



Forgotten Embers

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Description: She will do whatever it takes to find the answers to her past even if it means marrying the cold and arrogant crown prince.

Wren Hayden grew up orphaned on her aunt and uncle's farm where the days were long and predictable. Everything changes when she is pulled into an unfamiliar world by a man only known as "the Bishop". Death is a close companion as she finds herself inextricably tied to a dark prince.

If she has any hope of finding a way home she will have to navigate a court where the lines between friendship and love blur, creating the perfect recipe for betrayal. The only fate worse than death is finding the answers to the past.

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Prologue

The immortal rarely forced to consider the cost of life is death. So it went for the gods and goddesses of Valmere. The five immortals found themselves content to simply exist without constraints of time or burdens of death. Centuries passed and the divine siblings fell into a pattern of levity and revelry. As all beings are wont to do, restlessness began to settle in the oldest god. A longing began to build. A need for purpose. An aching for validation.

And so it was that Lucius, the eldest god, created the people that would grant him the peace of immortality. Lucius reveled in his creations, watching as they lived with the fierceness of the sun, never to be deterred from their need to survive and make their mark.

The youngest goddess, Serephina, watched with awe as she took in the struggles that plagued the mortals. It was not their suffering that called to her, but instead their determination and capacity for love. She rejoiced in their triumphs and mourned their losses as if they were her own. In all of immortality, Serephina had never felt the burning of life more than the time spent watching over Valmere's inhabitants.

Not all were pleased with Lucius' creation, and discord began to fester among the three middle immortals. Lera, Adrius, and Agratious looked down at their brother's creation, and saw the death and destruction the humans wrought upon each other. Disgust and bitterness began to take root in the immortals until they resented their brother for taking it upon himself to create change where there had only been perfection.

The three embittered immortals conspired to put an end to their brother's creations once and for all. Seeing the discord his creations had caused among his siblings, Lucius resigned himself to the loss of his legacy. The goddess Serephina, who was different from her siblings, and with a fire few possessed, rallied her courage, knowing that an immortal life would no longer sustain her.

Too long had she watched over the mortals of Valmere learning to love and live. In one broad stroke of the magic living within her, she spread herself across the mountains, oceans, and plains of Valmere until her magic lay like a blanket over the people.

When Lera, Adrius, and Agratious discovered their sister's betrayal, anger quickly gave way to vengeance. For, while each sibling held great power, their magic could never be used against one another. Through Serephina's actions, Valmere was forever untouchable by her siblings.

Drained of her power, Serephina no longer held the magic that once flowed through her immortal body. Forced to reconcile the existence of their brother's creations, the other immortals cast Serephina out into the mortal lands. Her sentence was to live and die among the volatile humans whom she had loved enough to sacrifice immortality.

Lucius understood the just anger of his siblings and watched as Serephina was relinquished to his creations, but the eldest god vowed to watch over his youngest sibling for her sacrifice and for the love he still bore for her.

Thus was the creation of Valmere.

Chapter 1

The roar of the wind was all the comfort Wren Hayden craved as she peered out at the mountains far in the distance. Her eyes narrowed, trying to see up into the

mountainside where she knew the royal family of Kazmir lived. She wondered what it was like to grow up knowing the world was at your beck and call. Raising her hands in front of her face, she studied the hard lines of her hands where callouses had formed over the years. A hollowness built in her stomach as she shoved her hands down, knowing that she would never understand what it meant to live a life of leisure.

Hollowness soon gave way to irritation as she silently chastised herself for taking her aunt and uncle's kindness for granted. She was lucky to have a home and a family to love. Being only a toddler when her parents died, her situation could have been very different. She could have been forced into an orphanage or left on the streets, but instead, her aunt and uncle had taken her in and loved her. Whatever fantasy she created in her head was nothing to the reality of safety.

Her thoughts were torn from her by the sound of her name being called. Pushing up on her arms, her hands sank into the soft grass and came away with remnants of dirt. She wiped her hands over her brown wool dress with an exasperated sigh.

The morning sky was pink with the promise of another day as Wren trampled down the hill to where her home lay, chimney already smoking. Her aunt was never one to waste time. As soon as she opened the front door the smell of fresh bread and bacon greeted her.

"It's about time you found your way down here." Aunt Kate didn't bother to turn from the stove as she stirred her creation vigorously. "Set the table and then make sure your cousin is awake."

It was one of the things Wren loved most about her aunt. She never minced words and you always knew exactly where you stood with her. Not wasting time, Wren quickly set the table with four plates. Aunt Kate turned around, setting a bowl of golden rolls between them. The smell that wafted from them was like comfort and happiness.

“Don’t—” Her aunt’s warning was cut short as Wren snatched a roll and stuffed it in her mouth.

Aunt Kate sighed, but as she turned back to the stove shaking her head, a small chuckle escaped her. Despite the lightness in the interaction, Wren could see how tired her aunt was. It seemed like there were new lines appearing on her face daily and she had begun to notice gray strands interwoven in her long blonde braid.

Turning towards the stairs and through a mouth full of food Wren said, “I’m going to get Georgie!”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” Her aunt reprimanded though there was no bite to the words.

As Wren climbed the steps, she heard her aunt mutter something about her being practically feral. Georgie’s door was cracked open and despite the light pouring through his window and into his eyes he still slept soundly. Red curls surrounded a pale, freckled face relaxed in sleep.

Her heart swelled at the sight of him and it seemed almost a sin to wake him, but then again she wasn’t prepared to explain to her aunt why Georgie wasn’t at breakfast. Wren crouched down next to Georgie’s bed and gently pressed on his shoulder.

“Georgie. It’s time to wake—”

Georgie’s eyes flew open, showing off the amber color. “Wren?” While his eyes seemed wide awake, his voice was clouded with sleep.

“Your mum sent me to wake you up because you slept too late.” She tickled him, earning her a barrage of giggles.

“Will you read me the dolphin book?” he asked through his laughter.

Wren sighed, dropping her hands to her side. “You just woke up.”

“So?” He asked in the way only a six year old with no concept of time could.

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“So, your mum’s ready for breakfast, and you know what happens if we keep her waiting.”

Georgie eyed her suspiciously. “What happens?”

Wren raised her brows and whispered conspiratorially, “She turns you into a bunny.”

Georgie didn’t even blink. “I’m too old for that sort of pretending, Wren.”

Her heart sank a little at the declaration. He was getting bigger and while she loved to watch him grow, it also broke her heart.

She stood and swatted her hands at him to move over. “But are you too old for dolphin books?”

Georgie eagerly scooted over in the bed, leaving space for Wren to slide in next to him. She chuckled at his eagerness as she reached for the red and silver book sitting on his nightstand. It was his most favorite book and either her aunt, uncle, or her read it to him at least twice a day.

Of all the people and things in her life, the little freckled boy was by far her favorite. His smile and laughter were contagious, and one was always present since he was egregiously spoiled. He was the apple of her aunt and uncle's eyes, and very rarely had to ask twice for anything. He brought so much light and life to their small family.

There was no resisting his charm. "All right, all right. You are lucky I also love dolphins."

Opening the well-worn book, she began reading the familiar words, speaking of a vast sea filled with all sorts of peculiar creatures and large fish with fins on their backs that loved to leap and jump out of the sea in spectacular displays of strength and beauty.

“Dolphins already? That must be a new record.” The man leaning against the door frame was a grown version of Georgie.

Her uncle Jasper had the same curly red hair and freckles as Georgie. The only difference was Georgie had inherited her aunt’s brown eyes.

“It’s never too early, Papa,” Georgie said, his tone serious.

Uncle Jasper smiled fondly at his son. “Your mum is waiting and don’t tell her I said anything, but she’s a little grumpy this morning.”

“Mum!” yelled Georgie loud enough Wren winced. “Papa says—”

Wren clasped her hand over Georgie’s mouth stifling the damning words. A rough laugh broke from Uncle Jasper who turned and made for the stairs.

“You little trouble maker,” Wren chastised as she slipped from the bed and tickled him once more for good measure.

By the time they made it downstairs, Wren half expected a lecture, but her aunt’s mood melted away at the sight of Georgie. He instantly ran to her and wrapped his arms around her thin waist.

“Papa says you’re a grump.”

“Does he now?” Aunt Kate looked up from the little mop of red curls and fixed Uncle

Jasper with a stare as he took his seat, but he only winked at her.

Taking their seats, everyone dove right into the home made breakfast her aunt had spent the last hour making.

Her aunt nudged her uncle and he cleared his throat and rubbed his hands together. “I-I meanwewondered if you might like to go spend the day with that friend of yours.”

Her aunt slapped her uncle lightly on the arm. “Her name is Cara, you idiot man.”

Her uncle grumbled, “Yes, right. Cara. Anyway would you like to—” He didn’t get a chance to finish his question because Wren jumped up eagerly and ran to the other side of the table to throw her arms around them. They both seemed equally uncomfortable, displays of affection not quite to their liking, but they endured it anyway.

“Thank you!” Wren hadn’t meant to shout, but the delicious thrill running through her was too much to contain.

Georgie squinted up at her. “You are acting weird.”

She smiled back at him indulgently. “That, my prince, is because your parents just gave me the day off.”

Georgie pouted. “I will come along as well then,” he said perfectly reasonably as he turned to exit his chair.

“You will not, Georgie. You are going to stay and help me at home today.” her aunt said the words in a tone even Georgie knew better to argue with. On second thought, his face smoothed with determination as if he might argue anyway.

Wren bent down and kissed his forehead. “I’ll see you tonight, trouble!” she called, grabbing another roll before heading to the front door.

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“I’m not the trouble, you are the trouble!” he shouted back.

Wren laughed and even her aunt and uncle were chuckling. None of them were immune to Georgie’s charms. She thanked her aunt and uncle once more and waved to Georgie. Georgie waved back sadly, and Wren ran back to give him one more kiss on the cheek.

“I love you, trouble,” she said as she pulled away.

“Love you, too,” he grumbled and turned defeatedly back to his eggs.

Wren didn’t feel too awful at having to leave Georgie sad. He would soon find something to cheer him up, and, more importantly, these days were so painfully rare for Wren.

She eagerly went to the stable and saddled up a brown mare new to the stable and yet to be named. The mare recognized her and snorted before moving towards Wren and butting her head against Wren’s chest. Wren rubbed the horse’s nose before mounting her and urging her forward. Wren relished the feeling of the wind in her hair and the earth moving quickly beneath her. This felt like freedom, this felt like a choice she could make every day. Their ride to the village was far too quick as they arrived at a familiar cottage on the outskirt of the village. Tying up the horse, she quickly walked to the door and knocked eagerly.

A middle-aged woman opened the door looking concerned until her eyes took in Wren. “Oh, Wren, it’s only you.”

“Good morning, Ms. Landry,” Wren replied politely.

“Cara!” called the woman, turning her head towards the house. Not a second later, a beautiful raven-haired girl appeared in the doorway. Upon seeing her friend, she threw her arms around Wren and squealed delightedly.

“You wicked creature! Why has it been so long since I’ve seen you?” Cara exclaimed in mock indignity.

Wren smiled as the other girl released her from her tight embrace. “It’s not exactly up to me when I get a day off, Cara,” she said playfully, even though the reality was her lack of freedom was endlessly frustrating for her.

These days she could spend with Cara were far and few between and while she understood the need to help with the farm, she still wanted to be a woman in her youth who could socialize and choose her days.

Cara narrowed her gaze as she followed Wren’s thoughts. In truth, she had only ever voiced these feelings to Cara because she would never want to hurt her aunt or uncle or for them to feel she was ungrateful for everything they provided for her. Deciding not to say anything about the situation, Cara turned to her mother. “Mama, may I go with Wren?”

Her mother rolled her eyes and wiped her hands on her stained white apron. “I am no monster, Cara.”

Cara lifted up on her toes and kissed her mother’s cheek. Ms. Landry smiled fondly at her daughter and said, “Be sure to be back before sundown. I don’t want you both out after dark.”

Cara gave a quick, “Yes, Mama!” And then she was grabbing Wren’s arm and

dragging her down the street, kicking up dirt in their haste.

Wren shouted a goodbye to Ms. Landry who was shaking her head with a smile. Wren felt a familiar pang of loss and bitterness as she watched the older woman's reaction. She would give anything to know what it felt like to have her mother look at her like that. To know what it felt like to have someone love you so unconditionally.

Her aunt was a good woman and she was a wonderful mother to Georgie, but she couldn't fill that void and it was something she had never asked of her. It was a loss Wren would carry for her entire life. Sometimes when Wren thought about it she would be filled with such rage she couldn't breathe. Even at twenty-two, Wren had yet to make peace with the blinding loss. She often wondered if she would die, old and gray, and with bitterness in her heart over what never was.

If the day came that she met someone and fell in love, she would do it without her mother's advice or her warnings. If she had children of her own, she would not be able to ask her mother for help or learn from her. Every day was a reminder she would never have what so many people took for granted.

"Where are you, Wren?" asked Cara, looking at her with furrowed brows.

Wren hadn't even realized they had slowed to a walk and she had lost herself in the painful thoughts. "I'm sorry, Cara. I was distracted," she said simply, not wanting to explain the path her mind had wandered.

"Well, it wasn't a very happy distraction. Look at your face!" Cara pinched Wren's cheeks playfully. "I will have none of that today. Today is for fun and mischief."

Wren laughed, knowing Cara's plans never ended well. "And what mischief are we up to today? It better not have anything to do with Andrew Hastings! I'll not share you," she declared proudly.

Cara gave a snort. “That moron! Oh, no, you won’t have to worry about him anymore. Did you know Arianna caught him with Melanie Hornbrook kissing outside of the market last week? I rid myself of him in a most public and humiliating way.”

Wren laughed at her friend’s confidence. “Good. You were too good for him anyway.”

Cara gave her a sly glance. “Matthew Dennish has been asking after you an awful lot lately.”

Wren blushed. Matthew was good looking to be sure, but she had never really given the subject much thought. There was little time to spend in town and with everything to do on the farm; time for that seemed impossible. She wondered what her aunt and uncle would do if someone did try to court her. It wasn’t a secret she was getting older and most of the women her age were married or soon to be married, but the prospect never thrilled her. Perhaps it was that no one in the village thrilled her.

“Shall we take a small detour to the blacksmith shop then?”

“Oh, no!” Wren had not meant the words to be a shout, but panic seized her. “It’s just, Matthew was always very nice and, of course, a blacksmith apprenticeship is a great opportunity and I would be lucky, but I just don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Cara stopped walking and turned to face Wren, her beautiful face gravely serious. “He would be lucky. Not you.”

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Wren smiled at her friend's kindness. "Thank you, Cara. But I just want to spend the day with you. Maybe another time."

Their favorite lake was a long walk from the village, and, truth be told, Wren should have gotten her horse and brought it because it was on the way back to the farm. Now she would have to walk back to the village and still make the long ride home. Clearly, forethought was something she lacked.

When they finally made it to the lake, they were both drenched with sweat, the summer sun merciless. Unspoken understanding flitted between the two women who quickly took off their woolen dresses and ran to the water wearing only their underclothes. They would have to walk home in the drenched clothes, but it seemed a small price to pay.

This was their favorite spot because so few people ever came this way. The farm was far from civilization and the closest town to their village was in the other direction far south. This made for a place where they could truly be free and themselves.

The women laughed and pushed each other as they got closer, trying to make the other one go first. They were hot, but the water was always painfully frigid. When they made it to the water's edge, they stopped and wearing matching grins, they took each other's hands and ran into the water, laughing as the shock of the cold water rushed their bodies.

They spent the day alternating between splashing in the water and tanning themselves on the grass. Cara told her all about the drama in town and who was courting who, and Wren listened eagerly. Her friend was animated and eager enough that Wren

always felt enraptured by her stories. Before they even realized it, the sun began to fall. Cara gave a small cry and quickly pulled on her dress over her still wet underthings.

“Mama is going to murder me. As in actually kill me. Remember me as I was, my friend.”

Wren laughed at Cara’s theatrics, pulling on her own dress.

A stab of pain shot through her as she watched Cara move quickly, gathering her things. To have someone love you so much they would be out of their mind with worry if you were only a little late. Wren shook the thought away not wanting the bitterness to ruin her remaining time with Cara.

As Wren turned to leave she was overcome with a sudden longing. Putting a hand to her stomach in an effort to settle her nerves, she searched the still lake for what had inspired the unsettling feeling.

It felt like there was something at her core, growing and pulsating. The longing she had felt grew until she was sure she had never known such a need. The water was calling to her deep in her soul. She squinted towards it trying to make sense of the sensation overriding her body.

Something gleamed in the shallow water, and Wren felt a wave of shock go through her. They had been there all day in that very spot and nothing had been there. Still the need in the pit of her stomach grew until she felt like her body was not her own.

She shook her head, trying to shake the irrational feeling, but her whole body went taut as if by command.

Wren was conscious that she couldn’t rationalize what was happening, but the

longing and need only grew. The shining she had spotted began to glow as if it were made of starlight itself. All thoughts fled from her as she walked towards the source of the light.

Wren's feet stepped into the water as the need in her grew, and she was acutely aware of the fact that she needed to know what the light was more than she needed to breathe.

Water shifted around her waist, but she only went deeper and deeper. The light had seemed to be shallow when she first saw it, but now it felt as if the bottom was evading her. She was distantly aware of her name being called.

The blinding need in her was suddenly replaced with anxiety as something pulled at her legs. As if the invasion released her from the spell, Wren turned her body and tried to make for the shore. She realized what she had been doing and where she was, causing bewilderment and shock to flood her.

Something tugged at her leg again and she fell, losing her balance. Cold lake water splashed into Wren's open mouth and panic welled within her. She reached her arms out desperately trying to find the bottom of the lake. Wren realized abruptly that she was farther out into the lake, and the water was too deep for her to find any sort of grounding. She frantically kicked her legs and tried to swim for shore ignoring the rapid beating of her heart.

Wren opened her mouth to cry out, but she was pulled under the frigid water. Her body screamed in panic as her lungs ached for air.

Wren managed to kick free of whatever was holding her, and as her head broke the surface, she gasped for air. The cold air hitting her lungs burned as if her body no longer recognized it. Cara was shouting her name, but she was too far away.

As she was pulled under another time, she kicked with futile strength, refusing to die. She broke the surface once more. The sound of shouting behind her grabbed her attention and relief swam across her. Cara was nearly to her.

Wren kicked and kicked, her lungs burning with the effort. She could almost reach out her hand to Cara's and she was struck by the thought that she might make it. She was going to survive this. The fleeting thought quickly evaporated as both of her legs felt the phantom tug, and then she was under the water again, unable to breathe, being pulled deeper and deeper into the abyss. Wren felt a hand wrap around hers, but she knew the truth of her fate even before the darkness took her.

Chapter 2

Wren broke the surface once more and desperately pulled cold air into her burning lungs. She felt arms tugging at her and she gratefully reached for them. Her chest heaved as she collapsed on the blissfully solid ground. She had thought she would die in that lake enough that being on land felt like a miracle.

She opened her stinging eyes and was shocked to see an abundance of stars. There were never this many stars in the sky and she was sure she would have noticed on her ride from the village if there had been such a drastic difference.

As her body filled with more oxygen, she also noticed how cold the night air was. It was frigid enough that she would have worn a coat. With her chest still heaving, she rolled over onto her hands and knees trying to regain her balance enough to stand.

A body slammed into her, pinning her to the ground. "Wren! Oh my gods, what were you thinking? Goddess's blessings, what was that?"

Never in her life had she been more grateful to hear Cara's voice. With burning lungs, Wren wrapped her arms around her friend and let out a sob.

“Thank you!” The words were gargled as if Wren had swallowed the lake water.

Cara attempted a laugh. “As payment, you can tell my mum why I am late.”

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“I will personally petition her to spare you.” Wren threw her head back and sucked in a ragged breath. She had nearly died and the energy of surviving it now thrummed in her veins.

“Get up, both of you.” The voice was unfamiliar with a nasally tone that she was sure she would have remembered.

Alarm flared in her and in Cara as she felt the other woman tense on top of her. The energy flowing through her veins, once triumphant, turned to fear. They were both soaking wet and vulnerable in the middle of the night. Any man who roamed these parts at night was likely not their friend especially when they spoke like that.

Wren looked up and was startled to see a short statured man in a brown robe. Of everything his voice had conjured in her mind, that was not it. Cara apparently thought the same as her body relaxed slightly. The man was past middle age, and the reality that he was likely in a bad humor seemed more possible than him being a threat.

Cara stood and offered a hand to Wren. Wren stood on shaking, burning legs, but she quickly lost her balance, falling back into the wet grass.

“I will not ask you again, girl,” repeated the strange man as she stood and regained her balance.

“Give her a minute, you ass. She almost drowned back there.” Cara glared at the man even as she helped Wren to her feet.

“What are your names?” There was an eerie tone to his voice that had Wren wrapping her arm around Cara’s waist and pulling her towards her.

Never one to be intimidated, Cara straightened. “We are fine and you should be on your way.”

A dark chuckle radiated from the man sending ice through Wren, paralyzing her. The man held out a single hand and energy seemed to radiate from the palm of his hands. It was similar to the pull she had felt in the lake, but this was more like pressure that poked and prodded at her. As soon as it had begun it was gone.

Before relief could find her, a cry ripped from Cara and her body was pulled from Wren. Wren shouted as she bent down reaching for her friend who was now kneeling on the ground, her eyes pressed together as her face contorted in pain.

“I will not ask for your name again,” the man said with a smile that showed yellowing teeth.

Wren ignored him as she leaned down and tried to help Cara up. She froze as Cara let out a cry of pain and doubled over. Though it was impossible, Wren knew the man standing over them was the reason for this pain.

“Wren,” she choked out, her voice hoarse from the near drowning. “Wren Hayden. Please. I don’t know what you are doing to her, but please stop.”

As if fulfilling his request had been the cure, Cara’s cries stopped and she reached for Wren, her chest heaving with effort. As soon as Cara was upright she threw her arms around Wren’s waist and buried her face into Wren’s neck.

“Run.” Cara’s breath was hot against Wren’s cool skin, but the determination in that one word held her focus.

The man laughed and a new sort of panic filled her. “There will be none of that.”

Wren tried to take a step back, but her feet seemed rooted in the ground. Despite knowing there was no help nearby she looked around and let out a gasp when she found her surroundings were entirely different and she was not at all where she had been before. There was a large stone building in the distance eerily similar to the castles in Georgie’s stories. She turned towards the lake and only saw greenery in the distance surrounding the water. She was accosted by the thought that she was unconscious and dreaming, but the solidness of Cara next to her told her she was not.

“What are you doing? Why can’t I move?” Cara’s body thrashed against the power that held them.

“Cara, stop,” Wren whispered.

Whatever Cara heard in her voice was enough to ground her. “Look around.”

Moments and eternities flashed between them as she waited for her friend to confirm their reality or to condemn her madness.

“Goddess. Where are we?” Cara’s voice held a touch of awe where there should have only been fear, but that had always been her way.

“Come with me, Wren Hayden. I want to make one thing very clear to you.” The man paused, allowing their attention to flow back to him. When he was satisfied, he brought his hands together. “Should you disobey me or act in any way against me, I will kill you right where you stand. Is that quite clear?”

Wren snorted despite the panic rolling in her. “I am not going anywhere with you.” She backed away a step for good measure and before she could rejoice at the freedom of movement her feet hit cold water and she recoiled immediately. Icy steel appeared

against her throat and Wren sucked in a breath. She tried to make sense of this reality as she realized there was a dagger to her throat.

Fear paralyzed her.

“You will come with me and you will do exactly as I say.” He held the dagger tight enough to her throat Wren was sure if she spoke it would draw blood.

“Don’t hurt her!” Cara screamed. “Whatever you want, I can do it. Just don’t hurt her.”

The man sneered at her. “You can’t give me what I want, you stupid girl.”

As if to prove his point, he stretched out his free hand towards Cara and she screamed in agony, clutching her head.

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Wren didn't even think about the consequences or what she was doing as she twisted her body to grab her friend. Stinging pain grabbed at her neck as she ran her hands over Cara's slim form trying desperately to find the source of her pain.

She tried to breathe out something that sounded like agreement as she realized there was no physical cause of her pain. She would do anything if it only meant Cara never screamed like that again. Tears rushed down the smaller woman's face as she fought against the pain.

"All right!" Wren shouted. "I'll go! Please just stop!"

Cara slumped to the ground, holding her face in her hands. As Wren bent forward, Cara looked up, her eyes swollen and red. "No, Wren. Don't. Go get help."

"Interesting you should value her life over yours, but I can work with that motivation." He seemed to delight in his words, as his mouth twisted into a smile. "I'm afraid help will not be coming. However, you might both live to see the morning should you comply."

Cara's eyes sparked like dancing flames and Wren's belly went leaden. She knew her friend and knew the determination that burned in her. She would fight her way free even if it meant death if she believed Wren could walk away from this.

"Cara," Wren whispered. It was enough to pull her friend's gaze back to her. Wren shook her head like the coward she was. If Cara was fire, then she was ice. "Do what he says."

Cara's eyes narrowed as she stared at her accusingly. Wren would accept it if it meant they lived through this.

"Excellent. Now walk," the man said as he gestured towards the massive structure she had noted before.

Wren's brain thought rapidly trying to figure out what was happening to her. She clearly wasn't in her home any longer and she was obviously in a very poor situation. They could try to run, but she was sure he would throw that dagger and something in her knew he would not miss. Her mind couldn't work fast enough beneath the fear that threatened to cripple her. The thought occurred to her she should be crying or begging, but she felt too dazed and unsure to allow herself the luxury. All she knew was that Cara's hand in hers was all that mattered.

More questions rolled in her mind, but then she was standing in front of what was certainly an expansive castle. Her gaze wandered over the stone fortress before landing on a massive iron gate. Torches lit along either side of it and their light gave way to a pair of guards whose gazes passed over the three of them as if they were nothing out of the ordinary.

Wren had the alarming thought that if she went through the gate she would never come out again. In desperation she raised her voice still hoarse from taking on so much water. "Please help me! This man is holding us against our will. Please!"

Dread filled her belly when she saw the men plaster identical grins on their faces. One of the guards walked to a lever which lifted the gate while the other came to stand behind them, hand on the sword sheathed at his side.

"Thank you, Gregory. Please escort these young ladies to the green room for preparations."

Wren whirled around, no longer concerned by the threat at her back. All that she knew was if she went in there she wasn't coming out and if she couldn't get away then maybe at least Cara could. Even as she willed the courage to act in herself she was always one step behind Cara. Cara turned, her damp hair fanning out, as she threw herself at the guard. With the element of surprise she managed to pull the sword from his sheath. She was an image of strength and everything Wren could never be.

Cara reached for Wren's hand and pulled her back, putting distance between their captors. The sword outstretched as if it could fend off three men at once. With Cara's spirit, Wren didn't doubt it could.

"We are leaving. If you follow us I will not hesitate to run you through." Her voice didn't betray the fear that caused her hand in Wren's to tremble.

With the light of the flickering flames the man who had threatened them came clearer into view. He was older than she expected, and had a long graying beard and a sharp nose. He smiled serenely at her. The feeling of his smile solely on her caused an array of shivers to run themselves over her skin. Cara turned to look at her and as she opened her mouth to speak, a line of red appeared at her throat.

Cara's eyes widened in surprise as a gurgling sound erupted from her throat. Wren's mind tried to grapple with the reality of what she was seeing and yet the horror filling her bones and heart told her she already knew. Wren bent to reach out for her friend even as Cara's body fell forward. Her knees hit the soft ground as she cradled Cara's body in her arms. Someone was screaming making it hard to focus on helping Cara and yet Cara's eyes stared forward as if she didn't see Wren at all.

"Cara, Cara." Her name was a plea amidst the screams.

"You will do as you are told and say what you are told to say, or you will be killed

immediately. Then I will find your family and I will kill them. Do you understand?" The bearded man's voice tried to cut through the noise all around her.

"Help her!" she demanded as she brushed errant strands of hair from Cara's beautiful face.

"She's gone. I warned you what would happen if you didn't obey. You can't save her, but you can spare your family if you comply." Where his voice had held a note of pleasure before there was only impatience.

"I can't leave her," she sobbed.

There was no denying the truth she already knew. Her best friend, the person who knew her best in the world, was in her arms and there was no life remaining in her. Crimson dripped from the line across her neck that no weapon had touched. It was difficult to feel anything above the crushing force of loss that threatened to bring her down.

"I can't leave her," Wren repeated dumbly even as the blood seeped onto her arm.

"Gregory." The guard moved as if his name were a command and stepped towards her reaching for Cara.

"No!" Wren screamed, pulling Cara to her.

"Unless you want to see her body tossed into that lake and your family behind it then I suggest you let Gregory do his job," sneered the man.

Wren shook her head, thoughts and nightmares crashing into each other. "What will you do to her?"

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“That depends on you. If you do as I say she will see a proper burial. If not...” He held out his hands as if the matter was out of his control.

Her own body felt heavy as she warred with herself. Cara deserved a proper burial, but more than that, she deserved to live. It should have been Wren. Wren should have been the one that grabbed that sword, but she had always been too slow. Too focused on logic to act.

“Okay.” She choked out the traitorous word. She was a coward and her friend was dead because of it.

Setting her head to rest against Cara’s cool forehead, she sobbed. “I’m so sorry, Cara. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Hands tore Cara away from her and the guttural cry she let loose sounded foreign to her ears.

The roaring in her ears was all she focused on as she walked through stone gates and foreign halls. When they came to a door, the man stopped holding a hand out to her. Wren’s body ceased its movement at the command. Everything felt strange as if her body were not her own. As if proving she was a liar once more, she lurched forward as she realized the guard holding Cara’s lifeless form was continuing down the hall. A sword at her neck was all that stopped her from running after her friend.

“Her body will be prepared. Should you be obedient tonight you will be permitted to bury your friend.”

Fresh tears fell down her cheeks. She opened her mouth to assent, but it was nothing more than air. It felt as if the life she knew had happened to someone else and all she was made of was Cara's death.

She was shoved into a room with deep green walls the color of infinite forests. Candles flickered around the room revealing two women in dull gray dresses, their hair pulled back into tight low buns. The door shut behind her, lock clicking ominously.

As soon as the door was closed she threw herself at the two women, pleading despite her whispers, "Please help me, they killed—" The truth burned her throat. "Please help me."

One of the women heaved a sigh and the other raised a single eyebrow before dragging her over to a tub full of water, pulling at her dress.

"What do you think you are doing?" Wren yelled, swatting them away.

The elder woman rolled her eyes and called out, "Leonid!"

In response, the lock clicked and the other soldier stepped into the room wearing a malevolent grin. She had hardly been aware of him on their way here, but then it had been hard to focus on anything.

"The Bishop has given express orders that if you should not comply, I am to inform him so he may maintain the rest of his promise to you." The words were said as if they were some delightful secret shared between friends. From the mad look in his eyes, Wren was sure he was the type of man to take delight in carrying out his orders.

Wren felt a shiver run through her body and it was entirely possible she would be sick right there. Whatever Leonid saw in her made his face fall in what could only be

described as disappointment. He wanted her to fight, but he should have known there was nothing left in her.

As soon as he left, the women began pulling at her dress again, and rage quickly overwhelmed her panic. “I will do it! May I not at least have that dignity?”

The women merely shrugged and stepped back, watching her carefully to make sure she did as she said she would.

Wren tugged off the wet, heavy dress and slowed only briefly when it came to her underclothes. When she hesitated, the older woman looked pointedly at the door and Wren could not bear to be seen by the sadistic guard’s leering face in her current state. Forcing her into the tub, the women began working on her, rubbing soap and oils on her that smelt like fresh lavender and sage. Under any other circumstance, this might have been a relaxing experience, but as it were she was painfully aware there was something sinister happening.

When the women finished washing her, they held out a robe, gesturing for her to climb out and into it. Without any explanation she was shoved into a chair where one woman began tugging on her hair and the other began working on her face with strange brushes. She had heard of women painting their faces to increase their beauty, but it did not make sense why they would be doing that to her now.

“Please tell me what is happening.” The words were dull and lifeless. The woman only shushed her while the one doing her hair tugged on her head so hard she cried out.

As tears fell no doubt leaving streaks on her painted face, Wren held still while the women finished their ministrations. When her hair was placed tightly against her head, and the other woman was satisfied with her face, they beckoned her to go to the other corner of the room where a remarkably beautiful gold-and-white dress hung.

Wren had never seen such an ornate and well-made dress before. One of the women pulled it down and the other yanked at Wren's robe. She realized with a start they meant her to wear the dress.

"I don't understand." None of it made any sense as if it were all some chaotic dream.

The woman only pulled at her robe, causing it to fall from Wren's shoulders. Painfully aware of her nakedness, she moved to cover herself. The woman who had taken off her robe, slapped away her hands and gave her a pair of fine, white satin underclothes.

Wren eagerly put them on, needing to cover herself from their eyes. When she was finished, one woman pulled a corset around her and tightened it to the point Wren's already sore lungs screamed for more air. Her protests fell on deaf ears, and they held out the beautiful gown to her, urging her into it.

The sleeves came all the way to her wrists, and the bodice was tight against her chest and stomach. It had obviously been made for someone smaller and less endowed than herself. Everything felt tight against her, and the silk fabric fell easily around her.

The dress, though ornately done, was not puffy, but instead clung to her skin gradually moving away from it. She had the brief thought that if she walked, the indent of her legs would show against the dress.

One of the women went to knock on the door and the guard opened it up, moving his gaze slowly over her. She bristled at the liberty he took, but knew she could do nothing to provoke him. He gestured for her to leave the room and she obeyed despite the anxiety that rose in her chest telling her she should not be alone with this man.

He led her to an open door that gave way to a darkened room lit only with a few candles.

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“Walk. Do not stop or you will die,” he ordered.

Doing as she was told, she walked down the dimly lit room noticing a few figures sitting on either side of her. The notion of calling out to them died on her lips as she turned to see the guard staring menacingly at her. Swallowing hard, her heart beat rapidly as if it would come through her chest at any moment, but underneath it all was the violent current of grief.

When she got to the end of the room she saw two men standing in front of her. Long gray beard, pointy nose, eyes filled with murder met her. She was standing in front of Cara’s murderer. He smirked at her as if he had followed her thoughts. “Stand right here and face this way and remember our earlier discussion. You will say what I tell you to say.”

He gestured for her to stand and face the other man. It was dimly lit, but she could tell the man across from her wore black clothes that blended into the darkness around him. His pristine black hair fell to just above his shoulders, shadowing his face. His features were sharp, but the look of distaste curling his lips told her she didn’t have an ally in this man.

The man who pulled her out of the lake began speaking in a language she did not know, but the other man seemed to as he repeated the words. His voice was deep and he spoke each word as if it was a curse. When he finished, both men peered at her expectantly and she was painfully aware her ignorance might get her killed. It didn’t seem physically possible her heart could sustain this rapid beating for long. Her stomach rolled with anxiety and she considered what would happen if she was sick right then.

“You will repeat the words as I tell them to you, girl,” sneered the nasally man. The man in black only looked away from her, clearly annoyed with her ignorance.

She tried her best to repeat the words even as silent tears caressed her cheeks. When they were satisfied with her attempt, the man in black turned and walked from the room as if he detested being there a moment longer. Leonid, the guard, passed him and grabbed her arm, taking her back from the way they came.

“Welcome to Haradon court, Wren Hayden,” jeered the man with the nasally voice, and then she was being pulled down the room again by her arm.

The guard led her without another word to a smaller corridor where he opened the door and thrust her in before locking it behind her. Locking her in with her grief and fear to consume her as she tried to understand what had happened.

She sat curled in the dark for what could have been hours or minutes, the truth of the time didn’t matter. When the door opened once more Wren didn’t bother to move. She felt numb and lost to reality.

“The Bishop is prepared to make good on his word,” a deep voice said.

The memories she fought against bombarded her and it was as if she were drowning once more. She pushed herself off the hard ground and wiped at the tears that wouldn’t leave her be for more than a few minutes. As her eyes fought to adjust to the new light she realized the man before her was the one that had carried Cara’s body. She threw herself towards him. “Where is she? I need to see her!”

He grunted in response and held out a hand for Wren to move forward. Even amidst the fear strangling her she knew she would do whatever it took to help her friend. The steps that led her to outside of the massive castle were long and infinite. Judging from the lack of light peeking out the stained glass lining the castle walls it was still night,

or perhaps a new night. Time felt foreign. Following the lit torches and the solemn guard in front of her she felt the wind press against her as they came to an open door. The grass beneath her feet gave slightly as if it were damp with morning dew.

When the light of the torch the guard carried finally cast light of their destination a choked sound escaped Wren. It was a suffocating and consuming sound as if it could encompass the grief swirling inside her tainting everything. Ten feet ahead of her lay a hole, freshly dug, and just to the side of it lay a white sheet with the distinct shape of a body underneath it. All at once her feet were rooted to the ground and yet she felt the need to be at her friend's side.

"Bishop says you get ten minutes." The guard huffed as if this were a casual meeting.

She had thought it a hundred times and would think it a hundred more, but all of this seemed like one terrible dream. The tragedy of it was she could have convinced herself it was if it wasn't for the savage pain that pummeled her spirit leaving no doubt of its existence. As Wren came to kneel next to the white sheet she sucked in a breath as if it could give her the courage to do what needed to be done.

Once she pulled back the sheet, the last of the hope and denial she had been harboring left her. Eyes closed as if in sleep, Cara peacefully rested atop the moist ground. Wren's eyes drifted to the perfect thin line across her throat and the sobs she fought broke loose from her chest. Her grief would not be denied.

Lifting her hand to her friend's face, she caressed her cool cheek. "I'm so sorry, my friend."

There were no words that could encompass the responsibility Wren felt for her friend's loss. She had come back for her. She was dead because she had had the courage to jump in the water after her. Her mother would never know how her daughter had died with the bravery of an army. Cara. Her friend since she was a

young girl. Cara, who's infectious laugh and bold personality left others wishing they had more of her time.

The guard cleared his throat and Wren fought the urge to throw something at him. This was the last time she would see Cara even though her loss would be a constant presence no matter what her uncertain future held.

"May you find the peace you deserve, my beautiful friend," Wren whispered as she placed a kiss on Cara's too cold forehead. She replaced the sheet and sat in defeated silence as her friend was lowered into the makeshift grave and dirt thrown over her as if her life could be buried in its depths.

Chapter 3

Two days passed in the empty room with the only interaction with other people being when guards would slide in some food. Grief gave way to numbness. When the door opened and a guard ordered her to come with him, she didn't even fight. The energy it would have taken to even question him was more than she could give. She followed him down stone hallways with red carpet lining them until they stopped at an oak door. He opened it and unceremoniously shoved her in, shutting the door behind her.

The room consisted of a massive oak bed with white bedding atop it, a small table with chairs across from it, a beast of a wardrobe, and an expansive fireplace in the corner. Her eyes wandered to a window that took up an entire wall, a chaise lounge placed underneath it.

It was too dark for Wren to see what lay outside the window making her feel even more trapped than she already did. Somehow her dark and empty room had been less oppressive than being surrounded by basic comforts. Greedily drawing in air, Wren blew it out slowly and purposefully. Her mind tried to grasp onto what was happening, but the fibers of knowledge slipped between her fingers.

She moved to the fireplace, easily distracted by its size and commanding presence. Intricate carvings wove throughout it, a series of vines and greenery that seemed to tell a story of creation. Running her fingers over the cool wood she saw five figures standing together, holding hands. The vines connected the images led to a cliff where four of the figures seemed to be throwing the smallest off. Bile rose in Wren's throat and she jerked away.

The sound of a door opening made her twist around. Her anxiety was only minimally placated by the form of a small woman with blonde hair in a tight bun above her neck wearing a dull gray dress. The woman dropped into a slight curtsy before moving towards the fireplace.

The fireplace was at least six feet high and four feet wide so the small woman could have stood inside it, but she merely crouched in front of it and started pushing the wood before a small fire lit, consuming the logs until the heat of the flames warmed Wren's skin. With the flames, Wren could admire the intricate details of the engravings more closely.

Where the figure had been tossed over the cliff led into delicate leaves intertwined with branches that held blossoming flowers flowing in cascades from the center. She had not realized she had moved closer to the fire until a woman gently grabbed her arm, and Wren jumped as if attacked.

The woman wore a small frown, but her eyes softened with what Wren dare not hope to call kindness. Wren's eyes began to sting, but she willed the tears to recede. She wouldn't shed any tears in front of her captors, she wouldn't give them the satisfaction. They had ripped her from everything she knew and taken everything from her. Everyone.

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“I am Sophie, your maid. I apologize that the fire was not lit.” The words were quiet, but firm as if she were used to people listening to her.

“My maid?” Her voice was hollow. “I only want to go home, please help me.” Wren didn’t know why she thrust the words at her when this woman was likely ordered to confine her here and was in on the whole abduction. The thought left a wake of confusion in Wren’s mind as she tried to understand why anyone would abduct her in the first place.

“I’m sorry, my lady, you cannot leave this room.” She whispered the words as if she felt sympathy for Wren. “There are guards posted outside your door and I have been asked to prepare you for bed.” Sophie shifted uncomfortably, and it was clear that she also was unaccustomed to such an arrangement.

Wren’s lip trembled. “They killed her. They killed my best friend. She was trying to protect me and they killed her.”

Sophie’s cool exterior cracked under the words and her eyebrows turned down in unrestrained sympathy. As if she knew there were no words to heal the wound of loss, Sophie stepped forward and threw her arms around Wren. Instead of being confused as to why a strange woman would show her sympathy, Wren let herself fall into the hug. Let herself be comforted.

When the tears dried and her shoulders stopped shaking, Sophie led her to the small table where she magically produced tea. As soon as the tea was poured, Sophie took the seat across from her.

“I’m sorry for your loss. What has been done to you is monstrous. I wish I could make sense of it, but Be—” Sophie was cut off as the door slammed open and a cold voice shouted to the guards to leave immediately.

He wore the same black tunic as earlier, but his hair was less pristine, tousled to where it now started to fall across his eyes. She saw that his face was pale, but currently flushed as if he had run here. Wren doubted that to be the case since his breathing was slow and measured. In more light, she could see close trimmed facial hair.

It occurred to her the reason for the flushed cheeks likely had more to do with anger as she noticed his blue eyes blazing as if he could incinerate the whole room. She had the strange thought that maybe he could since it felt like the air had been stripped from the room.

The man took a noticeable breath and looked towards Sophie who nodded before standing and taking a seat on the chaise. Wren wanted to open her mouth to tell her not to go, to not leave her with this man, but nothing came out.

Feeling entirely alone, Wren folded her hands together, centering herself. Whoever this man was, he couldn’t take anything more from her.

Of all the things she could have imagined or expected, she could not have predicted that this man who seemed taller than any she had ever met would casually stroll over and take Sophie’s seat across from her. Silence stretched between them with only the cracking of the fire for distraction. His coat was made of fine material and it clung to him easily showing the hint of muscle.

“I do not know what you want me to say, Sophie.” He ground out, leaning back in his chair as if all of this were painfully tedious.

Sophie let out an audible sigh. “Wren Hayden, this is His Royal Highness, Prince Malaki Blackwood, who seems to have forgotten how to talk to other people.”

The words crashed over Wren like waves meeting the shore, violent and consuming. She had found herself in a precarious situation that had no precedent. Wren did not know which fact to try to tackle first—that a servant had just chastised a prince or that this ill-mannered man in front of her was royalty.

The words she fought for shrank inside her until she was painfully aware that her mouth was hanging wide open.

“You are a prince.” Wren repeated dumbly. Cara would have loved that. She would have been fawning over him before his name had even left Sophie’s mouth. The grief crawled within her, fresh with memory.

The prince took a small silver flask from his coat pocket and unscrewed it. There should be a limit on how many misfortunes one person could endure. He raised his glass to her and said, “Ah, thank you, my lady, I was quite in danger of forgetting my station.”

“Kai.” The word was said low and in warning from Sophie who turned from her new task of setting clothes on the bed.

“You are a terrible maid, Sophie,” he said dryly. “Well, this has been lovely, but I do think I will find entertainment elsewhere tonight.” He downed the contents of his cup and stood from the table.

“Sophie, Lady Wren, truly a pleasure.” His words were dull and devoid of sincerity. Just as quickly as he had come into the room, he was gone. Wren heard him call for the guards and say something that earned a laugh from them both.

Wren looked down at her cup, realizing she had never even touched the tea Sophie had poured. Movement next to her showed Sophie glaring at the door the prince had just exited through.

“I apologize, my lady, he is not normally this way. He has been drinking, and drink makes fools of us all.”

The statement didn't seem to warrant a response which suited Wren just fine as she became aware of how heavy her body felt. Nothing made sense and it seemed she would get no answers tonight. “Sophie? I would like to sleep now.” Perhaps in sleep she would wake up and this would all be some terrible dream. She would wake up to the sounds of the farm and sunlight pouring in through her window. She would walk downstairs and have breakfast only to have Georgie come downstairs rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Sophie seemed about to say something and then thought better of it, nodding quietly.

Wren began walking towards the bed when Sophie stopped her and gestured to the night gown laying on the bed. Without another word, Sophie moved behind her and began undoing the straps on her dress and as it fell to the ground and began unlacing her corset.

Any modesty she had once harbored was gone, and she stood quietly while Sophie helped her into a wistful white nightgown. Wren wished the corset had been the reason for the tightness in her chest, but with it off, the tightness had not loosened.

Crawling into the bed, Wren laid her head on the pillow, not bothering to pull the covers over her. As she closed her eyes and let the exhaustion of the day take her, a single tear trickled down her cheek.

Chapter 4

Wren awoke to the smell of bacon and for an instant her heart leapt knowing she was back home and her aunt had risen early and made breakfast. Opening her eyes, she took in the expansive room from last night and knew it was only false hope. Her eyes searched for the source of the smell and fell on the table across from the bed where she and the prince had had tea what seemed like days ago. The small table was laid full with an array of meat, eggs, and fresh fruit. Wren's spirits lifted when her eyes landed on the steaming cup of tea at the edge of the table. The room was not nearly as cold as it had been the previous night, but the warm tea sang to her enough that she pulled the covers back, not remembering having put them on, and settled herself at the table. She pulled the steaming cup to her lips and blew softly, watching the steam shift from its upwards course. The door quietly opened and Sophie entered carrying a large green dress.

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“Good morning, my lady. I am glad to see you up. I thought you might like to walk in the garden and get some fresh air.”

Wren sneered inwardly at the suggestion, but then thought it might be wise to learn the grounds and lay out if she was ever to escape this place. She nodded and began eating the warm bacon and egg on her plate. At least this was not so unfamiliar to her. In fact, if she closed her eyes she could almost imagine Georgie talking a mile a minute and her aunt smiling patiently, while uncle quickly grabbed some bacon and headed out to the fields. Her heart ached and she had to force herself to come back to reality.

Finishing breakfast and washing up, Sophie helped Wren into the green dress she had seen her carrying. Wren was grateful that she was not forced to endure the corset from the previous night. As Sophie worked silently on the buttons, Wren found herself admiring the beautiful details. It was trimmed with a gold lacework that flowed on the edges of the sleeves only to meet in a cascade of swirls down the center of the hunter green dress.

“Sophie. It is beautiful.” Even her dress from last night did not seem as fine as this.

Sophie smiled, “I am glad you approve.” Approval was an understatement as Wren did not think she would ever again wear a gown so fine in all her life.

Sophie walked to the door and knocked on it twice. The door opened and a guard peered in. “Lady Wren wishes to walk in the garden this morning.” The guard looked to the other guard before nodding. Sophie gave a reassuring gesture and Wren began walking out of her cozy prison.

The hallway that faced her was long filled with windows overlooking expansive gardens that she had not been able to visualize last night on her march to her cell. It seemed every window showed more greenery and in the distance a large looming castle towered over the greenery.

Soon, she came to an opening in the hallway and just as if it was part of the building a courtyard appeared. It did not appear to be only a courtyard though, it seemed that this was the entrance to the entire garden. Wren wondered briefly at the logic of this in regards to security before realizing she could smell the flowery scent and the breeze of fresh air. She relished the feeling of liberation the scents brought to her and breathed in deeply as if she could bottle them up.

She placed her palms face out and closed her eyes appreciating the feel of the sun and the wide open space. Hearing a sniff, she was reminded of the two guards and Sophie following behind her. The brief feeling of liberation dissipated quickly as she was reminded that she was still a prisoner.

They continued their walk through hedges and blossoming trees until they came upon a small area that consisted of a bench surrounded by blooming flowers. Sitting on the bench, Wren allowed herself a moment to forget her circumstances and closed her eyes only focusing on what her senses gave her. The sweet perfume of the air, the warmth wrapping around her like a favorite blanket.

“What a wonderful coincidence. I have been eager to speak to you, Lady Wren!” Wren was jolted from her revelry and before she could refute her status as a lady her eyes opened and the most handsome man she had ever seen was smiling down at her. He was in a gray and white tunic and had dark brown hair perfectly arranged. It struck Wren that his eyes were strange in the sense that while they were a light blue, they seemed almost murky.

The handsome stranger laughed, “But how rude of me, I am Prince Richard

Blackwood, pleased to meet your acquaintance.”

Wren’s mouth went dry as she watched him give a slight bow. “Prince?” Truly, she would need to work on being more articulate in the future.

“Ah yes, you would already be familiar with my overly warm and caring older brother, Kai. I assure you we are nothing alike, no need to be so concerned. I only wanted a chance to meet you and speak to you.” Wren began to get the sense that this was a man who enjoyed the sound of his own voice. Still she found herself grateful for the warmth he was showing her.

With a slight smile, Richard made a gesture to the guards and they left them with a bow. The prince turned back to her and then a frown fell on his otherwise beautiful face. He turned to Sophie who was still standing nearby, watching them. “Surely, your mistress will be quite safe with me, Sophie. I should think you would enjoy the time to spend with my brother as it has been, gracious, an hour since you last parted ways. I know he does not like you to be far from him.” Wren did not miss the slight in his words or the brief anger that shone on Sophie’s face.

“I have been ordered to stay with Lady Wren should she need anything.” Sophie’s words were short and made no room for further argument. At least that likely would have been the case had she not been speaking to a prince.

“Leave us, Sophie. Go fetch my dear big brother if you must, but go.” Sophie stared daggers at the prince before her face hardened with determination and she clumsily curtsied before turning abruptly and hurrying past the hedges.

Richard smiled and Wren could not help the unsettling feeling that filled her stomach as he turned his victorious grin on her before settling back into the charming one she had previously admired.

“Bless, now isn’t that better?” He leaned against the wall, arms folded. “I’d say we have a few minutes before she scurries back with reinforcements. Now Wren, how are you enjoying Haradon?”

Wren bit her lip. There were a considerable number of thoughts to run through in a short amount of time. Despite Sophie’s obvious allegiance and strange relationship with the elder prince she trusted Sophie, but she clearly didn’t trust the prince before her. Still, any potential ally was a possibility she couldn’t refuse.

The words poured out. “I just want to go home.”

Richard nodded, his short chestnut hair sliding into his eyes. “I thought you might say so.”

