summon her Wildling ability only to be overpowered. She smiled wider, baring her teeth.

She didn’t even see the blade of ice until it was through her throat. Then it sliced through her chest, and legs, and arms. The ice kept shifting from liquid to solid, over and over, resisting Lark’s healing.

“Thank you,” Isla said to Cleo, and she broke free from the roots that had restrained her. Still on her knees, she thrust her arm into the water, until her fingers curled around the sword that she had thrown inside just minutes before. “Also—you almost killed me.”

Cleo just shrugged a shoulder.

Lark watched, dying and healing, again and again, as Isla slowly rose from the water. She took a step, and metal flew through the garden, into the fountain, curling around her ankle. Then around her leg. The other. She outstretched her arm, and the pieces came together like puzzles, the armor Ferrar had made her from her father’s own locking into place over every inch of skin, until she was luminous and warm. She had hidden it all. Everything had been planned.

She pulled Cronan’s sword completely out of the water.

“I can’t hold her for long,” Cleo said. “Go. And don’t forget your promise.”

“I won’t.”

The night before, she had visited Cleo and made her a promise. The Moonling had freed Lark from the ice. She had brought her there.

Now was Isla’s turn to follow through with her part of the plan.

She took off through the gardens, listening to Lark’s gargled screams. The roots beneath her feet began to shift, and she knew she didn’t have long as she tore down the path toward the maze.

A shot of blue sailed through the air, Cleo propelling herself toward the ocean in an arc of ice and water.

Her time was up.

She kept running, until she was at the maze’s mouth.

And Lark was behind her. She was panting, healing, ice falling from her body and crashing against the frozen grass. She stepped into the labyrinth.

It was time.

Isla dug the sword into the grass. With shrieking cries, the dreks emerged and formed a barrier around the maze, encircling it, trapping them within. They moved in sync, as a single, giant being under her command.

Lark looked up at them, then at Isla. “Did you think they could stop me?” She took a step forward. And even though they were both within the maze, her wounds began to heal, flesh and muscle and bone rebuilding. Her face split into a smile. “Did you think my power would be nullified here? So close to a door to the place from which I came?”

“No,” Isla said. “I didn’t.”

And then she portaled them both to the center of the maze.

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ORO

He didn’t know what was taking her so long. Grimshaw was pacing the forge, shadows eating away at the newly fallen snow, destroying everything in their path. That was what he did, it was what he was good at. Ruining all that was good in this world.

“Your acute hatred of me is flattering,” the demon said, sensing his emotions. “But best to keep it at bay while we work together.”

Speaking of working together, where was she?

The Nightshade seemed to sense his impatience, his concern, because he gruffly said, “She’s coming.”

“Let’s go to her,” Oro insisted. “She could—”

“She told us to wait here,” Grim said, his anger making the shadows at his feet point like a dozen swords in Oro’s direction. He could see it in his face, though, the concern they shared.

“For what, exactly?” Grim had barely told him anything.

“Closing the portal requires all our power. The blacksmith has enchantments here that can bind our abilities together. She’s going to portal here, and we’re going to send Lark through for good.”

Oro frowned. He was just about to ask him what the hell kind of plan was that, when a screech clawed the air in half.

Dreks.

They were supposed to be gone now. The storm was over.

Oro stilled, as the realization dawned on him. “She doesn’t need us to open the portal,” he said. “She doesn’t need an enchantment. She has our power. She can do everything herself.”

Fear, potent as anything he had ever felt, filled his chest. “She has her own plan. That was why she only told you. I would have known she was

lying.”

Grim shook his head, still disbelieving. “Why would she lie? What could she possibly have planned?”

Oro tried to think, tried to put the pieces together. “I’m not sure, but she must mean to sacrifice herself in some way,” he said, flames curling from his palms. “To try to get around the prophecy.”

The Nightshade’s voice seemed to shake the world as he said, very slowly, “What prophecy?”

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PORTAL

The portal in the Place of Mirrors was crafted from shade-made metal . . . with Wildling blood infused. It had taken her time to figure out the technique, with the auger's help.

"It's like a shield with a sword-sized gap in it," he had said, musing.

That was how she had gotten the idea to come to the maze and infuse her own blood into the metal of Cronan's tomb. How she decided to create a new skyre, from the metal's blood.

They were one.

Her power slipped through the shield.

She unleashed that power right at Lark as they landed in the center of the labyrinth, sending her shooting back against the maze.

Lark recovered quickly. Her hands were out, and Isla was swallowed by the hedges. Their entire interior was made of thorns like pointed teeth. Without her armor, they would have ripped her to pieces, but this metal did not scratch, it did not falter.

Isla summoned her strength. She dug deep into herself, to the deepest springs of her power, and began to drag it out.