He pushed himself off the wall and came to stand in front of her, leaning down conspiratorially. “I can help you, but you can’t tell Sophie or my brother else they will try to stop you. Do you understand? I am not going to risk my neck helping you if you can’t keep a secret.”

The air felt thick, and her heart beat wildly. Here was her chance and she wouldn’t throw it away, but there was something nagging at the back of her mind.

“Why?” Wren drew a long breath. “Why would you help me?”

Richard’s smile grew and Wren got the impression that he was often smiling. “My brother is insufferable on his best day. It suits me to see him lose for once.”

What Wren thought would give her answers only brought more questions. “How would me going home be a loss to him? He’s been nothing but horrible.”

Richard tsked. “Here’s the thing. We’ve got about two more minutes. Do you want to

know how to get home or not?”

Anxiety fresh and consuming blossomed deep in her chest. If she had more time then perhaps she could figure out who to trust, but she didn't have that luxury. If she ever wanted to see her home and family again she would need to be bold. Cara needed her to tell her mother what happened. She could do this for her friend.

Meeting murky eyes, she said, “Tell me.”

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Richard grinned, before leaning close to her to whisper in her ear. The close contact wasn't wanted and yet Wren found that her feet were frozen to the soft dewy ground.

"The lake outside of the castle. My brother was explicitly told not to let you anywhere near it for two days, the first being last night. Apparently, should you find yourself there you could return home. That's all I know."

Breathing suddenly seemed like the only thing she was capable of. The lake. The lake she had come through last night. Of course, that would be her way home, but only for one more day.

"There are always guards outside my door unless your brother is there," Wren said, considering the possibilities and finding none.

Richard brought a curved finger below his mouth as if thinking. "We could drug him, but I suspect Sophie would catch on quick enough."

Wren gave an impatient groan. There was a way out and it was slipping through her fingers.

"Ah! I've got it! Shortly after nightfall I'll come to you. Just be ready." He seemed entirely proud of himself.

Raised voices carried over the garden and Wren twisted towards the sound.

"Do not say a word about this to anyone. You can't trust any of them. Do you understand?" He whispered furiously, as if time were being snatched away.

The words wouldn't come, but Wren nodded nonetheless. Home. She was going home.

"It's been a pleasure, Wren. I'll see you tonight," Richard crooned, stepping around her just in time for her jailers to return. Prince Malaki wore black from head to toe that clung to his narrow form. His shoulder length hair was freshly combed and half was tied up in a small knot. He had none of last night's color in his cheeks and looked decidedly pale without it. Sophie was huffing behind him, cheeks rosy from effort. Her medium length blond hair was pulled into a thick braid that she threw over her shoulder as she came to a stop behind the eldest prince with a look of contrition.

Blue eyes flashed from Wren to Richard and for a moment Wren could have sworn he knew their plan. That her chance of escape had gone as quickly as it had come.

"Brother. What is the meaning of this?" said Prince Malaki's cold voice.

"Oh, Kai, do not be so dull. I was just getting to know Wren." Richard put his arm around Wren's shoulders as he said the words.

Wren saw Prince Malaki's body stiffen as he stared at his brother. "Richard." The word held all the warning and rage that radiated from the older prince.

Seeing his words upset his brother, Richard moved to pass by him. "I am afraid I must be leaving as it were. Father has requested my presence this morning, I only wished to meet the lady everyone is making such a fuss over." Turning towards Wren and Sophie, he smiled. "I will see you later this evening, Lady Wren." As Richard attempted to move past him, the older prince clad all in black grabbed his arm.

"Now, now Kai. We are all friends here, but I am sure father would be interested to also learn of this." With obvious hesitancy the older prince let go of his brother who smiled and left leisurely.

“Sophie.” The word from the dark prince was both a demand and a plea. Sophie nodded and led Wren back towards the hallway they had come from. Her heart beat wildly in her chest. The relationship between the two men was strained, but it didn’t matter. She was going home. They reached her room and Sophie quickly ushered her in and gestured for her to settle back into the chair where she had eaten her breakfast. The uneaten food and now cool tea still sat in front of her. Wren raised her eyes from the unappealing array of food and was surprised to find Prince Malaki at the door, seething with rage.

“What did you say to him?” His cold eyes locked on her as he said the words that were clipped with barely restrained anger.

Sophie looked at him in shock and looked to say something, but Wren found her own temper filling her. “I don’t see how that is any of your business.”

“What did you say to him?” He repeated the question, each word was deliberate and deathly quiet.

There should have been more time granted to her to figure out the factions and dynamics of this strange world, but then again she never should have been there to begin with. One prince treated her with disdain and anger while the other offered her a chance home. There was little question in her mind of which she was prepared to follow.

Wren straightened in her chair, meeting his cerulean eyes that flamed with untamed wrath. She would not be intimidated. “As I said. I don’t see how that is any of your business and you can storm around this whole gods forsaken castle and I still won’t be inclined to discuss it with you.”

His eyes widened for a fraction before he let out a long slow breath. Perhaps that wasn’t the best method after all. In hindsight it didn’t seem wise to antagonize her

jailer when freedom was just out of reach.

The prince pinched the bridge of his nose and blew out a long breath. There was a small curling satisfaction at the knowledge she had irritated him. He deserved all of that and more. Coming to some sort of resolution, Prince Malaki took two long strides to where she was sitting and took the seat opposite her, leaning forward. There was no kindness in his narrow face or hint of compassion for the precarious position he had placed her in.

“Let me explain a few things to you. My brother does not have good intentions. Whatever he said to you—whatever he promised you is nothing more than beautifully wrapped poison. I can’t protect you against him if you don’t tell me what he said.” The words were clipped as if he were speaking to an errant child. It made her blood boil.

Wren leaned forward, mimicking his position. “I don’t see why I should believe a word you say to me. You have been nothing but unpleasant. Why would I ever believe that you mean to protect me?”

The prince’s fists clenched where they rested on the table and she could see her words had found their target. “Because you are my godsdamn wife whether I wish it or not.”

A pregnant silence filled the room as Wren stared at the man before her. There was no hint of jest on his ever-serious face. Laughter bubbled up in her and soon she was clutching her stomach as cascading humor fell over her. She hadn’t had many expectations for this conversation, but announcing that she was married had not once crossed her mind. They were mad. All of them in this desolate place except maybe Sophie. But when she tried to seek aid from Sophie, she was pale as if she would throw up right there enough that Wren would have to question her sanity as well. The sight of her was enough to take the misplaced humor from her. Gathering her breath

she steeled herself.

“You all are mad. I would never marry you.” A strange feeling of panic began clawing at her insides where the humor had once been.

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The prince stared at her as if she told him the secret of the universe and she noted with a grim ache that Sophie was watching her in much the same way. It was Sophie who spoke first, breaking the deafening silence, “They didn’t tell you.” It was not a question and when Sophie spoke again, pity in her drawn face. “The ceremony three nights ago, Wren, that was your wedding.”

She was sure her mouth was hanging open. It was as if her mind was lost in some space between comprehension. She sought understanding between her companions, but found Sophie’s lips pulled thin and the prince was still staring at her as if he was also struggling to understand.

“I should have expected this. One more cruel arrow, as if this sentence was not enough. I must go.”

Wren stood from where she had been seated and nearly yelled at him to stay and explain, but she could not find her voice. Sophie stepped away from her and moved towards the prince who was already pulling the door open. “Kai, you have to talk to her, she deserves to know what’s happening. This is cruel.” He did not turn around before he left the room, leaving a sickening empty space in his wake.

“I feel sick,” blurted Wren as she brought a hand to her mouth.

Sophie was there in an instant rubbing her back, the intimate gesture strange in such a cold place.

“Sophie, tell me what is happening, please.”

Sophie hesitated before her features set in determination.

“You were brought here for the purpose of marrying Kai. It is complicated, but that is the truth of it.”

Wren moved towards the bed and sat stiffly. “Sophie, what happens now? I did not know I was being married, I only knew they told me to say the words or I would die. They killed Cara and threatened my family. I did not know what they were and they cannot be binding if I did not know what I was saying.” Her voice edged higher and higher as the panic and trauma of the past few days settled back in.

Sophie’s eyes were soft as she sat next to her. “They are binding, my lady, all the same they are binding.” Her voice was nearly a whisper.

Wren closed her eyes and tried to take deep breaths in order to steady herself. Nothing made sense. Wasn’t it just a few days ago she had woken up on the farm and enjoyed a peaceful breakfast with her aunt, uncle, and Georgie? Why did she stop at that lake? Why had she felt compelled to stop? The memory of what had been done to her that night took root in her mind.

“Sophie, are there witches here?” The question came out almost as a whisper, she was frightened to ask, but she needed to know. When Sophie’s brow wrinkled in question she searched her mind for the right word. “Magic?”

Sophie nodded. “It is almost entirely faded from our lands, but there are a few who can access it if that is what you meant by witches? We call magic users sorcerers. No one knows why it’s fading. It used to be so common that at least half the people had access to it, but no one knows why it went away.” Sophie looked at her hands clasped together in her lap and there was no mistaking the pang of loss in her words. Seeming to remember herself, she gave a small chuckle. “Of course, the priests said it was a lack of faith in the gods and that it was their punishment to the unfaithful.” The roll of

her eyes clearly stated how she felt about that explanation.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Other people say it was stolen, though I have never put much into that theory. Either way the next generation will likely be the last to know magic.”

Wren kept her eyes closed trying to absorb the words. At home, if you were accused of witchcraft you would burn for your crime. It was forbidden to even whisper about it. There had been a witch in a nearby village when she was small and she remembered how people spoke of her worshiping the dark gods and meeting them under the light of the moon to do their bidding. Wren had asked her aunt about it and she said that it was only ignorance and judgment, but Wren did not know what that meant at the time. The way Sophie talked about magic was with sorrow and longing. Clearly, the people of this world did not treat witches the same way.

“Did a sorcerer cast a spell on me to bring me here?”

Sophie stared ahead as she nodded slowly. “We think you were brought here by the Bishop who is the most powerful sorcerer left to us in Haradon. He is the advisor to the king.” Seeing the question on Wren’s face, she continued. “I only know what Kai has told me. There is a wealthy kingdom north of us, North Helm. The king sent Prince Richard there for diplomacy meetings last spring. When Prince Richard came back he said he was in love with their crown princess and she with him. The King was eager for the alliance since North Helm is our greatest threat, but our own laws stood in his way. Our law states the elder sibling must be married before the younger can enter into such a union. It is an old law that has always been strictly followed. The priests say it is a commandment from the gods and while some may not believe that, with magic fading no one is willing to risk the gods ire.”

“He killed Cara. My best friend. She fought back the night we were taken and he killed her.” Sophie wrapped her hand in hers.

“I’m sorry, Wren. He’s not a good man, but he’s also not touchable. The King won’t hold him responsible for it. Kai’s tried.”

Wren didn’t know what to do with any of that information so she clung to the next question. “I don’t understand why I am here, why I was married to him. Aren’t there women lining up to marry a prince? In my world there would be no shortage of women willing to marry for wealth and power. I realize that your prince is excessively disagreeable and without emotion aside from anger, but still there must be someone.”

Sophie wore a sad smile. “You don’t know him yet.”

“I have seen enough and I don’t want to know him better. Please answer my question.” Wren regretted the bitter tone immediately since Sophie had shown her nothing but kindness.

With a deep breath, Sophie continued. “I don’t know why they brought you here for this, only that they did. You are right that many women here would rush to marry him despite his...disagreeableness. Power is important here at court and marrying him would give them a significant amount of that considering she would eventually be queen. They never even brought anyone from court forward as a suggestion. If Kai knows why, he has not told me, but I think he doesn’t know either.” Sophie exhaled as if she could release all the tension in the room.

Wren shook her head still not understanding. “Why would the prince agree to a marriage he obviously doesn’t want to be a part of? I understand that in order for the younger to get married the older must, but why someone he has never met? Why wouldn’t he simply say no? As a crown prince he must have some choice.”

Sophie looked straight ahead and then with great reluctance spoke, “You aren’t the first.”

Wren felt as if she had been punched in the stomach. She whispered the next question, “He is married to others?” This would at least invalidate their marriage in her world as this was considered bigotry, but she was unsure if it mattered in her world that she was married following their customs anyways. Even still she was not interested in being part of such a grotesque union.

Sophie shook her head, “No, Wren. Remember when you said that they told you they would kill you if you didn’t say the words?” Wren nodded. “The last one they brought refused to say the words, they killed her right there in front of Kai. The king ordered it done and the Bishop carried out the sentence, using his magic to withdraw all the air from her lungs.” Wren couldn’t help the chill that fell over her. She had considered refusing.

“You said ‘the last one’?” Wren felt the dread settle in her belly.

Sophie looked as if she would be sick. “There were two more before her. The first, Kai refused to marry, as you said, he does not want to be married even if it means the good of the kingdom. That’s not true.” Sophie paused to consider her words. “If it was for his people’s safety and well-being he would. He would not force someone to wed him if she did not wish it though.” Sophie ignored the look of disdain on Wren’s face and continued. “He refused and the King ordered her death while he watched so that he would know the price of his refusal.”

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Wren felt dread coil in her. That she was in a kingdom run by such a man was unsettling. Her need to find a way home surged throughout her entire body, but instead she asked, “The second one?”

“She died when they pulled her through the portal. I do not know why, Kai won’t talk of it. He told me of the other two because I would not relent asking him what had happened. I have never seen him look the way he has since those days.”

Wren considered Sophie carefully before gently asking, “Sophie, are you and he—I mean, are you...” Sophie let out a laugh that felt foreign after such terrible tales.

“No. Gods, whatever gave you that idea? We have been friends since childhood. I would do anything for him, but no, I do not love him in that way.” She continued chuckling as if she were trying to test out the scenario in her mind.

Wren wasn’t sure what to say as she couldn’t understand what about the prince could inspire such loyalty from her.

“I keep thinking I am going to wake up and be back home, my aunt and uncle chastising me for sleeping so long. They must be so worried. Poor Georgie.” Seeing the question in Sophie’s face, Wren answered. “My little cousin. He is only six years old. He won’t understand what’s happened.”

Sophie looked like she was about to ask more questions, but thought better of it. “I cannot help what has happened, my lady, but I can make you some tea to settle your nerves.”

Wren smiled despondently. “I think my nerves are beyond settling, but thank you just the same. Sophie, I just told you I come from a farm, not even a farm I can inherit as it is my aunt and uncles. Please call me Wren. I am not a lady.”

Sophie shook her head mournfully. “It would not be proper for your maid to call you by your given name, my lady.”

“You call the prince by his name, I should think that far more improper,” countered Wren.

Sophie made to answer when there was a soft, but firm knock on the door. Sophie looked at Wren apologetically before going to answer it.

“Kai? What’s happened?” He pushed past her gently, lightly putting his hand on her shoulder as he passed. Sophie seemed more concerned than she had at any of the times he had barged in without any consideration. He glanced at Wren, briefly meeting her eyes before turning towards the wall.

“I am sorry. It had not even occurred to me that they would keep you in the dark. You deserve more than what you have been given.” His voice was quiet and distant.

The man in front of her seemed a faint echo of the fiery prince before.

Sophie took a tentative step forward. “What happened?”

He shook his head, his hair slightly disheveled at the movement. “Nothing. All of it. Take your pick.”

This new prince was a development that Wren couldn’t ignore. “Send me home.”

The sudden declaration earned her two pairs of eyes. “Impossible.” The dark voice

stated unceremoniously.

What hope she had felt was quickly dissipating. She took her chance with Sophie who bit her lip as if considering. “The sorcerer from North Helm. They say he is more powerful than the Bishop. We could ask him.”

The prince turned his glare from the wall to Sophie. “Yes, I will just write a letter to the foreign sorcerer and ask him if he could send a kidnapped girl back to whence she came. Really brilliant plan, Soph.”

Sophie shook her head looking as if she hadn’t even heard the insult in his words. “There must be a way. We just haven’t thought of it yet.”

This was a strange turn of events and yet it seemed that at least Sophie was sincere in her desire to send her home.

“The lake. Where I came through last night—”

“No.” The vehemence in the single word was enough to send a chill over Wren.

Ignoring her body’s reaction, she stood from the bed and met his challenge. “Why not? If that’s how I got here then why can’t it be how I leave?”

His piercing gaze stretched over her, a question and an answer. “It wouldn’t work. You are stuck here for the time being and it is best you make your peace with that.”

Irritation, hot and consuming rose within her. “Would you? If you were stolen from your family and friends and brought to a hostile world would you simply make your peace with it?”

She hadn’t known him long and yet she knew his answer. Instead of confessing the

truth, he shook his head. “I will see about the viability of the North Helm sorcerer, but I will not risk relations with them even for you.”

“Even for me? What does that even mean? You have done nothing for me.” She had seen the look in his eyes when she brought up the lake. He knew it was her way home and he was content to leave her as a prisoner.

He shrugged, but there was a kindling fire in his eyes that she could see him warring with. He was angry, but for some reason he was suppressing it.

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“Send me home,” Wren demanded once more.

He took one large stride to her and she was forced to look up to meet his eyes. Gods, he was tall, even for her and she wasn’t short by any means.

“I don’t know what you discussed with my brother. He is content to be as quiet about it as you are, but I would caution you against trusting him. My brother only loves himself and everything he does is self-serving.”

“Sounds like a family trait,” she countered.

Cerulean eyes narrowed. “Don’t be selfish. This isn’t just about you anymore. There are kingdoms at play here and whether you want to be involved or not, you are.”

She shook her head. “It all means nothing to me. All I care about is getting home.”

Irritation flickered over him. “Then you would do well to get used to disappointment.”

Before she could cover up a retort he turned in one swift motion and made for the door. With his hand on the handle he said, “She does not leave this room unless I say, Sophie.”

Assuming Sophie to be compliant he opened the door and it slammed shut with a thud that made Wren’s body cringe. A gnawing and devouring feeling threaded itself through her body slowly consuming her. Sophie must have seen what was happening because she instantly wrapped her arms around Wren, but it was too late. The air had

gone from her lungs and the panic had claimed her.

Chapter 5

The clock above the fireplace mantle ticked away endlessly. She had spent the rest of the day trapped in her room as were the crown prince's orders. Sophie had attempted to teach her a few games and had brought her books, but she couldn't tolerate any of it. Mostly, she just lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. After nightfall. That was what the younger prince had said. He would come for her and she would go to the lake and go home and forget this nightmare.

Banging at the door had her pushing her body up off of the downy bed, an alarm flooding her body. Their game was given away before she started. Would she be arrested for trying to flee? She was apparently married to the crown prince, would that save her from her treachery? Would he fault her for trying to get home? That at least she already knew the answer to. He had told her to get comfortable and to accept her position. That was something she could never do. She needed Cara back. Needed Georgie. Needed her aunt and uncle.

Sophie stood up from where she was reclined in a crimson chair in the corner, sheltered by the warmth of the fireplace. She placed the book she had been reading down on the cushion and shot Wren a cautionary glance. Wren understood the meaning well enough. This could be friend or foe and she suddenly regretted not asking more questions instead of just imagining herself back in her own bed. A glance out the paneled windows told her the sun was not yet down, but the orange hue of the sky promised it would be soon. It was too soon.

Sophie cautiously opened the door, its large wooden motif blocking her from seeing the person on the other side.

"Your presence has been requested by the crown prince. His highness will receive

you in the throne room immediately,” a voice boomed.

“Give us a moment,” Sophie admonished.

“I was told just you, Lady,” he corrected.

Wren smiled despite her nerves. For some reason, she doubted Sophie appreciated being called a lady. It didn’t suit her any more than it suited Wren.

“Fine.” The door slammed in response and a string of curses followed Sophie across the room as she slipped her slippers on. When she was out of fresh words to name the crown prince she turned to Wren.

“I don’t know what he means by this, but stay right here and don’t open the door for anyone.” Seeing something in Wren’s face, Sophie stepped closer. “I mean it, Wren. I know he’s an ass, but he means well. He’s just not good at showing it. You can trust him and I hope that by now you know you can trust me. I can’t imagine what you have been feeling and what has gone through your mind, but we will sort it all out.”

Wren nodded, her throat suddenly gummy. The fact of the matter was that she did trust Sophie. From the moment she had arrived Sophie was the only one who had seemed to care about her. Unfortunately, that trust didn’t extend towards those she served. Her judgment was clearly clouded by friendship as she had called it.

“Thanks, Sophie,” Wren managed without choking.

The blond haired woman’s mouth turned down in a frown, but she seemed to decide against whatever she had been thinking about saying. When she was nearly to the door, the guilt Wren had been trying to push away rose, making her chest tight and heavy.

“Sophie.” She whirled around, her light gray dress and braid following behind. “Thank you. Thank you for being kind to me. I will always remember that.”

Her brows furrowed. “What made you say that?” Suspicion laced her words.

Wren shrugged her shoulders hoping it appeared as nonchalant as she wanted it to be. “I just felt like I had been unfair to you and that you should know.”

Her face smoothed as she accepted Wren’s answer, but instead of understanding there was a seriousness that formed over her youthful features. She was beautiful in a subtle way. Her jawline and cheekbones were molded with precision and her thin eyebrows neatly draped her dark blue eyes. She might have been breathtaking, but for her wide nose that seemed to dominate her petite face. Sophie put her hand on her hip, tilting her body with the motion. She was uncommonly short, but she always seemed to command the space around her.

“Let’s get one thing clear. You don’t owe anyone anything. You don’t owe Kai and you certainly don’t owe me. We earn your trust and you earn ours. That’s the way this works. Okay?”

If Wren hadn’t been feeling guilty before the pressure in her chest told her that she surely did now. “Okay,” she managed.

The other woman studied her as if convincing herself that Wren actually understood. “I’ll be back in a few.”

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That could have been a promise or a threat depending on how she wanted to receive it. Forcing herself to nod she swallowed back emotion that she couldn't afford to feel.

When the door shut behind Sophie, Wren was left with her traitorous thoughts. She should have told Sophie about Richard. She should have trusted her to help her. Maybe Sophie didn't know that there was a way for her to go home and she would have helped if she had only explained. There was also the possibility that Sophie would have told the prince and he would have stopped her. Richard had said that his brother would stop her and that her going home would negatively impact him, but she still didn't understand.

Her thoughts blissfully ended as a soft, almost inaudible knock on the door filled the space. Not wasting time, Wren slipped on her shoes she had kept next to the bed and hurried to the door. Creaking it open just an inch she peered into the hall. A grinning prince winked at her.

Opening the door the rest of the way, Wren smiled nervously.

He leaned forward to whisper. "Chin up, little princess, you are going home."

A thrill went through her at the promise. "Where I won't be a princess. I never thought I'd be happy about that."

A deep chuckle met her. "Being royalty has its perks. You could stay and find out, but then you would have to stay married to my brother."

"I think I'll take my chances as a commoner again," Wren said dryly.

His laugh was more boisterous this time and Wren searched the halls, making sure they weren't seen.

"It's a shame. I think I would have liked having a sister. Alas, fate is a cruel mistress. Off we go." He kicked his heels as if it were a signal of some sort and turned down the hallway.

Her breath caught as she belatedly realized she was meant to follow him. He waved a hand without looking behind him, and Wren forced her feet to remember how to walk. She quickly gained pace, and as she came up next to him, she saw that he was just as tall as his brother.

Everything else about them aside from that was dissimilar. Richard wore his short brown hair cropped close to his head. Where his brother was lean, the younger prince boasted thick muscles without even trying. He was charmingly handsome and easy going. Everything his brother was not. The only other similarity they shared was their shared blue eyes, but where Prince Malaki's were bright, Richard's were a murky blue.

The hallways were blissfully free of onlookers and from Prince Richard's confident stride, Wren was confident that this was not a coincidence. As they reached the main entrance to the castle, the large wooden doors that seemed to run the entire length of the castle were wide open, letting a cool evening breeze run through her. It smelled of fresh green grass and the promise of home. She eyed the two guards warily, but the tension burdening her shoulders released as Richard slung an arm over one of their shoulders and said something conspiratorially, making the guard laugh.

It made her wonder what it must be like to go through life with such ease and command. She imagined the young prince never knew of any burdens or heartache. At least that was the way he carried himself. It occurred to Wren that she would have liked to get to know and understand this prince.

“I offered to take the princess for an evening stroll, but you know how that goes. You promise one thing and live to regret it.” Both guards found the prince monstrously funny. “Anyway, Wren, you go ahead, and I’ll be along shortly.”

“Are you sure, Your Highness? We were told she was not to leave the castle?” one guard with a thick mustache asked cautiously.

Prince Richard merely placed a large hand on the guard’s shoulder and laughed. “Of course, I’m sure. After all, the princess is safer with me than anyone else, right?”

It was clear that that was not a stance either guard was willing to take and as they stepped to the side, hope rose in her. Richard gave her a slight nod and as she passed him she placed her hand in his loose hanging one and squeezed gently. He deserved more of a thank you than that, but with watching eyes it was all she could offer.

As she met his eyes, they seemed to soften, his lips pulled into a thin line before he seemed to find himself as the jolly prince once more. The brief interaction left her feeling confused, but if the man was reconsidering her rescue, then she could not afford to waste more time.

She released his hand and followed the narrow stone path, the lake just below the hill the path dominated. Her veins were alight with life as her family’s faces flashed before her. Georgie was probably confused and hurt by her disappearance and her arms ached to hold him and reassure him that she had never meant to leave him. That he was the best thing in her life.

Her aunt was probably exhausted from trying to run the house and try to figure out what had happened to her. Her uncle likely had let the farm get behind in searching for her and it would take them days to get it back to rights, but for the first time in her life she didn’t dread the work. She would gladly toil under the hot sun if it meant being where she belonged.

The lake below seemed to hum with an unnatural presence and it was no wonder considering what it was. Some sort of portal between her world and this one. It was strange that tonight, the lake seemed uneasy as if something were not quite right about it. Wren considered the night she was brought here and remembered how the lake had seemed to call to her, everything in her driving her towards it. This was not that call. In fact, her stomach rolled with nausea the closer she got to its shore. She looked behind her and realized she was far enough down the hill that she could no longer see the guards and Richard.

Burying the growing feeling of dread and attributing it to the last time she had been here, she pushed forward. She was going home. The smell of evergreen and fall air crested over her and she breathed in deeply, steadying herself. The lake came into perfect view as she stepped off the stone path. It was peaceful in a way that she could have spent hours contemplating life on its shoreline, admiring the perfect reflection of greenery in its waters.

A strange buzzing filled her ears and a sensation of wrongness had her body locking up. She told herself it was just the memory of this place. That she should take the last three steps into the shallow waters. Three steps was all that remained between her and home. Her skin crawled with unease and dread. Ignoring it, she took another step. Georgie. Home. A slight discomfort was worth the promise that lay before her.

Nausea had her raising a hand to her mouth, but she swallowed it back taking another step. One more. One more step and she would be home. Would it be like last time? Would she feel as if she were drowning? The memory had her grasping at her throat. Now was the time to be brave. She could question everything later, but only cowards stood at the threshold of freedom and wavered.

She lifted her foot to take the last step when something pummeled into her, pulling her back, away from her salvation. She screamed; it was raw and it was full of the panic that had been building in her since she left the castle. Her body fell and landed

on something warm and firm. Heavy breathing finally gave her the realization that she had been pulled away by a person. She twisted her head, straining to see who had come between her and home, but she was saved the trouble.

“What were you thinking?” The crown prince’s words were breathless, but nonetheless filled with malice.

Panic seized Wren’s body. She tried to free herself from him, but he had his arms locked around her middle, holding her against him.

“Let me go!” she shouted.

“No,” he ground out, his breath hot on her neck. “If I let you go you are going to go straight into that lake and that is a fate you do not want.”

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Rage mixed with her panic and she rammed her elbow into what she assumed was his side earning her a pained groan from her assailant.

“Stop fighting me and let me explain, you insufferable woman!” he shot back, tightening his grip around her.

“Let me go!” she repeated. “I’m going home!”

He growled against her. “That isn’t how you get home. It’s a death sentence. If you stop fighting me, I will explain.”

Despite herself, his words interlaced with the anxiety she had been feeling only a moment ago. She paused her thrashing. “Why would I listen to the person who wants to keep me here?”

The prince stilled beneath her. “You think I want to keep you here?”

Despite his strange response, Wren ground her teeth and sent another elbow into his side. He let loose a pitiful moan.

“Gods, stop doing that,” he said harshly.

“I’ll stop when you let me go,” she said.

He twisted until she was on her back and he loomed above her. There were beads of sweat on his forehead, and his breathing was coming fast enough that she knew he had run to catch up to her. How had he figured it out so quickly? She was a fool to

have hesitated. Balling her hands into fists she prepared to fight, but his hands were suddenly around her arms holding her firmly against the cool ground.

“Listen to me,” he demanded. “You go into that lake and you will stay there for the rest of your days, caught in a place between worlds. Maybe you’ll die of hunger and thirst first or maybe whatever magic created it will keep you alive there forever. Either way, your life is forfeit if you step into that godsdamn lake.”

“You lie.”

Richard had said that her leaving would be detrimental to him. This was just another ploy to keep her a prisoner.

“I assure you, Princess, I have a lot better things to do than chase after idiotic girls with a death wish and spout fairytales to them. I told you this lake wouldn’t work. I told you I would reach out to North Helm. Why do you insist on throwing your life away?”

His clear blue eyes bore into her and Richard’s strange reaction when she had left him flickered in her mind. The way the lake felt strange. Everything seemed to point to the truth of his words, but she refused to believe them. Home was feet away, and she would be damned if she let this chance escape her. From the hard lines of his face looming above her, she knew she would not get another chance. She brought her knee up, prepared to do what damage she could, but the prince seemed to anticipate her and shifted to the side, her knee barely making contact with his hip.

“Foolish,” he chided. He shifted his body, pulling at her arms till they were both righted.

Wren only had a second to consider her new position when he released her only to sweep her off the ground and haul her over his shoulder. The scream she let loose

was one of loss and one of despair. With each step he took, she could see her freedom furthering from her grasp. Georgie. Home. It was all fading out of reach.

She kicked and screamed, but the man carrying her might as well have been made of stone. He was unmoved by her heart break and when she heard the crackling of torches her screams turned to sobs as realization fell over her. She was never going home.

Chapter 6

The despair that burrowed into Wren's body was one that was all consuming and permanent. There would be no shaking this feeling for as long as she lived. Barely registering the guards that stared open mouthed as their crown prince carried Wren back into the castle, Wren gave up. She let go of the hope she had cradled and nurtured and released it back into the godforsaken world.

The crown prince must have registered her defeat as he slowly lowered her, her feet meeting plush red carpet and her back leaning against stone. Wren closed her eyes as if she could hide from him and this fate which had laid claim to her. Neither of them said anything, only the flickering of the lights that illuminated the long hallway gave off any sound.

"Are you reasonable enough to walk back to your room without trying to run away?"
He broke the silence.

Forcing her eyes open, Wren glared at the prince who watched her as if she were likely to spew venom at any moment. "Do I have any other choice?"

Prince Malaki gave her a smile that was full of malice. "I can carry you there if you insist upon it."

Wren wished she had something to throw at him, but she wouldn't even be granted that luxury. In answer, Wren turned and began walking down the hall that she knew well enough to be the opposite direction of her salvation. Fighting back tears that threatened to break with each errant thought she tucked them away. Prince Malaki was at her side, hands folded behind his back as if this were nothing more than a leisurely evening stroll.

When they made it to her room, the prince opened the door and she fought back the urge to kick him once more. How easily he opened the door to her prison, content to see her locked away once more. She was saved having to see if she would comply with her instinct or not, by blond hair rushing towards her. Barely having enough time to brace herself against the force of the small woman catapulting towards her, Wren sucked in a breath as Sophie collided into her.

“Oh my gods! He got to you in time. Thank the gods. Wren, I'm so sorry. I should have known when Richard was acting so smug and you were saying things that sounded like good bye. I shouldn't have left you!”

Despite the warmth that crept in at the other woman's affection, Wren peeled herself away from Sophie and walked into her rooms. Sophie and the prince shared a silent conversation that ended with a nod from Sophie towards the exit. Curiously, the prince heeded her silent command and shut the door behind him. As much as Wren was grateful to be free of the man, it felt as if the final nail of her coffin was being hammered in.

“I'm sorry, Wren. I can only imagine what Richard said to you, but you can never trust him. He—”

“I don't care, Sophie,” Wren interrupted. “I just want to go to bed.”

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Argument danced in Sophie's eyes and yet her shoulders fell as she helped ready Wren for bed. No words needed to be spoken. What was done was done.

The air was stifling. Wren couldn't find the air she needed to breathe. She quickly realized it was because she was in the lake again, she was drowning again, but this time there was no one to pull her out. Panic clawed at her throat trying to rip a scream from her, but the water only rushed in farther. Suddenly, she heard someone calling to her, pulling at her. She was desperate for air.

"Wren! Oh, gods, Wren. Breathe!" She felt someone thump on her chest, and the air released from her lungs. Her breaths came in quick succession and her lungs ached with each inhalation. Dully, she became aware of Sophie fretting over her, moving her hands all along her in an effort to find what was wrong with her. Wren knew she would not find anything and Sophie knew that, too. What was wrong with her could not be seen.

Soon, her breathing became more orderly and she was able to focus on her surroundings. She was in her room in the castle. Sophie was with her since she had slept on the chaise last night. It was still night, the window in her room showed a moon, bright and full, shining down to cast light in the otherwise dark room. Sophie, satisfied that no external injury had befallen her, relaxed slightly across from her on the bed. The bedding was strewn on the floor and there were pillows scattered along the floor surrounding the bed.

"The lake was a death trap, Wren. After it brought you here, the portal was in the process of closing. What was left was a place in-between your world and ours. It was never going to bring you home," Sophie explained gently.

When Wren remained silent, Sophie left her to her thoughts. Maybe Richard had lied to her, but who was to know what was truth and what was fiction in a place like this when she didn't even understand why she was there. It all felt exhausting and as if the weight of it would crush her. The only thing she knew was that she trusted Sophie. There had been no sense of deceit in Sophie's words, only the understanding of loss. It was enough to undo her.

Sophie returned with a small glass of amber liquid as if it could somehow cure her of the wrongs done to her. Deciding that if she were to be awake, at least she could be warm, Wren moved to sit in front of the fireplace. She realized the fire that Sophie had started earlier was only embers now. She stared at them as they lightly flared to life and dimmed again. Sophie sat next to her, also looking at the embers. Wren absently wondered what they meant to her.

"Make them pay." Sophie's words were quiet, but full of conviction.

Wren turned towards her, tearing her gaze away from the embers. Sophie was looking at her without any of the reservations she had previously shown as a lady's maid.

When Wren didn't answer, Sophie continued. "I know that right now you might not be able to feel the anger that is owed to you, but they deserve to pay for all of it. For bringing you here, for forcing decisions on you that were yours alone to make. They see us as pliable, women can be made to do whatever suits them that day. They made you a princess, to someday be a queen. Make them regret choosing you. Where they sought to use you, show them that women can wield power."

Wren felt the tears slide down her face. She wished she could match Sophie's passion, but the hole in her chest was too large. "Why are you helping me, Sophie?"

"Because I find I can no longer tolerate the tyranny of men, and I see something in you that gives me hope for a better day." Her answer was given like it was a fact,

solid and real.

“Thank you, Sophie. I am glad to call you my friend.” She squeezed the other woman’s hand tighter.

“I hope so, my lady.” Wren laughed at the use of the title after everything that had already happened and been said.

“Sophie, if we are to stand against the tyranny of men together, I believe we should call each other by our names, do you agree?” She tried her best to smile, but knew she fell short.

Sophie smiled brightly. “Yes, Wren, I do.”

Wren looked at her, her features set with determination.

“I believe you will be their own damnation and that their greatest mistake was choosing you.”

Wren smiled with more conviction. “You really are a terrible maid, Sophie.”

With a conspiratorial smile, Sophie moved to the fireplace and relit the embers. They both watched the reborn flames dance with renewed purpose.

Chapter 7

Wren spent the rest of the night and the next day in and out of sleep. Sometimes she was awoken by nightmares, but nothing like the previous night. Sometimes Sophie would be there moving about the room or sitting on the chaise. Sometimes she was nowhere to be found.

Occasionally, Sophie would try to wake her up to eat, but Wren only went back to sleep. Eventually, it seemed sleep was through with her as warm light poured into her room. The door to her room opened slowly, and she turned to see Sophie standing there, carrying a beige dress. When Sophie's eyes fell on Wren sitting up in bed, her eyes flashed with relief.

Sophie brought the dress over to the bed and laid it out. It was very beautiful, albeit a bit plain. The beige was outlined with faint silver swirls running along the outside of the sleeves and gathering in a swirl in the skirts. Wren felt dread looking at the dress knowing that Sophie expected her to leave her rooms. As if she heard her thoughts, Sophie gave her a sad smile.

"The king sent a messenger today, but you were asleep. He requires your attendance at court tonight. He had this dress made for you. The color is rather muted for court fashion."

"I expect I am to be a docile, obedient daughter then," bitterness laced each distasteful word.

Sophie met her gaze, unflinching. A challenge and a pact if Wren was willing to take it. "Yes, I expect so."

"It is a shame that there is too little time to shed expectations." Wren fiddled idly with the silk fabric of the dress.

"Wren." Her name drew her attention. "You are a princess. I think a wardrobe change should not be too difficult to muster." Winking at her, she moved to the door.

Wren was so startled by the action that she felt laughter bubble up in her, and it was not an unwelcome feeling.

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When Sophie returned hours later, it was with a beautiful deep red dress the color of mulled wine. Sophie laid the silk dress down, and Wren could not help but run her fingers along the fabric. The silk felt like a chance to make her own path underneath her fingertips.

“It’s perfect, Sophie.”

Sophie made quick work of her hair, carefully winding two braids into a crown around her head and ending in a tight knot at the nape of her neck. She let two small curls fall forward to rest on either side of her face.

Wren had nearly argued when Sophie put a little paint on her face, but she knew that she was painfully pale and she needed the color. Sophie insisted that she abide by court fashion and wear the corset, but Wren hated the sensation that she could not take a full breath. When Wren inevitably complained, Sophie merely clicked her tongue as if that were all the reproach necessitated.

She eased Wren into the red dress and even Wren could not deny the effect the dress had. The corset accentuated her curves so the dress hugged in at her hips before flowing out into more bountiful skirts. The neckline was straight across causing her bosom to be far more exposed than she would have liked. Sophie had to reassure her that this was the style and that it was not indecent at least three times. The sleeves of the dress were tight to her arms and hugged her wrists as well. Wren stared at herself in the mirror and wondered how a farm girl could turn into this in just two days.

She looked beautiful, she looked regal.

A near gloating smile lit up Sophie's narrow face.

"Red was a good choice, Sophie," whispered Wren.

Chapter 8

Wren's heart fluttered wildly in her chest as she reminded herself to take deep, settling breaths. Even though Sophie walked close to her side, Wren was too distracted to make conversation. The castle seemed entirely different from any of the other times she had glimpsed it. Where it had once seemed cold and despondent, it now seemed more complex.

The farther they got from her rooms and into the main castle, the higher the ceiling became until Wren had to crane her neck all the way back to see them. The ceilings while still made of stone, seemed to crawl up each corner in a unique pattern until it met at the highest point. The main part of the castle had stained glass in some of the hallways while some held the red banner she had previously seen.

Now that her mind was clearer, and it was not so dark, she could see that each banner held a dagger within a circle of roses, set upon a white background. Wren found herself leaning towards Sophie to ask what they meant. Sophie told her they were the symbol of House Blackwood, the royal family. Footsteps behind her had her glancing back to see a single guard trailing them. Regret coursed in her veins as she struggled to process the reason for the change. Whatever false hope she had harbored of going home through the lake seemed to be gone.

Sophie had her turn down another hallway just as big as the rest, and Wren was struck with the thought that she would never be able to find her way back. When they came to a large wooden door Sophie knocked twice.

"Come." The command was given like the voice had never known dissidence.

The door opened and Wren was shocked to see a large room lined with wooden paneling and stained glass surrounding the outside, and an extraordinarily large table in the middle of the room with a large fireplace in the corner. As her eyes made their way around the room, absorbing the beautiful architecture, she realized that it was not an unfamiliar voice that had answered their knock, but Prince Malaki's.

He was sitting in a chair, holding a large book, near the fireplace when they entered, but upon seeing them, stood up. Though Wren felt the magnitude of their last meeting weighing on her, she could not help but notice how well the prince looked in his court clothes. His jacket and trousers were all black, and his hair was more orderly, his black hair nearly reaching his shoulders now that it was combed and styled.

His eyes met hers briefly before he quickly turned his attention to Sophie. "Sophie, are you responsible for this?"

The words were quiet enough that Wren had a sudden fear that Sophie would be punished. Wren answered quickly, "It was my idea, Your Highness."

A hint at surprise flickered before he regained his cold composure. Before Wren could come up with a way to absolve her friend, Sophie said, "I picked out the color, thank you." She then made a mock bow towards the prince, who rolled his eyes, and an unfamiliar smile appeared on his lips. "Yes, yes, I am a terrible maid," Sophie interrupted the prince before he could deliver the familiar admonishment.

"Remind me to have you replaced immediately." Though their relationship had always been strange and different than a servant and her prince, after all she called him by his given name, this was something else. He spared a quick smile for Sophie before turning towards Wren, his face now devoid of the humor he had just shared with Sophie. "Tonight my father will present you to the rest of the court. From what Sophie has told me, I gather you are unfamiliar with such gatherings?"

The words stung as if he were making fun of her humble life, but he merely walked to the table and put down the book with an audible sigh.

“My father will expect you to be agreeable and meek. You would be wise to not disappoint him. Your fashion choices will already fail at such an endeavor.”

He seemed detached when he spoke to her, as if she weren't worth his time. It was not that she expected anything different from him given their previous meetings, but part of her hoped now that she was officially trapped here that he might not be as hostile.

Shame and doubt began to crowd her mind, and she gripped the fabric of her dress to try to ground herself.

The prince seemed to consider her fidgeting before saying, “It is worth it though in this instance. Though as you will come to see my father is not a forgiving man. Make only polite conversations with the members of the court, do not engage in any of their schemes. For all intents and purposes, ours is a love match. You are low born from Crishaven, which is south of us. We met when I was abroad for a short stay to reaffirm our alliance with the King and Queen of Crishaven. We met and instantly fell in love. I would hear nothing of your status and we were married with the king's blessing. You understand?”

“Hardly.” She had not meant to say the word out loud, but all of this was so absurd. None of this made sense from why they had brought her here to why they were fabricating the details of their sham of a wedding. Feeling emboldened by her anger, she went on, “I don't understand why I was brought here in the first place. Why do we have to lie about it? What is the purpose of any of this?”

The prince arched a brow at her. “Do you feel better now?” She made to tell him she most certainly did not when he continued, “You will find it is much more freeing to

recognize that my father's plans are his own and asking questions is futile." The words were casual, as if he were discussing the weather.

"Do you truly have so little dignity? You are content to be a puppet for others? Well, I am not, and I will never be." She felt rage building in her, clawing at her insides, desperate to get out, but her body had trapped it.

"Then you will be very disappointed in your life here. However, that is your decision." He turned away from her and began to walk to the door they had entered through.

"You swore you would help me find a way home." She hated the plea in her voice. He did not deserve to see any weakness in her.

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“Never speak of our agreement to anyone. Never. Do you understand me?” The venom and urgency in his voice silenced her immediately.

She merely nodded.

He took a deep breath. “Now, let us go to our wedding feast, it is not dignified to be late.” He made sure to put emphasis on the dignified, continuing his mocking of her.

She gritted her teeth. Sophie came over to her and gave her a hug and a reassuring smile before passing the prince and giving him a seething glare as she left.

The prince did not seem phased by her departure, and instead merely held out his arm. Suddenly, very conscious that she was alone with him, Wren felt a rising anxiety. Pushing it down, she took a deep breath and went to put her arm in his.

The touch made her feel as if she would be sick right then and there as she remembered the way he had used his body to prevent her escape, but before she had time to dwell on it, they were already moving. He did not bother to speak to her, and she could not have brought herself to speak even if he had. She felt dizzy and dizzy as their steps continued, and as soon as she thought she could not take one more, he suddenly stopped.

“Breathe, Wren.”

Wren realized then that her breaths were coming fast, and yet she could not get any air into her lungs.

The prince released her from his touch and backed away. “Wren. Look at me.”

When she did not, could not look at him, he repeated the command with more force. She finally managed to comply and her panic was momentarily overshadowed by the surprise she felt at the genuine concern in his eyes.

“You need to slow down your breathing. No, do not look away from me. Look in my eyes. Breathe in. Good, now release it.” He continued to stand across from her and take breaths in and out with her.

When her head began to clear, and she felt as though her lungs would not collapse, a sudden wave of weariness came over her.

“Thank you.” she said quietly.

Cerulean eyes ran over her, searching for any sign of the panic that had just gripped her. Seeing nothing, his eyes went back to their usual guarded steel and he turned towards the direction they had been walking. “It was nothing. You will need to learn to control your emotions. Are you able to handle this?”

Whatever gratefulness he had earned from her was gone. She was a fool to think there had ever been actual concern for her in him. He only cared that she present herself as a dutiful bride.

The panic still threatened to build again, but she would do this because she must. She would do it because she needed to know more about where she was and how she could fight it. She nodded and returned to taking his arm.

It turned out their destination was not far from them as they came to another set of large wooden doors with a guard on either side. They bowed in unison when they saw them. The prince did not so much as look at them. They opened the doors and festive

music and revelry filled her ears.

Following the prince's lead, she entered the hall and was not prepared for the sight that befell her. It was the largest room she had ever seen filled with tables that followed the outline of the space creating an open area in the middle of the room. It might have seemed plain if it weren't for the tapestries of white and crimson accented by elaborate stained glass windows lining the walls.

Across from the tables was a dais where an imposing man with salt and pepper hair down to his shoulders loomed above them all. His face was set in a grim line as he seemed to survey the people below him as if they were ants beneath his feet. Next to him was Prince Richard, who was having his glass refilled.

The sight of so many finely dressed people drinking and socializing as if they had no cares was almost as fascinating as everything else about the room. Wren might have been content to spend hours watching them and trying to understand what it must be like to have so little responsibility if it weren't for the music ceasing quickly followed by the voices that had eagerly been raised moments prior. Cold dread crawled over Wren's skin as she felt a chorus of eyes land on her, dissecting her and devouring her all at once.

"My good people of Haradon, I would introduce you to your new princess, Princess Wren of Crishaven." The king's booming voice was like a siren calling out to a ship lost at sea in the dark of night. He stood with his arms wide and inviting with a smile that looked like it had been rehearsed.

The hall erupted in thunderous applause and she became acutely conscious of a different set of eyes on her. Prince Malaki was smiling down at her, but she realized the smile did not meet his eyes.

"It is an honor to finally be able to introduce your new princess to you all. There will

be much time this evening for us to celebrate, but first, let us feast.”

At the prince’s words, the band resumed their music and everyone began talking eagerly amongst themselves. The prince moved to the dais, still holding her arm in his. He might as well have been carrying her leash for the way she blindly followed his lead. They climbed the steps to where the king was standing, holding his arms out to her.

She noticed that as they got closer, he was a considerably large man, taller than either of his sons, and his body spoke of many plentiful years of food and leisure. As they neared him, the prince let go of her. The relief of freedom from his touch short-lived as the king put his arms around her. She barely remembered to return the gesture as her heart beat rapidly, his hot breath seemed to collect on her neck and the sickly scent of too sweet wine met her.

He pulled away from her and smiled at his eldest son, but the words he spoke were cold. “Was this your girl’s doing?”

Wren struggled to understand the question before understanding dawned on her and a chill filled her veins. The prince had warned her that his father was not a man to be trifled with, but she hadn’t understood till she heard the way he seemed to promise retribution in a simple question, his deep voice impregnating each word with intention.

She was about to take the blame as she had previously done when speaking to the prince, but the prince replied just as coldly, “No, Father, I take all the credit for the last-minute wardrobe change. I just couldn’t help but imagine how breathtaking my wife would be in crimson. It would seem I was right, wouldn’t you agree?”

The word he referred to her as, in addition to his quick defense of Sophie, was enough to muddle her mind that she was barely aware of the king assuring his son

that they would continue the conversation later. An arm draped over her shoulders causing her to jump slightly. It was clear she was on edge and needed to center herself. She wasn't gifted the time to even try as Prince Richard leaned his body into hers.

“Sister! Ah, it seems like forever since I last saw you. I must say, you are beautiful in red, but I rather thought you would be more comfortable in wool.”

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She felt her cheeks burn with shame, the words seamlessly finding their mark and reminding her that she did not belong in a world of fine things and leisurely parties. With the biting reminder clarity filled her and she knew this man had not meant her well when he had offered to help her. Still doubt called to her as she considered whether the lake truly had been a trap or if the youngest prince had meant to make a joke of her attempt at escape.

“Richard. Do you not think it’s a bit early in the celebration to be quite so drunk? I will thank you to be careful in the words you speak to my wife.”

Relief had her letting loose a long breath at being saved a response and she might have been grateful to the elder prince if it wasn't clear his rescue was more about the power struggle between the two men.

“Enough. We are showing our people that we are united and happy. Your squabbling is not needed.” With the order given, there was nothing left to do but take their places on the dais.

Prince Richard returned to his spot to the left of the king, slumping slightly almost like he was sulking, which brought a brief flare of victory warming her belly. Prince Malaki held out his arm for her, and she took it, walking towards the right of the king.

The prince pulled out the chair next to his and held her hand as she lowered herself into the chair before taking his own seat. As soon as they sat, servants brought out wine and more plates of food than Wren had seen in her entire life. Everyone at the tables began eating the food that had already been placed on their tables. The noise in the room was abruptly loud enough between the talking and the music that she could

hardly hear herself think.

“You need to eat at least a little, Wren.” His breath was warm on her neck.

She jumped in surprise, having not noticed him leaning over to her. Meeting his gaze and trying to funnel all the irritation she had ever felt she grabbed her cup and drained it dry letting the sweet wine chase away her fear.

He only rolled his eyes at her and went back to his meal. The king and prince talked together, but it was impossible to hear a single word above the noise. Nausea seemed to circle her insides as she looked at the array of roasted meats and fresh boiled vegetables that would have fed her family for a month. The smell of honey and spices filled her, but she knew she wouldn't be able to stomach any of it.

The king stood up after a time and announced the dancing would begin. Continuing to push around the food on her plate with her fork, she was unprepared when Prince Malaki stood up and offered her his hand. Her ears seemed to hum as blood pooled in her face. Surely he did not expect her to dance and certainly not with him. She heard a small laugh from Prince Richard, no doubt enjoying her situation.

Prince Malaki's eyes narrowed as if to tell her that her discomfort was not going to change their plans, and if it weren't for the voice inside her head telling her that she needed him to get home, she might have not taken his hand. He led her to the dance floor where other couples gathered around them. As if they had been waiting for the two of them, the band began playing. The song was a delicate array of violins softly swaying that she might have found beautiful if the prince hadn't placed his heavy hand on her waist and pulled her towards him.

He leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Follow my lead.”

She wanted to protest that she did not know what that meant, but they were already

moving. She struggled to keep up with his feet as they made wide sweeping movements around the floor. The prince would occasionally twirl her, and she would stumble to regain her position, but soon she found she was actually enjoying the movement. A laugh escaped her, and she threw herself into the music.

The music changed and she realized they were doing a coordinated dance that required her to change partners repeatedly. She quickly figured out the steps and lost herself in the music and movement. The tempo seemed to pick up and she breathed heavily, trying to keep up with the pace. Her partner spun her and she found herself suddenly in her husband's arms where she was flush against his chest.

She relished the laughter that left her, feeling lighter than she had since she came to this terrible place.

Malaki's brow furrowed with concern, but seeing she had not gone mad gave her a tentative smile. "It would seem you are a quick learner."

She could not get enough of the warm joy that spread throughout her, finally feeling truly alive. "That was wonderful!"

He studied her for a second before shaking his head and the thought occurred to Wren that she must be losing her mind because she thought she heard a small chuckle leave the stoic prince. Before she could make sense of the strange sound, a servant appeared next to her, offering her more wine which she eagerly took, feeling as if she had not drunk all night. She hardly managed a few sips before the glass was taken from her. Irritation flared in her as she watched Malaki give the glass back to the servant who strode away instantly.

Before she could protest he said, "Too much and you will be drunk, unable to think. Already you are flushed, and the wine is affecting you." He then gestured for a servant who brought her a glass of water.

What must it be like to have every need anticipated? It seemed impossible to imagine a world where people's sole job was to make sure you had everything you needed. Yet, as impossible as it was it seemed she had stumbled into one such world. Despite her irritation at having the prince dictate her actions she was grateful for the water as it quenched her thirst better than the wine had.

As she drank the water, another man made his way to them. He was shorter than Malaki and his blond hair was cut shorter than the other men, falling above his ears. He bowed to them.

"Your Highnesses, I wondered if I might beg the princess for a dance." The man who spoke was short with a mousy appearance.

Malaki's hand tightened on her back, pulling her closer to him. She had not even realized his hand had been resting there. Irritated that he should think to have any claim over her, she smiled at the man and gave him her free hand. Wren handed the water back to Malaki who's blue eyes flared with unspoked irritation.

Fortunately for Wren, their little charade would prevent such a display, so she only smiled sweetly at him before following her new dance partner to the dance floor. They made their way through the people and music with ease, the crowd seeming to part for her.

The music was fast and made for very little time to speak which suited her just fine. When they finally stopped, she was nearly out of breath. Before she could wonder at what to do next, another man was there asking for a dance. She gratefully accepted each time, enjoying the feeling of her feet lifting off the floor and the music all around her.

She had never danced before like this. Cara and Wren had danced as children playing, but this was different. This felt like life itself. Lost in herself, she was surprised when

the music changed to a softer beat. She smiled graciously at her partner, who murmured to her that she was lovely.

Seeing a nearby servant, she moved towards him and thanked him when he offered her some wine from her tray. She drank it greedily, enjoying the liquid and handed it back to the servant.

“You are a magnificent dancer, Princess.”

She turned to see a middle-aged woman in an ornate white and yellow dress looking at her. She bowed to her.

“Please forgive me, I could not give up my first opportunity to greet our new princess. I am Lady Daugherty, my husband was the late Lord Daugherty, may he rest in peace. It is so lovely to have a princess amongst our royal family again.” She placed her arm in Wren’s and leaned in conspiratorially. “Too many men, you know.”

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The smile Wren wore was not forced. “It is good to meet you, Lady Daugherty. Excuse me for saying so, but your hair is the most remarkable color.” Normally, Wren would have felt embarrassed at such a bold statement, but her heart felt light tonight.

In truth, Lady Daugherty’s hair was beautiful, it was a sort of gray silver that Wren had never seen before and unique for one so young.

If Lady Daugherty took offense to her compliment she did not show it. “Thank you, Princess. I must give all the credit to my late husband and my daughter for the fading of my hair. You know it used to be quite red.” She spoke with such fondness that it warmed Wren.

“I think it must be lovelier now than back then, a symbol of a life well lived, though you are still so young.”

Lady Daugherty laughed at that and squeezed her hand fondly.

“That did not take long, Lady Daugherty.” Malaki was beside them in an instant, and though his words seemed irritated, she saw only good humor in his eyes as he looked between them.

Bowing, Lady Daugherty said, “Indeed, I would rather like to keep her to myself, she is quite good company. As you know, that is something to be treasured.” She moved her hand which had been still holding Wren’s and placed it in Malaki’s.

To her surprise, Malaki held her hand briefly before dropping it and moved closer to

her, putting his hand against the small of her back. She nearly laughed at the affectionate gesture, realizing he was putting on quite the show.

Lady Daugherty seemed to be buying into his act, as she smiled warmly between them both. “I will permit you to do your obligatory greetings and introductions, but please return her to me before too long.”

“You know I could never refuse you, Lady Daugherty.” Malaki’s voice was warm and teasing and Wren couldn’t help but feel as if she had found a new version of the prince.

She quickly learned that it was indeed the same prince she had previously known as the affection he had shown Lady Daugherty was quickly replaced by a cool and confident prince with the other guests. He did not leave her side the rest of the evening as she met the people of his court. They all regarded her with deep curiosity, and if they began to ask too many questions, the prince quickly excused them from the conversation and moved to the next guest.

As she continued to mingle, the effects of the wine began to fall away from her and her exhaustion seemed to fall heavy on her shoulders. Greeting what seemed like the millionth guest, she could not hold back the yawn that escaped her. Malaki considered her briefly, but did not reprimand her lack of decorum.

An older man with graying hair bowed before them. “Your Highnesses, I am so pleased to finally be able to speak to you.”

“I regret, Lord Bamberly, that we must retire now. I am quite weary after such a wonderful evening. I hope you understand.” The prince smiled at the gentlemen who quickly agreed that it was absolutely understandable.

Malaki offered her his arm and escorted her out of the hall through the main doors. It

took only seconds after the guards closed the doors for Wren to realize her ears were ringing from the constant music and noise. As they moved away from the hall and away from their guests, Malaki dropped her hand.

He did not say anything to her as they walked down the long hallways that twisted and turned till Wren's head was spinning. She looked behind her, realizing there were no guards following them. So it was just for her the guards had been present; she should have expected that.

The silence was becoming more palpable, and her feet were aching in her heels. She wanted so much to remove them, but continued on. Turning down the next hallway, a chill lit her bones as she realized where he was taking her. She stopped abruptly and the prince took a few more steps before noticing her hesitancy.

"This isn't the way to my room," she said dumbly.

He heaved a sigh as if this was all very taxing on him. "Now that you have been introduced to the court, my father insisted that you be moved to the rooms adjacent to mine as is tradition. There is a door and you will not be bothered by me."

He gestured his arm forward as if to ask her if she was ready to continue. She nodded, eager to be alone even though her heart beat too quickly despite his promise to leave her be. As he had said, the next set of doors were similar and only a few paces from his door. He knocked on the door once.

"You did very well tonight, Wren."

Surprise made her peer up at him, but she found his eyes cold as he faced the door. The door opened and Sophie's eyes darted between them.

"Make sure she drinks water, and have her take one of the medicinal draughts before

bed.” He turned towards his room and disappeared through the doors, leaving Wren to wonder who the prince really was.

Chapter 9

Thenextmorning,Wrencursed the light that came in through her window and wished she had the strength or willpower to get out of the bed to close the curtains. Her head pounded and she put the pillow over her head to shield it from the light.

She heard the lock on the door click and she opened her mouth to curse whoever was disturbing her, but when she popped her head above the blanket, Sophie threw back her head and let out a boisterous laugh. With a dramatic growl, Wren threw a pillow that came up short in hitting its intended target and having given up Wren decided to go back to hiding under her pillow.

“Settling into our role as princess nicely, I see. Good morning, Your Highness.” Sophie gave a mock bow and strode farther into the room as if she owned it.

“The curtains, Sophie. Please,” Wren pleaded.

Sophie only shook her head at her. “Princesses don’t exactly get to lounge in bed all day, Your Highness. You have obligations.”

“I detest you and this whole, ridiculous kingdom.”

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“How you wound me, Highness. Now drink this, it’ll help.” Sophie handed her a vial that was similar to the one she took last night. It tasted bitter, but she choked it down all the same. “And here I was worried you wouldn’t have a good time.”

“Terrible maid,” groaned Wren.

“Well, your terrible maid is now telling you to get out of bed, have breakfast, and get dressed because you have the lovely privilege of attending etiquette lessons today.”

This earned Sophie another groan, but not wanting to be caught off guard by the court again, Wren rolled out of bed. She could already feel the liquid Sophie gave her soothing her head.

With as much breakfast as she could stomach in her, Sophie helped her into a new dress. This one was less grand than the one she had worn last night, but it was still beautiful. If there was one thing she liked about this place, aside from Sophie, it was the dresses. This one was a deep blue silk without any trimming or frill. The neckline was straight across again, but there was sheer muslin fabric on either side of the corners that wrapped around her neck lightly. The sleeves came down to her wrists like the others had.

It was rather simple, but she felt more comfortable in it as if its simplicity was reminiscent of home even though the only thing she had ever worn there had been sturdy wool dresses. The thought of home was like a rock filling her belly. She remembered how close she had been to the lake and how she could feel the magic still there ready to bring her home.

Whether or not the elder prince had been telling the truth about the lake being a trap hardly seemed to matter anymore. It was difficult to see him as anything other than the reason she was still here pretending to be nobility. Sophie did her hair in a way that it laid to the side over her right shoulder, her brown curls falling against the soft fabric of the dress. It was a relief to have some pressure off her head, which was already feeling almost normal.

When she inquired what was in the vial, Sophie told her dismissively that it was just a concoction of herbs and roots. Feeling as ready as she ever would be, she moved to open the door where a guard was standing. Of course. He bowed to her, and as Sophie and Wren left the room, made way to follow them.

Sophie led her to a small parlor where she was pleasantly surprised to find Lady Daugherty waiting for her. Any familiar and friendly face felt like a wish granted. As she entered, Lady Daugherty stood up and went to meet her, dismissing the guard at the same time. “Your Highness, it is a pleasure to see you again.” She gave a small bow and, rising, gave Wren’s hand a small squeeze.

“I must confess I am grateful to see that you will be my tutor, Lady Daugherty.” Wren felt her body relaxing as she had not realized how much anxiety she had on her way here.

Lady Daugherty smiled fondly. “For as long as we can get away with it, anyway. Kai asked if I would be your tutor, and I find myself having a difficult time telling him no.”

“He is different with you than the others,” Wren said as if it weren’t a question.

“Your first lesson is to never say what you are thinking.”

Wren recoiled at the change in the woman’s tone.

“Except with three people. Kai, Sophie, and myself. Someone could have taken what you just said and used it against your husband.” Her tone had taken more of a gentle tone again, but she could see how much Lady Daugherty wanted her to understand by the way her eyes burned into her.

Wren frowned. “But he is the crown prince.”

“That is exactly why they will use it against him. Lesson two is the court is full of people scrambling for power and willing to wield whatever weapon they have to achieve that power. Do you think the Blackwood line has always been our monarchy? The king’s father seized the throne from the previous reigning king and slaughtered his whole family. Their family line is extinct now. Do you understand?”

Wren only nodded, suddenly realizing how little she knew about this world.

Lady Daugherty's eyes softened. “If Kai is seen as weak at all, they will go after him, and they will be merciless. If the king finds his son weak, he will not hesitate to allow them. I know the court seemed glittering and full of splendor last night which is how the king intended it to be. Everything that you see, everything you are allowed, is given at the mercy of the king.”

At her pause, Wren considered everything that had been said. Her position here felt more precarious than ever before. It was one thing to have been kidnapped, but another to know her place here was at another’s mercy.

Grasping blindly at anything, Wren said, “You said you were my tutor for as long as we could get away with it.”

That earned her a pleased smile from the other woman, unexpectedly filling Wren with pride. “Indeed. I am here because Kai asked me to do this without the king’s consent. Likely, he will find out soon enough and put a stop to this, but I will do what

I can.”

“Why would he want to stop you from teaching me?” Lady Daugherty seemed to be a lady of respect amongst the court.

“Because he does not trust me. Kai’s mother, Cordelia, was my sister. She died when Kai was only six and Richard four.” There was a youthfulness to the grief that coated her face as she lost herself in the memory of the deceased queen. “When she died, she asked me to watch over her children and protect them. The king knows I will do this at all costs, even if it means working against him, so he prefers me where he can see me.”

“Why would the king want to hurt his children—his heirs?” Her own father had died when she was young, but when she imagined him she could only ever see him being loving and kind.

“This is what you must never forget. The king will do whatever it takes to preserve his power no matter who is in the way. The survival of his line is important to him, but he has two sons.”

Wren felt horrified at such a statement. The man she had met last night did not seem to be the monster Lady Daugherty described. She didn’t even know if she could trust her own husband, let alone someone he trusted. The only person she truly trusted was Sophie.

The thought of Sophie made her turn, she realized that, at some point, Sophie had snuck off. Wren made a mental note to ask Sophie about her relationship with the prince and Lady Daugherty. She needed the whole picture to be able to survive in this place.

“One last thing I need you to understand before we proceed with your lessons.” Lady

Daugherty's face hardened, all kindness and understanding gone. "If you ever became a danger to my nephew, I will not hesitate to remove you."

Swallowing hard, Wren fought for the right words. The threat was radiating warning throughout her body. Through the wave of fear Wren realized that she did not know if she was a danger to the prince. She did not mean him harm, but she still didn't know what her purpose here was and what plans the king had in store for her. The uncertainty crawled up her body, foreign and unwelcome. She would need to find answers if she had any hope of surviving this.

Chapter 10

The rest of the lessons passed without threats or family histories. Lady Daugherty spent hours teaching her court decorum, proper titles, and the prominent houses within the court. Wren's head was spinning by the time Lady Daugherty finally called for the guard to return and escort Wren to wherever she wished to spend the remainder of her afternoon.

Wren found herself wandering the maze of corridors, appropriately tipping her head in acknowledgment at any of the upper class who bowed and addressed her just as Lady Daugherty had shown her.

Just as she considered asking the guard to help her find her way back to her rooms, the most beautiful sound she had ever heard drifted all alongside her. Her body thrummed at the melody as it seemed to pull at her, suddenly desperate to find the source of the music. Turning down the hall, she came upon an open wall that led out to a garden much like the one she had first met Prince Richard in.

Memories of that meeting and what it led to caused her to hesitate before the pull of the music coaxed her into entering. She pushed forward, moving between the trees and flowering bushes until she came to where a beautiful willow tree rose high above the hedges.

Underneath its leaves sat a blond, curly-haired man on a bench. He had his head down and his eyes closed as he moved a stick alongside a wooden instrument. It was making the most haunting and delicate sounds she had ever heard. The sounds curled within her, finding their place in every part of her soul.

The song was somber, almost mournful, and yet joy cradled deep in her chest. She closed her eyes, not wanting to disturb the musician. She thought of Cara and Georgie. Chasing him around the farm or playing hide and seek even though he always hid in the barn hayloft no matter how many times they found him.

She smiled, remembering snuggling up to Cara on cold nights, giggling and feeling as if nothing would ever change. She thought of her own parents who died young, but who she always imagined loved her more than anything. She thought of her aunt and uncle who worked hard and took care of her even though she was not theirs.

As the music ceased, Wren's eyes opened and she became aware of dampness along her cheeks. The man looked up as if coming out of a daze, his green eyes widened with surprise before he hastily set aside his instrument and bowed deeply. Suddenly aware of how intrusive she had been, Wren turned to leave, her mouth feeling as if it were filled with cotton. Before she had managed a step, she felt the pressure of his hand around hers, a gentle pull urging her to turn.

"I am sorry to have upset you. I did not know you were there. I would not have played it had I known." His voice was deep, but reminiscent of the musical notes he had created.

Turning fully to meet his gaze, she said, "You think I am upset by the sounds you were creating just now? That was the most beautiful thing I have ever heard, and I will never regret it. Please do not apologize."

His eyes were a deep green that reminded her of forests and warm summer days. At her words he smiled a brilliant smile that could likely bring the sun shame. It was difficult not to smile back at him, the transparency in his face. Realizing he was still holding her hand, he hastily let it fall. He shifted awkwardly, neither of them sure of what to say.

“What is that instrument that you were playing, Lord...?” Wren knew he must be someone important by the fine clothes he wore, but past that she couldn’t have said.

“Forgive me, I am Prince Wesley Hallewell, but please call me Wesley.”

Wren stared at him, confusion making her head murky. She was sure she had not heard of a third prince. Seeing her confusion, he laughed. “Oh, I forgot you are not from Haradon. Still, I am surprised you are not familiar with my family in Crishaven. We do have diplomatic ties with your king and queen, but we do not venture there very often.”

Realizing he was rambling on, he cleared his throat. “I am the Prince of North Helm where my father, King Thomas, and my mother, Queen Elizabeth, are the reigning monarchs. I am here at my father’s behest in anticipation of my sister’s arrival.”

She smiled at his willingness to share so much information with her, which was directly contrary to how Lady Daugherty had portrayed the court. Perhaps North Helm was different from Haradon.

“It is an honor to meet you, Prince Wesley,” she said earnestly.

“Wesley,” he quickly corrected her.

“Wesley,” she repeated with a smile. “Please, will you tell me about your instrument? I have never heard anything so beautiful in all my life.”

He smiled eagerly and went to pick up the object in question. “This is called a violin, Princess Wren and—”

“Wren,” she corrected.

He grinned. “Wren. This is a violin created from my father’s best luthier. I never go anywhere without it. If I ever feel lost in a new place or weary, it soothes my soul.”

Wren couldn’t say if it was his honesty or his warm countenance, but she immediately knew she liked this man.

“How do you play it?” Her soul burned with curiosity to understand this violin and how it could create such melodious sounds.

“Ah, yes. That takes a bit of practice, but you move the bow—this stick—along the bridge of the violin—or the strings—in different ways, depending on the note you wish to make.” He demonstrated moving the bow across the bridge of the violin.

She longed so much to touch it and understand everything about it, but resisted the urge. “Would you play it for me again?”

The smile he gave her warmed her from the inside out and made her feel as though she were enough. He went to the bench and gestured for her to sit, a happier tune than his previous melody drifted through the air. It was lilting and full of warm summer days spent by the lake without a care in the world.

She watched him contentedly, noticing how he closed his eyes as he moved through the song, giving himself over to the melody. His chin rested on the corner of the violin while his hand held the long part of it, his other hand moving the bow skillfully. When he stopped, he reopened his eyes and found her staring at him.

Her cheeks flushed, and she struggled to regain her train of thought. “That was incredible.”

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He smiled back at her almost shyly. “I don’t think you would tell me if it was poorly done, even if it was atrocious.”

She shook her head. “Perhaps not, but that does not mean I am dishonest with you now.”

Sitting straighter, his eyes flashed with concern. “I did not mean to imply that you were dishonest, I only meant—”

“Wesley.”

He stopped talking abruptly, but concern still radiated from him.

“I was not offended, I believe I know what you meant.”

A sigh of relief slipped past his lips, the tension falling from his shoulders. She considered him and then considered Lady Daugherty’s words of caution on trusting others. She decided to go with her instinct and trust the kind prince. “Why are you so unlike the others here at court?”

If he was shocked at her frankness, he did not show it. “My parent’s court is much different than here. In North Helm, the Hallewell line has been ruling for over a century. My parents rule differently than how it is done in Haradon.” His voice held longing and she could tell he was homesick. “That is not to say that we do not have issues within our own court and power struggles—” He seemed to consider how best to phrase his thoughts. “I only mean to say that it is different.”

“I can see that.” She studied him, seeing the muscle in his cheeks tighten. “How long have you been away from home?”

“Three months, though it does feel much longer than that.” Sympathy softened his face. “I suspect I am in good company on the homesick front though.”

The willow tree hovering above them seemed to mock her longing. “I miss it very much. This place is so different, everyone is so eager for something from someone else, and no one ever says what they mean.”

“I should think you are used to that being from Crishaven. It is quite similar to Haradon, I am told.”

Wren silently cursed herself for forgetting who she was meant to be. “Of course. It’s only... I am low born, and court maneuverings did not mean much to me.” She hoped the explanation was enough to dissuade him from casting suspicion upon her.

He nodded, but she could see that her lie had not quite been accepted. “How long has it been since you were home?”

Too long. Had they given up looking for her and Cara? The thought was like a knife to the stomach. Images of Cara lying cold in the ground flooded her.

“Princess Wren?” Wesley’s voice was gentle and cautious.

“Hmm?” she asked, before she became aware of the fresh tracks of tears down her face. She had spent so long trying to repress those thoughts and yet with one question she was back sitting next to Cara’s grave.

“I’m sorry,” she said as she wiped her tears hastily. “It’s just—” The truth died on her lips.

“It’s all right. You don’t need to say anything you don’t want to.”

Maybe it was the open honesty in his face or the way he asked nothing of her, but the words poured out of Wren before she had thought it through.

“My best friend died right before I arrived. It was terrible and unexpected.”

Before the words were out the prince had already taken her hand in his, his brow furrowed with genuine concern. “That must be so difficult for you.”

With her free hand she tried to erase the tears that wouldn’t stop now that she had let them out. “She was brave and kind and better than me in every way that matters. It should have been me that died, not her.”

It was a truth she had not yet been brave enough to think out loud and yet it was as real as the sun shining down above them.

“I’ve only known you a small while now and I would risk my life to say that I am sure your friend would disagree with that. If she was as brave and good as you say, I think she would want you to be happy.” His voice was soft, comforting in a way she hadn’t experienced before.

Wren thought of Cara and how she had always pushed her towards finding her own happiness. Everyday hurt without her by Wren’s side and somehow she knew that it would always hurt. This loss was imprinted on her soul, but she always knew that Wesley was right. Cara would want her to find happiness.

The heaviness that clung to Wren like a second skin told her that that day would not come for quite a while. She would grieve her friend and for all the life that was lost to her.

“Thank you,” Wren managed. “I didn’t realize how much I needed to talk about her.”

“It is my privilege and honor that you chose me,” he said, raising his free hand to his heart.

“You are very easy to talk to,” she said.

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“I can see why Prince Malaki was so taken with you. You are very easy to talk to as well and beautiful.”

Wren’s cheeks felt flush and she averted her gaze nervously. She heard the probing question he left unspoken, but was distracted by his kind words. She felt starved for kindness in this place and she reminded herself to be wary of that need.

“Yes, I am very lucky to have been noticed by the prince.” Before he could push for more information she said, “I must be going, I have an appointment with one of the lady’s from court.” The lie felt sour on her tongue, but she stood up and made to leave.

“Princess Wren, I didn't mean to pry.” He looked so remorseful it made Wren smile.

Turning to him, she said. “It’s Wren.” The guard who had been standing at the entrance followed behind her as she left. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought she heard the prince sigh as she left him and his beautiful violin behind.

Chapter 11

The guard took Wren to her rooms since she felt that she had met her requirement for meeting new people for one day. With the sun pouring into the room it compelled her to see what lay outside her prison.

A lush garden filled with flowers of every shape and color. It seemed as if a narrow arch opened up to something else, but she could not quite make out what it was. She ached to explore it, but remembered what her main purpose was in coming back to

her rooms.

Her eyes lingered on a wooden door that she knew was the entrance to Prince Malaki's rooms. Ignoring the anxiety that rose in her she went to the door, cracking it open enough that she could see the guard.

“Excuse me, would you be able to ask my Sophie—I mean, my maid Sophie to come here. I mean, can you send for her?” Wren cursed her own awkwardness, but took the grunt the guard offered as assent.

With nothing to do, but be alone with questions and memories, Wren walked, moving her hand along the beautiful wood-paneled walls until she came across a small bookshelf. She read the titles, not recognizing any of them, but felt thankful for their presence. At least she would have this.

She paused by the door next to the bookshelf that she knew connected her to the prince's rooms. Slowly and quietly, she turned the knob, and sighed with relief when she realized it was locked. Moving back to the sitting room, she sat on one of the chaise lounges that gathered in front of the lit fireplace.

The door to the sitting room opened, and Sophie entered, looking entirely alarming. Her blonde hair was pulled back with a black ribbon. She wore tight breaches that emphasized the shape of her hips and clung to her legs, and a loose yet damp white shirt. Wren realized with alarm that it was sweat that clung to her shirt as her face was dripping and red from obvious exertion. Wren was nearly positive that she had run here.

“What is it—what is wrong?” gasped Sophie.

Wren stared dumbfounded. “What's wrong with me? Sophie, what in hell's bells happened to you?”

Sophie stared at her, deathly serious. “Did you just say hell’s bells?”

Wren shuffled her feet. “Yes.”

Sophie doubled over laughing. Wren felt uncomfortable that it was at her expense, but merely put her hand on her waist and stared down at the small, strangely dressed woman.

When Sophie showed no sign of ceasing her merry jaunt, Wren cleared her throat. “Are you quite done?”

Sophie waved her hand out at Wren while the other clutched her stomach. “Almost. Oh gods, I can’t.”

Wren’s irritation was hard to maintain at her friend’s happy laughs, so she moved to the table and lowered herself into the chair with as much dignity as she could muster. Sophie, finally regaining composure came to sit across from her, tears streaming down her face.

Wren gaped at her. “Why are you dressed like that, and what have you been doing?”

Sophie shrugged. “Training.”

“Sophie, I need to know why you look like this, what training you have been doing, and why Prince Malaki and Lady Daugherty trust you. I need to know, Sophie.”

Sophie sighed and leaned back in her chair. “I look like this because I have been running sword drills with Kai. Kai trusts me because I am his friend—only friend, at that. I suppose Lady Daugherty trusts me because she’s my mother.”

“Pardon me?” Wren could not process the words she had just heard.

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Wren, I don’t think you need me to repeat it.”

“Why are you a maid?” Wren nearly shouted the words.

Sophie shrugged noncommittally. “Kai asked for a favor. Also I am not a maid, I’m your maid. See the difference?”

“But you’re a lady!” breathed out Wren, unable to wrap her mind around the revelations.

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“It’s unfortunate, but yes, I have been called such.” Sophie sighed, clearly bored with the conversation.

“Why did you let me think you were a maid, why did you insist on calling me my lady?” Wren felt a little betrayed under all the confusion. Sophie was who she had trusted most and she had deceived her.

“I wanted to really throw myself into the part, and you needed someone you could trust. Would you have trusted Lady Sophie?” She said as if it was distasteful.

Wren shook her head. “I would have trusted you because you are who you are, Sophie. Was that all an act as well?”

Sophie’s face hardened. “I have never been anything but myself with you, except the maid part.”

Wren smiled. “No wonder you were such a terrible maid.”

The tension broke from Sophie’s face and she gave a small chuckle. “I was set up for failure. Poorly qualified and all.”

“This is why you always acted so forward with Malaki. This explains a great deal,” mused Wren.

Sophie grinned. “You called him, Malaki.”

She hadn’t realized she had been so informal. She wondered at her misstep, but

hurriedly changed the subject. “Doesn’t your mother mind that you dress up like a man, play with swords, and pretend to be a maid?”

Sophie tilted her head. “You have met my mother. She feels differently about the role of a woman. She does not believe I need to drink tea, sew, or gossip to have worth and I am grateful for it. Of course, I grew up in the court, and I take part in the required events.” She sighed. “Listen, Wren, Kai and my mothers were sisters. Kai’s my cousin, and we have been inseparable from birth.

“When I was old enough that playing with boys was unacceptable, my mother insisted that I would be allowed to maintain training with Kai. The king agreed. I don’t think he cared one way or another. So when Kai found out that they had taken you, and that you were being forced to marry him, he asked me to look after you. Being your maid seemed like the best option.

“He sent away your assigned maids and paid them to not immediately make it known. It’s well enough that you found out now, we were going to have to give it up soon before the king figured it out. We have been feeding them information about you to give to him, but he will soon wonder why it’s nothing of merit and send new more reliable maids.”

Wren put her hand over her mouth trying to process it all. Everything made more sense now, but then nothing made sense at the same time. The only thing she could think to ask was. “How can you stand to be friends with him?”

Sophie grimaced as if hurt. “Wren, there is something you need to know about Kai. I know he can be difficult. He hasn’t known love outside of my mother and I and that could never be enough.” She paused suddenly, tilting her head to the side. A small smile played on her lips when she continued. “Kai is a good man. He may not think he is, but he is so much more than the mask he insists on wearing.”

The door opened and Malaki stood there, flushed and expressionless.

“Eavesdropping is illegal, Prince Malaki,” sang Sophie.

He sent her a warning glare and turned to Wren. “I only came to make sure nothing was amiss after that maid came in blathering for Sophie as if she were an idiot. I see everything is fine. I will see myself out.”

Sophie rolled her eyes and Wren could only stare, not knowing what to say and wondering how much he had heard.

Before he went through the door, he paused, not bothering to turn around. “Wren, I indulge Sophie and let her hold onto her fantasy of my worth, but it is not a mask that I wear. You should not listen to her nonsense.” He left and shut the door without waiting for a response.

Sophie put her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands, groaning in frustration. Wren heard mutters of “idiot” and an alarming amount of violent suggestions on what to do with the prince.

Finally she put her arm down and said, “I’ll kill him, that’s the only thing left to do.” Wren must have looked concerned since Sophie burst out in laughter, and Wren realized it was a jest.

Sophie stood up and rested her hand on Wren’s shoulder. “I will forgo killing your husband for now because you are my friend, but I do fear I must leave you to have some words with him.”

Sophie squeezed her shoulder and smiled down at her before leaving to follow the prince.

Of all the things that had happened since she arrived in this place, this whole exchange might have been the oddest.

That night, Sophie never came back and in her place two new young women came to attend to her. She told them she was fine, but they insisted on getting her ready for bed and tending to the fire. Despite having spent the rest of her day in her rooms in order to try to process the conversation with Sophie, Wren still felt at a loss. Worse was the feeling of guilt that crept in as she thought of Cara and wondered if her newfound friendship was somehow a stain on her memory. Even as logic told her that Cara would want her to be happy, she couldn't escape the feeling that she had betrayed her lost friend.

Chapter 12

A week passed, blissfully quiet. Wren attended her lessons with Lady Daugherty and spent the evenings with Sophie playing cards or just talking, which usually ended in fits of laughter. Sophie knew wonderful stories of all the pompous members of court, and whenever Wren relayed an embarrassing conversation with one, Sophie would make her laugh by sharing an unflattering story of the person concerned and while the feelings of guilt and shame for Cara still found her, it seemed to be less often.

She only saw Malaki at court affairs such as dinners where she held onto his arm and played the part of a dutiful wife. She thought more of what he had said that day about his mask, but she could not make sense of the glimpses of the man Sophie insisted was there. The man who had soothed her through her panic and who had apparently sought justice for Cara. The man who had asked his cousin and friend to stay with her. Who asked his aunt to give her lessons so that she might have a chance at success here.

If she thought about these things too long, she remembered that all of them benefited him. He needed her to be able to maintain this charade so as not to reflect poorly on

him. None of it was done out of concern for her as was evident by the way he spoke to her and treated her.

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Wren was disturbed from her endless train of thought as she lay in bed by the sun shifting just enough that it shone in her eyes. Shielding her eyes, she became aware of the path outside of her window, and how she had yet to see where it led.

A jolt of excitement ran through her as she realized today she could finally do so as Lady Daugherty had other engagements. Removing herself from the bed, excitement coursed through her as she moved to pull one of her dresses from the wardrobe. A simple green silk dress that would allow her the movement to explore whatever lay outside her prison walls. She smiled thinking how much Georgie would love to explore the massive castle.

Wren dropped the dress with a gasp. She had forgotten.

Somehow she had forgotten how much she wanted to go home. Today was the first time she had woken up and not felt like she was in a strange place. She had felt comfortable upon awakening instead of the panic she usually felt of nightmares and waking up in a castle. Nausea built in her as she donned the green dress with renewed purpose.

She couldn't afford to become complacent when she knew her aunt, uncle, and Georgie were worried for her. When Cara's mother needed to know what happened to her daughter. They needed her to find a way home.

When Wren was satisfied that she was put together well enough that she might be taken seriously, she opened the door, finding a familiar guard standing there. She requested to know where Prince Malaki was, but he informed her that he had no way of knowing.

Stamping down her annoyance, she walked from the room without another word, knowing he would follow. Knowing someone always followed. How could she have ever felt comfortable here when there was always someone watching her?

It only took a few inquiries to determine the prince was in a council meeting. When she turned to her guard, he nodded before taking her in that direction. He brought her to a room with a large wooden door that had a guard on either side of it. Wren made to open the door, but one of the guards put out his arm.

Wren gritted her teeth in annoyance. No matter how much she attempted to persuade the guard, he merely told her no one was permitted entry during council meetings. Resigning herself to having to wait for the doors to open, Wren propped herself against the adjacent wall, not caring whether Lady Daugherty would deem it improper or not.

Wren's resolution to wait wavered only briefly as she reminded herself that there was nothing more important than finding a way home. She would wait all day if it meant doing anything proactive to find a way back to her family.

Two hours passed and Wren's commitment fractured enough that she pushed away from the wall and began pacing so that she would not give up and go back to her rooms. The creak of a door accompanied by voices had her whirling around, her dress twirling behind her.

A few of the cabinet members passed her strange glances before giving her small bows and murmured greetings. It occurred to her that she likely appeared strange having just been pacing. An ache in her hands pulled her attention and she saw that they were red from where she had been nervously rubbing them together. She only prayed she didn't seem as disheveled as she felt or else she knew she would lose ground with the prince.

When no one else came through the door, Wren took a deep breath, determined to enter and get the answers she needed. Wren couldn't stifle her small gasp as she rounded the corner and came face to face with Wesley, who easily recovered from his own surprise to smile brightly at her.

"Wren, how wonderful to see you. I was beginning to wonder where they had locked you away at," he said as if she had not nearly accosted him.

Wren's heart raced, but she willed her nerves to quiet enough to prevent her from seeming like a fool. She forced a smile. "No doubt you were just about to attempt a daring rescue."

Wesley feigned shock. "It was to be done tonight. Who gave me away?"

The sound of their laughter filled the hall, and Wren's nerves instantly gave way the comfort of easy conversation. The Prince of North Helm had such an easy-going manner about him that it felt almost safe to be near him. She didn't have to worry about making a blunder of her lack of etiquette or court knowledge. She couldn't help but wonder at how different things would be for her if this was the prince she was forced to marry.

"Well, this is a sight to see. Sister, are you here to see my dear brother, or have you come for Prince Wesley's company?" Richard's deep voice broke her from the dangerous thoughts and she might've been grateful if it hadn't been for the insinuation in his words. Almost as if she had let her guard down too much and he had seen her thoughts.

The anxiety she felt was quickly replaced by irritation and the sight of the younger prince's gloating smile. She only had to endure him at dinners, and even then his company was short-lived, as he usually roamed among the court following meals.

She opened her mouth to answer the probing question, but as her eyes met Wesley's, he gave her a knowing smile. "If only I were so lucky, but no, I fear the princess is only indulging a foreign dignitary with niceties."

Wren gave him a grateful nod as she felt her chest lighten.

Richard looked between them before settling on Wesley. "Of course. My sister is settling into her new role quite nicely, don't you think, Wesley?"

The tone Richard adopted with Wesley was different than with others. He seemed more respectful as if he were deferring to the other prince. It was an observation she would keep close to her. Whether it was because of Richard's relationship with Wesley's sister or something else didn't matter. It was information she didn't have before.

Wesley seemed entirely unfazed. "Indeed, I have heard nothing but glowing accounts from the court."

Wren's heart leapt at the unexpected compliment. She turned her face away as she felt it heat suddenly fighting the urge to scream at her own foolishness. Was she so starved for kindness outside of Sophie that she would jump at every polite conversation?

Before Wren could manage to think of a response, a familiar dark form came through the door. His blue eyes landed on her first, widening only briefly before he recovered and took in the other two men standing in front of the room.

His surprise was quickly replaced by cool arrogance as he fixed his stare on her. "Why are you here?"

Irritation flooded her, but his words left her feeling like she didn't belong. She

refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing he had cowed her. She straightened her shoulders as she returned his glare with what she hoped was an equally unmoving glare. “I needed to speak with you and it could not wait.”

He scoffed. “That seems unlikely.”

Wren bristled at the dismissal in his voice.

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“Forgive my brother, Wren. He’s only bitter because father rejected his proposal today.” Richard narrowed his eyes at his brother as if he were reminding him that they were meant to be in love when in front of others. A foreign prince likely required that duplicity and certainly when it was his sister Richard was meant to marry.

If Wesley noticed the tension between them, he made no sign of it. “For what it is worth, Malaki, I thought your proposal very admirable.”

Malaki turned his gaze from her to the other prince, and Wren felt a wave of relief at the release of his cold eyes on her. “Thank you.” His words were clipped and she wondered if anyone was immune to his disdain.

Wesley seemed unmoved by the lack of warmth from Malaki and smiled warmly at her, “It was wonderful to see you again, Wren.”

Malaki stiffened at the use of her name and she wondered if the informality was a breach of some kind. She smiled back at Wesley, ignoring Malaki. “You as well, Wesley. I hope I may listen to you play your violin sometime soon.”

He gave an enthusiastic, “Of course!” and then nodded to the other two princes before setting off.

Forcing herself to focus on the other two men, she was met with anger in Malaki’s eyes. If he was mad that she had made a friend in such a cold place, she was not sorry. Despite his attempts to surround her with only his choice of company, she did have some independence and she wouldn’t allow his temper to take that away from

her.

Richard smiled as if someone had said something delightful. “As much as I would love to stay, I have training with Gray. How unfortunate for me.” As he walked away, she heard him chuckling.

Wren could not see anything remotely funny about the situation to warrant the reaction unless he was taking pleasure in how much they could not stand each other’s presence. She very much regretted coming here, as she could see Malaki was in no mood for demands.

He only raised a brow at her, some of the anger fading behind his eyes, but he did not speak.

“I need to speak to you about what you promised—” She was cut off as he forcefully grabbed her arm and pulled her down the opposite hallway the other two men had gone.

He did not loosen his grip on her until he had practically shoved her into an alcove she hadn’t even known existed. Wren realized, with sudden alarm, that they were standing very close together in the small space.

“Wren. You cannot just say whatever you like wherever you like. Do you not think the walls are listening to you?” Malaki’s voice was a series of rushed words of reprimand.

Despite the warning in his words she tilted her head. “If I am being honest, that actually sounds quite paranoid.”

“Gods help me, you have been too long alone with Sophie.” His words were heated, but his expression held none of it. If she hadn’t known any better she might have

thought that she had amused him.

A smile fought its way onto her face against her will as she realized that she had, indeed, sounded like Sophie.

Malaki seemed to relax a fraction. “I have written to the North Helm sorcerer, but it is a delicate matter. I cannot have anyone finding out, especially my father or the Bishop. They will know at once what it is I seek.”

Wren felt a jolt of hope at knowing there was already a letter in route. “How long do you expect till you have a reply?” She knew she should have attempted to conceal the eagerness in her voice, but she was too hopeful.

Malaki pinched the bridge of his nose and made a small sound of annoyance which quickly deteriorated her good mood. “You don’t understand. I could not state my intentions in the letter I sent, and it will take some correspondence to determine if it is even safe. North Helm is a month-long journey from here.”

She only stared at him, her mind unwilling to calculate what he was saying. Her lungs felt as if someone had taken all the air from them.

Even worse, Malaki was looking at her with obvious pity. “It will be months, if not years before we can even attempt it, Wren. I thought you understood this.”

Wren had to remind herself to take a breath as her eyes stung. Needing to grasp onto something, anything to fight back the tears that threatened to overflow, she held onto the anger that coiled in the pit of her stomach. “Because you tell me so much? Because you are such an open book? You tell me nothing and what you want me to know you send your aunt or your cousin to tell me. You don’t even have the decency to speak to me except when you must.” Wren was grateful for the venom in her voice that served to cover up her desperation.

Some emotion she could not read briefly passed over his face before he said quietly, “I did not think you would relish my company.”

Wren sighed. He was right that his very presence made her anxious and the nausea when he was too close was unwelcome. “I deserve to know what is happening. If this is to be my life for—” She could not bring herself to say it out loud. “You need to communicate with me. You cannot leave me in the dark.”

Malaki looked to be fighting a silent battle in his mind before he sighed wearily, running a hand over the top of his head which held a tight black knot. Instead of the stinging retort she expected, he only said, “I’ll try.” His voice sounded as if he was choking on the words.

“Thank you,” responded Wren, her voice barely a whisper.

Malaki only stared at her longer, his expression unreadable. He seemed to be studying her as if she were a puzzle he were trying to solve.

With their conflict resolved, Wren became aware of the tiny space they were cramped in. She shifted uncomfortably and Malaki shifted as if realizing the same thing.

“Did you have plans for today, outside of accosting me outside the council room?” His voice held no real heat in the words and Wren nearly gaped at the unexpected question.

“I did not.” She wanted to complain about how she had very little to occupy her days, but did not want to seem more petulant than her response already did.

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“May I show you something you might enjoy?” Wren hesitated, unsure about him, and unsure what he would think she would enjoy. Her mind roared with questions and uncertainty.

She wanted to tell him that he didn’t know her and he barely spoke to her so how could he possibly know what she enjoyed, but then she remembered she had just asked him to be honest and if this was his attempt to make peace then she would be wise to accept it.

She knew so little about the person he was and what was important to him. If she was asking him to communicate with her, then she needed to put in some effort as well. Wren forced her eyes to his as she asked, “What was your proposal?”

Malaki’s eyes flashed with surprise at the question before he blew out a breath as if the question caused him great annoyance. He looked like he wished he could escape answering the question, but he too seemed to recall their truce. “A decrease in taxes.”

“Very illuminating, Your Highness.” Wren thought she saw a small smile pass over his face, but it was gone just as quickly.

“I proposed a plan to lower taxes on the villages in our lands and increase the taxes on the noble houses. I also proposed taxing the temples, which was apparently the worst thing one could suggest.” His words were sarcastic, but she could see the anger in his face.

“Why would you propose that?” Wren knew very little about taxes or politics, but did not want to seem ignorant in front of the prince. Still she did know that taxes being

increased was something her Uncle had often talked about angrily.

Malaki's face was impassive as always before stating coolly. "You do not have to feign interest."

Wren felt a flush of anger at his assumption. "I asked you because I wanted to know. I feel no obligation to converse with you."

Malaki's lips quirked upward, and Wren felt a strange sense of satisfaction at the response. "Thank you for clarifying your position, Princess." His voice was lighter than it had been before.

Despite his amusement, Wren chastised herself for being so hostile when they were clearly trying to reach some sort of peace. Before she could be too angry at herself she remembered that she did not owe him or anyone here false politeness. "I only meant to say, if I ask you a question, it is because I wish to know the answer."

He shrugged one shoulder, as if acknowledging the validity of her response. "If I agree to tell you, will you agree to let me show you something?"

Wren had forgotten the previous request. Not having a good reason to deny him, she agreed, and Malaki gestured for her to step from the alcove. He followed behind her and they fell into step easily. "The people of this kingdom struggle to feed their children and maintain a home while we and the rest of the court delight in this massive castle and enjoy many other estates. If we expected less of those who have less to give and more from those who have more to give, the kingdom might thrive more."

"I fail to see how that makes anything other than logical sense." Wren could not understand why anyone would disagree, but then she knew enough of the world to know that people were often greedy.

“Yes, but logic is not the wealthy’s concern. Their concern lies only in maintaining their wealth and even growing it. My plan would put a damper on that for them, though not to a significant degree. All the same, it was denied.” He said the words as if they were of no consequence to him, but she could sense the frustration he tried to hide.

“Someday you will be king and you can do what you like.” Even though they continued to walk, she could see him tense at her words.

“Nothing is certain in this kingdom.” He stopped walking then, bringing her to a sudden halt. “Wren, you need to understand that I may be the crown prince and you may be tied to me, but there are no guarantees for the future.”

Wren felt strangely hurt by his words. Did he mean to say that he was already looking to replace her? Of course, she knew that he did not care for her, and she was a burden thrust upon him. Anxiety began to rack her as she wondered if he was able to put her to the side would her death sentence still take effect, or if not, how would she live? She had gotten comfortable in Sophie’s friendship, in her familiarity with the castle, but this was not her home and she truly had no home. No family to fall back on. She was entirely alone.

Malaki tilted his head slightly as he watched her a moment before walking forward again. Then just as suddenly stopped. “What were you thinking? Just now when I told you there are no guarantees for the future.”

“It does not matter.” Wren didn’t know what she would say, but the truth seemed a very poor place to start.

“It does matter. I would know if you would tell me.” His words were almost gentle, coaxing. His eyes were piercing causing her to shift, suddenly uncomfortable.

She paused for a while searching for an answer. After what seemed an eternity, she decided to tell part of the truth. “I only hope that we can find a way to send me home soon.”

He continued to stare at her like he knew there was more to it than that, but he did not ask. Instead, he only continued to walk.

Wren picked up her pace to catch up, grateful to have his piercing eyes off of her. They spent the rest of the short walk in silence before coming to a wooden door the prince casually opened, not bothering to knock.

When they walked in, Wren could see a room full of instruments and portraits. Each portrait contained a picture of someone holding some sort of instrument. In the corner, two men were speaking to each other and abruptly stopped, seeing who entered the space. They quickly came over, bowing and giving pleasantries.

“Borno, I thought Princess Wren might enjoy the music chamber and that you might give her anything she requires.” The prince seemed to relax with the older man.

“Of course, Your Highness. It would be my great honor. My son, Hector, and I will be happy to assist in whatever way we can.” Borno did seem rather eager. “I have noticed that Your Highness is very fond of music.”

Wren felt startled by the white-haired man’s assessment before she realized he was likely in charge of the musicians at dinner each night. It was not a secret that Wren enjoyed dancing, and in fact, she knew people talked of it.

“Is it your music that I hear each night in the hall?” she asked.

Borno nodded and smiled, causing the many lines in his face to melt together until where they began and ended were indiscernible. “Yes, Your Highness.”

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“Well, then I must thank you for such wonderful music. Hearing it is often the best part of my day.” Wren was surprised at the honesty spilling from her.

“It seems as if you two will get along just fine. I will leave her in your capable hands, Borno,” said Malaki matter-of-factly.

Wren turned to him, suddenly alarmed. “You are leaving?”

He looked at her, a glimpse of uncertainty in his otherwise confident face. She could see what he could not say out loud. He thought to do her a kindness by leaving her, knowing how his very presence made her feel ill.

Strangely, Wren noted that she had not felt sick in their walk over here. She also knew that with Borno and Hector watching, she could not say anything that would give away the truth of their relationship.

Seeing something in her expression, a flash of disappointment crossed his face. “I have some things to see to. Should you need anything, I will send a guard to wait outside for you.”

Wren scoffed inwardly at that statement. A guard to watch her, not to aid her. Still it would seem there was nothing else to delay his departure so she merely nodded. He seemed about to say something, but instead turned to leave.

Before his tall form could make it more than a step, Borno called out, “Actually, Prince Malaki, if you had some time, Hector and I have just finished a composition. It would mean a great deal if you might hear it before we debut it at tonight’s dinner.”

Malaki turned smoothly and narrowed his eyes at Borno. Even Wren was taken aback by the abrupt request given that Malaki had just announced his departure. She was even more surprised by the fact that he nodded slightly in agreement.

Borno's face lit up in a smile, making his dark eyes nearly disappear. He mumbled something to his son who could not have been more than sixteen causing him to jump and gather two chairs. Wren accepted the chair and settled herself into it, smoothing her green dress nervously.

When she and Malaki were both seated, Borno took up positions in front of them. She was surprised to see Borno take out the same instrument Wesley had played and her heart leapt at the thought of hearing its haunting notes once more. Hector pulled out an instrument that had a small wheel on the end, but also a series of keys on the side of it.

"Of course, there will be more of us playing tonight, but you will get the idea of it with just the two of us." Borno smiled reassuringly.

Borno nodded to his son and they picked up the tune. Wren watched as they meticulously worked their instruments to coax beautiful sounds from them. Borno's violin was just as beautiful as she remembered Wesley's to be. They plucked at the strings and pressed the keys of their instruments until their notes blended with each other, and when not in sync with each other, built off each other to create a succinct and beautiful chorus.

Wren closed her eyes, feeling the music wash over her and grow into something strong and firm at the pit of her stomach. Her feet twitched and she knew what the ache in her bones was for. She opened her eyes and was surprised to find Malaki studying her openly.

She felt her cheeks flush, but the call of the music was something she realized she

would never be able to ignore. She stood up and held out her hand to him. There was surprise written in his narrow face for a brief moment, but he recovered quickly and took her hand, standing smoothly. She took a steadying breath and offered her other arm.

His lips quirked as his hand landed on the small of her back so that she could place her hand on his arm. She noticed he maintained a few inches between them as he always was careful to do so. She raised her brows at him as he stood motionless, and he huffed out a small laugh. Then he was moving, giving her body what it craved at the first sound of music.

By now, they had learned each other's movements after so many nights of dinners and obligatory dances. As much as they failed to connect, their bodies knew how to dance together, anticipating each step of the foot, each glide, each twirl.

Borno's music filled the room and soon they were moving faster in response. Wren's breath was coming fast with effort, but her heart raced with a different sort of exhilaration. The music collected in her soul just as it rose in the notes from the instruments.

She closed her eyes, knowing her body would follow Malaki's as he led her across the stone floor. She wanted to be part of the music to know what it was like to be infinite. Malaki spun her and she opened her eyes, surprised at the unexpected movement.

When she twirled back into his arms, she was laughing at the way her body thrummed with the pleasure of the dance. The music that had built upon itself slowly took away each block until it was falling down, causing their performance to slow in response.

Wren closed her eyes once more, knowing the beautiful sounds were about to fade,

but wanting to savor each note that remained. When Borno's last string plucked, Wren and Malaki came to a halt, and she breathed heavily from both exertion and happiness.

Wren opened her eyes and was surprised to see Malaki peering down at her, his blue eyes alight with something she couldn't say. As her chest heaved, she realized the distance he was always so careful to maintain had faded into nothing.

Wren stepped away from him, and she saw his jaw tense as if he had noticed his mistake as well. Wren tucked errant hair behind her ears and took a deep breath turning to Borno and Hector. Needing to focus on anything other than the prince.

"That was beautiful, Borno. And you as well, Hector." Wren's words were breathless, but she hoped they understood the very real gratitude she felt towards them. Borno bowed low to her as if to say that he was also grateful.

"Thank you, Borno," said Malaki from behind her, and she felt more than saw him turn to leave. Wren whirled around to his tall, dark form leaving.

Wren turned back to Borno and Hector and smiled. "Thank you so much, both of you. I apologize." She hastily left after Malaki, who had already left the music room. She had to pull up her dress to run after him, and, as if he heard her coming, he stopped suddenly.

A familiar anger rose in her. "Are you incapable of being polite?" She shot the words at his back.