All the people she had killed, all the death, all the blood, all the dreks, all the things that made her a villain, instead of burying it down, she took hold of it and let it consume her.

Lark was powerful.

But so was she.

Isla stepped out of the hedges and felt herself glow, her abilities radiating out of her, circling her in a galaxy.

Lark forced the hedges behind her down—but they passed right through her: a Nightshade skill she had learned. The Wildling sent roots to chain her

ankles and force her onto her knees, but they melted into nothing against her armor and the Starling energy she had coated across it.

The ground beneath Isla parted, attempting to swallow her, but she was faster, making her own tunnel down and appearing behind Lark. She whipped around, but Isla met her vines with a blade of shadow and watched them disappear.

She encased herself in shadows, and every bit of nature Lark threw at her withered away. Lark herself seemed to weaken the closer she got to her, as Isla grew and grew, until her darkness was taller than the hedges. This wasn't Grim's power. It was her own. Her father's. The one she had taken, the one he had willingly given her.

Isla allowed the darkness to claw its way through. She did not fight it, not anymore. It was part of who she was.

Every power she possessed emerged, melding, all six realms' abilities merging to form something else. Something different.

It was her distraction at finding something new inside that cost her.

Vines shot from the ground and wrapped around and around her head so that she couldn't see, couldn't hear, and couldn't move. Her senses were snuffed out one by one, and she roared just before her mouth was smothered as well, as she felt Lark press a nail into her chest. It was as if she meant to dig right through her flesh, to the part the heart had mended, and take it with her own hands. Isla tried to shoot her powers out into the world; but without most of her senses, she had no focus, no direction.

She whipped wildly around, and she couldn't breathe—couldn't think. She was suffocating beneath the vines. They belonged to Lark; she controlled them. Isla's arms went limp at her sides. Her chest constricted as she sought air.

That was when she felt it. Them. Oro and Grim. Their bonds to her. Getting closer.

No.

Lark grinned wickedly. "The most dangerous people are those who don't fear death, Isla." Lark didn't need to. She was impossible to kill.

"I hope you're right," Isla said, a smile spreading across her face. Her own body was smothered, useless—but her shadow was not.

It peeled off the ground, and she directed it as if it was another limb, just as Sairsha had. She instructed it to reach into her pocket and remove the

feather hidden inside of it. The shadow began picking off the feather's barbs, and Isla found the restraints around her loosen. She found the nail that had begun digging into her chest retreating.

Isla took a breath in the space she was given, and unleashed. The vines splattered all around her, and her shadow dropped back onto the floor, but not before handing her the feather.

Lark was on her knees before her, panting, a hand against her chest.

"It took me a while to figure it out," Isla said. "But then I realized . . . Aurora must have tried talking to you. She must have found out about you somehow. She must have considered freeing you to get what she wanted. She was Starling. She wouldn't have put part of her soul in something like a feather . . . but you. You would. And you used her handwriting as your own. This was how you knew where I was. You were already rising, spreading poison through Nightshade, but you couldn't get out. My blood . . . it freed you, didn't it, when I pricked my finger?" Lark lurched, but Isla filled her palm with flames. She dipped the feather inside, and Lark twisted unnaturally, roaring. "This must hurt . . . right?" Isla said, barely recognizing her own voice, the beast within her preening at the sounds of suffering.

She blew the feather out, just halfway to burning. Lark heaved on the ground before her. And Isla took a step toward the coffin. She placed her hand against it, feeling its power rise and her own rushing to meet it. She poured all of herself inside—the Nightshade, Wildling, and Sunling abilities she had gotten through both love and death. She had portaled hundreds of times with her starstick, and she summoned that ability, Grim's flair. She shook with her concentration, until she felt the world peel in front of her.

Clouds began to gather overhead.

With a flick of her wrist, the coffin exploded. Only a hole remained. It was dark and endless, a slice of sky breaking open, a burst of color at its center, as if a forever dawn bloomed inside.

"No," Lark said, still on the ground, choking on her words. "Foolish girl. Push me through, and I will find a way to return. I will come back."

Isla tilted her head at her. "No," she said. "You won't."

She slung the sword that controlled the dreks across her back. She could feel Oro and Grim fighting against the creatures. She could feel a break in

their shield. At her command, they scattered, ordered not to hurt anyone anymore.

She hadn't had Zed and Grim steal the sword again to control the dreks, though they had been useful.

No, she needed it because it had been enchanted by Cronan himself. It contained his blood.

Which meant she could find him with it.

Remlar had explained the scroll. He confirmed what she had read in the desert—that a portal could only be closed on the other side.

It was why she had stolen the bone from Oro. Why she had started to shape her own plan.