He did not bother to turn around and face her. "I did not want to inconvenience you by forcing my presence on you."

Wren wasn't sure what she had expected him to say, but that certainly had not been it.

She fought for the words to respond and managed to breathe out, “I asked you to dance.”

He spun around then, hearing the anger in her voice. They agreed to try to communicate, to be something other than cool disdain and conflict, but he always had to be difficult in some way. “I didn’t recall asking for your pity,” he said coldly.

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Wren stared at him as if he had gone mad. He thought she asked him to dance because she pitied him? Where had he gathered that? She had asked him to dance because it had felt right. Why did he insist on ruining everything at every turn? Wren let her rage boil and grow. If he would be difficult then she would protect herself.

“Well, you have it. What will you do with it?” she spat out, even as she felt her eyes sting.

“Nothing,” he said, a chill in the air around the word. She was left standing there, suddenly wishing she had something to throw at him. Instead, she passed through the halls easily until she found herself in her room, slamming the door behind her.

Chapter 13

That night, Wren dreamed of her parents. She dreamt of them living in their home that sat between two mountains. Wren remembered what the mountain air felt like on her face as she stood out on their balcony. Her father and mother were sitting at a table having lunch together. Her father said the world was big, but she didn't care. All she needed were her parents.

They were so happy here. Wren ran laughing towards her parents to tell them about the funny story she thought of about a bird and a snowflake when all of the sudden her parents' heads turned towards where their front door faced. The creases on their faces spoke of a worry she had never seen in them before.

Mother and Father were never worried and certainly no one ever came to visit them except for Uncle. A visit from Uncle was a happy time though and would not upset

them so. Her parents met each other's eyes as if having a silent conversation before her mother suddenly picked her up, clutching her tightly to her body. Her father came and laid a kiss upon both their heads and went to the door.

Wren couldn't see who was at the door from where her mother held her to her, but then she recognized Uncle's muffled voice. The door closed and father came back with eyes rimmed with silver. Wren reached for him wanting to make it better, but then her mother only clutched her tighter and started crying and saying no over and over. Father put his arms around Mother and her and whispered to them, "It is not forever, she will be safe, my love."

Her mother sobbed into his arms. "You don't know that. You can't know that. We can protect her here better than anyone else can."

"Darling, you know that isn't true. You knew this day would come." Her father's words were gentle, but there was resolve laced within. "Please, Ella, don't make this harder than it needs to be."

Betrayal shone in her mother's violet eyes. "How can you say that? How can you do this?"

Tears slid down her father's eyes and he went to pull Wren from her mother's arms. Her mother was fighting, trying to hold her, and Wren began to cry, unsure of all the emotions and change in her parent's usual grace. When her father finally succeeded in taking her, her mother fell to the ground sobbing. Her father held her close and whispered to her, "It is all right, my little bird. You must fly now, but we will see you again. We love you so much."

She told her father she did not understand, but then he was at the door and Uncle was there and wearing strange clothes. When she went to ask why, her father only kissed her and handed her to Uncle. It was then that Wren realized he was taking her away

forever.

She didn't know how she knew, but she did, and as she heard her mother's sobs and saw her father's tears, she tried to fight. She tried to go back to them. Uncle's arms were tight and she couldn't get away. She kicked and screamed, but they only walked farther until everything was a blur and she couldn't remember the rest.

Wren woke up to someone shouting at her, someone grabbing her shoulders. She suddenly sat straight up, a deep hoarseness lined her throat. She remembered her mother and her father, except they weren't as she remembered. They hadn't lived in a beautiful home in the mountains, they had lived in the village. Panic gripped her and she found she couldn't breathe.

"Wren, it is only a dream. Wren, you need to breathe." The words, decisive and sure, jolted her to reality. She knew that voice.

She turned her head and saw Malaki kneeling beside her in the bed, concern written all over his beautiful face. Suddenly registering that he was here with her in her bed, a different kind of panic flooded her, and she jumped away from him, somehow managing to climb out of the bed. He immediately got off from the other side and put out his hands to her as if she were a wild animal in need of soothing.

"It's all right, Wren. You were having a nightmare." He spoke quietly, his voice a deathly whisper.

Wren breathed, her chest heaving. "How did you get in here?" she rasped.

Malaki only pointed to the door that adjoined their rooms. The door that had been locked. The door he obviously had the key for. Why had she not realized that would be the case, that she could never be safe here?

She couldn't stand to have him near her, in the same room as her. Her stomach rolled and she felt out of control. She couldn't get enough air, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't do any of this.

"Get out," she sobbed.

"Wren, I am not going to leave you like this, you need to calm down." He said the words as if he was concerned, but they held all the arrogance of a prince used to getting what he wanted.

"Calm down? You stole me and took everything from me!" She felt panic and rage fight for space within her. Needing to be alone and desperately fighting for control, she didn't even consider an alternative as the vase of flowers on her nightstand went flying towards him. "Get out!" she screamed.

Shock was written all over his face. He likely had never been spoken to in such a manner, but all she knew was she needed him gone. Recovering, Malaki nodded and backed away from her slowly, not taking his eyes off of her. The farther away he got, the more she felt she could breathe, and when he was gone and the door shut, she gasped, begging air into her lungs.

The panic filled her, but it was different. Beginning to cover itself in grief as she lay on the floor, holding her knees to her chest and sobbed.

That was how Sophie found her a short time later as she burst through the door Malaki had left through. She saw him standing at the door looking at her and she felt the panic rise. Sophie saw where her eyes went and she turned sharply to the door.

"Close the door, Kai." When he didn't immediately do as she said and only stared at Wren, Sophie got up and closed the door after pushing him back into his room. Then she was back by Wren's side, running her hands over her, checking to see if anything

was wrong. Something was wrong with her though.

Something had broken inside her. Something she could never put back together again.
It was out now.

“Come, my friend, let me help you back up into bed.”

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Wren only nodded, feeling numb inside. Sophie led her to the bed and pulled the covers over her. Wren lay on her side, staring at the large window as if she could see beyond it. Then there was rustling in the bed, and she realized Sophie had climbed in with her.

“Wren?” She whispered. “Can I hold you?”

When Wren only nodded, Sophie came closer and wrapped her arms around her.

After they lay like that for a time and Wren’s breathing became steady. Wren felt Sophie let go of her, and closed her eyes, not wanting Sophie to feel like she needed to stay with her. She heard Sophie’s footsteps move towards the door to Malaki’s room where she opened it quietly.

Wren opened her eyes and saw that Malaki had his head against the door frame, but when he realized Sophie had opened it, his gaze shot past Sophie to where she was sleeping. Wren quickly closed her eyes, hoping he hadn’t seen her watching in the dark of the room.

“She’s asleep now. I’ll stay with her.” Malaki looked to say something in protest, but Sophie put her hand around his arm and said, “Get some sleep, Kai.”

Malaki murmured something with a bitter laugh. Most likely lamenting his interrupted sleep from her episode. Wren felt hollow inside, and when the door closed again, she closed her eyes and let herself become nothing.

Wren awoke to light streaming into her rooms through the large window, curtains pulled back. She sat up, trying to figure out why she felt so exhausted.

“Ah, the princess has deigned to grace me with her presence.” Wren looked to where Sophie was standing by the entrance to the sitting room. She noted that Sophie seemed tense, though she was pretending to not be.

“I haven’t seen you here in the morning like this in a while.”

Sophie narrowed her eyes at Wren slightly, but didn’t say anything. She put her hand on Wren’s. “Let’s get dressed, I want to show you something.”

Wren picked out a deep gray dress and left her hair undone to fall in curls down her shoulders. When she came into the drawing room, Sophie was there waiting for her. Wren frowned as she scanned her, but did not say anything. She only handed her a jade coat that went all the way to the floor, covering her dress.

Wren wondered why her friend was acting so strangely, but didn’t want to pry. They walked together until Wren realized Sophie was taking her through the door that led to the path by her room. She smiled at her friend who gave a tentative smile back. She didn’t care how she was getting to explore it, only that she was.

They followed the path that grew smaller with each turn until the trees became sparser and a strange roaring filled her ears. Sophie gave her a reassuring nod as Wren’s steps slowed. As they walked, the air felt crisper and there was a chill in the air that she hadn’t noticed as if the breeze thrived the farther they got from the castle.

Instead of making her uncomfortable, she welcomed the chill, feeling at home in it. The roaring intensified, and that’s when Wren saw it. A waterfall like she had only read about in books flowed in front of her, pooling into a large body of water with a rocky beach surrounding it.

Endless water surrounded her, taking her breath away with its beauty and infiniteness.

Sophie studied her. “This is the edge of our kingdom. If you followed that water, you would travel to other kingdoms and likely places we don’t even know exist.”

Wren was in awe at it, and relished the feel of the breeze wrapping around her, never to be contained, always free. Wren longed to be with it and to know the freedom it whispered all around her. She didn’t realize she had walked to the cliff until Sophie grabbed her arm and pulled her back, shouting her name. Her friend looked at her as if she had never seen her before.

“What is happening to you, Wren?” Her eyes were filled with worry.

“There’s nothing wrong with me. I am the same as always.” She felt the lie in her bones as she said it. There was something fundamentally different about her, but she couldn’t say what it was.

Sophie only stared at her, not accepting the lie. “Fine. What happened last night, Wren?”

She was about to explain that she went to bed and when she woke up Sophie was there, when Sophie shook her head.

“Wren, why did Kai bang on my door in the middle of the night looking like he was terrified? Why did I find you on the floor, staring at nothing? What happened, Wren?”

Nothing Sophie was saying made sense. She remembered none of that. She vaguely remembered a dream, something lost. “Sophie, I don’t remember any of that.” Wren moved to push the hair from her face the wind had blown into it and Sophie grabbed her wrist.

“What is that?” Her voice shook with suspicion.

Wren followed her gaze to the inside of her wrist where a black string of ivy wrapped around her wrist, embedded into her skin. She pulled her arm from Sophie and tried to scratch it off, but it would not come off. Panic started to claw at Wren and Sophie grabbed her hands preventing her from scratching at the reddened skin further.

“Something is happening, Wren. There’s a reason they brought you here, and I would bet my life it has to do with this. If this is why they brought you here, then there is one thing I am sure of. The king, the Bishop, no one can know about this.”

Wren realized then that she loved her friend. This girl who barely knew her, but would protect her from powerful men. This friend who stayed with her in the middle of the night after everything was taken from her. The friend who held her hand and promised to take on the world with her. Something pulled apart farther in Wren’s chest, but she ignored the pain.

Sophie had insisted they find Malaki. That he must be going out of his mind after last night, and Wren couldn’t help but snort at the idea. Sophie’s image of him always acted as a mirage to the rest of him. Sophie led her to a part of the castle she hadn’t been to yet, where an archway opened to the outside leading to a massive training arena.

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This was where they went when they talked about training. There were men everywhere, using bows and arrows, sword fighting, fighting with only their bodies. There were horses in a stall nearby, and she noted that there was a long line of seating booths. They must have held events here though she could not imagine what.

Sophie didn't slow down her step and instead pulled Wren along with her. They made their way to where a large group of men stood surrounding something. The smell of sweat was thick in the air. A couple of men looked at Sophie and Wren curiously, but went back to their business.

Suddenly, Wren heard the clash of swords and realized they were coming from beyond the circle of men. Sophie pushed through, not bothering to apologize and continued to pull Wren with her.

Wren did not know what she had been expecting, but when she moved past the men she saw Malaki with a sword fighting another man. His dark hair was pulled back into a small bun on top of his head and his face was hard in concentration, sweat pouring down his face.

She continued her study of him and her eyes lingered on the hard muscles of his stomach that glistened with sweat. It was as if he was in another world, and the only thing that mattered was this fight. His opponent fought to keep up with him and it seemed as if Malaki was going to disarm him when they turned and his eyes met hers.

He paused for just a moment, but it was too long, and the other swordsman grazed his arm, blood beginning to seep from the wound.

The swordsman stopped, stammering, “Malaki, I am sorry, you were moving so fast, I did not realize—”

Malaki only put his uninjured hand on the other man’s shoulder. “Bryson, I asked you to fight as if your life depended on it, didn’t I?”

The other man nodded, but his face was drawn with concern.

“You did well, my friend. Thank you for being a worthy opponent.”

The man called Bryson bowed and clasped his hand with Malaki’s.

“The show is over, back to work!” called Malaki and the crowd dispersed. He walked towards Wren, wiping his face with a towel, and all she could do was stare at him, trying to force her gaze to his face, but his blue eyes pierced hers, searching for something.

When he was close to them, he never pulled his eyes from Wren and she felt as if she might die under his scrutiny. She was suddenly acutely aware of his body and his presence.

“Kai, we need to talk.” Sophie’s voice dragged his gaze from Wren’s, and she released the breath she had been holding.

Whatever he saw in her gaze convinced him not to ask any more questions. He began walking towards the castle and Sophie and Wren only followed trying to keep up with his quick steps.

Wren oddly wondered if he often walked around the castle without his shirt and she just hadn’t noticed it before. Noticing a couple of maids gazing admirably at him she thought perhaps this was a rare instance. When they got to her rooms, she made to

stop, but he kept going down an adjacent hallway, and Sophie stopped briefly to pull her along. Wren's heart raced as realization dawned on her that they were going to his rooms.

Her stomach rolled and she pressed a hand against it, trying to steady herself. When they entered, she noticed that it was oddly similar to her own room, except, where she could see into his bedroom, there was a desk with papers strewn about it and all over the floor. She thought she saw a chair on the ground, but would have had to step on her tiptoes to peer in.

Malaki was at his wardrobe, pulling out a shirt and throwing it over his head. At least now he was less distracting. He moved back into the sitting room and stared at her. “What is it?”

Wren found herself stammering, unsure where to start, how to tell him when she didn't even remember last night.

Wren was forever grateful for Sophie who said, “She doesn't remember last night.”

Before he could give voice to his skepticism, Sophie grasped her wrist and held it out to him, bearing the strange mark. He moved towards her and made to grab her arm, but paused.

“May I?” The question was soft and full of hesitancy.

Wren nodded, swallowing hard. In one hand he held her arm and the other he ran his finger across the mark on her wrist sending a chill up her body. His brows furrowed as he studied it.

“When did you notice this?”

“This morning.” Her voice was a whisper.

His eyes searched hers. “You don’t remember anything from last night?” His voice was equally quiet, and she thought she heard anxiety lacing his words.

“I remember having a dream about something.” She sighed, attempting to release some of the frustration from her body. “I lost something in it. I don’t remember anything else.”

He nodded as if he understood, and she realized that he hadn’t let go of her arm and his finger still lay across her wrist. She looked up and noticed the red seeping through his white shirt.

“Oh, you’re bleeding!” Wren quietly exclaimed.

He dragged his eyes away from hers to where his shirt was soaked through.

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“Oh, that,” he said nonchalantly, as if it were a scrape.

Sophie sighed. “Sit down you idiot. I’ll dress it.”

Wren suppressed a small laugh at her friend’s admonishment of the prince. Malaki did not argue with her. He only moved to the chair, sat, and removed the stained shirt. Wren inhaled sharply and turned away. When she dared to look back, Malaki was sporting a small satisfied smile.

“It’s only a small cut, Wren, I’ll be fine.”

Sophie returned carrying water and bandages from the wash room and set them on the table. “It’s hardly small, and I was not concerned about your well-being.” Wren was grateful for the control her voice had since the truth was it was not the wound that had affected her. There most certainly was something wrong with her.

As Sophie cleaned and dressed the wound, she murmured something to Malaki. He turned towards her then, caution in his blue eyes. “Do you want me to tell you what happened last night?” The words were not commanding, and she realized then that he would respect her wishes no matter what he thought she should do.

Wren paced a few times and studied her wrist. She stopped and turned towards him. “Yes.”

He gestured to the seat across from him and she hesitantly took it. “I could hear you screaming from in here, so I retrieved the key and opened the door. You were in the bed thrashing, sweating, and I could go my whole life and never hear that sound

again.” His voice was thick with emotion and Wren found she couldn’t meet his eyes. “I woke you up, and when you saw me, you lost it. I understand. Of course, I understand.” He ran his good hand through his hair that had come undone, clearly unsure. “You told me to get out, and when I said I wouldn’t leave you, you threw a vase at me.”

Wren almost laughed at that, but didn’t when she saw there was no humor in his face. He was nervous. Why would he be nervous? He can’t be surprised she would throw a vase at him, he was a very aggravating person.

“Wren. You didn’t throw it with your hands.” His voice was quiet.

Wren laughed. “Well, I don’t suppose I threw it with my feet. You must have been still half asleep.”

His face held no humor. “I was awake when this all happened, and you threw it at me, but you didn’t touch it, Wren. It flew at me.”

Wren snorted, feeling uncomfortable with both his and Sophie’s gazes on her. “You are being ridiculous.”

He pulled his half-bandaged arm free from Sophie and leaned towards her. “I swear on my mother’s grave, Wren, I am not lying to you now.”

Wren recoiled at the intensity in his gaze and what his words meant. “I am not a witch.” She was surprised by the steadfastness of her voice.

Malaki leaned back in his chair then and Sophie continued bandaging his arm, looking as if she were trying to riddle a puzzle.

“No, I don’t think that you are.” His voice was so casual and Wren wanted to believe

him. Wanted to believe the punishment for witches was different here when she remembered that they had sorcerers and what Sophie had told her about magic.

“There are sorcerers here, magic is not unusual. Perhaps it was something else and you are mistaken.”

“I am not mistaken.” He was still leaning back in the chair and Sophie moved back admiring her work on his arm.

“Wren, I told you it is rare even among people born here. You are not even from here, and you already told me your world doesn’t have magic.” She turned to Malaki. “This is why your father and the Bishop brought her here.”

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “It doesn’t make sense, though. The other women. Would this have happened to them as well?”

At the name of Cara’s murderer she felt her body fill with familiar grief coated with anger. How casually they all talked about the man who had taken away her best friend.

“I don’t know, but we need to figure it out and we need to keep your father and the Bishop from finding out what has happened. That means your brother, too, Kai.”

“You think I don’t realize that, Sophie!” His voice shook with a barely concealed temper. He took a deep breath and waved a placating hand at Sophie, remorse in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Soph. I know, I know what you are saying. It’s only, they will likely know to watch for this. I don’t know how to conceal her wrist. If her sleeve raises even a little, they will see.” He sounded frustrated and Wren felt herself grateful that he would try to help her regardless of his motivation.

Sophie nodded. “That’s easy, I’ll have all her dresses made to have the sleeve come

to a point and wrap around her middle finger, that way it will hold no matter how she moves.”

“What if they get suspicious? It’ll be obvious we are trying to hide something,” Malaki countered.

“No, I’ll start spreading word around the court that you prefer that style and the idiots will all line up to have it done by tomorrow’s dinner. We will have hers done after that so it seems like she’s only following court fashion.”

He considered it. “Clever, Soph. That should work. I have been trying to poke around my father trying to gather any information why he called her here, but he won’t give up on anything. When he and the Bishop meet, it is in seclusion. I cannot even bribe the guards to overhear them, they take no chances.”

Wren felt a flash of surprise that he had already put in such effort, but then remembered that she was as much his prison as he was hers.

“Well, then, we just take it one step at a time. We will figure out something.” Sophie tried to make her words hopeful.

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Despite the sorrow and the need for retribution, Wren felt the need for answers more than anything. “I could talk to the Bishop, maybe he will give something away.”

“Absolutely not,” Malaki growled. “How could you even suggest it after what he did?”

His words forced her to flinch. They were sharp and too accurate.

She felt as if her body were made of frayed fabric. “Because I need to know.”

The momentary softening of his face was all she received for sympathy from him. “I said no. You are not to go near him or my father, do you understand me?”

Gone was the tender prince who had timidly asked to see her arm. It seemed the true prince was back again.

She was about to insist that it was her life, her problem, when he waved to the door. “Go, both of you. I need to think.”

Wren felt indignant at the dismissal, but Sophie only stood up.

“Fine, you ass. Gods, you are the worst.” Sophie grabbed Wren’s hand and pulled her not towards the entrance, but through the bedroom towards the door connecting their rooms where she noticed the key was still in the lock.

Wren snatched the key from the door and placed it in the small pocket of her dress. Before she closed the door behind her, she wondered why the prince’s rooms were

covered in debris, as if he had ripped apart the room.

Chapter 15

Sophie's plan to introduce the new fashion trend worked instantly, and soon all the ladies of court were walking around with dresses where the sleeves went down into a point to the middle finger. Wren was surprised briefly at the effect a rumor of Malaki's preference would spark such change, but then again she remembered her own reaction to seeing him yesterday. They obviously hadn't spent enough time with him, else they would know how ill-tempered he was.

After the chaos and revelations of yesterday, she longed for something to ground her. She inquired after Wesley from the servants, finding a sudden need for his calm presence. She was always surprised at how much the servants knew. They seemed to know everyone's whereabouts at all times.

She found Wesley in the library of the palace. Wren was struck upon entering at how there could be so many books in the world. The room was a rotunda of two stories filled to the brim. Comfortable chairs were placed around the room for people to sit and enjoy the many volumes. There were also desks in some corners where some men bent over books and wrote their thoughts on them. She tore her eyes from the magnificent room and found Wesley in one of the chairs farthest into the room, head dipped over a book.

She walked over to him, and he was engrossed enough in the pages that he did not notice her approach. "And what sort of book does a prince read?"

He jumped slightly at her interruption, but his easy smile soon fell into place. Wren wondered at the flip her stomach did, but decided it was better off to ignore it. His curly, blond hair was perfectly placed, and she couldn't help but admire his sharp features.

“Wren! To what do I owe such an honor?” The way he said her name did make it feel like an honor.

She wasn’t sure what to tell him. That she had sought him out because she felt she needed to? That she couldn’t explain it? She was saved from having to answer when he suddenly stood up. “Oh, pardon me, let me get you a chair.” He started to move to one of the chairs, then turned towards her awkwardly. “That is if you want to stay? I shouldn’t have assumed.”

She smiled at his insecurity. “Of course, I would love to.” He smiled back at her and pulled a rather heavy-appearing chair towards her. Though he made it look simple, she could tell the weight of it was straining and she couldn’t help but give a small chuckle at the prince’s chivalry.

He gave a small bow and gestured for her to sit. She curtsied and let out a laugh as she folded herself into the chair. There was a loud hush from the second floor and Wesley grinned at her. “Being royalty means nothing in a library.” His whisper was conspiratorial.

She smiled and repeated her first question. “So what is it that you are reading?”

He gave a mock affront. “That is a very bold question, Princess. We hardly know each other.”

Wren rolled her eyes at him, and she wondered at how she already felt lighter with his easy-going attitude. “As it so happens, I find you quite agreeable so I will allow this one indiscretion.” His serious face could only be maintained briefly. “I am reading a book on fish.”

Wren could not hide her shock, of all the things she had expected, that was truly not it. “Fish?” she said skeptically.

“Yes, Wren, fish.”

Her heart fluttered at how his voice lingered on her name.

“It turns out fish are quite interesting as well as a self-sustaining resource. There is much we don’t know, but what we do know of their life cycle is fascinating.”

Wren found herself admiring his sincerity. “I will just have to take your word for it.”

He raised an eyebrow, “Or you could read the book.”

“Fair point.” Somehow she did not think she would be reading his book recommendations. A thought occurred to her then. “Do you think they have any books on magic?”

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He arched an eyebrow at her. “Yes, I suppose they would, but I must say I find it interesting you would seek out such a book. Crishaven is known for its rejection of magic.”

There was no judgment in his words, but she cursed her misstep all the same. “That’s just it. I’ve never been able to learn about it, and now that I am here, I find that I am curious.”

He nodded as if that made perfect sense and excused himself. He went to speak to an elderly gentleman who gestured to the top floor. Wesley came back to her and told her that all the books on magic were upstairs. They made their way up a beautiful spiraling staircase to the top where Wren suddenly felt overwhelmed at how she would find what she needed when she didn’t even know what that was.

“What specifically do you want to start with?” Wesley asked helpfully.

She shrugged. “I am not sure. Maybe a general summary.”

He nodded and went to the shelf running, his finger along the books, reading their titles. He gave a small sound of joy when he pulled one off the shelves and handed it to her.

She looked at the old book, *When the Gods Bestowed Their Magic*, and felt a thrill at the find. Even though Sophie and Malaki maintained that she was not from Valmere so it couldn’t be linked, this had only started when she had come here. It was worth researching it. “This is perfect, thank you.”

He was willing to find other books for her, but she did not want to seem too eager. Even with Wesley, she didn't want to risk anything getting back to the king or Bishop. They made their way back to their seats where they both began reading their books. One about fish and one about magic.

It was not long before Wren was engrossed in the history of this land. She curled her legs beneath her dress and placed the book on her lap, settling into the space.

The gods ruled over the lands of Valmere for many eons, enjoying endless seasons of peace. One such season, the eldest god, Lucius, looked at his siblings and felt that it was not enough. It was then he created man and the world we enjoy today.

His siblings felt betrayed at this breach and disagreement befell the immortal siblings. Adrius, Lera, and Agratious, planned to kill the humans, not wanting their presence to disturb their peaceful way of life. It was then the youngest, Serephina, sacrificed her magic to give it to the mortals. Her magic filled the mortal lands and protected them, as the sibling's magic could not be used against each other.

It was in their anger, they cast Serephina out. She would live out her days as one of the mortals she chose to protect over her siblings. Seeing how violent the humans were and how prone to wars and chaos, the siblings knew they had sentenced their sister to death and were satisfied with her punishment.

Lucius, who was grateful for his sister's compassion for his creation, vowed to protect her. Finding where she had been reborn among the humans, he hid her from his siblings who vowed to see her life end for her betrayal.

It is not known what became of Serephina, but her magic flows throughout the lands of Valmere, and her goodness is bestowed upon those that her magic finds worthy. We refer to them as sorcerers, but it is their magic that protects us from vengeful gods. The people of Valmere pray to the almighty god Lucius for his continued

blessings and give offerings to the vengeful Adrius, Lera, and Agratious in hopes that if Serephina's magic ever fades from these lands, they will have mercy on us.

Wren was ripped from her reading by Wesley's voice saying her name. Wren jumped at the intrusion and the prince gave a small laugh and apologized for startling her.

"I wondered if you might like to take a break and go for a walk?" he inquired delicately.

"Was your fish book not engaging?" Wren asked dryly.

He chuckled. "Even the most interesting of tales require a break every now and then."

"If you say so." She moved to get up and was surprised to find how stiff her legs were from being folded underneath her. She stood up and lost her balance momentarily, but Wesley was there in an instant. His hand stabilized her lower back. She felt embarrassed at her clumsiness, but smiled when his face lit up in a flush and he removed his hand as soon as he was sure she was steady.

He offered to hold her book, but she didn't want to part with it, already learning so much. Wesley had to talk to the librarian, assuring him that he would personally hold her responsible for the well-being of the book, as books this old were not generally allowed to leave the library.

Wesley apparently spent enough time in the library that the librarian trusted his word.

As they left the quiet of the library and back through the halls, Wren said, "You are very good with people."

Wesley smiled down at her and whispered, "You know, you do not have to whisper any longer, right?"

She flushed, not realizing she had. He only laughed good naturedly and she felt her embarrassment ease.

“I was raised to be good with people, it is one of the things a ruler must be.”

She almost made a comment about how not all princes felt that way, but remembered their ruse. Now with everything that happened last night it was more important than ever to maintain the facade. She only nodded as if she had no qualm with his statement.

“Are you the heir to your kingdom’s throne?” She briefly chastised herself thinking the question had seemed more impertinent than she had intended it to be.

If Wesley had thought it rude he did not show it. “I am. It is only my sister and me. As I am the oldest, I am set to inherit.”

“If your sister were older, would she be allowed to inherit?” she asked.

“Yes, it has not happened in a few generations, but our laws do not ban women from holding the throne. I understand that we are unique in that notion. We are also unique in that the king and queen hold equal power. It does not matter which was born into the role, their chosen consort is given equal power.”

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“You choose your consort?” She found herself surprised by the notion.

“Yes, it is one of the reasons our family and kingdom has been so successful. We are stronger together.” He said the words with pride.

“What if you do not find someone you wish to marry?” She was so intrigued by his kingdom and how it differed from her world and even this kingdom.

“Then we do not marry. In fact, three generations ago, the king never married, saying he could not find the right person with which to share such a great responsibility. And before you ask, when he died the throne went to his younger brother, who was my grandfather.”

“I am sorry for asking so many questions, it must seem rude,” said Wren, acutely aware of how many questions she had already thrown at him.

He stopped then and looked at her. “I did not mean to make you think I was unhappy with your inquiries. I only meant to say, I can see the thought cross your mind and only thought to save you the time.” He seemed so concerned that he caused her offense.

“How chivalrous of you, Your Highness.” She tried to smile in an attempt to put him at ease.

Wesley seemed to think it over to decide if he believed her or not. Whatever he saw in her convinced him and they began to walk again.

She tried to wait as long as she could to ask, but she could not resist. “Why do your parents allow you to leave for so long if you are their heir?”

He smiled at her indulgently. “They believe learning about other kingdoms and its people will make me a better ruler. More than that, it is at my sister’s bequest that I first came here.”

“Because of Prince Richard.” He looked at her then, surprised at her knowledge. She chided herself for revealing knowledge she wasn’t supposed to have.

Wesley paused and then made the decision to continue. “Yes, because of Richard. She wanted to come here immediately, but my parents would not allow her. It seems our unique notions of women and power only extend to those who are not beloved daughters.” He chuckled. “My sister is fastidious. She knows what she wants and she does not wait. My parents denied her request and she asked them if I went and approved if she might go. This was accepted.”

“And do you? Approve, I mean?” she inquired.

“I am unsure whether telling a member of the royal family whether I disapprove of their family is a diplomatic notion.” While the words were serious, his smile showed he was only teasing. “In truth, I have not decided. It is part of the reason I have remained so long. I want to protect my sister, but also give honor to her choice.”

“That is very noble of you, but I can’t help but feel like she should be able to make her own choice in the matter. How can you know what is in her heart? What you see and feel will likely not be what she does. Unless you also find Prince Richard to be devilishly handsome and charming?” She nudged his arm jokingly and he grinned down at her.

“I must confess, he is rather charming—and have you seen his jaw line?”

She burst out in laughter and thought she might not ever breathe from laughing so much.

“Though his humor does pale in comparison to my own.”

She let out a snort before covering her nose and mouth in horror.

Wesley looked at her with wide eyes and burst out into his own fit of laughter. “That was the most adorable thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

Wren playfully smacked his arm and he held his hands up defensively.

“I would not lie to a lady.” He paused. “Even one that snorts.”

He backed away from her before she could hit him again, and he laughed cheerfully.

She could not maintain her fake ire any longer, and she also laughed. “It is a terrible burden to bear. My friend, Cara, used to tease me mercilessly.” At the mention of Cara, all her amusement faded.

Horror coated Wesley’s face. “Oh gods, Wren. That was your friend who—” He seemed to struggle with how to say the word as if it would remind her that she was dead once more. “I’m sorry.”

Defeat laced his apology and despite the sorrow that had once more carved through poorly healed wounds she found she didn’t want him to feel dismay. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

“It’s good to think of her even though it hurts. Forgetting her would mean forgetting one of the best parts of my life. I always want to remember how much I loved her.”

Wesley squeezed her hand back and it was exactly what she needed in that moment. “I’ve heard it said that time is the cure for all hurts.”

He meant the words to be comforting, but they fell onto her soul wrong. Wren searched for the words that would convey the depth of loss. “I don’t think that is true. It feels more like the pain will always be there, but other things begin to grow around it so it’s not as consuming as it once was.”

As soon as she said the words, she knew them to be true. She would always mourn Cara, but she would also love again. It was a tragically hopeful thought that settled into her with ease.

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Green eyes the color of sanctuary bore into hers. “How can you show such strength in the face of what so clearly causes you pain. It is remarkable.”

The need to break the tension building in the air filled her. “If we stand here any longer people will think we are part of the decor.”

When she let go of his hand and they began to walk again, he balled the hand she had held into a fist and then stretched it. She wondered if she had made him feel uncomfortable and hoped not.

When they rounded the corner, Wren’s eyes landed on a lady of the court dressed in her dinner clothes and she cursed quietly.

Wesley grinned at her. “I heard that, Princess.”

She couldn’t bring herself to be sorry now that she realized it was nearly time for dinner. It would seem that dinners were an important function for the royal family and it was one of the demands the king had made of her. She had been so engrossed in Wesley’s company she had entirely forgotten about the impending evening of socializing and dancing.

“We need to get ready for dinner! I did not realize it was so late.” Wesley frowned just then, realizing the increase in formally attired people in the hallways.

“It would seem so. Would you like me to walk you to your rooms?” For some reason the polite request made her pause.

“I know my way back from here. I’ll see you at dinner!” She started for her rooms when she turned around and called, “Thank you, Prince Wesley.”

A few people made to stare, but he only smiled at her as if they were the only people that mattered and for the briefest of moments it felt like they were.

Chapter 16

Wren took in sharp breath as the maid tightened the corset as if she were personally determined to see how tight it could be without killing her. She loathed dinners for the sole reason that she was expected to wear the cursed garment. When the maid was satisfied that Wren could take in just enough air to survive, she helped her into a dark blue gown.

Despite the corset that was threatening to suffocate her, she admired the gown that fit snugly around her waist and flowed out into fuller skirts from there. The neckline was in the traditional straight across fashion, but without the muslin of her everyday dresses to offer more modesty.

In fact, she was fairly alarmed at the amount of her showing, and when she said so to the maids, they brought her a beautiful gold necklace with a sapphire that fell perfectly to the center of her chest. Wren supposed it pulled some focus away from her and agreed to wear it. Her hair fell in loose waves across her shoulders. When she saw her reflection, she hardly recognized herself. She was different in some way, but she didn’t know exactly how.

Taking a deep breath, she opened her door and was surprised to see Malaki clad all in his formal black attire, leaning against the opposite wall. When he saw her, he straightened, pushing himself away from the wall. His eyes widened before he quickly settled into his normal bored countenance.

“I’m here to escort you to dinner,” he said absently.

“Truly? Here I thought you just made a habit of standing outside my door.” She was surprised to hear herself tease him. Her good day must have been going to her head.

Neither of them seemed to know what to do with her good humor and so she took his offered arm and mentally prepared herself for the inevitable awkwardness.

The silence was palpable until Malaki said, “Has anything changed?”

She shook her head, having just inspected the mark when she hid it from the maids. He didn’t say anything and barely acknowledged her the rest of the way. When they entered the dining hall, there was not the fanfare as there had been when they announced their marriage. Wren paused at that thought.

She did not feel as if they were married, but she supposed she knew that was how it would be. He was distant and if she caught a hint of something else, he did something even more awful to bury it. She didn’t understand him and she found she didn’t have the energy to try.

When they made their way up the dais, the king greeted her as if she were a most cherished daughter, pulling her into a hug. “There is something different about you, my dear.”

She could feel Malaki stiffen behind her and she silently cursed him knowing that his father noticed, too. As soon as dinner was done and the music began, the King stood and held out a hand to Wren.

“May I have this dance, daughter?”

Wren felt a bubble of panic rise in her, and she turned to Malaki for help, but his

attention was focused on his father as if he could will him to sit back down. If the king noticed, he did not show it as his eyebrows rose at her hesitation. Not seeing a way she could refuse the king she stood and took his hand despite the pit growing in her stomach. They made their way to the dance floor, and she was acutely aware that all eyes were on them.

Wren searched helplessly for how to extricate herself from the king's grasp, but Malaki sat straight-backed while Richard's head was bent towards him, speaking rapidly.

"Tell me, how are you finding your new life here, Wren?" The king spoke casually as they began their dance.

"I find that there is much to learn about here, and it feels as if I am discovering something new each day."

His silence and blank face made her wonder whether that was the right answer or not.

"I've never seen my son quite this put out before."

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She glanced at Malaki, not understanding what he meant, and saw he was tense, his clenched jaw visible even from where she was on the dance floor. Prince Richard had taken her seat next to him and was leaning towards him, saying something that earned him a biting remark from his brother.

“Truly, I find he often looks miserable.” Wren regretted the jibe as soon as she saw the king’s smile.

“You see what he wants you to see. Do you want to know what I see?” The king raised his eyebrow at her.

“I am not sure that I do,” she replied honestly.

Answering as if he did not hear her, the king said, “I see my son, who is fiercely protective of you. I am quite sure if it were not for his brother, he would have already intervened in our time together. I confess, I have seen Malaki take lovers before, but he has never looked at them in quite the way he does you. If I didn’t know better I would think you put a spell on him.”

Wren stared at him in disbelief, wondering if they were talking about the same person. The music stopped and the king bent, raising her marked hand to his lips. His lips lingered too long and her skin crawled, but she willed herself to not pull away. Even after he released her and moved to speak with the gathered nobility she stood frozen trying to fight the nausea that his touch left in her. She was about to turn and leave, not caring about the consequences when she heard a voice behind her.

“May I have this dance, Princess?” Wren turned and found Wesley, his eyes lit with

concern.

She contemplated running, but then closed her eyes and took a deep breath. He wore a combination of white-and-blue dress clothes that complimented his blond curls. He looked just as handsome as ever.

Dancing with him was precisely what she needed. With every dip and twirl the pit in her stomach lessened until she hardly noticed it. When the music ended they strode arm in arm to where a servant stood holding a tray of wine. After they both caught their breath again, Wesley met her gaze, something she couldn't name dancing in his eyes.

"You are beautiful."

Wren was surprised to find herself smiling at the compliment, despite the fact that normally she would argue with such a statement. The truth was, she did feel beautiful tonight. She felt alive, so full of life that she felt like it might burst from inside her.

"Thank you, you don't look too dreadful yourself."

He smiled. "A glowing review, truly."

She laughed, and his smile brightened.

"The way you dance, Wren, it's like the music is a part of you and you of it. I saw it the first night you danced, and tonight it is even more evident." He said the words with awe in his voice, but there was also a sense of curiosity.

She shrugged. "I don't know why, but I feel it. I feel like it is a part of me. I cannot explain it."

“And you do not need to. You do not owe anyone an explanation.” He looked at her earnestly, and she was struck by the thought that if she were ever uncertain, she need only see his green eyes to know who she was. Before she could feel embarrassed at her blatant staring, he said, “I’ve written to both my parents and my sister to request her presence here at Haradon court.”

“I thought you said your parents would not allow it?” asked Wren.

He nodded. “I did, but I thought about what you said. About how she should be able to make that decision for herself. She has already found Prince Richard to be worthy, but she should be able to decide if this is the sort of court she wishes to live in. Like I told you before, it is vastly different from our own court. You made me realize that this was not a judgment I could make for her. I have urged my parents to reconsider.”

Wren didn’t know what to say, but felt inexplicable pride at having played a part in giving another woman control over her life. She took a deep breath and fought the growing emotion threatening to overwhelm her. It may have been a small decision to Wesley, but to her it was everything she couldn’t have for herself.

Misreading her silence for displeasure, he frowned. “I thought you would be pleased.”

Wren turned her head away, trying to regain composure. When she turned back, her voice was still thick with emotion. “I am. Truly. You are giving your sister something precious.”

He tilted his head studying her. “Wren, why is this so important to you?” He was suddenly frowning at her, and she noticed him look towards where Malaki stood across the hall talking with one of the nobility. “Wren?”

She could see the suspicion on his face and reminded herself that she needed to be

more careful around him. Wesley had a way of making her feel safe enough to let down her guard. Worse—she trusted him. She would have told him everything even though they had only known each other a short time. There was so much she still didn't understand, and if it put him at risk, she wasn't willing to risk it.

“I only think that more women should have the chance to make the decision that I was able to and now your sister will be able to.” She tried to project confidence into her words, but looking at him, she knew she had not been successful in extinguishing his suspicion. To his credit, he did not push the issue.

A groan came from behind her. “There is not enough wine to tolerate this evening.”

Wren grinned as she turned to see Sophie approaching her. She wore a ridiculously elaborate yellow-and-green dress that's neckline might have been more scandalous than her own. The other woman took another gulp of the wine she was holding and looked like she was restraining herself from downing the whole glass.

Wren laughed, “Why, in the name of all that is good, are you wearing that dress and not your pants?”

Sophie made a mocking face at her as she adjusted the gown trying to loosen it around her stomach. “My mother's doing. There were threats.”

“She is quite a formidable woman.” Wren tried for sincerity, but couldn't hold her smile back at her friend's continued discomfort.

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“Yes, well, that formidable woman sent me to tell you that she expects you immediately after breakfast. Which I am sure I do not need to translate for you means too damn early.”

Wren feared Sophie might just rip the dress off and be done with it, but then seeming to think better of it she did drink the last of her wine.

“Sophie, just how much wine have you had?”

In answer, Sophie actually stuck her tongue out at her.

Wesley let out a booming laugh, earning him a startled jump from Sophie. “Oops, I suppose that was not the lady-like decorum my mother demanded.” She glanced nervously between them. “She’s not looking over here, is she?”

Wren peered over her shoulder finding Lady Daugherty in conversation with some other lord. She shook her head and Sophie sighed with relief.

“How are you this evening, Prince Wesley?” asked Sophie, finding her manners.

“Very well, Lady Sophie. What about you?” He wore his charm like it was a second skin.

Sophie groaned. “Please, just Sophie. Truly, I will never know why I was cursed to this life.”

Wren rolled her eyes at Sophie’s dramatics. She wasn’t sure where Sophie fit into the

world, but she was sure this wasn't it.

"Prince Wesley, I wondered if I might ask a rather large favor from you?" asked Sophie who seemed to shrink into herself.

"Of course, Sophie," he readily agreed.

"My mother's made me agree to come to dinner, mingle a bit, and she made me agree to one dance and then I can be free from this hellish prison."

Though there was no question directed at him, Wesley smiled and nodded all the same. With a nod to Wren, he offered Sophie his arm and they moved to the dance floor. Wren covered her mouth trying to stifle the laugh that threatened to burst from her at seeing Sophie's discomfort on the dance floor. The music was slow, but she still looked as if she was concentrating on not tripping, the prince's grace offsetting her clumsiness only slightly.

She was so engrossed watching them she hadn't noticed when Malaki had taken the space next to her till he said, "How drunk is she, that she is willingly dancing? Or is she a prisoner and I must defend her honor?"

Wren was surprised to hear the mirth in his voice, but then again, Sophie had always been different to him. "She is indeed a prisoner, but I must inform you, it is not Wesley holding her captive, but rather your aunt."

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but he nodded gravely. "Ah, I should have known that. My aunt encourages a lot of Sophie's independence, but she does demand some tradition."

"I wondered—" The lack of confidence he normally had gave Wren pause. "Would you like to dance with me? It's only—it would be suspicious if we did not."

Wren looked over at him, sure he was jesting after their argument last time they attempted to dance together. She was surprised to see only sincerity in his handsome features.

Wren studied him a moment longer before holding out her arm, which he took and then guided her to the floor.

“You truly are radiant tonight. I am sorry I did not tell you earlier at your door.”

The sincerity in the words took her back, but where she expected to see mirth in his eyes she only saw genuine clarity.

“Thank you,” she said over the gumminess in her throat.

Silence fell between them as the music caught beneath her feet. She tilted her head back when he twirled her, delighting in the feel of the air rushing around her. When the music stopped they were both breathing heavily with the effort of the dance.

His gaze burned into her. “What are you?” The words were full of awe.

Before she could answer the confusing question she was saved by Prince Richard approaching them. “I wondered if I might steal my lovely sister for a dance.”

Malaki pulled her a little closer to him as he had not released his hands from their original resting places. He didn’t even notice her unspoken question as he glared at his brother. Wren wondered then about what the king had said about Malaki being protective of her, and for the first time she could see some truth in it. The thought caused something foreign and confusing to spread throughout her.

Ignoring the unwelcome feeling, she said. “It is all right. I do not mind.”

He seemed to war with himself, but passed her hand to his brother, a warning in his eyes to the younger man who oddly nodded back at him.

“I believe I owe you a debt,” he said over the instruments.

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She had expected him to taunt her, but she had not expected that. “Excuse me?” she questioned.

“Wesley said it was you who advocated for Mary to come here.”

There was little doubt who Mary was. “Everyone deserves a choice,” she said simply.

Richard’s face so often caught in a mischievous smile or amusement fell. “I’m sorry for that day, Wren. I hate that I tricked you and I hate knowing what could have happened.”

There weren’t words for how she felt about his apology. There was pain in the memory of that day. Pain when she thought of how she had believed she could go home. Pain in the thought of what fate had awaited her if Malaki hadn’t stopped her. Pain in the knowledge that home was worlds away.

Richard seemed to accept her silence as punishment. As soon as the music ended he pressed a kiss to her hand and left the hall.

“Gods, what did you do to him?” said Sophie, appearing next to her.

Wren looked at the direction the younger prince had gone in and said, “I think he realized that some mistakes can’t be undone.”

Sophie turned to her, obviously wanting to question her more, but Wren shook her head.

“Have you fulfilled your obligations? I am suddenly quite ready to be done with this evening.” Sophie nodded and they made their way from the ballroom.

Wren turned her head, sparing a glance for Malaki who watched them go.

When they were free, Sophie growled. “I am going to burn this cursed dress. Will you be okay?”

Wren laughed and agreed that she would. They separated, and she was grateful that there were no guards to follow her. Apparently, the king thought her well and truly imprisoned now. As she settled into her bed, well and truly exhausted, a knock came from her door.

Wren opened the door, revealing Sophie in her nightclothes. “Sophie?”

Sophie only pushed past her and said, “Oh, I’m sorry. Did you think I was going to leave you alone after last night? I rather think not.”

Wren smiled at her haughty friend and embraced her. In truth, Wren was anxious about sleeping alone, and she had taken the key and locked the door leading to Malaki’s room which helped to alleviate one anxiety only to elevate another.

The women giggled as they got into the bed and as they curled up under the sheets they laughed at the spectacle of the court and at the gossip of the night. As Wren finally fell asleep she realized that she was happy.

Chapter 17

Dreamsofbeinglost and trapped plagued her sleep, but she did not wake in the night. When Wren awoke, it was to sheets and blankets strewn about and sweat dampening her skin. She sat up and looked around the room, feeling the weight of the unknown

on her.

Wren felt burdened by the knowledge that something was happening to her, but she didn't know what it was. Having enough of the unknown, Wren decided that she would go against Malaki's express orders. There was one person who knew why she was here and he was the one who had brought her here. She knew that she needed to speak with the Bishop, for better or worse.

Sophie had already woken up and left to do whatever it was that she did during the day. Wren put on a pale blue silk dress that covered her mark and left her hair undone in loose curls. She went to Lady Daugherty's lesson and impatiently waited through each lecture and reprimand. Wren bit the inside of her cheek when Lady Daugherty chastised her for being too open and easily read at the previous night's dinner.

As much as Wren needed to learn how to survive in the court, she didn't want to become one of them. Being genuine wasn't a fault; it was something to be proud of.

When she was finally free of the lessons, she made her way to the palace chapel where she was told she would find the Bishop. When she got to the chapel, she was struck by how large and beautiful it was. It had rows of pews that led to a dais where there were many candles lit that illuminated an elaborate stained glass window.

She walked down the aisle, needing to see the window up close. It depicted five people, one man, set aside from the rest. One woman and two men together on the right side of the window and in the middle a young woman standing alone. Below her were rolling fields with houses and people going about their daily lives.

"The story of Valmere," said a nasally voice behind her.

Wren whirled around to see a man she had only seen twice before. Fear and hatred fought for control of her as memories crashed against her. She saw Cara's face so full

of life rendered lifeless. Her breath seemed to rush out of her and there wasn't enough air, but she fought down the panic against the need that brought her here. She tried to quiet the part of her mind that told her to run from him, that screamed murderer. She had come here to get answers and she would endure whatever pain she had to in order to get them. She pushed down the screaming in her mind and forced all the decorum and grace Lady Daugherty had taught her to the surface.

“The story of the five gods,” she replied with more calm than she felt

He raised an eyebrow. “Indeed. Lucius, our creator, and his siblings Adrius, Lera, Agratious, and Serephina.”

“Do you worship them here?” She held back the mountain of questions she had.

He lifted his hands to his waist with his palms forward. “We recognize the worth of all the gods, but recognize their grace and goodwill differs in where they bestow it.”

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“That sounds quite vague.” She tried to keep her voice emotionless, but Cara’s face at the moment of her death played incessantly.

The Bishop made his way over to where she stood and peered up at the window. “Lucius, we pray to in all things, for he is our creator. Adrius, Lera, and Agratious we pray to when we need their cunning or their aid in overcoming our enemies. Some pray in fear, others in worship. Serephina, we honor her sacrifice, but recognize the dead cannot answer our prayers. She is included in all our depictions of the gods, but it is not for anything but tribute.”

“She died because she betrayed her siblings and saved humanity,” stated Wren matter-of-factly. She had already read all of this and used the knowledge to ground herself.

“Yes, her betrayal to her siblings was great. Even Lucius, who was grateful for her intervention, recognized the betrayal. Her other siblings never forgave her, and have long sent their displeasure for humanity in the forms of plagues and famine. It is said that Adrius, Lera, and Agratious began to enjoy ruling over humanity and influencing its evolution. Some say they forgave Serephina, others say their wrath is long and true.”

“They sound terrible. Why would anyone pray to those that would see them destroyed?” The genuine question flowed from her lips.

The Bishop gave a knowing smile. “Better to court the good will of the wicked than to be at their mercy.”

“I suppose it would depend upon your own value of yourself.” She knew she shouldn’t have retorted in such a way, but this man made her feel an anger she hadn’t known before that churned and mixed with her fear till she wasn’t sure where one emotion ended and another began.

He seemed delighted at her response. “One might believe so. How are you faring in our fair kingdom?”

Wren loosed a breath as she realized she could no longer be the court manipulator that Lady Daugherty wanted her to be. “Why did you bring me here?” And then the question that kept her up at night. “Why did you kill her?”

He continued his eerie smile. “Only time can tell.”

“You murdered her.” She felt near to quivering with rage as she gripped her dress to keep from lashing out.

“I did.” He turned away from the window and looked towards her. “Do you want to know what happened to Serephina?”

Wren wanted to say no and leave, but her own curiosity was a sin in itself. She knew he was toying with her, but she also knew that she would endure all of it if only to know what was happening to her.

“They say she lived a mortal life full of love and bore many children that carried on her magic. Her line protected and elevated by her brother Lucius. They say her other siblings hunted for her, but could not find her. This we know is likely true because her magic still fills our lands today.”

“But the magic is fading,” she added, pointing out the error of his logic.

“Yes. Yes it is fading,” his voice solemn as he reached a hand up to toy with the edge of his long white beard.

“Does that mean her line is dying out?” Her need to know burned into her.

“Some believe so.” He seemed to be waiting for something and Wren fought the urge to shy away from his searching gaze.

Wren realized with certainty that he was not willing to give her the answers that she needed. He would give her just enough that she would keep needing more. Frustration burned in her, making her chest feel tight. Every vague answer only led to a new rabbit hole of questions. There was no peace that he would willingly give to her.

As her thoughts churned, he watched her and she was left with the sinking feeling that he looked very much like a cat who was toying with a mouse. Wren swallowed hard, but tried to will strength into her voice.

“One day you will pay for your crimes.” She turned not waiting for a response.

When she was finally free from the chapel she shivered knowing that his cold eyes never left her back as she willed herself to walk at an unhurried pace.

Chapter 18

The library was quiet and familiar to her now. She felt safe in its leather-bound books and its promise of knowledge. Wren had devoured the book Wesley found for her. She had been able to confirm the theories the Bishop had hinted at, but still she could find nothing about other worlds or how magic was gifted.

There was nothing about markings or dreams in all of its pages and when she had

closed the book it was with a heavy heart. Wren ran her finger along the edges of the leather-bound books, trying to read the titles that might offer her some hope of answers. Wren's hand landed on one that sought to answer the distribution of power.

As she flipped through the pages, she quickly realized it was also made up of theory. Seeing no other titles that promised her any answers, she tucked the book under her arm and curled up in the same chair she had sat with Wesley. She had tried to ignore the sinking feeling in her stomach when she had scanned the library and found his chair empty, but as she sat down she felt his absence once more.

Trying to stamp out the strange feeling, Wren cracked open the book and searched for answers in its old pages. The book detailed similar theories the Bishop had discussed, such as Serephina's line dying out, and those being chosen to have magic based on their merit.

Wren easily rejected that theory quickly because if the Bishop had magic when so few did, she refused to believe that it was based on merit. The author continued on to discuss a theory about Lucius helping Serephina to cheat mortality despite enraging their siblings further. This theory did not garner much attention because the magic would not have weakened over time if she had maintained her immortality.

Wren was startled from her reading when the library door slammed open and gave way to one black-clad prince who looked to be in particularly poor spirits. He scanned the library and Wren's heart beat furiously waiting for his eyes to land on her. She did not know why he inspired this reaction in her, but as he stalked towards her she was sure she had never seen his anger directed at her.

"I need to speak with you somewhere private."

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Wren swallowed and willed herself to drag her gaze from his stare only to see that every eye in the library was on them. When she looked back at him, she tried to hide the anxiety flooding her.

“You can speak to me here,” she said cowardly. The way he was looking at her made her quite sure she did not want to be alone with him.

“I cannot,” he replied.

“I should think speaking is not a problem for a grand prince such as yourself.” Teasing him was the wrong answer, and yet she did it anyway.

“Why do you torment me?” His eyes closed as he said it and for a moment she was surprised to feel remorse. Sighing, he opened his eyes. “I went to see the court physician for your ailment of poor indigestion, he recommended—” He was stopped abruptly when she flew from her chair, grabbing his hand and pulling him from the library and the judgment of its occupants.

By the time they made it to the corridor she whirled on him. “Are you completely mad?” she said, when at last he paused to catch his breath.

He raised his eyebrows as if she were the one who had lost their mind. “I told you I needed to speak with you privately.”

“Was there something you needed, Your Highness?” she asked, rolling her eyes. She instantly regretted reminding him of why he had come to find her in the first place.

His eyes darkened causing her stomach to flutter in response. He pulled her into a nearby alcove, their bodies dangerously close.

“You went to see him.”

She did not need to ask who he was referring to. “Word travels fast I see,” she replied haughtily, refusing to apologize for searching for answers.

“He did not hesitate to find me and gloat about your visit.” He sighed, looking at her as if he could find some riddle in her. “I told you not to go to him.”

“I need to understand,” she replied defeatedly.

His face softened slightly, but she could see the anger that remained. “He will never give you an answer that you need.”

“I know that now,” she said, dropping her eyes to the stone floor between them.

The silence stretched between them until she heard him say her name so softly, she thought she might have imagined it. When she lifted her eyes to his, he was looking at her as if he were debating whether to say something or not. He closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them again it was with resignation.

“Are you all right?” His voice was quiet, hesitant.

“No.” The answer was one of the most honest things she had ever uttered.

“He will pay for what he did one day.” His promise was an echo of her own.

Wren’s eyes burned, but she didn’t look away. “When?”

Malaki's eyes were made of ice. "I don't know, but I swear to you he will pay."

The promise was both enough and could never be enough. He seemed to understand the truth of it as silence stretched both of them lost to the past and unrequited retribution.

"Why won't you let me help you? I can find the answers for you if you only give me time." His words were quiet, nearly a plea.

Wren narrowed her eyes at him, trying to decipher these hints and whispers of a different person. "I didn't know you wanted to help."

He shook his head. "Wren, I have been trying since the moment you got here. I have not stopped. I will not stop."

Wren gave a bitter laugh as everything suddenly became clear. "Of course, I should have realized how eager you were to be rid of me." She had thought that she was seeing what Sophie always claimed was in him, but she was certain Sophie was mistaken. Malaki only changed himself to be whatever served his purpose. The glimpses of humanity she witnessed in him were only ploys to get what he wanted from her.

He stared at her, and his blue eyes felt like they were boring into her. His face hardened and he took a deep breath. "I am sorry that I gave you that impression."

Her veins flowed hot as she took in his unapologetic features. Refusing to let him know how close she had come to believing his act, she merely shrugged a shoulder before turning her gaze to the stone wall rather than face his scrutiny. The silence stretched between them, and when she looked back, she saw his gaze fixed on her mouth. She felt her breath hitch and her heart thump wildly in her chest.

“You bite your lip when you are nervous.” She could have sworn he was breathless as the words left him.

“I am not nervous,” she lied.

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He smiled and for some reason a tightness grew in her thighs. She didn't remember him standing so close to her before. Her breathing was becoming shallower. She looked up at him, seeing something in his eyes she hadn't seen before.

"Wren." His voice was a whisper and they were so close now that she could feel his breath on her.

"Yes?" she whispered back, the feeling spreading in swirls to her stomach.

He leaned in towards her, and she knew he was going to kiss her. She didn't dare to breathe. His eyes searched hers before he pulled away from her suddenly.

"Don't go to him again. I will give you all I have found so far." He removed himself from the alcove, leaving her breathless and with the realization that he had nearly kissed her. What was more alarming to her, was the knowledge that she had wanted him to.

True to his word, the prince placed his research under her door that evening. Some papers on the history of the gods, some on magic users, but what caught her interest was one philosopher's notes. The book discussed how there are other worlds and while no magic exists in the land, the inhabitants may have dormant magic.

He hypothesized that if one such person were to be transplanted that their magic would have an awakening that was both violent and abrupt. Wren's breath caught. This could be it. She was all at once excited to have an answer and angry that Malaki had withheld this information from her.

Wren moved to their shared door and banged on it until Malaki opened the door abruptly, concern flickering through his blue eyes as his eyes roamed over her. Wren felt the anger in her veins dampen at the uncharacteristic concern, but she remembered the pages she was holding at her side which only served to flame her anger. She waved the pages in front of him and looked at him with what she hoped was a proper mix of disbelief and anger.

Malaki took the papers from her and sifted through them. “This is not anything. I’ve thought about it. Even if this was true, it wouldn’t explain why my father and the Bishop brought you. This source doesn’t even cite where his deductions came from.” He seemed irritated at having to explain its illegitimacy.

He handed the papers back to her and she took them, holding them against her chest as if she could will them to have answers. “It is more plausible than anything else we have to go on.” She nearly winced at the desperation in her voice.

His face softened. “I know you want answers. We will find them. The main thing is that whatever reason you are here for, my father and the Bishop seem content to leave you alone.”

Malaki leaned against the door frame, and Wren fought the urge to take a step back as it put him closer to her. As her anger dulled, the memory of what had happened between them in the alcove came flooding back, causing her cheeks to flush.

She was grateful he didn’t seem to notice as he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Has my father said anything to you?”

The question startled her from her traitorous thoughts. Wren paused, thinking about the dance she shared with the king and how he claimed Malaki was protective of her.

She realized she was cowardly enough not to be willing to share his father’s musings

with him as she said, “Nothing remarkable, he seems to have little interest in me.”

Malaki sighed, clearly wanting to call her out on the lie, but held his tongue. Instead, he pushed from where he was leaning against the door frame, eyeing her with uncertainty. She narrowed her eyes, not understanding the sudden change in his demeanor.

“Would you like to go to the village with me tomorrow?” The words came out slightly too fast. When she didn’t answer he continued, “I was going tomorrow, and I thought you might care to see something other than the castle walls.”

“Alone?” Wren sputtered.

He chuckled. “Wren, we are on all counts married. But yes, we would be alone.” Seeing that his jest did not land quite right, he stammered, “I understand if you don’t want to, truly I under—”

“I would like to go,” Wren said quietly, trepidation mixing with what could only be curiosity.

He smiled then and it was unlike anything she had ever seen in his face before. She had seen him cruel, angry, despondent, bored, but this was something different. She found herself thinking that she was very lucky to have witnessed a breaking of the mask this prince wore so fervently.

The mask slipped back into place and he was his unaffected self again. “Wonderful. We will leave right at sunrise in order to avoid unpleasant conversations. Good night, Wren.”

With that he shut the door in between them leaving her staring at nothing. She was struck by the thought that she had never met anyone with such tumultuous mood

changes.

Chapter 19

Wren woke up long before sunrise, unable to maintain sleep due to the anxiety that filled her. There were too many unknowns and now she had agreed to leave the castle with the prince. She had no idea what to expect today and cursed herself for saying yes. She had not been willing to give up the opportunity to see the world outside the castle.

She tossed and turned, trying to find a position that was comfortable. With a groan, she sat up and resigned herself to being awake. She dressed in a plain blue gown and left her hair undone. Fastening a black cloak around herself, she looked at her reflection.

Her time in Valmere had done her well. Her cheeks were fuller, as was her figure, from the regular meals. Wren was startled to find that she actually looked different than she had before Valmere. Her skin, which had been tan from days in the sun, was now pale, and it made her green eyes more vibrant. Even her brown hair seemed healthier and darker. She did not understand all the changes she saw in her, but then she had never lived the life of royalty before.

A knock sounded at the door to Malaki's room and she opened it quietly, trying not to wake Sophie. Malaki wore his usual attire, but today he had a sword strapped to his side nearly hidden by a similar black cloak. He peered past her to where Sophie slept with her arms above her head and rolled his eyes.

"Did you tell her we were going?" he asked quietly.

Wren shook her head. He sighed and moved past her while saying, "I didn't realize you had a death wish, or perhaps you thought her wrath would fall solely on me."

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He bent down to the bed and shook Sophie's arm, to which she did not awaken. Sighing, he reached down and shook her harder.

Sophie woke with a start and yelled, "Hell's bells, what is it? What's wrong?" Her face twisted with panic before her sleep-filled eyes fixated on Malaki, her eyes narrowing as finally saw him. "Why are you dressed like that, what's happening?"

Malaki laughed. "Hell's bells?" Wren fought down a laugh at her friend's adopted verbiage. "I only wanted to tell you that Wren and I are going into the village so you don't make a scene trying to find us."

Sophie peered past him to Wren then and her suspicion gave way to smug satisfaction. "Well, be gone then, I have beauty sleep I need to get to."

Malaki huffed a laugh and turned away from the other woman who had already lay back down and closed her eyes. He gestured to Wren to follow him, and they left through his rooms. The hallways were eerily quiet, and the sky outside was dusky from recently awakening. When they came to the castle gate she felt a sense of anticipation she had never known before. It felt like freedom was just a breath away.

The guards didn't question them leaving, but gave a slight bow and opened the gate. The air that hit her was chilly, and rather than pulling the cloak closer around her, she held out her arms, embracing the chill. It felt as if it was breathing life into her and she breathed in deeply, welcoming it into her lungs. She heard a horse whiny and looked in its direction to find a young boy holding two beautiful horses.

Wren's heart leapt at the sight of the majestic animals. She strolled to where they

stood and held out her hand to the white mare nearest to her. The mare huffed out a warm breath over Wren's hand. Wren lifted her hand and ran it along the horse's forehead. When Wren was sure the mare trusted her, she put her forehead against the horse whispering soothing noises as she ran her other hand along her mane.

Wren pulled away from the horse and she moved alongside it, running her hands over its back and side. She looked over to Malaki, who was watching her carefully. Unbidden, a smile found its way to her face, and she realized that her body was humming with satisfaction. He held her gaze long enough that her hands stilled on the mare and she turned away.

"Thank you, Elton. Remember discretion." She heard Malaki's voice, but did not move to witness the interaction. Her attention had found its way back to the mare who seemed entirely pleased with the attention it was receiving.

"Her name is Wanderer," Malaki said quietly, his voice carrying slightly on the wind.

"Yes, your name suits you very well," she said as she moved to stroke the mare's forehead once more.

"You are fond of horses?" asked Malaki, moving towards the black horse the boy had brought with Wanderer.

"I have always loved them. They are so large and powerful, but they always choose peace," she said absently as she moved to Wanderer's side.

Wren pulled up her dress in one hand and used the other to grip the saddle. Using the strength in her arm and her leg she pulled herself up and swung her leg over the side of Wanderer. She heard a low rumble of laughter from Malaki and found him watching her with undiluted amusement.

“I seemed to have forgotten you grew up on a farm.” He was still chuckling when he mounted his own horse smoothly. The stallion shifted under the prince’s weight. The stallion stood taller than Wanderer and Wren found herself having to crane her neck in order to see Malaki. Wren took in the sight of Malaki on the horse and she couldn’t help but feel like she was seeing a painting. Malaki all clad in black with his dark hair loose in the wind’s tendrils upon the dark stallion made for a fearsome sight.

Wren took a deep breath. “What is his name?”

Malaki’s mouth twitched upward. “Midnight.”

Wren gave a small laugh. “That is not very original.”

His smile matched hers. “I was twelve when I named him.”

“Well, in that case, I suppose it is understandable.” Wren nodded graciously, earning her a small chuckle from the prince.

Malaki clicked at the horse and tapped his leg against Midnight’s flank urging him forward. Wren mimicked the action with Wanderer who heeded her easily. They maintained a slow pace and Wren felt grateful as she enjoyed the feel of the horse beneath her and the wind whipping around her body like an old friend. Each breeze brought with it the smell of dew on the fresh grass bringing her back to the farm in fond memories.

“What are you thinking of?” inquired Malaki from her side.

Wren tried to muster a smile, but the thought of the farm reminded her how much she missed her family. The castle didn’t feel as confining as it once had, but she would never truly be at home there. She missed Georgie so much that her heart ached in her chest enough that she put her hand to it trying to soothe the pain.

“I miss my cousin.” She was surprised at her own honesty.

“Georgie?” confirmed Malaki.

Wren turned her gaze to him in askance. She had never talked to him about her family or anything about her life before coming to Valmere.

He seemed to understand her silent question. “Sophie.”

The name forced a small smile from Wren. “Busybody.”

He grinned at the admonishment. “I’m sorry that you have to miss him.”

Wren became painfully aware of the ache in her heart once more. “I don’t have words for how much I miss him. I miss my aunt and uncle, of course. But Georgie. I worry about what my disappearance has done to him. I’ve been with him every day of his life. It feels like I’m missing a piece of my soul.”

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Malaki looked at her, considering. “He knows you love him. He won’t feel abandoned, Wren.”

Wren wondered how he knew the unspoken fear. She worried so often that he would think she chose to leave him. That he would feel like she hadn’t wanted to be with him when he was the most important person in the world to her. Wren wiped at a tear she hadn’t realized she’d shed. She nodded, unable to meet Malaki’s gaze. She lifted the hood of her cloak to shield her from the sudden cold she felt.

“I’m sorry, Wren. I didn’t mean to upset you.” He sounded so sincere that it caused her tears to fall with more fervor.

“It’s not your fault. It’s important to be reminded of why I need to get back.” She knew her voice was thick with emotion and she couldn’t stand the pity she felt radiating from him. She kicked her heels into Wanderer’s flanks and the mare increased her speed until they were galloping. She heard Malaki curse behind her and urge his own horse forward. The wind blew back her hood, and she found she didn’t mind as the cold air hit her face, reminding her of the happiness she had felt when she first left the castle.

Malaki caught up to her, and she turned, seeing concern in his eyes that was quickly replaced with relief when she smiled reassuringly at him. She didn’t want to talk any longer of what she had left behind, but she did want to feel the exhilaration of riding and feel the air pass around her, caressing her skin. Malaki turned his gaze forward and kept pace with her as they rode along the rolling countryside with only the sun creeping upon the horizon and the greenery of the forests around them.

Too soon, homes with smoking chimneys came into view and she knew that they had already reached their destination. They slowed their horses back to a leisurely walk, and Wren felt the familiar calm of having ridden come over her. Whenever she had felt trapped she would take one of the horses and go for a ride to clear her mind. She always came back feeling more at peace.

She looked at Malaki as he slowed his pace alongside her. His dark hair was windswept, but his pale cheeks had a flush to them. “Thank you for asking me to come today,” she said breathlessly and unexpectedly.

He turned his gaze to her, and she could tell he was just as surprised as she was by the sudden admission. He seemed to be warring with himself, but only said, “Don’t thank me yet.”

Wren bit her lip at the warning in his voice. She suddenly wished that she had been more cautious about accepting the offer. She hadn’t asked any questions, but had agreed on the sole promise of leaving the castle walls. Before she could ask him what he had meant a small voice carried on the wind.

“Prince Kai! I knew you would come. I told my mama that you would be here soon, but she said you got married and wouldn’t be leaving the castle anytime soon. Wait till I tell her that I was right and she was wrong!” A small blond-haired boy was running to meet them at the edge of the village. They came to a stop and Malaki easily dismounted and ruffled the boy’s hair.

“Hey!” shouted the boy as he tried to straighten out the already unruly hair.

“Were you playing watch guard again, James?” asked Malaki, smiling fondly at the boy as he tied the horse to a post.

“Someone needs to watch over the village,” stated James as if it was an obvious fact.

Wren smiled as she dismounted Wanderer and brought her alongside Midnight. Malaki reached out for her reins and Wren handed them to him with a murmured thank you.

Malaki looked at her, something she couldn't discern passing across his face. He seemed to recover and smiled at the boy. "I don't think you should tell your mother that she was wrong. I don't recall her being the type of woman to appreciate the reminder."

"Well then she ought not to be wrong again." Said the boy haughtily.

Malaki shook his head, a fond smile playing on his lips. "James, this is Princess Wren."

The little boy, James, beamed up at her. "You're real pretty."

Wren laughed and thanked the boy who then ran away, presumably to tell his mother of his find.

Malaki gestured for her to follow, and they made their way through the dirt-paved streets. Many of the villagers were already moving, and to her surprise, when they saw her and the prince, they bowed and smiled affectionately at them. The contrast between how people reacted to Malaki within the castle and here was astounding. They came to a large building and Malaki knocked once before entering, Wren right behind him.

The smell of fresh bread hit her as soon as the door opened and she breathed in deeply. The room around her was similar to the bakery back home causing her a pang of homesickness. A young woman appeared from the back patting her hands on her apron causing white powder to accumulate in the air around her. When the woman looked up and took in Malaki her face lit up in a genuine smile.

“Ah, here is our long-lost prince. We had feared we had lost you to the new princess.” Noticing Wren, the woman curtsied. “You must be our new princess. It is a great honor to meet you, Your Highness.”

Wren smiled at the woman, liking her immediately. Malaki smiled back at the woman and said, “I am sorry to have stayed away so long, Sarai. I hope you and Erick are doing well.”

She rubbed her hands on her apron. “We cannot complain, that is for sure, which is much in thanks to you.”

“You had no issue receiving the coin then?” he asked casually.

“No, your messenger was very thorough, though we did miss seeing you. It was more than generous, and I am happy to say the whole town is thriving. We are so grateful for you.”

He seemed to disregard the praise and turned to Wren. “Forgive me, Wren, this is Sarai, the finest baker in all of Valmere.”

The woman smiled at him affectionately and waved her hands as if swatting away the compliment. “He exaggerates.”

“I do not,” he said seriously.

She only gave him another wave of her arm as if she could bat away the compliment. “What can I do for Your Highnesses today?” she asked, her cheeks flushed.

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“I wanted Wren to try some of your fresh bread if it isn’t too much trouble,” the prince said casually.

Sarai nodded and turned to return from where she had entered from. Wren refrained from staring openly at him. She couldn’t help, but wonder just how many versions of the crown prince there were. She had only ever seen him converse so openly with Sophie and yet that was different as she knew they had been friends all their lives.

When Sarai returned she was holding a perfectly sliced piece of golden bread with warm melting butter on it. Wren reached out for the offered bread as she thanked the woman. She brought the still warm bread to her lips and was shocked at how it easily melted in her mouth. She closed her eyes as she enjoyed the medley of flavors that sang. When she finished chewing she opened her eyes and looked to Sarai in awe.

“I can assure you the prince was not lying. This is the best bread I have ever tasted.”

Sarai glowed with pride and sent them away with several fresh loaves despite being reminded they had plenty of bread within the castle.

After leaving Sarai’s they walked around the village, mingling with each villager who seemed happy to see their prince. A young group of boys were kicking a ball in the courtyard at the center of the village and Wren felt something unravel in her at the familiar sight. Her eyes caught unruly blond hair running towards them and she smiled when she realized it was the same boy from earlier.

He bent over resting his hands on his knees as he reached them, catching his breath. “She said she’d have my head for being prideful, but I was still right.” Both Wren and

Malaki laughed at the earnestness in his voice. “Will you play with us, Prince Kai?”

To Wren’s great surprise, Malaki took off his cloak and went to lay it in the muddy ground next to her. Wren reached for it instead, intercepting the beautiful cloak’s descent into filth. He smiled up at her and began to unbuckle his sword belt. She held out her other hand and he placed it in hers, still smiling at her as he tied up his hair into a neat knot on top of his head.

He then jogged over to where the boys were playing where they engaged in a competitive game. Wren quickly deduced that one side was meant to kick the ball past a certain line in order to score while the other side tried to prevent the act from occurring. Their game began to draw attention and many of the villagers came by to watch.

Some teenagers joined in and she could see Malaki’s forehead was wet from exertion. He was lining up to kick the ball across the field when one of the older boys appeared in front of him and kicked it away from him, causing Malaki to fall into the muddy ground.

Wren looked on anxiously, unsure how the prince would respond, but was surprised to see him laugh and clasp hands with the boy who helped him to stand. The crowd that had now amassed cheered loudly, and Wren soon found herself invested in the game. Malaki scored a point, and she was surprised to hear her own voice join the crowd. The village was filled with such joy and laughter that Wren felt a lightness in her heart that she hadn’t felt since she arrived.

When the game ended, the villagers all rushed to Malaki to speak to him and he patiently spoke with each one. By the time he finally returned to her, his cheeks were flushed and his hair damp with sweat. Mud covered his fine clothes and even his face.

Wren reached up to remove a piece lingering on his cheek and the prince stilled

beneath her touch. She instantly pulled back her hand as if burned, realizing what she had done. Malaki grabbed her hand in response and his blue eyes locked onto hers even as silence stretched between them.

Wren inwardly rebelled at the flush that rose in her cheeks before turning away like the coward she was. She was saved by an elderly woman holding a walking stick coming towards them. “Well, then, let me meet this mysterious Princess.” Malaki smiled, dropping Wren’s hand.

“I am sorry to have kept her from you, Rose.” Malaki moved towards the elderly woman and took her other arm in his.

“Nonsense, boy, I can walk just fine on my own.”

Wren noted the old woman did not release his arm all the same. They stopped in front of Wren, and the older woman made a show of eyeing her up and down. She gestured for Wren to lean down towards her, and as she did, the woman took Wren’s chin in her hands and turned her head back and forth. Wren stilled under her scrutiny, unused to being so obviously appraised.

The woman released her and not taking her eyes from Wren’s she said, “You have some explaining to do, boy.”

If Malaki was surprised or offended at her statement, he did not show it. The old woman merely turned, taking the prince’s arm with her and began walking away. “You, too, Princess. Let’s be off. Go get your things from her, boy, she’s not your mule.”

Malaki chuckled and removed himself from the woman and made his way to Wren where he took his sword and cloak from her.

They made their way to a large home at the center of the village and followed Rose in. When they entered, they were met by a warm room with a fireplace and a sitting area. Rose sat down with all the grace of old age and Malaki and Wren took seats across from her.

“Well, where did you come from girl?” Rose said impatiently.

“Crishaven, ma’am,” replied Wren.

“I don’t recall asking you for the lie, girl.”

Wren looked at Malaki with panic, but he only shrugged a shoulder.

“Very few things slip past Rose,” he explained. “Wren is from another world. My father and the Bishop brought her here, but we don’t know why.”

Wren was shocked at the prince’s candor.

The old woman nodded. “Wicked man, the Bishop. His thirst for power will be the death of us all.” Turning to focus on Malaki, she said, “You see how the village is thriving? No doubt you think it is due to your benefaction, but you know that it is more than that.”

She paused, closing her eyes as if listening to something only she could hear. When she opened her eyes it was as if her eyes latched onto Wren. “The wind dances and the land sings. Our crops are suddenly plentiful and the weather consistently agreeable. This began a month ago.”

She felt Malaki’s gaze on her and when she turned it was as if he had never seen her.

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“I don’t understand,” Wren said, as anxiety worked its way through her.

“Wren, you have been here a month now,” Malaki said patiently.

“A coincidence, I am sure,” she replied, trying to deflect the accusation.

“I would not be so sure, girl. Come, sit by me,” said Rose, and Wren knew that it was not a request. Wren gathered that it was not wise to refuse Rose and did as she was asked. Rose studied her before putting her attention back to Malaki. “Has she changed in that time?”

“Yes,” breathed Malaki, and Wren whipped her head to him, wanting to demand what he meant by that. She did not have to wait long. “She grows more beautiful by the day, as if life is pouring into her.” He said the words while unflinchingly meeting her eyes.

All Wren could do was stare at him as shock quickly replaced the anxiety that had been sliding throughout her. She searched his eyes, looking for the jest in the words or even the cruel bite of them, but only found sincerity. A feeling warm and unfamiliar took root in her at the honesty in his ocean eyes.

“I see. Yes, I believe I understand.” The words released Wren from whatever spell she had been under and she ripped her eyes from Malaki’s to Rose, hope blossoming in her chest.

“For her weakness for humanity

She was thrown from above

Cursed with a life of mortality

The price to be love”

Rose’s voice was severe, but her wrinkled face was full of wonder. “My ancestor gave that prophecy and it has been handed down to each generation. Gods spare me, I never thought I would be the one to see its fulfillment.”

Malaki was suddenly kneeling in front of Rose, taking her hand in his. “Rose, what do you know?”

Wren’s heart lurched at the pleading in his voice and some part of her knew that his plea was for her.

The older woman shook her head as if clearing it. When she regained her thought she stared at Wren, her eyes alight with knowing. “Malaki, my boy, you have married a goddess.”

Chapter 20

Wren felt as if she were drowning and couldn’t breathe. Her mind had heard what the woman said, but it still did not make sense. Of all the thoughts and theories that had crossed her mind about why she was brought here and what she was, her being a goddess had never been one of them. Logic began to creep back into her after the bold words and Wren became sure that she had either misheard or the woman was mad. She couldn’t be a goddess because she grew up on a farm. A farm with her aunt, uncle, and cousin who had also never shown any affinity for the divine.

Her eyes drifted to Malaki, searching for him to defend her. She had never seen the

blatant shock on his beautiful, defined features. He leaned forward in the chair and ran his hand over his face. “Yes. Why didn’t I see it?” he muttered to no one in particular.

Wren’s mouth dropped open and shock filled her entire body. She gripped the silk fabric of her dress above her knees, trying to ground herself against the tide of panic rushing into her. “Neither one of you is making sense,” Wren managed to say, knowing the words were weak even to her.

Malaki looked over at her with such empathy that it only served to make her panic worsen. “Wren, think about it. How has being in Valmere made you feel? Even this morning when we left the castle. It was like the land called to you. And it did, Wren. It did, because it’s your magic that’s coursing through it.” The way he said the words were as if he were also working through the logic of them. Trying to put the pieces together as he considered them.

“I don’t have magic,” she said stubbornly.

“You did and you do. Or did I imagine that vase flying at my face?” He tried to give her a teasing smile, but it failed to hit its mark.

She shook her head and stood up feeling as if she couldn’t breathe. “I need one of you to explain what is happening.” She felt the rising panic and felt her breathing coming faster.

Malaki was at her side in an instant, his hands cupping her face forcing her to look up at him. “Breathe, Wren.”

She focused on his blue eyes, breathing in and out, just like she had done with him once before for an entirely different reason. His eyes bore into her, but she knew what he was trying to do for her. She felt her breathing relax to a more reasonable pace and

his hands loosen on her.

His blue eyes searched hers and when he seemed sure that she would not pass out he released his hold on her face, stepping away to stand by the fireplace.

“I saw it in you, the instant I looked at you. Power rises from you and your skin radiates with it.” Rose spoke as if it was mere fact and the world wasn’t crashing down around Wren. “The goddess, Serephina, gave her magic to protect us and in return she was banished to live a life of mortality.”

“Exactly, a life of mortality, Rose. She died,” said Malaki, who only moments ago had been agreeing with the old woman.

“A curse does not just last one lifetime, boy. That would be no curse at all. She was reborn over and over, doomed to live amongst those she chose over her siblings.”

Malaki shook his head. “Then why wasn’t she born in Valmere? Why was she born in another world devoid of magic?”

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“I don’t know,” replied Rose, slightly defeated. “The prophecy speaks of an end to the curse, but it doesn’t give anything more.”

Malaki’s face contorted with rage as he fixed his glare on Rose. “They brought her here, Rose. Why?”

Rose did not cower under his glare as most people did. Instead she met his gaze and said, “I am not a seeing eye, boy,” she admonished him. “There was a rumor of a second verse, a second prophecy, not given by my ancestors. Maybe they know of it? Perhaps it is your father you should ask.”

Malaki gave a grim laugh. “Yes, let me ask my father why he brought a reincarnated goddess living on a farm into Valmere and then married me to her?”

Wren couldn’t help the sharp sting of hurt at his words though she did not understand why.

“That is your choice,” Rose said as if she were washing her hands of the matter.

Malaki sneered at her, his rage growing by the second. “Malaki. You need to calm down,” Wren said the words slowly.

His gaze turned to her. “Calm down? Wren, how am I supposed to calm down if I don’t even know what they want from you? How am I to keep you safe if I don’t know from what?”

Wren stared at him, feeling as though one minute she was drowning under the weight

of his words and then not all at once. “I don’t know,” was all she could think to say.

Malaki didn’t take his eyes from Wren as he said, “Is there anything else that you can tell us, Rose?”

“Only that she calls back her magic into her and it is why you have seen the changes in her. I only worry what will happen if what little magic that remains in our world were to leave us.” Her words were said with gravity.

Wren felt fixated in place by Malaki’s gaze on her, feeling as if he were begging her to give him something she didn’t have. Wren nearly let out a sigh of relief when he broke away to look at Rose. “You think she is stealing the magic from the land?”

“It is not stealing if it was yours to begin with. She is taking back what is hers, perhaps unconsciously.” Rose shrugged as if it were nothing.

“The goddess gave her power to protect Valmere. Without it, would it not leave us without protection?” Malaki seemed to calm down with the need to theorize.

Rose only shrugged again. “What is protection against vengeful gods?”

Malaki stood perfectly still. “Do you think the other gods are still angry for what she did?”

“A god has eternity to stew on the wrongs done to them,” Rose said simply as if none of this was cause for concern.

Malaki paled at her words and his eyes drifted to Wren once more. “Don’t be so nearsighted, boy. Who was it that sentenced Serephina to her life of mortality?”

It was Wren who answered, “Lucius.”

Rose nodded. “Very good. Why did he do it?”

“To protect her,” Wren answered, remembering the story well.

Rose nodded enthusiastically. “An act of protection does not usually lead to certain doom, does it?”

A flicker of hope lit within Wren’s chest. Malaki felt it, too, from the way he nodded. “We need the other part of the prophecy.”

No one said anything, and it was just as well because everyone in the room knew it to be true.

Chapter 21

They rode without haste back to the castle. Conversation seemed like it might as well have been miles away after so many revelations. The weight of them all was heavy on them both. Even the air did not breathe life into Wren like it had before, not after she learned why it had in the first place. Questions ran through her like water over a stone.

How could she be a reincarnated goddess? It didn’t make sense that she would grow up on a farm in a different world only to be the reincarnated goddess of a world she had never heard of or knew existed.

Wren’s thoughts circled until her mind felt fuzzy and her heart heavy. She hadn’t even noticed that they had come upon the castle till they were stopping and having the horses taken to the stables. Wren patted Wanderer fondly before the stable hand took her. Wren hadn’t realized how long they had been in the village as the sun began to set behind them. She absentmindedly thought that dinner would be starting soon, the thought settling in her like vinegar. She could not tolerate the small talk and

mingling after so many burdens were placed upon her.

Malaki and Wren walked in silence through the halls. Wren was grateful the silence did not feel pained or uncomfortable, as if they both needed the quiet to hear themselves think over the roaring in their ears. Malaki passed her rooms without saying anything, and Wren couldn't bring herself to be offended that he was finished with her presence. Wren turned the doorknob, preparing to crawl into bed and forget about the day, when she felt so much as saw Malaki still before he turned towards her.

"I would very much appreciate it if you came with me." There was a strain in his voice that Wren had not heard from him convincing her to nod her head in agreement.

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When they reached his door, he unlocked it and pushed it open, gesturing for her to go in first. Wren stepped through, feeling the awkwardness build between them. The door to her room was still open from when they had left in the morning. Malaki took off his cloak and his sword, throwing them on the ground. His boots and clothes were still muddy from the earlier game, but he didn't seem to notice as he walked across the plush red carpet.

Without preamble, he turned and looked at her. "I'm sorry." His voice strained.

Of all the things that Wren had expected him to say, she had not expected the arrogant prince to invite her into his rooms to apologize. "Why are you sorry?" she breathed.

He ran his hand through his hair. "Because I don't know how to protect you. Because I don't have the answers you need. I thought, maybe Rose might help, but it only made it worse."

Wren shook her head. It was odd he should choose to apologize for the one thing he shouldn't have. "I don't think it made it worse. At least we have an idea of what could be happening." She felt calmer than she should.

"Could be?" he questioned her, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, I don't think you can just expect me to believe I am a reincarnated goddess because one old lady tells me so, do you?" She threw up her arms in exasperation.

He looked at her, painfully serious. "You are."

She shook her head at him, suddenly weary of this conversation. “I don’t really want to do this anymore, Malaki. I am tired.”

She turned to leave, but he took a step towards her, as if he would physically stop her. She peered at him, a question forming in her mind. He had never seemed so unsure of himself and for that alone she paused, willing to hear what he needed to say if only to assuage her own curiosity.

Malaki ran his hand over his face as if he understood the opportunity she was giving him, but didn’t know what to do with it. When he finally spoke, it was without his usual confident cadence. “I know today was a lot. I know you may not be able to process it. I understand that.” Each thought was said carefully as if he were meticulously forming the sentences. “We don’t have to talk about it, but please let me at least make you some tea.”

A small smile played on Wren’s lips. “Is that something we do? Have tea?” She had meant the words to be playful, but his face hardened.

Wren instantly regretted the words, only wanting peace between them. Taking a deep breath she took a seat at the small table and looked at him expectantly.

Tension fell from Malaki’s shoulders as he moved about the room, preparing some concoction of tea he kept with him. Wren had expected him to call for a servant, but apparently he had been serious when he had said he would make it. Wren realized that there was much she didn’t know about him and for some reason the thought wasn’t as unsettling as it should have been.

Wren murmured a small thank you when he set the tea in front of her, before taking his own seat. She lifted the steaming cup and the smell of orange and bergamot rose to greet her. Blowing on it softly, she watched the steam drift from its path into nothingness.

The silence stretched between them as if to cement the realization that they were very much alone. Fresh anxiety bloomed as she realized it was time to acknowledge that things had changed between them though she couldn't say exactly how.

Deeming the liquid in the cup cooled off enough to attempt to drink it, she brought it to her lips and felt the warm liquid coat her throat in a soothing flood. The mixture of orange and bergamot played together in a pleasant sort of dance and she raised her eyes to Malaki, finding his gaze already on her. "This is very good," she said without a hint of duplicity.

Malaki's lip quirked up as if he were pleased with the compliment. "It was my mother's favorite blend."

Wren bit her lip, trying to decide whether to ask more or not. It had already been a taxing day and the way he said the words it was clear that it was a delicate subject. Her curiosity got the better of her in the end. "How old were you when she died?"

Malaki looked down at the cup he twirled in his hands. "I was six when she died. They say her heart gave out."

His voice was quiet while he said it and she could tell that even if he had experienced the loss when he was six, it was a wound that never truly healed for him. Wren often wondered what was worse.

To know and love someone or to have never known them at all and only wonder at what could have been. She had been younger than Malaki had when she lost her own parents and her memories of them were fleeting if not non-existent. It was an anger she harbored towards the universe that she had no memories of them to cherish, but seeing Malaki's pain she wondered if it hadn't been mercy.

"I'm sorry. That must have and still must be very difficult for you."

He raised his eyes to hers as if searching for any deception. She fought down the urge to be angry with him for even thinking that she would be so crass.

“It was,” he said, raising the cup to his lips. He paused as he set the cup back down. “My mother used to take me to the village often. She thought it was important for me to know my people and how they lived. Rose’s daughter was one of my mother’s maids and they had become friends leading to many nights spent at Rose’s house. I remember how different my mother seemed when she was there. Almost like she belonged there more than in the castle.”

Wren barely breathed as Malaki’s story unfurled around them. She didn’t know what to make of the sudden altruism, but she also knew that she didn’t want to ruin whatever was happening by saying the wrong thing.

When she didn’t say anything, Malaki continued. “After my mother died I spent more time than my father approved of in the village and with Rose. More than anything or anyone she was what got me through those days. You’ve met my father. While I believe he loved my mother he didn’t know how to show empathy or console his sons. Rose never turned me away when I showed up at her door. She always ushered me in and made me feel like I belonged there almost like my mother had. She will never understand what she did for me, what she has always done for me.”

Tears pricked at Wren’s eyes at the sincerity and raw emotion in his voice. Before Wren knew what she was doing, she lifted her hand to put it over his, settling on the table. Malaki stilled under her touch and his eyes locked on to where their hands met.

Wren felt a sudden wave of uncertainty fill her at his reaction, and she moved to take her hand back, but he grabbed it in his. She raised her eyes to meet his, her heart thundering in her chest. He looked at her with warmth and without the confidence that he usually wore like a second skin.

Her stomach fluttered in response. “I’m sorry I called her some old woman,” Wren blurted.

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Malaki was only momentarily startled by her admission before he burst out in deep laughter. Wren pulled her hand away then to nervously fiddle with her skirts, unsure what to make of his reaction. When he finally regained himself he said with tears pricking at his eyes. “Next time you see her, you can tell her that you called her ‘some old woman’ and then we will be even.”

Wren smiled, despite how awkward she felt. “It turns out I don’t have enough steel in my blood for that recompense.”

Malaki chuckled once more. “Nor do I. I may be set to inherit a kingdom, but I would rather hide under my bed than incur her wrath.”

It was odd to see him in this way. To see him so unguarded and human. For the first time since meeting him, Wren was struck that she might finally understand what Sophie had been telling her all along.

Chapter 22

Wren awoke still groggy from the previous night. She and Malaki had parted ways shortly after she was through with her tea in favor of her bed. She had nearly fallen asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. She only had spared a few thoughts to wonder at what last night meant for their strange relationship.

Up until then, she had never given much thought to it knowing that they had been tied together through no will of their own. Something felt different after yesterday, and when she had reached out for his hand, she knew something had changed. Wren shook the thoughts away, unwilling to tackle the mountain of emotions and

implications. She shifted her body to roll over and came face to face with Sophie, blonde hair splayed around her erratically.

Wren smiled at her friend's sleeping form and attempted to wiggle out of the bed without waking her. When she was nearly halfway out of the bed Sophie mumbled, "Good morning, goddess."

Wren felt the blood drain from her face. She should have known that he would tell Sophie. Wren was quickly realizing there were very few things the pair kept secret from each other. This early in the morning, Wren wasn't sure if it was endearing or horribly annoying. She couldn't think of anything to say so she merely flopped back down on the bed. Sophie sat up and smiled at her. "To think this whole time I've been sleeping with a goddess."

"That isn't funny, Sophie," admonished Wren. "I guess I am not surprised he told you."

Sophie laughed. "I didn't really give him a choice."

Wren sighed. "That makes sense."

Wren leaned her head back against the bed and took in a deep breath. She wished she could go back to sleep and forget about it all. She knew she would have to confront the possibility eventually, but it still felt like more than she could handle. If she admitted there was a possibility that Rose was right, it would lead to too many questions and too few answers.

"I can see it, you know. He's right. You look different since you first came here. At first, I just thought it was because of the hard life you lived, but it's more than that." Sophie tilted her head as if she were seeing the changes right then.

Wren didn't know what to say having already heard this particular accusation, but she couldn't forget the words Malaki used when he had said the same thing. "She grows more beautiful by the day as if life is pouring into her." Wren put a hand to her fluttering stomach and cursed herself for being so easily affected.

"Sophie, I don't know what to do or what to think." Her voice held all the exhaustion she felt.

"Then accept that you don't know and keep going anyway," said Sophie simply. "Sometimes the most courageous act is blindly done."

Wren smiled at her friend. "You are really something, Soph."

"Well, I'm no goddess."

Wren threw the pillow at her which Sophie batted away easily. Wren shifted herself closer to Sophie and rested her head against hers. Whether she was a goddess or nothing, she was endlessly grateful for this friendship.

Chapter 23

After an entire day spent with Sophie ignoring the rest of the world, Wren felt more at peace. Her mind still wandered and she shoved down the fear that followed thoughts of the prophecy, but there was a part of her that felt safe. Since the first day she had come to Valmere she had felt safe with Sophie.

Her disarming humor and easy laugh always made Wren feel like she could handle what came next. In truth, she hesitated to even think what her time here would have looked like without the other woman.

Wren knew of only one other person who had made her feel at ease and safe. It had

been days since she had last seen Wesley and she was surprised to find how much she missed him. The prince had an easy way about him that she had come to appreciate and revel in. There was no tension between them or secrets making everything easy.

The part of her soul that was restless found her wandering around the castle in search of Wesley. Sophie was off with her mother for the day and Wren found she didn't want to be alone. Her wanderings brought her to the familiar outdoor garden where she had first met Wesley. Wren's heart leapt as her eyes landed on the blond haired, green eyed prince bent over his violin.

As soon as he came into view he lifted his head, a smile lighting his handsome face. "Wren! To what do I owe this honor?"

"I didn't know you owned this part of the castle," Wren said with mock annoyance.

"I didn't know you could produce such poor jokes. Will you tell me what is wrong?" he asked, gesturing at the spot next to him.

Wren furrowed her brows. "I didn't say anything was wrong."

Wesley frowned. "No, but it is written all over you."

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Wren took the seat next to him, busying herself with smoothing out her green silk dress. “What if I don’t want to talk about it?” She wondered at his ability to see the weight she carried. She had woken up feeling safer after spending the day with Sophie, but the prophecy and the possibility of not going home for so long was weighing her down enough that she was trying to hide from it.

“Then we don’t talk about it,” he said simply, but concern burrowed its way into his face.

She nudged his shoulder trying to lighten the mood, but she knew it was unsuccessful. She had sought him out because he made things seem better than they were, and yet somehow she managed to make things difficult. “Will you play for me?” she asked quietly.

A tear slid down her cheek despite all her willpower.

Wesley set the violin down and looked at her. “Let me help you, tell me what I can do.”

Wesley looked like there was something else he wanted to say, but he only nodded and picked up the violin. The music started low and as his fingers strummed and the stick moved across the bottom she closed her eyes and embraced the sound. They were mournful sounds much like the feelings building with her.

Despair filled the notes and she couldn’t stop the tears from flowing. Much to Wesley’s credit, he did not stop playing, despite noticing her distress. In each note, she thought of Cara and of Georgie. She thought of how even when she made it home

she would leave a part of her heart here. She was tied between two worlds and there was no hope for her to truly be happy and at peace.

The music stopped suddenly and then started again quiet, but building till the mournful music became one of hope and passion. She could feel the power through the notes coming from the instrument as if it were flowing into her very bones. Somehow she knew there had been loss and sadness, but in the end there was hope and healing. A lesson if the listener was willing to hear it. When Wesley stopped playing, Wren had her eyes closed as tears flowed like rain from her.

Wesley wiped away a tear, his fingers lingering on her skin. Her blood rushed warm at the touch and she opened her eyes, finding him looking at her, his expression pained. "I would take away your pain if you only tell me what is causing you so much distress."

She smiled, putting her hand over his resting against her cheek. "I know you would. You are a good man, Wesley." She breathed in deeply, feeling the pressure of his hand on her face.

She knew that she could trust him, that all she had to do was open her mouth and tell him about the prophecy, about what she might be, about how she came to Valmere. She knew he would work with her to find answers and that she would be better for his support, but somehow she couldn't bring herself to cross that bridge.

She knew she was a coward, but instead of the truth she said, "That was beautiful, what you just played."

"It was a song about a king who married his chosen queen only to have her die. He finds hope again in his people and by devoting himself to the kingdom ruling as she would have ruled." His voice was a near whisper.

“That’s very sad and very beautiful,” she whispered back.

“Wren.” Her name a whisper on his lips.

She answered his unspoken demand, but when her eyes met his every thought she ever had went murky. He was looking at her in a way that he shouldn't be. He raised a finger and ran it slowly along her jaw until it stopped to rest at her chin. Wren thought she might never exhale again and found that she was strangely not alarmed at the prospect. He tilted her chin up slightly and she knew she should say something, should stop what was about to happen.

When his lips fell on hers all thoughts left her.

His kiss was gentle, as if in askance. Her lips moved against his in answer. Wesley inhaled a sharp breath and wrapped one hand in her loose waves, pulling her closer while the other still held her cheek.

Despite the sudden burning and sensation of need in her, the kiss was painfully gentle as if they were something fragile that neither one wanted to break. Need gave way to logic and the kiss became more urgent. He nudged her lips open with his tongue as he groaned against her lips deepening the kiss.

As if awakening from a spell, Wesley made a pained noise and broke away from the kiss. Wren searched his eyes trying to understand.

“Wren.” He was breathless and her name a rasp. “We can’t.”

She pulled back from him, unable to understand the abrupt change of heart.

“Oh, gods, Wren. Don’t look at me like that. I want you, gods help me, I know it’s wrong, but I have wanted you since you first walked into this gods forsaken garden.

Do you know that I come here every godsdamned day hoping you would be here?"

"You are swearing a lot," she said quietly.

His laugh was light despite the heavy air around them. Humor dissipated as the reality of who they were settled back in. Pressing his forehead against hers he blew out a breath, the heat warming her.

"You are married, Wren, and not just to anyone."

At the stark reminder of Malaki everything she had felt earlier tasted like poison. She pulled back from him once more and shot him an accusing glare. She didn't need the reminder, but a small voice in the back of her mind said that apparently she did.

"He doesn't care for me." She felt the lie in her very bones. Whatever she told herself, she could no longer deny that in his own way, Malaki did care about her. She wasn't ready to make sense of what happened between them the other night. He had let her in and this was how she responded.

Shame flooded her and she suddenly wished she was anywhere else. As if her mind rebelled against the shame building in her she remembered that she wasn't given a choice in her marriage. Had she had the choice she would have never found herself tied to the dark prince. The sentiments warred in her so much that she barely noticed when Wesley stood up.

"I would do it, you know." He smiled sadly down at her. "I would start a godsdamned war for you, if I thought you wanted it."

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She didn't know what to say to him. She wanted to yell at him that she did want it, but there was still so much she didn't understand. So many emotions that were at war within her. So she simply said, "Your language is out of control."

He smiled sadly at her and moved towards her. His presence filling all of her senses. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead lingering. "I am here for you, Wren. If it is within my power, I will always give it to you."

"But you won't start a war for me?" she tried to joke.

He shook his head. "You didn't listen to me, I said if I thought you wanted it." He turned to pick up his violin and as he passed he brushed his hand against hers.

Wren stood motionless for some time after he left, his kiss still lingering on her lips and her guilt making her heart heavy.

Chapter 24

Wren found herself laying on the bench that she had previously shared with Wesley only an hour ago. The warm sunlight covered her like it was claiming her as part of the garden and Wren was loath to remind it that she was only a temporary fixture. She found she would much rather stay there and hide from the reality of what she had done. She had taken something that was safe and easy and convoluted it into something that was complicated and forbidden.

Wesley had been right. As long as she was stuck in Valmere, she was tied to Malaki. As much as she wanted to rage against her lack of autonomy, she knew she had put

Wesley in a terrible position. Just when she thought she had properly scolded herself, she remembered the kiss and the heat it had brought to her. She remembered how he smelt of coriander and cinnamon. She remembered how need built in her and how his lips fit against hers perfectly. She remembered how he had pulled away from her and embarrassment flooded her soon followed by anger that there was so little she could control.

With a dramatic sigh, Wren extricated herself from the bench, knowing that she couldn't hide there forever. She could possibly hide in her rooms for a considerable amount of time. Not nearly long enough to assuage the guilt and settle the anger raging throughout her, but at least it was something.

The halls leading to her room seemed particularly bare of servants and nobility coming and going, causing an eerie feeling to build in her. Wren rubbed her temple trying to rid herself of the confusing jumble of emotions taking up space in her.

A sense of unease and dread forced her to stand entirely still. It was the distinct feeling of being watched. She whirled around and found the Bishop watching her from the direction she had just come. His gray eyes bore into her, and she resisted the urge to scratch at her mark. Malaki's warning to stay away from him rang in her mind. Wren shot him a curt glare before turning back to her rooms.

"Did you have a nice trip to the village yesterday?" he called in his distinct nasally voice that made Wren want to cringe. Wren turned to face him, willing her face to remain neutral.

"Forgive me, I am unable to linger, I have an appointment," she lied smoothly, the need to be away from him growing. It was difficult to see him, let alone be near him without seeing Cara's lifeless body. That this murderer could walk free still kept her up at night even with Malaki's promise of revenge.

He came closer to her, and Wren fought the urge to take a step back, she would not let him see her fear. He would only know disdain and disgust from her. She wished she had some way of defending herself or at least some way to call for help, but she had the terrible feeling that if she called out no one would answer. When he was nearly to her, he fixed his eyes on her.

“Yes, I suppose your activity in the garden might make one seek refuge.”

She stared at him, feeling as if she must not have heard him correctly. Her hatred receded slightly to make room for the shock of his words.

“You will quickly learn, child, that I have eyes everywhere. There is nothing you can hide from me,” he said as he closed the distance between her and grabbed her arm, bending her finger to the point of pain in order to pull it from the hole that held her sleeve to her snugly. She tried to pull away, but his grasp was unyielding.

Before Wren could protest, he was pulling up her sleeve and they were both looking at the tattoo marking her skin.