She hauled Lark from the ground, snapping the vines and roots that sought to keep her. Sending Lark through the portal meant saving this world from destruction. But it also meant Isla's final chance at redemption.

Lark's power was bringing the dead back to life. Here, it meant little. It meant creating monsters. But in the otherworld . . . Lark could fully resurrect people. Remlar had told her so. There, Isla could kill her. Isla could take her power.

And she could bring everyone she had ever killed back to life.

There was just one more thing she had needed, in order to use the portal. It was why she had visited the augur the night before.

"The prophet's scroll says to go to another world, I must know its name . . . but it's been forgotten."

The auger nodded. "It was on purpose, you see." He grinned. "But the prophet knew that . . . so he carved the name into himself before he came here, to ensure he never forgot." The augur had crawled to the back of his cave and returned with something gleaming white. Presented it to her. There, in scrawled script, was a word, etched against bone.

The otherworld's name . . . was Skyshade.

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GRIM

She hadn’t broken the curse on the maze; that was clear when his own power died before reaching the dreks. Instead, she herself had broken through it, somehow.

He had tried to claw his way through the creatures, stabbing them with his sword, but their skin was nearly impenetrable, and whenever one fell, it was replaced.

Oro battled next to him, roaring as the dreks tore him apart with their talons, but he did not falter, and neither did Grim.

There was a great crash and growl behind them. Isla’s leopard had followed them. He ran toward the maze, toward her, as if he could feel something neither of them could see.

With his great size and might, he broke through the dreks, and Grim and Oro followed. With every turn, the leopard crashed into the hedges, cutting them in half, but the creature did not slow. He could smell her, and they followed.

Grim was powerless to portal. He was powerless to turn all the hedges to ash. All he could do was run as fast as he ever had in his life, next to his enemy, whose devastation he could see was as sharp as his own.

She had told him about the prophecy. She had trusted him. The pain twisted in his gut like a sword, because he only had himself to blame.

Now, for the only time in his long life, he was grateful for the king’s presence. If he could help save her, then he would bow before him if he had to, he would do anything. He would do anything for her, and he was just at the beginning of proving it.

The leopard arrived first, and its roar shook him to his very core.

A streak of lightning cracked the sky in half, landing right in the middle of the maze. The force of it sent them all flying back. The land began to shake. All the windows in the palace behind them shattered. Grim was on his feet in an instant. He didn't slow. He didn't care at all about the palace. All he cared about was her, and—

He reached the center and sank to his knees. Where the coffin had once stood, just a charred circle and a burnt white feather remained.

Lark had gone through the portal to the otherworld.

And so had Isla.