He smiled a self-satisfied smile. “I wonder which one of them gave you this.” He let her rip her hand away, holding it close to her body. “The king expects you at dinner tonight, your absence has been noted.”

He turned and walked away from her back into the depths of whatever crevice he had crawled out of. Wren’s heart thundered in her chest and she stumbled backwards before turning and walking as fast as she could back to her rooms. Her skin crawled and anxiety raged like a tidal wave within her. Somehow he knew about it all. He had seen her in the garden with Wesley and he knew about her mark.

The Bishop could do unspeakable damage with what he knew and Wren was sure that she couldn’t even begin to understand the scope of his ill intent. When Wren reached

her door she was nearly hyperventilating.

What would happen to Wesley if he told the king about what happened between them? What did it mean that the Bishop hadn't been surprised about the mark? Wren flung herself on the bed and let the questions crash around her until she was sure she would never leave her room again.

Chapter 25

Wren paced back and forth on the plush red carpet of her sitting room enough that she was sure her heels would leave indents. She knew she needed to work up the courage to go to dinner. The Bishop's warning had been clear and she could not afford to offend the king when the Bishop had so much power over her. She was already late for dinner despite having dressed long ago.

She told herself not to be a coward, but she couldn't bear to face any of them. Not Wesley, not the king, not the Bishop, and certainly not Malaki. When the rush of the moment was over between her and Wesley it felt like there was a betrayal there. Even though they were forced to marry and there was no love between them, it still felt like a betrayal.

Each thump on the door was as if it were on her own skin. Her heart beat so thunderously that she would not have been the least bit surprised if it came free of her chest. She stared at the door, bringing her fingers to her mouth. Wren hadn't bit her nails since she was a child and yet she found herself constantly reminding herself to cease the old habit.

"Wren, I know you are in there. Listen, my father sent me. He won't take no for an answer. He sent me to come and get you."

Wren groaned thinking there were very few other people he could have sent to

torment her.

She took a deep breath and opened the door, finding Richard looking at her apologetically. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” she replied, surprised at the heat in her voice.

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“All of it,” he replied quietly. “For this, for that, for all of it.”

“That is terribly specific,” she spat back.

“Gods, Wren, do you want me to go into detail because if it will make amends I will.”

She had never heard the arrogant prince use such a gentle tone. For reasons she could not fathom, the attempt at remorse only served to increase her foul mood.

“Did you know what would happen that night?” It was a question that had stayed with her like a loyal companion all those months.

Richard ran his hand over his face accompanied by a large sigh. “No. Yes. I knew it would get rid of you. I didn’t know that it would trap you in between there and here.”

“Did you think I would be able to get home that night?” Wren’s voice was low and full of poison.

Richard ran a hand through his hair and wouldn’t meet her eyes. She would make him say it. He thought he could be released from this confession without speaking the words, but that was not how this would end. The silence stretched on until Richard’s handsome face twisted with frustration.

“No. I knew it wouldn’t work.”

Wren hated the silver that she knew lined her eyes. “He really did save me that night.”

“Yes.” Richard whispered.

She had spent months hating Malaki for that night. Even when she could begin to look past the biting remarks and the cold countenance he presented she could never move past the knowledge that he had prevented her from going home. There wasn't enough time or energy to consider the implications of his actions that night.

“Why? I did nothing to you.” A rogue tear left a cool trail down her cheek.

If guilt had a corporeal form it would look like Richard did now. He took several steps back until he was supported by the wall. “You don't understand what it's like. What he pushes you to do and become. To everyone he's just the king, but for Kai and I it's different. I don't know how Kai does it. He somehow manages to live up to his every expectation, but doesn't have to make any of the sacrifices it takes.”

Irritation flooded Wren's blood stream as if it were a part of her. She didn't want his excuses or how he rationalized hurting her. So instead of asking the questions that needed to be asked she shut the door and strode past him, his footsteps following a few moments later.

Reaching the hall, Wren took a deep breath before entering allowing her anger to become her shield. The hall was abuzz with the normal chatter and it seemed that her presence wasn't readily noted which she was grateful for. She made her way to the dais where Malaki's eyes flicked to her sharp and assessing. She wished she could tell him he needn't bother worrying. The king only looked satisfied as she and Richard took their seats.

“Nice of you to join us, daughter,” crooned the king.

She bit back the retort that she hadn't had a choice. Instead she only faced forward, choosing to not acknowledge the comment. The servants laid out roasted chicken and

heavily seasoned boiled potatoes causing her stomach to roll at the sight and smell. The thought of eating any of it made her stomach flip unnaturally.

Malaki leaned in close to her and whispered, “Did something happen?”

Wren felt nauseous. Why would he ask her that? Had the Bishop already divulged her secrets? She shook her head and took a sip of the wine. Thinking twice about it she decided to simply drink the whole cup not caring if it was in poor taste. The king chuckled and she fought the urge to throw the empty cup at him.

“Father, what is this about? She is obviously upset, and you are obviously enjoying it.” Malaki meant to be protective of her, but she groaned into her once-more full cup of wine.

“Careful, Malaki. You forget yourself,” the king warned him quietly. It was easy to forget the king was a threat to them.

Wren remembered what she had learned about the king, seeing even his sons as expendable. He presided over these dinners with little theatrics, making him seem docile, but the voice that reprimanded Malaki was anything but docile.

Wren placed a hand on Malaki’s arm in an attempt to ease the tension building. “I am fine, truly. Just in a bad temper this evening.”

He looked as if he didn’t believe her, but let it go. She downed the next glass of wine, vowing to take the next one more slowly. Waves of anger and frustration rolled in her and she couldn’t understand the strong emotion’s presence. If anything, the time in the garden was more embarrassing than causing her anger. Even the meeting with the Bishop should have made her more anxious than angry.

“Wren, would you care to dance?” asked Malaki tentatively.

No. She did not want to dance. She wanted to wallow in self-pity and throw things against the wall.

“It will help, Wren. If not with me then someone else. I can get Wesley, if you like.”

She whipped her head towards him. “Why would you say that?” Her voice was thick with accusation.

Malaki looked at her and she could see that he was struggling to understand her anger. “Because you are at ease around him.” He lowered his voice. “Wren, you need to calm down. I’m worried what you will do if you don’t. Think of the vase.”

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She understood his words well enough. He wasn't worried about her, he was worried about her using magic if she lost her control. Somehow that made perfect sense. She should have known that that would be his concern.

"Fine." She stood, drinking the contents of her glass quickly. "Are you coming, Your Highness?" she said mockingly to Malaki.

He only stood and offered her his arm as they walked down the dais, and she hated that he didn't rise to the bait. He always had some cutting remark to make, but instead he was painfully demure. When they got to the floor, the musicians changed their music to a slower tempo.

Malaki made eye contact with Borno and gestured to increase the tempo. The music was fast enough that Wren didn't have time to think about anything else. Her feet quickly found the pace as she moved around the room, Malaki always close beside her. He spun her and she tilted her head back, looking up at the vaulted ceilings.

The tempo rose to an impossible beat and she breathed in the stale air, her breath ragged with exertion. One more spin and the music stopped suddenly leaving her crashing into Malaki's arms, her hair falling in her face. Wren panted, realizing the weight that had lifted from her chest. She laughed, putting her hand to her chest. Malaki was breathing fast, too, looking at her as if she were a puzzle.

She bent over trying to catch her breath. "Thank you," she rasped. She stood back up and he was still watching her. "Truly, I am better. I don't know what happened. I felt so much anger."

It was as if the music under her feet had expelled something from her. The anger that had been raging in her quelled enough that it felt like a fog had lifted from her mind. Wren had never been prone to poor temper and now that her mind was free all that was left was guilt over her behavior.

“Did something happen, Wren?” he repeated his question from earlier.

“Why are you asking me that?” she voiced her earlier thought, but this time it was a quiet plea to lie to her. If he knew the truth she couldn’t bear it. She wouldn’t be able to bear that he was being so kind to her despite knowing what had happened between her and Wesley.

“What happened, Wren?”

Her eyes fought desperately for something or someone to spare her from answering his question. They quickly landed on Wesley who was nearby watching her with unbridled concern. She averted her gaze quickly, but it was too late. Malaki looked between them and Wesley turned and left the hall.

“I see,” he said, dangerously quiet. Before she could protest, he turned and left her standing there. She moved to where one of the servants stood with a tray of wine and greedily took another, downing the glass with lightning speed.

“Easy, Wren,” said Richard as he took the glass from her hand. “You are giving my father exactly what he wants. I’ve never seen him so delighted, and I can promise you that that is not a good thing for you or for my brother.”

“What do you care? You hate your brother and apparently me,” she spat.

“I don’t hate you, Wren. Quite the contrary which is mildly annoying. As for my brother and I, we have a complicated relationship,” he replied calmly, as if that

explained everything. “I can’t get you out of here yet without him dragging you back, so we need to make the best of this. You don’t need to talk to anyone or do anything. You just need to be present. Stay with me and I will handle the small talk.”

She was almost grateful for him as he deflected each noble’s attention away from them by bringing up their family or something they were interested in. She quickly realized that Richard was good at this. He knew what moved each member of the court and he wielded it like a weapon.

She hadn’t seen Sophie approach until the small woman stood in front of her, her small frame taut with tension. “Not now, Sophie,” warned Richard.

Sophie only glared up at him before turning her glare on Wren.

Before Wren could ask her why, Richard stepped between them.

“Not now, Sophie. She needs to get through this.” Then lowering his voice, he added, “He wants her to get through this, Sophie.”

Wren blanched and groaned aloud not caring who heard. The wine was making her head foggy, but now she understood what this was about. Oh, gods, even Sophie hated her now. All she had was godsdamned Richard Blackwood as an ally. She was sure that if she died now she would just be reborn again to live a different kind of torture.

Sophie seemed to back down, but the glare she reserved for Wren was full of unspoken reprimands. “You are an ass, Wren Blackwood.” She said the last name as if it was a curse. Wren watched her friend as she stormed off and thought for sure she would just pass out right there in the middle of the hall. She reached for another glass of wine, but Richard smoothly took it from her.

“A little bit longer, Wren. There are some things wine can’t fix.” He placed his hand on the back of her arm to steady her. She hadn’t even realized she had swayed.

A few more members of the court came by, and Richard talked to them jovially. He casually turned his head to his father on the dais after the last one left and the king nodded subtly. “Okay, that’s enough.”

Richard took her arm in his and walked her from the hall with her only stumbling once. As they walked down the hall, she tripped once more and would have landed on her face if it were not for Richard catching her.

“Gods, Wren, you drank more than a grown man could handle.” Then he was picking her up, and she was too tired and the room was spinning too much to protest. When they made it to her room, he kept on walking.

She knew where he was going and she tried to protest, but he didn’t seem to care. Shifting her, he knocked on the door. There was no answer.

“Brother, I know you are in there. Open the godsdamn door, your wife is heavier than she looks.” She glared at the younger prince.

The door opened and Malaki stood with his shirt halfway undone showing the muscles of his chest and upper abdomen. His hair was tousled, and she couldn’t help but think how handsome he was. There was something wrong with her. She had caused so many problems and yet she seemed content to continue on making them.

He stood to the side and motioned for Richard to enter, still carrying her. He shut the door behind them as they entered and moved to the door to her room, opening it for them. She hadn’t even realized she had left it unlocked.

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“She can’t be left alone, Kai. She’s too drunk.”

Malaki merely turned his back on them. “I’ll call for Sophie.”

“Sophie already cursed her out in the hall. I don’t think she’s going to be much help,” Richard said as he set her down on the bed.

Wren tried to sit with as much dignity as she could muster, but the room had begun spinning precariously.

“Gods, Sophie. I’ll go find her myself.” Malaki seemed defeated as he turned to Richard. She noticed he diligently avoided looking at her. “Will you stay with her till Sophie or I get back?” Richard nodded and Malaki took his leave of them.

When she heard his door close she fixed a glare on Richard. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“You do,” was all he said as he stood looking rather uncomfortable.

She tried to stand up to prove her point, but felt like she was going to be sick.

“Listen, I know that my brother can be difficult, but he cares about you.”

She groaned. “Please don’t do this now, Richard. If you feel like you owe me anything, then don’t do this now. Please.” She couldn’t handle any more guilt than what was already weighing her down.

They sat in silence until a very angry Sophie came storming through her door. She looked at Wren and put her hands on her hips. “I am doing this for him because he asked me to. That is the only reason why.” She moved towards Wren taking off her shoes.

“Is he—?” asked Richard.

“In the training yard.” Sophie nodded. Richard left without another word and it was just her and Sophie.

Wren had never had Sophie’s temper directed at her and she was quite certain she would do anything to never have it happen again. “Sophie, please. I can take care of myself.”

Sophie ignored her and began unlacing her gown. “Sophie!” shouted Wren.

“What?” Sophie shouted back.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all of it.” Wren didn’t fight the tears that built behind her eyes. She had made such a mess of everything and hurt everyone she had come to care about.

Sophie paused, considering Wren before she knelt in front of her taking her hands in hers. “You stupid girl. He was trying. I thought maybe...”

Wren shook her head. “I’m so confused, Sophie. I don’t even know what I am and sometimes my emotions feel so powerful like I can’t fight them. I am not saying I am not to blame. I know I’ve made this mess. I just, I don’t know.”

Sophie’s face softened a fraction. “Do you love him?”

Wren wasn't even sure which him Sophie meant, and that made her all the more ashamed.

The answer was the same either way. "I don't know."

Sophie shook her head. "Truly, I did not know goddesses were so fickle."

Wren looked up, finding a smile on Sophie's face. "You forgive me, just like that?" she asked, not daring to hope.

"No. I'm still very mad at you. But I also can see that you are hurting, and believe it or not, you are my friend. Now let's get this goddess to sleep before the wine makes a second appearance."

Wren knew then that she would never deserve Sophie no matter how many lifetimes she lived.

Chapter 26

The next day was spent with Wren in bed vowing never to even look at wine and nursing a foul headache. By the second day she was finally able to get out of bed, but wasn't sure she even wanted to. That decision was soon ripped from her.

Sophie came through her door and looked at her assessing how ill she still was. Whatever she saw was enough because she said, "You had better get dressed. There is a delegation from North Helm arriving. Princess Mary is with them, but more importantly, so is their sorcerer."

Wren sat up abruptly, causing the room to spin slightly.

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Sophie smiled brightly. “He came all this way instead of writing, Wren. He must have some answers.”

Wren could barely contain the first glimpse of hope she’d had since the day with Rose. It felt like finally seeing the sun after nights of storms.

She moved to her wardrobe, grabbing a simple yellow dress.

Sophie snatched it from her. “No, a delegation of royalty means you have to dress like royalty.”

Sophie helped her into another painfully tight corset and chose a crimson dress outlined with white lacing to represent house Blackwood’s colors. Her chestnut hair was pulled back into an elaborate braid and color added to her cheeks. The color helped to hide the lingering side effects of the wine.

There was a knock at the front door and Sophie went to answer it. She said something quietly enough that Wren couldn’t discern it before calling out that it was time to leave. Wren followed her only to find Malaki in his familiar black wardrobe. His effort to not meet her eyes was commendable as he offered her his arm.

They walk down the halls in painful silence and Wren wished that Sophie had come with them to ease the tension. The easy conversation they had found was gone as if it had never been. When they were almost to the throne room and there was no one around, Malaki stopped.

When he finally spoke, he stared straight ahead, his voice was as cold as it had been

when they first met. “Your life is yours to do with as you will. I only ask that you be discreet as we still have to pretend at this sham of a marriage.”

Wren felt his words like a knife to the heart. There was so much he misunderstood, and so much he understood that she wished he didn’t. She was about to respond when a group of servants came passing by. He offered her his arm again, and before she took it, she looked at him.

“Kai, I am sorry.”

“Don’t do that.” His eyes met hers, full of ice. “Don’t say things you don’t mean and don’t apologize for what you aren’t sorry for.”

Other nobility passed them, eyeing them suspiciously. The hall filled with more people, and she realized her opportunity to make him understand had passed. They moved together to the doors of the throne room, which were wide open, showing an elaborate gathering of nobility lined on either side of the two large wooden thrones. The king sat in the largest one and Richard stood to the left of the thrones fiddling with his lapels, nervously. Malaki and Wren moved down the aisle and took their place on the right of the thrones.

They stood there briefly before a servant entered announcing the arrival of Her Highness Princess Mary Hallewell of North Helm. Wesley entered, painfully handsome in his own house colors of deep blue and gold. He ran his eyes over her quickly as if making sure she was well.

She tried to breathe normally, feeling Malaki’s presence was like a weight on her chest. To Wesley’s right, on his arm, was a beautiful blonde haired, fair woman wearing similar colors to Wesley in a beautiful flowing gown. As they neared the throne, Wren could see that her eyes were the same shade of green as Wesley’s. There was no doubt that they were siblings. When they reached the throne, Wesley

said, “Your Majesty, if I may introduce my sister, Princess Mary Hallewell.” Princess Mary bowed low, her eyes glancing over to Richard eagerly.

“Welcome, Princess Mary. What a surprise for us to learn that you were coming, let alone already here,” said the king.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. It is difficult to send word so quickly from North Helm as you know, and once I received my brother’s missive requesting me at court, I was eager to see him again.” She patted Wesley’s arm affectionately.

“Indeed. Strange that your brother had such a change of heart, but then again, perhaps it is not so strange,” he said without inflection.

Nonetheless, Wesley understood his meaning, his glance sliding quickly to Wren.

“It is an honor to be welcomed to your court, Your Majesty,” replied Princess Mary as if she had not noticed the tension.

The king nodded and signaled that he was finished with the meeting. The nobility dispersed and Wesley and Princess Mary moved to the side of the room where they were greeted by finely dressed lords and ladies.

“Go, boy, you are worse than a dog with a bone,” said the king, barely glancing at Richard, who murmured something and went to greet Princess Mary.

Princess Mary's polite smile grew into radiance itself when she saw him coming. She could never truly forgive Richard for what he did to her, but she knew now that there was goodness in him and she did not begrudge him his happiness.

“I hope the two of you are able to come to some sort of agreement that befits your stations.” The king did not bother to glance at them.

“It will not be a problem, Father,” replied Malaki tightly.

“Excellent,” said the king. “Now go rein your brother in before he makes a fool of himself.”

Malaki didn’t argue, and only offered Wren his arm again as they moved towards the small group. When they approached, Wesley blinked, losing track of his train of thought. She wished she could tell him to stop looking at her, especially like that.

“You must be Princess Wren. I believe it is to you that I must thank for my presence here.” Princess Mary smiled warmly at her.

“I am glad that you are able to be here now, Princess Mary. You are more beautiful than your brother described you,” said Wren politely.

Princess Mary smiled. “Please call me Mary.”

“Only if you will call me Wren,” replied Wren with a true smile. She already liked this woman who had her brother’s easy-going manner, but also spoke her mind.

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“Then I wonder if we might go for a walk, Wren. I am eager to learn about life here from someone also new to it.”

Wren nearly sighed in relief at the prospect of leaving the hall.

Understanding, Malaki released her arm from his. She looked up at him and regretted it instantly; he was the cold prince she had first met. Nothing of the man who played games with village children and teased Sophie was there any longer.

He turned to say something to Richard, ignoring her entirely. As she went to take Mary’s arm in hers, Wesley put his hand on her arm. “Are you okay?” he whispered quietly.

Wren turned back to see if Malaki had noticed, and saw that he was still engaged with Richard. “Everything is fine,” she whispered back. She could tell from the way he looked at her that he did not believe her. Mary only patted his arm and moved to take Wren’s arm in hers, finally freeing herself from the hall. They walked along the corridors passing nobility and servants alike.

“Was the journey very difficult?” asked Wren awkwardly.

Mary shrugged. “It was, but I think it was worth it. Rumors abound about the Haradon court, but I will appreciate seeing it for myself. How do you find the court?”

Wren wasn’t sure how she truly felt about the court here. There was certainly good to it and the nobility were not too terrible. The king was clearly oppressive as was the Bishop, but other than that it was not terrible. “It’s all very formal. It’s as if we are all

playing a game and I do not understand the rules.”

Mary laughed. “I believe that is any court, but yes, I can see how it is a bit more already.” They walked a little farther in silence before Mary said, “Are you happy here, Wren?”

Wren frowned. The princess was blunt and that was refreshing while also being intimidating. “There have been times where I have been happy while here. I think it is more so happiness with people that I have found.”

Mary tilted her head to the side, reminding Wren of a small bird. “Is my brother one of those people?”

Wren desperately searched the halls for onlookers and nearly let out a sigh of relief when there were none. She took a deep breath. “I am very fond of Wesley. He...” Wren was having difficulty gathering her thoughts. “I think there are very few people who are as genuine and kind as he is.”

Mary nodded. “He spoke very highly of you in his letters, especially when he finally sent for me. Truly, I am grateful for whatever it is you said.”

“I only think everyone should be able to choose for themselves,” Wren said dismissively.

“Not a small thought in a place such as this,” said Mary.

Wren wasn’t sure how to respond to that, and simply kept walking with the other woman. Their walk took them down into one of the many gardens.

“May I be frank, Wren?” asked Mary.

Wren laughed. "Have you not been already?" Then immediately regretted it when Mary's cheeks flushed. "I did not mean to be rude, it's just the way you speak is both refreshing and unsettling."

"My brother says it's because I am the youngest of the two of us and received special treatment from everyone making me spoiled." Mary laughed at the memory, but it quickly vanished from her face. Mary stopped and looked at Wren. "I have never seen my brother so unsure of himself. He may be kind, but he is strong. He does not doubt himself very often. I see it in him when he speaks of you and even more so when he looks at you." There was no question in her words. "I have asked him what has happened between you, but he will not answer me, which is very rare indeed for my brother to deny me anything. I am asking you now."

Wren bit her lip hard enough that it hurt. She didn't want to lie to the other woman, but she could not give her what she wanted either. "Do you love Richard?"

Mary gave her a sour look. "I detest deflection." When Wren didn't offer anything else she said, "I am very fond of Richard." Her voice lingering on the same word Wren had used to describe Wesley. "When he came to North Helm, I found the life of the second heir was something only he could understand. He was easy to talk to, and I found I greatly enjoyed his presence. I think it is obvious that such a union would be to the benefit of both our kingdoms, securing continued peace."

"Is that enough? Is it enough to sacrifice your own happiness for the good of others?" asked Wren with pain in her voice.

"I don't know," replied Mary somberly. "I think it is, but I do not know."

The question sobered both of them and they turned to walk back to the hall where their absence had surely been noticed.

After a little while, Mary said, “There was one other thing I wanted to ask you.”

Wren braced herself for whatever hard truth the younger woman would ask her to confront.

“Our court sorcerer demanded that he come with me here. You may not understand how strange it is, but he has never traveled to any kingdom and he certainly never demands anything. My parents were quite insistent that he not come, but he would not hear otherwise. I have asked my brother why this is and he assured me he does not know. I am asking you if you know.”

A flare of hope shot through Wren at the revelation. She had expected months of correspondence delaying much needed answers, but now he was here. She tried to remain unmoved by her words, but she was sure the princess missed very little. “I could not say, I am not privy to much that happens at court.”

“Indeed,” was the only response Mary gave. The rest of their walk back was spent in idle chatter about the weather and styles of dresses within court. She could tell that Mary was not interested in them, but was speaking out of obligation. Wren wished she could have told her it wasn’t necessary.

When they entered the hall again, it was much unchanged. The king had moved from the throne and was speaking with the other nobility. Richard and Malaki were together speaking with Lady Daugherty. Wesley was where they had left him, hands folded behind his back as he studied one of the portraits on the wall.

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As soon as they approached him, he turned, eyes darting anxiously between them. Wren understood what Mary had said then. He did seem unsure where before he was kind, but confident. Wren didn't like the uneasy feeling that wormed its way into her stomach at the thought.

"All is well, brother," Mary said, moving to take his arm. "I had best go make small talk with some of the nobility lest they think me a snob."

"A painfully false conclusion, to be sure," said Wesley, smiling fondly at his little sister.

She gave his arm a small shove before moving towards a group of ladies gathered nearby. When she was gone, Wren felt acutely aware of this being the first time they were alone together since the garden.

Wesley shifted uncomfortably and she could see the weight of their last meeting was heavy on his mind. "I was worried about you last night."

"You left." Wren hadn't realized that she had been upset about his departure until the words left her mouth.

"I was a coward," Wesley breathed. "I couldn't watch you so clearly in pain, but see him be your salvation when I could do nothing."

"My salvation." Wren laughed bitterly.

Wesley narrowed his eyes at her, but there was an unmistakable flash of relief on his

handsome face. "Wren, what I said yesterday—I said because I thought you were finding happiness here."

Wren felt the tear slide down her cheek before she even knew it was happening. "Wesley, I cannot do this. I am so sorry." She moved to leave, but the king was blocking her exit and she fought to control her emotion.

If she remembered one thing Lady Daugherty had taught her it was to never let your enemies see your true feelings. She saw the satisfied look the king gave before he twisted his features into mock concern, and knew that it was too late to heed her emotions.

"Daughter, tears on such a happy day? Perhaps Prince Wesley might be so good as to take the princess to get some fresh air." He said the words so congenial that Wren knew this was a game and that he was confident of his tactic.

If Wesley wondered at the king's request, he did not show it as he offered Wren his arm with an agreeable nod to the king. Wren dared a glance behind her as they walked through the throne room doors only to see the king smiling in their direction. A sinking feeling grew in Wren, and she knew that she was losing.

As they walked and began to pass less people, Wesley asked quietly, "What do they know?"

"Nothing, everything," groaned Wren.

Wesley tensed next to her, her arm still in his. She couldn't help but wonder if he regretted what had happened between them. She had replayed his words in her head over and over hearing the sincerity in them, but maybe he had not realized the cost would be so high. He led them with more purpose to one of the gardens where they found a small corner, unseen from anywhere else.

When he turned to her he did not release her arm from his. "Wren, I need you to tell me what happened yesterday." Wesley looked at her earnestly and her heart broke knowing that his priorities would have shifted with her arrival. "I asked my sister into this snake's den. I need to protect her."

Wren nodded, understanding even if it fractured something in her. "Wesley, I need to tell you from the beginning. It's clear the king is using you and you deserve to know all of it."

Wesley only looked at her with a cool awareness.

"I cannot tell you here. It isn't safe."

The Bishop's warning echoed through her as she considered that he could be watching them even now though she could not say how. Wesley nodded in understanding. The halls were previously empty which seemed like a blessing as they walked in silence, Wren's stomach churning with what she was about to confess. She wondered if he would still want her when she confessed the truth, but then had to also wonder if she even wanted him to want her. She couldn't deny the feelings that had begun to grow between them, but she also knew it was more complicated than just them.

When Wren realized where he was bringing her, her stomach fluttered a not altogether unpleasant feeling and she hated herself for it. Making sure no one was in the hallway, Wesley quietly opened the door to his rooms, holding it open for her. His rooms were considerably smaller than hers and she was dismayed to realize he only had one room with a large bed, a desk, a fireplace, and two small chairs facing it.

Wesley seemed to not be afflicted by any of the discomfort Wren had and only gestured to the chairs where she took a seat while he worked to coax the fire back to life. When he was finished he sat across from her and looked at her expectantly.

Wren took a deep breath. "I am not from Crishaven."

"I know that," he said with a soft smile.

Wren's mouth fell open, startled by the revelation. "What do you mean?"

Wesley's smile fell from his face, replaced by something she couldn't name. "Wren. I have always known that was untrue. The day we first met."

Her thoughts scattered across her mind as she shifted through them trying to find what he spoke of until she remembered how she had been naive of his family and their connections.

"More than that, there was so much grief in you the day we met. It didn't quite add up with the story they pedaled about you being a love match made in Crishaven."

How many others had seen through the lie and what did it mean that they had? Ignoring the uncertainty that unsettled her she made her decision. She would choose honesty this time.

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"I grew up on a farm in a world where we have no magic. I was pulled here by the king and the Bishop. I was told that I had to perform a ceremony or I would die. That was apparently my wedding. Then I was..." She paused, unable to speak of Cara.

Wren studiously stared at the fire, wishing she could throw all the painful memories into it and be rid of them as the words came tumbling from her. "For a while, I didn't hate it here. I had Sophie, and you, and even Kai..." She took a deep breath. "No one knew why I was brought here except the king and the Bishop, and they have shared nothing of their plans. Then a woman in the village told us something."

She paused unsure whether she was more nervous that he would not believe her or that he would. Wesley only watched her, waiting patiently. She breathed deeply. "I suppose I have missed something important." She undid the link from her finger and rolled up her sleeve exposing the tattoo on her wrist.

Wesley leaned over and ran his finger across it sending a shiver through her despite the dried tears on her cheeks. He did not let go of her wrist when he said, "What is it?"

She shrugged. "I am not sure, it appeared one night after I had a dream about my past, and apparently used magic to throw a vase at Malaki."

He looked at her then and laughed, still holding her wrist in his hands.

"You think I lie to you?" she said disappointed, but not surprised.

It took a moment for him to regain his composure, but when he did he said, "Gods,

no! I am just enjoying imagining you throwing a vase at him, whether it was magic or not." He laughed again and the sound was entirely wholesome. "You'll have to forgive me this petty indulgence."

When he was quite finished she continued, "A woman in the village saw me and knew I wasn't from this world. She told us of a prophecy,

For her weakness for humanity

She was thrown from above

Cursed with a life of mortality

The price to be love

She said that there is another part of it that is unknown to her, but that its meaning is that..."

She breathed deeply, finding that she could not say the words aloud.

Wesley moved his hands from where he was holding her wrist to take her hand in his. "Wren, you can tell me. I would never use any of this to hurt you."

She was surprised to hear eagerness in his voice and wondered how he was taking all of this so well. She supposed it was a testament to his character that he so readily accepted her.

Even if he had accepted her truth up until this point, his graciousness might end with the final revelation. "I am worried that you won't believe me because I don't even believe it. And I'm worried you will...I am worried."

He freed one hand placing it on her cheek and she found herself bending into it. "I don't have the right words to explain, Wren. I've never been so unsure and sure of something in my life. You consume my thoughts and when you are present, I find I forget everything and everyone else. I don't know if it's because of whatever you are afraid to tell me or if this is just my own curse to want what I cannot have. Either way, you shouldn't be worried."

Wren closed her eyes, leaning into the warmth of his hand as his finger caressed her cheek. "She said I was the goddess Serephina reborn and the magic of the land is flowing back into me, but also that I am helping the land. She said that if the magic were to leave the land though, if I took it all, that Valmere would not be safe from the gods."

Wesley leaned back removing his warmth from her. He didn't say anything for a long time until he said, "Serephina was made mortal at the beginning of Valmere."

"Apparently she was cursed to be reborn as a mortal throughout time," replied Wren.

"You were cursed," he corrected, and her heart both fell and rose at his validation.

"It's rather hard to think of myself as her since I have no recollection of her life," murmured Wren.

"What was the dream you had when your mark appeared," he asked.

"I dreamt that I was with my parents and we were happy. That we lived in a home in the mountains. I was taken by a man I called Uncle and my parents were sad, but it was like they expected it. The thing is though that I don't have a lot of memories of my parents so I don't know if that was truly them, but the man at the door was not my Uncle that I have lived with all my life," she finished, realizing she had not taken the time to truly think about the dream. She had had difficulty remembering it for days

after it had occurred, but through the fog she was able to make out some details.

"Lucius cursed Serephina to save her—you, I mean," pondered Wesley. "Without it, her siblings would have killed her as punishment. Gods, I mean you."

"It would be better for me if we refer to Serephina as her and not myself," offered Wren.

Wesley nodded. "She was mortal though, they could have killed her. Or did the protection she gave the land protect her as well?"

He stood up and began pacing. "But the prophecy speaks of an end to the curse. An end to her mortal life." He looked at her then and his brows furrowed. "An end meaning she could regain immortality or she would no longer be reborn?"

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"I don't know," she said quietly. She was not quite fond of either option not knowing what the outcome would be for Valmere.

"Maxon," he said suddenly. "You are the reason Maxon came with Mary! But how did he know?"

"The sorcerer?"

Wesley nodded in confirmation.

"Malaki wrote to him when I first came here because he thought he might be able to figure out what the Bishop knew and be able to send me home."

Wesley nodded as if this made perfect sense and another piece of a puzzle he was solving slid into place. She realized this is how his mind thrived, putting different pieces together to create a whole. His sense of perception was unparalleled and in that moment she regretted not confiding in him long ago.

"We should go find him," he said, moving to the door before he stopped abruptly. "What happened after we parted yesterday?" He slowly turned to look at her and part of her bemoaned that he remembered, but also knew that he needed to know.

"After the alcove when I left, I ran into the Bishop. He knew about what happened between us. I don't know how. He knew and he knew about my mark." She put her other hand to her wrist, covering it protectively.

Wesley moved slowly towards her. "Tell me what he said."

"I don't know, Wesley. I was already upset and then I panicked." She ran a hand over her face trying to clear her thoughts. "He told me the king expected me at dinner." She began pacing in an effort to remember. She stopped suddenly when she remembered what he said when he saw her mark. "When he saw my mark, he said that he wondered which one of them gave it to me."

She looked up at him as if he could figure out what it meant and his brows narrowed in concentration as if he was trying. He shook his head. "I don't know what it means. If it's one of the three gods or something else? I don't think it would be the gods. I don't think they mean you well and this seems harmless enough," he said, reaching down once more to touch her wrist. "Tell me what happened next," he whispered.

"I got away from him, but then I was in my room and ready for dinner and I was so angry. I felt so much rage, and I don't know where it came from or why. Then Richard came to get me saying his father sent him. Then when I got to dinner I was still so angry. Malaki tried to calm me down and asked me to dance, but I was so angry. I did though and after I realized he was right and I did feel better. But then he was asking me what happened to make me like this and I didn't know, but then you were there and I don't know what he saw, but he knew." She knew she was rambling, but her mind felt so muddled and it was hard to eloquently explain the night prior.

Wren felt the shame burn through her at how Malaki had looked at her, and how she couldn't sort her feelings. Telling Wesley only served to amplify the shame threatening to drown her. Wesley moved towards her until his hands were on either side of her arms. When he looked down at her, there was such anger and worry written all over him.

His voice was dangerously quiet. "Did he hurt you?"

Wren jerked her head up to him, shocked. "Who? Kai? Of course not. He would never." She was surprised at her sudden and passionate defense of him.

Wesley took his hands away from her. "I see." His words were a painful echo of Malaki's from the night before. He moved away from her, and she suddenly felt panicked that she couldn't lose him as well.

She reached for his hand, dragging him back to her and wrapped her arms around his hard stomach, hugging him tightly. He barely hesitated as he put his arms around her and rested his chin on top of her head. She wasn't sure how long they stood like that, but she would have paused time if she could.

When she reluctantly pulled away, she saw his face was more relaxed. He smoothed a piece of her hair and tucked it behind her ear. "Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me all of this, Wren. I promise my mind and my resources are yours to find the answers you need."

She smiled up at him, and she couldn't help but notice how the green in his eyes changed with whatever he was feeling. His eyes were such a vibrant green that she was reminded of when the leaves were reborn after winter took its leave. He was truly beautiful. She knew she shouldn't do it, that she should recognize that she was confused and that whatever was happening to her was causing her emotions to be erratic.

Despite knowing all this, she didn't just want him, she needed him. She pushed up on her toes, and in anticipation of her intention, he bent his head down to meet hers, pressing a gentle kiss to her mouth. He lightly took her head in his hand while the other rested on her lower back.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss. His mouth moved slow and purposeful against hers as if he were taking every moment of it in. The ache in her thighs began to grow, urging her to be closer to him, convincing her to kiss him with more fervor, his body responding to her growing need.

Her heart beat thunderously as she tangled her hands in his hair. He whispered her name against her lips in warning. The effect was the opposite though, and she urged his mouth open needing more. She saw the bed behind them and tugged at his shirt to follow her while never looking away from him.

His eyes startled her with the depth of their color, and the pure desire burning in them. Whatever he saw reflected in hers unraveled his self-control, and he was lifting her up and laying her gently on the bed. She only had to endure the absence of his warmth briefly as he lowered his body over hers. She bent her legs as he angled himself in-between them before meeting her lips with a new kind of urgency.

She had never known this feeling, this burning need. It was the most beautiful torment she had ever felt to need all of him, and not have it.

His breathing hitched when she pulled up his shirt and ran her hands along the hard muscles of his abdomen. "Gods, Wren, what are you doing to me?"

She grinned against his mouth. "I thought you were supposed to be clever."

He growled at her and began kissing her again, his tongue finding hers causing a pitiful sound to escape her lips. It only pushed him farther into whatever need he was feeling and he reached behind her, fighting with the buttons of her dress. She shifted, allowing him more room to maneuver them. She eagerly lifted his shirt which he graciously paused his button work to allow her to remove it.

The sight of his bare chest was as beautiful as his face and she ran her hands over it. He shivered under her touch before simultaneously kissing her and undoing the infinite buttons of her dress. She was struck by the thought that she could never get enough of this feeling, of him.

A knock came from the door and he stilled above her. He pulled his mouth away

from hers and she instantly mourned the loss of him. Another knock. He was breathing heavily and she could see he was trying to catch his breath. Another more insistent knock.

"I do not wish to be disturbed," he shouted.

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Instead of feeling fear that someone was at the door, Wren relished the huskiness of his voice, knowing it was because of her. She smiled and leaned up to kiss him again, his lips eager to find their rhythm with hers once more.

"Open the godsdamn door, brother," Mary whispered furiously.

"Shit," was all that Wesley said as he extricated himself from the bed.

Wren mentally echoed the sentiment and hastily climbed off the bed realizing half of the back of her dress was unbuttoned. Wesley turned to her and kissed her gently while cupping her cheek. The gesture in the midst of the sudden stress, heartbreakingly sweet.

He moved to the door and unlocked it, cracking it slightly so that he blocked Wren from view. She couldn't see Mary, but she definitely heard her when she said, "You idiot." Mary tried to move past him, but he maintained his blocking of the door. "I know she's in there, you stupid man, the king made a point to inform Richard and I and her husband that you two left together. I was hoping you weren't stupid enough to be here, but I see you have grown senseless in your time away. Now let me in." Her words were coming out quick in a hiss and Wren felt all the previous happiness and life slip from her at Mary's words.

Wesley turned back to her, a question in his eyes. She nodded and he let a red-faced princess into the room.

Mary took one glance at Wren's disheveled state and whirled on her brother. "I knew it, I knew you were too far gone, but I had hope for you." She directed her stare at

Wren. "Do you two have any idea what this will do? My potential marriage will do little to create peace if it is known the crown prince of North Helm is having an affair with the crown prince of Haradon's wife."

Even though the other woman was younger she held herself like someone who was raised to be a princess. Wren shrank at her words knowing that she was painfully correct. Despite the damning knowledge Wren couldn't find it in herself to regret what had happened between them.

"I am not going to answer to you, Mary, and I am certainly not going to apologize for how I feel about Wren."

Wren had never heard his voice so commanding and she thought her heart might explode from his unapologetic defense of his feelings for her.

Mary stared at her brother, but whatever she saw there caused her to sigh defeatedly and slide into one of the chairs. "Gods, help us."

Having tamed his sister, Wesley came over to where Wren stood and gently grabbed her face forcing her to look up at him. "Are you okay?" he said quietly.

She nodded and he released her only to move behind her and begin undoing all of his previous efforts by buttoning up her dress. Wren felt a flash of regret at the necessary action.

"Richard is searching for you, Wren," Mary said, not bothering to turn her head away from the fire. "I told him I was going to go look for you as well, obviously not saying I was coming here. The point being that you should go, Wren, before they think to check here."

Wesley finished with her buttons and his hand lingered on her neck a moment too

long, sending a chill through her. He smiled down at her, clearly satisfied by her reaction.

"She's right. I should go," Wren said reluctantly.

He nodded in response and kissed her forehead. He walked her to the door where he peered out before opening it for her to leave. Before she could leave he grabbed her hand one more time squeezing it and gently hanging on as she pulled away.

She made easy work of not being seen by anyone of consequence and safely made it to her room. One look at herself in the mirror made her realize she was lucky to have not run into anyone. Her lips were slightly swollen and her hair had fallen out of the elaborate braid in wisps and strands.

The door to her room opened and Sophie stood staring at her relief pouring off of her. She shook her head and turned back to the hall. "Gods, Richard, she's right here where I said she would be, you ass."

Apparently, Richard did not believe her because she blocked him from entering. "Do you often make a habit of just bursting into lady's rooms?" She turned back at Wren and mouthed, "Hair."

Wren understood her meaning and undid the elaborate braid allowing it to fall freely over her shoulders and back hiding any evidence of her recent activity.

"Let me in, Sophie," growled Richard.

"Fine, but just so you know you are a jerk," sulked Sophie, who moved into the room, letting Richard enter.

Richard watched Wren with narrowed eyes, but his face relaxed a fraction giving his

relief away. "Where have you been?"

Wren gave him an irritated glare. "Here. Is it suddenly your job to keep account of me?" Wren realized she had never seen him quite so upset. "Did something happen?"

He threw his hands up in the air in a silent plea. "Gods, I know I have much to atone for, but this is too much for one man."

"How dramatic," stated Sophie from the seat she had taken.

Richard shot her a glare before turning his gaze back to Wren. "My father made a point to announce to us that you had left with Wesley."

"I did as your father suggested I do. I needed a walk to clear my head. Things haven't exactly been easy here, have they?" retorted Wren.

Richard searched her face before giving an exasperated sigh and sitting in one of the other chairs, slouching into it.

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"Now don't you feel silly." Sophie smirked at Richard.

"Forgive me for trying to prevent my brother from killing the crown prince of our most notable rival kingdom." He pinched the bridge of his nose, and Wren was reminded of when Malaki would do the same thing.

"I hardly think we are at risk of that." Sophie rolled her eyes.

Richard only stared at Sophie, who didn't seem moved by his gaze.

"What we really need to think about is why your father is so set on causing this rift. He does nothing without purpose."

Richard nodded. "You are right. He is obviously trying to put distance between the relationship Kai and Wren have formed."

"I am right here, you two," Wren pointed out.

Richard and Sophie merely glanced at her, before turning back to each other. "Could be he finally wants to make a move on North Helm. To be honest, he didn't seem thrilled about having Princess Mary here," theorized Sophie.

Richard shook his head. "Too risky. North Helm is too strong."

"Not if he has both their heirs," rebutted Sophie.

"North Helm would go to the next successor without issue," responded Richard.

"What if he thinks he has a weapon that will help him?" said Wren looking at Sophie pointedly.

Richard was oblivious to the exchange. "Ridiculous. There is no such weapon."

Sophie shook her head, a silent message to hold her tongue with Richard there. Wren was saved from having to decide whether or not to abide by her friend's advice when a pale Malaki opened the door, holding a paper.

Chapter 27

Malaki pulled his eyes up from the paper long enough to take in the three of them. His eyes lingering too long on Wren. Wren felt the weight of his gaze on her and it took all her self-control to not shy away from it. While she couldn't regret what had just happened between her and Wesley, there was some other feeling beside it she couldn't understand.

"Good, you are all here." For all the fuss they had made about figuring out what she had done with her afternoon Malaki did not seem concerned. He turned to Richard and said unceremoniously, "Richard, you should likely know that Wren is the goddess Serephina reborn, brought from another world to Valmere by father and the Bishop."

Richard just stared open-mouthed at his brother while Sophie said, "Excellent plan, Your Highness. Why hadn't I thought of announcing it every time I walked into a room?"

Malaki ignored her and looked at Wren. "I am sorry I didn't ask you first to tell him, but he is here and I've spoken to Maxon, the sorcerer from North Helm, and he knew the second verse." He was talking uncharacteristically fast which made Wren nervous. She stood up quickly and went over to him to grab the paper knowing what

would be on it. Malaki didn't argue when she took the paper and read aloud.

"Time leaks away

The vessel returns

The curse its sway

Time's fragile turn"

Richard was still frozen in place, unable to speak, but Sophie squinted her eyes as if she was seeing the words.

"Time is obvious, it has been countless generations since Serephina was banished. The vessel returns though," pondered Malaki.

"It's me," said Wren.

Malaki nodded, agreeing with her.

"What?" said Richard, finally finding his voice.

"I was brought back to Valmere, and the magic within Valmere has been pushing into me, a vessel," explained Wren matter-of-factly.

"Exactly," agreed Malaki. "The curse—its sway. That could be Serephina's curse of being reborn, but why would that hold any more sway if the vessel has returned."

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"Excuse me!" shouted Richard. "Can we just pause and allow me a second to catch up. There's a great deal of puzzle pieces I need to connect."

Puzzle pieces, thought Wren. She needed to bring this to Wesley, but after the way they had all reacted it seemed the wrong thing to do. Not to mention she agreed with Sophie and Richard the king's effort to create a rift between them all was concerning.

Malaki sighed and explained to Richard a similar tale to what she had just told Wesley. Whether it was wise to bring so many people into it was clearly a lost concern, but it seemed it was too late for second thoughts. She was surprised at how much she trusted Richard despite their sordid past. She had seen a change in him since the night he thanked her for encouraging Wesley to ask Mary to court.

Where he had barely acknowledged Malaki without blatant hostility before, he now seemed protective of his older sibling. Even still, the information they were giving him could be dangerous should his allegiance change once more. For the moment she was grateful to only have two enemies.

"The Bishop stopped me yesterday and he knew about my mark. He said, 'I wonder which one of them gave this to you?'" Wren blurted out.

"Oh, and you thought a day later was a good time to share this information," Sophie said as she threw up her hands in exasperation.

"There wasn't exactly a great time to tell you both yesterday," Wren said, irritated, before she looked at Malaki's face, which had changed to something she wouldn't dare name.

"Is that why you were so upset last night?" he asked quietly, his voice low.

Wren understood then what she had seen in his face. It was hope, and it broke her heart. It broke her heart because he shouldn't have hope, and she shouldn't want him to have it. She willed her voice to steady. "Partly. After I saw him, I felt so intensely angry. It was like I couldn't control it."

"What was the other part?" His voice was still quiet.

Sophie and Richard whipped their heads towards her and she was acutely aware of three pairs of eyes on her. She knew she should be honest and not give him hope where there was none. He hadn't been wrong about his assumptions regarding Wesley and her.

Wren soon realized she was a coward because she couldn't bear to have him look at her in the cold way he had since last night's dinner, so she said, "I had just found out I was a goddess reborn the day before. Or is that not a reason to be upset?"

Malaki let out a long breath so subtle she might have missed it had she not been watching him carefully. "This is problematic that the Bishop knows about your mark, it is clear he expected it to be there," he said, returning to the task at hand with renewed fervor.

"He seemed happy to see it," Wren clarified.

"But what did he mean, by which one of them gave it to you?" asked Sophie.

"At first, I thought it could be the other gods, but I think they would like to do more than leave a mark on me if they could touch me," said Wren. "Do you think Maxon might know?" Wren paused, turning to Malaki with an accusatory glare. "Does he know what I am?"

"He already knew, Wren. It's why he came with them. Whatever I said made him suspicious and when he saw you in the throne room today he knew." He looked at her apologetically.

"Will he help us?" she asked cautiously.

"I think so. I will have to talk to him more to know for sure. He wants to meet you," said Malaki.

The coward in her said, "Not today." Instead of admonishing her for wasting time, Malaki only nodded. She felt lost in a whirlwind and she needed to settle her mind.

"I think we need to talk about father's maneuvering," pressured Richard.

"Not today," echoed Malaki, looking at her as if he had heard her thoughts. Gratitude laced through her, warm and content despite the chaos of before.

"Gods, I don't know which is worse, you two on the outs or you two working together," complained Richard.

"Outs, most certainly," offered Sophie helpfully.

Wren couldn't help but smile at her friend who always found a way to lessen the weight on her shoulders.

"We haven't been to the keep in a while, Richard," said Malaki with a sly smile directed at his brother. She was sure she had never seen such a look on him before and she nearly gaped at him.

Richard slowly moved his hand away from his face and looked at his brother with wide eyes and an open mouth. "Because we aren't ten, Kai."

"I feel ten," said Sophie eagerly looking at Malaki who smiled back at her wickedly.

"Fine, but I am not it first." Richard sighed while getting up from his chair.

They all turned to peer at Wren expectantly. "I feel like I have missed something important." Wren was acutely aware of the feeling that she was caught in a trap.

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"Indeed you have, my dear sweet goddess. Time for an outfit change," said Sophie, coming towards her with mischief alight in her eyes.

Chapter 28

Being in tight breeches and a white shirt while hiding in a cold cell was a strange turn of events for Wren. It turned out that visiting the keep actually meant that people hid while one person searched for them. Sophie had gleefully filled her in on the way to her rooms where she provided an outfit change.

Wren had looked at her friend in disbelief when she had presented her with the shirt and breeches, but Sophie was clear that there would be no argument. Wren was painfully conscious of how the breeches clung to her as they were made for Sophie who was smaller than her. Even the white shirt that was usually loose on Sophie, clung to Wren.

Before they had even left Wren's rooms, they had argued until it was decided Sophie would be the one to find them. When Sophie and Wren arrived at the looming stone structure, Sophie had shooed her, telling her to go hide while she counted.

Wren had entered the dark building and was startled that the only light available poured through the thin cut windows along the walls. She had to wave away cobwebs and fight through the dust that inhabited the building. It was clear that no one had been here in some time and she wondered what the tower had been used for.

Her wandering brought her to a stairwell and she was shocked to see that it continued on for what she assumed to be the top of the tower. Each floor held a door along the

stairwell and each floor seemed to have a series of rooms. Some looked like they had once been living spaces while some were still used for storage. One floor consisted of a series of cells that lined the walls of the tower in a circle.

That was how she ended up curled up in the corner of a long-abandoned cell hiding. She had curled herself into a corner where a set of handcuffs loomed above her. She regretted her choice in a hiding spot as soon as she settled in. If someone took the entrance to this floor and rounded the corner, she would be easily seen. She heard footsteps coming down the corridor, and she stood up pressing her body against the wall. The footsteps came closer, and she found her breath coming faster with every echo of footfall.

Soon the footsteps were close enough that Richard came into view, his eyes quickly landing on her.

"A terrible hiding spot, sister." He smiled roguishly.

"Well, I haven't had years to figure out the best ones so I am at a disadvantage," she complained.

"All right. Fair point. I will give you a tip as a gesture of good will," he said benevolently. "Top floor of the keep there is a wooden crate. Hide in it. I used to hide in there and they could never find me because if you turn the latch counterclockwise it's impossible to open from the outside."

He backed out the cell door. "But first, you count." He turned and ran out of the room.

Wren couldn't help, but smile at the lightness she felt. She counted for what seemed an appropriate amount of time before going to see who she could find. The keep was dark and cold and yet Wren wondered at the history the old tower had seen.

Wren made her way to the stairs, finding each floor and exploring it. Her legs ached from climbing so many stairs and she made a mental note to ask why there wasn't a floor limit for hiding. She came upon a room on the seventh floor that had its door suspiciously shut.

Wren's heart beat frantically as she carefully opened the door unable to prevent the aged creaking it groaned with. The small room held racks of old weapons that were obviously rusted and forgotten. She moved along the racks slowly pushing them out of the way. An axe dropped to the ground by her foot causing her to shout in alarm.

"Gods, Wren, why would you look behind weapons? Are you trying to get your foot chopped off?" said Sophie, crawling out of a pile of blankets in the opposite corner that she had failed to notice.

Wren only smiled at her. "I guess that means you are it."

Sophie cursed at her, but as Wren left, she could already hear her counting. Wren climbed what seemed like an unending amount of stairs until she was sure her legs would give out. Just as she was about to abandon Richard's hiding place, she reached the top, collapsing on the floor to catch her breath.

When Wren recovered enough to take in her surroundings, she found a circular room with tall narrow windows every few feet. She walked to one of the windows and a cool breeze found its way through the narrow slit.

Wren breathed in the cool air welcoming it after the climb up the stairs. She had never been so high up in all her life and when she dared a glance down towards the ground a queasy feeling filled her stomach forcing her to withdraw her gaze. When she worked up the courage to look again, she took in the expansive green fields and the castle looming nearby. She could see how the castle opened up to the many small gardens from the tower, and she could even see the village far in the distance if she

squinted enough.

She wasn't sure how long she stood admiring the view, but soon she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Wren turned around in a sudden panic and found the box Richard had told her of. She quickly opened the lid of the box and folded herself inside, her hands searched for the latch to turn and found it right as the footsteps reached the top of the stairs.

Her heart beat so fast, she thought whoever was out there would hear her. She put her hand over her mouth trying to stifle the sound of her breathing.

"Richard, I heard you get in the box, you know Sophie and I used to let you hide in there forever as a game. It's not a great hiding spot." He began pulling off the lid of the box. Wren held her breath as she realized Richard was a liar as well as a poor strategist when the lid popped right off.

Malaki looked very surprised to see her instead of Richard. "You aren't Richard," was all he said.

"Well spotted," said Wren, standing up. "Your idiot brother told me this was a good spot to hide."

Malaki laughed and offered his hand, helping her get out of the box. She easily maneuvered her leg to get out without the constraint of a dress. When she went to get her other leg out of the box, her foot caught on the useless latch causing her to stumble. Malaki quickly reached over and caught her before she fell. Her breath hitched and she righted herself using his arms for support. When she stood straight again, she was holding either of his arms with hers and she was painfully close to him.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice almost a whisper.

"It's all right. It isn't your fault I'm clumsy." Wren shrugged nonchalantly, though still so close to him she was anything, but nonchalant.

"No, not for that." He pushed out a breath. "I'm sorry about how I treated you yesterday, and all the days before that."

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"Kai, I am not so fragile as all that." With all the guilt she was carrying, she couldn't bear to hear his apology.

He closed his eyes tightly. "Say it again." His voice a raspy whisper.

Wren's breath caught at the sound of his voice. "I am not fragile," she whispered back.

He opened his eyes and shook his head. His blue eyes pierced through her.

She met his gaze as she whispered, "Kai."

His breath caught, and she realized her own breathing was strained. He leaned down towards her as she raised her face to his. A hair's breadth separated them.

When he spoke his breath was warm on her skin, he said, "Wren. Do you want this?"

She tried to catch her breath, but it felt like she couldn't breathe in a delicious way. She knew it was wrong, but she nodded her head in agreement anyway. His blue eyes sparked with need and his voice was heavy with restraint. "I need you to say it."

She didn't hesitate at the command. "I want this, Kai."

He let loose a breath and then his mouth was on hers, and there was nothing gentle about the kiss. His kiss was all the need and desire he had been holding back. He was digging one hand into her loose hair and the slight hurt sent lightning through her.

She pulled his head towards her, deepening the kiss. She didn't know where he ended and she began, she only knew that any space between them was too much. She pressed against him needing to eliminate any space between them earning her a low groan from Kai. Adrenaline and surprise surged through her as he suddenly picked her up, one arm holding her back and the other supporting the weight of her body. She wrapped her legs around him, never more grateful for pants.

He carried her to the wall, allowing her to feel every inch of his body pressed against hers. His mouth and teeth found her neck and she arched her back, pushing her chest closer to him. The white blouse she was wearing came apart in the middle, exposing her heaving chest. She saw him take the sight of her in and the raw need in him nearly undid her.

He was back to kissing her and moving down her neck as if he couldn't decide where to focus his attention. A moan escaped her and she threaded her fingers through his hair, needing more of him.

"Well, the rules of this game have certainly changed." She had never hated the sound of Richard's voice more.

"Well, I am not prepared to adapt to them. At least not with you." And Sophie's.

Kai breathed heavily, his forehead against hers. "Get out now or I will kill you both personally." His voice was husky with exertion.

"Very rude," said Sophie.

"Not at all like a future king should speak to his loyal subjects," agreed Richard.

Wren smiled against Kai's mouth which still hovered painfully close to hers as she continued to breath heavily.

"Out!" shouted Kai, his voice authoritative.

"Fine, we will be downstairs trying to drink away this vision from our minds." Sophie pouted.

"Truly traumatic," agreed Richard as they turned and left.

Wren laughed, unable to control the overflowing of emotions in her and she felt Kai's smile at the sound.

"I really could kill them," breathed Kai, his voice steadier than it had been previously.

She laughed again, fairly giddy. "I am ashamed to say I would miss them—even your brother."

He huffed out a breath, and she regretfully unwrapped her legs from his waist as he gently lowered her. His eyes roamed over her, and she shivered under the heat of his gaze.

"I am going to need you to stop looking at me like that if we are to ever leave this tower," she said quietly, only partly joking.

"This is my favorite tower in all of Valmere. I am prepared to stay here," he said with mock seriousness, but his voice was still thick.

She moved towards him and pulled his head down to her once more, their lips meeting, more controlled this time.

"Gods, I won't survive you," he said against her lips.

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"A very dramatic statement, Your Highness." She smiled, pulling away from him enough to look at him, her fingers still tangled in his black hair.

"I prefer when you call me Kai," he said huskily.

He bent down and kissed her deeply. She broke away enough to say, "Kai."

And he murmured against her before biting her lower lip causing her to forget whatever she had been about to say.

He lifted his mouth from hers painfully slowly. "I am finding self-control to be very difficult at the moment," he whispered.

"I don't recall asking for your self-control," she said as she leaned up, kissing his neck.

He pulled away from her, taking all his warmth from her body. When he spoke, he looked at her with conviction. "You deserve better than a dusty old tower."

She smiled, warmed by his sentiment. "Let's go see about that wine then." She grabbed his hand pulling him towards the stairs and he followed her.

When they reached the bottom of the tower, they found Richard and Sophie sitting on the grass, each with their own bottle of wine. Wren and Kai took spots on either side of them, her sitting next to Sophie who simply handed her the bottle. Wren drank the sweet wine, letting it coat her throat before handing it back. The sun was already setting and the sky was a dusty pink. No one said anything for a while as they passed

the bottles back and forth and watched the sun set.

"Remember that time we told Richard if he caught one hundred fireflies and sang Little Prince while spinning in circles he would be granted three wishes by the gods?" mused Sophie after a while.

Kai chuckled, but Richard said indignantly, "I was out all night catching the blasted things."

Sophie smiled. "You were remarkably gullible."

"I was seven," shouted Richard, taking a swig of his wine.

They passed stories back and forth for a time until the sun was gone and the moon was high. Wren felt flushed from all the wine and slightly drunk by the time Sophie stood up and offered her hand.

"Gentlemen, give the lady and me a tune."

Richard started singing a song she didn't know, but that was perfect for the rowdy dance Sophie engaged her in as they danced wildly across the field. When they were done Wren and Sophie fell to the ground laughing. They lay back down, looking at the stars, and Kai explained each constellation to them, earning him teasing marks from his brother and cousin. Wren's eyes felt heavy with all the activity of the day coupled with the fact that she was most certainly drunk at this point.

She was startled by Sophie hitting her. "Don't fall asleep. More to do," she slurred.

"Go away, Sophie," she said, waving a hand at her limply. Wren scooted herself closer to Sophie so that she could use her legs as a pillow. She closed her eyes once more in the soft grass, under a sky full of stars, and with the cold air encircling her

she fell asleep. Her heart was warm and her body filled with hope.

Chapter 29

She clung to her Uncle tightly and asked for the millionth time why she couldn't go back to her mama and papa.

"Because, little one, you are more important than the sun, moon, and all the stars." He flicked her nose playfully when she looked over at him. "Now hold on tight, my love."

She squeezed his neck and closed her eyes. A rush of wind overtook her and she squeezed him tighter feeling a rush of fear.

Just as suddenly as the wind had come it stopped. She was shocked to see that she wasn't in the mountains any longer and no snow laid on the ground. There was a strange sound coming from nearby and when she looked she saw what she knew to be a horse from the books her mama and papa had shown her. She took in her surroundings as much as she could, but it was so dark. Nearby there was a house, and smoke rose from the chimney. Her uncle began walking to the home still holding her in his arms.

"You must be brave now, little one," he murmured.

He knocked on the door and a woman answered, her hair tied loosely up with falling strands landing in her face. She wiped her hands on her apron before glancing up at them.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening at the sight of them. "Jasper!"

Wren cringed at the loud call, burrowing her head into her uncle's shoulder.

Her uncle set her down, but she still clung to his hand. Another man appeared behind the lady taking in the sight of her. "Hello, Wren. I am your Uncle Jasper and this is your Aunt Kate."

"I've never heard about you," she said skeptically.

He lowered himself to her level. "I know, sweetheart, but we are going to take good care of you."

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"I want my mama and papa," she said petulantly.

He placed a hand sadly on her shoulder and stood nodding to his wife. "Come with me, my sweet, and we will get you some warm milk."

She didn't know what that was, but the woman seemed kind so she went with her.

As she went with her she heard her uncle say, "You will have your heart's desire when I am satisfied that she is well looked after."

The man who had called himself Jasper said, "How long will that be?"

"When I am satisfied." Her Uncle sounded angry. "What is given can be easily taken away should I deem it necessary."

"We are grateful of course," said the other man. When she turned back to him, he was bending his head towards Uncle.

"She is worth more than you can possibly imagine." With that, her Uncle turned to leave and somehow she knew she wouldn't see him again.

Wren's body felt like it was on fire. Flames licked at her and she screamed, trying to call for help, but she couldn't find the air in her lungs to speak. She was vaguely aware of the sound of her screams and yet she felt as if she couldn't draw in a full breath. The fire burst through her in waves searing her bones and boiling her blood.

She writhed under the force of the pain. She had never known pain like this or heat

like this. She had no idea how she was still alive when her body had to have been ablaze. As another wave hit her, she didn't care if she died, she just needed the pain to stop.

Panicked voices rang around her, but still they didn't do anything to stop the flames from consuming her. She heard them calling her name, but she couldn't respond. Her body felt wet like she had been submerged, but the water gave no relief from the heat.

Please, she thought.

She felt her body being picked up and a familiar voice murmured to her that it was going to be okay, but he was wrong. She was dying and the pain was unbearable. She had never been more grateful than when the world went black.

Chapter 30

When Wren awoke, it was to aching muscles and silk sheets. Opening her eyes, she looked around, but everything hurt. She at least recognized that she was in her own bed and that there was light pouring through her window. She could hear the crackling of the fire in the otherwise silent room. She pushed up on her hands in an effort to try to sit up and had to grit her teeth in order to bear the pain.

The aching pain in her body made her wonder what had happened to her. She was grateful when her eyes landed on the slumped form of Richard in a chair next to her bed. She looked down and found herself in a thin white nightgown. She knew she should feel self-conscious with Richard present, but too many questions burned in her. She raised her arm out to gently wake the sleeping prince when her eyes caught the familiar mark on her arm, except it wasn't familiar anymore. It had grown.

Where there had been one circling length of ivy, now a second rose right above it.

Panic flooded her and she brought her other hand to the mark trying desperately to remove it. She knew it was futile, but the sight of it after everything was too much. It felt like a warning, as if time were running out when Wren still didn't know for what.

Strong hands grabbed hers and held them to her sides. Before she could fight back she registered Richard's looming presence.

"It's okay, Wren," he soothed. He looked as if she had interrupted his first sleep in days. His normally pristine brown hair was disheveled and he had stubble growing which was unusual for the well-groomed prince.

Wren took in a few deep breaths trying to calm the insistent panic swirling inside her. When Richard was satisfied she would not harm herself, he let go, and Wren raised a hand to her face wiping at tears she hadn't realized she had shed.

"It's not okay, Richard. What happened? What's happening to me?" Her voice was hoarse from not being used, but there was no mistaking the panic in it.

"You've been out for two days. That mark appeared a day ago," he said, gesturing to the source of her panic. "Wait right here." He moved to her door, and Wren felt her panic rise thinking he was going to leave her. Instead, he cracked the door open enough to murmur something before coming back to his seat at her bedside.

Tears welled in her eyes. "I'm scared," she confessed.

To Richard's credit he didn't try to give her false reassurance and instead only nodded, taking her hand in his. They sat like that in silence for a long time before Wren murmured that she was tired and lay back down.

The door to her rooms burst open, and Wren couldn't find the strength to turn over to see who it was. Fear had given way to numbness, and she found she didn't care one

way or another who it was. Richard rose from his chair while also removing his hand from hers. He gave her arm a gentle pat, and she heard the door close behind him.

Kai was standing in front of her a moment later, and she wished that she had felt relief or anything at the sight of him, but she only felt tired. He took the seat his brother had occupied and leaned towards her. His eyes ran over her searching for something.

“Wren,” he whispered, and she could hear the pain and worry in his voice.

She wished he hadn’t expended so much energy over her. She couldn’t find any words to say and didn’t look away from him, hoping that was enough, but knowing that it wasn’t. He was pale, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

Kai ran his hands through his midnight hair like he so often did when he was unsure of himself. She closed her eyes, feeling the weight of them.

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“Please, let me help you.” She had never heard him plead before. He was leaning forward in the chair with his hands laying on the bed just before hers. So careful not to touch her, even now, unless she told him that she wanted him to. She wished she could have told him that she did.

“The mark grew,” she murmured, barely audible.

“I know,” he said quietly.

Wren closed her eyes again. Last time this happened, it had been different. It hadn’t been two days, and the pain hadn’t been suffocating. At the memory of it, she winced as if she were still able to feel the flames licking at her skin.

“Wren, are you in pain?” He stood reaching for a vial next to her bed. “Sophie left this for you in case you were.”

She shook her head; even that movement was effort. “I was before.”

He blanched as if the memory was painful for him as well.

“Tell me how to help you.” His normally vibrant blue eyes were muted as if there were a film over them. She could see how unsure he was. Unsure of what she needed, unsure of what she needed him to be. She wished she had answers for them both.

“I just want to sleep,” she whispered.

He nodded and took his seat again, watching her. Wren wanted to tell him that he

should leave, but then she realized she didn't care either way. The darkness took her and she was grateful for it once more.

Chapter 31

Sunlight poured through Wren's window, ripping her out of the darkness that had become like a second skin. When she looked around she found that she was alone this time and hated the relief that flooded her. Wren didn't know how long she had been in bed and didn't care to know. She urged her unused muscles to get up and move, but they protested as she sat up. There was warm tea next to her bed and she sipped it gratefully, her mouth horribly dry.

When she went to put the cup down, her eyes caught her new mark. Suddenly desperate to cover the mark Wren ventured to push her muscles further by going to her wardrobe to find anything that would hide it. Grabbing an emerald silk dress, she donned it and quickly slipped the embedded string around her middle finger. Relief flooded her at not being able to see the triangle on her skin.

Wren's eyes caught her reflection in the mirror, and nothing could have prepared her for how sallow her cheeks were. What was more surprising was, outside of her cheeks, she almost appeared healthier than she had before. Her skin was tanner, and her complexion was clear and glowing. Even her hair was more lustrous and a deeper brown. She shook her head, not wanting to make sense of any of it.

Wren brought the cup of tea to the fireplace and sat trying to recall the fever dream she had had. At first only the emotions she had felt were tangible. She remembered being sad, but also scared. She remembered being taken from her parents.

Wren dropped the cup, causing it to shatter into a million pieces when she was able to recall that it was to her aunt and uncle she had been brought to. A bargain, she was part of a bargain. They had never truly loved her. She wasn't sure what part of the

realization was most painful for her.

Before she had a chance to worry about the shattered glass Sophie was there kneeling in front of her, grabbing her hands, and asking her if she was okay.

“I didn’t know you were here,” murmured Wren.

“I was in Kai’s room, trying to sleep a little, but I heard a crash, and—oh gods, Wren, what happened?” Sophie was buzzing with concern.

She gave a bitter laugh. “What part are you asking about?”

Sophie dropped her hands and stood up indignantly. “This isn’t you, Wren. You are kind and patient. Almost too good, minus a few glaring flaws here and there.”

A spark of fire lit in her. “And just what are these glaring flaws?”

Sophie looked past her. “Well, for one your inability to make up your mind is problematic, but also there is the one where I think you set your bed afire.”

Wren was about to ask her what she was talking about, but the other woman paid her no more heed as she went and grabbed a pitcher of water, tossing it on the flames taking up a small portion of the bed. Wren stared in disbelief. She had felt the spark in her before it happened. She grabbed at her wrist anxiously.

“I am really going to struggle if I can’t make you mad. Do you think you can learn to control that?” Sophie said as if she hadn’t just witnessed a magic fire.

“I remembered how I came to be with my aunt and uncle.” She said the titles bitterly.

Sophie didn’t say anything, only came to sit across from her, ignoring the shattered

teacup.

“A man took me from my real parents and brought me to them as part of a bargain. They didn’t even want me.”

Sophie didn’t hesitate, “Maybe they didn’t want you to begin with, but I am sure that is not how it ended up being.”

Wren shrugged and wiped at the tears flowing down her cheeks. She was not willing to entertain the idea that they came to love her, not after she knew they had only taken her in exchange for something. Realizing Wren was not going to offer any more, Sophie took to cleaning up the cup. When she was finished she brought a new cup of tea to her, making a poor joke about not breaking this one and took her seat again.

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“People are really worried about you,” Sophie offered.

A bitter laugh escaped Wren. “I am quite sure the people of this castle do not truly care what happens to me one way or another.”

Sophie narrowed her eyes. “The ones that matter do.” Wren shrugged and took a sip of her tea. “Are you up for visitors?”

“No,” murmured Wren.

Sophie whispered something under her breath and left the room without further ado.

Wren was grateful for the emptiness. Sophie had tried to tell her that this wasn’t her, but it didn’t feel like there was anything else left of who she was before. She didn’t even know if who she had been before was who she was.

Everything she had believed in was a lie. Her parents weren’t even dead. Pain and loss threatened to crumple her and she put the cup of tea down to clutch at her stomach. They had let her go. They had given her up.

The emotions running through her crowded her until she couldn’t bear them any longer. Her breathing was coming in raggedly. When she had cried enough that she was sure her body had nothing left to give, she curled up in the chair and stared at the crackling fire. Her aunt and uncle hadn’t wanted her and her parents had given her up.

The door opening shook Wren from her endless spiral of thoughts. She didn’t bother

to turn and see who it was. It didn't really matter. She heard the door lock before Sophie walked past Wren with purpose to Kai's door, which she shut and locked.

Wren thought how odd it was and perhaps that this was somehow Sophie's new tactic. A very poor one, if it was.

"Wren." The last voice she would have expected spoke behind her. She whirled around in her chair to find Wesley standing, unsure of what to do with himself. Her mind told her to get up, but her body couldn't muster the willpower.

"You shouldn't be here," was all she could think to say and then cursed herself because he deserved more than that from her.

He took tentative steps to her and knelt in front of her. Even kneeling he was tall enough that his face aligned with hers. "Sophie came and got me. She said you were awake, but not yourself. She thought..." He stumbled over the words. "She thought I might be able to help, but we don't have very long."

She focused on his ever-changing green eyes, and saw that they were darker than she had ever seen them. Dark like a forest at midnight. He reached his hand out and cupped her face and she leaned into the gesture.

"I've been going out of my mind, Wren. Mary and I have been asking after you, and all they would tell us is that you had taken ill. I saw them all though—Sophie, Malaki, and Richard—and I knew it wasn't just a passing illness." He breathed out. "It's so good to see you now."

She didn't say anything, and instead just closed her eyes, relishing the warmth of his hand. It felt like an anchor in the chaos and emptiness of her mind.

"It had to do with the prophecy, with what you are." He had the decency to not phrase

it as a question when the answer seemed so obvious.

She undid the hook around her finger and lifted the silk from her wrist baring it for him. She couldn't bear to see it, so she turned her head and kept her eyes closed. He ran his finger over it, and a shadow of what his touch did to her before found her.

Seeing she was upset by it, he pulled her sleeve over it and refastened the hook around her middle finger. "I understand if you aren't ready to talk about it, but I am here for you when you are." He hesitated. "I've been doing research, but I haven't found anything remarkable. It would help if we had the next part of the prophecy."

"As the vessel returns

Time seeps away

The curses sway

Weakens with each passing day"

The words came from her mouth unbidden. She hadn't even realized she had memorized them.

"How?" he said, mesmerized.

"Maxon," was all she said.

"They trusted him enough to tell him what you were?" His words held disbelief and a little bit of anger.

"He already knew from the first letter we sent. It's why he came," she explained. When he didn't respond she said, "I'm the vessel."

He nodded. “Yes, that makes sense. Sophie told me on the way here what you did earlier. I can see it in your face that you have more of your magic in you even if she hadn’t told me.”

“I feel so very numb,” she confessed.

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Wesley raised a hand to smooth away stray strands of her hair, and she found herself closing her eyes in an effort to feel something. When she opened her eyes, he seemed to be debating something. “Just to be sure,” he said right before he was kissing her. It was the same soft, gentle kiss from before. As if he was afraid she might break.

She realized with surprise that her arms were around him, and she was kissing him back. She felt the echo of warmth in her and she kissed him harder, needing to feel more. He gave her what she silently asked for and deepened the kiss. She could feel this. The kiss blocked out everything enough that she didn’t feel like she was drowning. When he finally pulled away, she was breathing hard, but something in her had thawed.

“I felt that.” Wren smiled with the relief that she wasn’t entirely numb.

“If I am being honest, I would have been a little offended if you hadn’t,” he said, his voice thick.

She laughed and relished the sound of it even if it sounded foreign to her. The door to Kai’s room unlocked and Wren jumped. Her body relaxed when she saw that it was only Sophie. She hated that she could feel again since now guilt curled around her like an old friend.

“You need to go now,” Sophie said firmly without any hint of urgency.

Wesley nodded before turning back to Wren. “I am here for you whenever you call.” He stood, laying a kiss on her forehead before leaving.

Sophie followed after him and Wren was once again alone with her guilt and the other feelings stirring within her demanding to be named.

Sophie returned only a little while later, and was immediately busying herself around the room, straightening things up and making the bed.

“Thank you, Sophie,” Wren said quietly, knowing that her friend was upset.

Sophie turned to her, anger in her eyes. “Do not thank me. I just betrayed my oldest friend for you.”

Wren felt the words as if they were a knife to her heart. “I know,” she said quietly.

Sophie looked like she might leave the conversation at that, but true to her character she could not. “I don’t know what it’s like for you. I don’t know what you’re feeling and the stress of what is happening to you, but you can’t keep on like this Wren. They deserve better. Both of them.”

“I know,” she repeated. She couldn’t put into words how she felt about each of them.

When she was with Wesley she was at ease and nothing seemed too difficult or too painful. With Kai it was different. She couldn’t put words to what had happened in the tower or where it came from. She only knew somehow, he had worked his way into her heart, so slowly she hadn’t even realized it was happening.

Sophie sat down across from her and leaned forward, looking intently at Wren. “I would do almost anything for you, but I would do anything for him, Wren. I need you to understand that if you make me choose...” She sighed. “Just don’t make me choose, okay?”

Wren frowned. “I can’t change how I feel.” It was a pathetic answer, but she felt so

lost and so alone again.

“I don’t expect you to. If you need to let him go, do it, but you can’t keep both of them.” Sophie’s words were quiet and Wren could see how they pained her. She knew that no matter how much Sophie pretended she would be fine if she let Kai go that it would hurt her.

“I’m legally bound to him, so it isn’t much of a choice is it, Sophie?” Wren snapped back, feeling rising anger at Sophie’s self-righteousness.

“Being bound by marriage is different from being bound by love. They are not synonymous. You know that I am sorry that you never had a choice in your marriage or your path, but you have a choice now.” With that, Sophie got up and left her alone with her treasonous thoughts.

Chapter 32

Days and nights passed, marked only by servants bringing trays and Sophie’s occasional presence. The others had tried to visit her, but she refused them all. She would rather be alone and isolated than have to confront what was happening to her and what she needed to do. On the fourth night, a knock came at her door from Kai’s room. She didn’t know what to say so she said nothing at all.

“Please, Wren. Let me come in.” His voice carried to where she sat in front of the fire watching its flames dance and flicker. The storm inside her raged. Sometimes she felt so devoid of emotion, it was difficult to remember to eat with only Sophie to remind her. Other times, she felt so angry, flames danced in her palms. She almost preferred those to when fear gripped her so entirely that frost would build on the windows and along her hands.

“Come in.” She pushed out the words as if it were the only way to get them out.

The door opened and Kai came in. His hair was tied back and she could tell he had come from the training yard from the sweat lingering on him. He took the seat next to her, his eyes running over her.

“Sophie said she was making sure you ate,” he said, deathly quiet.

“She is,” she replied softly.

“Well, she isn’t doing a good job of it,” he said, his voice full of quiet anger. “You can’t keep going on this way, Wren.”

She tossed him a cold glare. “And just how do you think I should go about it?”

He matched her glare. “I can’t say for sure, but wallowing by yourself, wasting away doesn’t seem like the best method.”

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“It’s so easy for you to sit there and judge me. You have no idea what it’s like to know your life is not your own. That the only family you ever knew never wanted you. That your parents gave you away and to know you are entirely alone.”

“Spare me the sob story, Wren. You are not alone and you know it. You have people who care for you, but you won’t let them help you. If you are in a prison, it is of your own making.” His voice reminded her of the cold prince she had known.

“How dare you?” Flames raced across her skin and the carpet by his feet burst into flames.

He stamped out the flames with his boot and leaned back in his chair. “I suppose I should be grateful it wasn’t me that you lit aflame.” His smirk only made her more irate.

She concentrated on the fabric of the chair by his hand and it also came alight. He laughed and patted it out with the sleeve of his arm.

“There you are,” he purred.

“Go away, Malaki,” she said, the flames extinguishing from her hands.

“So we are back to Malaki then,” he said casually. “I distinctly remember you calling me something different when you were throwing yourself at me in the tower.”

Flames danced on her skin once more, higher than they had ever been before. The flames snaked up her arms, begging to be released. “You are an ass.”

“Perhaps.” He watched in awe as the fire licked and caressed her skin like a lover.
“You are terrifying.”

“Stupid of you to anger someone you refer to as terrifying,” she replied, her flames slowly retreating down her arms, but dancing low on her palms. His strange response had thrown off the anger she had felt burning through her.

“I needed to know that you felt something, even if it was anger at me. I also needed to see if you could control it,” he said, as if it were obvious.

“There are better ways,” she sneered, but all the heat was gone from her, her body already cooling.

“That’s true. What would you recommend?” His voice was low and suggestive.

She threw the pillow she had resting under her arm at him which he easily knocked away. “You are a cad.”

He shrugged. “You need to learn how to use it and control it, Wren.”

It was her turn to shrug. The truth is she didn’t want to use it or learn how.

“I want you to meet with Maxon tomorrow. I’ve been speaking with him and I think he can help you. He might be the only one that can.”

“Fine, if you will leave me alone now.” She turned her head away from him.

“If that’s what it takes. Good night.”

She heard him get up from the chair and leave, shutting the door behind him. She felt and heard the window pane frost over despite the warmth of the room.

Chapter 33

The air was frigid as the wind burst through the trees, rushing around them. Wren clutched the green cloak tighter around her. “I fail to see why we are out here freezing when your sorcerer hasn’t even deigned to show up.” They were far from the castle so that any prying eyes would be unable to see whatever it was that Kai expected her to do.

“I see your mood is much improved,” Kai mused while continuing to stare ahead to the horizon. Snow began to fall lightly around them. “It isn’t usually this cold this time of year and I don’t know that it has ever snowed at this time either.”

It didn’t seem like there was an appropriate response to that so she remained silent. She studied him from the corner of her eyes. He looked like the night itself with his black cloak pulled up around his face. He always had a commanding presence about him that she sometimes thought he would have rather been without. Wren turned from her study of Kai when she heard movement behind her. A small, brown-haired man wearing glasses huddled beneath a brown cloak walked towards them.

“Thank you for coming, Maxon,” Kai said as he turned to face the strange man. Wren eyed the infamous North Helm sorcerer and was surprised at his appearance. She had imagined him to be imposing and maybe even intimidating, but Maxon had a friendly face and an unassuming presence.

“It is an honor to be asked,” he said earnestly. He stopped about five feet from them and bowed low to Wren. “It is truly an honor to meet you, Wren.”

“That is very kind of you,” she murmured quietly, finding that she didn’t want to be rude to the young man. More surprising than his appearance was his age. He could not have been any older than her. She had expected him to be old and wise, and yet here he was still marked by youth.

Maxon smiled warmly at her and then stared at the horizon that had previously captivated Kai's attention. "I feel it, too. The land feels more barren, as if this strange weather is not the last of it."

Kai turned his head to the side slightly. "Is it her?"

“Yes,” Maxon replied quietly.

Wren whirled to him. “I didn’t do anything.” She felt the anger at his accusation fan her flames and tried to ball her hands in a fist to prevent their appearance. She was surprised at her temper after feeling sympathetic towards the sorcerer. Her emotions had become erratic to the point that she was unsure what she would feel one moment to the next. She was exhausted from constantly fighting the anger, fear, and pain.

“Not on purpose, of course,” he quickly corrected, a sliver of anxiety creeping into his voice.

“How am I responsible for the weather and the land?” she responded hotly.

“Easy, Wren. He’s just trying to help.” Kai turned to face her, his blue eyes cool like frost to match the snow.

“It’s all right, Your Highness,” Maxon replied diplomatically. “As you gain more of your power back, it is pulled from Valmere. The land feels its absence, and this is how it is responding.”

“How do I give it back?” she asked as if the solution would be simple.

“I don’t know. I only know that it’s not just the land you are pulling from. I have even lost some of my own power. I fear when you finally ascend, there will be nothing left in Valmere.” He didn’t sound afraid, but rather as if the topic was a puzzle he could solve.

“Ascend?” she asked.

He looked at her nervously. She could see that he did better with puzzles than with people. “It is only a theory of mine. I do not know for sure, I cannot know for sure.” He pushed at the brim of his glasses nervously. “I assume that your return and the retrieval of your magic means you are destined to have your immortality restored.”

She laughed. “That’s ridiculous. Serephina’s siblings would have found a way to kill her or torture her. Why would Lucius curse her to live as a mortal only to allow her to come back?”

“I admit, I do not know, but for what other reason would you be taking your magic back?” he asked reasonably.

“I do not do it on purpose and I do not want it.” Her anger was growing and she felt the spark light in her hands. The flames leaked between her clenched fingers seeking a way out, a way to be free.

“Your emotions are heightened right now because of the magic building in you. It can be a burden to all who are gifted with it, but we learn from early on how to channel it. You will have to learn it now,” Maxon replied gently. When she didn’t say anything, he continued, “You are like a tea kettle that needs the lid to be opened to release the pressure. You need to release the magic that has nowhere to go inside you. Try to direct all your flames to those trees,” he said, as if it was simple.

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine the now tiny flames in her palms shooting outward, but nothing happened. “I can’t.”

“You didn’t even try.” Kai’s voice was cool, but there was irritation in it, too.

She turned to face him. “Yes. I did. There isn’t exactly a book that tells you how to

control your god like magic.”

He rolled his eyes. “Now you are just being dramatic.”

She glared at him. He had been different since their time in the tower. More callous towards her. “Can you just make up your mind on how you would like to treat me because I am getting whiplash from how quickly your moods change. First, you treat me as if I am not worth the dirt on your boots, then you act like you are actually concerned or care, then...” She stumbled over the words not wanting to put a name to what happened between them in the tower. “And now you treat me as if I am some petulant child.”

He smiled at her, but it was not a kind smile. “If I treat you like a petulant child it is only because you are acting like one.”

“You are impossible. I am not doing this any longer. Goodbye, gentlemen.” She turned to make her way through the snow building on the ground.

“Oh, come now, Wren. There are other ways to start flames. Wasn’t it you that told me that? I remember you being quite enthusiastic about that method the other day. Your tongue did the most delightful—”

She turned back and slapped him hard enough that it echoed amongst the forest.

“If I could take it back, I would in a heartbeat, you royal ass. You are so irritating, I cannot stand to be near you.” She shoved him hard and he laughed. “I don’t see how you think this is funny, but your moods are so chaotic, I suppose it makes sense.”

He was still chuckling when he put her head in-between his hands and turned her to face the forest. It was ablaze and the heat from the flames cast a warmth over them removing the chill from the air.

“Incredible,” whispered Maxon.

“She is,” agreed Kai, looking at her.

She stared at him as if he had gone mad, but he only shrugged his shoulders. “You needed to be mad.”

She stared at him, trying to figure out who Prince Malaki really was. “You didn’t have to be such an ass about it.”

“I’m fairly certain that is false,” he replied casually. “How do you feel?”

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She took a breath and realized so much of the tightness and pressure that was suffocating her was gone. She breathed in deeper, closing her eyes, feeling as if there was room in her body for her again. She smiled. It had been days since she smiled. She opened her eyes and looked at him. “It’s better, but aren’t we worried about the forest?”

“It was my least favorite forest in all of Valmere,” he replied easily, no smile upon his face.

She bumped her shoulder into his. “You are insufferable.”

“So I have been told.” he smiled back at her and she was reminded of how few people were lucky enough to see that smile.

Maxon cleared his throat clearly uncomfortable. “Have you noticed any other elements available to you?”

She frowned at the reminder of when the fear and frost would come. “Ice,” she said, trying to hide the anxiety in her voice.

Maxon nodded. “Water can be channeled in all forms. Once you have more control, you will be able to manipulate it. Try to think of water that moved you in some way.”

Wren closed her eyes and thought about the waterfall from the path to her rooms that she still visited some days. There was such a serene quality to being there that she had found comforting on the days she missed her family.

At least what she thought had been her family. A chill crept over her. What would they say if she came back to them? Would they tell her that they had come to love her even though they hadn't wanted her? Would they say they were grateful she had been pulled into that lake?

The thought of the lake overtook any thoughts of the waterfall, and instead she remembered the feeling of drowning. Her feet desperately kicking trying to propel her out of the dark abyss. Familiar panic began to build in her again, but then a voice was pulling her out. Cara's face flashed in her mind, one second bright with life and the next red pooling at her throat.

"Wren, you aren't there anymore. You are here, you are safe." Strong arms encircled her and she opened her eyes, realizing that it was Kai holding her.

She let her head rest on his chest and breathed in deeply, tears falling down her face. He ran his hand over her hair bringing her back to the present, and when she opened her eyes, she saw the snow was coming faster and ice layered the ground underneath her.

"Maybe water wasn't the best thing to focus on, aye, Maxon?" Kai said accusingly over her head.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. You created the ice through your fear. As long as you cannot control your magic, your emotions will dictate what it does." She heard him shift uncomfortably. "You can turn this ice into water though, you just need to want it and believe that it can be water."

She pulled away from Kai, preparing to use a few choice words on Maxon, when Kai took her head in his hands and looked down at her. "You can do this."

She felt doubt creep into her, but the way he was looking at her as if he knew she was

incapable of failure made her suddenly weary to disappoint him. She closed her eyes and imagined the ice as water. Willing it to be liquid once more. When she opened her eyes she looked at the ice under her feet, willing it to thaw.

Nothing happened at first, but then slowly the ice melted, soaking into the ground. Wren's boots sank into the now muddy ground. Pride, hot and bright, filled her and when she looked up at Kai he was smiling at her with unmistakable pride. He reached down and tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear, the gesture strangely intimate.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt, but I feel that I should explain how to also undo the magic...er, the forest is still burning." Maxon's voice radiated awkwardness and Wren smiled at Kai who smiled back conspiratorially. Breaking the moment, she turned to Maxon expectantly.

"Well, you see, once the magic has done the damage, there is no undoing that damage. So the trees that have been burned are gone, but you can either call a powerful rain to douse the remaining flames or you can call it back into you, but given how much the magic was suffocating you I would not recommend that." He was rambling nervously and Wren found that she liked the honesty of this man.

She closed her eyes and looked towards the burning forest. She imagined the rain this time. She remembered the feel of the rain pouring down on her the night before she had come to Valmere. How it had felt to work alongside her uncle and know that each day was predictable and safe. It was funny now how much she had detested that normalcy when the uncertainty of the future plagued her dreams.

She drew herself back into her task and imagined the rain putting out the flames, smoke rising from the forest floor as it cooled. Rain began falling heavily from the sky, soaking her hair and weighing down her cloak. She laughed seeing the fire eviscerated. When she turned back towards Maxon and Kai she saw that Kai was studying her, rain pouring down his face.

“Truly incredible,” he yelled over the pounding of the rain. She laughed as he picked her up, swinging her around. She felt lighter than she had since the night of her attack. She laughed and for the first time since her powers had appeared, felt hope that she could control them.

A warm bath and fresh clothes awaited Wren once she was able to call back enough of the downpour that it wouldn't flood the land. Maxon had explained that it was a delicate balance, and that she needed to be careful how much she called and how much she could handle taking back. The fire was roaring in her room by the time she was washed and dressed and she gratefully sat in front of it, having a new appreciation for the flames.

A knock at her door showed Sophie and Richard with plates full of food and bottles of wine. “We heard we were celebrating tonight,” said Richard, trying not to drop the plates of meat and cheese he carried.

Kai wasn't far behind, and they spent the night laughing and enjoying each other's company. It occurred to her that perhaps the family you choose is more important than the family you are brought into. She found that she very much enjoyed her new family.

Chapter 34

Wren woke with a new sense of peace and a new sense of purpose. She could learn to use her power, and if Serephina had used it to protect this world, then she could as well. She had left her rooms early in the morning after a long night of celebrating. She had forgotten how nice it was to simply walk about the castle.

When she had only made it a few hallways, a familiar curly blond-haired man nearly ran into her.

Wesley seemed just as surprised to see her, but recovered quickly. Before she could ask him what he was doing, he searched the hallways before he leaned down to whisper in her ear, “You Are stunning today.”

Her cheeks blossomed with heat at the feel of his breath on her as much as at the words.

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“I am very glad I ran into you, I have something I need to talk to you about, but it cannot be here. We can use my room.” The sudden insistence in his tone made her stomach curl with distaste.

She meant to say that she didn’t think that was the best idea, but the way his eyes seemed to bore into her made her hold her tongue. They carefully made their way to his rooms, and Wren vowed to herself to maintain a respectable distance taking heed of Sophie’s words. Sophie had been right that she could not keep both of them and that it wasn’t fair to either of them.

When they arrived at Wesley’s rooms, he went to his desk where he pulled out a piece of paper, his brow creased as he studied it.

“Wesley, what is it, what’s wrong?” She went to him and placed her hand on his arm trying to put him at ease.

“Gods, Wren, I don’t want to be the one to tell you this. Please, sit down.” Heeding his words while anxiety bloomed afresh in her chest, she looked at him.

He fiddled with the paper in his hands. “Ever since you told me about everything, I’ve been searching through everything I could find. When you got sick I got desperate. I snuck into the Bishop’s rooms and went through his things. At first, I thought it was pointless, but then I found this.” He held out the paper to her and she took it, her hand shaking. Wesley was always calm and composed that if he was this rattled it must be something truly terrible.

She read over the paper, panic filling her stomach. Wesley took her hands. “There

was a third verse of the prophecy.”

“I can see that,” she replied, her voice shaking.

A gift forsaken

Freely given

Once claimed

Death be called

“What does it mean, Wesley?” Her voice shook.

Wesley wrapped his arms around her and she didn’t argue despite her earlier resolve. She buried her head in his chest, trying to will her breathing to calm. They both knew the words on the paper foretold of her death.

“We can fight this, but we have to be quick. Wren, I need you to be honest with me, even if it hurts me.” She nodded into his chest. “Do you love Malaki?”

She pulled away from him, shocked at the question. He was looking down at her so sincerely and with such need that she found herself answering. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Why would you ask me this?”

He gave a sigh of relief. “Because I believe I’ve figured out the prophecy. The first verse talks about the past and Serephina’s punishment. The second your return to Valmere. The last though, I think is speaking of how your magic can be claimed by any mortal.”

“I don’t understand,” she said dumbly.

“I found papers in the Bishop’s rooms. I believe that they meant to make you fall in love with the prince so that he could be the one to claim that power, but Wren—” He paused as if he would have given anything to not have to speak his next words. “Malaki knew. It was his plan. He’s been writing them updates on your progress. It’s how the Bishop knew about your mark. In his latest note, he spoke of how your mark had grown and that he suspects you are close to being in love with him, enough that he can take the magic for himself.”

Wren shook her head and backed away from him. “That’s absurd, Wesley. Kai would never. How could you say that?”

He looked at her with such sympathy that it made her want to scream. “Wren, I saw the letters. I saw what he has planned for you.”

“Tell me,” she demanded.

A sigh of defeat left his shoulders slumping as he produced a piece of parchment from his coat. With trembling hands she took it, already recognizing the scrawling script from the papers he had given her with all his research months ago.

Wren’s progress has been slow, no thanks in part to my inability to move past my disgust at pretending to care for her. If I didn’t see the proof of the marks on her skin I would have discarded this plan long ago. Keeping Sophie in the dark has proved difficult, but I suspect we are close now. As of yesterday, the mark has grown which if our suspicion is correct means that we are close to the prophecy being fulfilled.

As to our previously discussed problem, I have set in motion a plan to remove Prince Wesley from our court. It’s clear that he is becoming more of a problem and we cannot afford to have him distract the girl else all of this was for nothing. I may need you to put some more fear into her once more as the last proved successful in pushing her towards me. Your service in this endeavor will be rewarded when all this is done.

-KB

Her chest felt hollow. She might as well have been the lost and broken girl who had first stepped foot into this castle. Despite the words written on the parchment before her, her mind raged against them. This had to be some trick of the Bishop's. He was cruel in the worst ways and it was not below him to fabricate such lies.

Wesley moved towards her, but she stepped away from him not wanting to be touched. He sighed. "They think, because of the last line, that if he kills you once he is sure you love him, then he will be able to take the power and use it to take Valmere for himself. It seems he has been working with his father and the Bishop for a long time. There were many letters, but I only dared take one. He helped to bring you here, Wren."

"This isn't true." Tears rolled down her face. "I will talk to him, he will explain it."

Wesley was there again, wrapping his arms around her. This time she was too exhausted and fragile to stop him. "We have to go, Wren. As soon as I found out, I went to the harbor and bought a ship and crew so that we can leave and keep you safe. I swear I'll never let anything happen to you."

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“I don’t understand,” she said defeatedly. “It doesn’t make sense.” She knew she was repeating herself, but the betrayal cut her like a knife.

Every time he looked at her with awe when she used her magic, was it because he was coveting it for himself? Was everything an act to gain her trust and affection? Gods, and she was stupid enough to give it to him.

Wesley had asked her how she felt about him, but she knew she felt more for him than she was willing to admit. The small moments with him when he showed who he really was adding up to something more. But that wasn’t who he was. He had manipulated her and she had been so desperate for connection that she fell for it.

Memories of that day in the village where everything had changed for them. Had Rose been just some old woman he paid to say those things? He had known the answer long enough and needed to convince her he was her ally. The tower had felt real and yet had he been worried about her feelings for Wesley and stomached being with her in that way?

Wesley’s door opened and she whirled, the new prophecy creating paranoia in her. When she turned, she saw Mary, who coolly assessed the situation. “Good, she’s here. We need to go. I’ve let it be known that the three of us are going for a ride, but I think if the king or princes hear of it they will be suspicious.”

Wren looked at her, not understanding her meaning. It was Wesley who explained, “I told her everything when I found out. I needed to get her out, too, and my sister is rather stubborn and demanded the truth. I trust her.”

“I would do anything for my brother, and he has chosen you. Even knowing this will mean war for our kingdom. We need to go. We can discuss it further on the way. We will get clothes and things as we go..” Mary’s cool voice was demanding, leaving little room for argument.

“I don’t know, let me talk to Sophie,” she pleaded desperately.

“You know you can’t. She will only go to him and then we will have lost our opportunity.”

Wren felt broken by Wesley’s words. Tears streamed down her face. This felt so wrong and yet, Wesley had never lied to her. At least she had the comfort of knowing Sophie likely didn’t know. At least that had been real.

“Can I leave a note?” Maybe she could explain. Maybe they could tell her how ridiculous she was for believing it. Her chest felt hollow and she bit down on her lip trying to stay her tears.

“I don’t think that’s wise, Wren. I’m sorry,” Wesley said as if he wished he could take away her pain. She nodded slowly, and he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I will always take care of you.”

Mary gave her a black cloak and a pair of boots for riding. No one questioned them as they left the castle and mounted the steeds waiting for them. Wesley and Mary hadn’t brought anything with them either, not wanting to be suspicious. They rode quickly, not giving the horses time for rest as Wesley and Mary insisted they be on the ship before their escape was noted.

When they reached the harbor, Wesley sold the horses for half their worth, and they boarded a ship called The Expanse. When aboard, Wesley dealt with the captain who was clearly a man used to a life at sea. His skin darkened by the rays of the sun and

his hands calloused by years at sea. He accepted coin from Wesley, and then he was giving orders to set sail. Everything was happening so quickly, she felt like she couldn't breathe.

Mary was next to her, putting her arm around her. The air was chilly and sea breeze blew the hood of her cloak off causing her hair to blow into her face. "I'm sorry, Wren. I can't imagine what you are feeling. I was prepared to marry Richard to preserve peace, but now I see the Blackwood's never intended peace. They will pay for what they have done." Wren did not mistake the anger in her voice.

"Richard loves you." Wren wanted to say that she knew the words to be true, but she had recently come to realize that she knew very little.

Mary's gaze flicked to hers and Wren could have sworn that she saw regret flash in her eyes. "I think that they are very talented in making us believe that."

Their burdens and wounds hung between them as they stared at the endless sea before them.

"You are very brave." Mary's voice was distant, haunted as she stared ahead. "It takes courage to love freely."

Wren thought about how she had made such a mess of her feelings and how caring had made her an easy target for betrayal.

"I think it's weakness. If I were stronger I might have seen it coming."

To her surprise, Mary put her hand over Wren's that rested on the edge of the ship. When Wren turned her head there was silver lining Mary's eyes.

"I'm sorry." She whispered.

Before Wren could find the words that would comfort her, Wesley came over to them. “I could only bargain for two cabins so we will have to make do.”

Mary linked her arm in Wren’s, any trace of the emotion she had shown before vanished as if it had never been. “I think I will enjoy getting to spend some time with our stolen princess.”

Wesley narrowed his eyes on his sister. “A poor jest, Mary.”

Mary only shrugged. “If we can’t laugh then what’s the point in anything?”

Wren forced a smile and they were shown to the cabins. It was a narrow space and the two women would have to sleep close together. Wren found herself sliding into the now familiar darkness. Her body beginning to numb. They made it to sea without pursuit, and even the incredible expanse of ocean without end did little to comfort her. Wren had read stories about ocean’s like this, but she never believed she would be on a ship experiencing it for herself.

As Wren stared out at the endless ocean, Haradon drifting farther away, Wesley came up beside her. “I can see you pulling away, Wren. Don’t let them win. Don’t let them take happiness from you.”

“I thought they were my friends,” she said dumbly.

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“They were very convincing. Even I believed it,” he responded.

“You see the good in everyone so that is little comfort,” she said, smiling up at him.

He smiled down at her and ran his finger down her cheek. “No amount of power would ever be worth giving you up. He was a fool.”

She closed her eyes, finding that his words stung more than gave her comfort.

The captain came up behind him and asked to speak with Wesley, who reluctantly left her side. Whatever the captain said seemed to upset Wesley, and she drew closer trying to see what was wrong. Wesley looked over at her and forced a smile. “Unfavorable winds. I was hoping to be at the nearest port in a few days, but it might take longer.”

“They can’t catch up to us though, right?” Wren said anxiously.

He was on her in less than second, holding her head in his hands. “I told you I would always protect you, and I meant it, Wren. But the answer is no, they won’t be able to catch up.”

She took some comfort in that. “What will happen, Wesley?”

He sighed. “I’m not sure. They will see it as an act of war that Mary and I left with you, but they also know that they cannot match us in the strength of our army. They may declare war in an attempt to get you back as you are so valuable to them, but if it comes to that we will fight.”

“I don’t want people to be hurt on account of me,” she said quietly.

“It’s more than that, though. You are worth a thousand wars. They would use your power to conquer all of Valmere, and people would surely die in their thirst for conquest. There isn’t any way that this ends without people being hurt, Wren.” His words brought a chill to her and she felt as though the world had gotten colder.

Chapter 35

That night Wren woke up screaming. Mary was next to her in an instant, but the princess looked pale and ill. “It was just a dream, Wren.”

Wren wanted to argue that it felt real enough, but she couldn’t bring herself to tell the other princess she had dreamt of Kai and Sophie laughing at her gullibility before they stabbed her. She winced at the memory and pushed it down, not wanting to think about it.

“Mary, are you okay?” She almost looked a shade of green.

“I don’t do well at sea. It is why we went the long way to get to Haradon initially. This way is, of course, much quicker, but the price is high.” She heaved into a bucket.

Wren tried to help her, but the princess waved her away. “Honestly, Wren. I would rather just be alone and get through this. I know I promised you princess bonding time, but I am afraid I am going to have to pass. If you go get Wesley, I am sure he can work something out with the captain. You shouldn’t have to be in close quarters with me like this.”

The princess looked at her apologetically and when Wren tried to protest she insisted.

Wren put her cloak over her nightgown and went to where Wesley’s room was next

door. He opened the door, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He wasn't wearing a shirt and she was acutely aware of the hard lines of his abdomen. "Wren, are you okay?" Concern laced his voice still thick with sleep.

"I'm fine, but Mary is very ill. She said she wants to be alone, but I don't think she should be. Maybe you can talk some sense into her."

Wesley sighed. "You will learn quickly that my sister is stubborn. The day anyone convinces her to change her mind will be historic indeed. I will go check on her, though, and try my best. Please wait in here."

Wesley left Wren in his cabin, which was the same size as her and Mary's. His, however, had a large window next to his bed. Wren climbed onto the bed to look out and watched as waves crashed against it. She hadn't realized just how high the waves were tonight, but as she noticed them, she began to feel the boat sway with greater fervor. It was a small blessing that she wasn't afflicted with sea sickness like Mary had.

The sea felt surprisingly like home to her. The feeling of security on the water was interestingly similar to how she felt around music. Anxiety rushed through her and she looked around the room desperate to see what she searched for.