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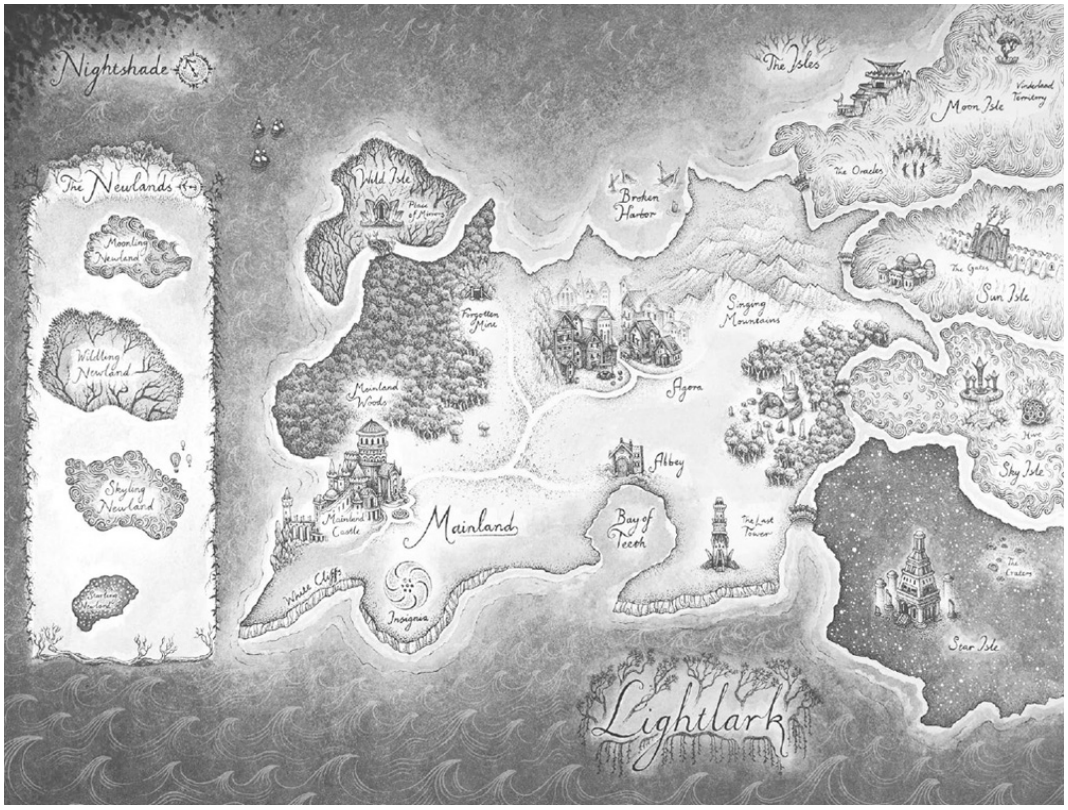
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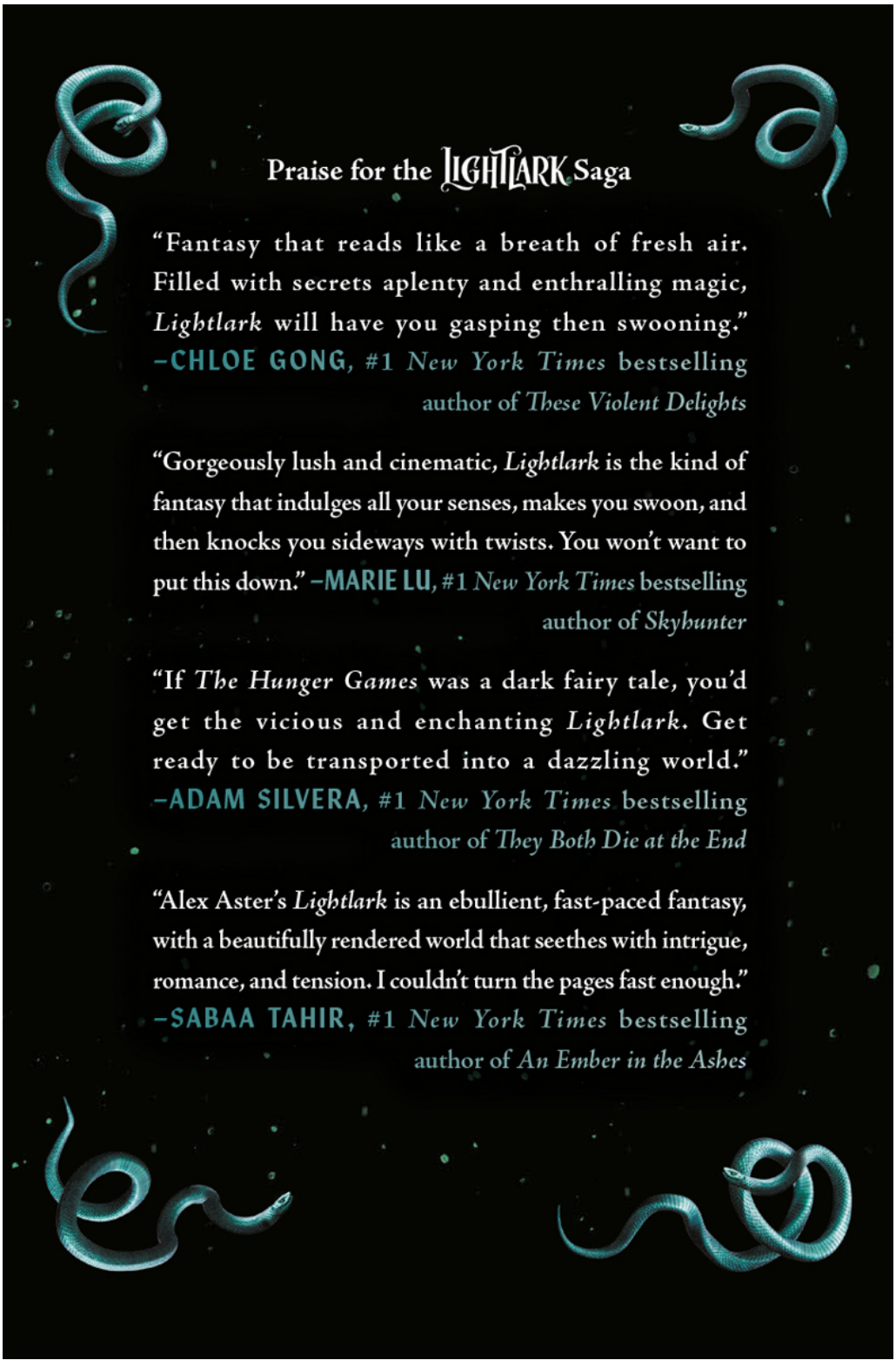
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