When Wesley entered once more he saw the panic in her eyes. "What is it, what happened?"

"Your violin! Wesley, did you leave it?" He had said the violin had been made with great care and she could tell it was special to him.

"There wasn't time to grab it, but it's all right, Wren. Truly, you are more important to me than any violin." He said the words so earnestly, she flushed realizing she was still in his bed.

She tried to gracefully gather her cloak and step off the bed, but she feared she looked rather clumsy. “How is Mary?” she said, trying to salvage her dignity.

“Well enough, she will be fine. She is only stubborn. I’m afraid she was wrong about my being able to get another cabin. The captain was adamant that there weren’t any more available. If you like, I can sleep on the floor in here, if you are comfortable with that.” He said the words nervously.

Wren blushed. “No, it’s okay I can take the floor, this is your room and you have already done so much for me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I am a bit offended that you believe I am the sort of man that would allow a lady to sleep on the floor of a ship while I enjoy the bed.”

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“No, I know you aren’t, it’s only, I just...” Wren was cut off from her ramblings by the ship throwing her.

Wesley was there in an instant, catching her with his arm around her waist. She laughed at her embarrassing lack of balance, but as soon as she looked up at him, her laugh fell from her lips. His eyes held the same need that had broken her weeks ago in his rooms. Heat crawled up her body and she felt her cheeks flush.

“I’m sorry,” She murmured.

“For what?” he replied, his voice husky.

“My poor balance.”

He smiled at that and cupped her cheek in the familiar gesture. His smile faded and by the way his eyes drifted to her lips, she knew where his mind had gone. Anticipation built in her and she was surprised to find how much she wanted this, how much she needed to feel close to him.

“Wren.” His voice was thick with restraint. He made to pull away, and knowing that that need inside her was screaming to be heard, she reached up on her toes and landed a gentle kiss on his lips. He hesitated briefly, his need for her falling behind his need to be chivalrous.

He wrapped his arm around her waist while his other hand cupped the back of her neck. His touch sent shivers through her. He pulled away, smiling at her body’s reaction to him, before whatever he saw in her eyes made him bend down to kiss her

fervently.

She fumbled for the clasp on her cloak, the fabric too heavy and thick between them. It came undone and then she was standing before him in a thin white gown. He ran his eyes over her like a caress, eyelids heavy with desire. Running his hands over her arms, he bent to kiss the exposed skin of her neck moving painfully slow, lower and lower.

She let out a moan and then his lips were on hers, and he was picking her up gently in his arms, laying her ever so gently on the bed. Then his body was over hers, and he was looking at her as if she was the most magnificent thing he had ever seen. “Wren, are you sure you want this?”

Wren shouldn't have hesitated at the question. She should have known right away the answer was yes. Everything she had thought true had been a beautiful lie. The way Wesley saw her, and the comfort of his touch was like a barrier against the tidal wave rushing towards her.

Maybe it was wrong that she didn't know the answer right away. Maybe it was wrong that she was about to say yes, but her body ached with need for him, to feel his touch all over her.

She nodded once. He released a breath he had been holding and laid gentle kisses over her skin, pushing the strap of her dress out of the way, not missing a single spot to run his lips over.

He carefully undid the laces in the front of her gown, exposing all of her. His hands were over the bare skin in an instant and she arched her back at the touch. Where his hands went, his lips followed. She had never known such divine feelings now moving through her body. More than that was a need growing in her. She fumbled blindly trying to remove any clothes that prevented their skin from touching. Wesley was

there in an instant, pulling her dress over her head before removing his own breeches.

She knew she should be nervous, but she also knew that she wanted this and that it was her choice. Her body was hers to give and she chose to give it to the man before her. A man who had chosen her over and over again even at great risk to himself. A man who radiated kindness and swore to protect her.

There was no shame in this act, and as he whispered her name, entering her as she gave herself entirely to him. When the pain came, it felt right that there should be a price. Everything she had ever loved and touched had a price.

He moved rhythmically in her, and her hands clenched in his hair, a strange feeling building in her thighs and belly. A moan escaped her, and she found herself moving with him in time needing more, needing it not to stop as that warm feeling grew and grew until she was calling out his name and waves of pleasure racked her body.

They lay there panting heavily, their bodies weak with pleasure. Wesley regained himself first, and he held himself with one hand above her while the other traced lines on her cheek before he bent down and kissed her gently. "My love," he murmured.

She startled at the words ever so slightly, but relaxed when she realized they felt right. This is what love felt like. Feeling safe and feeling this happy. She nuzzled up to him and they lay cuddling like that until they fell asleep, the rocking boat perfectly in time with their contented bodies.

Chapter 36

Hergownwasmadeof the stars themselves and her hair was entwined with them. It was always her chosen appearance for she loved the night sky the best of all. She paced across the expanse. She already felt weak, much of her power gone. It had been worth it though and she wouldn't hesitate to do it again. Such beauty and complexity

deserved to thrive, deserved to have a chance to live.

She heard them coming before they appeared and she stilled herself, preparing for whatever they felt the price of her perceived betrayal would be. She would not beg them and she would not apologize for what she had done.

Lucius was beside her then. “That was foolish.” She looked at him, of all of them she had expected gratitude from him. “They will not forgive such a slight, Serephina.”

“I am well aware, brother,” she replied back haughtily.

“You are not like the rest of us. You never have been,” he said quietly.

She knew what he was speaking of. She had always felt different from the rest of her siblings. Never truly enjoying their infiniteness and the power that they wielded. For what was infiniteness without purpose? She knew this is why when her brother presented his creation to them she had been so deeply moved. Here was purpose. Guiding these lives and watching them fail and triumph.

When her siblings had shared their disgust, content to be limitless and simply be, she knew she would do anything to ensure the survival of her brother’s creation.

“For your sacrifice and your goodness, I will do what I can for you, sister.” She looked at him surprised after his earlier words had held such condemnation. “Live well, Serephina.” That was when pain she had never known found her.

Pain wracked Wren’s body and all she could think of was that it was happening again. Flames cascaded over her finding every crevice of every vein and every bone. She had the strange thought that this must be what it was like to burn alive. She cried out, but she was painfully aware that nothing and no one could help her.

She only wished that death would take her quickly so that she might not have to endure the burning and stinging plaguing her. She called out for the gods, but they were painfully silent. Sweat poured from her skin soaking into the sheets. It felt like punishment for the bliss she had just known. Another wave of pain burst in her allowing peaceful darkness to envelop her.

Chapter 37

Wren awoke in a place she did not know. The room was small, but filled with bright colors. Even the bed was a light blue and the table across the way a light green. Wren sat up, feeling strain and protest in her body as if it had not moved for many days.

Aside from the bed and the table, there was nothing else to give her clues about where she was. She crept to the only small window and looked out seeing some land below her, but mostly the expanse was the ocean surrounding her on all sides.

Only wearing a thin nightgown she was hesitant to go out searching her surroundings, but the need to make sure she was safe was greater than her modesty. She crept carefully to the door and silently turned the door knob, finding it locked.

Panic began to well in her and she ran back to the window to see if it would open. Thankfully, it gave way under her pull, but she was several stories up and it would be impossible to use it to escape.

She obviously wasn't in North Helm since Wesley would have never locked her in a strange room. An uneasy feeling settled in her that maybe Malaki had caught up to her and locked her up, only waiting for her to wake up to witness his betrayal before he killed her. How had she not seen his duplicity before Wesley told her about the third verse.

His affection for her had never made sense. He had been so cold to her and then magically changed to pretend he cared about her. It made sense now, setting Sophie up as her pretend maid, gaining her trust.

Making it seem that they were the only ones who cared about her. They were probably unhappy to find her friendship with Wesley and that likely was why Sophie was so cold when she referenced him. Gods, if she hadn't found Wesley, what would have become of her? Her magic would have been used to kill and conquer. She still didn't want this magic, but at least she could hold onto it and not allow it to be used for nefarious purposes.

Running her hand over her forearm, she stilled suddenly. She had been so distracted by where she woke up that she hadn't looked at her mark. Maybe she had purposefully not looked, afraid to see the truth of what lay there.

Taking a deep breath, she turned her arm and stared. A third circlet of ivy rose above the rest, wrapping itself around her arm. The ominous mark stared at her. She fought to understand the markings. Lucius had said he would do what he could for her, but none of what had happened to her seemed to be to her benefit.

She had begun pacing when the lock of the door clicked and it opened with a noticeable creak. Wren held her breath, trying to gather any magic that she could to defend herself, but in her fear it felt like trying to grasp drops of rain. Relief flooded her when she saw a familiar tall, blond-haired figure. She breathed out a sigh of relief and ran to him, wrapping her arms around him, his body firm and steady.

"I thought that..." She couldn't finish the thought. "I am so relieved to see you." She exclaimed. She realized with a sudden coldness that he wasn't holding her back. She pulled away looking up at him, seeing something new, something calculating in those familiar green eyes. "Wesley? Did I do something?"

Heat rushed to her cheeks as she remembered the last time she had seen him and anxiety bloomed behind it. Did he regret what they had done? Had she in some way pressured him and now he couldn't stand to touch her? But, no, he had shown her that he had wanted her just as much as she wanted him. Wren put her arms around herself,

taking another step away from him.

“Wesley, please. Say something,” she pleaded.

Wesley only sighed and took the key he was still holding and locked the door before turning back to her. Something was not right, he would never just leave her to feel this unsure.

“I had hoped to be able to explain to you everything in detail, but it turns out our pursuers are much more invested than I had originally believed.” His voice was cold, but at least in some way his words were reassuring. He was obviously worried about evading Malaki and it weighed heavy on him. It also explained why he was taking precautions with her safety, but he was sorely mistaken if he thought a locked door would prevent the Haradon prince from entering.

“Why aren’t we on the ship if they are so close? We need to leave. Is Mary all right?” She remembered how sick the princess had been and was instantly concerned that was the reason for their delay.

“She’s fine.” He shrugged. “Listen, Wren. I’ll make this brief.” He paused as if he were pondering the best way to tell her and she wondered at this version of the man she loved. He was being so purposeful, whereas normally he was more passionate and instinctual. “It turns out, I withheld some information from you, quite a bit if I am being honest.”

She looked at him, her brows furrowed. Before she could ask what he meant, he continued.

“Let me explain the verses to you so you can understand what is happening. The first verse obviously speaks of Serephina’s fall from immortality, destined to live mortal lives over and over. Did you and he even try to decipher it?” He waved away the

question. “The second verse also references the curse. You figured out you were the vessel, so at least I can give you that much credit, though it seems painfully obvious. Essentially, when Serephina’s reincarnated form returned to Valmere, love would be the key to unlocking her magic.”

“Wesley, when did you figure out all of this?” The way he talked of it was like he knew it by the back of his hand, but that couldn’t be. He wouldn’t have withheld all this information from her when he knew it could help her.

Ignoring her question, he continued. “‘Times seeps away’ spoke of the life cycles you had. Explaining is much more tedious than I had anticipated.” His voice was callous and slightly irritated.

Nothing was making sense. Why was he acting this way and how long had she been asleep that he had been able to decipher this all?

Taking an irritated breath he continued, “Third verse. ‘A gift forsaken’, well what is a gift if not immortality, which you just threw away. Next, well here we are back to the curse aren’t we? If love was the key to your power, you also had to give it away willingly and you did so easily.”

“I gave it to you,” she said dumbly. “I don’t understand why you are acting this way to me, Wesley. Tell me what it is so I can understand the change in you. You’ve obviously learned something terrible about me that changed how you felt.” She felt an unfamiliar self-loathing that ate at her core. How could she be so terrible to warrant this change?

“Let’s not be hasty. ‘Once claimed, Death be called.’ Once that love is claimed, death can be called. I have already kindly told you the meaning behind that line, no need to dally.”

Wren recalled his words before they had escaped Haradon. That Malaki had planned to make her fall in love with him and then kill her to claim her power. Wesley already knew that so that could not be the reason for his change in demeanor.

“And here we are to the finale, finally as it were. I had to move up my timeline considerably quicker than anticipated because I was suspicious that somehow you were becoming dangerously close to falling in love with your husband. I quite thought you safe from that fate upon meeting him, but there is no accounting for taste.

“You see, I knew what the buffoon King of Haradon and his Bishop were planning because well, spies are quite the helpful tool. I seized the opportunity by having my sister pretend at a courtship with the youngest prince in order to have a reason to come to Haradon and be present when they went about their summoning of you.

“Imagine having to wait three months for those idiots to get the correct spell, and then dragging innocent girls from around Valmere to make Malaki think they were willing to kill them until he finally agreed to marry you. Three deaths seems excessive to get his obedience, but I suppose some people are born to think their lives mean more than others.” He took a small breath and rolled his eyes as if this were all tedious as if what he was saying didn’t make Wren’s head spin.

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He planned to be there? He knew? Why had he never told her?

She was saved from the spiral of her thoughts by his continued monologue. “I made myself available to you, and you were so desperate that you took to me like a fish in water. I could have told you the sky was black, and you would have worshiped at my feet. I thought I had all the time in the world to formulate how I would go about taking Valmere once I had completed the process, but I had not counted on just how desperate and lonely you would be, and it would seem how desperate and lonely the prince was. At first, I felt confident he would push you away and his coldness would only drive you to me quicker, but it was clear he was in love with you and I couldn’t risk you falling in love with him and taking my victory.”

Fear welled deep in her. It was him, when he convinced her to leave saying Malaki planned to kill her and take her power. It was his plan all along and she had given everything away so easily. She felt like she was going to be sick, but self-preservation had her trying to grasp her power.

Wren tried to summon her flames to protect herself, but she knew she needed to be angry to have them at her side and what she felt now was more fear than anger. He meant to kill her. She needed to keep him talking. He had said Kai wasn’t far behind. Maybe she could keep him talking and there would be time, gods please let there be time.

“How did you know all this without the prophecy?” she asked, trying to keep the quiver from her voice.

She hadn’t succeeded, and he grinned, enjoying the effect he was having on her. “I

was the one to have the king stumble upon it of course. That prophecy has been passed down in my family for generations and we have guarded it from everyone except the descendants of the seer. Imagine my surprise at finding out we were unsuccessful in killing out her line when you told me about the woman in the village.

“Ah well, at least she only had one verse. But I digress, I gave the legend and the prophecy to one of my spies who was a frequent visitor to the old king’s bed and she fed it to him till he ate his fill. He and his Bishop worked tirelessly to perfect their summoning spell and their plan. Would you believe the king had planned to seduce you himself until my spy suggested his son might be more effective in his youth? The king did not take kindly to that and he beat her quite badly, but then he agreed. I feared the king would be too possessive of you to allow me the access I needed.

“Malaki however, I knew wouldn’t care one way or the other about you and I could take my time. Well, then you know the complications that decision produced.”

His hand moved to his back and cold fear gripped Wren. Ice spread from her feet, but he didn’t seem to notice. Keep him talking, thought Wren. “How did the king expect to obtain my power if it can only be given through love.”

Wesley laughed, “Oh my gods, it truly was laughable. He thought that he could control his son enough that he could force his hand to help him control Valmere. I do think that man is very mistaken about his son’s sense of honor. Nonetheless, his fail safe was to kill his son himself, taking the power for himself. You see, the prophecy applies to all who wield the power, not just you. The king knew his son loved him and he could easily take the power for himself. Quite bloodthirsty, if you ask me.”

As he talked, Wren tried to gather the power of the ice into her palms and manipulate it, but the ice power in her had never worked that way. It was more of something that just happened to her. Still if she could use the ice underneath him to put him off his balance she might be able to grab the key from his pocket and escape. She needed

more time and gods help her. She needed answers.

“Does Mary know?” Her voice was a whisper.

He raised his brow. “Obviously. I’ve already explained it was a family affair. How else would I get her to pretend to be interested in that idiot? I had to write to her to come move things along when I began to see the way Malaki looked at you. I knew my plan was in danger. Mary was kind enough to come and help my innocent lovesick act move ahead of schedule.”

She felt her ice answering her call and she slowly spread it to surround him without him noticing. Just a little more time and one more painful answer. “You knew you already had my love when I left with you. Why that night on the ship?”

He smirked. “Gods, you truly are naive.”

Her ice retreated and fire filled her veins at his words. She wasn’t sure whether to rejoice or bemoan the change in her plan. “You know, I wasn’t actually convinced you did love me. I thought making him the villain and you being with me would be enough, but you moped around so pathetically. I realized I had to solidify your feelings for me in order to be absolutely sure. I am glad I took such precautions because it would seem you needed a little bit more convincing. You were not a bad time, though, if it is any consolation.”

How dare he talk to her like that, how dare he trick her into giving herself to him? The fire roared in her and it burst from her palms wrapping around her arms.

He took a step back, clearly unprepared for her to be able to master her magic enough to be a threat. His worry at her power manifesting quickly diluted. His eyes that she always loved were a crystal green, light and full of calculation.

“He loves you. You know that don’t you, Wren? He was behind us in a matter of hours. If I hadn’t picked my ship carefully, he would have caught up to us. It must have been Maxon who betrayed me. My father gave him the first two verses of the prophecy to see if he would be willing to use his magic to help us when he joined our court a few years ago. He refused, saying that he would not meddle in the will of gods. Coward. I was very distressed to learn he had come with Mary. I thought him not knowing the third verse would be enough, but it seems he figured it out when we left. He must have told Malaki and he rushed to your rescue.”

Wesley’s smile once full of kindness was full of malice.

“Gods, do you know he was willing to give you to me if it meant you were happy. He confessed as much to me when you were recovering from your last burst of magic. That is when I realized I had to move quickly. To think you actually believed that forged letter, but then again I did work very hard on it.” Just like he knew it would, the words took her magic from her when her body radiated with shock.

She hadn’t known. She hadn’t realized. All those moments she thought were manipulations were real. His carefulness around her, his protectiveness, his affection, It had all been real and she had been a fool.

Wren had very little time to come to terms with the realization because a sharp pain burst from her stomach and she looked down to see a knife protruding from it, blood staining her white nightgown.

“Stupid girl,” Wesley murmured as he withdrew the knife. She looked up at him in shock and saw a triumphant smile on his beautiful face. She put her hands to her belly trying to cover the wound, but there was so much blood.

“I had us stop here when I knew you were close to waking so that he might discover your body and know that he failed. That he was prepared to give you to the very

person that ended your life. That way when I come for Haradon, he will know to kneel before me.”

Wren stumbled and fell to her knees, black spots appearing around her and her head becoming fuzzy. This was the pain of her nightmares. This was how a goddess died at the hands of love. She opened her mouth to speak when she noted a strange metallic smell and warm liquid coming out of her mouth. Realizing it was blood, she knew that she would die here in this strange room, in this strange world. The pain began receding and she felt coldness take its place.

“Oh, gods, this power is delicious. You aren’t even dead yet and I already feel like I could do anything.”

He closed his eyes and Wren saw fire appear in his right hand. He marveled at it and smiled at her. Extinguishing the fire, he knelt in front of her and placed his lips to hers, his mouth coming away crimson with her blood.

“Thank you, my love.” With a wicked grin and his eyes glowing with new, untamed power he pushed her shoulders and she fell to the ground, blood pooling around her. As darkness took her, the last thing she saw was him unlock the door and leave laughing.

Chapter 38

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Serephina. She opened her eyes expecting black abyss, but found pure white light instead. It was warm and it was beautiful.

“Serephina.” She turned to the voice and found herself looking at a figure she had only seen once before in her memories. Though he was ageless, he appeared in the form of a middle-aged man with short brown hair and a trim brown beard. He was of average height and build, but it was his eyes that gave away he was not mortal. His silver ringed eyes locked onto hers and she found that she was too tired to be awed at this immortal’s presence.

“Serephina.” She sighed at the repetitive false name. Perhaps it was hers once, but it was not hers now. Her mortal body was already dead or dying and her power stolen. There was nothing left for him in her any longer.

“That is not true, Serephina. You are tired, but you have much left to do. You need to wake up.” He looked at her like he pitied her, but his words demanded more of her.

“I have given enough, I have done enough. I am tired and now I will rest.” She closed her eyes, feeling as if she needed only let go to be free.

“Then you condemn the world you gave your mortality for to darkness.” His patient voice told her that he knew her better than she did.

“It was not I who made that choice. I grew up on a farm.” Her words came out a bit too harsh to give credit to her story of choosing rest.

“You are one and the same. I have watched over every life you have lived and always

you are the same. Always you are the goddess that saw beauty and goodness in imperfection and gave all to protect it. You cannot fight who you are when it is at your very core.” He smiled fondly at her and she found herself wanting to earn that smile, the tug on her too strong to fight.

“Why me? Why this version of Serephina?” she asked, needing to know why any of this had happened and why her body lay behind her in a strange room.

“The why does not matter. What matters is what you do with the time given to you. You can choose to pass from this world and take your rest, leaving the world to burn or you can burn for this world. You can choose to take the love you have been gifted and shed its light on the darkness that threatens all. You can choose.” He folded his hands in front of his body and looked at her expectantly.

“My time is already through and it is because of what you call a gift.” Still, ‘You can choose’ reverberated in her. She could choose.

“Not all love is a happy story, but you will never be weaker or less than because you chose love. It is love that sustains you now, and it is love that calls you back. Love makes us strong, it brings us together. Fear is what makes us weak, isolates us.”

“I don’t understand.” Hope flared in her all the same under the bone drenching fatigue her body carried.

“You came into your power in three. Three loves. Power awakened by three. One cannot take what does not belong to them,” he explained patiently.

“Sophie and Kai.” She understood now. The power and remnants of her immortality were divided inside her three ways. Wesley only took what was his. “But I was dying, I am dead.”

He nodded gravely. “Your power laced with immortality was not enough to heal you from such a wound, but I have added my power to yours. For what you gave, I will give but a shadow of that cost. Yet still I feel it’s absence even now. Your body is healing in the mortal world. You must choose now.”

She thought about what it would mean to finally rest and to wash her soul of a world cruel enough to give her love and betrayal in the same breath. Yet, it was also a world that gave her Sophie who was good and kind. It gave her Kai who she still had so much to learn about and know. There may be darkness in this world, but there was still good to be celebrated.

“No choice at all is still a choice, Serephina.” He looked at her gravely, and she could feel her tie to this place weakening. The threads pulling away from her mortal body and the promise of the release of nothingness. She knew what she would choose. She would fight to protect the world from what she had given to Wesley and for the good that lived within that world.

A hint of a smile graced the immortal’s lips. “Live well, Serephina.”

Chapter 39

Wrenawokewithagasp to the smell of lavender and salty air. Panic rose in her as she clawed at the enclosure she was trapped underneath. Her frantic hand waving and pulling gave way to a white sheet that had been covering her body.

She sat up, taking in her surroundings. She was somewhere dark filled with storage that looked to be shipping supplies. The earth rocked underneath her and she realized with a start that she was on another ship. Her fingers felt for the wound in her abdomen that she knew would be gone. Her fingers ran over a slight imperfection in her skin. Her eyes adjusted slowly to the darkness of the hull revealing a scar where Wesley’s dagger had slid into her. She placed her hand over it, a reminder of what

love was capable of.

Finding her feet, she slid to the side of the cot she had been placed on. Bracing herself, she stood feeling her legs shake slightly at the movement, the silk dress she wore pooling around her. The sway of the ship and the weakness of her healed body fought to incapacitate her, but she knew she needed to assess her situation. She had sworn to protect this world and she would do little good hiding in a foreign ship's hull.

Grabbing a fishing spear stashed nearby, she made her way up the stairs, holding onto the side for balance. She would not be caught off guard again, she would be wiser than she had been before.

Seeing light pouring in from above her, Wren knew she was close to the ship's deck. She paused and felt for her magic. It felt far away, but she was able to pull an ember as her right hand illuminated the remaining darkness with her light. She would be stronger than she had been yesterday.

As she entered the deck, she breathed the salty air into her lungs, relishing the feeling of being alive. This feeling had almost been taken from her and she would not take it for granted again. She heard a gasp and a muttered prayer, and whipped her head around to see a young boy likely no older than fifteen with a dropped mop staring at her with shock.

Seeming to gather his wits he ran in the opposite of her direction frantically. Of all the reactions she had expected upon arriving on the deck, that had been low on her list of possibilities. The sun was setting and there was no one else on deck meaning the boy had likely run to find his crew mates making that where she needed to go to catch her enemies off guard.

She reached down into the well of her power and smiled when she felt it filling up

closer and closer to the surface. Wesley had taken one third of her power and without it she felt more control as if she wasn't bursting to the seams with untamed magic.

Her footsteps were sure despite the sway of the ship and she called another set of flames to her other hand holding the spear. The flames danced around the spear, bouncing harmlessly off the wood it was made from. She heard running footsteps coming from the stairs nearly in front of her and stood still readying to release magic and spear alike.

A pair of brown eyes met hers and she dropped the spear and released her magic staring in disbelief. Sophie's face held disbelief and unwavering hope when she looked her over.

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“You were dead. I saw your body.” Her face contorted with pain. “I washed your body and prepared it.” Tears began sliding down her cheeks and she crossed her arms around herself as if she could protect herself from the memory.

“Sophie. It’s a bit harder to kill a once goddess than that.” Wren tried to lace her words with humor, but the horror Sophie’s words had instilled in her made it difficult. She was saved from having to force more false bravado by Sophie running the distance between them as the smaller woman wrapped her in a hug that brought warmth to Wren’s cold bones. She returned the hug and rested her head against Sophie’s landing nearly on top of it.

Sophie’s body shook, and Wren knew that in this woman, she had at least chosen well to give her love. She took one of her hands and held Sophie’s head to her own trying to offer her comfort.

Perhaps before, Wren might have shared in her friend’s tears, but this Wren felt farther away, not as easily swayed to tears. She lifted her gaze, feeling eyes on her. Kai was staring at her in much the same way Sophie had, disbelief and hope, but there was unmatched pain in his cerulean eyes that pierced her. She could see from looking at him that Wesley had succeeded in sending his hateful message to the Prince of Haradon. He had thought that he had been responsible for her death, but in this he was wrong. There was only one person responsible for her death and he would pay for his transgressions.

Wren gently untangled herself from Sophie, giving the other woman an encouraging smile before turning her gaze back to the prince. She wished she could take away his pain, but she could see the memories of the past few days were forever ingrained into

his memory whether she stood before him or not.

Wren moved slowly, but sure of herself towards him. He stood still as if he were immobilized by some unforeseen force. She stood in front of the still prince and reached a hand up to his cheek. His eyes closed tight as if he were in pain.

“I carried your body.” The words were choked and his voice was hoarse.

“But I am here now,” she whispered, still holding her hand to his cheek.

He smelled of sweat and the sea as if he had not indulged in bathing for days. There was the making of a dark beard on him granting credence to her theory.

“How?” he whispered, his eyes finally opening to lock on hers.

“You.” She smiled and then nodded to where Sophie stood behind her. “And Sophie.” His brows furrowed as if he did not understand her.

“Remarkable,” came a voice she had only heard once before. She briefly glanced to where Maxon stood, staring at her with awe and what could only be described as scholarly interest. She returned her gaze to Kai whose pained eyes never looked away from hers. “We didn’t realize—I didn’t think it was possible. Three.”

Wren smiled at the man’s confused speech as he tried to process her presence. “I also had a little help from a god, if I am being honest.”

Kai’s hands came up to either side of her face and slowly ran down her arms.

She laughed. “I am real, Malaki,” She chided. A small smile finally appeared on his strained face before he pulled her against him, wrapping strong arms around her. She let herself melt into him, feeling grateful. Their relationship was still complicated,

and after what Wesley had done to her, she knew it would be a barrier for them, but she would fight for what remained for them.

Chapter 40

As it turned out, rising from the dead caused one to have quite an appetite. Kai guided Wren down the steps to where they had come from and she noticed that he very rarely stopped touching her in some small way as if he were afraid she would disappear if he did. Sophie followed quickly behind them with Maxon in tow. They entered a small dining area where the smell of seafood greeted her eager stomach. Her appetite was momentarily forgotten when she spotted a tall woman with her bright red hair pulled back and a blue captain's uniform staring at her.

"So Lawrence has not lost his mind," she mused, a sarcastic expression bearing an otherwise beautiful face. Sophie was at Wren's other side in an instant linking her arm through hers. The captain merely nodded and said, "I suppose you have a story for us, Wren Blackwood."

Kai's hand on the small of her back tensed slightly. "She needs to eat, and she does not owe you any explanations, Captain Smollett."

She did not miss the command in his voice that he rarely wielded.

"As it were, she is now a very much alive passenger on my ship and I am loath to remind you, Your Highness, of the agreement we had about who carries the power on this ship." She said his title with mock sincerity, but her words were taut with authority.

Kai made a small irritated sound. "Very well, but you will allow her a few minutes of silence and time to eat."

Captain Smollett nodded her head slightly and gestured to the table filled with food. It was clear Wren's return to the living had interrupted their dinner. She ate the fresh fish placed in front of her greedily and drank three glasses of water before she finally looked up at the fiery-haired captain who studied her without restraint. Kai's reaction to the woman made her cautious in how much she wished to divulge in her presence.

There was something she needed to know and she knew it would hurt to say his name, but this was her reason for returning to the land of the living. "Where is Wesley?"

She heard the rage in Kai's breathing before she saw it, but it was Captain Smollett who answered. "On his way back to North Helm from what we gathered. We on the other hand are headed in the opposite direction towards Haradon." The captain's tone was matter of fact, but she could see her words angered Kai.

When Wren looked at him questioningly, still unsure of the dynamics in the room he growled out, "A mistake."

"Prince Malaki, I will not discuss with you further why it would be a mistake to engage a newly magically empowered man on the sea with a ship poorly prepared for battle. I believe I told you that should he succeed in his nefarious plot we would retreat."

Wren found that even though this woman clearly infuriated the prince next to her she liked her strong mind and business-like approach.

"I do not need reminding, Amelia." He glared at the other woman.

Captain Smollett, Amelia, merely looked at him and began eating the dinner in front of her.

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Wren wasn't sure if she was grateful to be far away from the thief who stole her power or if she bemoaned the chance to do away with him before he could return to his army. That was assuming she could control her power. It felt closer to her now and easier to access, but then again, Wesley had seemed to have no problem calling upon it. She remembered her flames in his hands as she lay dying, a wave of coldness ran through her body as she recoiled from the memory.

Wren was brought back to the present by Sophie's calm, but insistent voice speaking. Wren turned her head towards her groggily, as if she couldn't quite shake the memory she had just been in.

Sophie's face was concerned, but her gestures and her voice were as if she were trying to coax a dangerous animal. "Wren, you are here with Kai and me. You are safe."

Wren wrinkled her brow, not understanding Sophie's needless reassurance. "I know that," she said absently.

She did know that. She was far away from the man that stabbed her and left her for dead as a message to her friends. The man she had loved, gods help her, the man she knew she still loved. She rued that knowledge and she would rage against it later, but in this moment, she was too tired to try.

"All right, good. Just put out the fire, Wren." Sophie still watched her as if she were some feral animal, but her words gave Wren just enough awareness to realize what she was doing.

Both of her hands were raised palm up before her and fire flared bright and eager, weaving through her fingers. She hadn't even realized that she had called upon her fire. It must have been the memory of Wesley and her magic on his skin.

She quickly recalled the magic, absorbing it back into herself, it spreading throughout her like an old friend. She looked around the cabin and everyone stared at her. Captain Smollett, Maxon, Sophie, and even Kai, all looking at her as if she were dangerous.

It was Captain Smollett who broke the painful and accusatory silence, "Miss Blackwood, I do feel compelled to tell you that wooden ships and fire rarely go well together. Indeed, I'd venture to say that they have a rather poor history. Please do be kind enough to refrain from such theatrics in the future." The strange woman then picked up her fork and took a bite of the fish as if nothing had happened.

Concern flooded Kai's tired features. "Wren, what happened?"

She shook her head, unwilling to discuss the memory that would haunt her dreams for the rest of her days, be they few or many. Kai didn't press her for more information, but Captain Smollett studied her with cool indifference. "Will it be a problem, Miss Blackwood, for you to control your magic while on this ship?"

"I don't know," replied Wren, the truth finding its way from her mouth.

Captain Smollett tilted her head, almost imperceptibly. "We might consider sedating you for the remainder of this voyage for the safety of those aboard."

Kai stood up, prepared to say something likely rude to the Captain. Wren put her hand gently on his arm. "It is all right, she isn't wrong." turning her gaze back to the Captain, she said, "If it is a problem, I will inform you immediately."

Whatever the other woman saw in Wren's face caused her to nod slightly. Kai sat back down, clearly considering threatening Captain Smollett.

"What would you like to know, Captain Smollett?" Wren asked the other woman who had done away with her dinner.

"First, please call me Amelia." There was no smile or nod of friendship in the other woman's countenance. "Secondly, I think we would all appreciate learning how a very dead body stored in my hull became reanimated."

Wren searched Kai to see how much she should reveal to ease the Captain's concerns, but also preserve what would be dangerous knowledge.

"I understand your concern, Miss Blackwood, however, I am well aware of the circumstances that led you to your seemingly temporary demise. I would not agree to give passage to the prince or Miss Daugherty unless they divulged all the details leading up to their rather hasty request."

Wren still looked in askance at Kai despite the captain's reassurance, and he nodded in agreement. The captain must be a formidable woman to elicit such information from her friends.

Wren took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I suppose the easiest method is to ask you what you know of why Wesley did what he did." When she opened her eyes, she met Maxon's pale gaze knowing he would have been the one to put the pieces together. She had met the man only once before, but she could tell he was especially studious.

He nodded nervously, pushing his glasses more firmly to the bridge of his nose. "Well, ah, the prince, that is Prince Malaki, came and found me soon after your departure because—his um..." His nervous rambling made her want to shout at him

to be more straightforward, but she was saved the indecency by Kai.

"I went to Maxon after my father came to my rooms frantically talking of getting you back saying that you had been spirited away by the North Helm royalty. He told me of the last verse and how he had planned to force your affection to me so that I might lead our country to greatness. It would seem you were not being as pliable to my father's plans as he would have liked and so he began to encourage his." His mouth curled distaste at the mention of Wesley. "Affection, as he thought, jealousy might be an apt motivator. He had not expected that he would convince you to leave with him. That is when I went to Maxon." She could see the reciting of those events was difficult for him yet he did so with restraint.

Maxon cleared his throat. "Yes, well I, of course, knew of the prophecy from my arrival into the North Helm court and I had been concerned when I first received Prince Malaki's letter regarding your arrival and the king and Bishop's involvement. I am familiar, you see, with the Bishop, as our community of sorcerers is small and continues to grow smaller. He has always been an ambitious man, but this. To manipulate gods and their power is blasphemy for our order. When I heard that Princess Mary was coming I sent a missive to the king and queen to ask them for permission to join the delegation and they approved." He glanced around nervously, suddenly uncomfortable with all eyes on him. "So, as it were, when I had heard that you had left with the prince and princess I was able to deduce their intentions."

Wren breathed in and out, feeling her lungs expand and release. "You are obviously aware that he succeeded. He intends to put all of Valmere under his rule. He doesn't realize he doesn't have my full power. He only has one third of it." She turned her gaze to her lap and smoothed the blue silk gown. She could feel everyone's gazes on her. She raised her eyes to Maxon who smiled at her, trying to offer support.

Only he had deduced what she had meant on the deck of the ship. It was one thing to tell Sophie that she loved her, but quite another to confess, in front of all these

people. She shook her head, realizing she was not strong enough.

She was forever grateful for Maxon, who recognizing her discomfort said, "I suppose we should be grateful that he did not entirely succeed and that you are still with us."

"Thank you, Maxon." She could see that he knew she meant gratitude for more than just his words.

"But what are we to do now? He will only learn to control my powers more and he made it clear that North Helm's forces were no match for Haradon's." She presented the query to anyone, eager to evade the subject from how she survived Wesley's betrayal.

Kai leaned back in his chair. "First, we must deal with my father. His actions have proven that he does not have Haradon's best interest in mind and he will need to be deposed."

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Sophie gasped. "Kai, that is treason." She looked truly aghast at such a suggestion even knowing what the king had planned for his son. It occurred to Wren that they might not know that he had been willing to kill Kai to take the power for himself. She tucked away that information for later, filing it under the same category as how she survived.

Kai only shrugged. "He has forfeited his rule, as far as myself and Richard are concerned. Richard stayed behind to make sure our father did not try something desperate, but when we return we will overthrow my father."

"And then?" Wren asked.

"Then we will send word to Crishaven and notify them of our mutual enemy." He said the words matter-of-factly as if he did not care what he was implying.

"You mean us to go to war," Amelia said just as calmly.

"I see no other option for fighting a power hungry royal with a formidable army at his disposal. Do you have any suggestions, Captain?" His voice was cold when directed at the other woman.

"Quite. Why doesn't our resurrected and more powerful goddess simply take her power back and or dispose of the problem without risking thousands of lives." Though her words were pointed, she did not rise to the bait of Kai's tone.

"She has done enough," he growled back at the Captain.

"She can speak for herself." Wren threw back at him. He seemed prepared to argue with her before he thought better of it and gestured for her to continue. "I agree that Haradon is a more imminent concern and while my magic feels different and more accessible, I still have not mastered it. Wesley immediately accessed my magic and showed a level of control I have only just gained. I need more time before I can face him. I think Kai's plan is likely more pragmatic in the meantime."

Amelia did not say what she thought about Wren's interjection one way or another. She struck Wren as a woman who rarely wasted words. "Well, then, we shall continue on our course. We will arrive, if our current speed holds, within a day." She stood from the table smoothly. "I will retire for the evening. Good evening everyone. Welcome aboard the Ginsburg, Miss. Blackwood." With a nod to Wren, she removed herself from the dining room leaving Wren curious about how such a woman came to be.

The room felt suddenly too small and she was made uncomfortably aware of the silence surrounding the remaining four. There still was much to be said and yet she wasn't ready to give voice to the words.

Maxon cleared his throat and stood significantly less smoothly than the captain had. "I think I will also retire." He left awkwardly, bumping into a wall on his way. Wren smiled at the awkward man who had clearly spent more time around books and philosophy than people.

"You can stay with me, Wren," chimed practical Sophie. "Though you are a terrible blanket hog." She smiled at her friend's admonishment and took her hand in hers, squeezing it lightly.

"I do think it might be best to retire, if that is okay with you both." No one objected, and she noticed that ever since she had corrected him, Kai had been painfully silent. With a murmured good night, Sophie took her to her quarters which were barely big

enough to fit them both comfortably. Sophie, in her infinite goodness, did not ask Wren any questions, but merely allowed her the peace to lie down and close her eyes.

Chapter 41

Sleep came and went quickly that night, passing Wren by after only a few hours. Sophie lay soundly sleeping next to her, the ship giving the occasional creak in protest to the gently flowing waves beneath it.

Wren silently removed herself from the bed, careful to gain her footing and not make noise so as to not wake her friend. She crept out of the dark cabin and felt her way along the stairs till she could finally feel the soft ocean breeze and breathe in the salty evening air.

Moving to the side of the ship, she breathed in deep and looked up at the stars illuminating the deck and the immediate sea around them. Being alone with only the stars and ocean for company she felt more at peace than she had in quite a while. She had been through trial after trial since being pulled to this world and yet under the open sky, it felt like she belonged. Perhaps it was the remnants of her power calling out to her, but there was beauty in this land and for the first time since she made her choice she was glad she had chosen to live.

She had been so engrossed in her thoughts and the world around her, she hadn't heard the footsteps approach before he was standing next to her, arms resting on the ship's edge, staring out at sea. "If you want to be alone, I understand. I couldn't sleep and when I saw you come up, I thought..." She had never seen Malaki Blackwood hesitate. "I wanted to apologize to you for speaking for you. I know you can speak for yourself, it's just that I failed you once and I am finding it hard to..." He cut himself off, unable to find the words he required.

She turned her head to him. The moonlight shining down illuminated his dark hair,

half now pulled up into a small bun. It held a tinge of blue in the light and the change only increased the brightness of his blue eyes. He seemed so unsure around her since she had been back, but then again she also felt unsure. She didn't know where they stood, but she was willing to take her time and find out if she had that long.

"You seem different." He studied her before he withdrew his gaze back to the sea. She realized then that she had never replied to his earlier confused apology.

"I feel different," she said as if she were talking about the weather. Silence stretched between them before she finally said, "That's what he wanted, you know. For you to feel like you failed me, to be unsure in your judgement, to be less than you are." She could see him close his eyes tightly still facing out to the ocean.

When he opened them, he did not turn back to her, he only said, "Then in that he did succeed." The words were pained, but also laced with anger. Not anger at Wesley, but anger at himself she realized.

"No, he did not," she answered quietly, turning to look at him. "You have something in you that he will never be able to understand. You choose kindness when you could choose to be selfish. You live for others under the guise of living for yourself. I see you, Malaki Blackwood, and it is a hopeful sight to be sure."

He did look at her then, not saying anything. He seemed to be studying her face looking for any trace of a lie. "I'm sorry." The words were a near whisper. "I'm sorry I was a fool, and that I didn't see him for what he was."

"If you are a fool, then I am an even bigger fool. He tricked us all. He was a very good actor," she answered.

"I only ever wanted to give you what would make you happy," he said, looking back out to sea as if the truth was too much to witness.

“Then you should have asked me what would make me happy,” she said with conviction.

There was one truth she had taken from her experience and that was that she would be strong enough to decide for herself. She would be responsible for the paths she walked down. Wren knew she would be stronger than she had been before, but she also wouldn’t shut out love and kindness because those things also made her strong.

“I’m sorry for everything that has happened to you, everything that has been taken from you. I will always be available to aid you or make amends in any way I can.” His voice was hoarse with earnestness and it warmed her heart.

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She settled her hand on top of his against the chill railing and made herself stare into those fathomless blue eyes. “Don’t be here with me to make amends. Be here because you want to be. I don’t desire retribution from you, only your friendship, if you have it to give.”

His eyes moved back and forth searching her eyes for something. She wasn’t sure if he found what he was looking for, but he raised the hand she had rested on his, and pressed it gently to his lips. “Of course,” he said.

He released her hand and they went back to facing the sea and their thoughts. It wasn’t long before their hands rested together again on the railing, finding comfort in each other’s nearness.

Wren didn’t know how many hours passed in this way, but she did know that this choice she was making felt like the right one.

Chapter 42

WrenawoketoSophiestaring at her unabashedly. After Kai and she had said casual good nights to each other, she had wandered back to their cabin feeling more relaxed and calm than she had before. That feeling seemed to wither as she faced the acute stare of the woman in front of her.

“Good morning, your death-defying goddess princess person.” She smiled wickedly.

Wren grinned back. “That’s quite the title, do you think people will struggle to recall it?”

The women giggled, and Wren was reminded of the choices she would need to make.

“I want to tell you what happened,” she said quietly, but with confidence.

Sophie immediately sat up, eager to hear her story if she was willing to tell it. Wren regaled her with everything that happened from the time Wesley convinced her to leave and even what happened on the ship. Her voice broke when she recalled with perfect clarity his betrayal and how it felt for his dagger to slide into her belly.

Sophie listened with rapt horror and offered her friend reassurance or sympathy when appropriate. It was easiest to tell her about what Lucius had revealed to her about her power being broken into thirds and that she held one of those pieces of her power.

When she finished telling her everything that happened, Sophie furrowed her brow. “If I awakened one part of your power, then I suppose you are welcome.”

Wren grinned at the mischief in her friend’s brief smile.

“His Royal Ass woke the other, then who woke the last one.”

Wren smiled at her, knowing that she would be pleased with the answer. Sophie did light up at that and gave her a wicked grin. Before she could say whatever shameful thing her grin indicated, Wren held up a hand to stay her. “I am not ready to tell him, Sophie.” Sophie deflated a little bit at the statement, but also nodded that she would respect her decision.

“If I could erase anything from my mind, I would first erase what we saw when we entered that inn. Next I would erase the image I can’t stop seeing of him holding you.” Sophie closed her eyes tightly as if she could force the memory to stay away. “We both felt responsible, but I think something broke in him and I don’t even think having you back can heal it. It’s as if his light has dimmed.” She turned her head and

Wren caught sight of a tear falling down her beautiful, tanned cheek.

“None of us will ever be the same, Soph. But that doesn’t have to be an entirely terrible thing. We are wiser than we were before and we will use that wisdom to set right the wrongs the king, the Bishop, and Wesley have set into motion.” Wren laid a comforting hand on Sophie’s shoulder and the other woman looked back at her, smiling sadly.

Sophie had had the forethought to gather a few things of Wren’s before they set sail and so Wren was able to wear one of her simple pale green silk dresses. Wren was tempted to borrow one of Sophie’s pants and shirts combo that were much more freeing upon a rocking ship. Indeed, Sophie did look more able to maneuver as they made their way to the dining room from last night. Sophie tossed a piece of fruit to Wren who eagerly sank her teeth into its soft flesh, the strong smell of citrus filling her senses.

She grinned at Sophie who also enjoyed the first taste of the juicy fruit. They laughed and made their way to the deck where the sun was shining bright and the breeze flew by them caressing their free skin. Wren thought, not for the first time, that she could do ship life.

Something about the sea called to her with its passionate display of waves and stormy nights, but also its calm and serenity with small constant waves. Stirring her from her reverie, she saw the captain and a remarkably commanding and intimidating man standing next to her.

Amelia met her eyes and began walking towards her and Sophie. The deck was filled with far more people than the previous night, but each of them gave way to their Captain. The man followed slightly behind Amelia and said something that Wren could not make out over the rush of the sea and wind. The Captain gave a smirk to whatever it was, but did not respond.

“Good morning, Miss Blackwood. Miss Daugherty.” She nodded to each of them in turn, and to her surprise, Sophie rolled her eyes. If Amelia noticed the gesture, she did not say anything. “I would like to introduce you to my first mate, Alexander Adler.”

The hulking man gave a slight nod to Wren and she was once again struck by his commanding presence. He was easily the tallest man she had ever seen. His black hair was in a neat bun on top of his head and he wore a simple combination of a fitted shirt and trousers. The outfit certainly left little to the imagination on the status of how muscular he was.

“It is an honor to meet you, Mr. Adler,” she said, trying not to show how intimidated she felt by his presence.

“Alexander, please.” His voice was just as deep as she expected. She smiled at him, appreciating his friendly gesture.

“How long till we arrive?” interjected Sophie impatiently.

“This evening, likely just after sundown,” answered Amelia, who turned her gaze to Sophie. Sophie did not seem bothered by the woman’s attention. “Miss Daugherty, I wondered if you might accompany me to look over a few things in preparation for our return to port.”

Sophie gave a strange laugh, but followed the other woman giving Wren a small wave as she went. Wren was uncomfortably aware that she was alone with Alexander who loomed over her. He gestured to the side of the deck where they could look out at the ocean. Not having a reasonable excuse to remove herself from the situation, she obeyed.

“The captain informed me of your story,” he said matter-of-factly. “I wanted to

simply tell you that it is an honor to have you aboard this vessel.”

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Wren blushed, surprised at the unexpected praise. “Thank you, that is very kind.”

“I was born and raised in Crishaven, and while perhaps the other two kingdoms have forgotten to respect the gods and the one who protected us, Crishaven does not forget. We honor your sacrifice still.” His voice spoke of devotion and she could see that he meant his words.

Wren felt uncomfortable knowing that it was not her, but some other form of herself that he praised. “I understand your sentiment, Alexander, but I should inform you that I have no real memory of being Serephina.” She said the words quietly, not wanting anyone working nearby to hear.

Alexander nodded in understanding, but said, “Perhaps not, but it is clear you carry her character and strength inside you not only by your actions, but in the way those close to you care for you.”

Wren looked up, shocked by his words. He didn’t even know her, but still his words moved her and she was grateful for them. She found words were difficult to speak as emotion welled in her and she set a hand to her stomach, willing it to settle.

“As I said, Your Highness, should you need anything while on this vessel or any other time, if the captain wills it I am at your disposal,” he said with conviction.

Desperate to change the topic and calm herself, Wren said, “The captain is a formidable woman.”

He smirked. “Indeed she is. It has been a great honor to serve under her for many

years and gods willing many more.” Despite his large appearance that initially intimidated her, she found that his raw honesty and respect for those around him made her value him very much.

“Where will theGinsburggo after making port in Haradon?” she questioned. It was then that she spotted a pod of dolphins jumping and swimming in line with the ship and she squealed in delight, her dress twisting around her as she eagerly turned to have a better view.

“I have only ever read about dolphins in books! They are remarkable!” she exclaimed, pure delight welling deep within her. She eagerly watched the dolphins leap and bound, eager to keep pace with the ship. The sight quickly gave way to longing as she remembered how many nights she would curl up next to the fireplace with Georgie reading about the remarkable creatures before her. Now that she had a purpose in Valmere the hope of ever finding a way home was gone. She missed him so much her heart ached.

If Alexander noticed the change in her mood, he did not say. “They are majestic creatures to be sure, but also mischievous.”

Watching the dolphins, Wren became envious of their freedom to play and enjoy the sea at whim. It must be a very pleasant existence, she thought idly.

“As to the answer to your other question, we will remain in port and then go where Captain wills it. Good day, Your Highness.”

She turned towards him, surprised at his abrupt leaving, but she soon realized why he had taken his leave of her. Kai took Alexander’s place next to her, and she felt a strange stir in her stomach from his presence. He had pulled his hair up into a tight bun, likely to save him the trouble of the wind blowing it. Indeed it was quite an issue, as she was constantly having to pull her hair over her shoulder and tuck it behind her ears.

“I wanted to talk to you about what to expect when we get back to the palace,” he said simply.

She looked back over to where the dolphins were beginning to fall back from the boat and she bemoaned their presence, but was grateful to be able to focus on the task at hand.

“All right,” she said, turning to face him and folding her hands in front of her.

He gave an amused smile. “All right then,” he echoed, and his expression sobered. “Before I left, Richard and I discussed it, and we agreed that our father was no longer fit to rule. This will not be a simple task to dethrone him. As far as I know, he is unaware of our plans, but then, my father seems to always have a contingency plan. I want you to understand that if my father feels threatened, he will do whatever he can to maintain his power, even if it means executing his own sons—or you.”

She stilled at his words, knowing what the king was capable of, but for Kai to have to acknowledge his father’s willingness to kill him was horrifying.

He continued on as if it were nothing. “We are going to have to play court politics and maneuver from within. I have spent much of my life putting distance between the court and myself, and it will be difficult to overcome. You and Richard, however, are respected at court. We will have to be careful. One whisper and our lives will be forfeit.”

She swallowed hard. She appreciated how frank he was being so that she might be prepared, but it also made her stomach roll with anticipation of what was before them.

“One more thing that is absolutely crucial. My father must not know you have retained any power. He needs to believe that Wesley succeeded entirely.”

She nodded, understanding his meaning even more than he could understand. If the king thought there was any chance he could still attain her power, he would kill her and Kai to get it.

As they turned to face the expansive ocean, Wren was forced to confront that her world was quickly changing. They might not be going to war with an army just yet, but Wren knew that they were about to go to a different war. A war where each word and gesture meant survival or certain death at the hands of a ruthless king.